

A Comparison of Mothers of Adolescent Incest vs. Non-Incest Perpetrators

Meg S. Kaplan,¹ Judith V. Becker,² and Douglas F. Martinez³

One hundred and thirty mothers of adolescent sexual perpetrators were interviewed. Mothers of incest perpetrators (n = 48) were compared to mothers of non-incest perpetrators (n = 82). Results indicated that significantly more mothers of incest perpetrators reported having been physically and sexually abused, having a sexual dysfunction, and having been in prior psychotherapy. With regard to their sons, a higher percentage of mothers of incest perpetrators reported that they believed their son had committed the sexual offense, was in need of treatment, and had a history of being physically abused. Additionally, a significantly lower percentage of incest perpetrators had involvement with the juvenile justice system.

KEY WORDS: incest; parents; adolescent sexual perpetrators.

INTRODUCTION

Child sexual abuse has been of great concern to our society. Some researchers have focused on perpetrators to learn more about etiology in an attempt to develop treatment and prevention strategies. Recent findings in this area indicate that adolescents commit large numbers of sexual crimes (Becker *et al.*, 1986). Further, nearly half of all adult sexual offenders had

¹Research Scientist at the Sexual Behavior Clinic at the New York State Psychiatric Institute and Assistant Professor of Clinical Psychology in Psychiatry at the College of Physicians and Surgeons, Columbia University, New York, New York 10032

²Director of the Sexual Behavior Clinic at the New York State Psychiatric Institute and Professor of Clinical Psychology in Psychiatry at the College of Physicians and Surgeons, Columbia University, New York, 10032.

³Research Scientist at the Sexual Behavior Clinic at the New York State Psychiatric Institute.

the onset of their deviant sexual interest patterns prior to age nineteen (Abel *et al.*, 1985).

One such study described the characteristics of 22 adolescent incest perpetrators. Results indicated that these adolescents had molested 39 victims. Twenty-three percent of this sample reported having been sexually abused as children (Becker *et al.*, 1986).

Family environment has been linked to the development of aggression (Bandura and Walters, 1959; Farrington, 1978) and delinquency (Loeber and Dishion, 1983, Patterson and Stouthamer-Loeber, 1984). Several other researchers have suggested a relationship between family characteristics and sexually delinquent behavior, such as: (a) exposure to family violence or physical abuse (Glaser, 1978; Lewis, *et al.*, 1979; VanNess, 1984), (b) neglect and abuse (Davis and Leitenberg, 1987) and (c) the absence of a strong marital bond (Mrazek, 1981).

A recent investigation by Kaplan *et al.* (1988), which presented data on 27 parents of adolescent incest perpetrators, indicated that they: (a) had a high incidence of physical and sexual abuse themselves, (b) under-reported their sons' physical and sexual abuse, and (c) had a high level of denial regarding their sons' incestuous behavior.

The present study was designed to compare mothers of incest perpetrators to mothers of non-incest perpetrators on several variables. It was hypothesized that the mothers of incest perpetrators would have a higher degree of abuse themselves and less denial than non-incest perpetrators.

METHOD

Subjects

Subjects were mothers of adolescent boys, ages 13-18, who had been charged with a sexual crime. Although both parents, if available, were asked to be interviewed, the majority of interviews were conducted with mothers, since they most often accompanied the adolescents. Both incest and non-incest perpetrators were entered into the study. For the purpose of this investigation, incest was defined as sexual contact between any family members, either biological relatives or individuals living in a family environment and recognized as a family member (e.g., step-brothers). All subjects were referred from either the criminal justice system or social service agencies to the Sexual Behavior Clinic (SBC) at the New York State Psychiatric Institute. SBC is an out-patient evaluation and treatment clinic for adolescent sexual perpetrators.

Procedure

Informed consent was obtained from all respondents and their mothers. Mothers were interviewed by a psychologist using a structured clinical interview designed to assess their demographic characteristics, psychiatric histories, histories of prior sexual and non-sexual arrests, knowledge of what their son was accused or charged with, history of physical or sexual abuse, and their denial or acceptance of their sons' sexual crime.

RESULTS

Data-Analytic Procedures

Statistical analysis consisted of 2×2 cross tabulation and chi-square, comparing the mothers of incestuous and non-incestuous perpetrators, and the specific area of inquiry. Of note, many questions offered a "don't know" or "not sure" answer option. Responses in these categories were dropped, with a resulting decrease in the total number of subjects listed for the particular item in question.

Demographic Characteristics of Mothers

There were 130 mothers interviewed. The mean age of the mothers was 39.5 years. The range was 28-58 years. Nine percent of the participants were caucasian ($n = 12$), 64% were black ($n = 83$), 25% were hispanic ($n = 33$), 0.8% were oriental ($n = 1$), and 0.8% were "other" ($n = 1$).

