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RECIDIVISM OF CHILD MOLESTERS: A STUDY OF VICTIM RELATIONSHIP WITH THE PERPETRATOR

DAVID GREENBERG

Department of Psychiatry, University of Western Australia, Perth, Western Australia, Australia

JOHN BRADFORD

Department of Psychiatry, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

PHILIP FIRESTONE

Departments of Psychiatry and Psychology, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

SUSAN CURRY

Department of Psychiatry, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

ABSTRACT

Objective: To compare the rates among of recidivism or re-offense among convicted child molesters who offend against biological children, stepchildren, and relationships where the child is an extended family member, acquaintance or stranger to the victim.

Method: Four hundred male subjects 18 years of age or older and at least 5 years older than the victim at the time of the index offense, were convicted of a hands on sexual offense against one or more children under the age of 16. Subjects were grouped into five categories according to the type of relationship the perpetrator had with the victim. The subjects records of criminal arrests and convictions was obtained from the national Royal Canadian Mounted Police data. Subjects were then followed-up for a period of up to 15 years after conviction when they were at risk to re-offend in the community. Survival outcome data after the index sexual offense was collected for all new sexual, violent, and any criminal offenses.

Results: A larger proportion of men (16.2%) who sexually offended against children who were acquaintances, were charged with a new sexual offense than men who sexually offended against biological (4.8%) or their stepchildren (5.1%). The percentage of men who were subsequently charged with any type of criminal offense and who offended against their biological children (19%) was smaller than men who offended against children where the relationship is an extended family member (40%), acquaintances (35.9%) or strangers (45.2%).

Conclusions: When comparing the different categories of relationship the victim had with the perpetrator, the category of stranger has been highlighted as a group with a higher risk for re-offense. Our results have shown that comparatively, the risk of acquaintance group is a significantly higher risk category than was previously thought. Although professionals are principally concerned with sexual recidivism, general criminality appears to present in relatively large proportions of all child molesters with the stranger group at the highest risk level. While no single factor will predict recidivism in itself, the importance of defining the relationship between the perpetrator and victim is evident from this study. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd.

Key Words—Child molesters, Pedophilia, Incest, Recidivism, Sex offenders.

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Requests for reprints should be sent to Professor D. Greenberg, Chair of Forensic Psychiatry, Graylands Hospital Campus, Gascoyne House, Brockway Road, Mt. Claremont, Perth 6010, Australia.

INTRODUCTION

SEXUAL ABUSE OF children by adult child molesters is a serious public health problem. Using a broad definition of sexual abuse, the Canadian National Population Survey found that 50% of females and 33% of males have been victims of "unwanted sexual acts," where four fifths of these incidents had occurred when they were children or youths (Badgley, 1984). Unwanted sexual acts are defined as the perpetrator exposing any sex parts, or threatening to have sex, or touching sex parts of the victims body, or attempting to or committing a sexual assault. Given the prevalence and persistence of this problem, legislators and professionals who deal with perpetrators of child sexual abuse are often uncertain on how best to manage these offenders. One response has been a move by certain legislators towards increased detention of sex offenders (Zonana, 1997). For example, in the United States, the Federal Supreme Court upheld the Kansas versus Hendrick's decision which confirmed the civil detention of sexual perpetrators after they have served their criminal sentences (Appelbaum, 1997). Conversely, others have highlighted the relatively low rates of sexual recidivism for most sex offenders compared with other serious criminal offenders (Grubin, 1997; Hanson, Steffy, & Gauthier, 1993). The perception that the only way to manage these offenders is containment in institutions has been questioned by Hall (1995). Central to this question of detention versus release of sex offenders, is the overall comprehensive assessment and management of risk for future recidivism. Knowledge of recidivism rates and survival analyses for convicted child molesters is therefore an essential component to any risk assessment and management process (Quinsey, Lalumière, Rice, & Harris, 1995).

