

# Nonsex Offences Committed by Child Molesters: Findings From a Longitudinal Study

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**Abstract:** *This study, which used a prospective as well as a retrospective methodology, examined the criminal records of 30 child molesters prior to, and up to 10 years after an index event of sexual abuse for which they were convicted: 73% had convictions for other offences, 60% had convictions for offences other than sex offences, 50% had convictions for property offences, 27% had convictions for offences involving violence, and 23% had convictions for drug offences. Offending levels for nonsex offences were significantly higher than the general adult male population. Any theory concerning the dynamics of sex offending against children needs to account for the level of nonsex offences committed by child molesters.*

**Keywords:** *sex offenders; child molestation; pedophilia; criminal history; recidivism*

Research on sex offenders has established that the offences that lead to convictions need to be seen in the context of a much bigger picture of criminal activity by the offender, and most offences escape detection (Abel, Becker, Mittelman, Cunningham-Rathner, Rouleau, & Murphy, 1987; Prentky, Lee, Knight, & Cerce, 1997).

One debate in the literature is whether sex offenders should be treated as specialists or generalists (Simon, 1997). There is a lot of evidence that sex offenders generally commit a wide range of other offences as well (Broadhurst & Maller, 1992; Hanson & Bussière, 1998; Soothill, Francis, Sanderson, & Ackerley, 2000; U.S. Bureau of Statistics, 2002). There is mounting evidence that this observation applies also to those sex offenders identified as child molesters. Yet what is known about this does not seem to have been incorporated into an overall theory of sex crimes against children.

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The evidence that child molesters also commit a great range of other offences comes from a number of studies (see Hanson & Bussière, 1998; Simon, 1997 for reviews). Weinrott and Saylor (1991), in a study of sex offenders' self-reports of criminal activity, found that the 67 child molesters in the study had committed more than 8,000 nonsex crimes among them in the 12 months preceding their incarceration. The mean number of offences per man was 121 and the median, 50. All but five had committed at least one nonsex offence. More than 20% were involved in assault, theft, burglary, possession of stolen goods, and drug-related offences within the year prior to the study. The list of nonsex offences included physical assault of children and partners. Although incest offenders reported fewer offences on average than extrafamilial offenders, all incest perpetrators admitted at least one nonsex crime.

Simon, Sales, Kazniac, and Kahn (1992) found that a substantial proportion of sex offenders against children had convictions for nonsex offences. Of these sex offenders in their study, one half of the offenders had a prior criminal record for nonsexual offences, and one fourth had a record of previous sex offences. More than 50% had a history of alcohol abuse, and one third had a drug addiction.

The evidence that sex offenders against children are likely also to commit other types of offences against the person emerges from a number of studies on risk factors for child sexual abuse. Sexual abuse against children is associated with the occurrence of domestic violence (Goddard & Hiller, 1993; O'Keefe, 1995). Physical abuse is also a known risk factor for sexual abuse (Fleming, Mullen, & Bammer, 1997; McGee, Wolfe, Yuen, Wilson, & Carnochan, 1995). This should not be surprising. Sex offences against children and personal violence offences demonstrate a lack of empathy for the person who is being abused or assaulted.

Sex offenders against children may also commit a range of property offences as well. Canter and Kirby (1995) examined the criminal histories of 416 offenders who had committed offences against children between the ages of 5 years and 12 years in the north of England. They found that 44% of the offenders had previous convictions. The mean number of offences was 6. The most common group of offences for which they had been convicted was offences in which property was stolen: 84 offenders had convictions for property offences as a juvenile, compared with 11 who had a conviction for a sex offence; 160 offenders had convictions for property offences as an adult compared to 72 who had convictions for sex offences. In a Canadian study of convicted child molesters in a prison population, Hanson, Scott, and Steffy (1995) found that 40% had prior convictions for property offences.

The evidence that sex offenders commonly have a prior criminal record for other offences needs to be considered in the light of the fact that a previous conviction, especially for a property offence, is common within other offender groups or even in the general population (Prime, White, Liriano, & Patel, 2001). If, however, levels of nonsex offences committed by child molesters are much higher than in the general male population, this may have implications for theories about

the dynamics of sex offending against children and perhaps also for treatment programs for child molesters.

