A Descriptive Analysis of Public School Educators Arrested for Sex Offenses

Lindon Ratliff a & Joshua Watson a

a Mississippi State University, Meridian, Meridian, Mississippi, USA

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LINDON RATLIFF and JOSHUA WATSON
Mississippi State University, Meridian, Meridian, Mississippi, USA

This study examined trends and patterns in public school teacher convictions in order to create a descriptive profile of teachers who have offended against their students. To accomplish this goal, the authors reviewed public records for demographic information as well as the history and frequency of teacher arrests and convictions in the southeastern United States from 2007 to 2011 and created an offender profile. Subsequent analyses were conducted to assess whether gender differences among sexual misconduct offenders existed in terms of the age of their alleged victim, the grade level in which they were employed at the time of arrest or indictment, and the manner by which their alleged crimes were revealed and charges were brought against them.

KEYWORDS sex offenders, education, schools, arrested, certification, sexual assault

The proliferation of incidents of teacher sexual misconduct being reported in the mainstream media suggests that this phenomenon is a growing epidemic in the United States. A 2000 survey conducted by the American Association of University Women (AAUW) found that 38% of students in grades 8 through 11 reported being sexually harassed by teachers or school employees (American Association of University Women, 2001). In addition, Wishnietsky (1991) found that 14% of high school students surveyed had engaged in sexual intercourse with a teacher. Though incidents of teacher sexual misconduct are sensationalized in the media and create public outcry, Fromuth, Mackey, and Wilson (2010) have noted that there is sparse research...
on this topic to guide researchers, school administrators, and community policymakers. To prevent the continued perpetration of these illicit behaviors, researchers (see Moulden, Firestone, Kingston, & Wexler, 2010; Shakeshaft, 2004) have suggested that the characteristics associated with identified sexual abusers who have offended against students be identified in an attempt to develop better screening and hiring procedures that deny these individuals access to students and help safeguard our schools.

Despite the expansive body of research that exists on the characteristics of sexual perpetrators inside the family unit, far less attention has focused on the perpetrator’s professional standing in society (Moulden et al., 2010). In previous studies, researchers identified personal characteristics that appeared to be common among sexual perpetrators. These characteristics included features such as being adult, single, male, university educated, psychologically stable, and having almost no prior sexual or criminal offenses (Firestone, Moulden, & Wexler, 2009; Moulden, Firestone, & Wexler, 2007). Though sexual predators are primarily male, evidence does not exclude females as offenders.

In their research, Vandiver and Kercher (2004) reported that there are six specific types of female sex offenders. The most common type is the “heterosexual nurturer” (p. 130). According to Vandiver and Kercher (2004), the heterosexual nurturer is someone who grooms her victims and does not engage in predatory behavior (e.g., Mary Kay Letourneau). As a result, these individuals are the least likely to have a history of arrest for sexual assault. A study by Knoll (2010) examining the patterns of female school teachers who were arrested for sexual offenses provides support for this offender typology. Examining sexual abuse cases in the state of New York, Knoll (2010) found that the female teacher who was a sexual offender had the qualities of a “teacher/lover who viewed herself as emotionally equal to her teenage male victim” (p. 374). Citing small sample sizes, Knoll (2010) advocates for more research concerning the female offender.

PREVALENCE OF EDUCATOR SEXUAL MISCONDUCT

In a 2004 report for the U.S. Department of Education, Shakeshaft (2004) noted that there have been only 14 U.S. and five Canadian or United Kingdom empirical studies on educator sexual misconduct, and only one received federal funding. Among these studies, Shakeshaft (2004) notes that two lines of research have emerged. The first line includes a series of incidence studies in which official reports of child sexual abuse made to child protective or criminal agencies are examined. The second line includes prevalence studies in which children are asked if they have ever been sexually abused or adults are asked if an adult ever abused them when they were children. While these paths exist, and studies examining prevalence or
incidence rates at regional levels have been conducted, a national incidence or prevalence study has not been conducted (Shakeshaft, 2004).

