

Trends & issues

in crime and criminal justice



Australian Government

Australian Institute of Criminology

No. 465 January 2014

Foreword | *Public policy initiatives to redress parental child sexual offenders have been hindered by the absence of an offending profile that characterises this core group of intrafamilial offenders. Drawing on data from a sample of 213 offenders, this study augments knowledge about sex offender typologies by identifying ten key descriptive features of parental offenders.*

The findings revealed that parental sex offenders have a distinctive profile unlike that of other child sexual offenders and are more criminally versatile than presupposed. This may provide useful information to support clinical practice and preventive interventions aimed at increasing offender desistance and reducing threats to the safety and welfare of young children and their families.

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Profiling parental child sex abuse

Jane Goodman-Delahunty

Almost universally, including every Australian state and self-governing territory, sexual relations between a parent and child constitute child sexual abuse (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989), although definitions of the crime and penalties vary by jurisdiction. Despite cultural taboos against incest and pervasive social opprobrium, complicity and silence about this offence impedes research advances (Sacco 2009). Studies in correctional settings typically include all subtypes of sex offenders and focus on high-risk extrafamilial offenders, leading to inconsistent findings about the treatment, risk management and prevention of intrafamilial offending (Butler, Goodman-Delahunty & Lulham 2012). Disclosure by popular celebrities of their personal experiences of incest has raised awareness of the widespread nature of this furtive offence (Phillips 2009; Winfrey 2011) but the topic remains understudied, misunderstood and inadequately addressed.

Information specific to offender subtypes can inform theory and assist in the development of evidence-based policies and interventions to more effectively reduce crime and enhance protections available to Australian children. To remedy the dearth of information about this covert crime and assess the distinctiveness of this subgroup of child sex offenders, this paper presents findings from an Australian parental sex offender sample referred to a community-based diversion program.

Prevalence estimates of parental child sex abuse in Australia

A meta-analysis of 65 research studies across 22 countries yielded comparatively high prevalence rates of childhood sexual abuse in Australia—38 percent for women and 13 percent for men (Pereda et al. 2009). Although 41 percent of Australian sexual assault victims are under the age of 15 years (AIHW 2011), only 10 percent of child sexual abuse cases are perpetrated by strangers (Richards 2011). Indications in the United States of a 28 percent decline from 1992–2010 in reports of sexual abuse by a family member are encouraging, but do not distinguish parental from other familial offenders (Goode 2012).

Precise estimates of the proportion of familial child sexual abuse perpetrated by a parent remain difficult to ascertain and are conservatively estimated at 15 percent of the general population (ABS 2005), with rates as high as 20 percent for female victims.

For the past two decades, sex offender management has focused on assessing the risk status of offenders using a variety of actuarial risk prediction instruments (Parent, Guay & Knight 2011). The primary objective has been the identification of high-risk offenders (Douglas & Skeem 2005). Studies of core groups of intrafamilial sex offenders, such as parental offenders, are lacking (Kingston et al. 2008). Researchers have stated that adult intrafamilial child sex offenders are distinct from other subtypes of sex offenders and therefore should be investigated as a discrete group (Finkelhor 2009; Stalans 2004). Moreover, policy development should not only focus on identifying whether convicted sex offenders are 'high risk' (Lussier & Cale 2013). Attention should also be given to lower risk offenders so treatment intensity can be matched to risk.

Compared with nonsexual offenses, child sexual offences in Australia are characterised by high attrition rates after the first report and prior to trial, a lower guilty plea rate, a higher rate of withdrawal and dismissal without hearing, a lower probability of conviction and a higher success rate on appeal (Goodman-Delahunty, Cossins & O'Brien 2010). Few parental child sex offenders are apprehended, charged and convicted for their offences (Cossins 2011). These factors contribute to the low number of parental sex offenders in custody.

Compared with other sex offenders, parental offenders comprise a group characterised by a low level of risk (assessed by risk instruments such as the Static-99; Hanson & Thornton 2000) and low base rates of reoffending (Langevin et al. 2004). As a result, the few parental offenders who do serve custodial sentences often receive short sentences, precluding placement in custodial treatment programs (Holmes 2011; Patrick & Marsh 2011). The small number of parental child sex offenders in

prisons has impeded research access and outcomes, which may assist in developing public policy on low-risk sex offending (Schweitzer & Dwyer 2003).