The recidivism rate for child molesters is dependent on the definition of recidivism, the sample population, application of treatment and length of follow-up after release into the community, among other factors (Greenberg, 1998). The true recidivism rate is difficult to measure as child molestation may go undetected by the caregiver or unreported by the child. Furthermore, self-reports by child molesters are notoriously unreliable (Abel & Osborn, 1992). Because of plea bargaining, a recidivistic child molester may enter into a plea of guilty to a lesser offense in order for the crown to obtain a sure conviction. Therefore, many researchers are now using new criminal charges or re-conviction rates as an indicator of recidivism of convicted sex offenders. These rates are therefore relative and should be considered underestimates of the true recidivism rate. Imperfections in these relative base rates of recidivism can be traced to methodological problems inherent in any outcome measure study of sex offenders which are beyond the scope of this article but have been reviewed elsewhere in the literature (Furby, Weinrott, & Blackshaw, 1989).

Recently there has been renewed interest in the recidivism and survival rates of convicted child molesters who have been released back into the community. In a meta analysis of the various studies completed during the past 52 years (1943–1995), Hanson and Bussière (1998) reported that 12.7% of a sample of 9,603 child molesters, who were followed up for an average period of 4–5 years in the community, sexually recidivate. The recidivism rates for nonsexual violence was 9.9% and 36.9% for any criminal, including a sexual, offense for the same follow-up period. Since 1995 there has been several subsequent follow-up recidivism studies of child molesters. Proulx and colleagues (1997) reported that in a sample of 269 child molesters, the cumulative rate for sexual, sexual and violent, and criminal recidivism was 13%, 15.2%, and 21.1%, respectively, after a mean follow-up period of 64.5 months. Sexual recidivism was defined as any charge or conviction for a sexual criminal act; violent recidivism as any charge or conviction for sexual or physical violent criminal act; and criminal recidivism was likewise any criminal act including sexual, violent or any general criminal act. Prentky, Lee, Knight, and Cerce (1997) reported that their three groups of 111 male child molesters released between 1960 and 1984, with follow-up for periods varying between 12 and 36 years, the sexual re-offense rate varied between 17%, 20%, and 22%. Quinsey, Khanna, and Malcom (1998) found that for child molesters, the sexual, violent and any criminal re-offense rate after a mean follow-up period of 44 months, was 17%, 27%, and 38%, respectively. All these

studies have investigated child molesters as a broad category with no subcategorizations as to gender or relationship of victim to the perpetrator. However, in Hanson and Bussière's meta-analysis (1998), sub-categorizing child molesters on the basis of the victims relationship to the perpetrator was found to be a discriminating variable in predicting recidivism. Firestone and colleagues (2000), divided their sample into incest and extra familial child molesters and reported that in a sample of 192 extra familial child molesters, who were followed up for a mean period of 7.8 years, the cumulative sexual, violent and general criminal recidivism rate was 15.1%, 20.3%, and 41.6%. In their sample of 251 intra familial child molesters, who were followed up for a mean period of 6.7 years after release into the community, the recidivism rates were far lower (Firestone, Bradford, McCoy, Greenberg, & Curry, 1999). The cumulative sexual, violent and general criminal recidivism rate was 6.4%, 12.4%, and 26.7%, respectively.

Although studies have broadly compared recidivism rates for convicted incest and extra familial child molesters, the rates of diverse categories of the victim relationship with the perpetrator has not been addressed in the literature. Despite the importance of further defining the victims relationship to the perpetrator in determining the likely potential for recidivism of child molesters, there has been no published studies on the survival rates using this predictor variable (Hansen & Bussière, 1998; Quinsey, Khanna, & Malcom, 1998). The purpose of this present study was to compare the sexual, violent, and general criminal survival rates for five different categories of victim relationship with the perpetrator including biological fathers, stepfathers, uncles and cousins, acquaintances, and strangers. This study is an extension of a body of work examining the recidivism and predictor variables of both intra- and extra-familial child molesters (Firestone et al., 1999, 2000). The practical importance of such data will later be discussed in this article.

