

Insights on Female Sex Offenders from the Missouri Registry

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There is limited research on female sex offenders and their offending characteristics. The sociocultural description of women as being nurturing, nonaggressive and, more significantly, nonsexual has diverted the attention from female sexual offending. Although reports have shown that female sex offenders make up two percent of the whole sex offender population, the true rate is remarkably higher because the caretaking behavior of women masks their sexual offenses. The purpose of our study is to explore the characteristics of female sex offenders. We analyzed the publicly available Missouri sex offender registry database and selected all female sex offenders ($n = 532$) of any age who committed their crimes in Missouri and were convicted in Missouri. We found that the 532 female offenders had a mean age of 29.8 years at the time of their first offense and were convicted for a total of 992 offenses. The calculated recidivism rate was close to 0.6 percent. Moreover, 89.5 percent of offenders had strictly contact offenses, whereas five percent had strictly pornography offenses. Implications for risk assessment are discussed.

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Historically, research has tended to focus less on women who commit sex offenses than on male offenders. This limited interest may be explained by sociocultural views which portray women as nurturing, nonaggressive, and nonsexual, resorting to violence merely as an act of self-defense; these acts of violence are usually committed against men.^{1,2} Such a portrayal can clash with the mounting evidence of women who voluntarily commit sex offenses against children or adults. Thus, fully understanding the phenomena of female sex offenders requires changing certain historical perceptions about women.

Traditional views tend to rationalize the behaviors of female sex offenders and their offenses. They consider that female sexual offenses are “harmless” and that women may sexually offend only if they have a mental disorder, are maladapted to their feminine role, or are coerced into the act by a man.³ Additionally, studies have generally shown that

there may be gender variances in child sexual abuse prevalence and in help-seeking behaviors, and that this may be secondary to a dichotomous perception that women are the “victims” and men are the “perpetrators.”⁴ Moreover, professionals tend to disregard victims when they report their sexual abuse by women, which adds to the victims’ trauma.² This problematic outlook on female sex offenders has been suggested to affect the reporting of sexual offenses perpetrated by women.² Although the harm caused by female sex offending is evident, the percentage of women among all sex offenders is estimated to be two percent.³ This percentage is likely an underestimation because the percentage is considered much larger than numbers extracted from prison populations. Victimization surveys show that the percentage of women in the sex offender population may reach 12 percent.³

Recent studies have consistently found that female offenders have different clinical, historical, and victim characteristics than their male counterparts.⁵ Additionally, women who offend alone have different characteristics than women who offend with a partner (co-offenders). One study found that female solo sex offenders against children had a higher likelihood of interpersonal and mental health problems compared with their male counterparts, and that

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female co-offenders had more difficulties in self-regulation.⁵ Additionally, male sex offenders were found to have more antisocial traits. Regarding offense-supportive cognitions, male and female solo offenders were more likely than female co-offenders to believe that children are safer targets than adults in that they are much less likely to retaliate and to believe that they had ownership over children.⁵

Regarding female sexual recidivism rates, a meta-analysis done by Cortoni *et al.*,⁶ involving more than 2,000 women, found that recidivism rates varied between one and three percent over a follow-up time-frame of 6.5 years. The five-year recidivism rate for female sex offenders (one to three percent) seems to be considerably lower than that of male offenders (13%).⁷ Interestingly, rates of nonsexual recidivism in women were shown to be substantially higher than sexual recidivism in women (21.3% versus 1.5%),⁷ a finding that is similar among male sex offenders.⁸

Literature has also shown a difference in sex offender characteristics for different crimes. Among older adult males, child pornography-only offenders had different characteristics than contact offenders who offended against minors and mixed offenders (who had pornography offenses and contact offenses).⁹ Pornography-only offenders have a shorter criminal history, a better level of functioning, and lower rates of antisocial features than the other two subgroups.^{10,11} Most research done on the risk of sexual re-offense has analyzed male sex offenders, so that many risk assessment instruments are formulated specifically to men.⁷ No tool has been designed to assess the risk of sexual recidivism in women because of the low prevalence of detected female offenders, in addition to the low rates of sexual re-offending (one to three percent).^{3,6,7} Recidivism in female sex offenders has mostly been studied in women who were involved in contact sex offenses.⁸ To the best of our knowledge, there is limited information on the characteristics and recidivism risk of female pornography-only sex offenders, compared with other types of offenders. These groups might have different profiles and recidivism risks, similarly to male offenders: The recidivism risk seems to be lower in male pornography-only offenders possibly because they have greater self-control.¹⁰

