

Adolescent Sexual Victimization

Choice of Confidant and the Failure of Authorities

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This study investigates the experience of sexual victimization among American youth. The objective is to determine who adolescents tell of their victimization and whether the choice of confidant influences the likelihood of the offender being arrested. Using data from the 1995 National Survey of Adolescents, the authors found that most adolescents do not turn to official sources but instead tell family members and friends about their sexual victimization. Although only 13% of sexual assault disclosures resulted in an arrest of the offender, arrest was more likely to occur when the assault was initially reported to the victim's mother. A much less common choice of confidant was mandatory reporters, professionals in contact with children who are required by law to report suspected and known child abuse. However, when mandatory reporters were informed, they were not consistent in reporting the offense to officials. Therefore, the authors suggest mandatory reporters are not offering the necessary support to adolescent victims of sexual abuse.

Keywords: *adolescent victimization; confidant; sexual abuse*

The experience of sexual victimization is one that is much too common for adolescents in the United States. In fact, of all sexual assaults reported to the police in 2000 and 2001, 67% of the females and 88% of the males were younger than age 18 years. Furthermore, of all known adolescent victims of violent crimes, 52% were victims of sexual assaults (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). Other sources also demonstrate this is an overwhelming problem, with a total of more than 1.4 million referrals of sexual abuse reported to Child Protective Services (hereafter CPS) in 2003 (Karski, 1999). The prevalence of adolescent sexual assault within society raises the question of whether these adolescents are confiding their victimization to anyone, and if these confidants in turn are leading the adolescents to authorities where legal action can be pursued.

Many cases of child sexual abuse that are referred to CPS are reported by professionals rather than the victim (Warner-Rogers, Hansen, & Spieth, 1996). However, professionals who are required to report child abuse often do not (Barksdale, 1989; Bensley et al., 2004; Bolen, 2001; Kenny, 2001; Vulliamy & Sullivan, 2000). In fact, it is estimated that fewer than one half of the cases of known sexual abuse are reported to CPS (Bolen, 2001). Even when victims report their experience to a social service agency, they often feel uncomfortable with the way they are treated by the individuals who work for CPS (McCourt & Peel, 1998). In addition, reporting sexual abuse results in the criminal prosecution of the offender with

relative infrequency (Skibinski, 1995). Prosecution in a sexual assault case may provide a sense of justice for the adolescent victims and their families. This lack of reporting, and perceived lack of real assistance, may have serious negative consequences for the well-being of the victim.

The current study examines the experiences of sexual victimization among American adolescents. First, we examine how common this problem is, who the offenders are, and whether these are isolated events or repeated experiences of victimization. Second, we examine who adolescents tell of these experiences, comparing the likelihood of turning to those who may be able to legally or professionally help the victim, such as teachers or the police, rather than family or friends who may be able to provide no more than emotional support. We also begin to examine the consequences of adolescents reporting sexual victimization. In particular we focus on whether the arrest of the offender is dependent on factors such as who the adolescent tells and the relationship of the offender to the victim. Finally, we consider the importance of the victim–offender relationship and the choice of confidant within logistic regression models on arrest of offenders, controlling for characteristics of the victimization.

Literature Review

Sexual Victimization

Sexual victimization includes any sexual activity, ranging from sexual touching to sexual penetration, with a child or adolescent where consent is not or cannot be given (Finkelhor, 1979). This includes any sexual contact between a child and an adult, regardless if consent is given. Consent by a child is considered invalid as she or he may not understand the nature of the actions that occur (Finkelhor, 1979). However, not all sexual victimization of children and adolescents is perpetrated by an adult offender. Acts conducted by other adolescents without the consent of the adolescent victim are also classified as sexual victimization.

Studies that examine the relationship between the offender and victim reveal that most children and adolescents are victimized by family members (Denov, 2003; Dersch & Munsch, 1999; King & Woollett, 1997). However, studies that are based on official sources, including social services reports, are likely to have an overrepresentation of cases involving intrafamilial sexual abuse (Berliner & Elliott, 1996). Services such as CPS are more likely to intervene in sexual abuse cases where the offender is a parent or another adult caretaker of the child or adolescent (Lanning, 1996). Service agencies are granted more power in situations involving family members, possibly because of the incestuous quality of the abuse that is occurring, or the assumption that abuse will be continuous within these types of situations.

Compared to studies that examine official or victim reports of offenders, general population surveys on sexual offenders unveil different results. These surveys conclude parents and parental figures represent less than 20% of all sexual abuse offenders. The majority of offenders are other adolescents, who make up one half of the sexual offenders against adolescent victims. In comparison to family abuse or abuse by other adolescents, sexual victimization by strangers is relatively rare (Finkelhor, Hotaling, Lewis, & Smith, 1990; Saunders, Villepontoux, Lipovsky, & Kilpatrick, 1992).

Sexual abuse victims suffer a host of psychological and interpersonal problems throughout their life. Sexual victimization of children and adolescents is especially problematic as the effects suffered are short term and long term. These victims are likely to experience a number of symptoms, including depression (Ezzell, Swenson, & Brondino, 2000; Feiring, Taska, & Lewis, 1998; Kendall-Tackett, Williams, & Finkelhor, 1993; Kliwer, Leport, Oskin, & Johnson, 1998; Morrison & Clavenna-Valleroy, 1998; Oates, O'Toole, Lynch, Stern, & Cooney, 1994), anxiety (Cooley-Quille, Boyd, Frantz, & Walsh, 2001; Ezzell et al., 2000; Kliwer, Murrelle, Mejia, de Torres, & Angold, 2001), and symptoms related to posttraumatic stress disorder (Briere & Elliott, 1994; Kilpatrick et al., 2000; Terr, 1991). Therefore, it is crucial that victims of sexual abuse are aware of and able to access services that may provide help in coping with their experiences.