METHOD

Subjects

All subjects were assessed at a university teaching hospital Sexual Behaviors Clinic (SBC) between 1982 and 1992. The 400 male subjects were 18 years of age or older at the time of the index offense and had all been convicted of a hands on sexual offense against one or more children who were under the age of 16 at the time of the offense. All child molesters were 5 years older than their victims at the time of the offense. Eighty percent of the same were assessed at time of trial or presentence stage of the judicial process. The subjects were grouped into five categories according to the type of relationship the victim had with the perpetrator: biological child ($n = 84$), stepchild ($n = 78$), niece, nephew, cousin, grandchild, sibling ($n = 65$), known to child but unrelated ($n = 142$), and unknown (stranger) to the child ($n = 31$). Subjects were included where they only offended against one known relationship type. At time of assessment where a subject had a known previous record of a sexual offense, these previous offenses did not cross over into one of the other four categories of relationship. This determination was made after a comprehensive psychosexual evaluation which included self-report, psychological, physiological, and official records (Bradford & Greenberg, 1998).

Procedures

The assessment process at the SBC routinely includes several components. On initial consultation a psychiatric interview is conducted by a staff psychiatrist. By a second interview a diagnosis is made according the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III and DSM-III-R; American Psychiatric Association, 1980, 1987). During interviews the subject's written consent was obtained for completion of all questionnaires, phallometric testing and use of this information for research purposes. Offense information was gathered at the Ottawa Police

Station from the Canadian Police Information Centre (CPIC), a national database of criminal arrests and convictions including Interpol reports from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Records were matched to individual subjects according to name, date of birth and index offense particulars. CPIC records contain the individual's criminal history and include details such as date of charge or conviction, nature of offense, disposition of the incident (i.e., convicted, charges withdrawn, stay of proceedings, and so on, and sentence/penalty imposed in cases of convictions). In order for the offender to be considered eligible for recidivism, he must have been in the community to commit a new crime; he could not have been incarcerated or in secure custody for reasons of mental illness. In Canadian penitentiaries, an offender is likely to be released after serving two thirds of his sentence when his risk for recidivism is considered low and when he has met the necessary release criteria. Most dates of release were available from CPIC records. When there was evidence an offender was incarcerated, but release date was unavailable from CPIC records, or from the Federal or Provincial Correctional Systems, the CPIC record was used to estimate the first date of eligibility. This date was calculated based upon an offender having served 2/3 of his sentence, that is mandatory release, after which the offender then remained "at risk" until the offender was charged or convicted for a new offense as indicated by the CPIC record. Recidivism was divided into three categories in a fashion similar to Proulx and colleagues (1997). Sexual recidivism was defined as any charge or conviction for a sexual offense, after the index offense. This included incestuous and non incestuous sexual offenses Violent recidivism encompassed any charge or conviction for nonsexual violent and sexual offenses. Criminal recidivism was defined as any charge or conviction noted in the CPIC documentation. A cumulative hierarchy in which each additional category subsumes that of the previous was adopted to account for plea bargaining distortions and to allow comparison with previous recidivism research with child molesters (Proulx et al., 1997).

Prior to performing statistical tests the data was screened to ensure assumptions underlying tests were not violated, outlying cases were identified by using a criterion of plus or minus three standard deviations from the mean or by visual inspection of the normal probability plots. Values of outlying cases were adjusted upwards and downwards, according to the direction of the problem. This method is appropriate when case retention is desirable and does not unduly influence the group mean (Tabachnick & Fidell, 1989). The values reported in the tables are post transformation.

