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A Descriptive Study of Psychosocial Characteristics and Offense Patterns in Females with Online Child Pornography Offenses

William Bickart[a]*, Alix M. McLearen[b]*, Melissa D. Grady[c] and Katie Stoler[d] iD

[a]*Chief of Sex Offender Programs, Psychology Services Branch Federal Bureau of Prisons, Washington, DC, USA;* [b]*Women and Special Populations Branch, Federal Bureau of Prisons, Washington, DC, USA;* [c]*National School of Social Service, Catholic University, Washington, DC, USA;* [d]*Department of Psychology, La Salle University, Philadelphia, PA, USA*

Despite a growing body of literature on females who sexually offend, there is a dearth of research on online sexual offending in women. This study collected descriptive psychosocial and offense conduct data on 98 females convicted of online sexual offenses housed in United States federal prisons. Psychosocial history results demonstrated that 60% of the subjects reported a history of sexual abuse ($n = 59$), while 46% reported physical abuse ($n = 45$). In addition, 47% reported a history of outpatient mental health treatment ($n = 46$), and 15% reported prior inpatient mental health treatment ($n = 15$). The majority ($n = 70$) of the women's offenses involved the victimization of accessible minors to produce child pornography for distribution on the Internet, most often in association with a male co-offender. Typically, the subject's child was the victim and the focus of the child pornography. Contact offending frequently ($n = 39$) occurred in the context of the production of child pornography. The implications of these findings, especially regarding the role that women play in the creation and distribution of child pornography, are discussed as well as important directions for future research.

Key words: internet-based offenses; pornography; sexual offending; women.

The psychosocial backgrounds and offense characteristics of females convicted of online sexual offenses have yet to be explored in a systematic or empirical fashion. Women play an important, but poorly understood, role in the production, possession and distribution of child pornography (CP). An emerging body of knowledge on typical (i.e. offline) female sexual offenders has emerged in recent years, to include an examination of offense pattern characteristics, offense typologies and prevalent psychosocial characteristics, including histories of trauma, substance abuse and mental

health issues (see Gannon & Cortoni, 2010). However, the extent to which online female sexual offenders resemble their offline counterparts is unknown. As such, it is critical that more research be conducted with women who are charged with offenses related to online CP.

This population is especially important to understand for a variety of reasons. First, it is possible that women may play a significant role in supporting or contributing to the pornography industry. By understanding their role in this industry, prevention efforts can be developed to curtail the production of CP and

its distribution. Second, more information is needed to provide clinical services for online female sexual offenders. For example, it is essential to understand the specific motivators that lead to their involvement in CP to develop interventions addressing female-specific factors. Finally, it is important to identify the relationships the children involved in these crimes have with the women, in order to develop child education and prevention programs that will encourage children to report such activities. The current study's primary aim is to address the significant gap in the literature on online female sexual offenders by reporting the results of an exploratory study examining the psychosocial and offense data of women incarcerated for online CP offenses in the Federal Bureau of Prisons.

Challenges of accurately identifying the rates of women convicted of sexual crimes

Until recently, sexual offending by women has attracted relatively little attention by researchers in the behavioral sciences. Multiple writers have speculated that this relative lack of interest can be attributed to the fact that women are relatively unlikely to perpetrate sexual abuse when compared to men (Cortoni, Babchishin, & Rat, 2017; Saradjian, 2010). For example, one study reported that of all individuals convicted of a sexual crime, only between 2% and 5% are women (Cortoni & Hanson, 2005). However, these numbers may not represent a true picture of the rate of sexual crimes committed by women. While the numbers are still lower than those for men, a recent meta-analysis reported that, when victim reports are used versus criminal arrests, the rate of sexual abuse incidents perpetrated by women increases to approximately 12% (Cortoni et al., 2017). As with many offense categories, it is highly likely that sexual crimes involving women are underreported to authorities. In addition, a higher proportion of reported sexual assaults by women lead to 'cautions or

diversion' as opposed to a custodial sentence (Queensland Sentencing Advisory Council, 2017), making it even more difficult to calculate an accurate rate or percentage.

One of the central challenges to understanding the prevalence rates of women convicted of sexual crimes is how such offenses are defined. Cortoni, Sandler, and Freeman (2014) have drawn attention to the inappropriate categorization of offenses related to prostitution and sexual trafficking as 'sexual offenses.' These offenses certainly include a sexual element, to the extent that the woman is a participant in sexual acts. However, in many of these cases, it could easily be argued that the women are the victims rather than the perpetrators of illegal sexual conduct. In other cases, the offense involves sexual abuse of an underage victim by a pimp, frequently abetted by a female accomplice who serves a role as a recruiter. The role of these 'female pimps' (Roe-Sepowitz, Gallagher, Risinger, & Hickle, 2015) also complicates the categorization of sexual crimes committed by women. The extent to which such cases of prostitution and pimping are classified by correctional systems as 'sexual offenders' is unknown, and further complicates effort to accurately calculate the total number of women who commit sexual offenses (Cortoni et al., 2014).

