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Understanding the Nature and Scope of Adolescent Sexual Offending Across Canada

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Abstract

This study examined data from the Uniform Crime Reporting Incident-based Survey capturing a national sample (N = 6,145) of all adolescents coming to the attention of the police in response to a sexual offence between 2009 and 2011. This data is not publicly available or reported elsewhere, and therefore provides a unique national perspective on adolescents accused of sexual offences in Canada. There are many challenges when it comes to providing access to justice for individuals who are involved in cases of sexual assault. Sexual assault cases are recognized as particularly challenging because they are vastly under-reported to police, and even when cases are reported and a charge is laid, there is a high attrition rate in these cases continuing through to court. When it comes to adolescents accused of sexual offences, it becomes further complicated. This is because adolescent sexual offending is distinct from adult-perpetrated sexual offending, and it is also distinct from other forms of adolescent offending due to the layered complexities of adolescent sexuality, the vulnerability of both the accused and the victim, and the intra-familial dynamics that are often present in these cases. As the initial gatekeepers to the justice process, police officers' use of discretion is extremely important and can be informed by an understanding of the nature and scope of this offence and the complexity of the dynamics involved. We used the Uniform Crime Reporting Incident-based Survey data to examine patterns about the type of sexual offence involved, the gender of the accused, the age of the accused, and the relationship of the accused to the victim.

Findings are discussed in the context of a greater understanding of the complexities of adolescent sexual offence cases and the challenges for police decision-making. In order for accused adolescents and victims to receive appropriate access to justice, be that through formal dispositions or informal extrajudicial measures, police officers and frontline workers must be sensitive to the difficulties related to this offence in terms of the often intimate relationship between the accused and the victim, and the interpersonal dynamics that are involved.

Keywords: Police decision-making; Adolescent sexual offending; UCR Survey

Introduction: Police Handling of Sexual Assault Cases

An ongoing challenge for police agencies in Canada is the pressure to appropriately and effectively respond to cases involving sexual assault. Police agencies are increasingly under scrutiny by advocacy groups, the media, and federal and provincial governments for the ways in which they handle cases involving sexual assault. A recent example comes from the Canadian national newspaper *The Globe and Mail*, which reported that approximately one in five cases of sexual assault were deemed “unfounded” by police agencies across Canada, which means that after a police investigation the offence was determined not to have occurred, nor was it attempted (Doolittle, 2017). This finding led many to question if access to justice is denied for victims of sexual assault. The result was a renewed outcry and public concern about the adequacy of police decision-making in cases involving sexual assault across Canada, and the generalized accusation that the police do not consider these cases serious enough to warrant an official response. This in turn led to a formal commitment from many provincial police organizations, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), and the Canadian government to review police practices pertaining to cases of sexual assault, to foster police transparency in the handling of sexual assault cases, and to create a national strategy for police and prosecutors for dealing with

cases of sexual assault (Department of Justice of Canada, 2017). In April 2017, the Police Information and Statistics (POLIS) Committee provided a recommendation that unfounded cases (including sexual assault) be collected and recorded in a uniform way in order to be disseminated into the public realm (Rotenberg, 2017). The most recent Statistics Canada publication was the first since 2006 to publish data on unfounded incidents, which included sexual assault cases (Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 2018).

A further challenge for police and justice officials in dealing with sexual offending is that this offence is one of the most under-reported offences and has a very high attrition rate even if reporting occurs (Alderden & Ullman, 2012; Taylor & Gassner, 2010; Murphy et al., 2014; Rotenberg, 2017). In some cases, victim non-reporting relates to the wider climate of harmful beliefs about victim culpability in sexual assault cases. For example, a survey conducted by the Task Force on Respect and Equality at the University of Ottawa revealed that a substantial proportion of students felt that victims may be blamed for sexual assault if they put themselves in a risky situation or were dressed in a particular way (University of Ottawa, Task Force on Respect and Equality, 2015). These findings, and other similar findings across campuses, have highlighted the socio-cultural backdrop that creates barriers for victim reporting. In addition, research suggests that these same broad perceptions are sometimes used by law enforcement agents investigating sexual assault cases. Campbell et al. (2015) found that law enforcement officers' perceptions of victim credibility focused on the moral character of the victim or their behaviour at the time of the assault. For juvenile (16 and under) victims of sexual assault, the authors found that when forming appraisals about the credibility of a sexual assault allegation, if there was limited physical evidence to make a decision, extralegal factors were employed, such as an evaluation of how "emotional" the victim was in making a statement, their overall reputation for lying, if they misbehaved at school, as well as their past sexual behaviour. Thus, non-reporting occurs for many of the broad issues cited above as well as the stigma and shame associated with the incident, which

are further exacerbated for a young sexual assault victim. Conroy and Cotter (2017) cite the most common reasons for not reporting a sexual assault to police include that the crime was minor and not worth reporting (71 percent), that no one was harmed (63 percent), and, importantly in the context of adolescent offending, that the incident was a private matter and handled informally (67 percent).