RESULTS

The subjects had an average of 7.16 years ($SD = 3.45$) at risk to re-offend. The groups did not differ on age at time of assessment. The mean age for all five groups was 39.11 years ($SD = 11.56$). The groups did differ on years of education [$F(4,366) = 5.41; p < .0005$]. **Child molesters who had offended against a child known to them, but unrelated, had significantly more years of education than child molesters who offended against children unknown to them, biological children, or children from the extended family.** The mean number of years of education for the groups of biological children, stepchild, extended family, acquaintance, and stranger were 9.81 ($SD = 2.56$), 10.39 ($SD = 2.68$), 9.89 ($SD = 2.86$), 11.43 ($SD = 3.99$), and 9.07 ($SD = 3.92$), respectively. As would be expected there was a difference on marital status among the groups ($\chi^2 = 89.02; df = 8; p < .00001$) (Table 1).

There was no significant difference between the groups on the proportion of subjects who had a prior conviction for a violent offense. Overall, 12.0% had a conviction for a violent offense prior to the index offense. The groups did differ significantly on the proportion of subjects who had a prior conviction for a sexual offense ($\chi^2 = 16.36; df = 4; p < .005$), a prior nonviolent offense ($\chi^2 = 10.96; df = 4; p < .05$) and a prior conviction for any offense ($\chi^2 = 10.31; df = 4; p < .05$) (Table 2).

Table 1. Marital Status by group

Group	Single (%)	Married/Commonlaw (%)	Separated/Divorced/Widowed (%)
Biological Child	3.6	63.1	33.3
Step Child	10.5	56.6	32.9
Extended Family	36.9	41.5	21.5
Acquaintance	47.5	33.3	19.1
Stranger	73.3	23.3	3.3

The recidivism rates for various subcategories of child molesters after a follow-up period of up to 15 years are summarized in Table 3. The proportion of subjects in each group who had any criminal re-offense after the index offense did differ significantly ($\chi^2 = 13.35$; $df = 4$; $p < .01$), as did the proportion who re-offended sexually ($\chi^2 = 10.46$; $df = 4$; $p < .05$) (Figures 1, 2, and 3). There was no difference in the proportion of the groups who re-offend sexually and violently ($\chi^2 = 7.47$; $df = 4$; $p > .05$). The results indicate that a smaller proportion of men who offend against their biological children tend to be charged with any type of new criminal offense compared with men who offend against children from the extended family ($\chi^2 = 6.95$; $df = 1$; $p < .01$), an acquaintance ($\chi^2 = 6.41$; $df = 1$; $p < .05$), or a stranger ($\chi^2 = 6.70$; $df = 1$; $p < .01$). A larger proportion of men who offend against children known to them, but not related, tend to be charged with a new sexual offense than men who offend against their biological ($\chi^2 = 5.52$; $df = 1$; $p < .05$) or stepchildren ($\chi^2 = 4.75$; $df = 1$; $p < .05$).

DISCUSSION

Overall, our sample of 400 child molesters were assessed at a mean age of 39 years. At the time of assessment, less than 5% of individuals in the biological and stepfather categories had a prior sexual offense, compared with 19% of the stranger group having a prior sexual arrest or conviction record. The literature suggests that child molesters as a group, have an early onset of paraphilic fantasy or behavior, usually in late adolescence, although there is considerable variation among the group (Abel, Osborn, & Twigg, 1993; Marshall, Barbaree, & Eccles, 1991). This would seem to imply that a certain proportion of this child molester population are actively perpetrating acts of sexual violence against children for some two decades before they are detected by an authority agency. Abel, Becker, Mittelman, and Rouleau (1988) reported that a proportion of this group perform a massive number of sexual acts thereby inflating the average number of sexual acts on children per offender. Therefore, the relevance of early detection of this subgroup of recidivistic child molesters has enormous implications for development of child abuse prevention strategies.

