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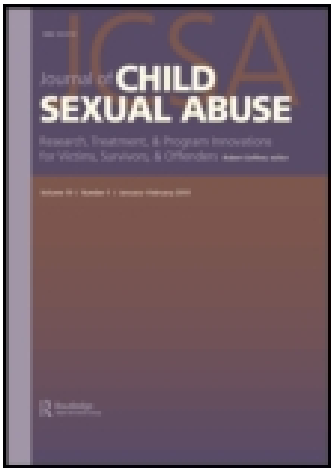

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Female Offenders in Child Sexual Abuse Cases: A National Picture

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RESEARCH ON PERPETRATORS OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

Female Offenders in Child Sexual Abuse Cases: A National Picture

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Female sexual offenders are significantly underrepresented in the literature. Largely due to a failure of our society to recognize women as offenders, we allow them to avoid detection, prosecution, and interventions like tracking, registration, or mandated treatment. This could be partially due to differences that exist in their offending behaviors, victim profiles, and personal characteristics that set them apart from male offenders, to whom our systems have become more attuned. This article features an examination of virtually every substantiated child sexual abuse case reported to child protective services in the United States for 2010. Findings detail observed differences between male and female offenders on multiple domains and affirm female sexual offenders to be distinctly different from their male counterparts.

KEYWORDS female, child, sex, offender, abuse, protection, gender, molestation

Child sexual abuse has reached epidemic proportions in the United States, and one of the most underrepresented groups of sexual offenders in the criminal justice system is that of the female sexual offender (FSO). Previous research has suggested anywhere from 15–20% of sexual offenses are committed by females (Faller & Coulburn, 1995). However, data collected from our criminal justice system indicates only about 1% of the sexual offenders in our prison systems are female (U.S. Department of Justice, 2007). Somewhere

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between the point where crimes are being committed against our most vulnerable populations and the mechanisms of the criminal justice system, where we as a society have traditionally sought to handle these problems, there has been a systematic breakdown, and a large offending population has evaded detection. Perhaps an investigation into the distinct differences that exist between male and female child sexual offending patterns can provide insight into this disparity.

One well-documented offense characteristic significant to female sexual offending is the lack of discrimination in relation to victim gender. Multiple studies have indicated that while male sex offenders tend to offend with exclusive victim gender preference, most typically female, FSOs are far less discriminant about the gender of their victim (Fehrenbach & Monastersky, 1988; Grayston & DeLuca, 1999; Vandiver & Kercher, 2004; Vandiver & Teske, 2006; West, Friedman, & Kim, 2011). Some of these studies have suggested that FSO samples have a slight preference for male children, while others noted their sample more likely to offend against female children.

Multiple studies have noted that female sexual offense patterns are distinctly different than males (Jennings, 1998; Roe-Sepowitz & Krysik, 2008), but understanding what makes those patterns so different can be difficult. Research has continuously found that FSOs are more likely than males to offend against their own biological children, close relatives, and children in their care (Fehrenbach & Monastersky, 1988; Lewis & Stanley, 2000; O'Connor, 1987; Tsopelas, Spyridoula, & Athanasios, 2011; Wijkman, Bijleveld, & Henriks, 2010). While these findings could be a product of access, women presenting with this type of offending behavior could be classified, based on the work of Matthews, Mathews, and Speltz (1991), as "predisposed offenders." This typology is often used to describe women who offend against their own biological children or children in their care and who have likely experienced prolonged and significant sexual abuse in their own personal trauma histories (Matthews, Mathews, & Speltz, 1991).

The predisposition of FSOs could prove important in further understanding them. Research suggests FSOs tend to have more significant personal trauma histories than their male counterparts (Strickland, 2008). These histories tend to include higher levels of previous and present physical and sexual abuse, higher numbers of perpetrators in reference to their own sexual abuse in childhood, a higher likelihood of close familial relationships with their perpetrators, a higher likelihood their perpetrators were siblings, and a higher likelihood that the onset of their abuse occurred at an earlier age and continued for a longer duration than that experienced by typical male offenders (Frey, 2010; Oliver, 2007). The complexity of female sexual offending and its difference from male offending begins to take form here in the discussion of personal trauma history. Numerous studies based on measuring the effects of adverse childhood experiences have found that child abuse survivors have a much higher potential to develop negative behavioral and physiological health outcomes based on high-risk behaviors (Centers for Disease Control

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and Prevention, 2013). This could suggest that FSOs, when examined from a trauma-informed perspective, could be differentiated from male offenders through the possible measurement of numerous potential risk factors.

