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Article in *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* · October 2016

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An Internet Study of Men Sexually Attracted to Children: Correlates of Sexual Offending Against Children

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We conducted an Internet survey of 1,102 men sexually attracted to children concerning their history of adjudicated offenses related to child pornography and sexual contact with children. Most of the men reported no offenses, but their rate of offenses was much higher than that expected for adult-attracted men. Correlates of offending are consistent with a strong role of the cumulative effects of temptation, especially age. Older men, men who had repeatedly worked in jobs with children, men who had repeatedly fallen in love with children, and men who had often struggled not to offend were especially likely to have offended. Attraction to male children, relative attraction to children versus adults, and childhood sexual abuse experiences were also strong predictors of offending. In contrast, permissive attitudes regarding child-adult sex and frequent indulgence in sexual fantasies about children were not significantly related to offending. Our findings represent the first large study of offending among men sexually attracted to children who were not recruited via contact with the legal system. Because of methodological limitations, our findings cannot be definitive. Reassuringly, however, results are generally consistent with those from the most pertinent existing studies, of recidivism among convicted sex offenders.

General Scientific Summary

We studied correlates of adjudicated contact and child pornography offenses in a large Internet sample of child-attracted men. Most of the men reported no adjudicated offenses. The strongest predictor of offending was current age, consistent with roles for both one's time at risk and men's cohort. Notably, permissive attitudes about child-adult sex did not predict offending record.

Keywords: pedophilia, sexual offending, correlates of sexual offending, recidivism

A primary motivation for studying men attracted to children has been to minimize the amount of childhood sexual abuse that they commit. The research most directly relevant to this end has been the prediction of recidivism among sex offenders (e.g., [Hanson & Bussière, 1998](#); [Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2005](#); [Hanson & Thornton, 2000](#)) and sometimes more specifically, men convicted of sexual crimes against children (e.g., [Hanson, Steffy, & Gauthier, 1993](#)). Results of this research have been used to inform sentencing and parole decisions (see, e.g., www.saratso.org). Men predicted to be most likely to commit additional sex crimes often receive longer sentences compared with men predicted to have low

likelihoods of recidivism. Sex offenders attracted to children may be especially likely to commit repeated sex offenses against them.

Causes of Sexual Offending Against Children

[Seto \(2008, 2013\)](#) has proposed that causes of sexual offending against children can be divided into two broad categories: those increasing motivation, and those facilitating the motivated, to offend. Motivating factors are primarily sexual and include strong attraction to children (especially relative to attraction to adults), strong sex drive (likely diminishing with age), and situational effects such as falling in love with particular children. Facilitating factors include a lack of inhibition due to antisocial traits, substance abuse, attitudes supporting the morality of child-adult sex, and low likelihood of detection. The motivation-facilitation model is well-supported. With respect to motivation, for example, laboratory-assessed sexual arousal by sexual stimuli featuring children is highly predictive of sexually offending against them ([Blanchard, Klassen, Dickey, Kuban, & Blak, 2001](#); [Freund & Blanchard, 1989](#); [Seto, 2008, 2013](#); [Seto, Lalumière, & Blanchard, 2000](#)). Sex offenders whose sex drive has been reduced via chemical or surgical castration have a greatly reduced chance of sexual

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We thank Ethan Edwards, Nick Devin, and Richard Kramer for their invaluable support and feedback.

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offending (Bailey & Greenberg, 1997; Weinberger, Sreenivasan, Garrick, & Osrán, 2005). With respect to facilitation, aspects of antisociality predict both sexual offending and recidivism among sex offenders (Seto, 2008, 2013). Indeed, a large meta-analysis found “deviant sexual preferences” (predominantly pedophilia) and antisocial orientation to be the major predictors of sexual recidivism among sex offenders (Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2005).

Sexual Offending Among Child-Attracted Men: The Sampling Problem

Virtually all relevant research has focused on men who have committed at least one sex offense. This focus has largely been due to practical constraints. Predicting sexual offending in men who had not (necessarily) yet offended would require collecting sensitive data on a large representative sample, whose identities are known, and following them over time. Such a design is highly unfeasible.

With respect to child-attracted men, the focus on recidivism has also reflected common, unexamined assumptions. As recently as 2011, the website of the [Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers](#) (2011; ATSA; www.atsa.com) included the following statement: “Although virtually all pedophiles are child molesters, not all child molesters are pedophiles” (All sex offenders are not the same, para. 1). How would ATSA, or anyone, know that “virtually all pedophiles are child molesters?” Empirical support would require a representative sample of pedophiles—or at the very least, a sample of pedophiles not recruited via their having been convicted of sex crimes.

Although recruiting pedophiles in a representative manner is currently an unattainable goal, it is possible to recruit them in ways other than through the legal system. For example, one early study by [Wilson and Cox \(1983\)](#) recruited informants from a London self-help group for pedophiles. The sample was small and necessarily unrepresentative. More recently, the Internet has allowed recruitment of larger, potentially more representative nonforensic samples of men sexually attracted to children. The important German Prevention Project Dunkelfeld is aimed at providing services to help-seeking child-attracted men before they offend (e.g., [Beier et al., 2009, 2015; Neutze, Seto, Schaefer, Mundt, & Beier, 2011; Schaefer et al., 2010](#)). Specifically, the project recruited “judicially unknown pedophiles and hebephiles (men attracted to prepubescent and pubescent children, respectively) to seek professional help with a view to avoiding CSA [childhood sexual abuse] and CPO [child pornography offending] infractions” ([Beier et al., 2015](#), p. 530). The Dunkelfeld research is especially noteworthy because participants are offered confidentiality with respect to past offenses, and so are likely to be more forthcoming about them. In one report from Project Dunkelfeld, only 34 of 291 men had no offenses, 106 had only child pornography offenses, 48 had only contact offenses, and 103 had both ([Beier et al., 2015](#)). Although this study is consistent with a high rate of sexual offending, the sample may have been unrepresentative due to participants’ help-seeking motivation. Child-attracted men seeking help to prevent offending may be more or less likely to sexually offend, compared with child-attracted men less concerned about offending.

Another method of recruiting child-attracted men who are not necessarily in legal trouble has involved large epidemiological

surveys. In one study, 8,718 German men were recruited via panel sampling; thus, they were unselected with respect to sexual interest in adults versus children ([Dombert et al., 2016; Klein, Schmidt, Turner, & Briken, 2015](#)). Furthermore, participants were promised anonymity. The authors estimated that 4.1% of the sample had sexual fantasies about prepubescent children, 3.2% had committed sexual offenses against prepubescent children, but that only 0.1% of the sample had a pedophilic sexual preference ([Klein et al., 2015](#)). Additionally, sexual fantasies about prepubescent children were related to sexual offending against them. However, only 12 men indicated that they had more sexual fantasies about children than adults. This raises the question of how well results would generalize to men predominantly attracted to children.

