

How Deceptive are Juvenile Sex Offenders Regarding Their Offenses?



Patrick K. Cook and Barry R. Burkhart
Auburn University, Department of Psychology

Introduction

Previous Research

- Annual arrest data indicate that males under the age of 19 years perpetrate a considerable proportion of criminal acts; 16% of all violent offenses, 14% of aggravated assaults, 18% of sexual offenses, and 19% of forcible rapes (Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Department of Justice, 1999).
- Of those offenses directed exclusively towards children, juvenile sexual offenders (JSOs) are estimated to perpetrate between 30% - 50% of all sexual offenses.
- Arrest databases provide the most reliable information describing prevalence rates; however, actual rates of sexual offending behaviors are estimated to be considerably higher as it is commonly assumed that offenses either go undetected or unreported (Barbaree, Hudson, & Seto, 1993).
- Furthermore, early investigations with adult sex offenders bolster the assumption that juvenile offending behaviors may be underreported as 58% of 500 non-incarcerated “paraphiliacs” reported the onset of deviant sexual interests prior to age 18 and approximately 50% of adult offenders reported their first sexual offense occurred during their teenage years, or younger (Abel et al., 1988; Abel, Mittelman, & Becker, 1985).
- Denial is a common behavior observed prior to the onset of treatment; however, limited empirical or descriptive data regarding the frequency of denial among this population exists.

Goals

- This investigation aimed to collect descriptive data from juvenile sex offenders prior to their release regarding their pre-treatment account of their offending behaviors.
- Determine if differences between pre- vs. post-treatment accounts of offending behaviors exist.
- To ascertain the frequency of deceptive behaviors (e.g., denial, minimization, etc.) by juvenile sex offenders prior to the onset of treatment.

Methods

Participants

- Male, juvenile sex offenders (N= 76) incarcerated at Mt. Meigs Correctional Facility, an Alabama Department of Youth Services facility, consented to serve as participants. Youth from throughout the state of Alabama were housed within this correctional facility as this facility received individuals from all counties located within Alabama.
- Average age at the time of release was 17.01 years old ($SD = 1.57$ years).
- Average length of incarceration was 427.88 days ($SD = 216.25$ days).
- The majority of committing offenses included a charge of rape (attempted), sodomy (attempted), sexual abuse (attempted), sexual misconduct, and assault.
- Demographic breakdown: Caucasian (64.0%), African-American (29.3%), B-racial (2.7%), and Hispanic (1.3%).

Figure 1. Initial interview Content in which JSOs Reported Being Dishonest.

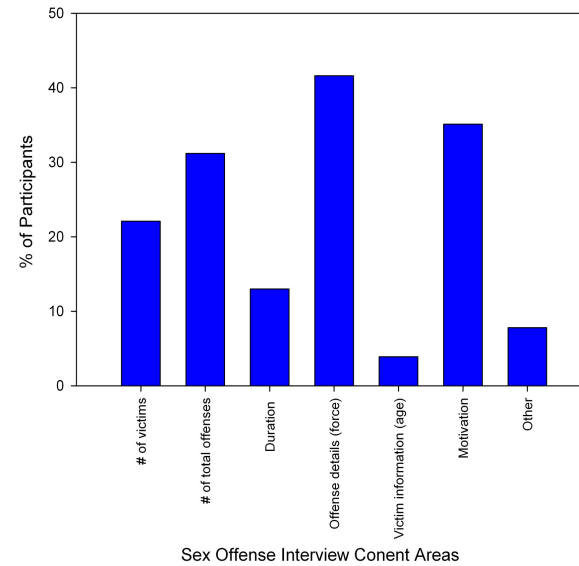
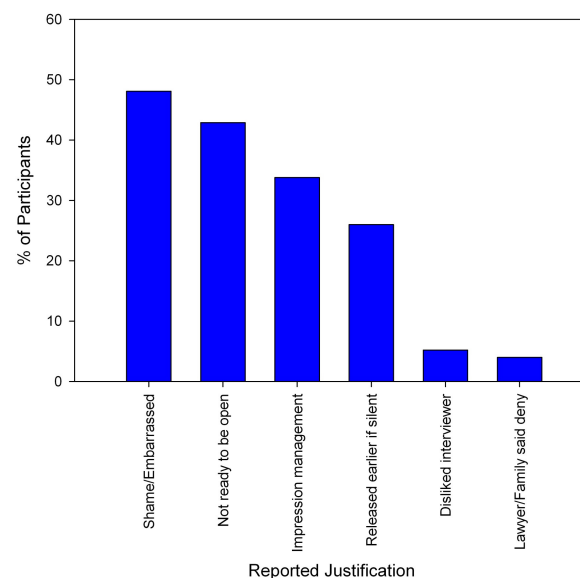


Figure 2. Reported Reason for Limited Disclosure During Pre-Treatment Interview.



Instrument

- *The Offense History Interview* is a 15-question, semi-structured, interview administered prior to release from custody, designed to gather information regarding an offender’s pre-treatment account of their sex offending behaviors in comparison to their account following treatment.
 - Descriptive information regarding offense behaviors, level of openness during their initial interview, motivation for deception, and additional interview dynamics were assessed via this measure.
- ### Procedures
- Juvenile sex offenders were interviewed by 2nd year graduate student clinicians following incarceration. This initial interview established the pre-treatment account of offense behaviors. Offenders were re-interviewed upon completing treatment (avg. length of treatment was approximately 428 days) and a post-treatment account of offense behaviors was established based on information gathered from this interview.
 - Graduate students completed the Offense History Interview and reviewed all available collateral information in order to determine pre- vs. post-treatment accounts of inmate offense behaviors.
 - Participation did not jeopardize inmate release status based upon information collected on this instrument as data was collected confidentially.

Results

- Self-report data and observed differences between pre- versus post-treatment accounts of offense behaviors indicated that 85% of participants were dishonest during their initial pre-treatment interview regarding various aspects of their offense (see Figure 1).
- Participants reported a range of motivations/justifications for their limited disclosure when first interviewed at Mt. Meigs (see Figure 2).
- When compared to the rate of openness/disclosure when first interviewed by police, 52.7% reported greater disclosure while 12.2% reported a greater level of deception during their pre-treatment interview at Mt. Meigs.

Discussion

- Prior to release, a significant percentage of incarcerated JSOs (85%) reported being deceptive regarding aspects of their offense behaviors when first interviewed prior to the onset of treatment with offense details (41.6%), reported motivation for the offense (35.1%), and number of total offenses (31.2%) most common.
- Therefore, it appears deception is a typical/normal behavior prior to the onset of treatment and most individuals report significant differences in their post-treatment account regarding their offense following treatment and prior to release.
- Treatment may facilitate a greater rate of disclosure regarding sex offending behaviors prior to release.

Future Directions:

- Examine if victim selection (e.g., children vs. peer aged) is related to the rate of disclosure during the pre-treatment interview.