This project's hypothesis was that there are gendered patterns in child sexual offending behaviors. Using national-level data on substantiated child sexual abuse cases, it is hypothesized that victim, perpetrator, and case-level characteristics will predict the prevalence of females listed as the primary perpetrator. To investigate this the following literature informed research questions were used:

- To what level do FSOs account for the substantiated perpetration of child sexual abuse?
- Do FSOs appear to be less discriminant about victim age and gender?
- Can the relationship between the victim and perpetrator predict FSO prevalence levels in child sexual abuse cases?
- Can victim risk factors be used to predict FSO prevalence levels in child sexual abuse cases?
- Can perpetrator risk factors be used to predict FSO prevalence levels in child sexual abuse cases?
- Can perpetrator age predict FSO prevalence levels in child sexual abuse cases?

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METHOD

The Data

To explore these questions, a secondary data analysis was performed on the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) Child File, FFY2010. The Children's Bureau Administration on Children Youth and Families facilitated the collection of this data in a national effort to compile, organize, and standardize child protective services data in order to expedite research that could improve standard practices associated with child welfare on a national level. The project was funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The data set was accessed through, and in cooperation with, the National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect (NDACAN). It consists of child/case-specific data related to all investigations or assessments of alleged child maltreatment that received a disposition in the reporting year. Data elements include the demographics of children and their perpetrators, types of maltreatment, investigation or assessment dispositions, risk factors, and services provided as a result of the investigation or assessment (2011). This data set, and previous versions of it, have been used in over 120 published research projects on a diversity of topics associated with national level trends in child abuse and maltreatment and organizational responses to it (NDACAN, 2014). However, it has never been used to assess dynamics associated with perpetrator gender in child sexual abuse cases.

The data contained in this set were collected from October 1, 2009, through September 30, 2010, and contain the child protective system reports for 49 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. Oregon is the only state that chose not to participate in the NCANDS program. Only cases that reached a final disposition between the listed dates were included in the sample. The total data set consists of 3,557,622 records from the participating localities.

In order to create a conceptually grounded working data set, particular considerations were taken into advisement in reference to the construction and organization of the Child File itself. In the logic model, the person listed as "Perpetrator 1" is the first person identified by the investigating caseworkers as primarily responsible for the child abuse allegation. Also, the maltreatment type listed as "Maltreatment type 1" is generally understood to be the primary allegation in the case. Multiple perpetrators and maltreatment type allegations can be listed for each case. This creates a situation in which, in order to correctly examine the research questions associated with this study, each perpetrator in the working sample must be directly linked with a specific maltreatment type for their case.

After an in-depth investigation of the data set as a whole, and in consultation with analysts from the National Data Archives, the data set was filtered (creating a working sample) to include only cases of child sexual abuse (n = 279,440) and was then screened for cases meeting the criteria:

1. Where the abuse allegation was listed as "Substantiated (n = 62,643)," "Indicated or Reason to Suspect (n = 4,118)," or "Alternative Response–Victim (n = 4)"
2. Where "Maltreatment Type 1" was listed as sexual abuse
3. Where the person listed as "Perpetrator 1" was responsible for "Maltreatment Type 1"
4. Where "Perpetrator 1" gender was known

After filtering was completed the final working sample (N = 66,765) was constructed and utilized for the majority of data analysis associated with this project. As mentioned, filtering the data into this working sample was necessary due to the complexity of the data set. It was fundamental to the integrity of the research process that only cases in which the primary perpetrator was matched to the primary offense be used. Furthermore, it was not the intention of this project to measure rates of substantiation or differential gendered trajectories toward substantiation. The research questions associated with this project are focused at understanding the dynamics of cases where evidence exists to support that abuse happened, and therefore filtering for only substantiated cases was necessary.