Another potential strategy is to recruit child-attracted men via Internet sites devoted to persons (generally but not invariably men) sexually attracted to children. These sites allow individuals to discuss relevant issues anonymously. Such issues include aspects of their particular attraction (e.g., preferred age/gender of children), the harmfulness of child-adult sexual interactions, legal issues, and emotional support of others on the site. The sites do not generally allow discussion of sexual activities with children or advocacy for illegal acts. We are not referring here to sites on the so-called “Dark Web,” which may facilitate illegal acts against children ([Greenberg, 2014](#)). Different sites vary in their members’ attitudes regarding whether society is right to revile child-adult sex as much as it currently does. For example, [Virtuous Pedophiles](#) (n.d.; www.virped.org) includes the following on its website: “We believe that sexual activity between adults and children is wrong” (Q4—We have no secret agenda, para. 1). Other sites tend to be silent on this issue, although members of some challenge the common assumption that child-adult sex is intrinsically harmful and wrong.

With respect to potential for research, key characteristics of these sites include their anonymity and their high level of activity. Men who frequent them are sufficiently confident that their confidentiality is secure that they participate by reading and sometimes posting messages about aspects of their sexual interest in children. Some sites are quite busy. For example, [Virtuous Pedophiles](#) has more than 1,000 members, and has recently averaged approximately 3,000 posts per month (N. Devin, personal communication, December 10, 2015). Another relevant site, [Heretic TOC](#), has recently averaged 300–400 separate page hits per day (T. O’Carroll, personal communication, August 15, 2015). Thus, the sites provide an opportunity to assemble a large sample of child-attracted men potentially willing to provide information of interest to researchers, provided the risk to their confidentiality is minimal.

The Present Study

We recruited a large sample of child-attracted men using some of the previously mentioned Internet sites for persons sexually attracted to children, in order to examine correlates of sexual offending. We restricted our questions to adjudicated offenses, and so participants—who responded anonymously—had no reason to provide inaccurate information. Obviously, recruiting child-attracted men through the aforementioned sites does not rely on their having committed sexual offenses. Thus, it is possible to compare men with and without any adjudicated sexual offenses against children. Although our approach has important limitations,

especially its unrepresentative sampling and cross-sectional (rather than longitudinal) design, the validity of our results can be evaluated, somewhat, by their consistency with other relevant research.

Below, we briefly review and explain evidence regarding several possible correlates of sexual offending against children included in our survey. We examined 10 predictors. The first four may reflect cumulative effects of temptation: current age, history of occupations working with children, having biological children, and history of falling in love with children. The next three reflect variation in aspects of sexual attraction to children: attraction to male versus female children, relative attraction to children versus adults, and frequency of erotic fantasies about children. These seven variables likely reflect motivation in Seto's (2008, 2013) motivation-facilitation model. Only two of the other three variables, tolerant attitudes toward child-adult sex and past struggling not to offend (possibly reflecting a perceived lack of self-control), are clearly related to facilitation. Childhood experiences of having sex with adults does not fit neatly into Seto's model.

Age

It is important to distinguish two possible meanings of age, which have opposite predicted relations with offending. Younger child-attracted men may be more likely to offend, because they have higher sex drive and, perhaps, lower impulse control compared with older men (Barbaree, Blanchard, & Langton, 2003; Harris & Hanson, 2004). Thus, one expects a negative correlation between age and likelihood of offending at a given time. In contrast, if one is concerned with cumulative likelihood of offending (i.e., whether one has ever committed a sex offense against children), there is more likely a positive correlation with age. Older men have had more opportunity to offend. The strength of the association between current age and past offending history partly reflects the cumulative effects of having had more opportunity to offend over time. It also reflects any cohort effects such that men from past or more recent cohorts differ in rates of sexual offending, independent of ages at which they offended. Cohort effects may, depending on their nature, raise or lower the correlation between a history of offending and age at assessment. In our study, we assessed current age, and not ages at which any offenses were committed.

History of Occupations Working With Children

Men sexually attracted to children who also work with children may be at increased risk to abuse them, for at least two, non-mutually exclusive reasons. First, frequent contact with children would represent a temptation to such men. Second, it is possible that some child-attracted men intentionally seek employment where they can have sexual opportunities with children. Three studies support the second possibility. In a study of men who had sexually abused children in the context of their professions, 15.0% admitted that they chose their professions in order to abuse children, and an additional 41.5% said that this was part of their motivation for working near children (Sullivan & Beech, 2004). Another study found that men who had sexually abused children in the context of work had higher rates of pedophilic diagnoses but lower rates of antisociality compared with men who had sexually abused children in nonwork-related contexts (Turner, Retten-

berger, Lohmann, Eher, & Briken, 2014). In a large epidemiological study of men unselected for attraction to children or adults, there was a small, statistically significant association between working with children and reporting sexual contact with them (Turner, Hoyer, Schmidt, Klein, & Briken, 2016).

Having Biological Children

Certainly, in our informal experience, there remains considerable concern that child-attracted men are liable to molest their own children. Moreover, men who have children have increased opportunity to commit a sexual offense against children, both their own children and their children's peers. Research on incestuous sex offenders suggests that some may be child-attracted, but that not all are (e.g., Blanchard et al., 2006; Rice & Harris, 2002; Seto, Lalumière, & Kuban, 1999). Our study has the potential to illuminate whether child-attracted men with children are especially likely to sexually offend.

History of Falling in Love With Children

Some men sexually attracted to children are liable to fall in love with them. Romantic love may cloud judgment or help men rationalize sexual contact with children, increasing chances of offending. Furthermore, some child-attracted men desire emotionally close relationships with children. For example, Wilson and Cox (1983) found that 29% of their sample described having a romantic or caring relationship with children in their sexual fantasies.

Attraction to Male Versus Female Children

Child-attracted men are more likely to be attracted to boys than adult-attracted men are to be attracted to men (Bogaert, Bezeau, Kuban, & Blanchard, 1997; Freund & Watson, 1992; Hall & Hall, 2007; Wilson & Cox, 1983). Furthermore, attraction to boys has been associated with a higher likelihood of sexual offending (Hall & Hall, 2007; Hanson et al., 1993; Harris & Hanson, 2004).

