

# Understanding the Factors That Affect the Severity of Juvenile Stranger Sex Offenses The Effect of Victim Characteristics and Number of Suspects

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Understanding factors that affect the severity of a juvenile-stranger sexual assault has implications for crime prevention, and potentially, the assessment and treatment of juvenile sex offenders. This study investigated how victim characteristics and the number of suspects affected the use of physical violence and weapons and the occurrence of penetration in 495 allegations of sexual assault committed by juveniles against strangers. Statistically significant interactions between victim age and gender were found for occurrence of penetration and use of violence. Differences in offense characteristics were also found between offenses with varying victim-suspect age differences. When comparing the rate of penetration in the presence and absence of violence, little change was observed for lone suspects. However, the rate of penetration increased significantly for groups in the presence of physical violence, suggesting that violence in this context may be more expressive than instrumental. Theoretical explanations and practical implications are considered.

**Keywords:** *young; adolescent; offence; violence*

The impact of rape on the victim is substantial and can affect psychological functioning, self-esteem, and the victim's lifestyle (Resnick, 1993). Researchers have suggested that the infliction of physical, verbal, or sexual violence on the victim during the offense can result in greater psychological harm (Smallbone & Milne, 2000). The incidence of physical violence against the victim in sex offences is commonly documented (Långström & Lindblad, 2000; Smallbone & Milne, 2000) although the actual percentages reported vary, possibly as a function of the type of sex offenders sampled and the prior relationships existing between victim and suspect (Woodhams, 2004). For example, juvenile sex offenders are reported as using more physical force than adult sex offenders (Miranda & Corcoran, 2000), and stranger rapes have been reported as more violent than acquaintance rapes (Koss, Dinero, Seibel, & Cox, 1988).

Understanding why the severity of sex offenses varies is an important issue that can have implications for crime-prevention advice and the targeting of police resources and for risk assessment and the selection of offenders for treatment or community interventions. This article focuses on a particular type of sex offender, juveniles (younger than 18 years old) who have sexually assaulted a victim previously unknown to them (a stranger). Research has indicated that this distinct population appears at particular risk of reoffending (Långström, 2002; Worling & Långström, 2003), and they have been the focus

of police investigative effort for some time (Woodhams, 2004). Only one study thus far has focused on juvenile-stranger sex offenders as a distinct population in their own right (Woodhams, 2004); therefore, this article sought to further develop the understanding of this specific population's offending behavior.

### **The Victims of Juvenile Sex Offending**

Previous studies have demonstrated that juvenile sex offenders target a variety of victims (Hunter, Hazelwood, & Slesinger, 2000; Långström & Lindblad, 2000)—victims of different genders, ages, and levels of acquaintance. Victim age has ranged from 2 to 77 years (Långström & Lindblad, 2000), although the younger the victims, the more likely they are to be male (Awad & Saunders, 1991). Offenders assault family members, nonfamilial acquaintances, and strangers (Hunter et al., 2000; Långström & Lindblad, 2000). Similarly, juvenile-stranger sex offenders assault both males and females, although the majority of victims are female. The age span of their victims is also wide (5 to 77 years); however, a concentration of victims aged in their early teens has been reported (Woodhams, 2004).

### **The Effect of Victim Characteristics on Sex Offending**

It seems intuitive that victim characteristics would affect the characteristics of a sexual assault for a number of reasons. They may influence how easily a victim can be procured. Muram, Hostetler, Jones, and Speck (1995) found that adult females were more often abducted than conned, suggesting that younger victims may be easier to procure. In relation to juvenilestranger sex offending in particular, Woodhams (2004) noted that some of the teenage victims of penetrative sexual assaults in her sample were conned to a more secluded location by suspects on the pretense of a dating scenario. She suggested that such an approach would be less successful with an older adult. Thus, a victim's age could affect the characteristics of an offense, and potentially, its severity. With regard to male-on-male sexual assault, a literature search failed to identify a study in which offense characteristics had been considered in relation to victim age.

Once victims have been conned to the offense location, their characteristics could affect how easily they are controlled. With regard to gender, it seems evident that females would be easier to control than males because of differences in physical strength (Miller, MacDougall, Tarnopolsky, & Sale, 1993). However, Kimerling, Rellini, Kelly, Judson, and Learman's (2002) findings that females were more often injured and restrained than males suggests the opposite, as do Jamel's (submitted) findings that violence was more associated with rapes of females. In contrast, Pino and Meier (1999) found that rapes of males were more likely to involve a weapon, but male and female rapes were equally likely to result in injury. Whether gender is a factor that affects the severity of a sexual assault is therefore unclear.