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Data Analysis

The variables were explored with both univariate and multivariate statistical analysis procedures. Groups were not randomly assigned, as there is no need to generalize data to the larger population since this data set constitutes all known values in existence for the phenomenon to be investigated. A series of prescreening procedures was conducted prior to analysis. These procedures were selected to address specific assumptions underlying the analysis of data using binary logistic regression. In addition, these prescreening procedures assisted in laying the groundwork for any univariate data analysis and interpretation as well. It should also be noted that all data associated with the NCANDS Child File FFY2010 have already been prescreened by personnel at the national archives prior to acceptance from the states and were cleaned upon addition to the larger data set. SPSS was used for all data analysis, including prescreening procedures, wherein it was found that there were no problems with missing data, outliers, or issues of multicolinearity.

Univariate procedures were utilized to assist in gaining perspective related to particular ways in which the data set is being evaluated. Measures of central tendency, *N*, standard deviation and percentiles were employed, where appropriate. The primary method of multivariate analysis this study employed was binary logistic regression (BLR). The measure was selected for multiple reasons. Among these reasons is that with a data set this large, group comparisons with very little mean difference will present as statistically significant (Granger, 2003). The BLR procedure includes a measure of the ExpB, which can be interpreted as an odds ratio. Since it is the goal of this study to predict levels of prevalence of FSOs based on constructed models using variables from the data set, this procedure was a good fit due to its robustness with large data sets and its ability to accurately address the research questions. Of note is that with a sample this large the significance of the Hosmer-Lemeshow statistic, typically displayed with BLR models, should be held tentatively throughout this project due to the fact that significance, in this case, could be thought of as a function of the extremely large sample size (Maletta & Ulrich, 2011). Multiple independent (predictor) variables were combined into sequential theoretically informed models based on prior research associated with female sexual offending. Models were kept to a manageable size, with preference being given to model development involving the most succinct number of independent variables possible.

RESULTS

When assessing the project's first research question, "To what level do FSOs account for the substantiated perpetration of child sexual abuse?" the data showed 13,492 of the cases in the data set (20.9%) listed females as "Perpetrator 1" on their case reports. This confirms previous research and

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TABLE 1 Quartile Distributions of Victim Ages by Perpetrator Gender

Perpetrator gender	0%	25%	50%	75%	100%
Female	Newborn	5 years old	9 years old	14 years old	Up to 18 years old
Male	Newborn	7 years old	11 years old	14 years old	Up to 18 years old

supports findings that actually suggest females are involved in primary roles associated with child sexual offending at slightly higher rates than have been previously measured.

Victim Age and Gender

The second question asks, "Do FSOs appear to be less discriminant about victim age and gender?" Results of the analysis support significant differences between male and female offenders in relation to the gender of their victims, $p < .001$ ($t = 25.445$, $df = 64{,}434$ and mean difference of .125). Male offenders were observed to target male victims in 19.3% of cases and female victims in 80.5% of cases, and female offenders targeted male victims in 31.8% of cases and female victims in 68% of cases. Basic group statistics indicated the mean victim age for male perpetrators was 10.77 and for female perpetrators was 9.43 years of age. As is seen in Table 1, while the upper ranges of the distributions of victim ages appear to be fairly similar, the distributions differ in the lower quartiles. This suggests that female perpetrators tend to have a larger range of victims, including younger victims than their male counterparts by an average of about 2 years.

Victim–Perpetrator Relationship

The third research question is, "Can the relationship between victim and offender be used to predict FSO prevalence levels in child sexual abuse cases?" A binary logistic regression model was constructed to measure the ability to predict the prevalence of FSOs based on parental status and whether the perpetrator had been in a caretaking role or had a history of substantiated prior allegations of abuse or neglect. No problems were noted in terms of missing data, outliers, and multicolinearity. Data were analyzed with BLR using perpetrator gender as the dependent variable and predictor variables listing "Perpetrator 1" as a "Parent," "Stepparent," "Adoptive Parent," "Caretaker," or "Prior Abuser." The regression model ($n = 21{,}066$, *8,418 females*; chi square = 17.107, $df = 5$, $p = .004$) predicted the status of the dependent variable with an accuracy level of 66.1%. Regarding the independent variables in the model, all were statistically significant at the $p < .001$ level or below (see Table 2).