Cameron and his colleagues conducted one such prevalence study in 1986. They surveyed 4,340 adults in select cities across the country in order to determine their sexual attitudes and experiences. In their study, participants were asked to view a list of 36 different caretakers and to indicate the ones they had sexual relations with in the past. The findings indicated that 1% of the respondents had a physical sexual experience with a teacher as an elementary student and 3% as a secondary student. Their findings indicate that victims are more likely to be abused in later grades. A study by Corbett, Gentry, and Pearson (1993) further highlights the increased risk for victimization in high school settings. Corbett and colleagues (1993) surveyed 185 students in two college introductory sociology courses to determine the frequency of sexual harassment by a teacher in high school (contact and non-contact). They found that 17% of the students had physical sexual contact with a teacher and 43% reported being subjected to verbal sexual harassment (defined in their study as uncomfortable comments of a sexual nature made by the teacher toward the student).

These earlier studies notwithstanding, perhaps the most accurate report concerning prevalence rates in the United States is the AAUW study titled “Hostile Hallways” (initially published in 1993 and replicated in 2001). The 2001 study, conducted to update findings from eight years earlier, surveyed 2,064 students in grades 8 through 11 (compared to 1,632 in the 1993 study) from a sample of 80,000 schools. Using self-administered questionnaires, 1,559 students were interviewed during English class with another 505 interviews conducted online. The AAUW (2001) reported that nearly 9.6% of students had been targets of educator sexual misconduct, harassment, or bullying during their school career.

While studies involving U.S. student samples appear to indicate that victimization rates are higher in secondary schools, this might not be the case in other countries. Internationally, Moulden, Firestone, Kingston, and Wexler (2010) examined the descriptive characteristics of Canadian teachers convicted of sexual offenses. Archival violent crime linkage analysis system reports were obtained from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, and demographic and criminal characteristics for the offender, as well as information about the victim and offense, were selected for analyses. In examining the 113 qualitative reports included in the crime reports they concluded that the victims had a mean age of 11.8 years and were slightly more likely to be female. The mean age of the offenders was 37.28 years. Although the study only included male offenders and did not assess gender comparisons, it is relevant for its examination of offenders’ characteristics as they relate to age of both offender and victim. Specifically, the results of this study, coupled with the results from studies previously discussed, indicate that the prevalence of student victimization is a growing problem at various levels of schooling.
OFFENDER CHARACTERISTICS

Educators who commit sex crimes against students share some common characteristics. Jennings and Tharp (2003) found that 25% of the educators in Texas who were disciplined for sexual infractions involving students between 1995 and 2003 were coaches or music teachers and thus had larger amounts of time to spend with students (e.g., football, basketball, and band practice). Though these educators are in contact with students for greater periods of time, Shakeshaft (2004) noted that it was their colleagues who taught other core curricular courses that were more likely to be reported for sexual misconduct. This statistic may indicate that teachers are creatively finding new ways to be in private situations with their victims.

Another offender characteristic that has been investigated is that of gender. For example, in their search of sexual misconduct on behalf of educators, Jennings and Tharp (2003) searched educator sexual misconduct public records of 606 teachers in Texas. They discovered that 88% of the offenders were male. In a review of newspaper reports covering a 6-month period, Hendrie (1998) found that 4 out of every 5 offenders were male. Shakeshaft and Cohan (1994) provided further evidence for the predominance of male offenders in their study of adults in schools. After conducting interviews with administrators, they determined that 4% of reported offenders were female and 96% were male.

In terms of the age of the offender, there is a paucity of research examining this variable. In one previous study, Hendrie (1998) found the age of offenders ranged from 21 to 75 years with an average age of 28. Clearly, there is not a pattern that can be detected, and further research into this variable is needed.