Muram et al.'s (1995) findings that sexual assaults against adult females more often involved the use of a weapon and resulted in physical injury, in comparison to those against young females, suggests an effect of age. Långström et al.'s (2000) cluster analysis of young sex offenders' offenses revealed five distinct clusters, two of which were characterized by stranger victims but differed in the age difference between offender and victim. In this study, the age difference between victim and suspect appeared to be associated with the level of violence used. A greater difference in age seemed to be associated with higher levels of violence. Unfortunately, this study sampled a relatively small number of offenders who had been

referred for forensic psychiatric assessment, and therefore, it may be unrepresentative of juvenile-stranger sex offenders as a whole.

With their sample of juvenile sex offenses, Hunter et al. (2000) included gender, age, and resistance in their calculations of “difficulty to control” scores. The high-scoring categories for these three variables were male gender, age 18 to 50, and physical resistance. Difficulty in controlling the victim was found to be predictive of violence used, with more violence inflicted on victims who were harder to control.

These findings in combination suggest qualitative differences in the sexual assaults experienced by different victims; however, thus far, the factors of gender and age (or age difference) have been considered separately. It is therefore also important to investigate whether age and gender may interact.

### **The Effect of Number of Suspects on Sex Offending**

In addition to victim characteristics affecting the severity of a sexual assault, studies have also highlighted differences in offense characteristics for lone offenders and those acting as groups (two or more offenders), with groups behaving more violently than lone offenders. This has been found for nonsex offenses (Conway & McCord, 1995, as cited in Conway & McCord, 2002) and sex offenses (Gidycz & Koss, 1990). For sex offenses, group rapists were more violent, used more severe forms of violence, and more often penetrated their victims. One previous study (Woodhams, 2004) investigated the differences in the occurrence of violence and penetration in offenses by lone and group juvenile-stranger sex offenders. Group offenders were significantly more likely than lone offenders to use physical violence against their victims (21% compared to 8%) and also were more likely to penetrate their victims (15% compared to 8%). The question as to why groups might be more violent requires consideration.

### **Theoretical Explanations for the Occurrence of Violence in Group Offending**

Social-psychological theory suggests many explanations for violent behavior within groups (Goldstein, 2002). Deindividuation, “the process of losing one’s sense of individuality or separateness from others and becoming submerged in a group,” is thought to result in feelings of anonymity, arousal, and a loss of individual responsibility (Goldstein, 2002, p. 30), which could facilitate the perpetration of violent behavior. “Groupthink,” in which individuals seek agreement and cohesiveness, could result in aggressive behavior if group members fail to stop or question the use of aggressive behavior in an offense. Modeling influences could exacerbate this situation and impair decision making, particularly under circumstances of high arousal (Goldstein, 2002).

Aggressive group behavior might result when individuals with similar proviolence attitudes come together, as explained by “convergence theory.” Norm-enhancement theory (Rabbie, 1982, as cited in Goldstein, 2002) would then propose that by coming together, “there is an increase in the perceived legitimacy and salience of normative beliefs and attitudes previously held by the individuals” (Goldstein, 2002, p. 110).

Researchers have commented that differences in the use of violence in lone offenses versus group offenses are a result of several factors: peer pressure, the importance the group places on violence, camaraderie, the experience of power when acting as a group, respect for the group leader, and fears of ostracism and humiliation if the individual challenges the group’s

violent behavior (Groth & Birnbaum, 1990; Leuw, 1985, as cited in Bijleveld & Hendriks, 2003; Scully & Marolla, 1985). Groth and Birnbaum (1990) have noted how the leader's "direction" of the sexual assault can allow other group members to diminish their feelings of responsibility. Awad and Saunders (1991) have noted that the peer group can have a disinhibiting effect on the juvenile sex offender.

These observations clearly relate to the theoretical explanations outlined above and could account not just for the emergence of physical violence within groups but also its continued escalation. The research literature has highlighted the influence of the peer group in adolescence (e.g., Loeber & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1996). Therefore, because the emergence of physical violence in a group sexual assault seems understandable, this might particularly be the case with a group of juveniles or adolescents.

### **Theoretical Explanations for the Purpose of Violence in Group Sex Offending**

The purpose of violence within group sex offenses has been investigated with mixed results. Aggression has typically been perceived as either instrumental, whereby aggression is used to achieve a goal and is unrelated to anger arousal, or expressive, whereby it is a direct result and "expression" of anger arousal (Smallbone & Milne, 2000). Researchers sampling adult sex offenders have indicated that violence in this context is instrumental, with the aim of committing the sexual assault (Smallbone & Milne, 2000), whereas others have suggested it is expressive because it is unrelated to the victims' resistance (Hazelwood, Reboussin, & Warren, 1989).

