

Group Sex Offending by Juveniles

Coercive Sex as a Group Activity

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ABSTRACT

We study sex offences carried out by groups of juveniles, focusing on offender characteristics and the interaction patterns within offender groups and between offenders and victims. Using reconstructions of offences from court files as well as information retrieved from personality screenings, we conclude that perpetrators generally had below-average intelligence, and otherwise a fairly average personality profile. Group size was on average four. Offences were generally not planned as such. In some cases, offenders had agreed to have sex with a victim, although without discussing how to arrange that. In other cases, offenders seemed to know what was going to happen without discussing it beforehand. In one-third of the groups, a leader orchestrated the offence during the perpetration. The group either was instrumental or functioned as a public to witness the debasement of the victim. The offence itself is often regarded as entertainment. In most offence situations at least one vaginal rape took place. In many cases the victim was threatened, even after completion of the offence.

KEY WORDS

Group Offending / Group Sex Offending / Juvenile Sex Offending.

Introduction

Group offences comprise a sizeable share of all juvenile offences, and juvenile sex offending in all likelihood often occurs in a group context. Exact figures are hard to come by, however. For the Netherlands, they can be estimated from registrations during the past decade at the Central Prosecutor's Office, which show that one out of three registrations of juveniles for a sex offence had been committed within a group. This suggests that at present a sizeable share of all sex offences by juveniles are committed in a group. Nevertheless, it is notable that research carried out to date into juvenile sex offending has more or less failed to address the group nature of juvenile sex offending.

One reason for this could be that (juvenile) group sex offending is a fairly recent phenomenon. However, although the literature is sparse, it appears that this is not the case. Smith's *Encyclopedia of rape* (2004) mentions that in Renaissance Florence one in three heterosexual rapes was a group rape. It is known that group rapes have occurred often, not just in recent conflicts such as those in Rwanda and Darfur, but also in more temporally distant wars and conflicts. For the Netherlands, Drukker (1937) reported for the years 1911–30 that 30 percent of sexual assaults by juveniles had been committed in a group. For Moscow, Oseretzky (1929) reported that 80 percent of all rapes by juveniles in 1925 and 1926 were committed in a group. For Berlin, Hartmann (1964) reports that, between 1958 and 1964, on average 11 percent of all cleared cases of rape were group rapes by juveniles.

Within typologies of juvenile sex offenders (O'Brien and Bera 1986), group offenders are treated as a separate type. Other types of juvenile sex offender are differentiated within the literature on the basis of the victim's age, the offender's criminal career (and particularly whether the offender can be classified as specializing in sex offences), or the type of sex offence ('hands on' or 'hands off', rape or indecent assault). However, the single factor that distinguishes a group sex offender from other sex offenders is the group nature of the offence: the offence may entail rape or assault or even a hands-off offence; victims may be children or peers.

Group sex offending by juveniles can be seen as a combination of two types of delinquency: delinquency in a group context and sex offending. As a result, in attempting to explain juvenile group sex offending, we could use theoretical insights into group delinquency and theories on sex offending. Our analysis will, therefore, exploit criminological insights into group offending in the broader sense, as well as insights into decision-making processes, mutual influences and interactions between offenders.

We shall first briefly discuss the scientific literature on group sex offending by juveniles and the literature on (juvenile) group delinquency. We will then use background information collected from personality test files, as well as reconstructions from court files of group sex offences, to attempt to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the characteristics of juvenile group sex offenders, their offender groups, their offences and their victims?
2. What patterns of interaction are evident between offenders and between offenders and victims, during, before and after the offence?

Literature

Group sex offenders, group sex offences and victims

O'Brien and Bera (1986) describe the juvenile group sex offender as aged between 14–18 years and coming from a complete family. His victims are girls of his own age. In general, group sex offenders are more likely to be followers than leaders. They 'want to belong', hold stereotypical views on the relationship between men and women, and have a strong tendency to shift responsibility for events to co-offenders and/or victims.

Just as for delinquent behaviour in general, ethnic minority youth are over-represented among juvenile group sex offenders. De Wree (2004), in her study using court files from Brussels, finds that all offenders were of either Congolese or Moroccan descent, two large immigrant groups in Belgium. Bijleveld and Hendriks (2003) do not find a particular over-representation of certain ethnic minority groups in their sample, although immigrants of Moroccan descent are prominent as juvenile group sex offenders in official registrations in the Netherlands. Bijleveld and Hendriks also find that juvenile group sex offenders are less likely than solo offenders to be victims of sexual abuse, and that more solo offenders have committed sex offences previously. At the same time, juvenile group sex offenders are younger than solo sex offenders. The two types of juvenile sex offender do not differ in terms of family situation, residential situation, education or previous non-sexual delinquency. On average, the personality structure of juvenile group sex offenders tends to be fairly average (Bijleveld and Hendriks 2003), a finding underscored by De Wree (2004), who reports that group sex offenders are less likely than solo sex offenders to have a deviant personality structure. She also shows how these offenders often have a combination of socioeconomic problems, a problematic school career and dim employment prospects. In a number of older studies, we see basically the same profile: Parrot and Guitton (1963) report that group sex offenders in Bordeaux

have below-average intelligence and score high on impulsivity. Phillip (1962) underscores the below-average intelligence level of group sex offenders, and furthermore reports that these juvenile offenders often come from incomplete families. Hartmann (1964) mentions that offenders have often been neglected.

Bijleveld and Hendriks (2003) report that the group sex offence is likely to be a serious one in a qualitative sense: 88 percent of the group offences studied in their research consisted of at least one rape (compared with 55 percent of sex offences committed by a single offender); De Wree (2004) and Porter and Alison (2006) also report the prominence of rape in these sex offences. Group sex offending is identified by De Wree as a predominantly urban phenomenon. Groups are formed spontaneously (Phillip 1962) and may either lack a clear hierarchical structure (Parrot and Guitton 1963) or be so hierarchical that the group hierarchy determines the order of abuse of the victim (Hartmann 1964).