ALLEGATIONS AND SCHOOL RESPONSE

According to Shoop (2004), there are five ways sexual misconduct comes to the attention of school officials, including formal complaints, informal complaints, observed abuse, observed suspicious behaviors, and rumors or anonymous reports. Of these types, informal complaints appear to be the most common. In a 1994 study, Shakeshaft and Cohan reported that in their sample of 225 school superintendents that had cases of sexual abuse, the allegations were reported when students informally told a friend (69.7%), someone else (44.9%), or a parent (31.8%), and formally when the student told a teacher (14.6%) or another school employee (14.1%). When alleged misconduct is reported, the majority of complaints is ignored or disbelieved (Shakeshaft & Cohan, 1994). In fact, this lack of response leads victims to conclude that teachers cannot be stopped (Shakeshaft, 2004).
The purpose of the present study was to provide a description of teachers who have sexually offended against their students. By examining trends and patterns in public school teacher convictions, our understanding of the types of individuals who perpetrate these acts increases and an offender profile might be created. This profile would serve as a potential screening device that school administrators could use when filling vacant instructional positions. Though not a definitive statement on who might or might not be an offender, our hope is that it will at least raise consciousness surrounding the safety of children in schools.

To accomplish our goal, we reviewed public records focusing on the demographic information as well as the history and frequency of teacher arrests and convictions in the southeastern United States between 2007 and 2011 (arrests were also examined to increase sample size because some cases may spend a significant amount of time in the legal system before a conviction can be made). Our examination and subsequent analyses were conducted to address the following research questions: (a) are there any gender differences among sexual misconduct offenders in terms of the age of their alleged victim (preteen or teen)?; (b) are there any gender differences among sexual misconduct offenders in terms of the grade level in which they taught at the time of their arrest or indictment?; and (c) are there any gender differences among sexual misconduct offenders in terms of the manner by which their alleged crimes were revealed and charges were brought against them.

METHOD

Participants

The sample for this study consisted of 431 certified public school educators in the southeastern United States who were arrested and charged with sexual misconduct offenses between the years of 2007 and 2011. Included in the sample were 319 male and 112 female participants, with the average age of participants being 36.82 (SD = 10.61). Of the participants, 9% (n = 39) were educators at the elementary grade level, 27.4% (n = 118) at the middle grade level, and 63.5% (n = 274) at the secondary grade level. In terms of subjects taught, participants represented a wide range of subject areas, including business, social studies, sciences, mathematics, language arts, music, technology, and special education.

Data Collection

Participants for this study were identified through a review of public records available from the past five years (2007–2011) in several southeastern states, including Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North...
Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee. Cases were included when an arrest or formal indictment was related to offenses of a sexual nature with a minor victim identified. The cases were then categorized based on the grade level in which the alleged offense occurred, the alleged victim’s age, and the method through which the alleged crime was noticed and reported. Though many of these cases are in the public record, no personally identifiable information was included in this study to protect the anonymity of the individuals whose cases were included in our analyses.

Data Analyses

Cross-tabulation tables were constructed to examine whether relationships existed between the gender of the offender, the age of the victim, the grade level in which the offender was employed at the time the offense was committed, and the avenue by which the offender was caught and charged. To determine the significance of these relationships, a Pearson chi-square test was computed for a pairwise comparison examining gender of offender and age of victim, a gender of offender and grade level in which the offender was employed, and gender and the manner by which the crime was discovered. As a follow-up, phi coefficients were computed as a measure of effect size to provide additional information on the strength of any significant associations noted between these sets of variables.

RESULTS

The first research question examined whether there were differences between male and female offenders in the victim group to which they most identified. To address this question, a chi-square statistic was conducted to examine whether the frequency of male and female offenders differ in the age of their victims. The results of the Pearson chi-square (see Table 1) indicate a significant difference between male and female offenders in the age of victims they were charged with offending ($\chi^2 = 8.55$, $df = 1$, $N = 431$, $p = .003$). Specifically, males were more likely to commit offenses with

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>$\chi^2$</th>
<th>$p$</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Offenders’ Victim Status</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offenders of victims 12 years of age and under</td>
<td>319</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>8.55</td>
<td>.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offenders of victims 13 years of age and above</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>99</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
younger students (ages 12 and younger) while females were more likely to commit offenses with older students (ages 13 and older). A phi coefficient of .14 was computed indicating the strength of the association between the two variables.