For juvenile sex offenders, Hunter et al.'s (2000) findings would suggest that violence in sex offenses is instrumental because it was related to victim resistance. However, in their article, these researchers also noted more gratuitous (expressive) violence. A subgroup that targeted peer or adult victims demonstrated significantly more violence in the absence of victim resistance. Interestingly, this subgroup also contained more group offenders. The relationship between number of offenders and violence was not tested. A possible interpretation of these results is that group offenders are more expressive in their use of violence.

The literature reviewed has indicated that group sex offenses involve more violence than sex offenses committed by a single offender. The empirical findings and theories from social psychology suggest that the use of violence by group sex offenders may be a result of the group dynamics and the offender's attitudes and may serve a more expressive than instrumental purpose. If physical violence in the context of sexual assault were about control and forcing the victim into submission (instrumental), the use of physical violence would be expected to considerably increase the occurrence of penetration in lone suspects. In other words, an increase in the frequency of penetration would be expected when lone suspects used violence. It would be hypothesized, however, that group offenders would be less likely to require violence to control a victim, because their sheer number would allow them to control their victim with greater ease. This hypothesis was tested in the current study.

### **Critique of Past Research**

The above studies have sampled a diverse population of sex offenders, both adults and juveniles. The relationships between suspect and victim have not always been considered, with some study samples' containing a mix of victim-suspect relationships (e.g., Kimerling et al., 2002). This is a limitation

because the relationship between victim and suspect might affect the motive for physical or sexual violence in a sexual assault. Reported differences in the nature of the sexual assault might, therefore, be a product of the type of relationship between the victim and suspect rather than a product of victim and suspect characteristics. As an illustration, as well as the apparent differences between adolescent and adult female victims' experiences of sexual assault reported above, Muram et al. (1995) also reported that adolescent victims in their study were significantly more likely to be assaulted by an acquaintance than were adult victims. To avoid this limitation, the current study focused solely on stranger sexual assaults by juveniles.

Another criticism of the previous research on group sex offending is its focus on fraternities (Gidycz & Koss, 1990). In addition, much of the research has been conducted in the United States. The current study, therefore, aimed to extend the research to a United Kingdom sample of offenses.

### **Research Aims and Hypotheses**

Based on the previous research, it was hypothesized that the age and gender of the victim would have a significant effect on the nature of the sexual assault (as determined by the occurrence of penetration, the use of physical violence, and the use of a weapon). The potential effect of an interaction between age and gender was also investigated, as were possible differences in the severity of the sexual assault, depending on the age difference between the suspect and victim.

The relationship between the presence of co-offenders, the use of violence, and the occurrence of penetration was also investigated, with the aim of determining whether violence in this context was more expressive or instrumental. To this end, the current study used log-linear analysis to investigate possible interactions between physical violence, penetration, the presence of co-offenders, weapon use, and victim gender.

## **Method**

### **Materials**

The data were collected from a database owned by a London Metropolitan Police analytical unit that specialized in analyzing sex offenses. Data on sexual offenses are coded and entered into the database on a daily basis. The type of sexual offenses entered include rape, attempted rape, indecent assault, and indecency with children. Allegations of indecent exposure are not included in the database, because of the manner in which the searches of the intelligence systems are conducted. The reliability of the coding is checked on an approximately monthly basis, thereby allowing sufficient time to pass should any further information about the sexual offense come to light from the victim or as a result of investigative inquiries. Amendments to the coding are made at this time if necessary.

The database holds information on victim, suspect, and offense characteristics but not personal identifiers for either the victim or the suspect, thereby protecting their identity. Whereas the age of the victim is known, the majority of suspect ages are as estimated by the victims, because it is a database of allegations. If a suspect is convicted of an offense at that stage, the age is considered known.

## Procedure

The data were extracted from the Metropolitan Police database and represented a complete set of stranger sex-offense allegations for 2001 in which the suspect was reported to be a juvenile (aged younger than 18 years). Allegations that victims had confirmed to be false were not included in the final data set. The final data set, therefore, constituted 495 allegations. Allegations from 2001 were used rather than more recent allegations to ensure the extracted data were as comprehensive as possible.