Characteristics of women who commit sexual offenses

Although there are a number of challenges in studying female sexual offenders, the amount of research is growing. One consistent finding among the available research is the high rate of trauma the women have experienced. Researchers have reported childhood sexual abuse rates to be between 50% and 80% (Cortoni, 2018; Hislop, 2001; Johansson-Love & Fremouw, 2006), in addition to high rates of rape in adulthood (Levenson, Willis, & Prescott, 2015). For these women, the majority of their abuse experiences began at an early age and often involved multiple perpetrators, frequently individuals they knew (Hislop,

2001; Rousseau & Cortoni, 2010). These experiences also involved violent abuse, which, in many cases, occurred frequently over a long period of time (Hislop, 2001; Rousseau & Cortoni, 2010).

When asked about their adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), only 20% of these women reported no adverse events, whereas 41% reported four or more adverse experiences, including childhood physical and emotional abuse (Levenson et al., 2015). This rate of abusive experiences is significantly higher than that in the general population (Levenson et al., 2015) and among other women who are incarcerated (Cortoni, 2018), including those convicted of a violent offense (Strickland, 2008). Some researchers have reported that not only are the rates of victimization higher among women convicted of sexual crimes, but the level of violence and intensity of their victimization are also more severe than those for other women in the prison system (Kaplan & Green, 1995; Strickland, 2008).

Given the high rates of victimization in childhood, it is not surprising that many female sexual offenders report and/or present with high rates of mental illness in their preoffense histories, including mood disorders, personality disorders, substance use disorders, psychotic disorders and mental disorder related to traumatic events (Christopher, Lutz-Zois, & Reinhardt, 2007; Faller, 1995; Fazel, Sjostedt, Grann, & Langstrom, 2010; Hislop, 2001; Johansson-Love & Fremouw, 2006; Lewis & Stanley, 2000; Rousseau & Cortoni, 2010; Turner, Miller, & Henderson, 2008). In addition, many of these women present a range of clinical features associated with pervasive psychological adjustment problems, including dependency issues (Gannon et al., 2008), poor social skills (Hislop, 2001), low self-esteem (Hunter & Mathews, 1997), identity issues (Hislop, 2001) and antisocial features (Ford & Cortoni, 2008). Given the intensity of their abuse experiences, it is highly likely that their mental health and interpersonal struggles are related to those histories

(Cortoni, 2018), as well as to the exposure to the violence and parental neglect they have experienced (Gannon, Rose & Ward, 2008). Researchers have had little success in developing a clear causal model to explain how abuse experiences may lead to or be related to sexual crimes (Cortoni, 2018; Ford & Cortoni, 2008). However, many of these struggles, including issues of inadequate behavioral self-regulation, poor problem-solving skills and susceptibility to the influence of antisocial peers (Cortoni, 2018; Ford & Cortoni, 2008), are considered risk factors among individuals who commit sexual crimes and are commonly addressed in treatment programs that target sexual offenses (McGrath, Cumming, Burchard, Zeoli, & Ellerby, 2010).

Characteristics of sexual crimes committed by women

Within the limited literature on women who sexually offend, several offense patterns have begun to emerge. For example, women are more likely than men to have a co-offender, as 30% of female sexual offending occurs in conjunction with a male co-offender (compared to only 2% of male sex offenders who had a co-offender; Williams & Biere, 2015). Women who have a co-offender are more likely to have a personality disorder diagnosis and to be closely associated with an antisocial peer than those without a co-offender, who are more prone to significant mood problems and overall poorer psychological adjustment (Gillespie et al., 2014; ten Bensel, Gibbs, & Burkey, 2016; Williams, Gillespie, Elliott, & Eldridge, 2017).

Less consistent in the literature is the role of paraphilic interests in sexual crimes committed by women. Some researchers have reported that sexual interests play a role for many women (Cortoni, 2018), while others report that this factor is only significant for a small subset of these women (Lambert & O'Halloran, 2008). A recent review of the literature on women convicted of sexual crimes

concluded that a pedophilic sexual interest in prepubescent children is present in few women prior to the onset of the pattern of offending, although deviant arousal may develop as a byproduct of repeated acts of sexual abuse over time (Cortoni, 2018). In contrast, women who perpetrate sexual abuse with adolescent victims more typically report recurrent sexual fantasies related to the victim, but the tendency in these cases is for the offender to elevate the victim to adult status in fantasy (Saradjian & Hanks, 1996). Again, the limited research on deviant arousal in women is insufficient to reach any broad conclusions.