The second research question examined whether there was a difference between male and female offenders in the grade level in which they were employed at the time of arrest or indictment. A chi-square statistic was conducted to examine this. As noted in Table 2, the results of the Pearson chi-square indicate that there was not a significant gender difference among the grade levels taught for the offenders included in the sample ($\chi^2 = 2.15$, $df = 3$, $N = 431$, $p = .542$). In sum, the frequencies for each grade level (elementary, middle, and secondary) were essentially equal.

Finally, the third research question examined whether there was a gender difference in the manner by which the offender was caught. To address this question, a chi-square statistic was conducted. The results of the Pearson chi-square (see Table 3) reveal that a significant difference exists between males and females in the manner by which they were caught and prosecuted ($\chi^2 = 21.30$, $df = 4$, $N = 431$, $p < .001$). Specifically, males were more likely to be caught by a direct claim from the victim, discovery by the school administration, or a police sting, whereas females were more likely to be caught through reports by other students or the victim’s parent or guardian. A phi coefficient was calculated to measure of the strength of this association and the resulting value was .22.

### TABLE 2 Prevalence of Elementary, Middle, and High School Victims among Male and Female Offenders

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>$\chi^2$</th>
<th>$p$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School Setting</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Elementary school</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2.15</td>
<td>.542</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle school</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>33</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school</td>
<td>274</td>
<td>208</td>
<td>66</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### TABLE 3 Prevalence of Method by Which the Crime Was Discovered among Male and Female Offenders

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>$\chi^2$</th>
<th>$p$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discovery Method</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other students</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>21.30</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent of victim</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>40</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim self-report</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police operation</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administration report</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>21</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the perpetrators of sexual misconduct in the high school classroom. Using public records data from all cases adjudicated in the southeastern United States over a four-year period (2007–2011), we were able to expand our knowledge of the perpetrator profile in these events.

Our first research question addressed victim age and whether there was a significant difference between male and female offenders on this variable. The results suggest that there is a significant gender difference with male offenders being more likely to offend younger victims (12 years of age or younger) than their female counterparts, who often commit crimes with older victims (13 years of age or older). This finding is perplexing and creates the question: why are older men going after younger victims? The “teacher/lover” typology (Matthews, Matthews, & Speltz, 1991, p. 94), which has been proposed to describe the adult female who views herself and her teenage male victim as emotional equals, suggests that female offenders would be attracted to older students/victims. Indeed, many of the stories popularized in the mainstream media today describe relationships between female teachers and teenage boys. In these situations, the female teachers may become enamored with the increased attention they receive from their adolescent male students and the relationship boundaries may become blurred. However, this does not answer why male teachers are preying on younger students. One possible explanation could be the issue of control. Male offenders may feel that they have a greater sense of control over younger students who might be more amenable to their advances, believing that they should do what their teacher asks of them.

It is important to note that with all sex offenses unreported cases could be affecting the findings when it comes to the gender of the offender. Shakeshaft and Cohan (1994), in their surveys of school superintendents, found that 66% of female victims reported as compared to only 34% of male victims. Gallagher (2000) concluded abuse by male teachers toward female students was more likely to be reported than female teachers’ abuse toward male students. With this, the question remains as to how many younger males have been abused by female teachers yet their cases have gone unreported.

School administrators could take from these findings the need to be more vigilant and aware of situations in which female teachers are spending increasing amounts of time with older male students or when male teachers are spending more time with younger female students. In addition, workshops and staff development sessions should be held to educate teachers on the definition of inappropriate conduct with students, examples of activities that should be avoided, and the consequences of making poor decisions.
Our second research question examined whether there was a difference between male and female offenders in terms of the grade level in which they were employed at the time of their arrest or indictment. The results revealed that there was no significant difference. This finding supports the collective findings of previous researchers (Cameron et al., 1986; Corbett et al., 1993; Moulden et al., 2010) that paint a picture of a growing epidemic that is occurring at all grade levels and is not simply a problem isolated to one campus or school setting.