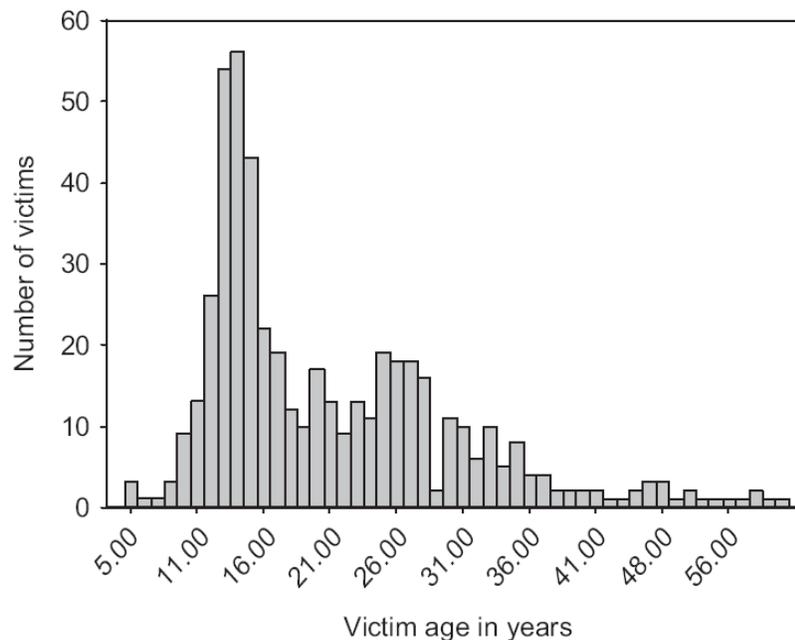
The coding of the allegations and their entry into the database were based on a detailed examination of each crime report. This was completed by the first author and other London Metropolitan Police analysts who had specialized in the study of sex offenses. As a result of some analysts' no longer being employed by the Metropolitan Police, it was not possible to test the interrater reliability of the coding. It should, however, be noted that raters had received identical training, and comprehensive definitions were used by all when coding the allegations. The coding categories and their respective definitions have been reported elsewhere, and interested parties are referred to Woodhams (2004).

## Results

### Victim Characteristics

Previous analysis of this data set revealed that the majority of victims were female (96%,  $n = 478$ ; Woodhams, 2004). With regard to the distribution of victim ages, Figure 1, a bar graph of the victim ages, indicates a clear peak in the early teen years.

**Figure 1**  
**The Number of Victims per Age in Years**



### The Effect of Victim Gender

The relationships between victim gender and other victim and offense characteristics are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
**Summary Table of Descriptive Statistics and Single-Factor Inferential Statistics Across Victim Gender**

Variables	Males	Females	Inferential Statistics
Victim age	$M = 14.9$	$M = 21.3$	$t = 2.581, df = 492, p < .01$
Occurrence of penetration	18% (3 of 17)	11% (51 of 477)	$\chi^2 = .82, df = 1, p = .366$
Occurrence of physical violence	12% (2 of 17)	14% (65 of 477)	$\chi^2 = .05, df = 1, p = .826$
Occurrence of weapon use	0%	4% (19 of 477)	$\chi^2 = .70, df = 1, p = .401$

### The Effect of Victim Age

Victims experiencing penetrative offenses were significantly younger than those experiencing nonpenetrative offences (Woodhams, 2004). A weapon was used in 4% ( $n = 19$ ) of allegations. The difference in victim age between assaults involving a weapon ( $M = 20.53$  years,  $SD = 13.02$ ) and assaults that did not involve a weapon ( $M = 21.15$  years,  $SD = 10.10$ ) was not significant ( $t = -.20, df = 18.87, p = .843$ ). The relationships between victim age, gender, and offense characteristics are summarized in Table 2.