Bijleveld and Hendriks (2003) describe the secondary and 'coincidental' role of the sexual element in group rapes. Violence, the exercise of collective power and a mutual power struggle are the central elements of this type of offence. The public humiliation of women is seen as an important objective of group rapes, a way for men to demonstrate their shared dominance. A similar function, that of the elevation of masculinity and group bonding, has been ascribed to wartime group rape (Smith 2004: 270). The sexual aspect of the crime becomes the means for the interaction of male camaraderie and a way of forming relationships or establishing competition. De Wree (2004) presents virtually the same aspects: she stresses the sense of power and dominance, which may cause the rape to be extremely violent in nature and the victim to be debased. Parrot and Guitton (1963) report that the offence is referred to as 'masturbating together into the belly of the sausage', where sausage (*saucisson*) is how these offenders referred to the victim. De Wree mentions that victims are generally known to the offenders. This was also reported by Phillip (1962); Parrot and Guitton (1963) mention that victims have often had sexual relations previously with one of the offenders.

Excitement and adventure are also mentioned as motives in the literature (see, e.g., Leuw 1985; Scully and Marolla 1985), as is boredom (Parrot and Guitton 1963). Findings on the degree of violence used during group sex offences are contradictory (Gidycz and Koss 1990; Boelrijk 1997; De Wree 2004; Porter and Alison 2006). Weapon use, including for harming the victim, is frequently reported for offenders in the USA (Porter and Alison 2006), but less frequently or even rarely elsewhere (Van Wijk et al. 2001; Boelrijk 1997; Porter and Alison 2006). Hartmann (1964) mentions that, in addition to being aggressive, group sex offences are regressive, in the sense that they are also voyeuristic and exhibitionistic.

Sanday (1990) studied the characteristics and customs that may be linked to gang rape of women by the members of one US 'fraternity' for male students. The fraternity culture places men higher in the social order than women. Men are seen as naturally aggressive, whereas women are passive creatures who may be humiliated. Having (many) sexual contacts, discussing these and allowing each other to watch one's sexual activities are seen as normal pastimes, constituting a bonding factor between members of the fraternity. The members discuss with each other how a girl might be persuaded to have sex, often using the ploys of getting her drunk and persistently trying to talk her into having sex. The boys also have terms for this, such as 'working a yes out'.

All in all, the juvenile group sex offender emerges from the literature as a fairly run-of-the-mill kind of juvenile offender, often from a non-ethnic background, urban, with little schooling and a fairly average personality structure. His offences are committed less for the sexual element than for male camaraderie and dominance over, and humiliation of, women.

Group delinquency

The general literature on group delinquency reveals that most co-offending involves groups of two to three people (Reiss and Farrington 1991; Weerman 2003; Sarnecki 1990). Offending groups tend to be subgroups of larger networks and the offences are committed in groups with a flexible composition, which can vary by type of offence (see, among others, Sarnecki 1990; Warr 1996). The youths in offending groups tend to be young. As they grow older, they commit fewer and fewer offences in a group context (Reiss and Farrington 1991; Weerman 2003). The instigator role, usually played by a relatively older boy within the group, and the joiner role can alternate as youths move between different offender groups (Warr 1996). Such characteristics make it difficult to describe group criminality in an unambiguous way. Group crime is characterized by dynamism, variability and complexity (Weerman 2003).

Weerman (2003) describes three fundamental explanatory perspectives for co-offending. According to the *group explanation* of co-offending, group influences stimulate criminal behaviour. Individuals participate in the group's criminal behaviour through social learning processes or by a transfer of criminal definitions. They receive group rewards in the process, or submit to group pressure or group force. According to the *selection explanation* of co-offending, offenders associate selectively with co-offenders on the basis of common characteristics. Criminal behaviour is the outcome of a combination of individual characteristics. Co-offending is a by-product of social selection, since offenders already spend time with each other and take

opportunities to commit an offence. The *instrumental explanation* of co-offending views readiness for crime as the outcome of costs weighed against benefits (advantages against disadvantages). Co-offending may be more productive than individual offending, perhaps by virtue of being easier, better or less risky.

None of the explanatory perspectives is capable of explaining fully the three derived 'general' characteristics of co-offending (variability, dynamism and complexity). To address this problem, Weerman (2003) combines the three theories and transforms them to create a theory based on *social exchange*. This theory states that one type of reward can be exchanged for a different type of reward. Co-offenders offer each other help and support in carrying out their offence and thereby exchange services. They may offer each other material and immaterial goods in exchange. Five categories of exchange goods can be identified: services (help with or participation in an offence), money/goods, appreciation, acceptance and information. Different types of co-offending are associated with different combinations of exchange goods and different relationships between co-offenders.

Warr (2002) describes a number of mechanisms that exist within juvenile groups. These mechanisms may greatly influence members' (criminal) activities. The fear of being ridiculed by fellow group members, a desire for status, loyalty to the group and its members, the anonymity and shared responsibility offered by the group, and the development of alternative moral codes can bring young people to break the law, which they would never do individually and which they sometimes morally reject.

In general, there is much variation in the planning and execution of offences in a group context. Co-offenders may already have established contact before the offence, but they may also develop the idea together. Different studies have shown that for many group offences little preparation is done in advance (see, e.g., Erez 1987; Warr 2002). Most offender groups appear to have one group member who exerts a great deal of influence over the decision of all group members to commit an offence (Hochstetler 2001; Warr 2002). In certain situations, instigators of group offending are known to keep track of opportunities for committing an offence, recommend to fellow group members that an offence be perpetrated, and bring along alcohol, drugs, tools and/or weapons when an offence is committed (Cromwell et al. 1991; Wright and Decker 1994; Canter and Alison 2000). Less informed offenders often only realize what is about to happen just before the offence is actually committed. This can cause them to feel that their only option is to co-offend (Katz 1988; Hochstetler 2001).

Research carried out by Hochstetler (2001) into the initiation and execution of offences by groups of robbers and burglars revealed three patterns of interaction between group members.