Sexual Assault Cases Involving Adolescents

Non-disclosure on the part of a victim can pose significant investigative challenges across all types of sexual assault cases. Furthermore, as it relates to cases involving adolescents, managing issues around delayed disclosure — in addition to the complex interpersonal nature of adolescent sexual offending — necessitates a high degree of sensitivity and skill. This is partly because almost all cases involving adolescents accused of a sexual offence involve non-disclosure/delayed disclosure and/or delayed reporting. MacMillan et al.'s (2003) study of child physical and sexual abuse cases in Ontario found a very small percentage (8.7 percent) of respondents with a history of sexual abuse reported contact with child protection services. In relation to delayed reporting, using data from the most recent General Social Survey, Burczycka and Conroy (2017) found 93 percent of victims of childhood physical and/or sexual abuse did not report their abuse to the police or child protection services before they turned 15 years old. More specifically, sexual offences against children and adolescents were more likely than any other types of offence against a person to involve a delay in coming to the attention of the police (Burczycka & Conroy, 2017). Rotenberg's (2017) analysis of sexual assault cases showed that when a victim knew the person who sexually assaulted them, they were nearly twice as likely to delay reporting the crime to police by one day after the incident, compared with victims who were assaulted by a stranger. The delay in reporting was higher when the accused was a family member.

In addition to the obstacles facing adolescent victims, the complicated dynamics of sexual assault also pertain to the police

handling of cases involving accused adolescents. The number of youth accused of sexual offences constitutes a significant proportion of calls to police. For example, in North America, between 14 percent and 18 percent of all police arrests for sexual offences involve adolescents under the age of 18 (Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 2003; Puzzanchera, 2013). In Canada, children and youth represent 55 percent of all sexual offence victims that come to the attention of the police, in spite of making up 20 percent of the Canadian population. In approximately 30 percent of these cases, the accused is also an adolescent, most often male, with the peak age of accused for these offences being 13 and 14 years old (Cotter & Beaupré, 2014). In fact, the police in Canada are more likely to come into contact with an adolescent accused of committing a sexual offence than an adult accused of committing a sexual offence, in part due to reporting that can occur from a variety of individuals such as parents and/or school authorities who may bring sexual offences to the attention of law enforcement. In 2014, the rate of 12- to 15-year-olds accused of a sexual offence against a child was triple that of adults: 18 per 100,000 vs. 6 per 100,000 respectively (Allen & Superle, 2016). When looking at the most recent youth court statistics from across Canada, adolescents are significantly more likely to be arrested for any sexual offence compared to adults (Alam, 2015), though once again many factors may be attributed to this, including parents and/or school authorities requesting charges to be laid by police. However, despite a general movement to divert adolescents away from the youth justice system, the same analysis by Alam (2015) found that between 2012 and 2013 there was an 8 percent increase in the number of sexual assault cases (696 cases in 2013 compared to 750 in 2014) and a 5 percent increase in other sexual offences cases (635 cases in 2013 compared to 667 in 2014) in youth court. This is in contrast to an 18 percent decrease in the number of robbery cases (2,336 in 2013 compared to 1,904 in 2014), a 12 percent decrease in the number of major assault cases (2,717 in 2013 compared to 2,396 in 2014), and a 7 percent decrease in common assault cases (3,878 in 2013 compared to 3,613 in 2014). Taken together, the above findings suggest that not only are the police

required to handle sexual offence cases involving an adolescent more often than similar cases involving an adult, but the degree of involvement is more extensive compared to other types of adolescent cases (e.g., violent-only offences), since sexual offence cases involving an adolescent are increasingly being brought to court. This underscores the importance of understanding how police interpret sexual assault cases involving adolescents and how they use their discretion in adjudicating a case. Police services are a gateway for accused youth and their families to access justice services in cases of sexual assault, even if the case is diverted to extrajudicial measures or in some other way. Providing support to the accused, victim, and families that have come to the attention of police can be very important. For example, in cases of adult intimate partner violence, accessing victim services through police reporting (though not arrest) was associated with reduced re-victimization (Xie & Lynch, 2017). In addition, Worley et al. (2011) report that the families of adolescents who commit sexual offences have substantial rates of violence, depression, and personal histories of maltreatment, and need to be supported for these personal and familial issues.