In our study, we aim to examine the criminological characteristics of registered female sex offenders and highlight the differences between pornography and nonpornography female offenders. Our study can

help add to the growing literature regarding female sex offenders. We retrieved our sample data from the publicly available Missouri sex offender registry database. We included all female sex offenders of any age, currently residing in the state of Missouri, who have committed their crimes and were convicted in Missouri. Our study provides information regarding sociodemographic characteristics as well as the recidivism risk in first-time female sex offenders. Such information can aid in formulating a more targeted risk assessment tool specifically for female sex offenders, which in turn can better assess the recidivism risk and prevent further offenses.

Methods

Data Source

We downloaded the sex offender registry file of Missouri in April 2021 through the Missouri State Highway Patrol Sex Offender Registry website.¹² The file had sociodemographic information for each individual who has been convicted of a sex offense and was required to register. The file also contained the offense and conviction dates of each offender as well as the age and sex of the victim(s) of each offense. The Institutional Review Board of the American University of Beirut waived review of the research, as it was based on public data.

Selection Criteria

We retrieved the data of all registered female sex offenders. We excluded offenders who had either committed their offenses or were adjudicated outside Missouri.

Measures

We gave each offender a unique identification number and retrieved the following sociodemographic variables: age at each offense, age at each conviction, and race. We grouped offense counts for each offender by offense date and conviction date. We coded each offense as described in the Revised Statutes of Missouri.¹³ To address our study's objectives, we categorized offenders as follows: pornography-only offender who committed strictly child pornography offenses; contact-only offenders who committed strictly contact sexual offenses; mixed offenders who committed both types of

Female Sex Offenders from the Missouri Registry

Table 1 Female Sex Offender Characteristics

Characteristic	Female Offenders (<i>N</i> = 532)
Age at earliest offense(s) leading to first conviction, median (interquartile range)	28.5 (23.0–35.0)
Race, <i>n</i> (%)	
White	471 (88.7)
Black	57 (10.7)
Other	3 (0.6)
Tier, ^a <i>n</i> (%)	
I	54 (10.2)
II	37 (7.0)
III	441 (82.9)
Counts, <i>n</i> (%)	
One	332 (60.5)
Multiple	210 (39.5)
Offender category, <i>n</i> (%)	
Pornography only	26 (5.0)
Contact only	469 (89.5)
Contact and Pornography (mixed offenders)	10 (1.9)
Prostitution only	9 (1.7)
Trafficking only	9 (1.7)

^a Sex offenders are classified according to a three-tier system depending on their offenses, as detailed in Missouri Statute 589.414. As of August 28, 2018, Tier I offenders are required to register for 15 years, Tier II offenders for 25 years and Tier III offenders for their lifetime.

offenses; prostitution offenders; and sex-trafficking offenders.

Furthermore, we extracted the age and sex of the victim(s) of each offense. We classified the victims' age according to the type of offense and the age cutoff used by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5) to diagnose pedophilic disorder.¹⁴ Missouri statutes specify that the age cutoff in child pornography offenses is less than 18 years of age. Therefore, we categorized pornography offenders according to the following two victim categories: prepubescent (13 years old or younger) and pubescent minor (14 through 17 years old). Conversely, Missouri considers age 17 to be the age of consent.¹⁵ So, we classified all other offenders into three victim categories: prepubescent (13 years old or younger); pubescent minor (14 through 16 years old); and adult (17 years old or older).

Analysis Plan

We conducted exploratory analyses using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), version 21.¹⁶ We ran descriptive statistics for all variables and then conducted bivariate analyses to identify correlates distinguishing pornography-only offenders from

contact-only offenders. We excluded mixed offenders from the bivariate analyses because of small sample size.