Relative Attraction to Children Versus Adults

Men much more attracted to children than to adults may be especially likely to act on their attractions to children, and thus to commit a legal offense against them. Various measures of relative sexual attraction to children compared with adults have been associated with higher rates of sexual offenses against children (e.g., Abel, Jordan, Hand, Holland, & Phipps, 2001; Abel, Lawry, Karlstrom, Osborn, & Gillespie, 1994; Barbaree & Marshall, 1988; Blanchard et al., 2001; Dombert et al., 2016; Harris, Rice, Quinsey, & Chaplin, 1996; Seto, Harris, Rice, & Barbaree, 2004). Whether this relation would also hold for a sample of men known to be attracted to children is uncertain.

Frequency of Erotic Fantasies About Children

Higher rates of erotic fantasies about children might conceivably be related to increased risk of offending, for two reasons. First, frequent fantasies might represent high sexual motivation. Second, they may also represent a failure of self-control. Two recent studies using the same large and representative online

sample of German men found that increased sexual fantasizing about children is associated with increased sexual offending against them, including both child pornography and sexual contact (Dombert et al., 2016; Klein et al., 2015). Again, however, this finding likely primarily reflects differences between men who are strongly attracted to children and those who are not attracted to them. It remains unclear whether it would also hold for a sample more uniform for child-attraction.

Attitudes That Child-Adult Sex Is Not Immoral or Harmful

Among men attracted to children, those who believe that child-adult sex is wrong and harmful may be less likely to commit sexual offenses against children compared with those who believe that child-adult sex is not necessarily wrong or harmful. Some studies suggest that adult sex offenders against children do not differ from nonoffending men in their attitudes about child-adult sex (Fisher, Beech, & Browne, 1999; Gannon & Polaschek, 2005; Tierney & McCabe, 2001) or that such attitudes are not related to recidivism (Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2005). However, other studies have found a link between more permissive attitudes toward child-adult sex and sexual offending against children, such that cognitive distortions about children's reactions to sex are related to the number of victims and duration of sexually assaultive behavior (Bumby, 1996) or to sexual contact with children (Stermac & Segal, 1989). Notably, a recent meta-analysis found significant, if small, associations between more permissive attitudes toward child-adult sex and recidivism for sexual offending (Helmus, Hanson, Babchishin, & Mann, 2013).

Having Experienced Childhood Sexual Abuse

The possibility that childhood sexual abuse causes some men to later abuse children has generated considerable research. On average, across studies, the hypothesis that having experienced childhood sexual abuse is related to later sexual offending against children has received some support. In a large meta-analysis of 17 studies comparing 1,037 adult sex offenders with 1,762 adult nonsex offenders, a significant difference was found between the two groups in their childhood sexual abuse history (Jespersen, Lalumière, & Seto, 2009). Specifically, the sex offenders were more likely than the nonsex offenders to have been sexually abused, and the sex offenders against children were also more likely than the sex offenders against adults to have been sexually abused. Seto and Lalumière (2010) conducted a separate meta-analysis comparing male adolescent sex offenders with male adolescent nonsex offenders. Across 16 studies, the sex offenders were almost five times more likely to have been sexually abused than the nonsex offenders. Across seven studies, sexual offending against children was two times more likely to be associated with having experienced childhood sexual abuse than sexual offending against peers or adults was. In a longitudinal study of 224 men who were sexually abused, 26 later committed sexual offenses, almost all against children (Salter et al., 2003).

Worry About Offending

Men habitually worried that they may commit sexual offenses against children may have reason for their concern. Schaefer et al.

(2010) found that 71% of Dunkelfeld offenders with undetected offenses perceived themselves at risk of offending, compared with 45% of pedophiles and hebephiles who were help-seeking but had not yet offended.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited via unpaid advertisements initially placed on websites associated with two organizations for men sexually attracted to children: B4U-ACT and Virtuous Pedophiles. Both organizations caution men not to have sex with children and are in this way different from some other organizations or websites frequented by men attracted to children. Through dissemination, our survey also reached readers of other websites, including Boy Chat, Girl Chat, and unspecified private forums.

The advertisements initially placed on websites associated with B4U-ACT and Virtuous Pedophiles contained links to an anonymous online questionnaire. Participants provided informed consent and proceeded to questions about their adjudicated sexual offending against children and potential correlates of such offending, among other aspects related to their sexual interest in children. The results on these other aspects of attraction to children are reported in another study of ours (Bailey, Hsu, & Bernhard, 2016a). The present study, including the recruitment method, questionnaire, and other aspects of the research design, was approved by an Institutional Review Board.

Measures

For the purposes of this paper, the relevant content of the survey included questions about adjudicated sexual offending and several potential correlates of offending. Most of these variables, including current age, history of occupations working with children, having biological children, history of falling in love with children, attraction to male versus female children, frequency of erotic fantasies about children, and having struggled not to commit sexual offenses are relatively straightforward and hence we discuss them in the context of analyses and results. We focus here on variables requiring more explanation.

Adjudicated sexual offenses involving children and child pornography. Participants reported whether they had ever been convicted (and separately, whether they had ever been arrested) for having sexual contact with a child aged 14 or younger or for viewing child pornography.¹ Importantly, we did not ask about any offenses not already known to legal authorities. This decision was intended to avoid legal complications for either participants or us, but we also expected that it would reduce participants' concerns about providing honest responses.

Sexual attraction ratings. Participants rated their sexual attraction to specific age/gender combinations on a scale from 0 (*no*

¹ In retrospect, it would have been better to ask about adjudicated offenses regarding viewing, making, or possessing child pornography. We suspect, but cannot prove, that respondents interpreted the question in a broad manner: that is, whether they had adjudicated offenses having to do with child pornography, rather than the more limited sense of simply viewing it.

attraction) to 10 (*maximum attraction*). Men rated their degree of attraction separately to males and females for the following age groups: ages 10 or younger; ages 11–14, ages 15–16, and ages 17 and older. These ages were chosen to correspond to four stages of sexual maturation (with associated preferences): prepubescence (pedophilia), pubescence (hebephilia), adolescence (ephebophilia), and adulthood (teleiophilia), respectively.

Attitudes that child-adult sex is not immoral or harmful. Participants responded to the following question: “What is your opinion of the morality of adults having sex with persons 14 or younger?” They chose from five options, including “very immoral,” “immoral, but not the worst thing an adult could do,” “it depends on the circumstances,” “not immoral if the act is consensual,” and “no more immoral than sex between adults.” We coded these respective choices, with higher numbers indicating more tolerance of child-adult sex, as 1, 2, 3, 3 (i.e., the third and fourth choices were both coded 3), and 4, respectively. Participants also responded to a related question: “What is your opinion of the harmfulness (to the child) of child-adult sex?” They chose from four options, including “very harmful,” “harmful, but not one of the most harmful things that can happen to a child,” “it depends on the circumstances,” and “no more harmful than sex between adults.” Respective coding of responses, with higher numbers indicating less perceived harmfulness to the child of child-adult sex, were 1, 2, 3, and 4.