Police officer perceptions of sexual offending are also important and may influence the ways in which they respond to cases involving adolescents. For example, how police officers perceive the relational dynamics involved in incidents of sexual offending can influence if and when they make an arrest. In a study conducted by Rollwagen and Jacob (2017) examining Canadian police data, it was found that the odds of arrest were decreased when adolescents were accused of sexual offending if the relationship was a current or former intimate partner. In contrast, the odds of arrest were increased if adolescents were accused of sexual offending in the context of a friend, family member, or stranger. The implication of these findings is that police discretion can vary depending on the perceived social distance between the adolescents accused of the offence and the victim (Rollwagen & Jacob, 2017).

How sexual offenders are perceived broadly can also influence the

ways in which police officers respond to these cases. For example, while it may be that youth sexual offenders and adult sexual offenders are perceived differently, adults are often perceived to be a unique group within the larger category of serious offenders in terms of their risk to public safety. As evidenced by policies that seek to regulate and restrict the movements of sexual offenders, even after serving their sentence, there is a belief that sexual offenders pose an indefinite risk and that they fundamentally cannot be rehabilitated (Durling, 2006; Hanson et al., 2014). This risk discourse is reinforced by political discourse and media stories of heinous, yet statistically unlikely, incidents. Adolescents are rarely explicitly separated from public discussions regarding issues of risk and public safety as they relate to sexual offending, which can result in adult-centric perceptions of risk being inappropriately applied to adolescents. This is in contrast to the reality that adolescents who commit sexual offences are actually a low-risk group of offenders. The average sexual recidivism rate for adolescents who have committed a sexual offence ranges from 7 percent to 10 percent over a lifetime (Caldwell, 2010), and studies have consistently found the general recidivism rate (i.e., any offence type) for adolescents who have committed a sexual offence to be much lower compared to the general recidivism rate of adolescents who have committed a non-sexual offence. For example, in a Canadian study by Carpentier and Proulx (2011) examining recidivism among 351 male adolescents referred to a mental health centre, and who had previously committed a sexual offence, only 10 percent committed a new sexual offence within the 8-year follow-up period. In a similar study from the United States, Calleja (2015) compared the post-release general recidivism rates of adolescent males who had committed a sexual offence and adolescent males who had committed a non-sexual offence, and found that the non-sexual offence group was eight times more likely to reoffend compared to the sexual offence group (3 percent versus 33 percent, respectively).

The implication of the above recidivism findings for police agencies is twofold. First, these findings highlight the fact that when responding to incidents involving an adolescent accused of a sexual

offence, police officers are likely to be confronted with someone who does not fit the prototypical profile of a “serious sexual offender” for which they may have been trained to respond. This in turn may limit police officers’ effectiveness when dealing with such adolescents given that they may not consider the significant developmental differences between youths and adults (Cauffman & Steinberg, 2000), if they have received any youth-focused training at all (Schulenberg & Warren, 2009). Second, officers may respond more inappropriately to adolescents who have been accused of committing a sexual offence than is justified by their level of risk to public safety. For example, as highlighted previously, the rate of youth cases involving a sexual offence making it to court in Canada continues to increase every year compared to other types of violent offences.

Current Study

The current study offers insight into the nature and scope of adolescents accused of a sexual offences across Canada. First, the study analyzes data from the Uniform Crime Reporting Incident-based Survey (UCR Survey), which is information collected directly by police officers. This information is therefore of most relevance for the purposes of informing the police on whom they are likely to encounter in the field.

Second, the current analyses include a specialized category of offences labelled child offences, which adds a degree of specificity regarding the types of offences associated with adolescents not available elsewhere. Statistics Canada does not publish data regarding these specific offences; instead, this information is aggregated under a broader category labelled ‘other sexual offences’ that appears in Statistics Canada publications. However, after submitting a formal request to disaggregate the ‘other sexual offences’ variable, methodologists at Statistics Canada’s Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics made a special exemption to the authors to provide detailed information on these offences to allow for more specific and informative comparisons in the current study. Finally,

unlike court-based information, the Uniform Crime Reporting Incident-based Survey captures the same incident information for adolescents under the age of 12 as for all other accused. Because individuals under the age of 12 cannot be criminally charged, there is very limited data regarding the involvement of such young individuals in cases of sexual offending. Although individuals under the age 12 cannot be charged, the police are still required to respond and manage such cases, which further highlights the value of the current study in terms of police interactions with very young accused youth.