Other researchers have sought to identify patterns among female sexual offenders by developing typologies (D. A. Harris, 2010), by classifying them based on either their mode of offending or their psychosocial characteristics (Mathews, 1989; Mathews, Matthews, & Speltz, 1989; Syed & Williams, 1996; Vandiver & Kercher, 2004). Although some argue that typologies are limiting (Bickley & Beech, 2001), they can be useful when the literature is limited as a tool for building testable theories or models of causality (Ward, Polaschek, & Beech, 2006) or for organizing treatment protocols based on group needs (D. A. Harris, 2010). It is beyond the scope of this paper to review each proposed typology. However, they tend to consider a common set of definitional criteria, which include: (a) the role of male co-offenders in the offense process; (b) the presence of an independent motivation toward sexual abuse on the part of the female; and (c) victim characteristics, such as age, gender and relationship to the offender (see D. A. Harris, 2010).

Crimes involving child pornography

Federal criminal statutes in the United States define 'child pornography' as any sexual depiction of minor children (under the age of 18). Specifically, 18 U.S. Code § 2251 prohibits the production, distribution, reception or possession of visual depictions of sexually explicit conduct involving minors, and further makes it illegal to induce, or conspire to induce, a child to engage in conduct for the purpose of creating such images. Prior to the advent of the Internet, the medium for CP was primarily printed matter (e.g. photographic prints or reproduction of prints in magazines) and videocassettes. These materials had to be obtained through the mail or in person, or produced by the user. Currently, CP materials are mostly digital products, capable of being stored on a variety of electronic devices and transmitted via the Internet or telecommunications systems (Seto, 2013). As noted by Seto (2013), methods of transmission of CP via the Internet 'does not respect national borders' (p. 25) and hence occurs with minimal technological or jurisdictional constraint. Perhaps more importantly, the ease with which these materials can be produced has led to a dramatic increase in the volume of CP available (Seto, 2013). The wide availability of digital cameras, coupled with the proliferation of smart telephones and other common electronic devices with cameras, has made it possible for persons with little technical expertise to create child abuse images in everyday settings, including the home.

With the ease and anonymity of producing and sharing digital material, online sexual offending has dramatically increased since the turn of the last century (Middleton, Mandeville-Norden, & Hayes, 2009). In the U.S. federal prison population, individuals who commit online sexual crimes are among the fastest growing segments of the total population, among both males and females (Magaletta, Faust, Bickart, & McLearen, 2012). From 1994 to 2006, child pornography prosecutions for all sexual offenders accounted for 82% of the growth in federal sexual exploitation crimes (Motivans & Kyckelhahn, 2007), resulting in offenses involving the possession, distribution and production of child abuse images currently being among the most frequently prosecuted federal sexual crimes (Motivans & Kyckelhahn, 2007).

Commensurate with the increase in the CP offender population, more researchers have

turned their attention to this group, but the attention has remained almost exclusively on men. As researchers began to explore this new group, they separated sexual offenses into two subtypes. Noncontact offenses are those involving possession or distribution of illegal materials, and do not involve physical contact with the victim (McManus, Long, Alison, & Almond, 2015), sometimes referred to as 'just pictures' cases (Bourke & Hernandez, 2009). In contrast, contact sexual offenses, defined by the presence of physical contact between the offender and the victim, are typical of offense patterns prior to the advent of the Internet. A third group of mixed or dual offenders, with histories of both contact and noncontact offending, is included in many studies. The similarities and differences between these three groups has been examined by many authors (Babchishin, Hanson, & VanZuylen, 2015; Elliott, Beech, & Mandeville-Norden, 2013; Lee, Li, Lamade, Schuler, & Prentky, 2012; Long, Alison, & McManus, 2012; McManus et al., 2015; Neutze, Seto, Schaefer, Mundt, & Beier, 2010; Seto, Hanson, & Babchishin, 2011). Although it is beyond the scope of this article to review their research findings in detail, two emerging trends are worth noting. First, offenders with noncontact CP offenses scored lower on measures of anti-social attitudes and higher on indicators of psychological barriers that prevent them from acting on their sexual impulses (Babchishin et al., 2015). Second, the noncontact and dual groups display the highest level of pedophilia, compared to contact-only offenders (Babchishin et al., 2015; Seto, Cantor, & Blanchard, 2006). However, these patterns were identified in men, and it remains unclear as to how these findings apply to women who commit online sexual crimes.