Sexual experience with an adult. Participants indicated either “yes” or “no” to whether they had had a sexual experience with an adult before they were the age of 15. Those who reported having had such a sexual experience then indicated whether the adult in question was a close relative, a family friend, a stranger, a friend, a distant relative, or some other person. Although we did not explicitly use language such as “childhood sexual abuse” in these questions, a sexual experience with an adult before the age of 15 is commonly considered childhood sexual abuse in the relevant literature, and thus we refer to it hereafter as such.

Exclusion Criteria

We excluded participants who did not indicate they consented to participate ($n = 10$), were female ($n = 66$), did not indicate they were at least 18 years of age ($n = 53$), or did not provide sufficient data regarding sexual attraction patterns ($n = 233$) or past sexual offending against children ($n = 87$). Additionally, we excluded 9 participants who failed to rate their attraction to children (i.e., prepubescent females, prepubescent males, pubescent females, or pubescent males) at least 5 on a scale from 0 (*no attraction*) to 10 (*maximum attraction*).

Of the 1,189 men who provided adequate data for inclusion in our related study (Bailey et al., 2016a), 1,102 answered questions about past offense history and were included in the following analyses. The average age of this resulting sample was 33.85 ($SD = 13.33$). Their average attraction rating of any age/gender combination of children (e.g., prepubescent females, pubescent males) was 9.57 ($SD = 0.92$). The most common referral sources included B4U-ACT (www.b4uact.org; $n = 310$), Boy Chat (www.boychat.org; $n = 136$), private forums for men attracted to boys ($n = 100$), Virtuous Pedophiles (www.virped.org; $n = 52$), Girl Chat (www.girlchat.org; $n = 44$), and private forums for men attracted to girls ($n = 43$); another 355 men did not specify where

they heard about the study, and the remaining participants came from a variety of smaller referral sources.

Results

Because not all men provided complete data, some analyses depend on fewer than 1,102 participants. Frequencies of arrests and convictions are provided in Table 1, separately for child pornography offenses and sexual contact offenses (with children aged 14 or younger), as well as for those offenses combined. Because we suspect it is most likely that child-attracted men accused of sexual offenses against children did in fact commit them, we have elected to count both men with arrests and men with convictions as offenders. The sample included 70 men with only a child pornography offense, 75 with only a contact offense, 23 with both offenses, and 934 men with neither offense. The association between the two offenses was statistically significant, odds ratio = 4.09, $p < .0001$, 95% CI [2.42, 6.93].

Correlates of Offending

We conducted a series of logistic regression analyses using 10 variables plausibly causally linked to offending as predictors, and using each of three separate definitions of offending as the dependent variable: child pornography offense only, contact offense only, and either type of offense. (Note that our use of the term “predictor” does not imply that the relevant variables were assessed prior to the dependent variables. They were assessed simultaneously. We use the term only in the conventional understanding of regression equations, with one dependent variable being estimated by one or more predictors.) We conducted separate regressions for each combination of predictor and dependent variable after standardizing the predictors. This allowed comparisons of their effect sizes. Because interpretation of standardized results depends on predictor variance, we have provided this information for each predictor.

Current age. Older men have been at risk of offending longer than younger men, and thus current age is an obvious potential correlate of offending status. Participants’ ages ranged from 18 to 71, with a mean of 33.85 ($SD = 13.33$). Age was significantly related to likelihood of offending for all three dependent variables. Results for the variable, standardized age, are presented in the first row of Table 2. Figure 1 shows the substantial relation between current age and offending status, for all three categories.

Because age was such a powerful correlate of offending status, we included age as a covariate in analyses of other predictors. Specifically, for each predictor, we present both results of univar-

Table 1
Frequencies of Arrests and Convictions for Sexual Offenses Against Children

Offense	Arrested	Convicted	Arrested or convicted	Neither arrested nor convicted
Child pornography	88	82	98	1,004
Contact	89	81	93	1,009
Either offense ^a	155	146	168	934

^a This includes men with both offenses.

iate logistic regressions using the predictor (the left columns of Table 2) and results from multiple logistic regressions using both the predictor and current age (the right columns of Table 2). It is especially important to present results adjusted for age because some of the other variables of interest (e.g., whether men have biological children) are strongly affected by age.

History of occupations working with children. Asked whether they had worked in jobs requiring contact with children, 548 (50%) men said “no,” 366 (33%) said “a few times,” and 187 (17%) said “frequently.” We treated this variable as numeric, from 1 (*no*) to 3 (*frequently*). Focusing on the combined dependent variable (i.e., either child pornography or contact offense), the resulting model implied that for men of average age (i.e., 33.85 years), those who never worked with children had an approximate risk of .10, those who worked rarely with children, of .17, and those who frequently worked with children, of .25. Controlling for age, this variable remained significantly related to offending status, for all three offending variables (see the second row of Table 2).

Having biological children. The 18.6% of men with biological children had significantly higher rates of offending, for all three variables, compared with the 81.4% of men without such children. For the combined variable, the rates were 12.5% and 7.6%, respectively. However, after controlling for age, none of the offense variables remained significantly related to having biological children (see the third row of Table 2).

History of falling in love with children. We asked participants whether they had ever fallen in love with a child: 348

(31.6%) said “no,” 215 (19.5%) said “once,” 385 (24.9%) said “a few times,” and 154 (14%) said “frequently.” Treating this variable as numeric, from 1 (*no*) to 4 (*frequently*), it was significantly related to all three outcomes, whether or not controlling for age (see the fourth row of Table 2). For the combined offenses dependent variable, 8% of men who had not fallen in love with a child had committed either offense, compared with 26% of those who had frequently fallen in love with children. (Unless specified otherwise, risk values do not control for age.)

Attraction to male versus female children. Our sample responded to a question regarding gender of attraction as follows: 416 (37.8%) were attracted to females only, 293 (26.5%) were attracted to both genders, and 393 (35.7%) were attracted to males only. Attraction to males, treated numerically from 1 (*attracted to females only*) to 3 (*attracted to males only*), was positively associated with offending status for all three variables, whether or not controlling for age (see the fifth row of Table 2). Men exclusively attracted to females had a risk of committing either offense of .08, men attracted to both genders, .14, and men exclusively attracted to males, .21.