## METHOD

In this study, we examined the criminal records of offenders convicted of sex offences against children. Offences were noted prior to the index event of sexual abuse for which they were convicted, and for up to 10 years after the index event of abuse. We also examined whether offenders had been convicted for nonsex offences as well as sex offences.

To date, most other studies have been purely retrospective. One reason for this is that in certain jurisdictions, sex offenders against children can expect to receive long sentences of imprisonment. In Australia, sex offenders against children are not necessarily sentenced to long periods of incarceration. For example, a study of patterns of sentencing in 1994 found that for the most serious of offences, sexual intercourse with a child younger than age 10, only 25 of 33 offenders were sentenced to imprisonment. The median full sentence was 5 years with a median minimum sentence to be served of 30 months. For offences classified as indecent assault (in which no intercourse occurred), a minority of offenders were incarcerated (Gallagher, Hickey, & Ash, 1997).

This study developed from a larger prospective study investigating the behavioural and emotional effects of child sexual abuse in Sydney, New South Wales (Oates, O'Toole, Lynch, Stern, & Cooney, 1994; Swanston, Tebbutt, O'Toole, & Oates, 1997; Tebbutt, Swanston, Oates, & O'Toole, 1997).

The 183 children in the study were referred over the 2-year period 1988 to 1989 to child protection units at two teaching hospitals. These are specified referral centers for the Sydney metropolitan area for the assessment of alleged sexual abuse. In 117 cases, the name of the alleged perpetrator was known. In 1998, 9 to 10 years after the index event of abuse, data on court outcome for those cases that went to trial or sentence were extracted from the Justice Information System at the Department of Public Prosecutions, District Court files held at the District Court Criminal Registry, Supreme Court files held at the Supreme Court Criminal Registry and Local Court Files held at the record departments of individual local courts. The Criminal Records Unit of the NSW Police Service provided information on the offenders' previous criminal record, given in unidentified form. All court and criminal record data were collected under a signed agreement of confidentiality and analyses of data focused on group effects so that individuals could not be identified.

From this search of the relevant court records, we were able to find evidence of 45 of these children's cases reaching trial or sentence. In 32 of these cases, the offenders were convicted of child sexual abuse. This is 27% of the 117 cases in which the alleged perpetrator was identified sufficiently to trace the case through court records. In this group, there were 30 offenders. In 21 cases (66%), convicted

offenders were given a custodial sentence. In another article, we explored the reasons why the great majority of cases did not proceed to trial or conviction (Parkinson, Shrimpton, Swanston, O'Toole, & Oates, 2002).

## RESULTS

### CHARACTERISTICS OF CONVICTED OFFENDERS

Of the convicted offenders, 97% were male. The one female offender committed offences in conjunction with a male offender. The age of the offenders ranged from 17 years to 72 years with a mean of 39 years and median of 38 years. Of the convicted offenders, 77% were employed, 13% were unemployed, 7% were students or pensioners, and employment status was unknown for 3%. Of the convicted offenders, 37% were married, 23% were single and had never married, 3% were either separated or divorced, 7% were living in a cohabiting relationship outside marriage, and for the remaining 30%, marital status was not available on the records. Of the convicted offenders, 10% completed primary school only, 13% completed secondary school only, 13% completed a trade certificate or a course at a college of further education (TAFE) and 7% completed a bachelor's degree. For 57%, information about educational level was not available.

### CRIMINAL RECORD OF CONVICTED OFFENDERS

Of the 30 convicted offenders, 22 (73%) had a total of 235 charges recorded against them and 185 convictions apart from the index event, as indicated in Table 1. Some offenders had committed offences prior to and after the index event. The mean number of offences per person was 8.4. Of 30 offenders, 18 (60%) had convictions for offences other than sex offences.

Table 2 lists the main categories of offences as recorded in police records other than the index event. Some offenders committed offences in more than one category.

