



Research Article

Reexamining the Risk of Offspring Sexual Assault in Households Parented Exclusively by Biological Fathers

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Abstract

Scholars report juveniles residing with both biological parents are at least risk of sexual assault. Judicial, social service, and healthcare practitioners question this discernment. This retrospective investigation sampled 1,830 undergraduates to verify parenting actors of sexually assaulted juveniles. Juveniles parented exclusively by their biological father between ages 9-20, and 1-20 were least likely to be sexually assaulted. These findings were inconsistent with literature reporting juveniles parented by both biological parents are at least risk of sexual assault. Judicial, social service, education, and healthcare practitioners need to reexamine the conventional doctrine that maintains juveniles parented by both biological parents are at least risk of sexual assault.

Keywords: Father; Sexual assault; Juveniles; Biological parents; Single-parent

Abbreviations: NIS-4: Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect

Background

Scholars routinely report that juveniles residing with biological parents are at least risk of sexual assault [1]. However, judicial, social service, and healthcare practitioners question this perennial discernment [2-10]. Their qualified wariness stems from the sampling methodology routinely used to estimate juvenile sexual abuse cases [11]. A prime example is the Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (hereafter NIS-4). The NIS-4 is limited to just three of five levels of the ‘sentinel sampling’ methodology applied to estimate the national incidence of child sexual assault. The first three sentinel levels capture abuse cases reported to, or investigated by, a judicial, social service, health care, education, or public safety agency. The fourth sentinel level represents sexual abuse cases not reported by the victim, perpetrator, neighbor(s), or unoffending family member(s). The

fifth sentinel level represents sexual abuse cases that no person or agency has recognized. This fifth level includes juveniles sexually assaulted outside United States jurisdiction. The fourth and fifth sentinel levels are excluded from the NIS-4 sample population. Consequently, considerable population pockets of juveniles sexually assaulted as well as their perpetrators, are excluded from United States national estimates of juvenile sexual assault.

Perpetrators of juvenile sexual assault transitioning in and out of victims’ lives are often not accounted for in United States sexual assault cases. Unaccounted for perpetrators of juvenile sexual assault include kinfolk, surrogate family, family acquaintance, or a childcare actor. Scholars report that there are unknown degrees of underreporting bias in United States national estimates of child sexual abuse cases, and with that the concealment of juvenile sexual assault perpetrators [1,11].

Townsend cautions that research ‘snapshots’ of juveniles under the age of 17 are problematic in that they are truncated accounts of juvenile sexual assault as well as truncated accounts of assailants [7]. This flaw is compounded by the scant data-based literature accounting for multiple juvenile sexual assault

perpetrators (i.e., different assailants at different points in time during the victim's childhood) as well as serial sexual assault perpetrators (i.e., same assailant at multiple points in time during the victim's childhood) [12]. In multiple and serial juvenile sexual assaults, the perpetrator is most often a parenting actor or family acquaintance [3,6].

This underreporting bias in juvenile sexual assault events harbor a considerable number of alien status juveniles and family units residing in the United States. Alien status children often experience parenting actors, kinfolk, surrogate family, family acquaintances, or childcare proxies transitioning in and out of their households. Alien status children often present with itinerant school histories that in turn hinder or conceal detection of child sexual assault. The vital role of school personnel in reporting child sexual assault cases was underscored during the COVID-19 pandemic. The prohibited and/or curtailed person-to-person classroom instruction mandated by the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a marked decrease in reported child sexual abuse cases. In addition, alien status children and family units are often faced with barriers of availability and accessibility to United States health care systems responsible for monitoring and reporting suspected child assault cases.

Alien status children and family members may view child sexual assault under a different cultural lens than that of the mores or statutes of their host nation—in this case the United States. In turn, family units harbor an invisible pool of child sexual assault cases and perpetrators. Despite these unaccounted for child assault cases and perpetrators in national data-bases ... child welfare and education agencies adamantly subscribe to the notion that children living with their married biological parents are least likely to be victims of sexual assault. The purpose of this investigation was to identify parenting actors of sexually assaulted juveniles spanning the early childhood and adolescence years of the victim.

Methods

This study was a retrospective cross-sectional survey utilizing a convenience sample drawn from the general population of undergraduates at a public, northeastern, metropolitan community college. The gross enrollment of the college was 23,938 with a median age of 22.0 years. The 1830 respondents represented 7.6% of the undergraduate enrollment that semester. Of the 1830 respondents, 1028 were female.