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TABLE 2 Binary Logistic Regression Model Predicting Offender Gender Based on Relational Status to the Victim

Predictor	Waldstatistic	Odds ratio[a]	*p*	95% CI
Offender is biological parent	299.620	4.671	<.001	[3.92, 5.56]
Offender is stepparent	194.491	.164	<.001	[0.13, 0.21]
Offender is adoptive parent	49.853	2.787	<.001	[2.10.3.70]
Offender is caretaker	18.002	1.567	<.001	[1.27, 1.93]
Offender is prior abuser[b]	333.322	1.833	<.001	[1.72, 1.96]
Constant	230.065	.124	<.001	

[a]The odds ratio measures the odds of having a female listed as the primary perpetrator (as opposed to a male) based on the predictor criteria.
[b]The offender has previous substantiated charges of child abuse.

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Based on the odds ratios of statistically significant predictors, child sexual abuse perpetrators are four and a half times more likely to be female if the perpetrator is the biological parent of the victim and almost three times more likely to be female if the perpetrator is an adoptive parent. Perpetrators are more likely to be male if they are listed as a stepparent to the victim. Furthermore, perpetrators are more likely to be female if they are listed as a caretaker and they're almost twice as likely to be female if they are listed as a prior abuser.

To further explore the relationships between offenders and victims an assessment of "Perpetrator 1: Relationship to Victim" variable was conducted. As is seen in Table 3, female offenders are listed as the parent of the victim in almost 80% of cases. While the parental category is the highest among male offenders (31.3%), males also tend to show more variability in relationships with their victims. They are often listed as "other relatives," (27.9%) "unmarried partners to the victims parent," (8.7%) or "friend or neighbor" to the victim's family (3.1%).

Risk Factors

In the Child File construction and organization a series of person-level variables described as "risk factors" document what could be considered problematic situational or behavioral characteristics in the lives of perpetrators or victims. These factors included such variables as drug or alcohol use, disabilities, mental or behavioral problems, and other areas. Risk factors were documented for both perpetrators and victims and were utilized to address the projects fourth and fifth research questions.

The first of these questions was "Can victim risk factors be used to predict FSO prevalence levels in child sexual abuse cases?" To address this question a binary logistic regression model, based on theoretically informed risk factors associated with the victim's lives, was assembled to measure the ability to predict the prevalence of female offenders in

TABLE 3 Descriptive Statistics on Perpetrator Relationship to Victim Split by Gender

Perpetrator relationship to victim (gendered)	Frequency	Percent
Parent		
Female	10,498	77.8
Male	15,965	31.3
Other relative (non–foster parent)		
Female	1,280	9.5
Male	14,214	27.9
Relative foster parent		
Female	23	.2
Male	27	.1
Nonrelative foster parent		
Female	44	.3
Male	107	.2
Group home or residential facility staff		
Female	42	.3
Male	134	1.5
Child's day care provider		
Female	120	.9
Male	785	1.5
Unmarried partner of parent		
Female	217	1.6
Male	4,415	8.7
Legal guardian		
Female	46	.3
Male	73	.1
Other professionals		
Female	71	.5
Male	286	.6
Friends or neighbors		
Female	100	.7
Male	1,569	3.1
Foster parent		
Female	11	.1
Male	42	.1
Other		
Female	663	4.9
Male	10,129	19.9
Unknown or missing		
Female	327	2.4
Male	2,032	4
Total		
Female	13,442	99.6
Male	49,778	97.7
System missing		
Female	50	.4
Male	1,192	2.3
Total		
Female	13,492	100.0
Male	50,970	

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TABLE 4 Binary Logistic Regression Model Predicting Offender Gender Based on Victim Risk Factors