Methods

Table 1 provides a summary of the study sample in regards to age, gender, and type of offence committed. The study includes a national sample of Canadian adolescents (N = 6,145) who were charged by police for committing a sexual offence between 2009 and 2011. Data from 2009 onwards was used in order to capture incidents of adolescent sexual offending that occurred after the age of sexual consent was increased to 16 years old. Age was recorded at the time the youth was charged based on official date of birth; however, in instances where date of birth was unknown, an estimate of age was made by the arresting police officer. Three age categories are included: under the age of 12 years old, 12 to 14 years old, and 15 to 17 years old. Only incidents involving one accused and one victim were included in the study, as this was the only way to aggregate and connect victim and accused information. As such, adolescents who were arrested for an incident involving multiple accused and/or multiple victims at once were excluded. It is possible that a specific adolescent was counted multiple times within the data. For example, it is possible that a person who was arrested for committing a sexual offence against one individual was then arrested a second time for committing a sexual offence against a second victim within the three-year study period. Unfortunately, the format of the data does not allow for the identification of repeat offenders.

Table 1: Raw count of youth accused of sexual violations, for Canada 2009–2011

Sexual violation	Male			Female			Total		
	<12	12–14	15–17	<12	12–14	15–17	<12	12–14	15–17
Aggravated sexual assault	0	1	14	0	0	0	0	1	14
Sexual assault with a weapon	3	22	31	1	3	4	4	25	35
Sexual assault	406	2070	2496	54	71	64	460	2141	2560
Child offence ^a	100	352	391	15	25	22	115	377	413
Total	509	2445	2932	70	99	90	579	2544	3022

Note. ^aincludes sexual interference, invitation to sexual touching, and sexual exploitation offences
Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, Uniform Crime Reporting Survey

Measures

Uniform Crime Reporting Incident-based Survey. The Canadian Uniform Crime Reporting Incident-based Survey (UCR Survey) is designed to collect detailed information regarding criminal incidents that occur within Canada. Information collected includes the following: characteristics of the accused, characteristics of the victim, and specific offence details. Information gathered by the UCR Survey is collected under the authority of the Statistics Act (Revised Statutes of Canada, 1985) and only includes data from criminal incidents that have been substantiated by the police. The UCR Survey is completed by police service members who extract criminal incident information from administrative files and input it according to standardized definitions and concepts (Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 2013). All police services across Canada are mandated to complete the UCR Survey for every criminal incident they record, and there is virtually 100 percent national coverage.

In an effort to increase the accessibility of UCR Survey data, the Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics (CCJS) has made five years of data (2007–2011) available to Canadian researchers for specific projects. However, the specificity of the data that is allowed to be used is limited by strict confidentiality regulations. CCJS has developed a system of confidentiality vetting that was put in place for academic researchers in order to protect the privacy of Canadian citizens (see Section 17(1)b of the Statistics Act). Essentially, all UCR Survey data requests submitted to CCJS for academic purposes

are assigned a disclosure risk score ranging from zero to eight, and only requests with risk scores of seven or below are approved for release (Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 2013). The disclosure risk score is calculated based on the nature and level of detail of all requested variables. Variables that are associated with a higher risk of identification, or revealing of a characteristic that can be associated with a specific individual or criminal incident (e.g., homicide violations), receive higher scores.

Study Variables. The current study includes four UCR Survey variables: gender of the accused, age of the accused, type of sexual offence committed, and relationship of accused to victim. Since the variables included in the study are highly sensitive, it was necessary to aggregate the variables nationally (i.e., collapse across all provinces/territories) and across several years (i.e., collapse across 2009–2011).

Gender of the accused. Gender of accused refers to the gender of the person being charged by the police. This variable is coded as either male or female based on information provided to the arresting officer, or based on an officer's own assessment.

Age of the accused. Age of accused refers to the age of the person being charged at the time they are arrested by the police. This is an aggregated variable and includes three categories: adolescents under 12 years of age, adolescents between the ages of 12 and 14 years old, and adolescents between the ages of 15 and 17 years old.

Type of sexual violation. Type of sexual violation refers to the specific type of sexual offence the accused is charged with at the time of their arrest. Charges laid by police officers may change at the pre-court stage or during the court process; therefore, these categories do not necessarily reflect what a person is ultimately convicted of, or if the person is convicted at all.