A preliminary step towards the improvement of treatment and management of parental offenders is a detailed profile of their victims, their offending behaviours and criminogenic needs (Olver et al. 2007).

Aims of the current study

- Extend the profile of characteristics of parental child sex offenders and offending behaviours.
- Document commonalities and differences between this subgroup and other child sexual offenders.

Method and procedures

The New South Wales Pre-Trial Diversion of Offenders Program (Cedar Cottage) provides treatment to parental child sex offenders, their victims and family members to prevent reoffending. Legal proceedings are adjourned during an eight week assessment period while the offender's eligibility to participate in the program is determined. Offenders who are accepted into the program enter a guilty plea and are diverted into the community-based treatment program; offenders who are declined treatment return to the courts for standard criminal prosecution. Treatment consists of bi-weekly individual and group therapy sessions, over two to three years.

Researchers were granted access to confidential records of the entire sample of parental child sex offenders referred to the Diversion Program for assessment, regardless whether treated or declined. The volume of information available about this offender sample was extensive. For each offender, records of bi-weekly group and individual therapy provided up to four file boxes of information. Clinical progress notes permitted the researchers to track the progress of treated offenders over a period lasting 24–36 months.

Even for offenders who were declined treatment, multiple records were generated during the assessment phase, including

the Multiphasic Sex Inventory (Nichols & Molinder 1984). Since the program also provided treatment for the child victim and other family members, contemporaneous supplementary clinical notes, usually unavailable to corrections researchers, added corroborative details about offending behaviours.

By manual file audit, records maintained in the clinical treatment files were systematically coded by postgraduate research assistants. Information gathered included demographic details, index offence and victim information. This information was used to develop a profile of parental sexual offenders.

Official records of prior offences and reoffending (reports, charges and convictions) after the date of the last contact with the program were gathered from the NSW Police Computerised Operational Policing System and the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research Reoffending Database, within a follow-up period ranging from four to 18 years ($M=9.1$ years). Offences were coded as sexual, violent, non-sexual non-violent and general (overall offending).

The parental offender cohort

There were 213 male parental intrafamilial offenders referred to Cedar Cottage from 1989–2003 and the entire population of referrals in that period participated in the study. At the time of the index offence, participants ranged in age from 20–68 years ($M=36.2$; $SD=7.4$). At the time of referral, most participants were legally married (64%; $n=135$) or in a defacto relationship (22%; $n=46$). Participants who were accepted into the treatment program (56%) were not significantly different in race, age and marital status than offenders who were declined entry to the treatment program (43%). Employment status was the sole variable that differed most widely between the two groups ($\chi^2=12.9$, $df=6$, $p<.05$), where a higher proportion of accepted than declined offenders were engaged in stable employment at the time of assessment (75% vs 57%). Potential differences due to selection for diversion were statistically

controlled by propensity analysis (Butler et al. 2012).

Major descriptive findings are reported below. The profile that emerged corroborated and extended prior tentative findings about this subgroup.