It is regrettable that most children and adolescents who suffer from sexual abuse are unlikely to seek help from anyone (Finkelhor, Wolak, & Berliner, 2001). These individuals may feel pressure to keep quiet to avoid creating disruptions within their family (Berliner, 1993; Marx, 1996) or may fear they will be blamed for their victimization. Research has shown that sexual abuse victims, particularly older adolescents, are often blamed for the incident (Pintello & Zuravin, 2001; Salt, Myer, Coleman, & Sauzier, 1990), thus indicating some justification for the reluctance of victims to report their experience.

Adolescents who do report sexual victimization are most likely to confide in parents or friends (Biaggio, Brownell, & Watts, 1991; Feiring et al., 1998; Furman & Buhrmester, 1992; Sauzier, 1989). Young children are most likely to seek help from parents, who tend to be most supportive of younger victims (Elliott & Carnes, 2001; Furman & Buhrmester, 1992). Although some researchers report that older children and adolescents disclose victimization to their parents, and particularly their mother (Sauzier, 1989), more consistently researchers have found that adolescents are most likely to tell their friends of the sexual abuse they suffer (Biaggio et al., 1991; Feiring et al., 1998; Furman & Buhrmester, 1992). This could be because adolescents are more likely than young children to have a strong network of peers and to view these relationships as the most available source of emotional support.

Although parents or friends may provide some emotional support and help, these individuals often do not have the necessary resources to adequately assist the victim. Victims of sexual abuse will often not seek out other sources of help such as social services or police officials (Warner-Rogers et al., 1996). Laws that identify mandatory reporters have been created in efforts to rectify this problem.

Mandatory Reporting

In the United States, laws concerning the responsibilities of citizens to report suspected child maltreatment vary across states. Eighteen states require that all citizens report suspected abuse or neglect (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], 2005a). However, the majority of the states identify specific professionals who are likely to encounter youths in the course of their occupations as mandatory reporters. These mandatory reporters consist of physicians, nurses, dentists, mental health professionals, social workers, teachers, day care workers, and law enforcement workers. All of these groups are required to report actual and suspected child abuse to CPS (DHHS, 2005a; Nelson, Dainauski, & Kilmer, 1980). Even so, studies have shown a number of these professionals

do not report suspected cases of child abuse because of a fear of invading the privacy of families, or as a result of inadequate training provided to the professionals in regard to the recognition of and coping with suspected abuse (Barksdale, 1989; Bensley et al., 2004; Bolen, 2001; Kenny, 2001; Vulliamy & Sullivan, 2000).

Most often, professionals are not given extensive training on how to recognize and report cases of child abuse. Teachers, for example, receive little training in college, and only a brief overview during the orientation process as a new teacher (Horton & Cruise, 2001). Some professionals such as physicians and nurses may be trained more extensively on how to recognize symptoms of child sexual abuse. However, the language used in reporting laws tends to be vague or confusing, complicating the process of actually reporting the abuse (Horton & Cruise, 2001).

Of course, mandatory reporters are not the only individuals who may hesitate to report suspected abuse. Bensley et al. (2004) conducted an interview of 504 adults in Washington State to determine how likely persons are to become involved in incidents of known or suspected child abuse. The majority of individuals who reported knowing of an abused child became involved in some way, reporting the abuse to CPS, talking to the parents of the child, or reporting the abuse to the police. Those who did not get involved indicated their lack of action was a result of fearing the reaction of the abusive parent. They did not want to risk worsening the child's situation and/or did not feel comfortable intruding on the family's privacy. Another reason individuals hesitate is they do not want to be responsible for the break-up of the family (Bensley et al., 2004).

Outcomes of Reporting

Belief in the importance of maintaining the family is also evident in the practices of social service agencies such as CPS. If abuse is reported to an official source, cases of sexual abuse are more likely than other types of abuse to be investigated and acted on (Karski, 1999). Bolen (2001) reported that in approximately one half of the instances where a sexual abuse case is acted on the abused child is removed from the home. However, according to the Children's Bureau of the U.S. government, this number is much lower, with only about 4% of sexually abused children being removed from the home (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, 2005b). Although separating the child from an abusive home may have clear advantages, such as increasing the availability of long-term monitoring of the child to help combat negative consequences of the abuse (Bulkley, Feller, Stern, & Roe, 1996), this action can be seen as a disruptive practice that may serve to further traumatize the victim (Bolen, 2001).

When child sexual abuse is reported to CPS, the focus of the agency is on protecting the child or adolescent. Therefore, whether it is more harmful to remove the child from the home or leave the child is a vital decision. This decision is in part determined by the relationship between the offender and the victim. When the offender is a parent or a caretaker of the child CPS is more likely to remove the child from the home (Lanning, 1996). These actions are reflective of the belief that children need to be rescued from parents who do them harm (Karski, 1999).

Cases of sexual abuse where a friend or other acquaintance is the offender are often not acted on in the same manner, if at all. Previous research has mostly focused on what happens

in cases of adult sexual offenders (Berliner, 1993; Denov, 2003; Dersch & Munsch, 1999; King & Woollett, 1997; Marx, 1996; Skibinski, 1995). Children abused by other children may not be perceived as being in as much danger, and official actions are often not taken to help the victim. This is largely because children are considered to need more protection against adults rather than abusive peers (Horton & Cruise, 2001). Therefore, these types of incidents of sexual abuse are not viewed as seriously as abuse by adult offenders, so victims of abuse by peers or other acquaintances are not likely to receive adequate help.

