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Do Sexual Offenders Molest When Other Persons Are Present? A Preliminary Investigation

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This study utilized a rough clinical survey to assess the prevalence of child molestation perpetrated in the presence of other non-collaborating persons. Survey data were gathered on 131 post-incarcerated adult sex offenders at two community treatment programs. Subjects were divided into two groups, child molesters (CMs) and nonmolesters (NCMs). Results indicated that 54.9% of the CMs had molested when another child was present, 23.9% had molested when another adult was present, and 14.2% had molested when both a child and an adult were present. Both groups implicated increased excitement, a sense of mastery, and compulsive sexual behavior as the reasons for this type of offense. Moreover, the data indicated that approximately 63% of the offenders who had not molested in the presence of other persons felt they may have progressed to that point had they not been arrested and placed in treatment. Limitations of the study are discussed.

KEY WORDS: child molesters; risk assessment; sexual offending.

INTRODUCTION

The image of a child molester carefully isolating his victim to ensure that he will escape detection is a popular one in the media. That image is likely the one that many professionals in the field have as well. While many offenders pursue their goals to minimize detection, we questioned whether these offenders were actually that careful. A search of the literature revealed little on the presence of other persons as a factor influencing offending behavior.

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A survey was distributed to 150 postincarcerated offenders in two community treatment programs to assess the degree to which the presence of another person served as an inhibiting factor in the commission of child sexual abuse.

METHOD

Participants

The participants were drawn from two community-based treatment facilities specializing in the treatment of sexual offenders. Of the 150 offenders surveyed, 131 turned in a completed questionnaire, for an 87.3% response rate. Ninety-nine of the participants were surveyed at a treatment program in the Pacific Northwest, and 32 were drawn from a treatment center in the Rocky Mountain region. There were a total of 113 child molesters (CMs) and 18 nonmolesters (NCMs) in the sample. The distinction of those in the CM group was any one who had committed an act of child molestation. The distinction of those in the NCM group was any one who committed a "hands-off" offense (i.e., exhibitionism, voyeurism, etc.). This sample of offenders consisted of males aged 21–55 years; the ethnic composition included Caucasian, African-American, Hispanic, and Native American subjects.

Instruments

A questionnaire of 13 items, presented in Table I, was constructed to assess whether offenders had committed sexually abusive acts in the presence of others who were *not* part of the offense. Items were written to have good content and face validity based upon the authors' clinical experience.

Procedure

Participants were asked to complete the questionnaire and were informed that participation was voluntary and that their choice to participate would not affect their treatment in any manner. There were no incentives offered for participation, nor were there punitive actions for refusal to participate. The questionnaire was distributed to participants during their weekly group therapy session and returned anonymously after the session had ended.

RESULTS

Due to many subjects responding to numerically based questions with simple check marks, the data are reported predominantly for positive endorsement of the

Table I. Others Present Child Molest Questionnaire

Please respond numerically with your best guess. Please do not respond with nonquantifiable answers such as "lots, plenty, few, many, and etc."

(1) On how many different occasions have you molested a child?
(2) On how many different occasions have you molested a child knowing there was another person in the same room?
  (A) Another child when you were not molesting them at that time?
  (B) An adult who was not a collaborator in your molesting?
  (C) Both?
(3) How many times when you knew the other person(s) were awake?
(4) How many times have you molested a child in or on a bed when another person(s) was/were in the same bed?
  (A) Another adult who was not a collaborator in your molesting?
  (B) Another child whom you were not molesting at that time?
  (C) Both?
(5) Why do you think anyone would do that?
  (A) Increased excitement (adrenalin rush)?
  (B) Sense of mastery (getting away with it, feeling slick and clever)?
  (C) Too compulsive to be able to stop?
  (D) Just plain stupid?
  Check all that you feel apply.
(6) If you did not molest a child in the same room with another noncollaborative person (child or adult), do you think you eventually would have gotten that far out of control?
  (A) Yes
  (B) No

questions. The first eight questions were applicable only to the CM group, while the remainder of the questions were applicable to all of the offenders in the study. The responses to the questionnaire are reported as percentages in Table II.