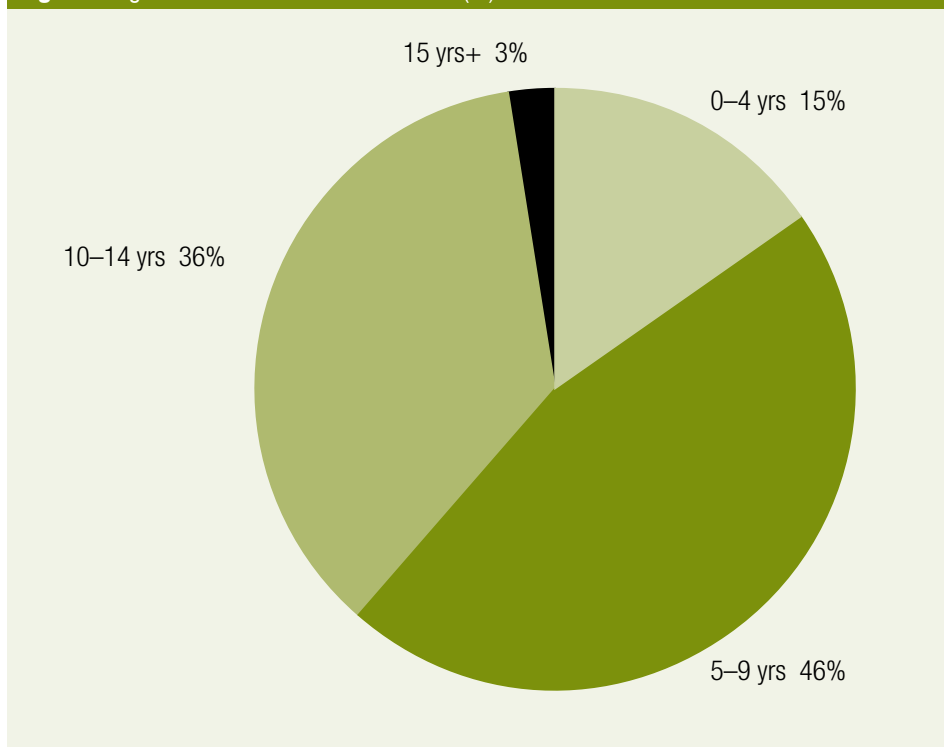
Victim–offender relationship

Most parental child sex offenders were men in a father–child relationship with their victim. During the 14 year period of observation, all referrals were men (the program subsequently had 1 female offender referral). Non-biological parents were stepfathers, foster fathers or de facto spouses of the non-offending parent. Although non-biological fathers (55%) predominated, the high proportion of biological fathers referred for treatment (45%) refuted notions that cultural incest taboos effectively inhibit biological fathers from perpetrating sexual abuse on their own children.

Extensive analyses demonstrated that differences between biological and non-biological fathers were negligible (Titcomb, Goodman-Delahunty & Waubert de Puiseau 2012). The two groups of offenders were demographically similar, with one exception—biological fathers were about three years older on average than non-biological fathers at the time of the first offence against the index victim ($M=37.8$ vs $M=35.1$ years, respectively) and at the time of referral to the Cedar Cottage program ($M=41.4$ vs $M=38.1$ years, respectively).

Few differences emerged between the offending behaviours of non-biological and biological parental offenders, both in terms of their prior criminal histories and their index offences. Non-biological fathers were more likely to have a history of prior criminal offences than biological fathers (61% vs 47%) and were also more likely to offend against younger victims ($M=7.8$ years vs $M=9.1$ years, respectively); however, these effect sizes were small, suggesting that these were not substantial differences. Finally, biological and non-biological parental offenders were equally likely to complete treatment (91% vs 93% vs respectively), to accept responsibility for their offending behaviour (48% and 44% respectively)

Figure 1 Age of victims of the index offence (%)



and to have similarly low rates of sexual reoffending (13% vs 9% respectively).

Age of child victims

Some instances of sexual abuse of infants occurred, but most victims of parental sexual abuse were young children of primary school age (see Figure 1). More than three-fifths of the victims were under the age of 10 years at the time of disclosure of the abuse. On average, three years lapsed between the onset of the first documented abusive incident and referral to the Cedar Cottage program. The mean age of the victims from the offending sample at the onset of abuse was eight years. Only three percent of the offending sample referred to Cedar Cottage had victims over the age of 14 years.

These outcomes were consistent with prior research showing that parental sex offenders comprised two main groups—those with very young victims (under 5 years of age) and those with pre-pubescent and pubescent victims aged six to 12 years (Firestone et al. 2005).

Primary victims are girls

Almost overwhelmingly, the child victims of parental sexual abuse in the community

sample were exclusively female (91%), confirming reports published two decades earlier about victim preferences of parental offenders (Parker & Parker 1986). Exceedingly few offenders in this sample had male victims exclusively (5%) and only a small proportion offended against children of both genders (4%; see Figure 2).