This variable includes four categories, described in order of severity based on the greatest maximum penalty prescribed by Canadian law.

Aggravated sexual assault is defined as a sexual assault where the victim is either wounded, maimed, disfigured, or has their life endangered (Criminal Code of Canada, 1985, s. 273(1)). Sexual assault with a weapon is defined as a sexual assault committed by someone carrying, using, or threatening to use a weapon; threatening to cause bodily harm to a person other than the assault victim; or causes bodily harm to the assault victim (Criminal Code of Canada, 1985, s. 272 (1a-c)). Sexual assault is defined as sexual contact with another person without that other person's consent (Criminal Code of Canada, s. 271(1a)).

To comply with the confidentiality requirements set forth by CCJS, the fourth offence category is an aggregation of three offence types. Sexual interference, invitation to sexual touching, and sexual exploitation have been combined into one category labelled child offences because they all have a victim age stipulation. Sexual interference is defined as touching, either directly or indirectly, with a part of the body or with an object for sexual purposes a person under the age of 16 years old (Criminal Code of Canada, 1985, s. 151). Invitation to sexual touching is defined as inviting, counselling, or inciting a person under the age of 16 years old to touch, directly or indirectly, the body of the person for sexual purposes (Criminal Code of Canada, 1985, s. 152). Sexual exploitation is defined as the sexual touching, directly or indirectly, of a person under the age of 16 years old by a person who is in a position of trust or authority towards the young person; with whom the young person is in a relationship of dependency; or who is in a relationship with a young person that is exploitative (Criminal Code of Canada, 1985, s. 151(1)).

Relationship of the accused to the victim. Relationship of the accused to the victim refers to the nature of the relationship between the victim of the criminal incident and the accused. This is an aggregated variable and includes three categories: family, acquaintance, and stranger. Family includes immediate family (e.g., biological siblings and non-biological siblings) and extended family (e.g., cousins). Acquaintance includes boyfriends or girlfriends, ex-

boyfriends or ex-girlfriends, previous sexual partners, friends, and neighbours. Stranger includes any victim that was completely unknown to the accused.

Data Analysis Procedure

The requested UCR Survey data was released by CCJS in a series of tables that included raw incident counts for each sexual violation category. These raw counts were inputted into a statistical database, and a series of chi-square tests were conducted using weighted frequencies. Due to the extremely low count of incidents in the aggravated sexual assault and sexual assault with a weapon categories (see Table 1), it was necessary to combine them. The violation category violent sexual assault was created and used in the analyses.

In addition to conducting omnibus chi-square tests, adjusted standardized residuals were also analyzed. All of the chi-square tests conducted had degrees of freedom greater than one, which limits the interpretability of the omnibus chi-square test. Additionally, because of the very large sample sizes, it is likely that the chi-square tests are biased towards significance (Agresti, 2002). As such, the standardized adjusted residuals are used to allow for more meaningful interpretations of the data.

Results

Summary of Results

Overall, 96 percent of all adolescents reported to police for a sexual violation across Canada between 2009 and 2011 were male. Of these male accused, 8.6 percent were under the age of 12, 41.5 percent were between 12–14 years old, and 49.8 percent were between 15–17 years old. Male accused were mostly reported to police for sexual violations against people they knew. Specifically, 63.9 percent of males were reported for offences against acquaintances, followed by 33.4 percent of males were reported for offences against family members, and only 6.1 percent of males were reported for offences

against strangers. A very small percentage of males (1.2 percent) were reported to police for a violent offence included in the violent sexual assault category.

In terms of females reported to police for sexual violations within the three-year study period, the frequency dispersion was more equal across age categories compared to males. Specifically, 27 percent of females reported to police for committing a sexual violation were under the age of 12, 38.2 percent were between 12–14 years old, and 34.7 percent were between 15–17 years old. Female accused were largely reported to police for committing offences against people they knew. Specifically, 59.5 percent of females were reported for offences against acquaintances, 40.5 percent were reported for offences against family members, and 3.6 percent were reported for offences against strangers. Female accused were also rarely reported for committing violent offences, with only 3.1 percent of female-accused violations falling within the combined violent sexual assault category.