Relative attraction to children versus adults. In our survey, we asked men to rate their attraction to different categories of children (i.e., varying in age and gender), as well as to adult men and women, on a scale from 0 (*no attraction*) to 10 (*maximum attraction*). Subsequently, we calculated the difference between attraction to children and attraction to adults as follows: We chose the maximum attraction to all categories of children as attraction to children. Similarly, we chose the maximum attraction to either

Table 2

Associations Between Sexual Offenses Against Children and Predictor Variables

Standardized predictor	Child pornography		Sexual contact		Either offense	
	Unit odds ratio (95% CI) Area under the ROC curve		Unit odds ratio (95% CI) Area under the ROC curve		Unit odds ratio (95% CI) Area under the ROC curve	
	Univariate	Controlling for age	Univariate	Controlling for age	Univariate	Controlling for age
1. Current age	1.69 (1.40–2.40) .664	—	2.39 (1.96–2.94) .763	—	2.15 (1.84–2.53) .725	—
2. History of occupations working with children	1.33 (1.09–1.62) .575	1.23 (1.07–1.80) .674	1.63 (1.33–2.00) .638	1.46 (1.18–1.81) .767	1.48 (1.26–1.73) .607	1.35 (1.14–1.60) .733
3. Having biological children	1.24 (1.02–1.51) .549	.93 (.74–1.16) .693	1.54 (1.28–1.85) .606	1.06 (.85–1.30) .772	1.40 (1.20–1.62) .576	.96 (.81–1.15) .744
4. History of falling in love with children	1.34 (1.11–1.70) .585	1.27 (1.02–1.58) .669	1.99 (1.58–2.54) .676	1.81 (1.42–2.34) .778	1.57 (1.33–1.87) .621	1.51 (1.24–1.84) .728
5. Attraction to male versus female children	1.50 (1.19–1.91) .596	1.32 (1.06–1.65) .685	1.62 (1.30–2.06) .630	1.47 (1.16–1.87) .776	1.56 (1.31–1.87) .617	1.40 (1.17–1.69) .738
6. Relative attraction to children versus adults	1.27 (1.03–1.57) .571	1.22 (.99–2.02) .677	1.38 (1.11–1.73) .592	1.32 (1.05–1.66) .763	1.34 (1.13–1.59) .584	1.29 (1.08–1.54) .729
7. Frequency of erotic fantasies about children	1.06 (.86–1.33) .528	1.07 (.86–1.35) .665	1.14 (.91–1.44) .534	1.17 (.92–1.51) .762	1.08 (.91–1.28) .528	1.10 (.92–1.32) .723
8. Attitudes that child-adult sex is not immoral or harmful	1.21 (.97–1.54) .559	1.10 (.87–1.41) .690	1.24 (.99–1.60) .571	1.07 (.84–1.38) .769	1.17 (.99–1.41) .554	1.03 (.86–1.25) .739
9. Having experienced childhood sexual abuse	1.51 (1.25–1.83) .603	1.31 (1.07–1.60) .701	1.61 (1.33–1.95) .621	1.31 (1.06–1.60) .779	1.58 (1.36–1.84) .613	1.32 (1.12–1.55) .750
10. Having struggled not to commit sexual offenses	1.29 (1.05–1.58) .572	1.20 (.97–1.48) .673	2.01 (1.63–2.50) .715	1.89 (1.51–2.37) .785	1.60 (1.36–1.88) .637	1.49 (1.25–1.77) .730

Note. In each cell, the upper figures represent the odds ratio, predicting offending versus not offending, and the 95% confidence interval (CI). The lower figure represents the area under the ROC curve; for analyses controlling for current age, it is the area under the ROC curve using both age and the relevant predictor. Statistically significant odds ratios are in bold.

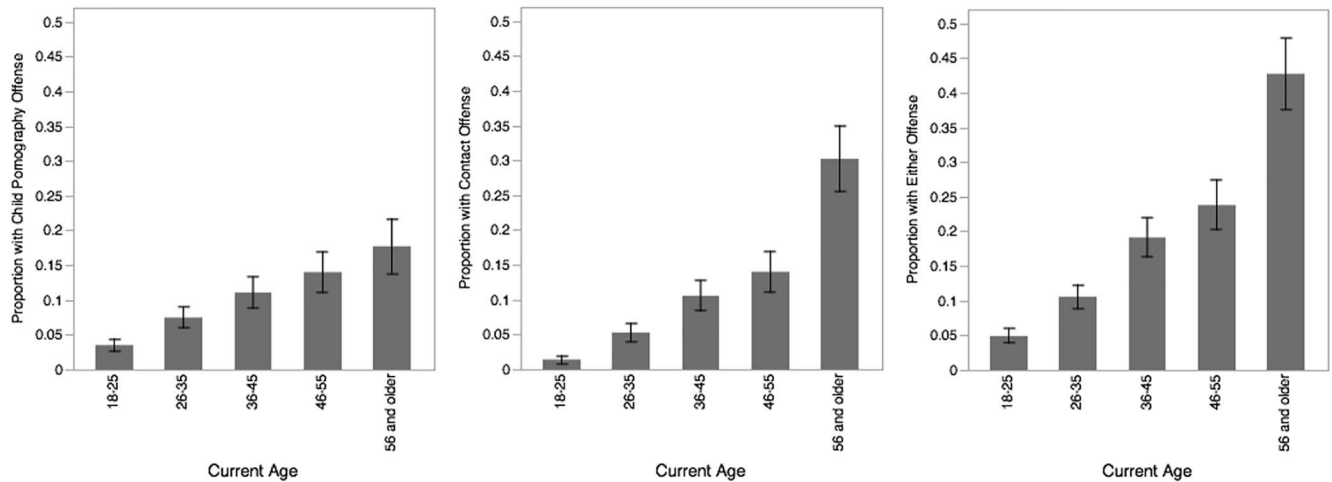


Figure 1. The relation between current age and proportion with a child pornography offense, a sexual contact offense, and either offense.

adult men or adult women as attraction to adults. Finally, we subtracted this attraction to adults from this attraction to children.

The mean score on this variable was 4.90 ($SD = 3.81$), indicating that on average, men's attraction to children exceeded their attraction to adults by nearly 5 attraction units. This variable was significantly related to all three offending variables. Men whose attraction to children exceeded their attraction to adults by less than 3 units had a 10.1% rate of offending on the combined variable. In contrast, those whose preference for children was at least 7 units more than for adults had offended at a 16.8% rate. Controlling for age, this predictor remained significantly related to both contact offending and committing either type of offense; the association with child pornography offending was only marginally significant (see the sixth row of Table 2).