Predictor	Wald statistic	Odds ratio[a]	*p*	95% CI
Victim alcohol use	2.286	.674	<.132	[0.40, 1.12]
Victim drug use	39.531	3.131	<.001	[2.19, 4.47]
Victim mental "retardation"	5.578	.533	<.019	[0.31, 0.90]
Victim emotionally disturbed	.069	1.029	<.794	[0.83, 1.27]
Victim vision or hearing problem	1.001	.744	<.318	[0.42, 1.33]
Victim learning disability	1.684	1.207	<.195	[0.91, 1.60]
Victim physically disabled	26.296	2.724	<.001	[1.86, 4.00]
Victim behavioral problem	17.131	.719	<.001	[0.62, 0.84]
Victim other medical condition	.066	1.026	<.798	[0.84, 1.25]
Victim was a prior victim	451.338	1.987	<.001	[1.87, 2.12]
Constant	6301.82	.234	<.001	

[a]The odds ratio measures the odds of having a female listed as the primary perpetrator (as opposed to a male) based on the predictor criteria.

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the working sample. No problems were noted in terms of missing data, outliers, and multicolinearity. Data were analyzed using perpetrator gender as the dependent variable and victim risk factors of "Alcohol Abuse," "Drug Abuse," "Mental Retardation," "Emotionally Disturbed," "Visually or Hearing Impaired," "Learning Disability," "Physically Disabled," "Behavior Problem," "Other Medical Condition," and "Child Was a Prior Victim" were included as independent variables. The regression model ($n = 26{,}663$, 5,903 females; chi square = 6.434, $df = 2$, $p = .040$) predicted the status of the dependent variable with an accuracy level of 77.9%. Regarding the independent variables in the model, 5 were statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level or below (see Table 4).

Based on the odds ratios of statistically significant predictors, child sexual abuse perpetrators are more than three times as likely to be female if the child is experiencing drug-use-related problems. Perpetrators are also almost three times more likely to be female if the child has a physical disability and almost twice as likely to be female if the child has been a prior reported victim of abuse or maltreatment of any kind. The perpetrator appears to be more likely to be male if the child is listed as having mental retardation or behavior problems.

As seen in Table 5, group mean comparisons of the independent variables in a sample of this size can show statistically significant differences even when the actual difference in means is quite small. However, of particular interest in this model is the variable measuring the child's prior victimization where the mean difference between male and female perpetrators is considerable.

Similar variables were also used to assess the research question "Can perpetrator risk factors be used to predict FSO prevalence levels in child sexual abuse cases?" A binary logistic regression model was constructed to measure the ability to predict the prevalence of FSOs based on the

TABLE 5 Group Comparisons of Victim (Child) Risk Factors by Perpetrator Gender (Male versus Female)

Victim documented with/as:	*t*	*df*	*p*	*M* diff.
Alcohol abuse	2.923	34045	<.003	.003†
Drug abuse	9.944	37400	<.001	.012†
Mental retardation	.541	40310	<.589	.001
Emotionally disturbed	4.846	40551	<.001	.011†
Visually or hearing problem	4.769	37017	<.001	.005†
Learning disability	3.494	35978	<.001	.005†
Physically disabled	5.370	40294	<.001	.005†
Behavior problem	1.803	35579	<.072	.005
Other medical condition	10.053	37445	<.001	.023†
Prior victim	34.116	59305	<.001	.155†

Note. t = t test score; df = degrees of freedom; p = statistical significance; M diff. = difference of the means between the groups (male and female) with 1 = criteria being present and 2 = to criteria not being present; † = female perpetrator numbers of incidence were higher than male perpetrators.

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perpetrator possessing particular risk factors. No problems were noted in terms of missing data, outliers, and multicolinearity. Data were analyzed with BLR using perpetrator gender as the dependent variable, and perpetrator problems related to "Alcohol Abuse," "Drug Abuse," "Mental Retardation," "Emotionally Disturbed," "Visually or Hearing Impaired," "Learning Disability," "Physically Disabled," "Other Medical Condition," and "Domestic Violence (in the home)" were included as independent variables. The regression model (n = 28,079, 5,740 females; chi square = 27.891, df = 2, $p < .001$) predicted the status of the dependent variable with an accuracy level of 80.2%. Regarding the independent variables in the model, 8 of the 9 were statistically significant at the $p < .001$ level or below (see Table 6).