Age Comparisons

Table 2 compares the type of sexual violation by different age groups, for male and female accused, respectively. A significant difference between age groups was found for male accused. The pattern of significant residuals shows that males under the age of 12 years old are significantly more likely to be reported to police for violations within the child offence category, whereas males between 15–17 years old are significantly less likely to be reported for violations within the child offence category. The residuals also show that male accused between 15–17 years old are significantly more likely to be reported for violations within the violent sexual assault category; however, this only accounts for 1.5 percent of all violations within that age group. No significant difference was found across age groups for different types of violations for female accused. Based on the table frequencies, regardless of age, females were predominantly reported for committing sexual assaults, followed by child offences.

Table 2: Frequencies and chi-square test of age of the accused and type of sexual violation committed by gender							
Age	<i>n</i>	Violent sexual assault % (residual)	Sexual assault % (residual)	Child offence ^a % (Adj. residual)	χ^2	<i>p</i>	ϕ_c
Male accused							
< 12	509	0.6 (-1.3)	79.8 (3.1)*	19.6 (3.6)*	19.23	.001	.06
12–14	2445	0.9 (-1.6)	84.7 (0.3)	14.4 (0.1)			
15–17	2932	1.5 (2.3)*	85.1 (1.4)	13.3 (-2.2)*			
Female accused							
< 12	70	1.4 (-0.9)	77.1 (0.9)	21.4 (-0.6)	1.66	.80	.08
12–14	99	3.0 (0.0)	71.7 (-0.4)	25.3 (0.4)			
15–17	90	4.4 (0.9)	71.1 (-0.5)	24.4 (0.1)			
<i>Note.</i> ^a includes sexual interference, invitation to sexual touching, and sexual exploitation offences *cell's adjusted residual is significant at $p < .05$ Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, Uniform Crime Reporting Survey							

Relationship Comparisons

Table 3 compares the type of relationship the accused had with the victim of the sexual violation, between age groups for males and females, respectively. A significant difference was found for male accused. The pattern of residuals shows that males under the age of 12 and males between the ages of 12–14 years old are significantly less likely to be reported for violations against strangers. Males between the ages of 12–14 years old are also significantly more likely to be reported for violations against family members. Conversely, males between the ages of 15–17 years old are significantly less likely to be reported for violations against family members, and are significantly more likely to be reported for violations against acquaintances and strangers. Overall, the pattern of results suggests that as adolescent males age, their sexual offending behaviour is more likely to extend socially outward. No significant difference was found across age groups for different relationship categories for female accused.

Table 3: Frequencies and chi-square test of the relationship between age of accused and relationship of accused to the victim by gender

Age	<i>n</i>	Family % (residual)	Acquaintance % (residual)	Stranger % (residual)	χ^2	<i>p</i>	ϕ_c
Male accused							
< 12	509	33.6 (1.0)	63.1 (0.2)	3.3 (-2.4)*	116.92	<.001	.14
12-14	2445	37.9 (8.6)*	58.5 (-5.5)*	3.6 (-5.8)*			
15-17	2932	26.2 (-9.1)*	66.1 (5.4)*	7.8 (7.0)*			
Female accused							
< 12	70	38.6 (0.1)	60.0 (0.2)	1.4 (-0.8)	7.98	.092	.18
12-14	99	46.5 (2.1)*	49.5 (-2.5)*	4.0 (1.0)			
15-17	90	28.9 (-2.3)*	68.9 (2.3)*	2.2 (-0.3)			

Note. *cell's adjusted residual is significant at $p < .05$
Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, Uniform Crime Reporting Survey

Table 4 compares the type of relationship the accused had with the victim, across the different sexual violation categories, for males and females respectively. A significant difference was found for males. The pattern of residuals shows that male accused were significantly less likely to be reported for violent sexual assaults and sexual assaults against family members. This pattern is reversed for the child offence category, whereby males are significantly more likely to be reported for child offences against family members. For females, no significant difference was found between the type of violation committed and the relationship of the accused to the victim. Based on the table frequencies, regardless of the offence type, female accused were reported for committing violations against acquaintances the most, followed by family members.