Incremental signalling. Group members approach each other by means of verbal and non-verbal expressions that become increasingly clearer and open to different interpretations. Without explicit mention of the offence, they sense whether other group members recognize the same opportunities for committing an offence and whether they are ready and willing to act. Conversations are short, agreement is frequently unspoken and information about risks is sometimes not divulged. Positive and provocative language is also used to build confidence. Some group members realize only at the last minute that an offence is about to be committed.

Target convergence. The second pattern of interaction is evident in situations where offenders have virtually no communication with each other. An abrupt gesture, a nod or a few words suffice for the group to switch to the offence. These are offence-sensitive situations, which arise unexpectedly. One youth may kick a passer-by and the rest of the group then starts to kick the person as well, without any prior verbal communication.

Establishing identity. Members of a criminal group know who has experience of which type of offence. An offence is committed together once, and the group subsequently always commits that type of offence. On the basis of these experiences, the group assumes a certain identity that fits with the type of offence that they commit. The group now commits offences as if it were self-evident, with no need for discussion.

Summarizing, several fairly different motives for co-offending emerge from the literature. Also, the processes by which a group offence materializes may vary. It is unknown to what extent these explanations apply to group sex offending by juveniles. In the following we will investigate this.

Research methods

Sample

In the Netherlands, the age of criminal responsibility is 12; special juvenile criminal law applies to juvenile offenders up to the age of 17, although where an older offender's development clearly lags behind, juvenile law may still be applied; the reverse may also apply in very severe cases, where the more severe punishments that are possible under ordinary criminal law are deemed necessary.

All juveniles who had undergone personality screening for at least one group sex offence at FORA¹ between 1993 and 2001 ($N=42$) constituted

¹ FORA is an independent Dutch organization that carries out diagnostic forensic research, including personality testing of juvenile defendants.

the basis for our sample.² Female offenders were excluded. Even though 70 percent of offenders ($N=33$) denied parts of the offence, or their own share in the offence, juveniles were included in our sample only if they had either confessed or been convicted, so that there could be no doubt about their participation. From now on, these juveniles will therefore be called 'offenders'.

In addition, the court files of all 42 offenders were analysed. The offenders had offended within a total of 25 different 'offender groups'. We refer to an offender group if two or more people committed the sex offence. One offender group was excluded from further analysis because the court files contained too little information for analysis. In addition to information on the 42 offenders who had undergone personality testing, the various court files also contained (often more limited) personal information on the various co-offenders. It is, however, not always known whether the other co-offenders confessed and/or were convicted. Somewhat tentatively, however, we refer to them also as co-offenders. These co-offenders were sometimes older than 17 or younger than 12. The number of offenders and co-offenders involved in the group sex offences studied totalled 91.

The 24 offender groups committed the group sex offences in varying 'situations'. We define a situation as a period within which, in a series of more or less continuous acts, one or more victims are sexually abused by one or more different offenders, who interact with each other during the acts. On occasion, the same victims were assaulted in different situations by differently composed groups of offenders.

Analysis of personality screenings and court files

Details of offences and offenders were sourced from the personality screenings as well as from the court files. Personality files were scored using a standard questionnaire (see Bijleveld and Hendriks 2003). The personality screenings had been requested by either the prosecutor or the judge as part of criminal proceedings. Such personality screenings in the Netherlands are conducted by trained professionals and entail several interviews with the juvenile defendant, his parents or caregivers, his school as well as any other relevant persons. Personality assessments are carried out with standardized validated instruments such as the Raven or ATL. Scores on personality variables are thus always normed to the population (in this case to the juvenile population). For details, see Bijleveld and Hendriks (2003).

² Parts of this sample were analysed in the Bijleveld and Hendriks (2003) article.

The information contained within the court files was coded using a topic list. The information here was of varying quality and level of detail. All court files included a summary from the personality test and/or a study by the Dutch Child Protection Council. In addition, all court records studied contained an indictment, which incorporated statements made by suspects, victims and any witnesses. In addition to retrieving background information about co-offenders and victims, the court files were also analysed to assess the nature and number of offences.

Finally, we reconstructed each offence situation from the court files. Our aim was to develop the most probable chronological scenario of events for each situation. In assembling the reconstructions, we noted as factually as possible all behaviour and communication shortly before, during and shortly after the offence. Clearly not all offence situations could be reconstructed to the same level of detail: many situations lacked clarity and some statements contradicted each other on certain points. If no plausible reconstruction of the components of a situation could be developed, the situation or (parts of it) was classified as ‘unclear’ and left out of further consideration. Cited text was copied verbatim.

Variables

A range of variables was used to describe the offenders. We describe the groups of offenders within four domains: demographic characteristics (age, ethnicity); personality traits (intelligence level, impulsiveness, suggestibility); family and school (family situation, truancy, educational level); and relationships with peers (quality of relationships, bullying behaviour, being a victim of bullying). Not all personality variables were known for all 42 boys studied. Information on the additional 49 co-offenders retrieved from the court files was almost always limited: ethnicity and age were often reported, but personality traits, for instance, were almost always unavailable. We report on the prevalence of the characteristics of offenders, victims and situations using averages and frequency counts.

Results

Quantitative description of offenders, offender groups, victims and offences

In the description of offender, victim and offence characteristics below, our calculations are based on varying numbers or different levels. In each case, therefore, we give the numbers upon which the percentages are calculated. Thus, for instance, if we report that ‘40 percent of offenders had property

X ($N=60$), this means that, out of 60 valid measurements, 40 percent or 24 respondents had property X.

Offenders

Sociodemographic characteristics

The age of 75 offenders is known. Five offenders were under 12 years old at the time of their (first) offence, and four offenders were over 18 years old. The age range was from 9 to 36 years. The average age of the 66 offenders who were aged between 12–18 years at the time of the offence was 14. Sixty-five percent ($N=65$) of the offenders were from ethnic minorities. Given that one in eight juveniles in the Netherlands is of non-ethnic Dutch descent (Zeijl et al. 2003), this is clearly an over-representation. However, almost one in two juvenile offenders apprehended by the Dutch police is of non-ethnic Dutch descent (Blom et al. 2005), so this is a less deviant ethnic profile for a group of juvenile offenders. Offenders from the Dutch Antilles were over-represented within this group: one-third of all offenders were of Antillean descent, 10 percent were of Surinamese descent and 8 percent were of Moroccan descent.