After excluding the 62 serious driving offences, 21 (70%) offenders had charges totaling 173 offences laid against them with 132 leading to convictions. Six of the offenders had charges against them as juveniles mainly for driving and property offences. Of the 30 offenders, 15 (50%) had convictions for property offences, 7 (23%) for drug offences, and 8 (27%) for offences involving violence.

Table 3 lists the sexual offences other than the index event. Nine offenders were charged with other sex offences either prior to, contemporaneously with, or subsequent to the index event of abuse, and eight offenders (27%) were convicted of such sexual offences. A total of 38 convictions were recorded against these offenders. It is not clear in all cases whether the charges and convictions were in relation to a sex offence against a child or an adult. This is because certain sections of the Crimes Act 1900 (NSW) might be used to prosecute offences against adults

**TABLE 1**  
OTHER OFFENCES OF CONVICTED SEX OFFENDERS AGAINST CHILDREN

	<i>Number of Offenders<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>Charges</i>	<i>Number of Offenders<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>Convictions</i>
Offences prior to index event	18 (82%)	179	18	137
Offences after index event	13 (59%)	53	11	45
Offences contemporaneous with index event	1 (5%)	3	1	3
Total	22 (100%)	235	22 (100%)	185

a. Because not all of the offenders were convicted on all charges, the numbers of offenders who were charged with a category of offence and the number who were convicted of an offence within that category may differ.

**TABLE 2**  
CATEGORIES OF OFFENCES OTHER THAN THE INDEX EVENT

	<i>Number of Offenders<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>Charges</i>	<i>Number of Offenders<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>Convictions</i>
Sex offences	9 (41%)	46 (20%)	8	38 (21%)
Serious driving offences	9 (41%)	62 (26%)	9	53 (29%)
Property offences	15 (68%)	44 (68%)	15	35 (19%)
Drug-related crimes	7 (32%)	31 (13%)	7	23 (12%)
Offences involving violence	8 (36%)	19 (8%)	5	8 (4%)
Other <sup>a</sup>	8 (36%)	33 (14%)	7	28 (15%)
Total	22 (100%)	235 (100%)	22 (100%)	185 (100%)

a. The category of Other offences refers to a wide range of offences including carrying an offensive weapon, resisting arrest, and offering a bribe.

and children, and the age of the victim was unclear from the records. Nonetheless, seven of the eight convicted offenders clearly committed other sex offences

**TABLE 3**  
SEX OFFENCES OTHER THAN THE INDEX EVENT

	<i>Number of Offenders</i>	<i>Charges</i>	<i>Number of Offenders</i>	<i>Convictions</i>
Offences prior to index event				
Against children	4	10	3	9
Age of victim unclear from records	4	25	4	20
Offences after index event against children	4	8	3	6
Other child victims contemporaneous with index event	1	3	1	3
Total	9	46	8	38

against children. In the case of the eighth offender, the age of the victim was unclear.

## DISCUSSION

This study demonstrates that a substantial majority of sex offenders against children have other convictions, for sex offences and nonsex offences. Of those who were convicted for the index event, 73% had committed other offences either prior to the index event or in the subsequent 10 years; 23% were known to have had a history of other sexual offences against children. This indicates that, for many of the offenders, the index event was one of a series of sex offences committed against children, and conviction did not lead to a cessation of sex-offending activity. This is so, even though 66% received custodial sentences for the index event, and therefore there were periods of time in which they were not at liberty to commit further offences in the 10 years following the index event.

Although the sample size in this study is quite small, the results are broadly consistent with the findings of other studies. The overall recidivism rate, 11 offenders convicted again of 30 (37%), was lower than that found in a Canadian study of child molesters, where there was a reconviction rate of 61.8% (Hanson et al., 1995). However, the Canadian study was able to follow up the offenders for up to 30 years after release, a much longer period of time than in this study. The proportion of child molesters with convictions for nonsex offences in this study is comparable to that found in other studies: 60% committed nonsex offences either prior to the index event or within 10 years afterward. This compares to an overall figure of 50% who had convictions for prior nonsex offences in the study by Simon et al. (1992), and 44% in the study by Canter and Kirby (1995). It should be

noted, however, that these studies reported only on prior offences, whereas in this study, it was possible to examine the criminal records of those who were convicted of sex offences against children before and for up to 10 years after their conviction for the index sex offence. The results in this study are also consistent with the findings of Canter and Kirby (1995) that it was more likely that a sex offender would have a conviction for a property offence than for another sex offence. Although other studies examined only prior convictions, a strength of this longitudinal study is that we were able to examine the offending history of child molesters over a much greater time span than in most other studies.