Respondents were recruited from intact Health Education course sections that were required or elective courses for all but five of the college's degree programs. Respondents were 18 years or older. Consent forms were obtained from each respondent. There were no incentives for participation or non-participation in the survey. There were no identifiers linking respondents to their responses. Classroom seating for the survey was arranged in formal

test-taking configuration. The purpose of the study was described to potential survey recruits as an examination of their lifetime sexual behaviors and experiences. The in-class survey was voluntary, anonymous, and averaged 39 minutes. Respondents opting out of the survey completed an in-class worksheet. Participants placed their instrument or worksheet in an unmarked sealed envelope and then into a cloaked ballot box. This study was sanctioned by the University's Institutional Research Review Committee.

The instrument recorded in part, demographics, natal gender, parenting actors from ages 1 through 21, and sexual assault experience including age at victimization, age of assailant(s), and victim's relationship to the assailant(s). Previous studies report a .85 to .91 reliability coefficient for the instrument [13-17].

Results

Sexual assault (i.e., rape) was defined as non-consensual, penetration of the vagina or anus by a penis, digit, or object-or oral stimulation of the genitals or anus. This standard is consistent with the definition of rape recognized by the United States Federal Bureau of Investigation [18].

The mean age of respondents was 21.6 years. Of the 1 830 respondents 5.1% (n=93) self-reported a sexual assault. There was no significant difference between males (11.4 years) and females (13.4 years) regarding the mean age at their first sexual assault ($t(84)=-1.97, p=.235$). There was no significant difference between males (18.1 years) and females (20.5 years) regarding the mean age of their perpetrator(s) in their first sexual assault ($t(84)=-.763, p=.352$). The perpetrator's 'identity' in the first sexual assault was: 30.7% kinfolk; 36.4% family acquaintance; 14.8% girlfriend/boyfriend; 9.1% first time date; and 9.1% stranger [19].

Of the 28 perpetrators identified as a 'relative', four were 'father/dad', three were 'grandfather', one was 'stepfather', four were 'brother', seven were 'cousin', two were 'step-father's brother', two were 'uncle', and one was half-sister's uncle (perpetrator identity had four missing responses). For first sexual assault: 16.9% were reported to the police, 11.4% of perpetrators were arrested, and 78.4% of sexual assaults were committed in the United States [20,21].

Parenting Structure

Respondents reported their primary parent caretaker(s) (e.g., biological, legally adopted parent, foster, step, grandparent, biological uncle/aunt, older sibling, etc.) for each developmental stage of: 1 to 4, 5 to 8, 9 to 12, 13 to 16, and 17 through 20 years. The parenting variable was blocked on four levels: (1) exclusively parented by biological father, (2) exclusively parented by biological mother, (3) exclusively parented by biological father and biological mother, and (4) parented by other actors.

There was a robust significant difference in the incidence of juvenile sexual assault by parenting actors. For juveniles from ages 13 through 20, 5.8% parented by their biological mother, 8.6% parented by their biological father, 3.9% parented by their biological mother and father, and 15.9% parented by 'other' were sexually assaulted (X^2 (3, N = 1268)=39.883, $p=0.000$). For juveniles from ages 9 through 20, 5.2% parented by their biological mother, 0.0% parented by their biological father, 4.1% parented by their biological mother and father, and 23.6% parented by 'other' were sexually assaulted (X^2 (3, N=1087)=82.245, $p=0.000$). For juveniles from ages 1 through 20, 5.4% parented by their biological mother, 0.0% parented by their biological father, 4.0% parented by their biological mother and father, and 83.3% parented by 'other' were sexually assaulted (X^2 (3, N=783)=379.183, $p=0.000$). (Note that proportional differences of sexually assaulted juveniles within individual parenting levels (e.g., biological mother) resulted from respondent attrition as years in household increased.)

There was no significant difference in the incidence of juvenile sexual assault between biological parenting actors (i.e., biological father, biological mother, or biological father and biological mother) from ages 13 through 20 years (X^2 (2, N=1036)=3.016, $p=0.222$); or 9 through 20 years (X^2 (2, N=896)=1.348, $p=0.488$); or 1 through 20 years (X^2 (2, N=723)=1.145, $p=0.564$). (Note: due to the null cell for biological fathers—a Monte Carlo sampling of 10,000 tables was applied.)