Personality characteristics

The offenders studied generally had low intelligence scores ($N=33$): 64 percent scored low on average and 30 percent was categorized as retarded. Offenders were judged to be average in terms of impulsiveness ($N=21$), neuroticism ($N=22$), extraversion ($N=22$) and sensation-seeking ($N=11$). Offenders had high scores on suggestibility ($N=11$), although the small numbers mean that this finding should be interpreted with some caution. The moral development of over 80 percent ($N=21$) was judged to have gaps or to be highly inadequate. One in three offenders was diagnosed with some form of psychopathology ($N=23$), usually a behavioural disorder. The boys' self-image was generally judged to be normal or positive ($N=24$); a negative self-image was reported for four boys.

Other characteristics

The biological parents of three in five of the offenders had separated ($N=36$). Given that one in six children in the Netherlands lives in a single-parent household and that one in three marriages ends in divorce (Bijleveld and Smit 2006), this appears clearly elevated. Unemployment within the family had been experienced by 44 percent of the boys ($N=25$); with unemployment in the Netherlands varying between 12 and 2 percent since 1980,

this figure appears elevated as well. Over one-third of the boys had been neglected ($N=29$), and the same proportion had been physically abused ($N=28$). Sexual abuse was rare; two boys were known to have been sexually abused ($N=25$). All but two of the offenders were being schooled at a low educational level (94 percent; $N=35$): half of the offenders were receiving special education (40 percent) or attending 'IVBO'³ (11 percent). Two boys were still attending primary school at the time of the offence. In the Netherlands, approximately 60 percent of juveniles follow lower-level secondary school; approximately 5 percent follow some form of special secondary education (Blom et al. 2004). The group studied here appears to perform relatively badly in school, in line with their comparatively low intelligence level. Half of the offenders reported a moderate to poor level of contact with peers ($N=28$); surveys in the Netherlands (Zeijl et al. 2003) have shown that, for a representative sample of 12–18-year-old juveniles, this figure would be approximately one in seven respondents, and as such the group studied here appears to have relatively unsatisfactory social relations with peers. One-third of the offenders claimed to have been bullied or harassed to a greater or lesser extent at school ($N=28$); given that 8 percent of secondary school students in the Netherlands report having been bullied,⁴ this appears elevated as well.

Offender groups

The average size of the offender groups was four boys. The smallest group consisted of two offenders and the largest consisted of eight offenders. If offences were committed in several different situations, the composition of the group would often change. A small network of offenders appeared then to exist, who sexually abused the same victim or different victims in groups of varying composition.

Offender groups were relatively homogeneous in terms of ethnicity. The offenders within a single offender group were, with one exception, always acquaintances ($N=42$). The exception was an offender who committed his offences with 'friends of friends'. Most offenders knew one or more co-offenders from their neighbourhood (39 percent). After this, offenders either knew each other from school (12 percent) or were relatives (12 percent).

³ *Individueel Voorbereidend Beroepsonderwijs*, or individual preparatory vocational education. This form of education is designed for pupils aged 12–16 years who need a great deal of support and individual attention.

⁴ URL (accessed 2 March 2006): <http://www.pestweb.nl>.

Over two-thirds of the offender groups (71 percent; 17 offender groups) assaulted one victim. Seven offender groups (29 percent) assaulted two or more victims, with one group assaulting four victims. All but one offender groups assaulted female victims.⁵

Victims

In total, 31 victims were assaulted. Their average age was 13 ($N=23$). Four victims (17 percent) were under 12 years old, and two victims (9 percent) were 16 years old or older; the range was 8–20 years. A quarter of the victims were of non-ethnic Dutch descent ($N=27$). When offender groups that consisted (partly) of non-ethnic Dutch offenders assaulted a victim, the victim tended to have a different ethnic background from that of the offenders. Two offender groups assaulted unknown girls whom they had encountered in the street or at a mutual female friend's house. Otherwise, all groups assaulted only victims whom they knew. For a number of these girls, the offenders seemed to form the only social network in their neighbourhood.

Offences

The 24 offender groups committed offences in 47 different situations. The majority (63 percent) of the offender groups committed one or more group sex offences in a single situation, although the victim in this situation may have been assaulted several times and by several different offenders, making for several offences. One-third of the offender groups committed offences in several situations. The maximum number of situations was six, found with two offender groups.

The group sex offences generally involved rapes: 92 percent of the offender groups raped the victim at least once, in at least one situation. Some victims were repeatedly raped in more than one situation, by several different offenders. One group of offenders, for instance, raped their first victim in four situations and their second victim in one situation. The first victim was raped three, five, four and eight times in the respective situations – 20 times in total; the second victim was raped three times.

The offender groups that assaulted their victim(s) in several situations did not rape the victim in every situation. Also, not every offender within an offender group would always rape the victim. Some offenders would only grope the victim or hold her down. Offenders' roles (raping or holding down)

⁵ Hereafter, we refer to the victim as 'she', although a male victim was assaulted in one situation.

may differ from one situation to the next. If an offender only held the victim in one situation, he would usually rape the victim in a subsequent situation.

Most offender groups assaulted their victim in one of the offender's homes (38 percent) or outside (29 percent). The other offender groups committed their offences in varying locations: at the swimming pool or at school, in toilet cubicles in semi-public places, huts, basement storerooms and lifts.

Interaction between offenders and between offenders and victims

One offender group's offence situations were omitted from the analyses of interaction patterns because, in all but one doubtful case, no coercion was used. The victim, who was under 12, initiated the sexual contact, but because of her age this was classified as a sex offence.