Even when sexual abuse cases are taken seriously and pursued by authorities, an actual arrest of the offender is rare. Because the focus is on protection of the child, following through with a prosecution, such as a court trial, may introduce further trauma and is not a common action of CPS. Because of the nature of sexual assaults of children and adolescents, medical evidence is often lacking (Palusci et al., 1999), and therefore the case often hinges on the child or adolescent's account of the incident. Prosecution of the offender, however, places stress on the victim if she or he testifies in court (Lanning, 1996), thus potentially causing more harm than good. Even when legal action is taken, the outcomes of these cases indicate that this problem is of fairly low priority in society. Of the individuals arrested for child sexual abuse, less than 20% are convicted for the crime. Of those offenders who are convicted, less than 33% spend longer than one year incarcerated (Bolen, 2001). Skibinski (1995) also found that arrests are rare and noted that even if the offender is jailed, treatment programs are not available to the offender. Because of this, when the sexual offender is released from the short sentence, she or he is likely to offend again. Even if the sexual offender is arrested, the adolescent may not receive the counseling needed, and the offender is not likely to attend recommended or required programs to address the issue of sexual abuse. Despite the problems associated with an actual arrest, the sense of justice and closure this particular act gives the victim is important.

The current study provides important contributions to the field of sexual abuse literature in three ways. The first contribution highlights what the experiences of sexual assault are among American youth, based on a nationally representative sample of youth rather than official reports. How common sexual assaults are, the relationship of the victim to the offender, and whether these are isolated incidents or repeated events are all examined as a first step in the current study. A second contribution is determining who adolescents chose as confidants after an experience of sexual assault. If it is known who adolescents turn to in such crises, important resources may be made more available to victims by providing training or assistance to these confidants. Finally, it is important to determine whether the choice of confidant has tangible differences in the outcomes for the victim and the offender. If specific groups of confidants regularly fail to bring the event to the attention of authorities, or arrests are not made consistently, it is possible that the victim will not receive appropriate help and protection. In addition, adolescents may be more susceptible to repeated victimization or at least be less willing to tell of further experiences if no tangible outcome resulted from confiding in someone.

Data and Methods

The data for this project are drawn from Kilpatrick and Saunders (1999) National Survey of Adolescents (NSA) in the United States, 1995. These data were collected through a

national probability telephone sample of 4,023 adolescents between ages 12 and 17 years, with some oversampling of central city areas. The data were then weighted by age, race, and sex to be representative of the 1995 U. S. adolescent population (Kilpatrick et al., 2000). Having such a sample allows us to make generalizations to the entire U.S. adolescent population within this age range.

In addition, these data are particularly valuable because of the types of information that were collected. Many studies of victimization only provide counts of different forms of victimization. However, the NSA collected information on the context of these experiences, including who the offender was, and the circumstances surrounding the event (such as whether the adolescent was scared, injured, or under the influence of drugs or alcohol). Moreover, the NSA includes information on what happened after the victimization. Specifically, the adolescent is asked whether or not she or he told anyone of the event, who was told, and what the outcomes of disclosing were. These outcomes could include having the incident being brought to the attention of the authorities, having the victim questioned by an authority figure including police or social worker, or the victim testifying about the incident in court. Therefore, these data are particularly suited to the current study because of the richness of the data on the experience and outcomes of sexual assaults against adolescents.

Victimization

The NSA describes specific acts of sexual abuse, rather than asking respondents a general question of whether any sexual abuse has occurred. This method of asking about specific types of acts allows for the inclusion of a variety of incidents, so even if the victim does not consider the act sexual abuse it will still be included in the analysis. Thus, this method allows for a better estimation of actual abuse occurring among adolescents.

Sexual victimization in the current study is measured by six questions that specify different types of incidents, with one additional question posed to the male respondents. These questions include specific unwanted sexual acts that were done to the adolescent, such as if a male has “put a sexual part of his body inside your private sexual parts, inside your rear end, or inside your mouth.” Other questions did not limit the sex of the offender to male and included questions regarding penetration with an object or fingers, oral sex performed on the adolescent, unwanted touching of the respondent, and being made to “touch the private sexual parts” of the offender. The final question, only posed to male respondents, asked whether a female has “ever put your private sexual part in her mouth or inside her body” when it was not wanted by the adolescent.

Adolescents in the current study who reported at least one of these acts of sexual assault were categorized as victims of sexual abuse. In the survey, if the adolescent reported an incident of sexual abuse, a series of follow-up questions were asked about that particular incident, including who the offender was, if the adolescent ever told anyone, and if legal steps were taken in the case. If the adolescent reported a second incident of abuse, the same series of questions regarding the context of the event were asked about this second incident, dividing the two incidents into the “first” and “most recent” experiences. Respondents who had endured three or more incidents of abuse were also asked to report on the incident they thought was worst or most serious. Thus, detailed information was provided on up to three incidents of sexual victimization for each respondent.

Offenders and Confidants

One of the follow-up questions had respondents indicate their relationship to the offender responsible for the acts of sexual victimization. These responses were combined into seven categories of parent, friend, child relative, adult relative, neighbor, other adult, and other child. The category of “parent” includes natural and stepmothers and -fathers. The child relative category consists of siblings and “other child relatives.” Grandparents and “other adult relatives” make up the adult relative category. Those categorized under “other adult” include teachers, coaches, youth group leaders, ministers, doctors, social workers, coworkers, and “other adults.” The other child category simply consists of “other children.”