Studies have shown that levels of education of child molesters does not predict sexual recidivism (Hanson et al., 1993; Rice, Quinsey, & Harris, 1991). By subcategorising the child molester population by victim to perpetrator relationship, the level of education in the acquaintance group

Table 2. Prior Conviction of Child Molesters

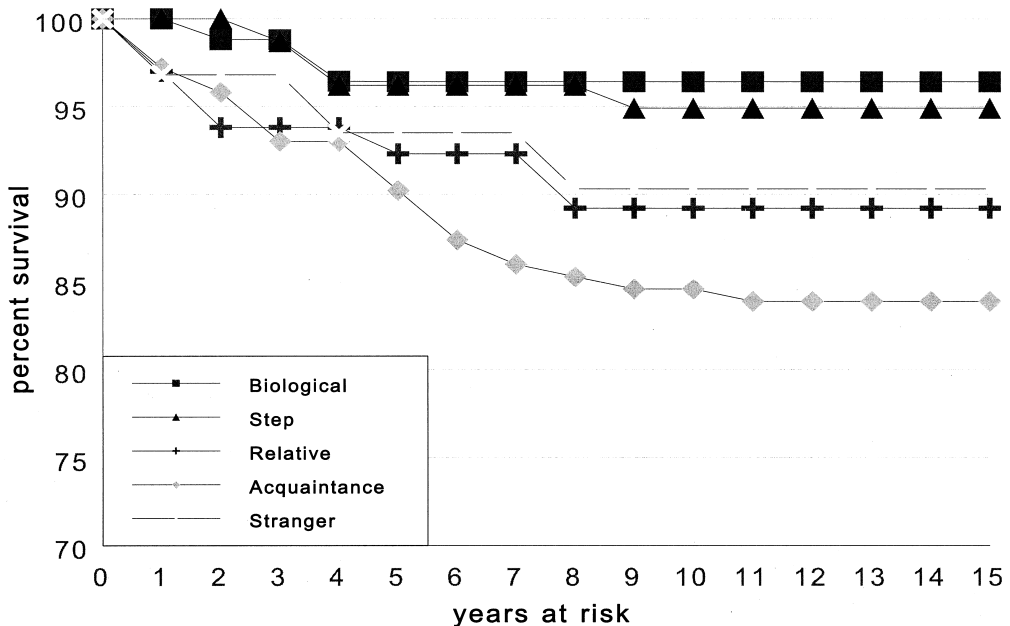
Group	Prior Sexual Conviction (%)	Prior Non-violent Conviction (%)	Any Prior Conviction (%)
Biological Child	3.6	33.3	36.9
Step Child	5.1	32.1	35.9
Extended Family	12.3	20.0	27.7
Acquaintance	18.3	27.5	38.7
Stranger	19.4	51.6	63.3

Table 3. Reoffense Rates of Child Molesters

Group	Sexual Reoffense (%)	Any Reoffense (%)
Biological Child	4.8	19.0
Step Child	5.1	25.6
Extended Family	10.8	40.0
Acquaintance	16.2	35.9
Stranger	9.7	45.2

was found to be higher than the other groups. The significance of this finding is uncertain, given that the acquaintance group also has the worst survival rates for sexual and violent recidivism. However, there is some concurrence in the literature, where low levels of education in a population of general sex offenders has been reported to be weakly negatively correlated as a predictor of sexual recidivism (Hanson & Bussière, 1998). It must be remembered that this relationship applies to the mean level of education rather than extremes of levels of the educational spectrum and for violent and general criminal offenders, there is a correlation between level of education and recidivism in these individuals (Harris, Rice, & Quinsey, 1993). Our results for marital status are consistent with that found in the literature with obviously a higher proportion of the two groups of fathers being married, separated or divorced than the other three groups who were more likely to be single.

