

Three Critical Lessons from the Penn State and Syracuse Sex Abuse Scandals

We can keep kids safer if we know the facts about child abuse

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The horrific revelations concerning the Penn State and Syracuse University sex abuse scandals offer us three critical lessons that we should always remember about child sexual abuse. If we do, we may be better able to protect children from sex offenders in the future.

These important lessons include (1) sex offenders come in all shapes and sizes and are likely well known to their victims, (2) regardless of the institution, we can expect a certain small number of men (typically about 5%) to sexually engage with minors (including teens) when given the opportunity to do so, and (3) any institution caught in a child sexual abuse scandal will likely try to protect the institution long before attending to the needs of victims.

Somehow we tend to think of sex offenders as creepy strangers who are unknown to their victims. This situation is very rare but typically makes a great deal of press when it occurs. The most likely person to sexually violate a minor child is a family member such as a step-father, uncle, or often an older brother or cousin. After that, teachers, sport coaches, choir directors, clergy, scout leaders, camp counselors, and others who are entrusted with the care and supervision of youth may be offenders. This is very important to remember. Most sex offenders are as close as the child's own home, school, and practice field.

Second, research conducted with institutions that serve youth such as public schools and churches (Catholic and non-Catholic by the way) during the past half century suggest that about 5% of men within these institutions sexually violate minors. Tragically, the ranks of clergy, school teachers, sport coaches, scout leaders, and youth camp counselors all include sex offenders. With access to and power over youth, a certain percentage of men will violate this trust and sexually engage with minors.

Finally, institutions who are caught in these scandals almost always work first to protect the good name of the institution trying to avoid scandal and embarrassment before contacting law enforcement and attending to the needs of the victims. Often leaders of these institutions are in denial in that they frequently can't believe that one of their valued organizational members (and even well thought of leaders) could possibly violate a child or teen.

It is critical to keep these three lessons in mind moving forward in order to be attentive to the sexual victimization of minors at other institutions. Believe it or not, about 15% of American men and close to 30% of American females report that they were sexually violated by an adult when they were a child. If those numbers don't shock you perhaps they should. Sexual abuse and these boundary violations are not uncommon. So, there are a lot of victims (and offenders) out there and many institutions have Penn State or Syracuse University like problems that may not have hit the press yet.

If there is any good news in this story it is that research suggests that sexual victimization of children and teens has decreased significantly since the 1980's within institutions and in homes. A variety of factors such as improved education, training of those working with youth, mandating reporting laws, two deep rules (i.e., adults can't be alone with one child such as in boy scouts), zero tolerance (i.e., any reasonable evidence that abuse has occurred results in never being trusted with youth again), increased public awareness, and so forth seem to be helping keep kids safer today than in previous generations.

But we can't rest until all children are safe in the company of adults. A goal we may never obtain but that we can approximate. We shouldn't let the Penn State or the Syracuse University stories come and go without carefully learning these lessons in order to keep kids safe moving forward.

By the way, if you are interested in the research in this area you might check out the work of David Finklehor at the University of New Hampshire, Charol Shakeshaft at Virginia Commonwealth University, Karen Terry at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, and Nancy Kellog at the University of Texas to get started.

So, what do you think? What have you learned from the Penn State and Syracuse stories?