Research on women and child pornography

At present, there is a dearth of research on women convicted of online CP offenses. As with studies on men, it is difficult to know whether the same models, theories and categories can be applied to women who commit CP offenses as to those who commit contact offenses. In addition, it is unscientific to simply assume that the same models, theories and categories that are emerging for men who have CP offenses can be applied to women. For example, as noted above, the male use of CP is strongly associated with sexual interests related to attraction to children (Seto et al., 2006). However, there is less consensus regarding whether women are also driven to commit sexual crimes due to their deviant sexual interests (Cortoni, 2018), and there is no evidence to support the conclusion that online female sexual offenders are motivated by sexual deviancy. Therefore, it is a challenge to draw any firm conclusions about women with online CP offenses because 'sexual arousal patterns, like many factors related to offending among female sexual offenders, are gender-specific rather than gender-neutral' (Cortoni, 2018, p. 60).

To date, there appears to be only one attempt to explore online sexual offending in women. However, this attempt, put forth by Elliott and Ashfield (2011), is limited to a theoretical framework developed to understand online sexual offending by women, based largely on an unspecified number of archived clinical interviews. Using case reports, Elliott and Ashfield propose the following criminogenic factors for these women: interpersonal/ socialization deficits, solo offending against adolescents, male-associated offending, sexual deviancy and cognitive distortions/recognition barriers. In their attempt to understand the motivation of women who commit online sexual crimes, they suggest that the women are more likely to be driven by an effort to maintain the emotional engagement of the male co-offender, rather than for the monetary or exchange value of the CP. While informed by clinical cases, the authors state that their framework is purely theoretical and is provided as a starting point for further exploration.

Limitations of current available research

As demonstrated in the above review, there is a paucity of research on women who commit sexual crimes due to the numerous challenges in studying this population. Even less information is available on women who have CP offenses. The one paper that has focused on women with CP charges is based on anecdotal clinical data, and offers a theoretical framework that has not been empirically validated. As such, researchers and practitioners have inadequate information to develop effective prevention and intervention programs for this population.

Present study

The present study represents the first effort to collect data on a sizable sample of women with online sexual offenses, with a clear categorization into contact and noncontact groups. Given the limited literature currently available, this study is descriptive and exploratory, aimed at providing information on women who are incarcerated for online sexual crimes in the Federal Bureau of Prisons. By using this particular population, we were able to include the largest possible sample of women charged with these crimes.

This study was guided by two research questions. First, what are the psychosocial characteristics of the women charged with online sexual crimes, including the prevalence of mental illness, substance abuse, history of trauma and other psychosocial factors? Second, what are the offense characteristics of online female sexual offenders? With regard to the second question, we were specifically interested in (a) the types of online offenses committed; (b) the prevalence of male co-offenders; (c) the relationship of the female offender to the victim of child abuse images; and (d) the prevalence of contact offending in CP production by females. As this study was exploratory in nature, there were no hypotheses posed for the research questions.

Method

Context of study

The federal prison system is responsible for the custody of offenders convicted of violations of federal criminal statutes. Federal criminal codes are enacted by the United States Congress in areas where the federal or national interest is at stake. As indicated above, 18 U.S. Code § 2251 defines child pornography as any visual depiction of sexually explicit conduct involving a minor (under 18 years of age), including photographs, videos and electronically stored data that can be converted into a visual image of a child. Child pornography offenses fall under federal jurisdiction when a means of interstate or foreign transmission of image is involved in the offense. Such transmission includes United States Mail or other common carriers, and electronic communication systems such as the Internet. In most cases, online CP offenders violate both local and federal criminal codes. However, because detection and investigation of these cases are typically conducted by federal law enforcement agencies, online sexual offenders are commonly prosecuted in federal courts and are sentenced to terms of incarceration in federal prisons.

Women comprise approximately 7% of the Bureau's population of nearly 184,000 inmates. The vast majority of the federal prison population are individuals sentenced to a term of incarceration for a violation of a federal criminal code, as noted above. A relatively small proportion of the federal prison population is composed of individuals who commit crimes in the District of Columbia, in tribal lands and in the military. However, all subjects in the present study were convicted of violations of a federal criminal code.

The research proposal was reviewed and approved by the agency's Research Review Board, in the Office of Research and Evaluation. The study relied upon administrative data that are part of the official records in agency archives.