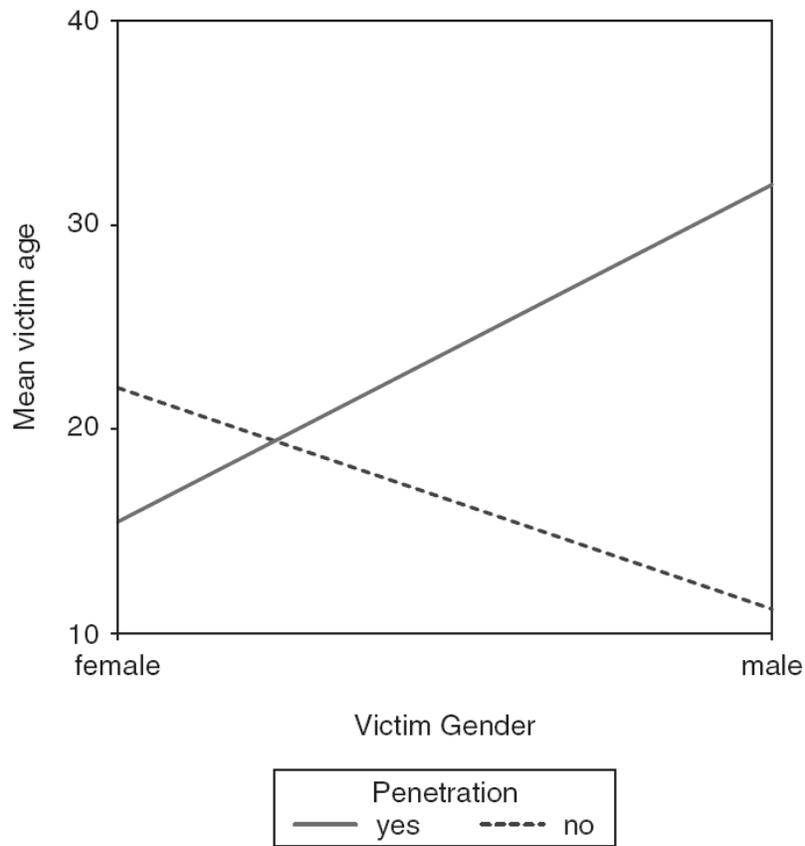
**Table 2**  
**Summary Table of Descriptive Statistics and Inferential Statistics for Victim Age, Victim Gender, and Offense Characteristics**

Variable	Mean Victim Age in Years				Inferential Statistics
	Males		Females		
	Yes	No	Yes	No	
Occurrence of penetration	32.0	11.2	15.4	22.1	$F = 18.11, df = 1, 490, p < .001$
Occurrence of physical violence	42.5	11.2	17.9	21.9	$F = 21.73, df = 1, 490, p < .001$

Multiple-regression analysis (see Table 2) revealed that when regressed on victim age, the interaction of penetration and victim gender and the interaction of physical violence and victim gender were both statistically

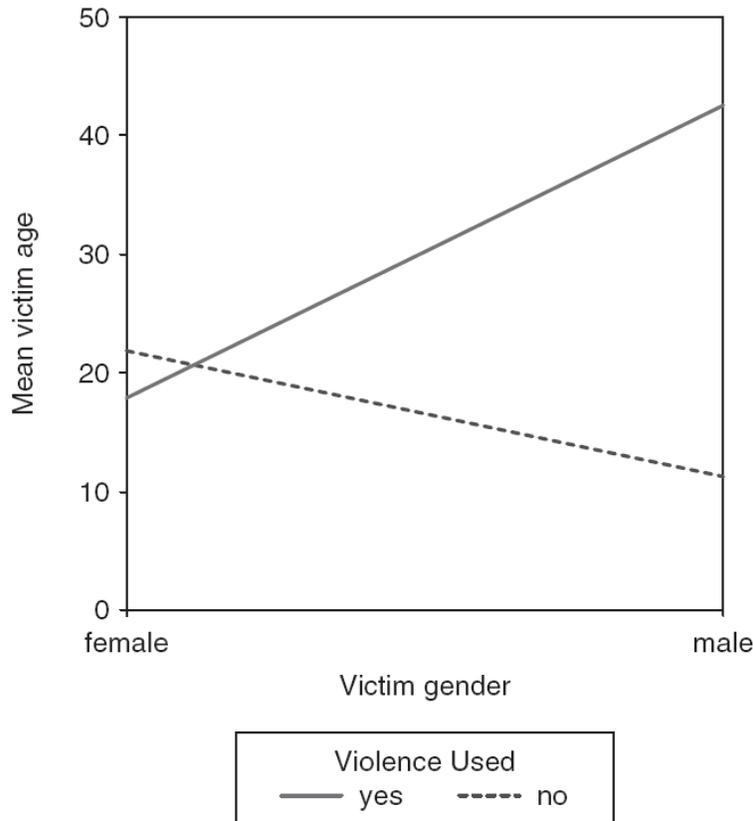
significant. These interactions can be seen in Figure 2 and Figure 3. Because no male-victim assaults involved the use of a weapon, an interaction between victim age and gender for weapon use was not investigated.