Frequency of erotic fantasies about children. We asked participants how often they intentionally engaged in erotic fantasies about persons aged 14 and younger. Responses included "never" (1.3%), "a few times a year" (3.1%), "monthly" (4.5%), "weekly" (7.3%), "a few times a week" (27.2%), "daily" (31%), and "multiple times a day" (25.7%). These responses were coded 1 through 7, respectively. This variable was not statistically related to any of the three offending variables, whether or not controlling for age (see the seventh row of Table 2).

Attitudes that child-adult sex is not immoral or harmful. In response to the question about the morality of adults having sex with persons 14 or younger, 17.2% of the sample said it was "very immoral," 18.4% said it was "immoral, but not the worst thing an adult could do," 24.4% said "it depends on the circumstances," 35.4% said it was "not immoral if the act is consensual," and 4.7% said it was "no more immoral than sex between adults." As mentioned previously, we treated these respective choices numerically from 1 to 4, with higher numbers indicating more tolerance of child-adult sex. In response to the question about the harmfulness (to the child) of child-adult sex, 17.0% of the sample said it was "very harmful," 10.1% said it was "harmful, but not one of the most harmful things that can happen to a child," 62.4% said "it depends on the circumstances," and 10.5% said it was "no more harmful than sex between adults." As mentioned previously, we

treated these respective choices numerically from 1 to 4, with higher numbers indicating less perceived harmfulness to the child of child-adult sex. The two numerically transformed variables were strongly correlated ($r = .72$) and thus we created a composite variable by standardizing each variable and then summing them. The relationship between this composite variable and offending was nonsignificant for all three dependent variables, both before and after controlling for age (see the eighth row of Table 2).

Having experienced childhood sexual abuse. Participants indicated whether they had had a sexual experience with an adult before they were the age of 15: 256 (24.4%) said "yes," and 794 (75.6%) said "no." Among those with such an experience, 26% said the adult was a close relative, 20% a family friend, 16% a stranger, 7% a friend, 4% a distant relative, and the remainder an unspecified, other person. Men with childhood sexual experiences involving adults reported significantly higher offending rates for all variables. For the combined variable, for example, 27% of men with such experiences had committed an offense, compared with 11% of men without such an experience.

There was a large age difference between men who did and did not report such experiences, consistent with a large decline in child abuse starting in the 1990s (Finkelhor & Jones, 2006). The mean age of men reporting abuse experiences was 40.38 ($SD = 13.84$), and the mean age of those who did not report them was 30.91 ($SD = 12.49$), $t(1,048) = 8.60$, $p < .0001$. Statistically controlling for participants' age, their experience of childhood sexual abuse remained significantly related to all three offending dependent variables, with abuse associated with a higher chance of offending (see the ninth row of Table 2).

What is the nature of the association between childhood sexual abuse and later sexual offending? One causal hypothesis is that such experiences cause sexual attraction to children (Freund, Watson, & Dickey, 1990). All the men in our sample were sexually attracted to children (due to selection criteria), but their degree of attraction to children, and their relative attraction to children versus adults, varied. Thus, we examined whether having had an abuse experience was related to either variable. Neither association was statistically significant (R^2 values $< .01$, p values $> .25$).

A second causal hypothesis is that experiencing childhood sexual abuse normalizes child-adult sex, thus decreasing inhibitions against it (Jespersen et al., 2009). We examined whether men who had experienced childhood sexual abuse had more permissive attitudes about such experiences compared with men without such an experience (using the aforementioned composite variable of attitudes about child-adult sex). This difference was not significant ($p = .07$) and remained nonsignificant after controlling for age ($p = .56$).

Having struggled not to commit sexual offenses. Asked to choose among four responses regarding how often they had struggled not to commit sexual offenses against children, 517 men (46.6%) said “never,” 280 (25.2%) said “rarely,” 182 (16.4%) said “sometimes,” and 49 (4.4%) said “frequently.” These responses were coded 1 through 4, respectively. Notably, we excluded 82 men (7.4%) who said that they had never struggled because they did not believe there was anything wrong with child-adult sex. This variable was strongly related to all offense variables, whether or not controlling for age (see the tenth row of Table 2). (The correlation with age, $r(939) = .16$, was modest, although highly statistically significant.) For the combined offenses variable, 9.1% of those who said they had never struggled had committed an offense, compared with 22.4% who had frequently struggled, 27% who had sometimes struggled, and 13.9% who had rarely done so.

Correlates of child pornography versus contact offenses. Results of the preceding analyses suggest that the correlates of child pornography and contact offenses are similar. Across all 10 correlates of offending, the areas under the ROC curves (AUCs) for the two outcomes correlated significantly, $r(8) = .79, p = .007$. Omitting the strongest correlate, age, the remaining AUCs were still highly correlated for the two outcomes, $r(7) = .59$, but the correlation was no longer significant, $p = .103$.

Correlates of Offending: Strength of the Combined Model

We conducted a multiple logistic regression using all 10 variables as predictors and combined offenses—either child pornography or contact offense—as the dependent variable. We focused on this variable because child pornography and contact offenses had similar patterns of association with the variables we considered. Furthermore, the combined variable had a less skewed distribution than either of the variables representing the separate offenses, allowing more precise estimation of associations. The overall model was statistically significant, $\chi^2(10) = 104.52, p < .0001$. With respect to effect sizes, entropy $R^2(U) = .14$, and the area under the ROC curve was .75.

Much of the overall association may have been due to age. Restricting the analysis only to subjects who have values for all relevant variables, the model using only current age as a predictor had an entropy $R^2(U) = .10$, and area under the ROC curve of .73. Thus, the addition of the other 9 predictors added modestly to the association with offending, controlling for age, although the increase was statistically significant, $\chi^2(9) = 33.69, p = .0002$. Of course, it is possible that age is causally confounded with other predictors in ways such that age is not causally prior to them. Such uncertainty is in the nature of the data we have.

Discussion

We examined correlates of sexual offending against children (i.e., child pornography or sexual contact offense against a child aged 14 or younger) in a large Internet sample of men sexually attracted to children. In contrast to most other relevant studies, ours did not use a sample ascertained via contact with the legal system. Also in contrast to most of those studies, ours was not designed to predict risk of sexual recidivism but to understand the potential motivations of sexual offending. Comparison of child-attracted men with and without sexual offenses against children revealed several differences. Notably, comparisons also showed a lack of differences in some variables where differences may have been expected. To be sure, our study has several limitations that prevent strong conclusions, and we address them below. With this caveat, we first discuss potential implications of our findings.

