

**Sexual Abuse of Parents**

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### **Abstract**

Over the last four decades, knowledge relating to sexual violence has grown exponentially. Most of this work has focused on sexual violence by adult men against their adult, female intimate partners, with a separate but significant body of literature examining sexual abuse and exploitation of children. Consequently, several groups have been excluded or have been rendered invisible in the literature and subsequent policy and practice developments. In particular, adult victims of sexual violence by their children have received very little research or policy attention. Currently, research examining sexual abuse against parents is subsumed within broader studies examining adolescent to parent violence or elder abuse. These broader bodies of literature have distinct methodological and theoretical biases which makes retrieving and comparing evidence specifically on sexual abuse very difficult. Following an introduction to the topic and overview of the underpinning conceptual, theoretical, and methodological issues, this chapter examines the available literature, identifying key themes in relation to victim, perpetrator, and offence characteristics. Additionally, it presents findings from an analysis of media reports of sexual assaults against people aged 60 years and over involving an (adult) child or grandchild. Additionally, given the paucity of available evidence, this chapter considers priorities for future research.

Key words: sexual abuse; child to parent abuse; elder abuse; older victims

## Sexual Abuse of Parents

### Introduction

It is widely accepted that sexual abuse and sexual violence are significant global problems affecting millions of people annually, in particular women and children. Globally, it is estimated that at least one in three women experience some form of physical or sexual violence in their lifetime (World Health Organisation [WHO], 2013) and in the UK the figure is one in five (Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2018). The ONS analysis, consistent with broader research in this area, reveals that adult men are also victims of sexual violence, although they are victimised at lower levels than women. Regardless of victim gender, males are responsible for the majority of sexual violence.

Sexual abuse has been defined variously as the engagement of children or other victims in a range of sexual behaviours where victims are unable to give informed consent, or where they are coerced or forced to take part in sexual activities that are developmentally inappropriate or harmful for them. Sexual abuse as a term emerged first as a sub-category within the broader child maltreatment field, but has since been extended to adults whose experiences may fit within this definition. WHO (2016) estimates that, across the world, one in five girls and one in 13 boys are sexually abused during their childhoods.

Often, sexual abuse is relational and occurs over a period of time. Although there may be elements of violence employed in the commission of sexual abuse, the nature of this violence may be subtle and not necessarily physical in nature. Many sexual abusers, for example, rely on coercion and trickery, and exploit the vulnerability of their victims in order to commit acts of sexual abuse.

Conceptually, sexual violence and sexual abuse are clearly related; often people talk about them synonymously, but it is important to draw out the distinctions, particularly as they apply to new issues such as those explored in this chapter. Over the last four decades there have been important developments across research, policy, and practice to develop understandings of the nature, consequences, and causes of sexual abuse and sexual violence in various contexts. This work has drawn attention to the widespread prevalence of sexual violence, the majority of which is perpetrated by someone known to the victim. For example, in England and Wales only 15% of rapes and sexual assaults of adults are perpetrated by a stranger (ONS, 2018). For child sexual abuse, the figure is lower still, with an estimated 93% of cases involving a perpetrator known to the victim (Rainn, N.D).

Research on adult victims of sexual violence has consistently reported that young women, typically aged 16-40 years, are most at risk of experiencing sexual violence. For example, in the USA it is reported that 54% of victims are aged 18-34 years (RAINN, n.d). In Canada, 47% of victims are aged 15-24 years (Statistics Canada, 2017). These findings are consistent across the globe. The most common perpetrator for women in these age groups is a partner/ex-partner or acquaintance (e.g. see ONS, 2018).

The focus of most research has therefore, and understandably, concentrated on developing an evidence base on sexual violence within the context of intimate and familial relationships, where the majority of sexual abuse of adults (and children) occurs. Most awareness raising and policy and practice developments have also focused on children and young women as victims. However, over the last decade there has been a steady increase in research examining sexual violence against previously hidden groups. This includes male victims (Weare, 2018) and those living in institutions (for example hospitals, prisons, detention centres) (e.g. Sondhi *et al*, 2018), and sexual abuse and assaults of older people (Bows and Westmarland, 2017; Bows, 2018; Bows, 2019). A body of research has also focused

specifically on harmful sexual behaviours in childhood and adolescence (Hackett, 2014; Hackett *et al*, 2013).

However, one group of victims that have received very limited attention is parents/grandparents. Whilst abuse of parents/grandparents more generally has been a topic of increasing interest over the last decade, the majority of this work has been concerned with physical, psychological, and financial abuse. For example, adolescent-to-parent violence (APV) and child-to-parent violence have emerged as distinct research areas in the last 10 years (see, for example, Bonnick, 2019; Condry and Miles, 2020). This work has drawn attention to the existence of violence and abuse of parents, estimated to affect between 7 and 21% of families (Miles and Condry, 2015). In England and Wales, the largest research study on APV to date, based on analyses of 1,892 cases reported to the police, reveals the gendered nature of this phenomenon: 77% of victims were female and 87% of suspects were male (Condry, 2014). Most of the behaviour was physical and psychological/emotional. Holt (2016) observes that studies from the USA, Canada, Europe, and Australia have found between 3.5% and 10.8% of young people have hit their parents on at least one occasion in the previous 1-3 years and up to 60% have used verbal aggression within the last 6 months. Sexual abuse is seldom mentioned in any of the existing research, despite being included in definitions of APV, prompting questions about the prevalence of sexual violence by young people on parents/parental figures and the usefulness of current conceptual models to describe this phenomenon.