Sample

Data were drawn from a computerized database of all females sentenced for a sexual crime in the custody of the Federal Bureau of Prisons as of November 2012. This initial search yielded 215 women, with approximately one third convicted of a prostitution-type offense ($n = 74$). These women were excluded as they did not meet our definition of women who were the perpetrator of a traditional sexual offense (Cortoni et al., 2014). Women serving a sentence for a nonsexual offense but who had a prior sex offense conviction were also excluded ($n = 15$) in order to focus exclusively on those women with a current offense for an online federal sexual crime. Finally, women with a non-Internet sex offense were excluded ($n = 28$). These offenders were serving federal sentences for a wide range of 'traditional' sexual offenses, such as sexual abuse of a child. The final sample consisted of 98 subjects serving a sentence for an online sexual offense, representing the entire population of female online sexual offenders in the standing population of the federal prison system in November 2012.

Data collection

Agency administrative data were used, with most drawn from the Presentence Report (PSR), which is completed during the pretrial phase of the adjudication process by United States Probation Officers. The PSR contains demographic, psychosocial and offense data, including the role of other persons in the offense process and the relationship between the offender and the victim. The reports are based on an interview with the defendant, with corroboration by collateral documentation and, in many cases, interviews with third parties. The records of investigating agencies are also incorporated into the PSR, providing comprehensive data on the offender's current offense of conviction.

The PSRs were coded by four doctoral-level psychologists with expertise in the scoring of actuarial risk assessments for sexual offenders. To reliably categorize each individual's PSR, a coding instrument was adapted from a protocol developed by researchers in the Office of Research and Evaluation for an earlier research project. To ensure that the raters had strong interrater reliability (IRR), a subset of 10 cases was coded by the four raters. They were able to reach 100% IRR on the first attempt. It is likely that the high IRR can be attributed to the comprehensiveness of the PSRs, the dichotomous nature of the variables (e.g. the presence or absence of a documented history of sexual victimization as a child) and the raters' prior expertise in scoring actuarial measures using similar definitional criteria, as noted below.

Variables

Psychosocial variables

History of mental health treatment (inpatient/outpatient)

The psychosocial history section of the PSR was reviewed to determine the presence or absence of a documented history of inpatient or outpatient mental health treatment. The presence of a history was coded as 1; no history of mental health treatment was coded as 0.

History of suicide attempts/gestures

The presence of any documented history of self-injurious behavior prior to arrest was coded as 1; no history of self-injurious behavior was coded as 0.

History of treatment with psychotropic medication

The medical history in the PSR was reviewed to determine whether there was any history of prescribed treatment with psychotropic medication prior to arrest. The following categories were used: No history of treatment was coded as 0; medication generally prescribed for a mood or anxiety disorder was coded as 1; medication generally prescribed for a

psychotic disorder was coded as 2; and history of treatment with medication in both classes was coded as 3.

History of cognitive impairment

The medical, vocational and educational history sections of the PSR were reviewed for any indication of cognitive issues. Any history of head injury with cognitive sequelae was coded as 1. Any indication of an intellectual disability, to include such terms as 'borderline intelligence' or 'significant learning disability,' was coded as 2. No history of cognitive impairment was coded as 0.

History of autism spectrum disorder

Documentation in the PSR indicating the possible presence of an autism spectrum disorder, to include Asperger's disorder, was coded as 1; the absence of such documentation was coded as 0.

History of substance abuse

Documentation in the PSR of a substance use disorder prior to arrest, evidenced by a history of negative consequences due to the use of alcohol or illicit substances, was coded as 1; the absence of a substance use disorder was coded as 0.

History of sexual victimization

The family history section of the PSR was reviewed to determine any history of sexual abuse as an adult or child. The item was coded as follows: sexual victimization as an adult (18 or over) = 1; sexual victimization as a child = 2; both = 3; or neither = 4.

History of physical victimization

The family history section of the PSR was reviewed to determine any history of physical abuse as an adult or child. The item was coded as follows: physical victimization as an adult (18 or over) = 1; physical victimization as a child = 2; both = 3; or neither = 4.

Criminal history variables

Age at first arrest

This variable was coded from the offender's age at the first occasion that she was brought into custody, to include the arrest for the current offense (i.e. for first-time offenders).

Prior offenses

Prior offenses were defined as court appearance sentencing dates for a 'significant criminal offense' (i.e. an offense for which the court could impose a custodial penalty or community supervision). The definitional criteria used were derived from the Static-99R, which operationalized a prior criminal offense as a distinct occasion on which the offender was sentenced for a criminal offense (A. J. R. Harris, Phenix, Hanson, & Thornton, 2003). The other definitional criteria stipulated in the scoring manual were also applied.