Before the offence situation

Offender groups prepared the sexual assault in different ways. In 33 of the 41 situations analysed, the offenders spoke about sex with each other or with the victim before the actual assault (touching, undressing, etc.) began. The offenders told each other that they wanted to have sex or asked for condoms; 11 offender groups actually agreed before the start of the offence that they were going to assault a particular victim. Taking all offender groups together, three patterns of interaction can be distinguished in respect of 'making an agreement'.

The first interaction pattern involves actual agreements. This pattern is evident in some form within 11 offender groups: before the start of the offence, the offenders discussed their intent/desire to have sex with the victim or a victim. These cases therefore show clear evidence of planning. Even if the offenders were not necessarily planning sexual assault, they were planning sexual contact. The offenders did not discuss with each other, or not in detail, how they were going to arrange to have sex with the victim. In this regard, this interaction pattern has characteristics of 'incremental signalling', as described by Hochstetler (2001): the offence is not explicitly mentioned but it is indicated. Seven offender groups did discuss in at least one of the situations the venue where they wanted to have sex with the victim. Six offender groups took their victim to a different venue from where they met her, for instance from the train station to someone's home, or from the street to a multi-storey car park. One offender group agreed to assault the girl at a swimming pool, because the offenders knew that she would be there; in this case, the offenders also decided the order in which they would have sex with the girl. The offenders refer to this as 'ploughing', taking turns to have

sex with a girl. This is one of the few cases in which the assault was very explicitly planned in advance.

Six of the offender groups that had agreed to have sex with a girl before the start of at least one offence had committed group sex offences in several situations. These offences were usually with the same victim, though in one case the offence involved a small group of girls. These offender groups appeared to arrive at the situation that having sex with the victims became self-evident. Their interaction pattern therefore bears characteristics of 'establishing identity', as described by Hochstetler, since the group commits the offence as if it was obvious they would do so.

One offender group deviates somewhat from the interaction pattern described. These offenders did not directly discuss having sexual contact with the victim. They repeatedly asked the victim, in each other's presence, whether she would have sex with them. When the girl kept saying 'no', the boys started to speak with each other in a language that the girl could not understand – what they actually said to each other is unknown – and then immediately started to assault her. This could indicate that plans were made shortly before the offence.

The offender groups that made plans often did this when they happened to meet their victim in the street, or when one of the offenders had arranged to meet the offender, perhaps in their home. Only when the offenders encountered the victim were plans actually made for having sexual relations. Two offender groups talked about having sex with unknown girls after meeting the girls in the street or at a mutual friend's house.

The second interaction pattern does not involve prior agreements; offenders seem to know what is going to happen. We find this pattern in eight offender groups. As becomes apparent from the statements and interactions to and fro, several offenders within the group knew that the assault was going to take place and that at least one boy would have sex with the victim. Often one offender or a number of offenders had told either the victim or a co-offender that they wanted to have sex with the victim. So these interactions do not entail more than a single remark. This pattern therefore seems to satisfy one of the conditions of 'target convergence', as described by Hochstetler (2001): only a few words or a small gesture are needed to instigate the offence.

Three of these offender groups did not explicitly discuss sex with each other or with the victim, but again the co-offenders seemed to know what was going to happen; some of the co-offenders explained this in their statements. Co-offenders seemed to pick up signals from the situation, enabling them to infer what was imminent.

One or more offenders from four offender groups indicated indirectly before the start of the offence that they wanted to have sex with the victim.

For instance, one offender asked group members for condoms, one or more boys in two of the groups exclaimed that they wanted to have sex with the victim, and an offender from the fourth group told another offender that he had just groped the victim. No mention was made to each other that the offenders wanted to have sex with the victim, but co-offenders understood this clearly from what was said. The message reached them indirectly.

When this interaction pattern applies, the victim is usually alone with offenders, usually in one of the offenders' homes. Often she has been invited there by one of the offenders, with the intention of having sex with one offender or to socialize without any apparent intention of having sex. The victim has therefore trustingly put herself in a situation that with hindsight can be seen as risky. This is another characteristic of target convergence (Hochstetler 2001): this is an offence-sensitive situation and offenders exploit the easy opportunity they have created. One offender group was the exception: they walked along the street with their victim and then pulled her into a basement storeroom.

When the third interaction pattern applies, the offender group makes no plans and offenders do not know what is going to happen. This pattern is rare. Only one offender group apparently spontaneously committed an offence. Both offenders started to touch the victim, without having discussed this. When the sexual assault of the victim proved unsuccessful, they then planned where they would assault her further and who could use the only condom available. The victim was an acquaintance of the boys and had walked chatting with the boys in a park before they started to touch her. Incidentally, it is questionable whether in fact any plans were made at all, or rather that any planning that was done was simply not revealed. It is also possible that plans had been made but were not reported by the offenders.

A number of situations were difficult to classify owing to a lack of information. Others did not fit within the classification discussed. It was unknown whether the offences committed by two offender groups were discussed beforehand or not. In another offence situation, a co-offender seems to have ended up in a situation without knowing what was actually going on. He suggested picking on a boy from the neighbourhood and the other offender said he knew a good way of doing that. The co-offender was involved in the sexual abuse and threatened if he did not want to join in.

All in all, it appears that, of the 20 groups whose interaction patterns prior to the offence we could interpret, over half show characteristics that resemble Hochstetler's (2001) incremental signalling pattern; and 8 resemble the target convergence pattern, where the offence takes place when the occasion arrives, as it were. Groups that had one interaction before the first situation had the same interaction pattern in any subsequent situations.

The contact that offenders have with their victim shortly before the actual assault can be divided into two types. The first type involves the group at first having normal contact with the victim, nearly always seeming to be chatting pleasantly with each other, which may be seen as a kind of 'grooming'. At a given moment, this changes into the victim being forcibly taken to a different location and immediately assaulted. In the second type, the offence situation is not preceded by normal, relaxed interaction; the victim is harassed from the first interaction between offenders and victim, with the offenders, for example, groping her or bullying her. These two types of contact occurred with almost identical frequency. In one case, the offenders got the victim drunk, which could be seen as a mixed type. No difference is evident between offenders who agreed beforehand to assault a girl and offenders who did not, in terms of how they associated with the victim beforehand.