Strengths and Limitations

This investigation should be interpreted with its limitations, as well as exclusivity in the literature. This study drew a convenience sample from a two-year college of undergraduates, limiting its generalizability. The study analysis only accounted for the first sexual assault reported by respondents. Causality cannot be inferred from this cross-sectional analysis.

Nonetheless, this sample presented uncommon insight into the research question given that it surveyed victims from the fourth and fifth sentinel levels not found in United States national estimates of child sexual assault cases. Notably, less than one in four juvenile sexual assaults were reported and approximately one in four juvenile sexual assaults occurred outside United States jurisdiction. Moreover, the sample was solicited from a pedestrian undergraduate population not constructed from a preassembled collective that was self-identified or identified by public safety, public health, education, social service agency, or social media as at-risk or victims in a sexual abuse/rape counseling, patient, therapy, or education population.

Discussion

Nearly eight of ten female sexual assaults occurred before age 18, with two out of three perpetrators being a relative or family acquaintance. Nearly nine of ten male sexual assaults occurred

before age 18, with three out of four perpetrators being a relative or family acquaintance. Notably, less than one in four juvenile sexual assaults were reported and approximately one in four juvenile sexual assaults occurred outside United States jurisdiction.

This study supports previous findings that parenting actors are significantly associated with the risk of juvenile sexual assault. Indeed, the highest incidence of sexual assault occurred when a juvenile was parented by 'other' than a biological parent(s). However, juveniles parented exclusively by their biological father between ages 9-20 years or from 1-20 years were least likely to be victims of sexual assault. Keep in mind that the incidence of juvenile sexual assault was unambiguously self-reported from victims as well as non-victim respondents. Only juveniles exclusively parented by their biological father during ages 13 through 20 years (i.e., not before age 13), reported a higher rate of sexual assault than juveniles exclusively parented by their biological mother or biological parents during the same developmental years. These findings were inconsistent with literature reporting that juveniles parented by both biological parents are at least risk of sexual assault.

No offspring parented by their biological father from ages nine through twenty years, or one through twenty years self-reported a sexual assault. This suggests that a single, biological father family household may represent the least likely family household in which the perpetrator of a juvenile sexual assault is a relative or family acquaintance. Indeed, children and adolescents were at greater risk of sexual assault by a relative or family acquaintance when parented by their biological mother or biological parents as opposed to their biological father. Two out of three sexual assault perpetrators in biological parents as well as biological mother households were stepfathers, step-grandfathers, lineage brothers, step-brothers, lineage cousins, step-cousins, step-uncles, and lineage uncles. Of note—sexually assaulted juveniles were more likely to be residing with their biological mother than with their biological father.

With this in mind, a possible explanation for this difference concerns the relationship/cohabiting sexual partners and relatives of single-parent biological mothers versus single-parent biological fathers. Albeit not statistically significant, when the three biological parenting households are compared—offspring parented by their biological mothers from 9-20 years as well as 1-20 years reported the highest incidence of juvenile sexual assault. Notably, juveniles parented in biological mother households reported the highest incidence of their sexual assault perpetrator being a relative (lineage or step), household member, or family acquaintance. This observation merits further investigation.

In this study, when examining the incidence of juvenile sexual assault in all possible parenting actor households ... juveniles parented by one or both biological parents were at least

risk of sexual assault. However, when examining the incidence of juvenile sexual assault exclusively in biological parented households ... juveniles were at no greater risk of sexual assault based on the actors in their biological parented household. Child and juvenile sexual assault education, prevention, policy, and practitioners need to recognize the paucity of child sexual assault cases in biological father parenting households when inferring the risk of child sexual assault. Such a reexamination will underwrite a more genuine accounting of juvenile sexual assault in households parented by one or both biological parents. In turn, this reexamination will initiate judicial, social service, education, and healthcare practitioners to reevaluate the conventional doctrine that maintains juveniles parented by both biological parents are at least risk of sexual assault throughout their childhood and adolescence.

Additional research is required using elegant research design to further define the victim, perpetrator, and context of juvenile sexual assault spanning the breath of childhood and adolescent developmental years. Indeed, the risk of child sexual assault is tempered by the presence of biological parenting actors across the breath of childhood maturation. Such basic research efforts are obligatory in endorsing judicial, social service, and public health policy and praxis in the education, prevention, risk assessment, and redress of juvenile sexual assault—including the apprehension of sexual assault perpetrators.

Statement of Human Rights

This study was approved by The City University of New York Institutional Research Review Board (IRB NET#: 11-12-037-0140). Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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