Separately, the field of elder abuse has been concerned with examining the extent, nature, causes, and consequences of different forms of abuse against 'older' people (variably defined as 50 and over, 55 and over and 60 and over). The available research indicates that at least 1 in 6 older people will experience some form of abuse each year (Yon *et al*, 2017), with psychological abuse being the most common, followed by financial abuse. Sexual abuse has consistently been found to be the least common form of abuse in elder abuse studies, although research from other disciplines (i.e. domestic violence and abuse studies) has produced much higher figures (see Bows, 2018, for a review). Most of the elder abuse research reports that partners/spouse and children/grandchildren are the most common perpetrators of physical and psychological abuse (Santos *et al*, 2019) and partners or acquaintances the most common perpetrators of sexual violence (Bows, 2018).

In summary, sexual violence and abuse towards parents and grandparents by their adult children or grandchildren has received limited research and policy attention, with even less attention having been paid to the possibility of sexual violence by adolescent children towards parents or carers. Sexual violence and abuse research has typically shown young women to be most at risk of sexual violence, either by partners or acquaintances, and the majority of research and policy has focused on preventing and responding to sexual violence against children and women within family and dating contexts. Although the existence of violence towards parents and older people has been recognised through the emergent APV and elder abuse fields, sexual violence and abuse against parents and grandparents remains a neglected area of inquiry. This chapter will consider the conceptual and theoretical issues related to the study of sexual abuse of parents and grandparents before examining the empirical evidence. The chapter starts by examining harmful sexual behaviours by children and adolescents and evidence on the extent of sexual victimisation of parents or carers. This is a complex issue which raises conceptual and definitional problems about the nature and dynamics of sexual abuse, vulnerability, and the abuse of power within family relationships. The chapter then moves to an analysis of sexual abuse of parents and grandparents by

children or young people, followed by an examination of sexual abuse of parents and grandparents by adult children or grandchildren, defined as 18 or over.

### **Conceptualising sexual abuse and violence against parents/grandparents**

Sexual violence against parents and grandparents by their children or grandchildren covers a very wide range of contexts, issues, and ages (of both victims and ‘perpetrators’), which requires careful and sensitive unpacking. Rather than being discussed as a single, homogenous phenomenon, it is important to recognise the significant differences between children and young people who demonstrate harmful sexual behaviours, and adults who commit sexual offences against their parent or grandparent. The conceptual and theoretical considerations are considered in this section.

### **Children and young people who display harmful sexual behaviours**

#### Scale

Whilst sexual abuse (as defined above) was initially conceived as a set of behaviours perpetrated by adults on children, as professional understandings of sexual abuse have developed over the last two decades, so awareness has grown of the relatively high proportion of sexual abuse instigated not by adults, but by children and young people under the age of 18 years.

For example, in their study of child maltreatment in the UK using a randomly generated postcode sample of over 6,000 individuals, Radford *et al* (2011) found that 65.9% of the childhood contact sexual abuse reported by respondents had been perpetrated by under 18-year-olds. Although accurate figures on the true scale of the problem of sexual abuse committed by children and young people are difficult to establish, not least because of different definitions of the problem, as well as the inherent secrecy involved in the commission of such acts, many commentators on the subject now agree that somewhere between one quarter and one third of all sexual abuse in the UK concerns children and young people as the alleged abusers (Almond, Canter and Salfati, 2006; Hackett, Branigan and Holmes, 2019).

#### Distinguishing problematic, abusive and harmful sexual behaviours in childhood

A wide range of terms have been proposed to describe sexual behaviour problems in childhood, acknowledging that childhood (i.e. in the UK defined as up to the age of 18 years) is a developmentally diverse period. For example, some ‘sexual’ behaviours are normal if they are demonstrated in pre-adolescent children, but concerning if they continue into adolescence. Other sexual behaviours, by contrast, are considered a normal part of the development of adolescents, but would be highly unusual in pre-adolescent children (Ryan, 2000).

One helpful definitional distinction that can be drawn is between sexual behaviours that are ‘abusive’ and those that are ‘problematic’. The term ‘sexually abusive’ is mainly used to indicate sexual behaviours that are initiated by a child or young person where there is an element of manipulation or coercion (Burton *et al*, 1998) or where the subject of the behaviour is unable to give informed consent. By contrast, the term ‘sexually problematic’ is more often used to refer to sexual activities that may not include an element of victimisation but may interfere with the development of the child demonstrating the behaviour or that might cause distress to others. The important distinction here is that while abusive behaviour is by definition also problematic, problematic behaviours are not necessarily abusive

(Hackett, 2004). As both 'abusive' and 'problematic' sexual behaviours are developmentally inappropriate and may cause developmental damage, the term 'harmful sexual behaviours' has been proposed as an umbrella term (Hackett, 2014).