Prior sexual offenses

Prior sexual offenses were coded based on a review of the criminal history section of the PSR. To qualify as a prior sexual offense, the PSR was required to document a clear sexual element to the offense. The definitional criteria used were derived from the Static-99R, which operationalized a sexual offense as officially recorded sexual misbehavior or criminal behavior with a sexual intent (A. J. R. Harris et al., 2003).

Prior violent offenses

Prior violent offenses were coded based on a review of the criminal history section of the PSR. To qualify, the PSR was required to document a conviction for a nonsexual violent offense. The definitional criteria used were derived from the Static-99R, which lists offenses defined as violent, including murder, assault and robbery (A. J. R. Harris et al., 2003). The other definitional criteria stipulated in the scoring manual were also applied,

including the categorization of attempted violence and juvenile adjudications as 'violent.'

Offense variables

Current offense

The offense of conviction on the subject's Judgement and Commitment Order was reviewed to classify the current offense in the categories of CP possession or CP production. However, to ensure that all cases meeting criteria were captured, the offense conduct section of the PSR was also reviewed to determine whether the offense featured an online element. In a small number of cases ($n = 12$), the official offense of record was the sexual abuse of a child (i.e. a 'traditional' contact sexual offense), but because the offense conduct occurred during the production of CP, these cases were coded as online offenses and were included in the sample.

Presence of co-offending

The offense conduct section of the PSR was reviewed to determine whether a co-offender was instrumentally involved in the subject's current offense. The presence of a co-offender was coded as 1; the absence of a co-offender was coded as 0.

Relationship of subject to CP production victim

In cases where the subject's offense involved the production of CP, the relationship of the subject to the victim was coded from the offense conduct section of the PSR. Victims who were the subject's biological or adopted child were coded as 'own child' (coded as 1); victims who were acquaintances but were not family (e.g. babysitters; neighbors) were coded as 'persons of access' (coded as 2); and victims who had no special relationship with the subject were coded as 'no personal relationship' (coded as 3).

Contact offending

The offense conduct section of the PSR was reviewed to determine whether the subject engaged in contact offending during the production of child pornography. 'Contact offending' was defined as physical contact in a sexual context between the subject and the victim. If there was any contact offending during the offense conduct, this item was coded as 1; the absence of contact offending was coded as 0. Giving verbal instructions to the victim, even if coercive, was not coded as contact offending unless physical contact occurred.

Results

Sample

The final sample consisted of 98 subjects of women who were convicted of crimes involving online CP. Within the sample, 86 subjects were convicted of violations of federal child pornography statutes (i.e. possession, distribution or production of child pornography), and an additional 12 subjects were convicted of 'traditional' contact sexual offenses committed during the production of CP.

The majority of the women were Caucasian ($n = 94$, 95%). Three subjects (3%) were African American, and one subject (<1%) was Asian. Five subjects, four Caucasian and one African-American, reported a Hispanic ethnicity, while the majority of subjects (95%) reported being ethnically non-Hispanic. The age of the subjects (at the time of the adjudication of their current offense) ranged from 20 to 57 years, with an overall mean age of 38 years. The mean length of sentence was 276 months, with four subjects serving life sentences.

Background characteristics: psychosocial history

Fifteen subjects (15%) had a documented history of inpatient mental health treatment prior to incarceration, and 46 subjects (47%) had a

Table 1. Documented victimization prior to incarceration.

	Physical victimization (N = 98)		Sexual victimization (N = 98)	
	n	%	*n*	%
As child only	10	10.2	42	42.9
As adult only	24	24.5	11	11.2
As child & adult	11	11.2	6	6.1
Neither	53	54.1	39	39.8

documented history of prior outpatient mental health treatment. In addition, 34 subjects (35%) reported that they were previously treated with medication for a mood or anxiety disorder; none had prior treatment with medication prescribed for a psychotic disorder. Twenty-four subjects (25%) had a documented history of suicide attempts prior to incarceration. Additionally, 39 subjects (40%) had a documented history of substance abuse. None of the participants had a documented history of autism spectrum disorder. Six subjects (6%) had documentation of cognitive impairment of mild to moderate impact on overall functioning, while none had a history of head injury.

As shown in Table 1, most subjects (61%) reported a history of sexual abuse at some point in their lives. Almost half (45%) reported experiencing physical abuse in their lifetime.

Background characteristics: criminal history

The majority (*n* = 70, 71%) of the sample was composed of first-time offenders (i.e. the current sexual offense was the only criminal appearance on record); 20 (20%) had between one and three prior offenses; and 8 subjects (8%) had four or more prior offenses. Only one of the subjects had a sexual offense prior to the current sexual offense. Four subjects had a single prior violent offense. The average age at first criminal arrest was 30.3 years of age.