These rates of offending other than sex offending in this study are higher than in general population studies. For instance, research in the United Kingdom that has tracked the cohort born in 1953 to 46 years of age found that 33% of men and 9% of women born in that year had been convicted of at least one standard list offence before the age of 46, most commonly for theft or the handling of stolen goods. Of this cohort, 2% had a conviction for a sex offence. Standard list offences include violence against the person, sexual offences, theft and handling stolen goods, criminal damage, drug offences, other indictable offences, other summary offences, and indictable motoring offences. The majority of offenders had been convicted on only one occasion, although 25% were convicted of four or more offences, and they accounted for two thirds of all court appearances by the cohort (Prime et al., 2001). No such cohort studies are available in Australia.

Certain limitations of the data should be noted. First, it is possible that in some cases a nonsex offence was committed concurrently with a sex offence and formed part of the same set of charges relating to the one incident of sexual assault. However, police records give few indications that there were such concurrent charges. Second, it is possible that certain nonsex crimes had a sexual motivation. Schlesinger and Revitch (1999) drew attention to the fact that many sexual murderers have a history of fetishistic or voyeuristic burglaries. We were not able to explore this issue within the confines of this study. Third, it is possible that some sex offences were plea-bargained down to convictions for nonsex offences carrying lower penalties. Again, we were not able to explore this issue given the limitations on our access to the data; however, there is not the same tradition or pattern of plea bargaining in Australia as in the United States. Research in New South Wales on child sexual assault prosecutions illustrates this. In a study of 571 proven offences finalised in 1994, the researchers found that in only 11% was a lesser offence accepted in full discharge of the indictment. Where this occurred, almost all offenders were convicted of less serious sexual offences than the ones originally charged. Only 8% of the accepted pleas were for nonsexual assault offences (Gallagher et al., 1997).

Fourth, the sample of convicted offenders in this study may not be representative of all sex offenders against children, including those who have not been apprehended, and those whose victims do not present to child protection units. It would have been valuable to be able to examine the criminal records of offenders on an individual basis, however the terms on which we gained access to the data

meant that we were limited to an analysis of group effects, which also prevented us from examining the relationship between custodial sentences and subsequent offending after the index event.

The extent to which child molesters engage in other forms of criminal behavior has implications for understanding the nature of sex offending. There is now a substantial research literature on sex offending against children. Theories of the etiology of sexual disorders have sought to explain sexually deviant acts by offering a range of biological (Money, 1990), psychological (Murphy & Smith, 1996) and sociocultural explanations (Stermac, Davidson, & Sheridan, 1995). The assumption behind much of this research is that sex offending against children needs to be studied as a category of criminal behavior that is different from other criminal behavior and that has a distinct etiology. A major focus has been on explaining deviant sexual arousal toward children.

There is, of course, considerable research evidence concerning sexual disorders, and this has informed theories about child molestation. Yet what has become clear is that the usual classifications of sex offenders against children are not at all discrete categories. Sex offenders against children cannot be neatly categorized into incest offenders and extrafamilial offenders, because many engage in intrafamilial and extrafamilial abuse (Abel et al., 1987; Faller, 1990). This makes it problematic to examine incest offending as a discrete category of offending. The characterization of sex offenders against children into fixated or regressed offenders has also been shown to be problematic. Simon et al. (1992) found that the distribution of offenders on this spectrum was unimodal rather than dichotomous.