### Diversity of children and young people with harmful sexual behaviours

Pre-adolescent children with sexual behaviour problems are a diverse group with differing levels of need. These children also display a wide range of problematic sexual behaviours that are beyond what might be considered normal for their developmental stage. According to Johnson and Doonan (2005), only a small sub-group of children demonstrating problematic sexual behaviours also engage in sexually abusive behaviour. Studies of children with sexual behaviour problems suggest this group of children is likely to have experienced what Gray and colleagues call 'catastrophic levels of maltreatment' (1999, p. 616) from early in their childhoods, combined with high levels of family violence, family poverty, and poor parenting. Problematic sexual behaviours may emerge as a direct consequence of children's own experience of being sexualised through abuse, or may represent a more complex and indirect response to trauma and neglect.

The vast majority of adolescents engaging in sexually abusive behaviours are male, even taking into account under-reporting and the lack of available intervention services for young women with such behaviours (Hackett *et al*, 2013; Ryan *et al*, 1996). In other respects, however, adolescents with harmful sexual behaviours are a very diverse group. This diversity applies not only to the nature of their behaviours, the degree of physical violence used in their commission, the age and gender of victims, but also to broader developmental issues such as the age of onset, their family and educational backgrounds, intellectual capacities, experiences, and motivations. Chaffin and colleagues (2002) conclude that adolescents who sexually abuse children have no single defining profile and no one set of personality characteristics, family backgrounds, personal histories or co-morbid conditions. However, compared with non-sexually offending young people, adolescents presenting with harmful sexual behaviours have been found to have under-developed social skills, higher incidences of learning disabilities, more depression, and problems with impulse regulation (Chaffin *et al*, 2002).

It is likely that there are a number of sub-groups within the population of adolescents presenting with harmful sexual behaviours, each of which has distinct needs. In particular, young people who target younger children appear to be different from those who sexually offend against peers or adults, though their behaviours are not mutually exclusive. In contrast to young people who sexually abuse pre-pubescent children, those who sexually offend against peers and adults tend to show high levels of general delinquency, physical violence, and non-sexual criminality (Parks and Bard, 2006).

### The complexities of perpetration and victimisation in childhood

Despite the increasing recognition and awareness of the problem of sexually abusive behaviour in childhood and adolescence, the identification of children and young people as 'perpetrators' of sexual abuse remains a challenging area, both conceptually and ethically. This is particularly the case if we consider children's sexual behaviours towards adults, including parental figures.

In many cases, both pre-adolescent children and young people who present with such behaviours are both instigators *and* victims of abuse. Often, their harmful sexual behaviours represent "one element of a range of predisposing experiences, underlying

vulnerabilities and presenting problems in their lives” (Hackett, 2014, p. 11). Therefore, there is considerable overlap for many children between their sexual behaviour and their underlying experience of family experiences of harm and abuse. This can make it difficult to understand the nature and dynamics of sexual behaviours presented by children and young people in family contexts, including those directed towards parental figures, within a traditional ‘victim/perpetrator’ dichotomy.

This is particularly the case for younger, prepubertal children with problematic sexual behaviours. For these children, problematic sexual behaviours are very often a marker and a direct consequence of their own experiences of abuse. Children who behave in a sexually problematic way towards a parent or grandparent are highly likely to do so not because of any underlying pathology or propensity for sexual violence, but because they have experienced what Finkelhor and Browne (1985) have termed ‘traumatic sexualisation’. This then can set the blueprint for how children believe they are expected to behave towards abuse and they therefore sexualise their subsequent interactions with other adults. In such instances, extreme care should be taken not to label children as ‘sexual abusers’ or ‘perpetrators’. They need support with regard to their own abuse experiences, protection given their vulnerability for further exploitation and abuse, and guidance about appropriate and safe behaviours.

Adolescents who present with harmful sexual behaviours are often more developmentally independent than younger children but remain heavily influenced by their parents and caregivers. Adolescents across most jurisdictions are criminally liable for their sexual behaviours, and so sexual behaviours that contravene laws can constitute ‘sexual offending’. However, there has in the past been an unfortunate tendency to pathologize and demonise young people who present with harmful sexual behaviours, to view them as if they are the same as adult sex offenders, and to fail to recognise and respond to them as children. For example, in their paper entitled *“Don’t Shoot, We’re Your Children”*, Chaffin and Bonner (1998) warn against the punitive, aversive, and absolutist tone in which ‘treatment’ beliefs have grown about children and young people who commit sexual offences.

#### What is known about young people’s harmful sexual behaviours towards parents?

Many studies reporting on the nature of young people’s victimisation simply distinguish between sexually abusive behaviours directed to ‘pre-pubescent children’ and those against ‘peers and adults’ which is often treated as one group. Therefore, it is somewhat difficult to ascertain the extent to which adults, and specifically parental figures are victimised. However, most young people who sexually offend target victims known to them, in many cases either intimate partners or members of their immediate or extended family. Taylor (2003) found that only 3% of 402 incidents of sexual abuse by young people involved victims unknown to the adolescent.