During the offence situation

During most offence situations, offenders did not discuss in detail the actions that could or had to happen for the assault to take place. The offenders made comments to each other, or gave each other assignments, but rarely asked things of each other. Discussion of the assault itself and the actions almost never occurred.

Rather than talk to each other, offenders spoke more with the victim, which also informed co-offenders about imminent events or what they needed to do. In four offender groups, the offenders did not speak to each other at all during the sexual assault. They spoke only to the victim. The offenders seemed to know what was going to happen, and there are indications that provocative language was used in only a limited number of situations. If group pressure was being exerted, it was fairly subtle and implicit: 'tough guys' will join in.

One-third of the offender groups had a clear leader, who gave (nearly) all the orders. This leadership was consistent in all the situations in which such offender groups committed their offences. These leaders also tended to decide which co-offenders were allowed to assault the victim and/or how. In a sense, they orchestrated the offence. If no single leader existed, or if two offenders shared leadership, assignments were much more likely to be passed to and from between each other. In these cases, initiative-taking seemed to be able to change quickly from one to another during the offence. Examples of common assignments included securing the place where the offence took place, ordering others not to watch, telling co-offenders to help hold the victim, and calling for condoms. Two offender groups threatened a co-offender to force him to help with the assault.

The execution of the offence can be subdivided into two types. The first type is instrumental. The goal of the offence seems clear to each individual offender, and offenders work together to achieve this goal. Leadership may be apparent, but it is not necessary. In half of the cases, offenders help each other without being asked or ordered to do so. The collaboration between offenders generally consists of offenders complementing each other. If the victim resists strongly and one offender is not able to hold her down on his own, a second offender (or more) will come and help. Condoms are also handed over. This collaboration extends to an offender holding open the victim's vagina or anus for a co-offender, to make it easier for the co-offender to penetrate the victim. It does seem here that offenders support each other and sometimes need each other in order to complete the offence.

The second type does not involve group collaboration. Offenders seem to operate more or less individually, and the situation can be chaotic. All the offenders want the same thing, at the same time. There is no leader. The atmosphere is typified by groping around as offenders try to 'get what they can'; no one wants to give way to anyone else. One offender phoned to tell the others to wait before 'getting' the girl, because he could not leave the house yet. No part of the offence is to be missed, it would seem. Offenders may also shout out that it is their turn and even argue with co-offenders about whose turn it is. It was even known for several boys to push their fingers into the victim's vagina at the same time and to try to shove each other out of the way. Rivalry is often evident.

The individualistic type of group offence is particularly evident when the victim is groped and fingered by the offender group. As soon as the group starts to rape the victim (vaginal penetration by a penis), this individualism can transform into an instrumental offence, in which offenders wait their turn (sometimes already wearing a condom) and are even prepared to hold the victim for someone else. The instrumental type may also involve competition between offenders but it seems to be more organized, for instance through the presence of a leader. The leader determines which offender is next to have sex with the victim, eliminating the groping around. The situation in which offenders dominate in numbers, which generally tends to facilitate the offence, does seem to hamper individualistic offences in particular. Nothing is organized and offenders seem to get in each other's way.

The degree to which, and the way in which, offenders communicate with the victim varied widely by offender group and by the situation in which an offender group assaulted its victim. Some offender groups told the victim what they were going to do to her. Other groups said almost nothing to the victim and just acted. Most offenders gave the victim orders,

related to going along with them, undressing, lying down, or performing sexual acts. Some leaders ordered victims to perform oral sex on a co-offender or to allow him to penetrate her. It is notable that in nearly half of the cases the offender group asked the victim before the assault if she would have sex with them or if she would undress. When the victim refused, the group made sure that they got the sexual contact anyway, usually by applying direct force. Over half of the offender groups threatened their victims. Three offender groups used a weapon, a knife or a firearm. The other groups used different methods, including squeezing the victim's throat and saying they were going to kill her or threatening her with physical violence. Two offenders threatened the victim with another offender. The victim had to do as they told her or they would involve someone whom the victim feared.

In situations when the victim was not threatened, she was nearly always physically held down by the offenders or put in a position that she could not get away. Three victims were locked in with offenders in a toilet or changing cubicle, from which they could not escape. Some victims were held down by one offender while another assaulted them. This form of violence, widely used by offender groups in these group sex offences, is very common. The infliction of pain and injury, such as by hitting the victim, on the other hand, is rarer. The dominant numbers of offenders meant that in many cases there was also no need physically to coerce the victim to cooperate. Many victims resisted though. Almost all victims indicated throughout the offence that they did not want the sexual contact: they shouted, hit, pushed, ran away and clearly said 'no'. Two victims tried to escape their attackers via a balcony. On viewing the reconstructions, it is incomprehensible that the offenders did not realize – as some offenders claimed – that the victim did not want the contact. Incidentally, no relationship was found between the type of resistance that the victim put up and the type of force that the offenders applied.

Seven offender groups humiliated and insulted their victim, by telling her she was no good at sex or had small breasts or by swearing at her. Offenders often did this when their sexual performance had been thwarted by the victim's resistance. This can be interpreted as offenders venting their emotions, but some reconstructions give the impression that swearing at the victim and putting her down was a way of gaining status within the group. In addition, a small number of offender groups complimented their victim after a sexual act had been performed, or for instance said that she had nice breasts.

The offenders' later statements reveal different 'reasons' for participating in the sexual assault of the victim. Some offenders joined in and some bystanders failed to help the victim out of fear of one of the

offenders: 'I didn't help because I was scared that the others would attack me.' Others mention their desire to show bravado, to belong and to join in: 'When my friend started touching her, I wanted to do it too,' reported one offender. Another said: 'I carried on . . . because I had to keep up the status of someone who has lots of sex.' Only then do the offenders mention the tension and sexual excitement involved in carrying out the offence: 'When she rejected my first approach, I just wanted one thing: to have sex with her.' Another offender stated: 'It was exciting to go on when she tried to stop me; the provocative language the others were using got me going, so I lost control and no longer knew what I was doing.'