Repeated abuse

In this sample, the index offence of only eight percent of the offenders involved single occasions of a single sexual act with a child. More than half of the offenders (57%) committed index offences that entailed between two and 50 separate incidents of abuse. Moreover, the average duration of the index offences was 3.5 years (range 0–16 years). On average, the offending parents engaged in multiple types of sexual acts with their children ($M=4.5$ acts, range 1–10). In other words, a description of intrafamilial offending as a one-off event was apt for fewer than 10 percent of the sample. One-third of offenders and victims disclosed between two and 10 separate incidents or occasions of abuse (33%) associated with the index offences, although the range was broad, from a single incident to in excess of 1,000 incidents (see Figure 3).

Figure 2 Gender of victims of the index offence (%)

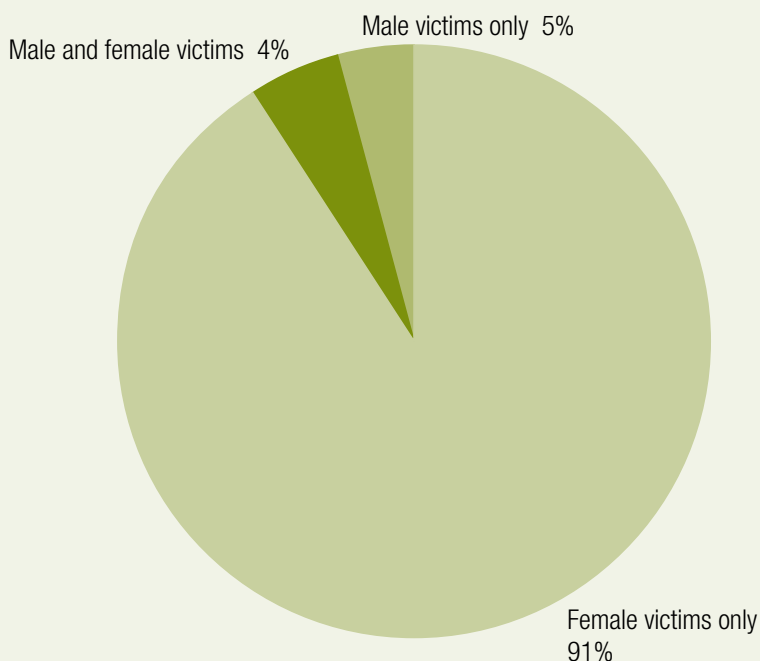
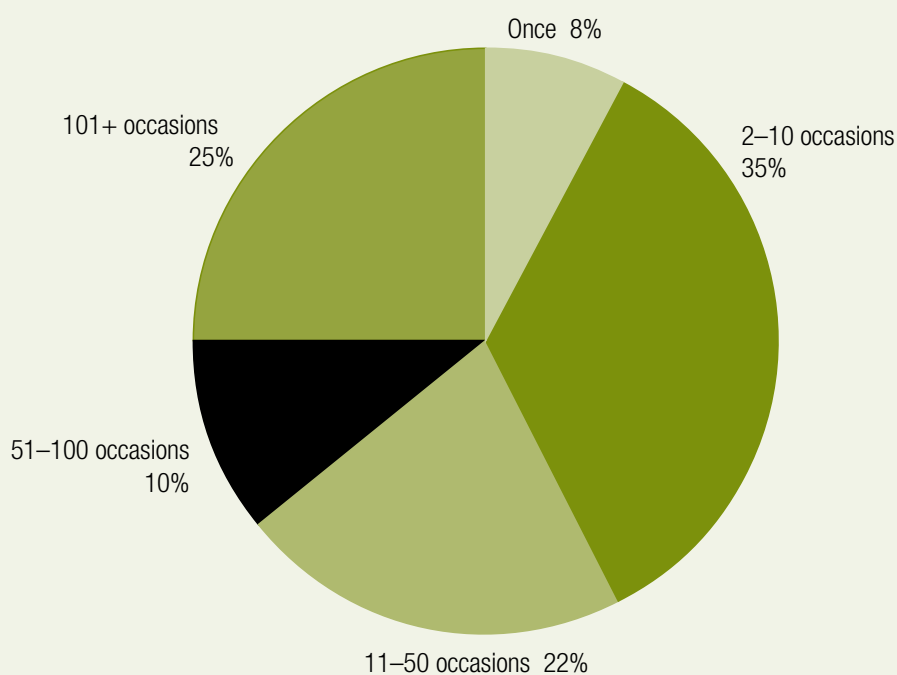