**Figure 2**  
**The Mean Age of Victim by Victim Gender and Occurrence of Penetration**



**Figure 3**  
**The Mean Age of Victim by Victim Gender**  
**and Use of Physical Violence**

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**The Age Gap Between Victims and Suspects and Its Effect on the Occurrence of Penetration and Physical Violence**

To investigate whether the difference in age between victims and suspects affected the occurrence of penetration or physical violence within an offense, the data set was divided into three groups. Because of the small number of offenses involving male victims, only the data on female victims were analyzed. Group 1 contained offenses in which the suspect was younger than the victim. In group 2, the suspect was the same age as the victim or up to 2 years older. The final group contained offenses in which the suspect was 3 or more years older than the victim. A frequency table was created to investigate how the age difference between victims and suspects might affect the victim's experience of the sexual assault. Table 3 indicates the frequency of penetrative/nonpenetrative and physically violent/nonviolent offenses across the three groups and considers the potential influence of multiple versus lone suspects.

If the victim is older than the suspect, penetration (3%, 10 of 286) and the use of physical violence (11%, 32 of 286) overall is relatively uncommon. If penetration does occur, it appears to coincide with the use of physical violence by the suspect (60%, 6 of 10 cases of penetration). This co-occurrence of physical violence and penetration only occurs where the offense is committed by multiple suspects.

With offenses in which the victim and suspect are the same age or the suspect is 2 years older, overall, there is a higher frequency of penetrative offenses (29%, 37 of 127). In contrast to the findings for the first group, considerably fewer (16%, 6 of 37) penetrative offenses within this group are accompanied by physical violence.

If the suspect is at least 3 years older than the victim, penetration is relatively uncommon (17%, 4 of 23). Interestingly, penetration is not as rare with this group as with the older victims. If it does occur, multiple suspects are again implicated (100%, 4 of 4), and penetration only occurs in the presence of physical violence. Overall, the use of physical violence is relatively high (35%, 8 of 23). However, the proportions of these offenses committed by lone versus multiple offenders is relatively similar.

**Table 3**  
**The Frequency of Penetrative, Physically Violent Offenses Across Relative Victim-Suspect Age Groupings and Across Offenses Involving Lone or Multiple Suspects**

Group	Violence used		Suspect Younger Than Victim		Suspect Same Age or up to Two Years Older Than Victim		Suspect Older Than Victim by 3 or More Years	
			Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
					Penetration			
Lone	Yes	Yes	6	17	4	10	4	1
		No	1	98	15	48		2
	No	Yes		9	2	9		3
		No	3	152	16	60		17

Note: The respective percentages can be found in the main text of the article.

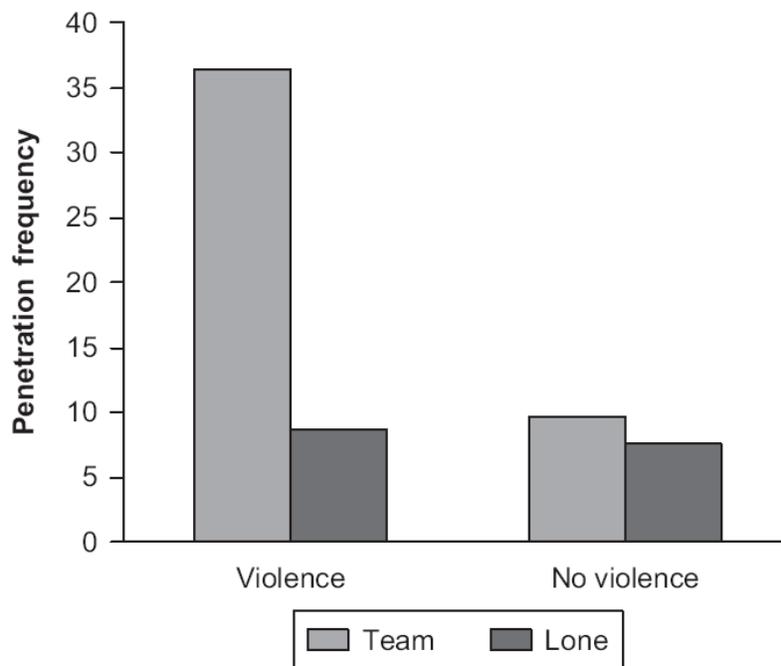
### Number of Suspects

Analysis of the current data set revealed that groups were significantly more likely to commit penetrative sexual assaults in comparison to their lone counterparts. A similar pattern was revealed when considering whether the offense involved the use of physical violence (Woodhams, 2004). The aim of the current study was to consider these variables in combination. To investigate the interrelationships between physical violence, penetration, and the presence of co-offenders, descriptive statistics were initially calculated

followed by a log-linear analysis. Figure 4 shows the three-way partitioning of the data by lone versus group, penetration versus no penetration, and physical violence versus no physical violence.