All but a few offender groups raped the victim by vaginal penetration with a penis. Offenders used a condom in half of these rapes. Offenders were already carrying the condoms or they were requested from a co-offender or bystander. In some offender groups, one offender may have used a condom whereas another did not. One offender group ran out of condoms and an offender came up with the solution of giving all offenders plastic lunch bags to wrap around their penises. One offender, with a leadership role, determined that no sex could take place without a condom. The remarks seem to suggest that this was more because several boys wanted to have sex with the victim than to prevent a sexually transmitted disease or pregnancy.

The offenders in 10 offender groups conversed with each other in their mother tongue, which was often unintelligible to the victim. In these cases, the victim was often therefore unaware what group members were saying to each other.

In seven offender groups, an offender said that the assault should stop. This actually happened in only one case. The perpetrators of the other offences carried on. One of these offenders got bystanders involved to stop the offence. The offenders who said that the offence should stop had all assaulted the victim themselves previously. So most offenders made no protest or little effective protest against the assault.

In not one situation did offenders seem to empathize with the victim. In one case an offender told a co-offender that he should not have put his fist in the girl's vagina; the context shows, however, that this comment should be interpreted as disapproving because the group could have faced trouble if the girl was damaged. One offender said that the girl should not have been raped because she was still a virgin. Almost no signs of remorse for the attack or empathy with the victim were displayed, despite the fact that a number of offenders did call out for the assault to stop.

Offenders even reported that the victim apparently gave 'permission' for the sexual contact: 'I got off with her because I knew from an earlier party how easy she was about having sex [this refers to an earlier rape] and

I thought she was up for it this time too.' Or: 'She had kissed a few other boys so I thought I could go further; she said no, but meant yes.' Some boys revealed ambivalent interpretations of events: '[She] showed no signs that she didn't want to do it, she moaned with pleasure and laughed afterwards. Though I suppose those laughing sounds could have been sobs.'

After the offence situation

Five offender groups tried to minimize the consequences of their offence by asking and/or forcing (through threats) the victim not to report the assault. Some other offenders concocted an exonerating story, which they agreed to report in their statement if the victim did report the assault. It is notable from the reconstructions how little concerned the offenders were about the possibility of the victim reporting the offence. Offenders' relative lack of concern could stem from their dominant numbers: the victim was often alone and there were many offenders, so it was her word against the word of many.

Another explanation may lie in many offenders' cognitive distortion of the normality of the events that had occurred or of the girl having consented. The offenders' behaviour after the offence also made the assault seem very normal: for instance, three offender groups took the victim home after assaulting her, and other offender groups went off together to play football, to have a drink or to listen to music. This appearance of normality is also evident in a small number of offences at the point at which the victim was assaulted: one offender went to the kitchen to eat gherkins, offenders and bystanders watched, and one offender sat and cut his nails. It is also evident in various offender statements, for example: 'I always share girls with good friends.'

When the boys discussed with each other what they had done to the victim, they did this in a bragging, distant way without expressing emotions. In these remarks, the boys afterwards mentioned only the facts, and not how they experienced them. Occasionally someone said that they had enjoyed sex with the victim, perhaps 'because her vagina was tight'. One offender was unhappy that another boy besides himself had had sex with his little sister.

In many situations, offenders seemed to regard the assault as an enjoyable activity that had given them status. In 17 offender groups, at least one of the offenders described everything he had done to the victim, said whether he had had an orgasm, showed sperm and/or triumphantly held up a condom. In 10 offender groups, offenders joked about what had happened to the victim after the offence or even during it. Almost all offender groups relived the offence in a certain sense, by retelling in a group context

the 'tough guy' stories mentioned above, or by laughing together about aspects of the event. In one situation, offenders shouted after the victim as she walked home after the assault, copying the way that she had cried and called out when trying to defend herself. This too was considered amusing. It does seem, from the situation beforehand, from behaviour during the offences and from offenders' behaviour after the situations, that sexual assault in a group context is considered to be a form of entertainment.

Discussion

Although our sample of offenders may not be large in a statistical sense, we have presented unique material on a rarely studied offence. The material relates to a specific group of offenders, that is offenders who were – because of the seriousness of their group sex offence – subjected to personality screening. Our description therefore certainly does not pretend to pertain to juvenile group sex offending in general. The material is particularly suited to describing the course of events during these offences and to analysing interaction patterns and group dynamics.

Our analyses portray the group of offenders in a way that largely corresponds with earlier findings by Bijleveld and Hendriks (2003) and De Wree (2004). Our findings are also consistent with much of what was found in studies carried out more than a generation ago; this is remarkable because the composition of the offender population (notably its ethnic composition) and the manner in which juveniles develop sexually have changed considerably since. In line with both earlier and more recent studies, we found that the offender groups were loose, that the victim often knew at least one of the offenders, and that the offenders were generally of below-average intelligence and relatively often from broken families. The manner in which victims were contacted and forced to comply and the manner in which they were often even dropped back home are also mentioned in these studies (notably Parrot and Guitton 1963).

Overlapping results with the Bijleveld and Hendriks (2003) study are to be expected given the partial overlap between the two samples. The group offenders score at a more or less average level on many personality characteristics, and they are of low intelligence. It is notable that offenders of Antillean descent feature prominently within the sample. In records of juvenile sex offenders who were indicted by the public prosecutor for a group offence, Antilleans are represented less prominently; Moroccan suspects form the largest group after offenders of Dutch descent.

Interestingly, our results are also strikingly similar to those found by De Wree (2004), who studied the court files of 25 (not necessarily juvenile)

group sex offenders in 2002 in Brussels, the capital of Belgium; her study is the only one we found that is comparable to ours in design. As reported also in De Wree (2004), the primary focus of the offences seems to be to force a girl to have sex with the group. In the offending situations we studied, sex itself is an important goal, although the descriptions suggest that the group humiliation or debasement of the victim is an important additional factor. The group clearly experiences the situation in which the offence takes place as a group: the offence is generally experienced as a group and recalled as a group.