Results

Sample Characteristics

Our total sample consisted of 532 female sex offenders who committed a total of 992 offenses between December 1979 and April 2020. They made up about 2.7 percent of the total number of registered sex offenders in Missouri included in the database. The age at time of offense ranged between 13 and 71 years; median age was 28.5 (interquartile range (IQR) = 23.0–35.0). Sample characteristics are displayed in Table 1.

Pornography-only offenders and contact-only offenders constituted five percent (*n* = 26) and 89.5 percent (*n* = 469) of the total sample, respectively. Mixed offenders (pornography and contact offenses) constituted 1.9 percent (*n* = 10) of the sample. Offense counts per offender ranged between 1 and 30; median count was 1 (IQR = 1–2). The most frequent offense was Statutory Rape, Second Degree (21.7%), followed by Statutory Sodomy, Second Degree (13.5%), then Endangering the Welfare of a Child, First Degree (7.4%).

Pornography and Contact Offenders

For the purposes of our analyses, we excluded the offender categories of trafficking (*n* = 9) and prostitution offenders (*n* = 9) because of small sample size. The remaining 505 female sex offenders were divided into three groups: pornography-only offenders (*n* = 26; 5.1%); contact-only offenders (*n* = 469; 92.9%); and mixed offenders (*n* = 10; 2.0%). More than 40 percent of contact offenders had exclusively male pubescent victims, and close to 20 percent had exclusively prepubescent male victims. More details are available in Table 2. Close to 40 percent of pornography offenders had a nonexclusive pool of victims (prepubescent and pubescent, male and female); conversely, about a quarter of pornography-only offenders had exclusively pubescent female victims. Further details are available in Table 3.

We compared pornography-only and contact-only offenders in bivariate analyses. We excluded mixed offenders because of small sample size. We found that pornography-only offenders were significantly

Table 2 Sample Size (Percent) of Contact-Only Offenders' Victims, by Age, Category, and Sex

Victims	Female	Male	Female and Male	Total
Prepubescent	77 (16.4%)	93 (19.8%)	7 (1.5%)	177 (37.7%)
Pubescent	40 (8.5%)	193 (41.2%)	3 (0.6%)	24 (50.3%)
Prepubescent and pubescent	6 (1.3%)	10 (2.1%)	1 (0.2%)	17 (3.6%)
Adult	9 (1.9%)	24 (5.1%)	—	33 (7.0%)
Adult and prepubescent	1 (0.2%)	1 (0.2%)	1 (0.2%)	3 (0.6%)
Adult and pubescent	—	1 (0.2%)	1 (0.2%)	2 (0.4%)
Adult, prepubescent, and pubescent	1 (0.2%)	—	—	1 (0.2%)
Total	134 (28.6%)	322 (68.7%)	13 (2.8%)	469 (100.0%)

Note. Prepubescent: age < 14 years; Pubescent: age ranges between 14 and 16 years; Adult: age > 16 years.

likely to be older than contact-only offenders at the time of their first offense (median age 35.0 versus 28.0; $P = .012$). The association remained significant after excluding offenders with adult victims ($P = .008$). Additionally, pornography-only offenders were less likely to have exclusive types of victims compared with contact-only offenders with only underage victims. Indeed, pornography-only offenders were significantly more likely than contact-only offenders to have prepubescent and pubescent (53.8% versus 4.0%; Pearson chi-square = 96.32; $P < .001$) and male and female (42.3% versus 2.6%; Pearson chi-square = 84.36; $P < .001$) victims.

Recidivists

Only three of 532 offenders (.6%) recidivated with a sexual offense (all contact offenses). The three recidivists committed exclusively contact offenses. All three had initial offenses against prepubescent male victims leading to first convictions. Interestingly, two of them had recidivating offenses involving adults: one was convicted of incest with an adult male victim, and one was convicted of second-degree sodomy with a female adult victim. The remaining recidivating offender was convicted of incest with a pubescent male. Two offenders recidivated eight years after their initial conviction date, and one recidivated 16 years after her first conviction.