Furthermore, some sex offenders against children commit sex offences against adults as well. Abel, Becker, Cunningham-Rathner, Mittelman, and Rouleau (1988) found that 25% of the men who targeted girls outside of the family also committed rape against adult women. Of the 126 rapists in their study, 44% had engaged in the extrafamilial sexual abuse of girls and 14% in the extrafamilial abuse of boys. Some rapists were also incest offenders. Sex offenders against children may also exhibit a range of other paraphilic behaviors, such as exhibitionism and voyeurism (Abel et al., 1988).

Such research indicates that any classification of sex offenders into discrete categories (e.g., Knight & Prentky, 1990) might, at best, need to be provisional. Although some offenders fit the clinical description of a pedophile (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) or can be classified in other conventional terms, many do not fit these categorizations. Classification as a rapist, incest offender, extrafamilial child molester, or exhibitionist may represent nothing more than the type of offence for which the person has most recently been apprehended.

The findings of this study (and similar findings in other studies) indicate that the sex offender/nonsex offender differentiation is also problematic (Simon, 1997). Although incarcerated criminal offenders who do not have a history of sex offending are very unlikely to commit sexual offences after release (Hanson et al., 1995), the number and range of other offences committed by child molesters

raises questions about the categorization of this group of sex offenders as specialists. Concentrating on sex offenders as a discrete category may obscure the extent to which sex offending against children shares common ground with other forms of criminal behavior.

Support for the view that sex offenders have certain characteristics in common with other offenders may be derived from certain other studies. In a comparison of incest offenders with men convicted of nonsex offences, Stermac et al. (1995) found that there were no differences between the two groups in the extent of violence used by these offenders in the home, and little differences in the extent to which threats or violence were used in committing their offences. Hunter, Childers, Gerald, and Esmaili (1990) found that child molesters could not be differentiated from other criminals by instruments such as the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI).

Clearly however, there are differences on other measures between sex offenders who commit crimes against children and nonsex offenders, for example, phallometric testing. Hanson & Bussière (1998) in a meta-analysis of sex offender recidivism studies, concluded: "For nonsexual offending, sexual and nonsexual criminals seem much the same, but separate processes appear to contribute to sexual offending" (p. 357).

The question remains how to explain the very high incidence of nonsex offences committed by sex offenders if prevailing theories of etiology focus only on sexual disorder. This suggests some new pathways for research on sex offending. As Simon et al. (1992) noted, "An explanatory theory of child molestation must incorporate a criminological perspective" (p. 222). Marshall and Barbaree (1990) proposed an integrated theory of the etiology of sex offending that incorporates biological factors, childhood experiences, sociocultural context, and transitory situational factors. It is apparent that any theory of sex offending, as opposed to deviant sexual desire, must take account of the fact that sex offenders against children are a heterogeneous population and that a range of different factors in combination may be at work. Any such theory needs also to take account of the fact that many adults are attracted to children but do not offend (Briere & Runtz, 1989; Hayashino, Wurtele, & Klebe, 1995).

There may indeed be differences between types of sexual offending against children in terms of propensity to commit other kinds of offences. A U.K. study of sex offender recidivism (Hood, Shute, Feilzer, & Wilcox, 2002) included an analysis of child sexual assault offenders. The study examined recidivism for 4 years for 162 offenders and 6 years for 94 offenders. They found marked differences for those who offended against children in their own family and those who offended against other children. For instance, among those who had offended against a child in their family, 7.8% had been reconvicted at the 4-year follow-up (11.4% at the 6 years), however in no case was the reconviction for a sexual offence or violent crime. By comparison, among those who had offended against a child outside their family, 21.2% had been reconvicted within 4 years (47.4% at

6 years), and 9.1% had been reconvicted and imprisoned for a sexual offence (26.3% at 6 years).

Exploring the extent to which sex offenders and other kinds of offenders have aspects in common may be of most importance in understanding factors, which lead to disinhibition. As Finkelhor (1984) suggested, one of the preconditions to sex offending is that the offender is not inhibited from molesting a child by those factors, internal or external, which restrain others from engaging in such antisocial behavior. Drug and alcohol abuse may have disinhibiting effects and may also lead to the commission of nonsex offences. Research that includes sex offending as part of a broader study of criminal behavior may well yield important insights into this pressing social problem.

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