Two follow-up questions asked adolescents whether they had told anyone of the incident and, if so who they told. Respondents could report having told a total of 16 different types of people. For the purposes of the current study, we combined these responses into five categories: mother, close friend, mandatory reporters, other family, and other. The mother and close friend categories were taken directly from the survey. The category of mandatory reporters includes police, social worker, doctor, teacher, principal, and school nurse, those who would be required to report suspected abuse to CPS in most states. The “other family” category includes fathers, stepparents, and siblings. Finally, the “other” category includes clergy members and an unspecified “someone else.”

Controls

Control variables in our analysis include contextual information about the events, particularly whether the adolescent suffered injuries as a result of the victimization (1 = yes), and whether the respondent feared death during the sexual incident (1 = yes). Sex and race are dummy coded, females coded as 1 and White coded as 1 (all other = 0). The age consideration is the age at which the first sexual victimization experience occurred. Income is the household income of the respondent, ranging from 1 (US\$0–\$5k) to 9 (\$100k+).

Results

A total of 326 respondents, just more than 8% of the sample, reported having experienced a sexual assault, with 109 respondents indicating that this was one of a series of similar events. This indicates that of those who had been a victim of a sexual assault, approximately one third were victimized more than once. At the time of the first incident, respondents' ages ranged from as young as 2 years to as old as 17 years, with 46% (150 respondents) reporting the first incident occurred between ages 12 and 16 years. An additional 28 respondents reported being age 18 or 19 years at the time of their first sexual assault. Because the sample was limited to 12- to 17-year-olds, these responses were coded as missing data. Although the majority of those who were sexually abused were girls, 22% of the respondents who reported sexual abuse were boys. White respondents made up 58% of sexual assault victims, followed by African Americans (24%). However, African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans all had a higher likelihood of experiencing such an incident. Specifically, whereas only 8% of Whites in the sample had been a victim of a sexual assault, 13% of

Table 1
Sexual Victimization Offenders and Confidants

	First	Recent	Worst	Total	Percentage of Total
Offenders					
Parent/stepparent	14	8	0	22	6.5
Friend	105	43	2	150	44.4
Other child relative	27	13	0	40	11.8
Other adult relative	30	12	1	43	12.7
Neighbor	22	4	1	27	8.0
Other adult	21	5	0	26	7.7
Other child	24	6	0	30	8.9
Total incidents	243	91	4	338	
Choice of confidant					
Mother	76	27	2	105	37.8
Close friend	87	30	2	119	42.8
Mandatory reporter	17	3	0	20	7.2
Other family	17	3	1	21	7.6
Other	9	3	1	13	4.7
Total incidents	206	66	6	278	

African Americans, 10% of Hispanics, and 16% of Native Americans reported such an incident. Asian respondents and those in the “other race or refused” groups had 7% and 4%, respectively, reporting sexual victimization.

Table 1 provides information on the reported offender in acts of sexual victimization. This table includes data for the first or only incident of sexual abuse, the “most recent,” and the “worst” incident. The total number does not add to 326, as some respondents who were victims of sexual assaults did not report their relationship to the offender, and others experienced multiple assaults and are therefore included each time they provided information on the identity of the offender. A total of 44% of the reports of sexual victimization were perpetrated by a “friend” of the victim. This is by far the largest group of offenders. In comparison, only 7% of the incidents were committed by a parent or stepparent, and 13% by any “other adult relative.” This finding indicates that adolescents are at greater risk of sexual victimization by their peers than by any other group.

Because the majority of respondents are victimized by friends, we may expect they choose other groups, such as parents or officials, to confide in. However, friends are also the most common choice of confidant in instances of victimization (see Table 1). In 43% of the cases, adolescents who tell someone about the incident of sexual abuse are most likely to tell a friend. Mothers were chosen as confidant by adolescent victims in 38% of the incidents of sexual assault. Very few cases were reported to a mandatory reporter (7%). Although mothers and friends are by far the most likely choice of confidant, who the victims tell may be influenced by their relationship to the offender. A next step in our analysis was, therefore, to examine whether the choice of confidant was influenced by the relationship of the offender to the adolescent victim.

As shown in Table 2, in 65% of the cases where the offender was a friend, the victim chose to confide in another friend. In comparison, adolescents only told their mothers about

Table 2
Choice of Confidant by Relationship to Offender

Offender	Choice of Confidant					Total
	Mother	Friend	Mandatory	Family	Other	
Parent/stepparent	9	1	0	1	0	11
Friend	15	50	3	4	5	77
Child relative	21	8	3	1	0	33
Other adult relative	28	3	1	3	1	36
Neighbor	6	7	0	0	0	13
Other adult	3	9	5	0	3	20
Other child	3	14	4	0	0	21
Total	85	92	16	9	9	211

a sexual assault committed by a friend in 19% of the incidents. Adolescents were much more likely to turn to their mothers when the offender was part of the family. In this analysis, a total of 80 incidents of sexual abuse were committed by family members, and in nearly 73% of these cases, the victim confided in her or his mother. An additional 5 respondents told other family members of their victimization. Therefore, in nearly 79% of the incidents when a family member was the offender, the adolescent victim kept the information within the family. Mandatory reporters were most often the choice of confidant when the victim had a more distant relationship to the offender. A total of 56% of the incidents that were discussed with a mandatory reporter were those involving “other adults” or “other children.”

