



# Serial Sex Offender Research

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# Agenda

- Current state of research on serial offenders
- Methodology
- Data
- Discussion
- Recommendations for changes in practice

# Current research

- Conflicting rates of same-crime recidivism among sexual offenders
  - Due in part to how sexual assaults are reported, investigated, and prosecuted
- Research design of previous studies
  - Majority focus on stranger assault against adult women only
  - Based on either convictions (usually linked through MO or confession) or on self-disclosure by perpetrators within or outside the criminal justice system

# Serials and Cross-overs

- Previous research -- very difficult to predict just from victim report, crime scene whether offender is serial offender or not
- Investigation, charging decisions, and post-release management (Sexual Offender Registry) usually based on belief that sexual offenders specialize (against children, or women, or strangers)
- Other areas with promising research on profiling/MO
  - Geographic profiling (hunting grounds & rational choice)

# Novel methodology

**The purpose of this study is to explore how individuals who have been linked via DNA commit sexual offenses without the prism of self-reporting or official linkages distorting, or in some cases, inventing, a coherent narrative.**

- Using DNA collected at the time of the assault (more representative of all sexual assaults) and augmented by official documentation, draw lines between otherwise “unconnected” cases

# Data Sources

- N=433 SAKs (e.g., victims) from Prosecutor's Office
  - Initial police reports
  - Task Force investigative reports
  - Medical records (details not in police report, i.e., condom used, victim's relationship to offender, etc.)
  - Lab reports
  - Prosecutorial outcomes
- ~500 variables about victim, offender, sexual assault, investigation (then and now), prosecution (then and now)
- What's unique about these data

# Sampling

- Cases that are currently prosecutable – those that were never successfully prosecuted but now have either resulted in an indictment (79%) or closed due to insufficient evidence (21%) – as of August 2015
- ~80% are between 1993 and 1999, prioritization based on SOL
- ~80% of sample consists of sexual assaults committed by strangers, causal/recent acquaintances

# Serial sex offender defined

- A person identified through DNA on a sexual assault kit AND/OR
  - Linked to at least one other kit
  - At least one other arrest for sexual assault (e.g., rape) in criminal history
- Early linkage (before conviction) important to avoid missing cases pled down or not thoroughly investigated
- A note about nonserial offenders



# Findings\*: serials vs. non-serials

## **Serials**

- More frequently strangers to victims
- More frequently offend outside/in a vehicle
- More likely to use a weapon or use threats
- More likely to kidnap

## **Non-serials**

- More frequently assaulted current/former intimate partners
- More frequently involved slapping/punching

\*statistically significant results discussed

# Data for analysis of crossover offending (AKA victim choice polymorpha, versatility, sexual polymorphism)

- Sample: only those with 1 or more linked SAKs in “backlog”
- Why: provided us the details of multiple assaults
- N=53 offenders covering 143 sexual assaults, mean # of assaults=2.7; range 2-7

# Those with 1+ linked SAKs

- Mean age first identified: 30.0 years old
- Mean age last identified: 34.7 years old
- Truncated ages for offenders
  - Young offender: 14 and 15 years old (n=2 assaults)
  - Mature: 48 and 57 years old (n=7 assaults)

# Relationship crossover

- Strangers only (56.6%)
- Nonstranger victims only (15.1%)
- Both types of victims (28.3%)
- *Thus, over 1/3 of these serials assaulted a stranger (defined as someone completely unknown to the victim) and a nonstranger*

# Examples

- Offender #1184: 2 women in separate offenses. 1 was his 13-year-old "girlfriend" (he was 20 years old), MO in that sexual assault involved using manipulation. Other, he vaginally, orally, and anally penetrated (stranger), kept gun to her head during entire assault
- Offender #1095: 2 women in separate incidences, 1 stranger, 1 nonstranger. Stranger was held captive in third-party's home for 3 days.

# Age crossover

- Age difference between victim and offender was **largest** when victim and offender did **NOT** know each other and the **smallest** when they knew each other.

# Examples

- Offender #92: 1 (stranger) who was 19 years older than him and 1 (stranger) who was 12 years younger
- Offender #98: 1 (stranger) who was 7 years older than him and 1 (stranger) who was 21 years younger

# Gender crossover

- Sample included only 4 male victims, so analysis of gender crossover is limited
- 2 offenders assaulted females and males, 3<sup>rd</sup> assaulted 2 juvenile males



# Examples

- Offender #3000: 1 of 4 offenders involved in sexual assault of 13-year-old girl at a party (a stranger) – 2 months later his 3 year-old son
- Offender #5: 3 sexual assaults, 2 females in separate incidences and in another incident, a 29-year-old sleeping male in a group home

# Consistency of MOs; Examples

- *Offenders who were most consistent in their MOs knew their victims.*
- **Examples**
  - Offender #88: 3 sexual assaults within 2 years; all he knew (friend, neighbor, relative); kept similar MO in all 3—attacked while they slept, didn't use force or a weapon
  - Offender #97: 2 women he knew, 3 months apart; similar MO—hanging out with women he casually knew as part of a larger group, got victims alone; dragged and held down; neither involved a weapon
  - Offender #154: 2 women met while working at bus station; victims agreed to drink with/date; took victims to his house and sexually assaulted them

# Discussion

- Serial offenders are more frequent than commonly thought
- Differences between serials and nonserials might be more of a function of how they know the victim – more research is needed
- MOs can be misleading, but some aspects – such as time or location of first approach – can remain relatively stable (crime linkage research)

# Undercount: What about the ones we don't know about?

- Data suggests only capturing a small portion of serials' sexual assaults
- Because....
  - Most are from early-to-mid 1990s (prioritization, statute of limitations)
  - Only have data on sexual assaults in Cuyahoga County
  - Only have data on reported sexual assaults that included never-tested SAKs
  - Only have cases that were never successfully prosecuted but now either indicted or closed due to insufficient evidence

# Recommendations for practitioners

- Treat every sexual assault as a possible serial case
- Shift focus from victim to offender to identify other possible victims
- If a SAK was collected, even in cases of “he said/she said,” test the evidence in a timely manner and enter results into CODIS
- More resources and training for responding officers and investigators to thoroughly follow up on all leads, including DNA

# Questions?

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