Discussion

Our study explored the characteristics of a large sample of female sex offenders in the Missouri registry and compared pornography-only, contact-only, and mixed offenders. We found that the age range of female offenders was 13 to 71 years with a median age of 28.5 years, which aligns with research findings on female sex offender average mean age being between 26 and 32.¹⁷ This information also parallels the findings of the vast majority of criminological literature on the age-crime curve showing a decrease in criminal behavior in middle age.^{18,19} Furthermore, we found that close to 90 percent of first-time offenders committed contact offenses; about 40 percent of this subgroup had exclusively pubescent male victims, whereas 20 percent had exclusively prepubescent male victims. It is possible that there are distinct subcategories of female contact offenders based on offender and victim characteristics. Vandiver and Kercher²⁰ used cluster analysis to come up with a typology of female sex offenders, using data from the Texas registry. They identified six categories of female sex offenders based on offender's age and criminal history, victim's age and gender, and relationship between offender and victim.²⁰ Other typologies took into account the presence or absence of a co-offender.^{21,22} To the best of our knowledge, none of the typologies accounted for pornography-only offenders as a distinct category.

Table 3 Sample Size (Percent) of Pornography-Only Offenders' Victims, by Age, Category, and Sex

Victims	Female	Male	Female and Male	Total
Prepubescent	3 (11.5%)	1 (3.9%)	—	4 (15.4%)
Pubescent	7 (26.9%)	—	1 (3.9%)	8 (30.8%)
Prepubescent and pubescent	2 (7.7%)	2 (7.7%)	10 (38.5%)	14 (53.9%)
Total	12 (46.2%)	3 (11.5%)	11 (42.3%)	26 (100.0%)

Note. Prepubescent: age < 14 years; Pubescent: age ranges between 14 and 17 years.

Pornography-only offenders totaled five percent of the sample, with 40 percent of this subgroup having nonexclusive types of victims with regards to age and sex. None of the pornography-only offenders recidivated. One explanation might be that pornography-only offenders have fewer antisocial attitudes and more developed psychological barriers, which help them not to act on their sexual impulses even though they display more pedophilic interests compared with contact-only offenders.^{10,23} One study found that female pornography-only offenders were not motivated by monetary gains but rather to maintain the emotional engagement of their male co-offender.²⁴

The number of recidivists was remarkably low at 0.6 percent. Two of three females re-offended within 10 years of their initial offense, when they were in their 40s. No relationship has been established between age and sexual recidivism in women according to two studies from two different jurisdictions (New York and Texas).⁷ In contrast to findings in male sex offenders, studies have shown that age and sexual recidivism in women seemed to share a linear relationship only in prostitution offenders. There was no association, however, between age and recidivism risk in female contact sex offenders.²⁵ We found that all recidivists had index offenses against male victims. This is a well-established risk factor for recidivism among male sex offenders²⁶ that may also be relevant among female sex offenders.

To our knowledge, our study is the first to compare characteristics of pornography-only and contact female sex offenders. The strengths of our study include a large sample size of an incarcerated and community-based population of female sex offenders. Our study has several limitations. First, our sample was too small to conduct regression analyses to identify correlates of pornography-only offenders as opposed to other types of offenders. Second, our study was cross-sectional and only included registered sex offenders who were alive at retrieval of data. This sample may under-represent the actual number of sex offenders in the population. Third, our dataset lacked important information that might distinguish types of offenders, including but not limited to: overall criminal history, the presence of a co-offender, socioeconomic data, mental health information, and history of adverse childhood experiences. Indeed, research has shown that these are relevant factors in assessing risk of recidivism among female sex

offenders.²⁷ The lack of available information about co-offenders in our dataset is an important limitation. Studies have shown that female co-offenders have different characteristics than solo offenders.^{5,21} Furthermore, co-offenders can be distinguished into two subtypes: coerced and accompanied.²² Fourth, we had no information regarding case dispositions. Fifth, our sample was restricted to Missouri and our findings may not be generalizable to other states or countries.

Conclusion

In conclusion, our study shows that the striking majority of female sex offenders in Missouri are contact offenders and mostly have pubescent male victims. Pornography-only offenders were different and mostly had nonexclusive types of victims with regard to gender and age groups. Women constitute a minority of registered sex offenders and seem to have low recidivism rates. Regardless, future research should explore the predictors of sexual offending, taking into account that predictors are probably gender- and age-specific and might be different depending on types of offenses. Gender-specific risk assessment tools are needed to better prevent recidivism.

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