One of the objectives of the current project was to assess what sort of outcomes result when adolescent victims tell someone about their experiences of sexual victimization. Therefore, the next step was to determine whether the event was ever reported to the authorities, such as the police, a child protective agency, or some other official. If the assault was reported to an authority figure, official assistance such as court-appointed counseling or other victims’ services are likely to be made available to the adolescent. A second step in this phase was to determine whether this event resulted in an arrest being made. Although the victims’ testimony in court is suggestive of a more permanent removal of the offender from the victims’ life, an arrest allows for the temporary removal of the offender from the presence of the victim, and also establishes a record on the offender for any future incidents. Table 3 presents the findings by examining these two outcomes by the choice of initial confidant and the relationship of the victim to the offender.

Although adolescents did confide in someone in 85% of the cases of sexual abuse, in only 35% of these was the incident eventually reported to the authorities. Somewhat unexpectedly, the group most likely to inform officials of the incident was the “other” category of confidant. In fact, in more than 71% of the cases reported to this group, the incident was brought to the attention of the authorities. Mothers were the group with the second highest reporting, with 55% of the cases confided in the mother being reported to the authorities. Confiding in a friend about the abuse was unlikely to result in an official being notified (only 17%).

Table 3
Official Action Taken by Initial Choice of Confidant and Relationship to Offender

	Ever Reported to Authorities				Arrest Made		
	Police	Other	No	% Reported	Yes	No	% Arrested
Choice of confidant							
Mother	34	21	45	55.5	25	80	23.8
Close friend	9	11	101	16.5	3	114	2.6
Mandatory reporter	4	5	10	47.4	4	4	50.0
Other family	3	2	16	23.8	4	16	20.0
Other	4	6	4	71.4	5	8	38.5
Total	54	45	176		41	222	
Relationship to offender							
Parent/stepparent	3	10	10	56.5	1	19	5.0
Friend	14	9	126	15.4	7	141	4.7
Other child relative	6	1	29	19.4	4	36	10.0
Other adult relative	13	8	22	48.8	12	32	27.3
Neighbor	5	0	20	8.0	5	22	18.5
Other adult	3	4	20	25.9	3	21	12.5
Other child	2	1	27	10.0	1	29	3.3
Total	46	33	254		33	300	

In addition to the relatively low numbers of incidents that were reported to authorities, the vast majority of cases also failed to result in an arrest of the offender. Of 326 cases of sexual victimization in these data, only 41 resulted in an arrest. Of all arrests made, the majority were a result of choosing the mother as confidant (61%). Therefore, it may seem that mothers are protective of their children and are willing to go through the processes that will result in an arrest of the offender. However, when examining adolescents who confided in their mothers, only 24% of these cases resulted in an arrest. The least effective choice of confidant for tangible outcomes was friends, with less than 3% of these cases resulting in an arrest. This may be an indication that friends do not have adequate resources or knowledge to address incidents of abuse. In cases where adolescents told a mandatory reporter of the abuse, 50% of the cases resulted in an arrest. Mandatory reporters may be perceived as having more authority themselves and thus are more likely to be influential in achieving a satisfactory outcome, including an arrest of the offender. However, the actual number of adolescents who told mandatory reporters was very small. Therefore, although 50% may appear to be an acceptable arrest rate, the reality is that mandatory reporters were only instrumental in getting four offenders arrested. Finally, an arrest was made in 39% of the cases for those adolescents who told someone in the "other" category. This finding suggests that individuals who are distanced from the adolescent are potentially willing to get involved and pursue legal action against the offender.

Beyond whom the victimization was initially reported to, another important consideration may be the relationship of the offender to the victim in predicting whether or not the confidant reports the incident, and thus, whether official action is taken. Consistent with previous studies, we found that abuse perpetrated by a parent or stepparent was likely to be

reported to the police or other authorities (Lanning, 1996). In fact, 57% of the cases involving a parental figure were eventually brought to the attention of appropriate authorities. In addition, more than 48% of the incidents of sexual abuse that involved another adult relative as the offender were reported to authorities. In comparison, cases that involved the respondent being assaulted by a friend were not likely to come to the attention of authorities. Only 15% of these incidents were eventually reported to the police or other authorities.

The largest percentage of arrests made were those where the offender was classified as "other adult relative." A total of 27% of these offenders were arrested. Other offenders who were likely to be arrested were neighbors (19% of those arrested), and other adults (13%). Intervention in abuse situations that involve extended family members or other adults as the perpetrators may be viewed as less intrusive than those cases with parental figures as the offenders. An arrest was made in only 5% of the cases with a parent or stepparent as the abuser. Sexual victimization incidents where a friend or another child was the offender were least likely to result in an arrest, with only approximately 5% and 3%, respectively, of each group being arrested.

Although the descriptive and bivariate relationships discussed thus far provide important information about adolescent sexual victimization, it is also useful to examine the likelihood of an arrest being made through the use of multivariate techniques. The results of the logistic regressions indicate the likelihood of an arrest does depend on the choice of confidants and the relationship of the offender to the victim. The logistic analyses include information on offenders, confidants, and arrest for only the first incident of abuse. Although the focus on one incident lowers the number of cases in the analyses, it ensures the cases under review are independent.