TABLE 6 Binary Logistic Regression Model Predicting Perpetrator Gender Based on Perpetrator Risk Factors

Predictor	Wald statistic	Odds ratio[a]	*p*	95% CI
Perpetrator alcohol abuse	21.628	1.448	<.001	[1.24, 1.70]
Perpetrator drug abuse	490.118	3.439	<.001	[3.10, 3.84]
Perpetrator mental "retardation"	16.851	2.154	<.001	[1.50, 3.11]
Perpetrator emotionally disturbed	85.773	2.348	<.001	[2.00, 2.81]
Perpetrator visual or hearing impairment	1.929	.678	<.166	[0.40, 1.17]
Perpetrator learning disability	13.059	1.614	<.001	[1.25, 2.09]
Perpetrator physical disability	22.915	1.814	<.001	[1.42, 2.31]
Perpetrator other medical condition	15.519	1.535	<.001	[1.24, 1.90]
Perpetrator experiences	468.758	2.498	<.001	[2.30, 2.71]
Domestic violence in the home constant	8854.995	.191	<.001	

[a]The odds ratio measures the odds of having a female listed as the primary perpetrator (as opposed to a male) based on the predictor criteria.

TABLE 7 t-Test Group Comparisons of Offender Risk Factors by Perpetrator Gender (Male versus Female)

Perpetrator documented with/as:	*t*	*df*	*p*	*M* Diff.
Alcohol abuse	18.761	34732	<.001	.050†
Drug abuse	36.931	34741	<.001	.123†
Mental retardation	11.497	30734	<.001	.013†
Emotionally disturbed caretaker	21.094	31829	<.001	.050†
Visually or hearing impaired	.916	30677	<.360	.001
Learning disability	9.347	29694	<.001	.015†
Physically disabled	10.892	31065	<.001	.017†
Other medical condition	8.201	30935	<.001	.016†
Domestic violence in the home	31.156	46802	<.001	.109†

Note. *t* = t-test score; *df* = degrees of freedom; *p* = statistical significance; *M* diff. = difference of the means between the groups (male and female) with 1 = criteria being present and 2 = to criteria not being present; † = female perpetrator numbers of incidence were higher than male perpetrators.

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Based on the odds ratios of statistically significant predictors, child sexual abuse perpetrators are nearly three and a half times as likely to be female if they are currently abusing drugs. Furthermore, perpetrators are more than twice as likely to be female if they are identified as mentally retarded or having emotional problems and are more likely to be female if they experience learning, physical, or other medical disabilities. Findings from the data suggest perpetrators are nearly two and a half times as likely to be female if there are issues of domestic violence associated with the family.

Group mean comparisons show eight of the nine independent variables in this model to have statistically significant differences between male and female perpetrators (see Table 7). Based on mean comparisons, the variable of domestic violence in the home shows to have a sizable between groups difference. Another important variable of note is that of drug abuse.

Perpetrator Age

The final research question, "Can perpetrator age predict FSO prevalence levels in child sexual abuse cases?" yielded results that should be held tentatively. Exploring the age of offenders at the time of the report suggested male and female offenders in this domain as well are heterogeneous groups. As is seen in Table 8, the distribution of ages in these reports suggests the mean age of male (33.2 years of age) and female (33.7 years of age) perpetrators to be quite similar. However, the distributions of perpetrator age do not follow the same pattern. It appears male offenders tend to have offending behaviors represented in this data that manifest at an earlier age and appear to continue for a longer duration, throughout their lives, than females. The distribution of female offender age could suggest that the female child sexual abuse perpetrators may offend for a shorter duration of time during their lives.

TABLE 8 Quartile Distributions of Perpetrator Ages by Gender

Perpetrator gender	0%	25%	50%	75%	100%
Female	18 years old	27 years old	33 years old	39 years old	70 years old or older
Male	18 years old	20 years old	32 years old	42 years old	70 years old or older

DISCUSSION

As noted, one of the primary concerns in this area is the disparity between rates of female sexual abuse perpetration and those of female sex offender representation in general prison populations in the United States. Somewhere between the offenses occurring and the social systems empowered to deal with them there is a critical gap. We are systematically missing opportunities to identify and address child sexual offending behaviors in a gendered capacity. This allows for particular populations of offenders to evade prosecution, sentencing, tracking, and treatment.