In what is the largest published UK demographic study to date of a sample of 700 young people who had sexually abused others, Hackett and colleagues (2013) found that in 75% of cases where the victim’s age was known, young people had abused children aged 10 years or under; 45% of young people had abused victims aged 11–17 years; and 17 % had committed offences against adults. In most cases, adult victims were not parents but unknown adult women in the community or, to a lesser degree, non-biologically related carers, such as foster carers or residential workers in institutional settings.

There is evidence to suggest that young people who sexually offend against peers and adults are a particularly high-risk group with significant crossover between their sexual behaviours and broader offending and non-sexual violence. Hunter (1999) suggests that:

- Juveniles who sexually offend against peers or adults predominantly assault females and strangers or casual acquaintances.
- The sexual assaults of these youths are more likely to occur in association with other types of criminal activity (e.g., burglary) than those who target children.
- These juvenile sex offenders are more likely to have histories of non-sexual criminal offenses, and appear more generally delinquent and conduct disordered than those who sexually assault children.
- This group of youthful offenders is also more likely to commit their offenses in public areas than those who offend against children.
- These juveniles generally display higher levels of aggression and violence in the commission of their sexual crimes than those who offend against children.
- Youths who sexually offend against peers or adults are more likely to use weapons and to cause injuries to their victims than those who sexually assault children.

What is striking here is the potential crossover between young people presenting with sexually abusive behaviours towards peers and adults and the broader knowledge from the field of 'adolescent-to-parent' non-sexual violence. For instance, the UK Home Office (2015) guidelines on APV and abuse added the use of "heightened sexualised behaviours" to their description (2015, p.3), although it must be noted that this was not then discussed further within the report. Literature on child-to-parent violence rarely addresses sexualised behaviours, and Cottrell and Monk's (2004) literature review found only one mention of it (Cottrell and Monk, 2004).

However, in terms of intrafamilial sexual abuse by young people, the majority of reported victims are younger siblings, as opposed to older siblings or parents. Sexual abuse of parents is rarely a topic in the existing evidence and even the largest demographic studies of adolescent sexual offenders do not identify this as an issue (Finkelhor *et al*, 2009). One can only conclude that the issue is highly uncommon. An ongoing study of recent cases of harmful sexual behaviour involving children and young people (Hackett, in progress) confirms this perspective. Of 511 cases of sexual crime involving children under the age of 18 years as the alleged 'perpetrator' reported to the police in one police authority area over a 12-month period in 2018, none related to adult intrafamilial victims. Additionally, though anecdotal, one of us has worked directly in this field as a clinician and researcher for approaching 30 years and in that time has encountered only two cases where young people have sexually assaulted a biological parent.

To some extent this is unsurprising given the definitional and conceptual issues addressed above; if sexually abusive behaviour by young people relies on the forcing or the coercion of more vulnerable individuals into sexual behaviours, then adolescents are less likely to offend against powerful adults in their lives than they are younger and more vulnerable children. As such, the dynamics of parent and adult relationships are often such that parents are unlikely to be the direct victims of sexual assaults from their children, though these relational dynamics can clearly change as children become adults and as parents become more vulnerable in their later years. This is perhaps why there appears to be a disjuncture between findings about the rarity of the issue of sexual abuse of parents in childhood, as opposed to the developing evidence of the issue as it exists relating to adult



children and older victims (as discussed below), as these relational dynamics change substantially across developmental periods.

Finally, a distinction might be made between the few cases that involve the direct sexual assault or abuse of parents by young people, and the many cases where parents are not the direct victims of a child's harmful sexual behaviours but are still affected by it. Often, for example, where adolescents sexually abuse their siblings, parents may feel significantly distressed and experience traumatic responses to their child's behaviour. The discovery of their child's behaviours can raise unresolved issues for a non-abusing parent about their own history of abuse, can put significant pressure on wider family relationships, and can plunge whole family systems into crisis (Hackett, 2014). As such, the impact of harmful sexual behaviours has been described as akin to shotgun blast rather than a rifle shot (Hackett *et al*, 2015) with the effects reaching beyond an individual victim to a whole family system and beyond into the community. In other words, whilst parents or grandparents may not be the direct victim of a young person's behaviours, they are often secondary victims, in significant need of support and guidance. As such, it is probably more useful to see harmful sexual behaviour contextually as a family trauma which impacts the young person displaying the behaviour, as well as their siblings, parents, grandparents and others as secondary victims, than it is to view it within a more simplistic and orthodox 'victim/ perpetrator' frame.