Offense characteristics: general trends

Table 2 presents frequency counts of the offense characteristics for 98 subjects in the sample, separated into three categories: CP possession; CP production with contact; and CP production without contact. Overall, two thirds of the subjects (*n* = 65) committed an offense with a male co-offender, whereas one third (*n* = 33) were solo offenders.

Child pornography possession

Twenty-nine percent (*n* = 28) of the sample were convicted of a CP possession offense only. These subjects collected and, in some cases, shared CP but did not participate in its production. Among the 28 women convicted of CP possession, 11 of these cases (39%) involved the possession of child abuse images in a collection shared with a male co-offender. The remaining 17 cases (61%) were solo child pornography offenses.

Child pornography production without contact

The women convicted for CP production without contact (*n* = 31, 32%) committed offenses in which they either instigated or participated in the production of child abuse images. Although they were physically present while the child abuse images were created, there was no evidence of direct physical contact between the offender and the victim. A typical example of such a case is a subject who took pictures of her naked child on her cellular telephone and

Table 2.   Offense of conviction.

Offense of conviction	n	%
Child pornography production with contact	39	40
Child pornography production without contact	31	32
Child pornography possession	28	29

Note. N $= 98$.

sent the images to her boyfriend. In another typical case, the subject gave verbal instructions and encouragement to the victim as a male accomplice created child abuse images.

Child pornography production with contact

In 40% ($n = 39$) of the cases, physical contact between the offender and victim transpired during the production of child abuse images. The contact offending during CP production ranged from manually posing a victim's legs to afford a view of the genitals to digital penetration of the victim's vagina or oral contact upon his penis. It should be noted that, in many offense descriptions, the subject was initially involved in the production of CP in a noncontact role (e.g. providing instructions and encouragement), only to gradually shift into a role involving direct physical contact with the victim.

CP production aggregate

To examine the offending patterns of the CP production group, data on the 31 CP production without contact subjects were combined with the 39 CP production with contact subjects, resulting in a group composed of 70 subjects. The data on the offense characteristics of the aggregate CP production category are presented in Table 3.

Discussion

Summary of results

This article presents the psychosocial background characteristics and offense patterns of a sample of incarcerated online female sexual offenders. The study was guided by two primary research questions. The first question focused on the psychosocial characteristics of the women who commit online sexual offenses. Consistent with prior research on females who commit 'traditional' sexual offenses, our findings indicate that a large percentage of our sample reported a history of either inpatient or outpatient mental health services, past treatment with antidepressants and/or anxiolytics, prior self-harm episodes, including suicide attempts, substance abuse and trauma histories. However, rates of cognitive impairment, autism spectrum disorder and past treatment with antipsychotic medication were low. The majority of subjects had no criminal history prior to the conviction for their current online sexual offense, and the prevalence of prior sexual offenses was extremely rare.

The second question focused on the offense characteristics of online female sexual offenders. The main offense pattern that we identified was that the majority of women in the sample committed an offense involving the production of online CP, with a minority convicted of CP possession/distribution offenses. Overall, two thirds of the sample committed an offense in association with a male co-offender. The large majority of CP production offenses involved male co-offenders. This pattern was not observed in the CP possession group. The majority of these subjects collected CP on their own accord and retained it for private viewing. However, a substantial minority of CP possessors shared a CP collection with

Table 3.   Offenses involving child pornography production.

	n	%
Offender's relationship to victim of CP production		
Own child (biological or adopted)	50	71
Person of access	12	17
No personal relationship	8	12
Presence of Male Co-Offender in CP Production		
Yes	54	77
No	16	23

Note. $N = 70$. CP = child pornography.

a male co-offender. We also examined the relationship women had with the victims of CP production offenses, and found that the victims were usually their own children. Finally, we studied the patterns of contact offending within CP offenses, and determined that in a large proportion of CP production cases, physical contact between the subject and a child victim occurred.

Implications

Based on the findings of this study, there are several important implications to highlight. First, women are a critical factor in the production of CP. The findings of this study indicate that CP production is an offense that, in many if not most cases, involves three parties: a male motivated to acquire CP, a child victim, and an individual who provides access to that victim. It appears that women are frequently the provider of the child victim, often using their own children. It is possible that the level of trust children have in their mothers and other female caregivers may serve to influence the content of child sexual abuse images, by creating the appearance that the victim is happy, or at least comfortable, with the ongoing abuse. In that respect, the offender is leveraging her role as a parent or trusted caregiver in the interest of obtaining

the type of child sexual abuse images desired by those who view it.