Just as Bijleveld and Hendriks (2003), De Wree (2004) and Porter and Alison (2006) had found, our findings showed that the offences were often quite serious, both in terms of the frequency with which the offence resulted in at least one rape and in terms of the number of times that the victim was sexually assaulted. The victim was usually threatened and, although physical violence tended to be rare, the victim was often humiliated and debased, as happened to a number of victims during sometimes very extreme situations. If we consider this in the light of the offender group's numerical dominance and the fact that the group was almost always within the victim's social network, these offences will clearly have had a major impact. In part, these findings may be attributed to the fact that we are studying a select group of offenders, that is, offenders who have been the subject of personality testing; we may therefore be investigating the (most serious) tip of the iceberg. Further research is certainly needed to determine the extent to which these characteristics can be generalized to other group sex offences perpetrated by juveniles. Another notable finding was that in a number of cases the assault occurred across different situations. It is possible that the numerical dominance of the offenders also acted against the victim reporting the assault, and that the hidden number in respect of group sex offending by juveniles is very large.

Although these offences are not particularly typified by physical violence, the offences do have a strongly coercive nature. Sex is first requested in many situations, but when it is not offered willingly it will take place under duress. Of course, given the nature of our sampling procedure, we do not encounter situations where girls agreed to have group sex, neither do we encounter situations where girls refused to have group sex and the group of boys complied.

The course of events in the initiation of the offence, and the interaction that precedes it, can be compared with what is known about the interaction patterns for other types of offence (breaking and entering, robbery). The typology developed by Hochstetler (2001) is recognizable in many of the situations that we reconstructed. We also encountered mixed forms within the typology, whereby one form transformed into another.

In the first interaction patterns that we identified, although agreements are made beforehand, only a few cases involve real planning of the assault. It is much more common for the group to agree that they are going to have sex with the victim, but not whether or how an assault will take place. This interaction pattern has characteristics of 'incremental signalling', in the sense that the offence is not mentioned by name. These group sex offences seem not to require any sounding out of co-offenders' readiness or the use of incremental signals or provocative language. In some situations in which agreements are made, the assault appears to be seen as self-evident, which is aligned with Hochstetler's third pattern of interaction (2001), the 'establishing identity' pattern.

Little communication seems to be required in the second and third interaction patterns. This corresponds with the 'target convergence' and 'establishing identity' patterns that Hochstetler identified among burglars and robbers (2001): no more than cursory remarks are needed to initiate the assault, which usually takes place whenever a good opportunity presents itself. The assault is self-evident to offenders.

The offender groups are informal groups of friends and acquaintances. Some of the offender groups have a clear leader, who determines what will happen and sometimes also the order in which co-offenders take their turn. Many other cases will involve an instigator (in the sense described by Warr 1996), and the initiative will often pass from one to another during the offence. In half the cases, the way in which co-offending takes place can be seen as true criminal collaboration, with offenders assisting each other in an orderly way. The other cases (the individualistic cases) are better described as group activities in which, paradoxically, the group behaviour in one way enables the offence but in another way actually hinders it.

The descriptions reveal aspects of both the instrumental explanatory model of co-offending (offenders commit the offence together because this enables or facilitates its execution) and the selection model (co-offending is a side-effect of the fact that willing offenders are already associating with each other). Indications of the purely group explanation are evident for only a few co-offenders (those who protest during the offence; an offender who really wants to go no further than just harassing the victim). For most of the group sex offences, the group seems rather redundant in reaching or learning the readiness to commit the offences. It is possible, however, that group mechanisms and the transfer of attitudes did play a role in establishing offenders' readiness, and particularly the self-evident nature of the assault and the cognitive distortions displayed during and after the assault.

Interestingly, the group does seem to play an extremely important role in the goals that are being striven for in committing the assault. The sexual assault in itself is an important goal, as the statements show and as confirmed

by the eagerness with which some boys act. However, there also seems to be a kind of rivalry and striving for performance. In general, the assault situations also seem to be intended as one of the activities that the group can participate in together; they even seem to be a form of entertainment. The group functions emphatically as 'the public', watching members' performance during the sexual assault. So group sex offending is literally a group activity. In this sense, we found correspondences with the activities described by Sanday (1990) in the context of the fraternity: winning status through many sexual activities, mutual onlooking of sexual activities, the normality of this behaviour and the bond that it creates – all aspects that are manifest within the groups that we studied. One important difference, however, is that Sanday describes how the fraternity's young men do in principle try to get the victim's consent. Again, because we are studying offenders here, this implies that consent must have been refused.

Following on from this, the 'social exchange approach' certainly seems applicable to the descriptions in this article, although the subject of the exchange does need some further specification. We recognize the assistance given during the execution of these offences and the other services offered. These will include the contribution to the dominant numbers, which may well be the most important service in respect of these offences. The most immediate benefit to co-offenders is participation in the assault. But other more immaterial matters are also sought. A key factor is being able to display one's performance and to acquire status. After the assault, other important rewards are having been part of the group experience and being able to boast about it. In this respect, it seems justified to add the following functions to the exchange goods identified earlier by Weerman (2003): acting as 'the public', and companionship. These functions seem strongly to increase the benefits experienced by offenders.

Our study has shown how the group interaction patterns that are prevalent for robbers and burglars are also found in group sex offences. This is remarkable for two reasons. First, sex offenders are generally viewed as a particular group of violent offenders with different (background) characteristics, different drives and different modus operandi from those of other violent offenders. Secondly, the gains from the offence are not tangible, like loot, but are of a different nature. As shown previously by Bijleveld and Hendriks (2003), group sex offenders are atypical sex offenders in the sense that they have a different personality make-up from solo sex offenders. This all points to juvenile group sex offenders resembling non-sexual violent offenders rather than sex offenders. An important avenue for further research is, we believe, the development of the criminal career of these juveniles, and particularly whether that career shows crossover to non-group sex offences, indicating some kind of specialization in sex offending.

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