Figure 3 Number of different occasions of sexual abuse (%) (n=213)



Details of undocumented victims were disclosed by 11 percent of the group in the course of individual or group therapy (Pratley & Goodman-Delahunty 2011). Repeat incidents may be more likely in samples of arrested/charged offenders (such as the present sample), as they are probably more likely to be disclosed.

Moreover, although one criterion for eligibility for diversion to treatment in this community-based program was the absence of any prior conviction for a sexual offence, a small proportion of offenders in the sample had prior convictions for sexual offending (5%). Indeed, if the less conservative criterion of official police reports or charges was considered, the proportion of the sample

noted to have a history of sexual offending doubled (11%).

Together, the scope of the index offence abuse, the further disclosures by offenders in the course of treatment (beyond what was documented in their index charge and statements provided by the child victims), coupled with the fact that one in 10 offenders had an official record of sexual offending, demonstrates that this is a more deviant and persistent group of offenders than has typically been presumed. In this regard, parental sex offenders are among the successful and productive sex offenders who tend to be classified as low risk and to receive shorter sentences (Lussier, Bouchard & Beauregard 2011).

Penetrative offences common

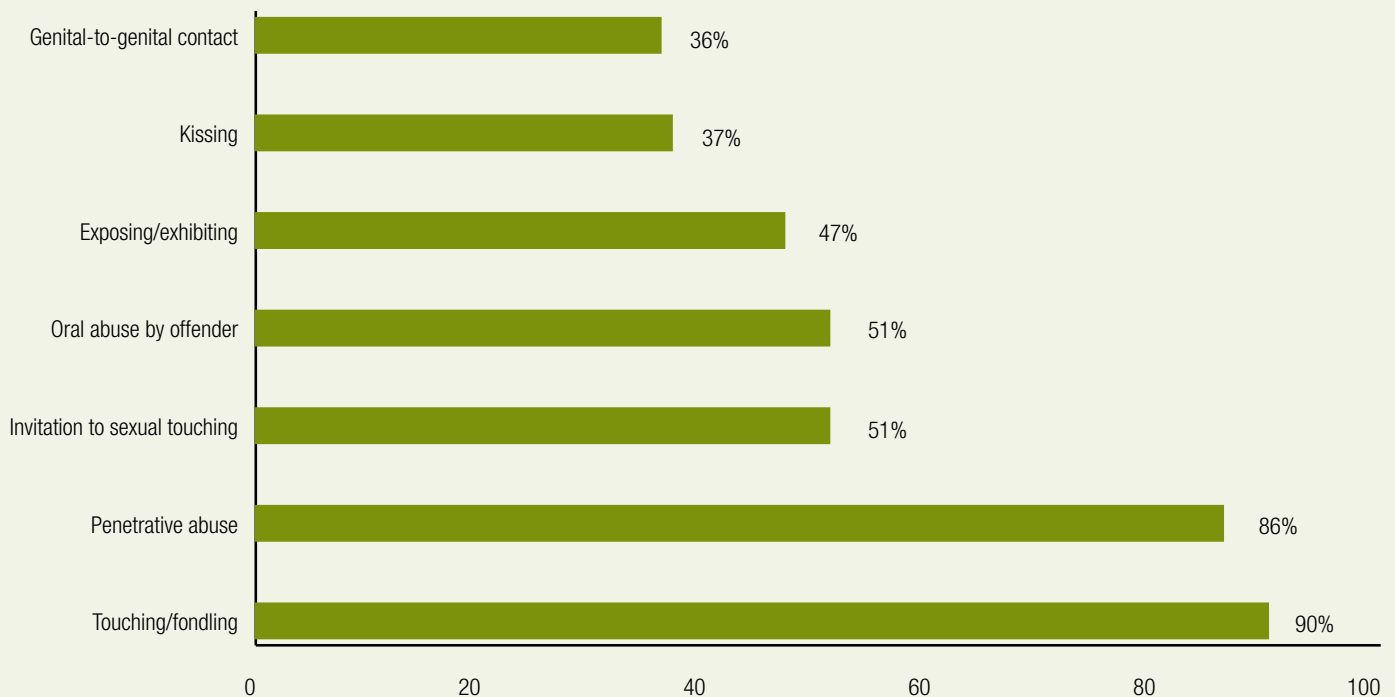
In this sample, only one offender was referred for a non-contact offence.