FSO Prevalence

The data from this study corroborates findings from previous research reasserting that slightly over 20% of substantiated child sexual abuse cases that are reported to child protective services in the United States involve a primary perpetrator who is female. Findings from this study showed that female perpetrators were identified in one out of every five substantiated cases of child sexual abuse as the first listed or theoretically implied primary perpetrator. When two perpetrators were listed, the number of females identified as co-offenders in a secondary capacity was over 42%. We must address the existence and uniqueness of female sexual offenders in our criminal justice systems, direct mental health practices, and through mechanisms of social policy development. Failure to adopt this empirical evidence of female involvement in child sexual abuse perpetration has significant implications for the health, safety, and well-being of our nation's children.

Victim Age and Gender

The findings from this study also provided evidence to suggest female offenders displayed a tendency to not only offend against younger children than males but to also have a wider distribution in age ranges of their victims as well. While this finding does have significant implications for improving investigation and public responses to child sexual abuse, it should be held tentatively in regard to understanding preferential offending behavior as it could have been a product of the sample and related to access. Previous research has also suggested reports involving younger children may be more

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likely to be reported to child protective services, while those involving older ones could be more likely to be reported to law enforcement (Bader, Scalora, Casady, & Black, 2008). This area needs further investigation to assess how victim availability is related to sexual offenses involving younger children. Considering that females are more likely to be in caregiving roles for young children, the issue of offenders' access to their victim(s) could have played a role in this finding.

Another facet of this investigation that adds to the state of the literature is that of female offenders and the observed gender of their victims. The findings of this study indicated male child sexual offenders offend against female victims with a rate of around 80%. Females, while expected to be less discriminant about victim gender, showed a distinct preference toward female victims (68%). This is an interesting finding for several reasons. First, it not only reinforces the notion that female offenders are less discriminant about victim gender than their male counterparts, but it suggests they are more likely to be reported as having female victims. These findings have noteworthy implications for child sexual abuse intervention and investigation improvements in that they are counter to commonly held beliefs associated with female sexual offending behavior. Ideas of gender preference in child sexual offending need to be explored further; however, findings associated with this project provide a first step by showing the gender of FSO victims to be more varied than male offenders, with a preference toward same-sex victims. Few studies have had the capacity to investigate the topic from such a significant data pool.

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Victim–Perpetrator Relationship

In addition to the victim's age and gender, their relationship to the offender was highly predictive of offender gender. This study found FSOs more likely to be listed as the victim's parent (77.8%) than males (31.3%). Male offenders were more likely to be listed as other relatives, unmarried partners, or friends and neighbors. When the perpetrator was a biological parent, the data showed the offender to be over four and a half times more likely to be female. The findings of this study suggest female offenders are far more likely to offend against their own biological children than males, and FSOs were also found more likely to offend against their adopted children and children with whom they were listed as a caretaker. Multiple studies are needed to assess this dynamic further. These include research to investigate gendered differences in the differential nature of attachment and boundary development among child sexual abusers and their own biological children. Considering previous research has suggested female offenders to have significantly higher levels of trauma, abuse, and sexual victimization in their own personal histories, further research is needed to explore the potential relationship between FSO trauma histories and improper boundary and attachment development (Oliver, 2007; Strickland, 2008).

This study also found FSOs, in substantiated cases, were nearly twice as likely to have a history of prior child abuse or maltreatment perpetration. Further research is warranted to assess the impact of perpetrator gender in the larger context of parental reunification standards in order evaluate the gendered implications for risk associated with prior abuse histories. This finding should also be held tentatively as it was it was not documented if children were more likely to be returned to the custodial care of a woman as opposed to a man. Further research is needed to assess if women are in fact more likely to reoffend or if this finding is one related more to rates of child placement after the first reported incident of child abuse and/or maltreatment.