Nonparental adult relatives as offenders increase the odds of arrest for the offender in sexual abuse incidents (see Table 4, Model 1). In relation to the comparison category of other adults and children, there is more than a 200% increase in the odds of an arrest for adult relatives as the offender. When elements of the sexual victimization were included in the model (Model 2), the offender as an adult relative does not maintain significance. Within Model 2, whether the respondent feared death is the only significant predictive factor. If the adolescent victim feared death as a result of the attack, the odds of arrest were increased (Odds ratio [OR] = 2.24).

Table 4, Model 3 takes into account demographic variables in the relationship between offenders and arrest rates. When age, sex, race, and income are included in the analysis, considerations of elements of the victimization do not maintain significance. Eleven percent of the variance in arrest rate is explained in the final model, with the consideration of offenders, elements of the victimization, and demographic characteristics.

In a logistic analysis of choice of confidant on arrest of the offender, cases in which adolescent victims told their mother were significantly related to the likelihood of arrest (see Table 5, Model 1). The most pronounced finding is the increased odds of arrest if the adolescent told her or his mother as opposed to others, including other family and "someone else," of the victimization (OR = 4.97).¹

Model 2 takes into consideration characteristics of the abuse experience, including whether the adolescent suffered injuries as a result of the attack, and whether she or he feared death during the experience. The choice of mother as confidant remains a significant

Table 4
Logistic Regression of Offender on Arrest

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE
Parent offender	0.82	1.07	0.67	1.10	0.47	1.17
Friend offender	0.52	0.56	0.55	0.56	0.62	0.57
Child relative offender	1.39	0.67	1.26	0.67	0.90	0.76
Adult relative offender	3.08*	0.54	2.74	0.55	2.56	0.59
Neighbor offender	1.52	0.70	1.34	0.71	1.35	0.72
Suffered injuries			1.25	0.54	1.33	0.55
Feared death			2.24*	0.41	2.03	0.42
Female					1.29	0.57
Age					0.97	0.06
White					1.77	0.44
Income					1.01	0.01
<i>N</i>	317		317		314	
Nagelkerke <i>R</i> ²	0.06		0.09		0.11	
χ^2	8.80		13.35		15.46	

Note: OR = odds ratio; SE = standard error.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

predictor of offender arrest (OR = 4.30). Telling the mother about victimization also remains a significant factor in whether an arrest occurred in Model 3, with the addition of demographic characteristics (OR = 4.40).

Within Table 5, Model 4 presents the full model results, including choice of confidant, characteristics of the victimization, demographic considerations, and who the offender was in the assault. The only significant finding within this model is the choice of mother as confidant. There is an increase in odds of more than 300% in arrest of the offender for those adolescents who told their mother of the victimization experience. Nineteen percent of the variance in arrest of the offender is explained by the full model.

Discussion

The first objective of the current study was to provide information on adolescent experiences with sexual victimization. The analysis provides evidence that such victimization cuts across all groups in our society and, for many adolescents, is not an isolated event but a repeated form of abuse. In addition, the abusers in these cases are often not those who have been the focus of past research. Past studies focus almost exclusively on abuse that occurs within the family and the continuing danger this may pose to the adolescent victims (Avery, Massat, & Lundy, 1998; Sauzier, 1989). However, though family members are identified as offenders in some of these cases, the majority of these victims were assaulted by a friend. This is an important finding because adolescents turn to peers for their sense of identity and self-worth and seek to find acceptance from friends (Coleman, 1961). This group of offenders has

Table 5
Logistic Regression of Choice of Confidant on Arrest of Offender

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE
Told mother of SV	4.97***	0.46	4.30**	0.47	4.40**	0.51	4.15**	0.54
Told authorities of SV	3.24	0.79	2.81	0.81	1.68	0.96	1.62	0.99
Told close friend of SV	0.43	0.78	0.43	0.78	0.41	0.79	0.42	0.80
Suffered injuries			1.03	0.54	1.09	0.55	1.23	0.58
Feared death			1.76	0.42	1.68	0.43	1.56	0.44
Female					1.31	0.58	1.22	0.59
Age					1.01	0.05	1.01	0.06
White					1.42	0.45	1.63	0.46
Income					1.01	0.01	1.01	1.21
Parent offender							0.40	1.22
Friend offender							0.73	0.60
Child relative offender							0.64	0.79
Adult relative offender							1.53	0.61
Neighbor offender							1.65	0.77
<i>N</i>	317		317		314		314	
Nagelkerke <i>R</i> ²	0.15		0.16		0.17		0.19	
χ^2	22.41***		24.27***		26.01**		29.02**	

Note: SV = sexual abuse; OR = odds ratio; SE = standard error.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

been largely ignored in the literature and by child protective agencies. The findings of the current study indicate that sexual activity among peers may actually be assault and therefore cannot be considered a harmless activity. Thus, the focus of child protective agencies should expand beyond family offenders to include sexual abuse by peer offenders.

The importance of the finding that friends are often perpetrators of sexual violence is particularly relevant because the examination of the victims' choice of confidant reveals that friends are also those to whom adolescents turn to for help and advice. Although past research indicates that peers may provide more emotional support than parental figures to adolescent victims (Feiring et al., 1998; Furman & Buhrmester, 1992), the support offered by the adolescents' peers may not be adequate, as these peers are not likely to be emotionally developed themselves or have access to, or knowledge of, legal or psychological resources that may help the victim. In addition, the friends the victim may turn to for help or support may find themselves having to withstand the onus of confronting the offender, who may be a mutual friend. Such confidants are unlikely to be able to provide tangible support or assistance to the traumatized victims.