The majority of the offences admitted (86%) were penetrative (digital or penile) irrespective of the age of the victim. Over three-quarters of the female victims (77%) experienced vaginal penetration. Figure 4 depicts the range of sexually abusive behaviours involved in the index offences. The most frequent sexually abusive behaviour engaged in by parental offenders was touching and fondling. Moreover, coercion was a strategy often used by the offenders, with one in every four victims experiencing sexual abuse accompanied by threats of extortion, or violence. In this respect, the profile of parental offenders that emerged resembled that more frequently associated with extrafamilial child sex offenders. The child victims experienced egregious forms of harmful conduct, both sexually and psychologically (Courtois & Ford 2013).

Most offenders were not sexually abused as children

Past findings on the proportion of child sex offenders who were themselves victims of child sexual abuse have been mixed (Lamont 2011). Some differences are attributable to the methodology, with retrospective self-report studies typically

Figure 4 Types of sexually abusive acts by parental offenders during the index offence (% of offenders) (n=213)



producing higher estimates than prospective studies; that is, retrospective methods yielded estimates that 33 to 75 percent of offenders experienced childhood sexual abuse. Studies of differences between retrospective and prospective reports of adverse childhood experiences showed medium to long-term reliability of retrospective recall (Hardt & Ritter 2004). A recent rigorous prospective longitudinal analysis of the association between child sexual abuse and subsequent sexual offending (officially recorded offences, thus less than prevalence) produced lower rates; that is, one in 20 among male sexual offenders, with higher rates among males who were sexually abused over the age of 12 years.

In the current parental sample, using a retrospective self-report method, the majority of parental offenders (61%) disclosed no personal history of childhood sexual abuse—self-reported rates of childhood sexual abuse were two in five (39%).

Extrafamilial victims unlikely

The offenders in the sample were unlike paedophiles who are sexually attracted to all children and appeared unlikely to commit sexual offences against children other than their own. Most offenders in the sample (82%) had a single victim of the index sexual offence; only a very small proportion (7%) had sexually offended against unrelated victims in the past. These findings were corroborated by other studies showing little victim crossover by intrafamilial child sex offenders (Beauregard, Leclerc & Lussier 2012; Firestone et al. 2005).