### **Adults who sexually offend against their parents or grandparents**

There have been limited conceptual and theoretical developments in relation to sexual abuse of parents/grandparents by their adult children/grandchildren. Although violence and abuse by sons/daughters towards their parents has gained increasing recognition over the last decade, most of this work has been concerned with physical or emotionally abusive behaviour by children or young people within the emerging adolescent-to-parent and child-to-parent fields. Adult son/daughter violence towards parents has been given limited attention. In particular, sexual violence is under-researched and theorised and as a result there is very limited available data on the issue. The majority of relevant work is situated within the elder abuse field, which will briefly be considered in this section.

There is no single, agreed definition of elder abuse. Different jurisdictions, governments, organisations, and individuals use various definitions to describe violence and abuse against older people. One of the more commonly definitions was proposed by the World Health Organisation, who suggest that elder abuse is:

an act of commission or of omission ... either intentional or unintentional .... Of a physical, psychological, financial nature or other material maltreatment ... that will certainly result in unnecessary suffering, injury or pain, the loss or violation of human rights, and decreased quality of life for the older person (WHO, n.d., p. 126).

This definition does not specifically mention sexual abuse and it is arguable whether 'other material maltreatment' sufficiently captures sexual abuse which should be recognised as a form of abuse in its own right. Most other definitions of elder abuse do specifically include sexual abuse, although it is common in parts of Asia for sexual violence/abuse to be excluded from definitions of sexual abuse (Bows, 2018).

To complicate matters further, there is also no agreed definition of 'older', 'elder' or 'old age' (see Bows, 2019). Again, the World Health Organisation has suggested a starting

point of 60 or 65 years in developed countries, but there is significant variation in the starting point used by different researchers. Organisations, and governments.

As well as the definitional problems that exist, there are significant conceptual tensions between 'elder abuse' and other categories of violence and abuse, most notably domestic abuse. The definition proposed by the World Health Organisation incorporates physical, psychological, financial and 'other material' maltreatment but does not specify any perpetrators or contexts. This is in contrast to several other elder abuse definitions, which specify that elder abuse is perpetrated by a spouse, family member and, in some cases, also includes those in positions or relationships of trust (Bows and Penhale, 2019).

In many cases, therefore, definitions of elder abuse mirror definitions of domestic abuse, which also typically include physical, psychological, financial, and sexual abuse by a partner/spouse or other family member (Bows and Penhale, 2019). Moreover, the existing 'elder abuse' research consistently reveals partner/spouse or other family members to be the most common perpetrators of 'elder abuse' in the community (see Bows, 2019, for a review). Separating 'elder abuse' from 'domestic abuse', when in reality most research indicates they are in fact the same thing, has been criticised by multiple scholars for obscuring the gendered nature of abuse of older people, positioning the issue as one related to age ('elder') and consequently suggesting abuse in later life is qualitatively different to that experienced in earlier life, and carrying victim-blaming undertones (e.g. see Bows, 2019; Holt and Shon, 2016; Brandl and Raymond, 2012; Desmarais and Reeves, 2007).

Elder abuse thus remains conceptually contested, and this is also true of elder abuse theory, which remains limited. In a recent review of elder abuse theories, Abolfathi Montaz *et al* (2013) identify nine key theories that have proposed to explain elder abuse. None of these theories are particularly well evidenced and most are concerned with specific forms of elder abuse, none of which is sexual abuse. Many, such as social learning theory, situational theories, and social exchange theory have been applied mostly in situations where the victim is dependent on the offender, which excludes a significant proportion of victims who do not have care needs and/or do not rely on their son/daughter or grandson/daughter to care for them. No theories have been specifically applied to sexual abuse, and therefore none has been tested in situations involving an adult son/daughter or grandson/daughter who perpetrates sexual assault against their parent or grandparent.

In sum, the existing elder abuse field has been criticised for being conceptually weak. There is a lack of agreement over how to define elder abuse and who constitutes an older person, and many definitions exclude sexual abuse. Theoretically, there have been no attempts to examine elder sexual abuse specifically and no specific interrogations of adult child/grandchild to elder sexual violence. As a result, there is a conceptual and theoretical lacuna when it comes to sexual abuse of older people by their adult children or grandchildren.

#### Research on adults who sexually abuse parents/grandparents

There is very little research exploring sexual offending against parents or grandparents. Most of the existing literature is located within the field of elder abuse studies, although there have been no specific studies examining elder sexual abuse by (adult) children or grandchildren. Rather, some broader studies examining elder abuse and/or elder sexual abuse include data on incidents where the perpetrator is a family member, including a son/daughter or grandson/granddaughter.

## Elder sexual abuse

There has been a steady growth of research examining elder abuse of the last two decades, much of which has been conducted in the USA. Some, although not all, of this research has examined sexual abuse either as part of broader studies examining elder abuse or as a standalone area of inquiry (see Bows, 2018 for a review). Often, the research reports on overall sexual abuse, of which sexual assault is a type, which can make disaggregation of data by type of abuse or victim/offender demographics difficult or impossible. To date, there have been no published studies which have specifically examined sexual abuse of elders by their (adult) children or grandchildren. In fact, much of the existing work has been concerned with sexual abuse in institutional nursing/care settings (e.g. Ramsey-Klawnsnik and Teaster, 2007; Teaster *et al*, 2007; Rosen *et al*, 2010; Ramsey-Klawnsnik and Teaster, 2008; Makimoto *et al*, 2015).