Regarding marital status, the majority of the subjects were not living with a partner. Thirty four percent of the subjects ($n = 44$) were married or remarried, 3% ($n = 4$) were living with a sexual partner, 33% ($n = 42$) were divorced or separated from their spouse, 5% ($n = 7$) were widowed and 25% ($n = 32$) were single at the time of the interview.

Adolescent perpetrators were divided into two categories. Those who had committed incest ($n = 48$) and those who had not ($n = 82$). Significant differences were found in the following categories.

Prior Therapy of Mothers

Mothers of incest perpetrators reported that they had been in therapy for a psychological problem significantly more (38.2%, $n = 18$; total $n = 47$) than

mothers of non-incest perpetrators (14.6%, $n = 12$; total $n = 82$; $p = .004$, chi-square = 8.09).

Prior Sexual and Physical Victimization of Mothers

Significantly more mothers of incest perpetrators (43.8%, $n = 21$; total $n = 48$) admitted to being physically abused than mothers of non-incest perpetrators (24.7%, $n = 20$; total $n = 81$; $p = .04$; chi-square = 4.2).

Similarly, significantly more mothers of incest perpetrators (34.0%, $n = 16$; total $n = 47$) admitted to being sexually abused than mothers of non-incest perpetrators (13.6%, $n = 11$; total $n = 81$; $p = .01$, chi-square = 6.30).

Sexual Dysfunction of Mothers

Mothers of incest perpetrators (31.3%, $n = 15$; total $n = 48$) were more likely to self-report a sexual dysfunction than mothers of non-incest perpetrators (11.3%, $n = 9$; total $n = 80$; $p = .01$, chi-square = 6.61).

Admission or Denial by Parents

Significantly more mothers of incest perpetrators stated that they believed their son committed the sexual offense (73.2%, $n = 30$; total $n = 41$) than mothers of non-incest offenders (39.1%, $n = 27$; total $n = 69$; $p = .001$, chi-square = 10.61).

Belief in Sons' Need for Treatment

Significantly more mothers of incest perpetrators (73.8%, $n = 31$; total $n = 42$) compared to mothers of non-incest perpetrators (48.5%, $n = 33$; total $n = 68$) reported that they believed that their son needed treatment ($p = .015$, chi-square = 5.82).

Prior Physical Victimization of Sons

All mothers were asked "To your knowledge, has your son ever been physically abused?" When compared to non-incest cases (11.3%, $n = 9$; total $n = 80$) mothers of incest perpetrators answered yes significantly more (31.9%, $n = 15$; total $n = 47$; $p = .008$, chi-square = 6.95).

Prior Legal Involvement

According to reports of mothers, incest perpetrators were more likely to have had no legal involvement (36.2%, $n = 17$; total $n = 47$) than non-incest perpetrators (8.6%, $n = 7$; total $n = 81$; $p = .0003$, chi-square = 13.04).

No significant differences were found in the responses of mothers concerning the following variables: prior sexual abuse of the adolescent perpetrators, prior psychiatric hospitalization of son or immediate family members, and both mothers and partners use of drugs or alcohol.

DISCUSSION

In a comparison of mothers of non-incest adolescent sexual perpetrators to mothers of adolescents who have committed incest, the pattern that emerges is that mothers of incest perpetrators either: (a) tend to disclose more about themselves in areas such as prior therapy, history of sexual and physical abuse, and sex dysfunction; or (b) have experienced more of the above. In addition, mothers of incest perpetrators are more likely to: admit that their son committed the offense, believe that he needs treatment for it, and admit to their sons' prior physical abuse. Since more of the mothers of incest perpetrators have had a prior history of therapy, this may have facilitated disclosure.

Further, as fewer incest perpetrators had involvement with the juvenile justice system, there may have been less perceived risk in disclosing offenses of their sons. Also, admission of their sons' abuse may have been facilitated by the fact that another relative (daughter, other son, niece or nephew) had disclosed that they were the victims, as opposed to a stranger making an allegation.

Regarding the sexual dysfunction finding, research has indicated that women who have been abused have a higher incidence of sexual dysfunctions than non-abused women (Becker *et al.*, 1986).

Particularly noteworthy was the high incidence of the parent's admission of their own and their son's history of abuse. Helfer (1987) has described the passing of physical abuse from one generation to another in abusive families. And intergenerational transmission of incest has been discussed by Cooper and Cormier (1982) and Justice and Justice (1979), among others. This may be a factor in this finding.

Given that mothers of incest versus non-incest perpetrators differ on a number of factors, further research needs to focus on how and if their sons' behavior has been due to parental influence, and what role familial variables play in the development of atypical sexual interests in adolescents.

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