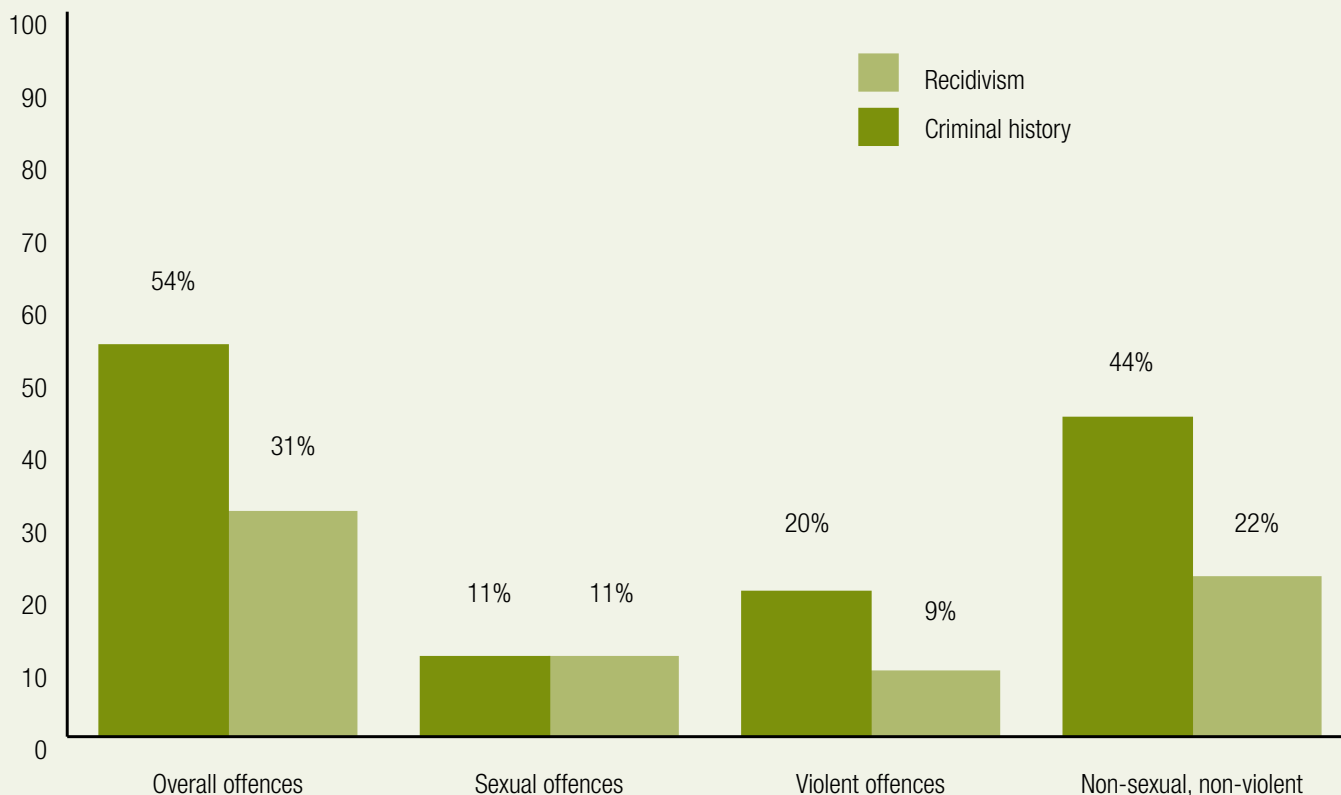
Notably, the sexual reoffence rates of this group of parental offenders were lower than those of their non-parental counterparts and also lower than those of extrafamilial child sex offenders. The majority reoffended against known related children (50%) or related children and adults (13%). The substantial majority of the parental offenders did not appear to pose a risk to children outside their own families.

Criminal versatility

Previous researchers reported that intrafamilial offenders had fewer prior convictions for non-sexual crimes than extrafamilial offenders (Smallbone & Wortley 2001). Findings in this sample revealed that the criminal proclivities of parental child sex offenders were rarely isolated and that the index offence was typically not the first official documented criminal conduct. As many as 55 percent of the group entered treatment with some history of prior offending and one in five (20%) had commenced their criminal careers as juveniles. The picture that emerged of parental sex offenders was of a group motivated by criminogenic needs, some sexual deviance and more criminal versatility than has been presumed (Cossins 2011).

The contention that intrafamilial child sex offenders are specialist offenders who commit only intrafamilial sexual offences (Weiner 1964) was partially refuted by the past criminal records or police intelligence on the offending sample, which reflected that over one-third had committed non-

Figure 5 Criminal history and recidivism, by type of offence (%) (n=213)



sexual offences during their adulthood and partially by their reoffending records, which showed that approximately one-fifth reoffended non-sexually (22%). The observed reoffence rate for non-sexual crimes was double the rate of sexual reoffences (11%). In other words, the likelihood of non-sexual recidivism far exceeded the likelihood of sexual recidivism.

Figure 5 displays the percentage of offenders with a criminal history and the percentage of reoffending, by type of criminal offence. Together, these data establish the versatile criminal proclivities of parental offenders—their offending was not confined to sexual crimes against their children. In this respect, they were similar to other sex offenders, who typically have previous convictions for nonsexual rather than for sexual offences and are more likely to go on to commit new nonsexual than new sexual offences (Smallbone & Wortley 2001).