Our results examined the sexual, violent and general criminal recidivism rates of the various categories of perpetrators relationships with their victims. For sexual recidivism, we found that the acquaintance group who had a large proportion of prior sexual offenses also were therefore likely to commit further sexual offenses. Included in this category are individuals who have a degree of familiarity with the child, but are unrelated such as teachers, caregivers, neighbors, and so on. Over 18% of acquaintances and 19.4% of the members of the stranger category had significantly more

**Figure 1. Child molesters: Sexual recidivism by victim relationship.**

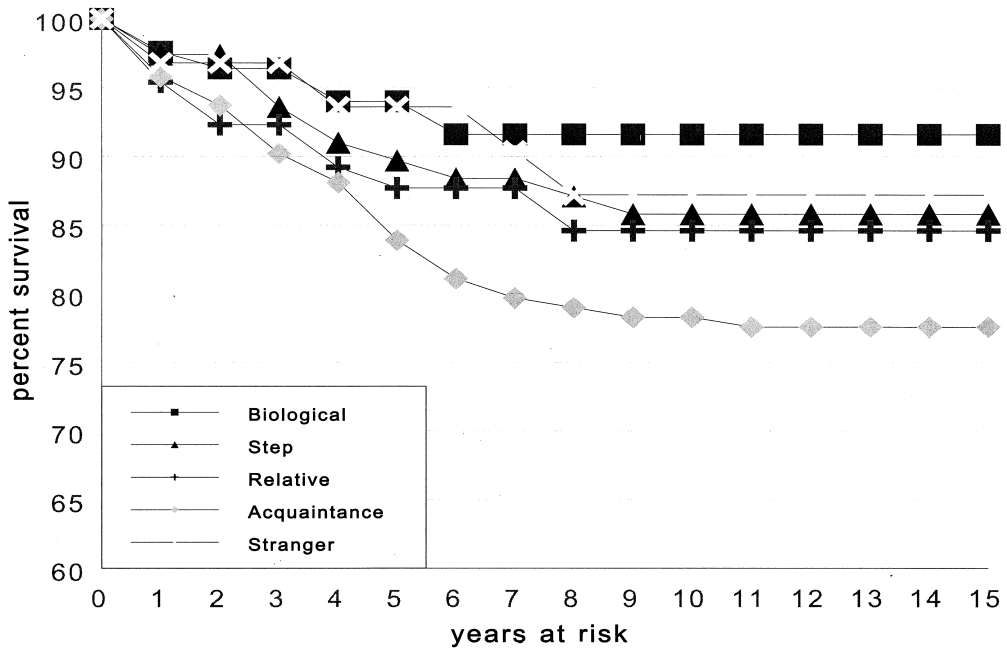


Figure 2. Child molesters: Sexual and violent recidivism by victim relationship.

prior sexual convictions than the step- (5.1%) and biological fathers (3.6%). The literature supports our findings and shows that one of the best predictors of sexual recidivism is a previous sex offense (Hanson & Bussière, 1998; Quinsey, Rice, & Harris, 1995; Rice et al., 1991). Therefore, predictably our acquaintance group had the highest proportion of a sexual re-offense (16.2%) compared to extended family (10.8%), strangers (9.7%), biological (4.8%), and stepfathers (5.1%) after a mean follow-up period of 7.16 years. Notably was a lower than expected rate for the stranger category although this difference was not statistically significant. Both Hanson and Bussière (1998), and Proulx and colleagues (1997) report sexual recidivism rates of 12.7% and 13% after an average follow-up period of approximately 4 to 5 years for a general group of child molesters. Firestone and colleagues (Firestone et al., 2000), reported a level of 15.1% after a mean period of 7.8 years for an extra familial group which excluded incest perpetrators. Quinsey and colleagues (1998) reported a higher rate of recidivism after 44 months could possibly be explained by the specific sample of prisoners who had been sentenced to terms of more than 2 years, thereby implying more severe offenses. Previous studies on sexual recidivism have stressed the stranger variable as an important predictor of sexual recidivism in child molesters and consequently implied dangerousness of these individuals (Hanson & Bussière, 1998). Our results concur with other studies showing that step- and biological father categories have the best survival curves (Firestone et al., 1999; Hanson & Bussière, 1998; Quinsey et al., 1998; Proulx et al., 1997). While not minimizing the importance of this finding, our study highlights that the acquaintance group appear to be at particular risk for sexual recidivism, relative to the other categories of victim-perpetrator relationship. The importance of delineating these groups is therefore apparent from our results. Furthermore, the extended family member category appear to have a similar (sexual recidivism) survival curve to the stranger group and they should not be considered in the same light as biological or stepfather incest perpetrators even though they are technical family members and in some studies have been considered part of the incest category. Unfortunately we did not have sufficient statistical power to delineate further subgroups of the extended family member category