One of the few studies to specifically examine incestuous abuse of the elderly was conducted by Ramsey-Klawnsnik in 2004. This study specifically examined 100 cases of elder sexual abuse in the family referred to protective services, distinguishing marital assault from assault by relatives (termed incestuous abuse in the study). The study observed three categories within the incestuous elder sexual abuse group: adult child perpetrators; other relatives as perpetrators; and cases bordering incestuous involving quasi-relatives as perpetrators. In most cases the perpetrator was an adult son. Ramsey-Klawnsnik (2004) reports that adult son perpetrators typically embody a number of characteristics: they are usually unmarried, unemployed or under-employed, reside with the victim and are financially supported by the victim. Substance abuse and/or mental illness are frequent features. Conversely, the few cases involving daughters tend to involve more 'major' mental health problems and substance abuse problems.

Burgess *et al* (2008) analysed 284 cases of alleged elder sexual abuse. One of the aims of the authors was to examine characteristics of victims, incidents, and who the perpetrators of elder sexual abuse were. As with previous studies, most victims were female (93.5%), ranging in age between 60 and 100 years. Most incidents occurred in the victim's home (72%) and most reports of the assaults came from elders themselves (33%). Most offenders were male (91%), ranging in age from 13 to 90 years, although most were aged in their 30s and 40s. Incestuous abuse accounted for almost a quarter (23%) of the cases. Further detail on the specific features of these cases is not provided. In an earlier analysis of these cases, Burgess (2006) report that of the 54 cases of incestuous abuse, the victim had dementia in 37 (68%) of cases.

Teaster *et al* (2001) examined 42 cases of elder sexual abuse between 1996 and 1999. Victims were female in 95% of cases and offenders were male in all cases. In total, 7.5% of the cases involved a son/grandson perpetrator. Further details about these cases is not provided.

Ramsey-Klawnsnik (1991) found 28 cases of suspected domestic elder sexual abuse as described by Adult Protective Services workers in Massachusetts. All the victims were female, and most were sexually assaulted by their caregivers, with the largest category of perpetrators being husbands and adult sons ( $n = 18$ ) although a further breakdown of these cases is not provided.

Teaster and Roberto (2004) examined 82 cases referred to Adult Protective Services in Virginia over a 5-year period. Again, most victims were female (95%) and most were aged 70-79. This study involved a higher proportion of cases where the victim resided in a care home (72%) where abuse is less likely to be perpetrated by a family member. In all but one of

the cases the perpetrator was male. The paper reports that 9% were ‘family members’ but further detail on the nature and breakdown of these relationships (i.e. spouse, son, other family member) is not provided and no further information on these specific cases is presented.

There have been very few studies examining sexual assault of older people in the UK. Jeary (2005) analysed 52 cases of sexual assault against a victim aged 60 years and over, drawn from (adult male) prison and social services case files. There were 54 victims across the 52 cases. The majority of cases involved a female victim and male offender. Victims ranged 60-98 years old. The author reports that, in a third of the sexual assault and killing, rape and attempted rape cases the offender is typically a relative, but further detail on these cases is not provided.

Bows and Westmarland (2017) reported on the first study in England, Wales and Northern Ireland to analyse a national sample of rape and sexual assault by penetration offences recorded by the police over a 5-year period. The study found, like others before it, that most victims were female (92%) and offenders were male in 97% of cases where offender information was available. Few of the reported cases involved an adult child/grandchild – only 6 cases, of which 4 were perpetrated by a child.

In summary, the existing research indicates that a relatively small proportion of elder sexual abuse cases is perpetrated by an (adult) child or grandchild. Although the evidence is limited, it is clear that most cases of sexual abuse of an elderly victim by their adult child or grandchild involve a female victim and male offender, the majority being adult sons. These typically occur in the victim’s home and may be more likely to occur where the victim has dementia. Offender unemployment, mental health and substance abuse have been observed in some studies, along with financial independence on the victim and being unmarried at the time of the incident, but these are merely observations in single studies and much more research on offender profiles is required.

#### Media reporting of cases of sexual offending against a parent/grandparent

Despite the almost complete absence of research examining sexual abuse of parents/grandparents, the incidence is not completely hidden from public view. Both local and national/international media has reported on cases involving an (adult) child or grandchild sexually offending against their parent or grandparent, albeit infrequently. The coverage of these cases is often fairly limited in terms of detail, however, given the dearth of academic research on this issue, media reports of cases are currently the primary source of information on sexual assaults of parents and grandparents. In order to provide further detail about this phenomenon and address some of the gaps in official statistics and academic research, this section considers some of the cases reported on (internationally) over the last few years, specifically identifying themes in relation to victim, offender and incident.