Unique offender profile

Various researchers have emphasised the heterogeneity of child sexual offenders

(Smallbone & Wortley 2001). Nonetheless, parental intrafamilial offenders are not often distinguished from other intrafamilial or extrafamilial child sexual offenders. The profile of parental offenders was unlike that of other child offenders in several respects.

First, as noted by other researchers (Firestone et al. 2005), parental child sex offenders are older than extrafamilial sex offenders—the mean age at referral was 39 years. Second, they were usually in a marital or defacto relationship (85%) and had participated in long-term intimate relationships with adult sexual partners. Third, they generally maintained steady employment and were often the financial breadwinners in the family unit. These factors, older age, an enduring adult intimate relationship and stable employment are typically regarded as protective, but did not serve that function in this group. Case studies of incest offenders similarly revealed that they were often 'outwardly productively employed, financially comfortable, and stably married and half had close church involvement' (Middleton 2013a: 251).

This subgroup of parental offenders was further distinguishable from other sex offender subtypes by virtue of the close and ongoing relationship with the victims (parental), the gender of victims (female), the age of victims (prepubescent children) and the low ratio of offenders with paedophilic urges.

Diversion reduced recidivism

A common public perception about child sex offenders is that their risk of sexual reoffending is so great that offenders should not be permitted to remain in the community and if released, must be monitored by sex offender registration or other preventive detention policies (McSherry & Keyzer 2009). However, research has indicated that this group is amenable to treatment interventions (Gelb 2007). Previous studies established that the Cedar Cottage program effectively reduced sexual reoffence rates from 13.5 percent to 7.5 percent (Butler et al. 2012) and that biological and non-biological fathers benefited equally from the intervention (Titcomb, Goodman-

Delahunty & Waubert de Puiseau 2012). These outcomes suggested that diversion to community-based programs such as Cedar Cottage in lieu of standard criminal prosecution may be particularly important in reducing the risk of future sexual offending by parental offenders (Cossins 2010).

Conclusion

This examination of parental offending behaviours is significant as it is one of the first studies of a sample comprised entirely of this subgroup of child sex offenders. This profile of parental offenders extended the boundaries of the documented heterogeneity of child sexual offenders and specified distinctive features of parental offenders.

Notably, risks posed by parental child sex offenders are comparatively low in probability, but if unaddressed, the magnitude of harm perpetrated to the child-victim by their protracted repeat offending is profound (Courtois & Ford 2013; Middleton 2013b; Ogloff et al. 2012).

The findings suggest that this group is more criminally versatile than previously acknowledged, both prior to the index offence and subsequently. In this respect, they are similar to extrafamilial child sexual offenders (Harris et al. 2011). Therefore, treatment should address their general criminogenic proclivities in addition to sexual offending.

Observed reoffence rates indicated that the risks that accompany diversion from standard criminal prosecution can be managed successfully in the community by appropriate treatment to address these criminogenic needs. Application of risk assessment tools that take account of dynamic factors and risk factors specific to this subgroup of child sex offenders (Beauregard, Leclerc & Lussier 2012; Stroebel et al. 2013) will further assist to identify criminogenic needs and changes in risk associated with treatment (Olver & Wong 2011).

This elaboration of the profile of parental sex offenders provides a basis to support clinical practice and preventive interventions

to increase desistance and reduce threats to the safety and welfare of young children and their families.

Acknowledgements

Dale Tolliday and Karen Parsons, former Clinical Directors of Cedar Cottage, facilitated data collection, and Kate O'Brien provided research assistance. Funding was provided by a grant from the Criminology Research Council (Grant: CRC 44/10–11) and a Faculty of Arts grant from Charles Sturt University.

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ISSN 0817-8542 (Print)
1836-2206 (Online)

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Disclaimer: This research paper does not necessarily reflect the policy position of the Australian Government

Project no. if applicable
Ethics approval no. if applicable
Dataset no. if applicable
CRC grant no. if applicable

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