Table 4: Frequencies and chi-square test of the relationship between type of sexual offence and relationship of accused to the victim by gender							
Type of offence	<i>n</i>	Family % (residual)	Acquaintance % (residual)	Stranger % (residual)	χ^2	<i>p</i>	ϕ_c
Male accused							
Violent sexual assault	71	16.9 (-2.7)*	73.2 (1.9)	9.9 (1.5)	31.99	<.001	.07
Sexual assault	4972	30.6 (-4.0)*	63.6 (3.6)*	5.7 (0.6)			
Child offence ^a	843	39.0 (5.0)*	56.1 (-4.3)*	4.9 (-1.1)			
Female accused							
Violent sexual assault	8	50.0 (0.7)	50.0 (-0.5)	0.0 (-0.5)	2.80	.60	.10
Sexual assault	189	36.5 (-0.9)	61.4 (1.2)	4 (-1.0)			
Child offence ^a	62	41.9 (0.7)	53.2 (-1.1)	4.8 (1.2)			
<i>Note.</i> ^a includes sexual interference, invitation to sexual touching, and sexual exploitation offences *cell's adjusted residual is significant at <i>p</i> < .05 Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, Uniform Crime Reporting Survey							

Discussion

The current research findings add to the limited Canadian research base on adolescents accused of committing a sexual offence. The information presented is not available elsewhere and as such is an important first look at the nature and scope of sexual offending in terms of age, gender, and the relationship to the victim of the allegation, from a national perspective. Study findings align with previous work highlighting the relatively low-risk nature of adolescents accused of committing a sexual offence (Rotenberg, 2017). Specifically, these data (see Table 1) show a marginal number of males (1.2 percent) and females (3.1 percent) were reported to police for committing an offence that fell within the combined violent sexual assault category during the three-year study period. Previous risk assessment and recidivism work regarding male adolescents who have committed sexual offences has shown that sexual recidivism is significantly higher among adolescents who target stranger victims compared to those who target known victims (Carpentier & Proulx, 2011). Adolescents who target strangers and commit violent sexual assaults are also considered some of the highest-risk offenders, as they are more likely to reoffend sexually and violently (Carpentier &

Proulx, 2011; Hanson et al., 2014). In the current study, a very small percentage (5.8 percent) of all male-accused incidents involved a stranger victim, and only seven male individuals total were accused of a violent sexual assault against a stranger within the three-year period. These findings further highlight that high-risk offending behaviour is statistically rare when it comes to adolescent sexual offending across Canada, rather than the norm.

Findings also highlight the increasing need for police officers (or other frontline workers) to be able to appropriately assess the broad spectrum of adolescent sexual behaviour, particularly sexual behaviour between similar-aged peers. The majority of adolescents who were reported to the police over the three-year study period were investigated for a sexual offence against an acquaintance. Male accused of sexual assault were significantly more likely to target acquaintances compared to any other relationship category. Although it was not possible to examine the specific age of the victims involved in these incidents, it can be inferred that most were same-aged peers given the acquaintance category included boyfriends, girlfriends, ex-partners, previous sexual partners, and friends. This inference is consistent with other UCR Surveys and Integrated Criminal Court Survey data. For instance, Cotter and Beaupré's (2014) analysis showed that when the accused of a sexual offence was between 12 and 17 years old, the victim was most likely to also be between 12 and 17 years old. Rotenberg's (2017) examination of UCR Survey data also revealed that one in three sexual assaults reported to police involve accused and victims in the same peer group.

Finally, findings also highlight the need for police officers to be versed in the complicated family dynamics that exist when adolescent-perpetrated intra-familial sexual offending occurs. The current study found that male accused of a child offence were significantly more likely to be reported to police for committing an offence against family members compared to any other relationship group, with approximately one-third of all recorded child offence

incidents involving a family member. While adolescents accused of sexual assaults are less likely than adults to be charged (56 percent versus 73 percent, respectively; Rotenberg, 2017), the way in which the incident is handled is important in situations where both the accused and the victim are in the same family, even if the police officer chooses to use extrajudicial measures. Worley et al. (2011) highlight research that shows that parents of youth committing incest offences were likely to under-report or deny sexual abuse by their sons. The authors also emphasize the lack of research literature and attention to the dual role of mothers with juveniles who sexually offend, noting that a mother of a juvenile perpetrator is often also the mother of the victim. Worley et al. remark that parents and caregivers should be considered as secondary victims in many cases. Thus, sensitivity is crucial. Although the police will most often refer such cases to child protective services, by virtue of being agents of the criminal justice system their involvement has the potential to exacerbate the negative impact of a traumatic event if not properly handled (Alaggia, Lambert, & Regehr, 2009). As pointed out by Schulenberg and Warren (2009) in their study of police officer training in British Columbia, Canada, police officers are inadequately trained for specific youth matters; this is true even for those officers whose specialized unit is working with justice-involved youth. The authors point out that police training should include sensitivity to developmental differences when interviewing youth and identifying and addressing issues such as child abuse, mental health, and fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASD). Based upon the findings from this study, it would be highly important for police training to also focus on the nature of the offence of sexual assault within the family sphere, and that it needs to be understood differently than other kinds of offences due to the complexity of this offence and the sometimes long-term nature of intra-familial sexual abuse. As Rotenberg (2017) notes, long-term incidents (i.e., spanning longer than a one-week period) of sexual abuse are disproportionately experienced by children. Thus, in order for the accused and the victims to receive appropriate access to justice, be that through formal dispositions or informal extrajudicial measures, police officers and frontline workers

must be sensitive to the difficulties relating to disclosures of sexual assault, the often intimate relationship between the accused and the victim, and the sometimes long-term nature of the abuse.