The CM group had a mean of 88.6 sexual offenses (not victims) per offender, with a range of 1 to 2000 individual offenses against respective victims. Participants indicated that they had molested a child when another child was present during 54.9% of their offenses. In contrast, respondents molested a child when another noncollaborating adult was present 23.9% of the time. Finally, 14.2% of the CMs reported having molested a child while both another nonvictimized child and a noncollaborating adult were present.

Furthermore, 44.3% of the CM group acknowledged molesting a child while others were present and with the knowledge that those nonvictimized and/or noncollaborative persons were awake. Moreover, 25.7% of the CMs had molested a child on the same bed with another child present whom they were not molesting, 12.4% of the CMs had molested a child on the same bed where there was another noncollaborating adult present, and 3.5% of the CMs had molested a child while there were both a nonvictim child and a noncollaborating adult in the same bed.

Seventy-seven percent of the CMs and 83.3% of the NCMs reported that the increased excitement could explain molesting a child while others are present. A sense of mastery and/or feeling particularly clever was cited as a reason for 77.0% of the CMs and 72.2% of the NCMs. Three-fourths of the CMs and 94.4% of the

Table II. Item Response Frequencies (Percentage)

Question	Child molesters ($n = 113$)	Nonchild Molesters ($n = 18$)	Total sample ($N = 131$)
Mean number offenses	88.6	NA	88.6
Molested one child when			
Another child present	54.9	NA	54.9
Another adult present	23.9	NA	23.9
Child and adult present	14.2	NA	14.2
Molested when knew other person was awake	44.3	NA	44.3
Molested when other person was in same bed			
Child present	25.7	NA	25.7
Adult present	12.4	NA	12.4
Child and adult present	3.5	NA	3.5
Reasons			
Excitement	77.0	83.3	77.9
Sense of mastery	77.0	72.2	76.3
Compulsion	75.2	94.4	77.9
Stupidity	38.9	22.2	36.6
Think they would have gone that far? (Yes)	64.2	53.9	62.8

NCMs believed that molesting a child with others present could be explained by being too compulsive to inhibit desires, while 38.9% of the CMs and 22.2% of the NCMs believed that it was explainable by "just plain stupidity." Approximately two-thirds (64.2%) of the CMs and 53.9% of the NCMs indicated that they would have progressed to that point if they had not been arrested and sent to mandatory treatment. However, 28.3% of the respondents refrained from answering the question at all.

DISCUSSION

Common sense might suggest that an offender would go to great lengths to ensure that he offends away from others to avoid detection. The results of the present study show that this commonly held conception must be reevaluated in situations involving child molestation. Despite the short-comings of self-report questionnaires and the possible nonrepresentativeness of the present sample, it seems that a certain portion of offenders molests in the presence of nonparticipatory others. If the molester has not engaged in molestation while others are present, he may progress to that level of offending in the future.

The finding that so many of the molesters in this sample had offended in the presence of others raises new issues for future research. There may be an identifiable subtype of offender prone to progressing from covert to more overt behavior, for whom the increased risk of detection is no longer an inhibiting factor

or becomes their preferential style of offending. Such an offender might be prone to offending more often because of the wider range of settings in which he would be willing to do so.

There may be less inhibition of sexually offending behavior when another *child* is present, as opposed to another *adult*. However, it does not appear that the presence of another person is a strong inhibitor for certain offenders. Further research is needed to identify factors which could contribute to a disregard for the presence of others in order to attain sexual gratification.

Finally, we would like to acknowledge the weaknesses of the questionnaire and the data derived from it. The questionnaire did not assess certain factors such as age, ethnicity, and number of victims. We acknowledge that the construction of the questionnaire is simplistic and thus, may have confounded the data. The questions would have been better addressed if written in a "forced-choice" fashion for statistical utility. This would have been wise since many offenders respond to questions of this nature with simple check marks. Additionally, for the reader's benefit, the questionnaire in Table I is presented exactly as distributed to the participants. We encourage the reader to bear in mind that this was quickly created for clinical purposes only. We make no claim as to its validity at this juncture. Clearly, this questionnaire could benefit from revision. Nonetheless, we found the data compelling and of potential interest to our colleagues.