Risk Factors

Prior incidents of abuse and maltreatment were not the only measured indicators of risk in this study. When assessing the factors associated with victim risk, this study's findings suggested that if children were listed to have behavior problems or to be mentally "retarded" the likelihood of their perpetrator being male was slightly increased. If children were listed to have drug-related problems or physical disabilities then findings suggested they were three times more likely to have a female perpetrator. If children were prior victims of abuse or maltreatment (any type), their likelihood of having a female perpetrator was almost doubled. These findings could be used to inform future research and identify a need for additional investigation of risk windows for potential victims. Data such as this suggests there are particular case level victim characteristics that could help identify children at higher levels of risk for specific types of abuse perpetration from specific perpetrators. Future interventions could utilize this kind of data to concentrate resources and target prevention efforts to specific high risk populations.

When offender risk categories were explored in a manner as to assess their ability to predict perpetrator gender, findings suggested that alcohol and drug use as well as mental, learning, emotional, physical, medical and other problems in the lives of perpetrators had the ability to predict the victim was abused by a female. Furthermore, the presence of domestic violence in the home increased the likelihood of a female being listed as the primary perpetrator by almost two and a half times. These variables speak to how female sexual offenders present as a group of people dealing with complex layers of trauma, disability, illness, vulnerability, and personal circumstances that comorbidly exacerbate their inappropriate boundary and offending behavior development. Based on the findings of this study, female offenders may very well be an entirely different population from that of male offenders, particularly as related to these identifiable risk factors. Further research is needed to assess the complexity of their life experience and its influence on their deviant behavior development. This research has added to the literature base by reinforcing how a history of traumatic experiences could differentiate

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female offenders from their male counterparts. Particular attention in future research should focus on the incorporation of trauma-informed perspectives when studying female sexual offending behaviors and in the development of FSO specific treatment protocols.

Perpetrator Age

Much like the personal characteristics of victims, there were several specific personal characteristics of offenders that spoke to the gendered differences between groups. Of these, the most significant was that of offender age. Findings suggested female perpetrators showed a smaller window of offending in their lifespans compared to males, with the identification of their offending behaviors starting later in life than that of males. Findings also suggested males continue offending later into their lives than females. Offending behaviors in both groups declined after 40 years of age, and sexual offending behavior in the female cohort was nearly nonexistent past 60 years of age. This finding should be held tentatively as it is possible that women are simply not identified, as males are, in the earlier stages of their offending behavior development. This research project was also void of any data on juvenile sexual offenders as the sample only included offenders 18 and older. Further research is needed to assess if the patterns found in this study are indicative of actual abuse and maltreatment incidents or if they are a product of or associated with levels of child sexual abuse reporting.

LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSION

While the findings of this project have the potential to inform multiple conversations associated with female sexual offending and on the differences that exist between male and female child sexual offenders, this research is not without limitations. The first of these is the fact that research conducted was secondary data analysis and therefore the methods for this project were not taken into account prior to the data being collected. Furthermore, since the data were collected from multiple jurisdictions and assembled into a final national data set, questions on measurement and documentation of the concepts could be raised. Other considerations in regard to limitations could be associated with the measurement of the phenomenon in this study being done with records from child protective services and not including records of all cases that originated within the criminal justice system or any extrapolation on undocumented child sexual abuse in the United States. Another limitation of this project is that this data set was designed to capture only a snapshot in the lives of the offenders and victims, as observed around the time of the documented offenses in 2010. The data do not account for the onset of offending behaviors; rather, it is a documentation of those offenses

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that were reported within the year. The data set also does not account for juvenile sexual offenders or for cases that may have occurred but did not have the evidence needed in order to facilitate them being classified as substantiated. The large data set was a strength in many ways, but it also complicated the analysis by limiting the manner by which statistical procedures should be interpreted.

This project investigated the research questions using virtually all documented occurrences of child sexual abuse recorded by the nation's child protective services systems for one year. Being able to investigate these issues from a national perspective creates a powerful story. There have been few studies that have examined FSOs in this large of a context, and at a minimum this research calls for continued and nuanced investigations to renew the exploration of the topics discussed in order to gain further insight into the phenomenon of female sexual offending. What the findings can suggest as a whole is that FSOs are distinctly different from male offenders in a variety of ways. The findings of this study have the potential to influence not only future research directions but also training and education efforts associated with child protective and sexual abuse investigative systems in the United States and abroad.

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