Offending Rate

A substantial majority of men in the sample—nearly 85%—had not been arrested or convicted for sexual offenses against children, including child pornography. To be sure, it is very likely that some of the men without such a legal history had in fact committed sexual offenses without detection. Furthermore, our sample is unlikely to include men currently imprisoned, and all other things equal, this would lead to an underestimation of the offending rate of men attracted to children. Our sample’s age structure also guarantees that the average rate of offending is an underestimate of offending across the life span. Some of the men were barely into adulthood, and the youngest had a low rate of average offending. In contrast, the oldest men in our sample had a rate of offending approaching 50%. Even with appropriate reduction based on the likelihood that that high rate partly reflected a cohort effect, we expect that far fewer than 85% will avoid offending during their entire lives. However, it is important to acknowledge that child-attracted men do not necessarily commit sexual offenses, and our results are consistent with the possibility that a large proportion of them do not.

The proportion of our sample that reported legal contact for sex offenses against children was much higher than for the general population, however. Although the precise frequency of such legal contact for the general population is unavailable to us, we are aware of two findings suggesting that it is much lower than for men in our sample. First, we surveyed a comparison group of men recruited for having primary attraction to adult women (Bailey, Hsu, & Bernhard, 2016b). Only 1 of these 122 men reported an arrest or conviction for a sexual offense against children (it was for child pornography). A second study suggested that 1 of 220 adult men is on a United States sex offender registry (SOL Research, 2009). Sex offenses requiring registration include both that we assessed (i.e., child pornography and a contact offense with a child aged 14 or younger). Thus, it is likely that most of the men in our survey with such convictions (13.2% of our sample) are on a registry. However, other sex crimes also require registration, and so the appropriate comparison rate is less than 1/220. Clearly, the men in the current sample have been convicted of relevant crimes far more often than typical men.

Correlates of Offending

The strongest correlate of offending was age. Indeed, age was more strongly associated with offending status than all the other predictors combined. To the extent that this finding reflects the length of men's risk period, it exemplifies the danger of temptation. Because degree of sexual attraction to children is likely an unalterable trait, men strongly attracted to children face temptation their entire adult lives. Consistent with this view, offending rates appear to decline more slowly among child-attracted men compared with potential sex offenders against adult women (Dickey, Nussbaum, Chevrolleau, & Davidson, 2002; Hanson, 2002). Two other variables producing significant associations with offending also support the importance of temptation: frequency of working with children, and frequency of falling in love with children. Temptation can be resisted, however, and in our sample, the majorities of older men, men who worked frequently with children, and men who have frequently fallen in love with children reported no offenses.

Although our results are consistent with a strong role of temptation in causing offending, there are other plausible explanations for the relevant associations. Consider age, for example. Conceivably, many younger men who have committed sex offenses are serving long prison sentences, thus removing them from our study. To the extent that this is true, the observed association between current age and offense status in our data would exaggerate the causal effect of age. Similarly, although the association between working in occupations close to children and offending may reflect the perils of temptation, it may also (or instead) represent conscious choices of child-attracted men who intend to offend. Some men have strong emotional congruence with children, characterized by a lack of interest in relationships with adults, a much stronger interest in having children as friends, an interest in child-typical activities, and an idealized view of children. This profile is especially common among men sexually interested in children, and it is associated with permissive attitudes toward child-adult sex (Hermann, McPhail, Helmus, & Hanson, 2015; McPhail, Hermann, & Fernandez, 2014). Thus, emotional congruence with children might conceivably help explain why some child-attracted men both work with children and sexually offend against them.

Cross-sectional designs cannot distinguish between the age effects and cohort effects (Schaie, 1965), and it is likely that part of the association between age and offending reflects the latter. There has been a marked decline in childhood sexual abuse starting in the 1990s (Finkelhor & Jones, 2006), paralleling the decline in violent crime in the West (Pinker, 2011). Thus, older men in our sample were adults during a time when childhood sexual abuse was more common, relative to the younger men.

In our sample, men with biological children were not especially likely to have a legal history of sexual offending against children. Thus, our results do not suggest that discouraging child-attracted men from having children would reduce the rate of sexual offending.

Two other significant correlates of offending both reflected variation in sexual interests. Risk of offending was associated with greater attraction to males and with greater attraction to children relative to adults. Regarding the first finding, increased offending rates for male-attracted men may partly be explained by the fact that boys are more likely than girls to put themselves in some risky

situations. For example, boys are more likely than girls to spend time with men, and it is overwhelmingly men who commit sexual offenses against children. This would not explain our finding that sexual interest in boys was significantly related to child pornography offending, however. Regarding the second finding, men much more attracted to children than to adults are less likely to find sexual interactions with adults (or adult pornography) rewarding, compared with men whose attractions to adults are more substantial. Thus, the former may be more liable to risk offending. Regardless, it is important not to construe the higher offending risk for men attracted to male children as reflecting a propensity of gay men (i.e., men attracted to other adult men) to commit sexual offenses against children. Men attracted to male children are generally not attracted to adult men (Bailey et al., 2016a), and so are not gay.

Men who reported that they engaged in frequent sexual fantasies about children were not significantly more likely to have had legal trouble for sexual offending against children, compared with men with less frequent fantasies. This negative finding suggests that among men attracted to children, engaging in sexual fantasies about them is not risky. It is, rather, spending time with children and developing sexual and romantic feelings for particular children, which appear to increase risk. Although this null result appears to contradict some past findings (Dombert et al., 2016; Klein et al., 2015), those studies—in contrast to this one—were not restricted to child-attracted men.

Men who believed that child-adult sex is morally wrong and harmful to children were not significantly less likely to have committed sexual offenses against children compared with men with much more tolerant attitudes about child-adult sex. These findings challenge assumptions that have been influential in the treatment of sex offenders. For example, the *Sex Offender Treatment and Progress Scale Manual* includes the following among sexual attitudes to be changed: “viewing sexual activity with children as not harmful” and “believing children can make up their own minds about having sex” (McGrath, Cumming, & Lasher, 2013, p. 10). Our results do not support the position that changing such beliefs and attitudes is an important component of preventing sexual offending. Rather, they suggest that in general, child-attracted men resist sexual offending for reasons other than the belief that it is wrong and harmful. Indeed, a minority of our sample believed that child-adult sex is invariably wrong and harmful. Yet the large majority of our sample had not been prosecuted for sexual offenses against children. These conclusions must be qualified, however, due to meta-analytic findings of small associations linking permissive attitudes with increased recidivism rates (Helmus et al., 2013).