In the current study, adolescent victims are overwhelmingly more likely to confide in their peers after an incident of sexual abuse. Peers, however, are not likely to seek outside help, such as counseling services, which would be beneficial to the victim. Sexual victimization is not likely to be reported to authorities when a friend is chosen as confidant, therefore inhibiting the likelihood the victim will be directed to engage in mental health services and

lowering the chance of legal action being taken against the offender. Even when these friends do encourage the victim to seek out additional help from authorities, there is seldom an arrest made.

Moreover, social service agencies and researchers need to reevaluate the importance of peer assaults in the lives of adolescents. Neglecting to provide information about help and support services available to adolescent victims and their peers who know of victimization is a failure of the social services system. Because the current study finds that peers play such a central role, as offenders and confidants in sexual assaults, it is vital that more information is provided to youth about this topic. Adolescents need to be more aware of the dangers of sexual assault among their friends, as well as have access to information about who are good people to go to for help if such an assault occurs. Perhaps the distribution of literature within schools and a discourse on the prevalence of sexual victimization among peers within this environment would enable adolescents to engage the proper authority channels. With information available on the occurrence of sexual assault by peers, it is hopeful adolescents would be more apt to seek the guidance of an adult, or the friends chosen as confidants would be empowered to inform authorities. Without this type of information, adolescents will continue to be left at the mercy of their uninformed, even if well-intentioned, friends.

In addition to friends, the current analysis indicates adolescent victims are likely to tell their mother of incidents of sexual victimization, particularly when the offender is a family member. Mothers are often perceived by the adolescent to be supportive (Corcoran, 2001; Elliott & Carnes, 2001; Morrison & Clavenna-Valleroy, 1998), and mothers are more likely, as adults, to have access to available networks for help. However, the support the victim receives from her or his mother may depend on the relationship the mother has with the offender (Malloy & Lyon, 2006). Adolescents who report nonparents' offending to their mother may rely on the assumption that their mother will want to protect them from further harm and will not be as likely to side with the offender (Elliott & Carnes, 2001).

Fortunately for adolescent victims, the current study finds mothers are a fairly good source of assistance for their children, particularly when the offender is a family member. Mothers are sought out as the choice of confidant in the majority of cases when the offender is a non-parent relative. Furthermore, the offender has a greater likelihood of being arrested when the adolescent victim chose the mother as confidant, regardless of the relationship of the offender to the victim. This highlights the importance of the mother as supporting the adolescent, while also taking measures to ensure the adolescent is protected from further incidents. Child protective agencies and other social service agencies need to focus on the positive influence of mothers as confidants of adolescent sexual abuse victims. These agencies should continue to expand programs to train parents on how to get help for their children who have been sexually assaulted, emphasizing the role of the mother in providing support and in leading to the arrest of the offender. However, it is uncertain that such training offered by agencies would overcome the hesitance of confidants to report adolescent victimization to authorities. The ability of child protection agencies and the criminal justice system to assist victims is dependent on the specific case. Nevertheless, as is evident in the current study, many of these cases are not brought to the attention of such authorities.

Although friends of the adolescent are the most likely offenders, parent and stepparent offenders are the offenders most likely to be reported to authorities. This pattern of reporting

to authority figures is a representation of society's perception of who is most dangerous to children and when intervention is needed to protect children (Karski, 1999; Lanning, 1996). The child or adolescent who is victimized in the home may be perceived as the most at risk, as they are likely to be in contact with the offender on a daily basis. Still, even though a large number of parental offenders are reported, few of these cases resulted in an arrest.

The idea of protecting children from adults with whom they come in contact with on a regular basis is supported by the logistic analyses considering arrest of the offender. Adult relatives are more likely to be arrested compared to other children and other adults. The presupposition that these relatives are not as close to the family may allow for a more vigorous pursuit of legal justice for the offender. However, when the choice of confidant is considered, adult relatives are no more likely to be arrested than other offenders.

Although an arrest may be a positive outcome, through the removal of the offender from the life of the victim, the official legal process may itself serve to further traumatize the youth. Young adolescent victims have been shown to change their testimony about the abuse or deny the abuse has occurred after it has been reported to an official source (Ghetti, Goodman, Eisen, Qin, & Davis, 2002; Marx, 1996). Ghetti et al. (2002) stated older adolescents are more likely than younger adolescents to consistently report the facts of the incident of sexual abuse. Younger children may be more influenced by adults involved in the situation and may change testimony to avoid anger, discomfort, or punishment within the scope of the family. However, all adolescent victims of sexual abuse are more likely to be consistent in their reporting of the facts than victims of other types of abuse. For sexual victimization, female adolescents tend to be more consistent than males (Ghetti et al., 2002). These past findings of problems with adolescents and adolescent testimony may be one explanation of the poor rate of arrest in the current study.

Further research should examine the importance of the victim's testimony in whether an arrest was made. The NSA does include information regarding whether the victim was ever interviewed by various officials, or if the victim testified in court. Therefore, it is possible to determine whether the testimony of the adolescent actually does influence the outcome of the case, however, the actual number of respondents within these categories is relatively low. In addition, understanding whether an arrest assists the adolescent victim requires further study. If the adolescent tells someone about an experience of sexual assault and no official measures are taken, that adolescent may be unwilling to disclose further incidents. Moreover, if the offender is someone with whom the victim has a continuing relationship, the lack of legal punishment may allow the abuse to continue. A preliminary examination of the NSA data does in fact find that adolescents with more than one incident of sexual victimization are more likely to confide in someone about the additional experiences if the offender in the first instance was arrested. However, more research is needed to determine if further victimization experiences involve different offenders, confidants, and outcomes.