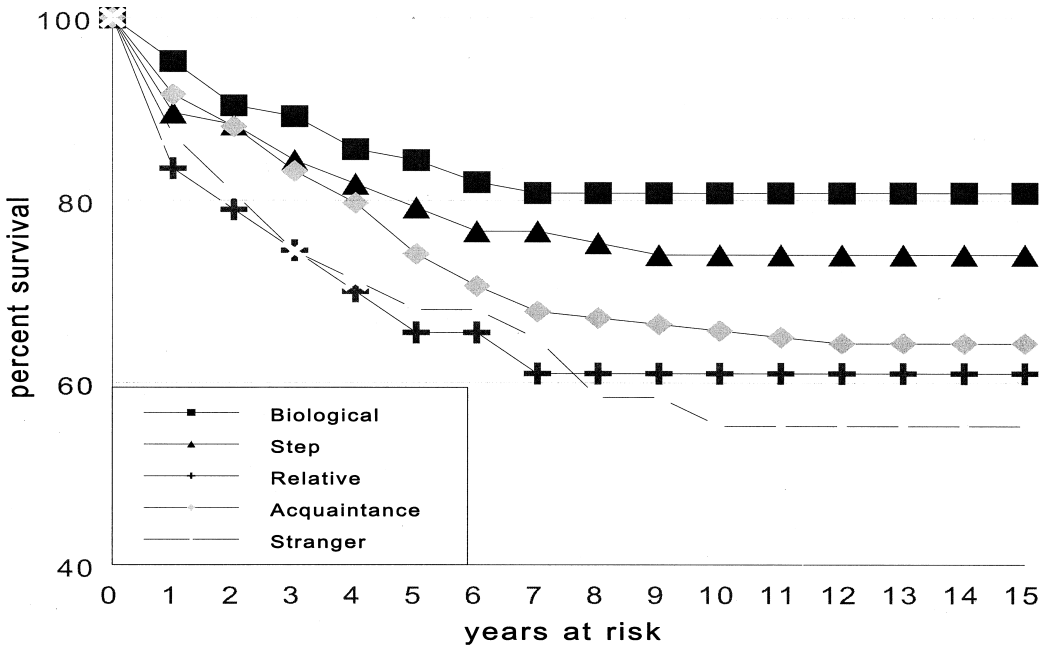


Figure 3. Child molesters: All recidivism by victim relationship.

such as grandfathers, uncles first cousins, and so forth, and this will need further clarification in future studies.