Figure 4 strongly suggests the presence of a three-way interaction. When violence was not involved, the likelihood of penetration was similar for group and lone offenders, being 9.6% and 7.6%, respectively. By contrast, when physical violence was used, the occurrence of penetration for group offenses increased considerably, from 9.6% to 36.4%, whereas the rate of penetration for lone offenders only increased from 7.6% to 8.7%.

**Figure 4**  
**The Three-way Partitioning of Group/Lone, Penetration, and Physical Violence**



A log-linear analysis was conducted with the variables penetration, lone/group, weapon use, violence, and sex of victim. These five variables were entered into the log-linear analysis, and the best fitting model confirmed that the three-way interaction between physical violence, lone/group, and penetration was statistically significant (chi-square = 4.58,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = .032$ ). There was virtually no association between lone/group and penetration when violence did not take place (odds ratio = 1.29, chi-square = 0.53,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = .467$ ). The association between lone/group and penetration was found to exist only when violence occurred (odds ratio = 6.00, chi-square = 5.89,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = .015$ ).

## **Discussion**

### **Victim Characteristics**

Analysis of the data used in the current study has indicated some statistically significant differences in the severity of offenses experienced by victims of juvenile-stranger sex offenders. No significant differences were found between victims' experiences of physical violence, weapon use, or penetration depending on their gender. This contrasts with previous research studies that have found females to be significantly more likely to experience penetrative and violent attacks (Jamel, submitted; Kimerling et al., 2002). The current findings share more similarity with Pino and Meier's (1999) study in which male and female rape survivors were equally likely to experience physical injury. Pino and Meier's finding that male victims were more likely to have a weapon used against them was not, however, replicated. Differences in findings may be partially explained by the different natures of the studies' samples.

Significant differences for victim age were found. Younger victims were significantly more likely to be penetrated than older victims (Woodhams, 2004). This contrasts with findings from Muram et al.'s (1995) study that did not find a significant difference in the occurrence of intercourse for adult and adolescent females. No study comparing adult and adolescent male victims could be identified for comparison.

An investigation of the combined effect of age and gender on whether penetration occurred revealed that younger female victims and older males were more likely to experience penetration. The finding for female victims seems logical because it could be argued that the procurement and control of a younger female would be easier, therefore increasing the likelihood of penetration. The opposite would seem to be the case for the older male. It is, however, quite possible that a confounding variable is involved. The sexuality of the victim was something that was not considered in this study; however, it is possible that this is an influential factor. Without knowing the sexuality of the victims, this could not be investigated. Nevertheless, the findings clearly indicate that young females and older males might be populations in particular need of crime-prevention advice.

The findings for physical violence are similar to those for penetration. Younger female and older male victims were more likely to suffer physical violence. If the purpose of violence is to control the victim, this finding would intuitively sit well with the finding for older males, who, it could be argued, would be harder to control; however, the finding with regard to younger females is not so easy to reconcile. This is assuming that physical violence in the context of juvenile-stranger sexual assault is instrumental. It is equally possible that some violence in this context serves an expressive purpose.

Past research has alluded to the possibility that serious sexual assaults observed to occur against teenage victims might result from a dating scenario (Woodhams, 2004). This possibility was investigated by constructing a group of offenses in which the suspect and the victim were the same age or the suspect was slightly older. These offenses were characterized by higher rates of penetration, the majority of which occurred in the absence of physical violence. This seems to support previous observations (Woodhams, 2004) and research findings (Muram et al., 1995) that victims of this age appear to be conned to a secluded location where the sexual assault then occurs. Hence, less violence is required.

In the current study, offenses in which victims were older than the suspects were characterized by a lower rate of penetration. An exploratory analysis of the data revealed that if penetration did occur, it co-occurred with physical violence. It is likely that violence is required to force an adult female victim to go with the suspect. For teenage female victims who are conned to a secluded location, escape might be more difficult, making a penetrative sexual assault easier. With an adult female, the achievement of penetration might be more difficult, requiring the use of physical violence, again for reasons such as the location of the offense, and potentially, the victim's greater physical strength.

Offenses in which the victim was at least 3 years younger than the suspect were characterized by a lower frequency of penetration, although the frequency was greater than with victims who were older than the suspect. Where penetration occurred, multiple suspects were implicated. Multiple suspects also appeared marginally more likely to use physical violence than were lone suspects.

These findings share some similarities with Långström et al.'s (2000) findings; however, their cluster analysis did not identify a cluster of stranger offenses characterized by penetration in the absence of physical violence. This is likely caused by differences in the two studies' samples. Successful convictions are less likely for nonviolent rapes (Harris & Grace, 1999; HM Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate, 2002). Therefore, such offenses would not be prolific in a sample of apprehended sex offenders.