Our third research question addressed the manner by which the perpetrators were caught and convicted for their actions. The results indicate that males are more likely to be caught by a direct claim from the victim or discovery by the school administration or law enforcement personnel. For female perpetrators, the predominant manner through which their actions are brought to light is through reports by other students or the victim’s parent or legal guardian.

An explanation for this finding could be in the way the different genders are socialized to respond to sexual advances and sexual activity. Shakeshaft (2004) has theorized that female abusers might be underreported in the literature and mainstream media if the target is male because males have been socialized to believe they should be flattered or appreciative of sexual interest from a female. As a result, we contend that male victims of female offenders may not view the sexual advances of their teachers as inappropriate or negative in any manner. In fact, it is most likely the case that their pride in the relationship and boasting to friends about the events that unfold ultimately leads to legal issues for the perpetrator.

In contrast, there is an abundant body of literature on child sexual abuse by male abusers (see Freel, 2003). The frequency with which it happens has conditioned society to be leery of any and all behaviors that may seem uncomfortable or sexually inappropriate. As a result, victims of male abusers may be more likely to come forward and report the abuse knowing that it is wrong and that there are procedures in place to protect them.

The fact that sexual abuse inflicted by female teachers is more likely to be revealed by discussion from other students demonstrates the need for school districts to listen to the student body. Students are talking about the offenses, so it may be in the best interest of the school administrators to lead the discussions. To this end, school administrators could put in place a hotline or anonymous online system for complaints or concerns to be lodged regarding possible sexual abuse. In addition, school administrators could work with school counselors to develop a peer helper program that would allow students who find themselves victims to have someone from their own peer group to talk to and report what has occurred.
Limitations

While the findings of this study help deepen our understanding of those who sexually abuse and offend students, there are some limitations that must be considered when interpreting our results. First, the data used to conduct the analyses in this study were collected from public records only. They represent cases that had been adjudicated or are in the process of adjudication. They do not include the many cases that either go unreported or have yet to be discovered. Second, the cases considered were all from the southeastern United States. Perhaps the results are more indicative of the local culture from which they were drawn than they are from across the nation. Readers are cautioned to consider the demographics of the states sampled in this study to determine whether the results may be applicable to their state or region.

Conclusions

The results of this study contribute to a better understanding of gender in perpetrators of sexual abuse in schools. Over a quarter of the sample (25.98%) was female, which is higher than in previous research studies where prevalence rates ranged between 4% and 20%. Researchers are prone to place the female perpetrator into a special category because there are fewer cases of female perpetrators of sexual abuse (Shakeshaft, 2004). According to Finkelhor (1984), the tendency to treat females as a special group grows out of a set of social beliefs that sexual abuse by males is normal while sexual abuse by females is defined as abnormal and therefore in need of additional discussion.

With news reports highlighting sexual abuse in schools, public awareness of sexual predators within the school system increases, and this leads to greater pressure for research in this area. This study will hopefully help school administrators gain a better understanding of the characteristics of sexual predators. Perhaps with a better understanding of the demographic profile of offenders and victims, school administrators can create better awareness programs to keep their students safe. After all, when a parent sends a child to school they trust the school to protect them from all harm. Unfortunately, the harm can come from within the school’s own hallways.

REFERENCES

AUTHOR NOTES

Lindon Ratliff, PhD, is an assistant professor in the Division of Education at Mississippi State University in Meridian, Mississippi. His research interests include civil rights and secondary education instruction.

Joshua Watson, PhD, is an associate professor in the Division of Education at Mississippi State University in Meridian, Mississippi. His research interests include child and adolescent wellness, counselor training, and Internet addiction.