A second implication is regarding how contact offenses are categorized when they involve women. In our study, there was a high prevalence of contact offending during the production of CP. The typical case involved the production of digital images of a woman sexually abusing her own child. Although her sexual contact with the victim may have been driven in part by a desire for sexual gratification on the part of the offender, it could also have been motivated by her desire to create child sexual abuse images, most often in complicity with a male co-offender. In this respect, the offender not only was an abuser of the child, but was herself a subject of the pornographic images, as well as a partner in their creation. While such conduct certainly meets the traditional definition of a 'contact sexual offense,' we suggest that it represents a new type of contact offending that is a byproduct of the influence of digital technologies on patterns of sexually abusive behavior. This finding may further complicate the challenges of classifying and even counting women who commit contact sexual crimes, as categories of offending may be more nuanced than the labels appear.

Third, our results add to the literature that women who commit sexual crimes have

histories of significant trauma and mental health issues. This finding has important implications for prevention of child abuse; it is essential that health and behavioral health providers screen and provide trauma-based treatment for children universally, and particularly for those identified most at risk (Levenson, 2014; Levenson et al., 2015). For the women who go on to commit sexual offenses, it is essential that they receive treatment focused on their mental health, substance use, previous victimization and other co-morbid issues (Ford, 2010; Ford & Cortoni, 2008; Rousseau & Cortoni, 2010). This study cannot identify a causal relationship between these behavioral and mental health issues and the offending. However, it is highly likely that these issues increase their risk of resolving their own struggles through coercive and/or unhealthy relationships either with their children or with the men they partner with to commit these crimes (Marshall, 2010).

Finally, the findings of this study indicate that much more research is needed with this population. This study was descriptive in nature and presented findings based on only administrative records of the crimes and the women's psychosocial histories. In order to increase our understanding of how to prevent such crimes, much more research is needed regarding the women's internal motivations and the influence of the partnerships formed with male co-offenders. We are, as yet, unable to address the question of how the offense patterns of women with online sexual offense are similar to and/or different from those of males and other traditional 'contact' offending women. This study was an initial step in trying to understand this new category of sexual offenses, yet much more study is necessary to understand completely the complexities of these crimes.

Limitations

There are several limitations of this study that are important to note. First, the majority of the psychosocial data were derived from the PSR, and, although some of the data in the PSR were corroborated from collateral sources, most of these data were largely based on self-report. However, some areas of the psychosocial history (notably, reports of childhood trauma) are difficult, if not impossible, to verify. The same limitation also applies to the data on offense conduct, although to a much lesser extent. The offense conduct data detailed in the PSR were largely based on records supplied by investigators, usually supplemented by digital evidence such as forensic analysis of confiscated child abuse images, computer devices and email exchanges between known parties. Therefore, the coded data related to the subject's offense conduct were likely to be an accurate representation the subject's actual offense behavior. For example, the identity of child victims of CP production and the role of a male co-offender were supported by data that meet the high evidentiary standards expected in a court of law.

Another important limitation is that much of the data, especially with regard to the psychosocial history, were dichotomous. Therefore, we are unable to report the severity, frequency, intensity or other variations of the variables. Future research should consider including questions that are able to examine these variables in a more nuanced way in order to identify patterns and begin to create causal theories.

Also, the generalizability of the findings is limited due to the nature of the sample. While the sample studied does represent the entire federal population of women convicted of online sexual offenses, the extent to which the federal population is representative of offender populations in other jurisdictions or noncorrectional settings is unknown. Finally, as this study was descriptive in nature, no causal relationships could be proposed or were investigated.

Conclusion

This is the first study to report offense and psychosocial characteristics of women who commit online sexual offenses with a sizable number of subjects. Although these women

comprise a small percentage of all sexual offenses, it appears that they play a significant and essential role in the production of CP, primarily through partnerships with males. In these partnerships, these women appear to identify and 'supply' the children used in CP, including their own children. The relationships that they have with the children may also influence the types of images that are created during the production phase, including initiating sexual contact. As such, these women participate in the production of child pornography on both sides of the camera – as a person who provides access to the victim, and as a secondary subject of the images. In order to prevent children from being used in CP, it is critical to learn more about these women's motivations and risk factors, including exploring how their significant histories may increase the likelihood that they are willing to engage in these crimes. Through a more complete understanding of this population, prevention and intervention programs can be developed to decrease the role that they have in CP, and in turn decrease the number of children who are victims of these crimes.

Ethical standards

Declaration of conflicts of interest

William Bickart has declared no conflicts of interest

Alix M. McLearen has declared no conflicts of interest

Melissa D. Grady has declared no conflicts of interest

Katie Stoler has declared no conflicts of interest

Ethical approval

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study

ORCID

Katie Stoler http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3459-3257

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