Searches on Google and Lexis Nexis using combinations of the keywords ‘parent’ ‘elderly’ ‘elderly parent’ ‘elderly grandparent’ ‘grandparent’ AND ‘sexual abuse’ ‘sexual assault’ ‘sexual violence’ ‘rape’ were conducted. The inclusion criteria were articles published between 1 January 2004 and 1 July 2019 in English involving any form of sexual violence by an adult (aged 18 or over) son/daughter or grandson/daughter against their parent or grandparent. Thousands of matches were returned on Lexis Nexis, however a further search using the terms ‘son’ OR ‘daughter’ OR ‘grandson’ OR ‘granddaughter’ OR ‘mother’ OR ‘father’ OR ‘grandmother’ OR ‘grandfather’ reduced the number of matches to less than twenty and, of those, only five met the inclusion criteria. A further search on Google revealed

27 cases. All of these cases reported on alleged or confirmed rapes or sexual assaults. It is likely that other cases have been reported by media outlets not captured by these database searches, thus the analysis presented here is exploratory rather than comprehensive or exhaustive.

Table 1. Characteristics of incidents, victims and suspect/offenders								
Case no.	Year	Victim Sex	Victim Age	Suspect/offender Sex	Suspect/offender age	Relationship	Location	Country
1	2010	Female	70	Male	25	Grandson	Unconfirmed	South Africa
2	2015	Female	90	Male	27	Great grandson	Home	South Africa
3	2017	Female	Unconfirmed	Male	29	Mother	Home	UK
4	2019	Female	50	Male	28	Mother	Outdoors	USA
5	2018	Female	69	Male	32	Mother	Home	South Africa
6	2019	Female	60	Male	42	Mother	Home	India
7	2018	Female	52	Male	30	Mother	Home	South Africa
8	2019	Female	Unconfirmed	Male	45	Mother	Home	South Africa
9	2018	Female	50s	Male	34	Mother	Home	Singapore
10	2017	Female	63	Male	46	Mother	Home	USA
11	2007	Female	35	Male	16	Mother	Home	UK
12	2016	Female	60s	Male	-	Mother	Home	Ireland
13	2018	Female	50s and 60s	Male	32	Mother	Home	South Africa
14	2019	Female	96	Male x2	19 and 15	Great Grandmother	Unconfirmed	South Africa
15	2019	Female	90	Male	-	Grandmother	Home	Kenya
16	2012	Female	65	Male	45	Mother	Home	Ireland
17	2006	Female	45	Male	19	Mother	Home/trailer	USA
18	2016	Female	98	Male	36	Grandmother	Home	Kenya
19	2015	Female	76	Male	21	Grandmother	Home	Malaysia
20	2019	Female	82	Male	20	Grandmother	Home	Dutwywa

21	20 16	Fem ale	81	Male	23	Mother	Home	USA
22	20 14	Fem ale	82	Male	34	Mother	Home	USA
23	20 19	Fem ale	50	Male	28	Mother	Public street	Willow vale
24	20 19	Fem ale	62	Male	42	Mother	Home	Ukrain e
25	20 19	Fem ale	Unconfir med	Male	32	Mother	Home	UK
26	20 19	Fem ale	45	Male	Late 20s	Mother	Home	Kenya
27	20 19	Fem ale	60	Male	25	Grandmo ther	Outdoor	Ghana
28	20 18	Fem ale	77	Male	24	Grandmo ther	Home	Kenya
29	20 19	Fem ale	75	Male	27	Grandmo ther	Home	Namibi a
30	20 19	Fem ale	79	Male	28	Grandmo ther	Home	Kenya
31	20 15	Fem ale	81	Male	35	Grandmo ther	Home	USA
32	20 16	Fem ale	93	Male	20	Grandmo ther	Home	Uganda

All of the 32 cases involved a female victim. Despite extensive searches on Lexis Nexis and Google, no reports of cases involving a male victim (father or grandfather) were found. Similarly, all 32 cases involved a male suspect or perpetrator; no cases involving a female suspect or perpetrator were found, despite extensive, focused searches for cases. In most countries, rape can only be committed by a male as it requires penile penetration, however, searches using the terms sexual assault/sexual abuse/sexual violence returned no female suspect/perpetrator cases.

In the majority (18) of cases analysed, the victim was the mother. In one further case, the incident involved both a mother and grandmother who were sexually assaulted by their son/grandson. Victims age was reported in 16 cases and ranged from 35 to 82 years, with most aged 60-69 years (n = 7). The offender age ranged from 16 to 45 years. Most were in their 30s (n = 6) or 40s (n = 5).

In the remaining 12 cases, the sole victim was a grandmother or great-grandmother. Victims age ranged from 60 to 98 years, with most aged 90-99 years (n = 5) and 70-79 years (n = 5). Offenders were aged between 19 (although one case involved two offenders, one of whom was 15 but was excluded from the analysis) and 36 years, with most aged 20-29 years (n = 9).

All but two of the reported incidents (n = 32) occurred in the victim's home. Five of the reports include references to alcohol or drugs in relation to the victim and/or suspect/offender. In 6 cases, the offender committed another offence against a different individual at the time of the offence.

