Juvenile Sex Offenders as Victims

By Sharon Doty, J.D., M.H.R.

In a recent article, we discussed the unique characteristics of teen offenders. Questions arose regarding whether these teen offenders are also victims of sexual abuse. Although there is not a great deal of research on this issue, there are a few studies that consider the problem of juvenile victims turned offenders.

In order to get a clearer picture of this issue, it is important to consider that a substantial number of child sexual abuse incidents are perpetrated by teens. Both the media and our own assumptions lead us to believe that the people who molest our children are older adults. That fact was recently highlighted in the case of 15-year-old Elizabeth Thomas who was allegedly abducted by her 50-year-old teacher. Media reports focus on the age of the alleged perpetrator and reinforce the message that only "old men" are molesting young girls.

While there is no denying that this happens all too often, the fact is that not all perpetrators are adults. In fact, in an estimated 23% of all reported cases of child sexual abuse, the accused perpetrator is someone under the age of 18. Additionally, although most victims are under age 12, teens between the ages of 16 and 19 are 3 ½ times more likely to be sexually assaulted than the general population. So, not only are juveniles committing a substantial number of the sexual offenses against children, but they are at high risk for being assaulted themselves. In fact, approximately 1 out of 5 female high school students report that they were sexually or physically assaulted by their date.

The question that still challenges us is whether these teen sex offenders were also likely victims of teen or childhood sexual abuse prior to offending. We know that most victims do not convert into offenders (regardless of age). However, what percentage of teen offenders were also victims is a different question altogether.

We do not have much research on this subject. However, a study published in 1996 found that among institutionalized male juvenile sex offenders, 39% were victims of child sexual abuse. In addition, 76% of institutionalized male serial rapists were also victims of child sexual abuse. This means that, at the very least, when a juvenile is accused of sexual assault of another young person, the accused's history is important to uncover in the investigation process. Being molested does not excuse abusive behavior. However, we do know that appropriate treatment of juvenile offenders has a
positive impact on reducing recidivism. Knowing whether the offender was also a victim can make a real difference in the treatment process for these young people.\textsuperscript{7}

In addition to the links between victimization and offending for teens, research also tells us that adult survivors of child sexual abuse make up a significant number of the people incarcerated on sexual assault charges. Once again, it is important to remember that most victims of child sexual abuse never become offenders. Being victimized in this way is not a precursor to offending.

Finding out whether a juvenile sex offender was, and is also a victim, can make a real difference in treatment and can powerfully impact the probability that the juvenile will continue to offend as an adult. This is an important question to answer in the investigative process if we are to break the cycle of abuse in families and in society. For those teen offenders who are also victims, understanding the impact of their sexual abuse is a key component in the intervention and treatment process.\textsuperscript{8}

References:

4. Ibid.
8. Ibid.