

Abuse, Sexual Discomfort, and Victim Typology in Adjudicated Youth

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Adolescent sexual offending is a focal public safety issue. Nearly half of all adults with sex offenses reported engaging in sexually abusive behavior beginning in adolescence (Righthand & Welch, 2001). However, intervention is important for adolescents adjudicated for illegal sexual behavior (AISB) because it breaks the cycle through treatment aimed at deterring further victimization of children and adults (Burkhart & Cooke, 2010).

Victim typologies provide important information for assessment and identify important treatment-related factors. For example, child and mixed-age victim offenders are more likely to have been victims of sexual abuse (Kemper & Kistner, 2010). Those with mixed-age victim patterns reported the highest rates of child abuse and most severe family problems (Link & Losel, 2021.) AISB with child-age victims exhibit greater anxiety and internalizing problems than other victim-age patterns (Faniff & Kolko, 2012). Youth with child-age victims tend to be less sexually experienced and socially isolated, suggesting a higher level of sexual discomfort (Leroux et al., 2016). Additionally, youth with peer-aged victims are more likely to have poor parental monitoring and are less susceptible to parental discord (Faniff & Kolko, 2012).

The current study sought to define the relationship between a history of sexual abuse and victim age in a sample of male AISB. Data was collected from 916 participants in a court-mandated residential treatment facility. A series of ANOVAs were used where the grouping variable was based on victim-age pattern (1=child age victim, 2=peer or older age, 3=mixed age). These groups were compared on the Millon Adolescent Clinical Inventory (MACI; McCann, 1999) Scales for family discord, childhood abuse, and sexual insecurity. The family discord scale is a measurement of tension and conflict with parents (McCann, 1999). The child abuse scale is a measurement of the severity of abuse, including physical, sexual, and/or emotional abuse.

The sexual insecurity scale is a measurement of discomfort regarding issues of sexuality and awareness of evolving sexual feelings.

Regarding the family discord scale, $F(2, 915) = 3.42, p = .03$, the group with peer-age victim patterns ($n = 236$) had the lowest mean scores compared to the other victim-age groups. Means and standard deviations are presented in **Figure 1**. On the child abuse scale, $F(2, 915) = 9.60, p = .00$, the group with peer-age victim patterns also had the lowest mean scores. For sexual insecurity, $F(2, 915) = 6.03, p = .00$, the group with child-age victim patterns ($n = 585$) had the highest mean scores compared to the other victim-age groups. These results add to the existing literature on victim typology and shed light on the victim-offender cycle. The results suggest that youth with more complex trauma histories and mental health needs, such as those with child-age victim patterns, may need more resources and time to achieve the same treatment gains as those with fewer risk factors. Overall, AISB are not a “one size fits all” group (Newman et al., 2018). Treatment programs should be individualized to meet these needs.

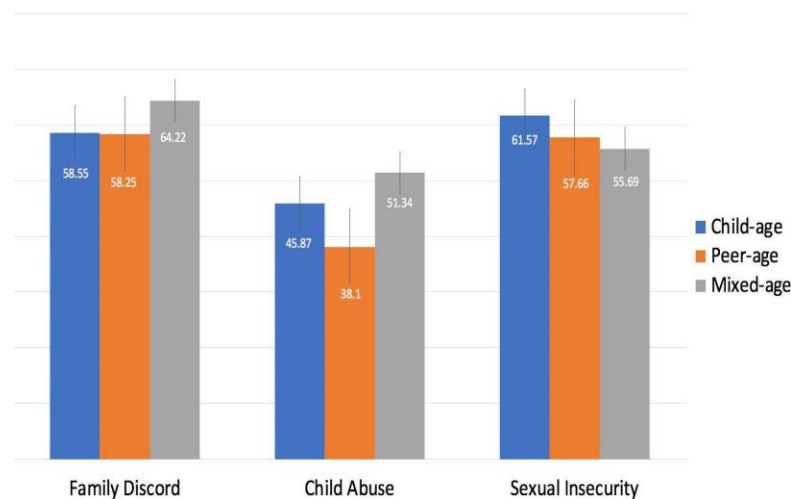


Fig. 1. Means and standards errors of the variables of interest.

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Statement of Research Advisor

Jenna's study was presented at two regional conferences, Southeastern Psychological Association and the AU Student Research Symposium, where she won awards at each. This included the Psi-Chi Regional Research Award and an Outstanding Presenter Award. Jenna will continue this victim typologies theme with new research presented at the Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers in Los Angeles, CA, in October.

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Authors Biography



Jenna Wettstein is a senior-year student pursuing a B.S. degree in Psychology at Auburn University. Her research interests include improving resources for children and adolescents exposed to trauma. Jenna is very passionate about promoting the recognition of etiological factors that contribute to victimization. In addition to her work with the Department of Psychological Sciences, she is a 2022-2023 College of Human Sciences research fellow. She is using her fellowship to investigate trauma-informed care in the foster system.



Kelli R. Thompson is an Assistant Research Professor in the Department of Psychological Sciences. Her lab is funded by a more than 20-year public-public partnership with the Alabama Department of Youth Services. She has shown a particular interest in undergraduate research mentoring in recent years. In the spring 2022 semester, more than a dozen original undergraduate research projects were completed by students. Most have gone on to publish in undergraduate journals such as this.