Limitations

The use of UCR Survey data limits the interpretability of the study findings. It is difficult to make comparisons between the current data and results from other sectors of the criminal justice system because there is no single unit of count across sectors. It is also possible that the actual charges laid are different from the most serious offence by which police-reported incidents are categorized. For example, an adolescent who is originally reported to police for committing an aggravated sexual assault may end up being officially charged with sexual assault, which would create a discrepancy between UCR Survey data and court data. The UCR Survey data used in the current study also only included incidents involving a single accused and a single victim, and thus likely provides an underestimation of the total number of adolescents reported to police for a sexual offence. Finally, because of confidentiality restrictions, we were required to collapse three years' worth of UCR Survey data, which limits any possible longitudinal or trend analyses. Despite these limitations, UCR Survey data were well-suited for the study's purposes, since it provides a broad scope view of Canadian adolescent contact with the criminal justice system as a result of being reported to police for a sexual offence.

Conclusions

The current study highlights that the nature of adolescent sexual offending in Canada varies based upon the gender of the accused, the age of the accused, and the relationship between the accused and the victim. Given that such cases often come to the attention of the police first, the role of individual police officers in providing access to justice for the accused and the victim is significant. For example, police officers must make critical decisions including whether to refer

the case to child protection services, and/or whether to divert the accused and apply extrajudicial measures as per the Youth Criminal Justice Act (2002). Further, while police officers typically respond to incidents where the victim–accused boundary is clearly outlined, in certain incidents, such as intimate partner violence, the victim–accused boundary is obfuscated by complicated interpersonal dynamics. The current study findings indicate incidents of sexual assault involving adolescents often involve blurred victim–accused boundaries. As such, findings support the need for specialized training for responding police officers, similar to that received by police officers regarding intimate partner violence. This training must include how to effectively and proportionally respond to the accused while simultaneously appropriately responding to the victims’ and families’ needs.

The current findings also support the idea that police training needs to be youth-focused and address the complexity of the offence of sexual assault, including training related to new forms of sexual offences that often involve youth, such as non-consensual sharing of images among youth (Dodge & Spencer, 2018). And in addition to training, specialized response units and/or the creation of independent units outside of the institution of policing may be a useful model for police services to adopt for responding to sexual assault cases involving adolescents. An example of this model is the Child Advocacy Unit (CAU) of the Toronto Police Service, which is a cross-sector unit including child protection workers, a child psychologist, social workers, and police officers. The CAU handles cases of sexual assault involving adolescent accused and has an internal referral process that expedites cases to outside agencies to deal with the complexities of these incidents. The CAU in Toronto is one of five similar centres across Canada, all of which are located within some of Canada’s larger and more resourced cities. Therefore, this model is not necessarily accessible to rural police services or smaller and/or less-resourced police services. In addition, the CAU emphasizes supporting victims of sexual abuse and their families (www.torontopolice.on.ca/sexcrimes/cyac.php), which contributes to

the idea that access to justice, access to services, and access to professional support is a priority for victims of sexual offending and their families, but not necessarily for the accused themselves. While the importance of supporting victims of sexual assault cannot be understated, in the context of the Youth Criminal Justice Act (2002), adolescents accused of criminal offence have an equal right to access to justice and support. It is therefore imperative that police encounters involving adolescents accused of a sexual offence are sensitive and informed about the nature of adolescent sexual offending. Broad police training may be an appropriate strategy for ensuring all police officers are equipped to appropriately and effectively respond to the unique challenges of cases involving adolescents accused of a sexual offence.

Providing an appropriate response to adolescents who are accused of sexual offending is vital and unique in relation to other functions of the youth justice system because of issues related to delayed disclosure, the stigma associated with sexual offending, the long-term nature of this offence, the complicated family dynamics that can surface, and the general vulnerability of the adolescents involved. The current study provides a first step toward furthering the discussion around a measured and proportionate response to adolescent sexual offending in Canada.

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