Management and supervision of incest perpetrators and their own respective families, may often be complex and fraught with difficulties. With access and custody disputes, certain families, in our experience, demand and attempt family reconstitution after the perpetrator (father) has served his full sentence and is no longer supervised by the probation or parole service. Also, child protective agencies, parole officers and judges are often faced with perplexing decisions on whether to allow various degrees of access of an incest perpetrator with a previous and subsequently now empowered older victim or their other non-abused biological children from the same family as the victim. Risk assessment and management of these incestuous fathers forms an essential component of any decision making process. Furthermore, judges weighing the need for retribution and rehabilitation may have to factor into their sentencing deliberations the potential risk to the community. Although no single factor solely predicts re-offense, certain factors have a higher predictive validity for the prediction of potential recidivism of child molesters (Firestone et al., 2000; Hanson & Bussière, 1998; Proulx et al., 1997). These categories or variables do not speak to a specific individual nor do they have 100% accuracy in predicting future recidivism. They do, however, assist risk managers as to the identification of higher or lower risk categories of child molesters and identify the probability of a member of that category re-offending. With predictive assessments, pure clinical assessment have been reported to be inferior to actuarial methods (Dawes, Faust, & Meehl, 1989). However, significant improvements with risk assessment of these offenders using clinically guided and actuarial methods have had moderate predictive accuracy success (Hanson, 1998). Clinically guided risk assessment tools have been developed which incorporate variables which have predictive validity into the clinical assessment (Boer, Wilson, Gauthier, & Hart, 1997). Actuarial assessment instruments incorporate weighted predictor variables and also show some promise in the burgeoning field (Hanson, 1998). Overall, it is foreseeable that our knowledge of

recidivism rates and predictor variables is likely to continue to improve in our decision making process with these types of child sex offenders.

Our study, of general criminal recidivism of child molesters, showed that almost two thirds of the stranger category had a prior criminal record. The recidivism rate for criminality in general, was therefore, not surprisingly, higher in the stranger group (45.2%) which may reflect a greater tendency towards antisocial behavior in this group. A large proportion of individuals in the acquaintance category (40%) and extended family members (35.9%) who perpetrated sexual acts against children were also found to commit criminal activities after the index sexual offense. These results tend to indicate that a greater degree of antisocial behavior is evident in acquaintances, extended family members and strangers who commit child molestation. This higher end of the spectrum of antisocial traits is consistent with the results from Quinsey and colleagues (1998), Hanson and Bussière (1998), child molester groups, and Firestone and colleagues (2000), extra familial sample which show general criminal activity of approximately 37% to 42% 4 to 8 years after the index offense. Even though the rates of general criminality were significantly lower, a relatively large number of biological (19%) and step fathers (25.6%) were also returned to the criminal justice system within the 12-year follow-up period. The relevance of this finding lies in the research information which suggests that antisocial traits and personality disordered individuals are at higher risk to re-offend (Serin, Malcom, Khanna, & Barbaree, 1994). This relatively large proportion (19% & 26%) of criminal recidivism contrasts with the lower rates of sexual reconviction (4.8% & 5.1%) for the biological and stepdaughter incest groups.

The practical implications of this outcome study lies with its utility for risk assessment and management of recidivism of child molesters by various mental health professionals and judicial officers. Risk assessment should not be considered a fixed determination, but rather a adjustable equation which requires continuing revisions to manage the risk of these offenders. The survival curves for our sample of 400 child molesters who were followed up for a period of up to 15 years, suggests the predominant risk for all three types of recidivism appears to be in the first five years post release. Hanson and colleagues (1993) report similar findings. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that some researchers have reported that the sexual recidivism gradually increases over a period of 30 years after release (Furby et al., 1989; Soothill & Gibbons, 1980).

In summary, it should always be remembered that official records are considered underestimates of the true recidivism rate. Despite these concerns, these recidivism rates for child molesters are considered by many as the most reliable measures we have to date to provides us with credible risk assessment data. Our results will be of interest to professionals who manage these sex offenders. Our findings should not be seen as advocating for unconditional access or custody for low risk categories such as incest perpetrators, but rather as tools for furthering our knowledge and understanding of risk assessment of child molesters. More attention needs to be paid to the acquaintance category for sexual recidivism and the stranger category for criminal recidivism in general. For example, higher levels of service for probation clients directed by probation officers in these higher risk categories may therefore be indicated. There is a mistaken belief that higher risk groups do not profit from amplified supervision and treatment (Andrews, 1996). Treatment provided to these specific categories of child molesters, must address not only why these offenders are at higher risk, but also direct interventions to those offenders who have specific predictor variables which are amenable to change and supervision.

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