The majority of reported cases occurred in African countries; most were in South Africa (9) with a further 5 cases in Kenya, 1 case in Ghana, 1 in Uganda and 1 in Namibia. Three UK cases were reported and one in Ireland. The remainder were spread across the USA (6) India (1) Singapore (1) Malaysia (1) and Ukraine (1). However, caution must be taken with interpretation of these geographical variations. Various social and cultural factors contribute to under-reporting of sexual offences; an absence of official reports to police or law enforcement and subsequent coverage by the media does not mean an absence of incidents.

### Discussion

Thirty-two cases of sexual assault or rape of a parent or grandparent by their (adult) child or grandchild were analysed. All of these cases involved a female victim and male offender, despite extensive searches for male victim and female perpetrator examples. This may reflect the types of cases reported to the police or law enforcement, and subsequently picked up by the media; in other words, offences involving male victims may be less likely to be reported to official agencies and/or covered by the media. Similarly, there may be an under-recording of cases involving daughters or granddaughters who perpetrate sexual assaults against their parent or grandparent. However, these findings are consistent with previous research which has reported on sexual abuse of parents/grandparents.

There is a clear geographical bias in the reporting of these cases. The vast majority of reported incidents occurred in African countries and were subsequently reported in local news. A small number were reported by national or international news outlets. Outside of Africa, North America had the highest number of reported cases in the media. Very few cases were reported in Europe or Asia.

Most of the reported incidents were perpetrated by a son against his mother. The absence of research examining adult son to mother sexual violence means it is not possible to draw comparisons with the previous studies. Moreover, relatively little detail is provided in most of the media reports. In half (9) of the reports involving a mother victim detail on the offender background and/or incident characteristics was provided. In four cases, alcohol consumption (either by the victim and/or offender) was a feature and three involved a weapon. In four cases the offender had a known history of violence, either against the victim or someone else. In one case it was reported that the offender infected the victim with an STI.

In 13 cases the sole victim was a grandmother or great-grandmother. Again, limited detail was provided on the incident, victim or offender characteristics beyond sex and age. However, violence against the victim and/or others was reported in four cases. Drug/alcohol use by the offender was mentioned in one case. Several (n=5) mentioned elements of pre-meditation and/or sustained abuse.

Overall, these findings support some of the previous elder sexual abuse research. In particular, the sex of victims and offenders and relationship between victim/offenders are consistent with the existing literature. Moreover, although limited, some of the cases reported on here reveal alcohol use by victims and/or perpetrators before the assault and offender histories of previous violent offending. However, very little else is known about the backgrounds of victims and offenders and the media reporting of these cases typically excludes reference to any other characteristics. Research which explores cases of elder sexual assault by adult children/grandchildren is needed to enhance understandings of risk factors, opportunities for early intervention and support needs of victims.



Contrary to much of the wider elder abuse literature, frailty and victim dependence on the perpetrator was not a feature of these reports. To the contrary, many of the media reports describe the victim providing support for their son/grandson or the perpetrator specifically planning the assault by isolating the victim or breaking in to the victim's home. Although the limited number of media reports analysed here means the importance of such findings cannot be overstated, it is of interest that this contradicts much of the dominant narrative about elder abuse, which positions this to be an issue linked to caregiver stress and/or victim frailty or vulnerability (see Bows, 2019 and Bows and Westmarland, 2017 for a critical review of the construction of elder sexual abuse).

### **Conclusions and future directions**

Abuse of parents/grandparents by their children has gained increasing attention over the last decade. Most of the research to date has focused on physical and emotional abuse by children and young people located within adolescent-to-parent and child-to-parent violence conceptual frameworks. A separate body of work has examined harmful sexual behaviours by children and young people, with a focus on siblings and other children as victims.

Although sexual violence against older people is emerging as a topic of interest in criminological and feminist research (and to a much lesser extent, the elder abuse field) there have been no specific studies in the last few decades looking at (adult) children or grandchildren as perpetrators. Nevertheless, the available evidence indicates these offences do occur, although they form a small proportion of cases.

This chapter has examined the issue of sexual violence and abuse towards adults and parents. The available evidence indicates that, although cases of harmful sexual behaviour by children do exist, these behaviours are usually against other children/young people and are rarely against their parents or grandparents. Sexual abuse or violence by (adult) children or grandchildren towards their older parents/grandparents is also relatively uncommon, but the existence of such behaviours have been observed in a number of studies and media reports. Most of these cases involve adult men perpetrating sexual assaults and rape, primarily against their mothers. There is a bias in the reporting of these cases, with the majority occurring in African countries.

We know very little about the backgrounds of victims and offenders in these cases, and further research which explores offending histories and trajectories, victim and offender demographics and economic, social and cultural factors is required. We also need to consider the risk factors for sexual offending against parents and grandparents by their (adult) sons and grandsons, and examine whether current prevention strategies adequately take into account the possibility of sexual offending in these contexts. These empirical foundations are needed to test existing theories on sexual offending to assess whether such explanations, traditionally used to explain stranger or partner adult sex offending against other adults, can be applied more widely to sexual offending by young people and adult sons/daughters who sexually offend against parents.

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