### **Number of Suspects**

When comparing offenses for different suspect-victim age differences, groups were often implicated in the most severe assaults. Analysis of the current data set has revealed that overall, group offenses involve more violence than offenses committed by lone individuals (Woodhams, 2004). This is consistent with the findings in the previous literature on both sexual and nonsexual offending (e.g., Conway & McCord, 1995, as cited in Conway & McCord, 2002; Gidycz & Koss, 1990).

The presence of co-offenders can facilitate a sexual assault owing to their intimidating presence or active participation (Groth & Birnbaum, 1990). Findings from the current data set indicating a higher rate of penetration in group offenses compared to lone offenses would also support this hypothesis (Woodhams, 2004). While these two issues have been examined in the literature, their relationship with one another has not previously been considered when comparing group and lone offenses.

If the purpose of physical violence in a sexual assault were to control the victim, a substantial difference in the rate of penetration would be expected for lone offenders who use physical violence compared to those who do not. This large difference in frequencies of penetration was not observed. If physical violence in this context were wholly instrumental, by definition, group offenders should need to use it less. A large difference in the rate of penetration would not, therefore, be expected for groups that use violence and those that do not. The opposite was in fact found. These findings together suggest that explanations for physical violence's being instrumental within sexual assault may not be adequate on their own.

An alternative explanation is that such violence is more expressive in nature. In the current study, it was found that the effect of group/lone on penetration

was almost entirely mediated by violence. It could be argued that because group formation temporally precedes the sexual assault and also the occurrence of physical violence during the assault, violence in this context is a product of the group. Such an explanation would fit with theories of group violence such as deindividuation and “groupthink” (Goldstein, 2002). However, it is also possible that individuals who have a predisposition to behaving violently are more likely to engage in group sexual assaults. This would have parallels with convergence theory (Goldstein, 2002). The above discussion about the role of physical violence within sexual assault has thus far assumed that the level of resistance from the victim is constant. A third explanation is that victims of group assaults might be more physically resistive, resulting in more violence on the offenders’ parts. Unfortunately, the current data set did not offer the opportunity to directly test this hypothesis.

It is possible that none of the above explanations in isolation can account for the use of physical violence in sexual offending. It is quite likely that violence within a sexual assault is both instrumental and expressive, and therefore, it may be redundant to treat the above theoretical explanations as exclusive. Future research could consider what precedes each act of violence in a sexual assault and whether violence occurred in response to victim resistance or was “unprovoked.”

### **Limitations**

Whereas the study has generated some interesting findings, it has a number of limitations that should be recognized. The findings with regard to male victims of sexual assault are based on a small number of cases. The reliability of these findings is, therefore, less than the reliability of the findings for the female victims, which are based on much larger numbers. It should also be noted that a specific set of juvenile sex offenders has been sampled, and thus, the findings are unlikely to generalize to other types of juvenile sex offender. Differences between the current sample’s characteristics and other published samples of juvenile sex offenders are discussed in Woodhams (2004).

Whereas the data in this study are likely to be more representative of juvenile-stranger sex offending than studies based on apprehended samples, the data is based on allegations made to the police. Rape and sexual assault are notoriously underreported to the police (Myhill & Allen, 2002) and this is especially the case for male rape (Pino & Meier, 1999). Related to this is the possibility that the apparent differences observed between offenses are a product of reporting behavior.

The data set used was developed from victim allegations, the minority of which resulted in convictions. The majority of suspect ages were, therefore, estimated by the victims. It is quite possible that some of the alleged offenses were actually committed by adults and that the victim has underestimated the suspect’s age. Conversely, it is possible that some victims have overestimated their suspect’s age, and hence, some juvenile-stranger sex offenses would have been excluded from this sample. There is no foreseeable way of overcoming this limitation. However, it should still be noted.

With regard to the statistical analyses, log-linear analysis assumes the cases in the data set are independent. There is a small possibility that within the data set, the same suspect may have committed more than one offense. The current state of the records did not allow for the removal of linked cases.

## Conclusion

This study has made a contribution to understanding what factors can affect the severity of a juvenile-stranger sexual assault and how these various factors might interact with one another. No previous study has considered this issue with this particular sample. This study has also considered the purpose of violence in juvenile-stranger sexual assaults and has suggested that the use of violence in this context is more expressive than instrumental. Whether this is truly the case, and if so, whether group dynamics or individuals' characteristics are responsible for this phenomenon, remains to be established.

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