A history of childhood sexual abuse was correlated with sexual offending (both child pornography and contact offenses) but not with degree of attraction to children. This suggests that if childhood sexual abuse causes an increase in later offending, it does not do so by increasing sexual attraction to children. Nor do our results support the hypothesis that experiencing childhood sexual abuse causes sexual offending via relaxing attitudes toward child-adult sex. In understanding associations between childhood sexual abuse and adverse outcomes, noncausal hypotheses (e.g., that men's early experiences reflect their family's genetics, and their later behavior reflects these same factors) must also be considered (Bailey & Shriver, 1999).

Limitations

Our study has important limitations. First, our sample was not recruited in a manner that could guarantee that it is representative. Thus, results may have been influenced by self-selection. Unrepresentative sampling remains a problem for all studies of child-attracted men, however, and a primary contribution of our study is its unusual, nonforensic, non-help-seeking sample. Future research will be required to establish whether our sample is more or less representative of child-attracted men compared with those more typical of published research.

Second, our study was not longitudinal. Because “predictors” of sexual offending were assessed simultaneously with the dependent variables (i.e., sexual offenses), it is more problematic compared with a longitudinal design to assume directions of causation.

Third, the correlates of offending that we examined comprised a very limited set. Because of our scientific interests, our survey focused on child-attracted men’s patterns of attraction. As already mentioned, we have conducted a separate study focusing on those variables (Bailey et al., 2016a). Thus, most of our potential correlates of offending concern motivational aspects, in Seto’s motivation-facilitation model. Unfortunately, we included only two potential correlates that clearly addressed facilitation: men’s attitudes about the morality or harmfulness (to the child) of child-adult sex and men’s past struggling not to offend against children. Future research could easily survey other potentially important aspects of facilitation, especially substance abuse and antisociality.

One final limitation, the issue of undisclosed offenses, has sufficiently complex implications that we discuss it at length below.

Undetected offenses. Our dependent variables comprised adjudicated sexual offending against children, and necessarily omitted undisclosed offenses. Regarding potential implications, it is important to separate two issues. First, to what degree do our dependent variables (self-reported legally adjudicated offending rates) underestimate the true rates of sexual offenses against children for child-attracted men? Second, do unreported offenses mean that our results regarding correlates of sexual offending are seriously misleading? In considering both issues, it is useful to note that our dependent variables, adjudicated offenses, are straightforward functions of the probabilities that men commit sexual offenses against children, that offending men are caught and their offenses legally adjudicated, and that the men accurately report on these adjudications. As we have noted, there is no reason we can think of for the anonymous men in our sample to misrepresent their past legal history. Thus, our dependent variables primarily reflect men’s actual offending histories and the detection and prosecution of their offenses.

With respect to the first issue, which concerns the degree to which adjudicated offense rates underestimate the actual offense rates, some past studies that effectively guaranteed participants’ confidentiality have suggested that the amount of undetected offending might be large. For example, Abel et al. (1987) studied 561 men with paraphilias recruited via mental health contacts, the legal system, or advertisements. Female-attracted pedophilic men in their sample reported an average of 20 victims; male-attracted pedophiles reported an average of 150. Importantly, most of these offenses were unknown to legal authorities. More recently, the Dunkelfeld project has provided data on undetected sexual offend-

ing. In one report, 41% of men from the Dunkelfeld project had sexually offended against children without being caught by legal authorities (Beier et al., 2009). Both the Abel et al. (1987) sample and the Dunkelfeld sample are likely to be seriously unrepresentative, however. Both relied on men who either were concerned about ongoing or potential sex offending or, in the Abel et al. (1987) study, were referred by others who were concerned. In our study, men who acknowledged struggling not to offend in the past were considerably more likely to have adjudicated offenses. Furthermore, only about 20% of the men in our sample acknowledged a degree of past struggle associated with substantially higher offending rates. Thus, it is possible that men in our sample, who were not recruited with respect to concerns about offending likelihood, both have committed fewer unknown offenses and are more representative compared with the other studies we mentioned. A future study recruiting child-attracted men as we have and then asking them about unknown offenses—with persuasive guarantees of anonymity or confidentiality—would provide important data on this issue.

Regarding the second issue, which concerns the extent to which unreported offenses render our correlational results invalid, this depends less on the extent of underreporting than on its specific pattern. For example, one reasonable hypothesis is that men with adjudicated offenses are more likely than men without them to have undetected offenses. This would be true if men with adjudicated offenses are more likely than other men to break rules and to sexually abuse children. If so, the associations we found would hold when using all offenses—adjudicated and undetected—as the dependent variable. (Of course, the parameter estimates would change.) Furthermore, to the extent that undetected offenses are common, our associations would generalize to the dependent variable “number of total offenses.” If, however, a correlate of interest was more strongly related to detection than to commission of offenses, then our results regarding correlates of adjudicated offenses would likely be misleading if extended to actual offenses. The causal hypotheses we have considered have all concerned actual offending rather than detection. That is not strong reassurance, however.

Conclusions

Despite the aforementioned limitations, the most relevant existing research supports the validity of our results. Some of our analyses are similar to those from studies predicting recidivism, which typically are longitudinal and use more systematic sampling. Reassuringly, our results are generally consistent with theirs. For example, past research has identified length of the risk period (age, in our study; Hanson et al., 1993; Harris & Hanson, 2004), offenses against males (attraction to males, in our study; Hall & Hall, 2007; Hanson et al., 1993; Harris & Hanson, 2004), and stronger sexual arousal by children than by adults (relative attraction to children vs. adults, in our study; e.g., Barbaree & Marshall, 1988; Blanchard et al., 2001) as statistically significant predictors of recidivism. Past research has also revealed that attitudes about child-adult sex are not very predictive of recidivism (belief that child-adult sex is not wrong and harmful, in our study; Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2005; Helmus et al., 2013). Finally, other research has supported a correlation between childhood sexual abuse

experiences and later sexual offending (e.g., Jespersen et al., 2009).

Our research supports the potential usefulness of highly cooperative samples of child-attracted men. Because they were recruited anonymously from sites catering to child-attracted men, participants had no obvious reasons to be less than honest about their sexual feelings and adjudicated offenses. Importantly, our method allows inclusion of nonoffending child-attracted men; thus, it enables the study of why many child-attracted men apparently may not commit sexual offenses. Because it was not our survey's primary purpose to elucidate correlates of offending (see Bailey et al., 2016a, for discussion of other aspects of the survey), it certainly neglected important relevant questions. There is every reason to expect that future, more comprehensive research can be conducted successfully.

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Received January 26, 2016

Revision received August 12, 2016

Accepted August 16, 2016 ■