The examination of the role of mandatory reporters in relation to sexual abuse victims is an important contribution in the current study. The training and legal requirements of mandatory reporters would presumably manifest in direct action being taken by such individuals when an assault is brought to their attention. In addition, if such groups are more successful in bringing the full weight of the legal system against the offender, it is vital to get mandatory reporters involved in cases of sexual assault. Unfortunately, the current study found mandatory

reporters are rarely utilized in cases of child sexual abuse. Children are likely to disclose their abuse to mandatory reporters only when the offender is not related to them and is not a friend. This supports the assumption that when abuse exists within the family, adolescent victims feel they should try to resolve the problem within the family. Similarly, adolescents keep the experience of assaults by peers within the friendship network. Mandatory reporters are likely to be perceived as outsiders and therefore are only contacted when the sexual assault offender is not directly connected to the victim. This is problematic because the current study indicates that professionals are not likely to become involved in the majority of the cases of sexual assault. Even more troublesome is when mandatory reporters are utilized this does not mean an arrest is imminent.

Legal action and intervention can be taken only after an authority figure is notified of the assault. The purpose of the creation of mandatory reporting laws was to involve professionals who are potentially aware of abuse that is occurring, implying the role of professionals as a credible source within the legal system (DHHS, 2005a). These professionals are an important link to legal action to protect adolescent victims. In support of the notion that such professionals can provide substantive support is that, compared to other choices of confidants, arrests of the offender are most likely to be made in cases where a mandatory reporter has been selected as the initial confidant. This highlights the importance of mandatory reporters in providing assistance to sexual assault victims. Professionals who report abuse are potentially more likely to be believed by the police and other authorities, therefore increasing the chance the offender will be arrested. However, the current study reveals that mandatory reporters do not always report abuse to authorities. Therefore, mandatory reporters are not fulfilling the full scope of their potential as assistants to adolescent victims.

Although the descriptive findings emphasize the importance of mandatory reporters, the logistic analyses provide a bleaker picture. When other confidant relationships are considered, the role of mandatory reporters does not actually increase the odds of arrest for sexual abuse offenders.² It is important to note the low number of cases in which adolescents chose mandatory reporters as confidant, which may influence the findings.

The current study found that young victims of sexual assaults do reach out and confide in important people in their lives. However, we found that the choice of confidant may serve to keep the victimization hidden within closed networks of friends or families. The fact that many such cases never reach the attention of authorities hinders the ability of any system to adequately address the needs of the victim or to punish the offender. Therefore, what is needed for abuse victims is a more consistent means of connecting these adolescents with individuals who are in a position to provide real assistance. Moreover, CPS and other authorities must acknowledge that the most frequent perpetrators of sexual victimization of youth are not strangers or even family members, but other adolescents who are friends of the victims.

Limitations

Although the current study provides important insights into the experiences of adolescent victims of sexual assault, there are several important limitations. Relying on self-report data may lead to problems of over- or underreports. Adolescents may refuse to provide information on their abuse, especially because sexual assaults may be highly traumatic or

if the respondent feels in some way responsible for her or his victimization. On the other hand, some respondents may report such incidents even if they have never occurred. Although these are potential problems, most studies have demonstrated that self-report data is relatively reliable and valid (Hindelang, Hirschi, & Weis, 1979, 1981; Hirschi & Selvin, 1967; Secades-Villa & Fernández-Hermida, 2003).

Another potential concern for these conclusions is the data used for the current study are from 1995, which may present a problem of generalizability to present-day adolescent victims. However, this would assume that whom juveniles would report victimization experiences to would have substantially changed over time. We argue that the selection of confidants would not have changed dramatically during this period of time. In fact, if any change has occurred, it would potentially be a decrease in the use of mandatory reporters by juveniles. One important type of mandatory reporter is the juvenile's teachers. In a climate of increasing student-to-teacher ratios and increasing pressure on students and teachers to perform in standardized tests, it is likely that teachers are less connected with students and are thus less likely to be seen by victims as potential sources of help. Thus, we expect that the findings in the current study still represent the experiences of victimization and choices of confidants today.

Although the findings of the current study highlight the importance of choice of confidant in sexual abuse cases, it is important to note there are indeed a small number of adolescents within the data set who have reported sexual victimization. This number is further reduced when considering the arrest of the offender, as very few cases of sexual victimization resulted in arrest. A low number of responses are not unexpected within this research because of the sensitive nature of the topic under consideration. Thus, future research may benefit by including samples of identified victims to further examine the relationship between the choice of confidants and whether offenders are arrested.

Notes

1. A series of regressions were run using different groups as the reference category. When mother and "other" were included in the model, both remained significant ($p < .001$ and $p < .01$, respectively). This finding was consistent for the models in which authority figure as confidant and friend as confidant were the reference categories. In these models, there was an increase in the odds of offender arrest for the mother and "other" category. Finally, when mother as confidant was used as the reference category, "other" confidant was significant ($p < .05$) with an increased odds of arrest. Within this model, friend as confidant was also significant ($p < .05$) with a decrease in the odds of offender arrest.

2. Logistic analyses were also run with each type of reporter against all others in predicting arrest. Mother as confidant was significantly related to arrest, similar to the final models. Friend as confidant decreased the odds of arrest by 80%, compared to all other possible confidants ($p < .05$). Individuals in the "other" category increased the odds of arrest of the offender by over 400% ($p < .05$). Mandatory reporters as confidant did not reach a significance level in arrest of the offender when compared to all other groups of confidants as the reference category.

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