



Study: Many sex offenders are kids themselves

By Wendy Koch January 5, 2010

More than a third of sex crimes against juveniles are committed by juveniles, according to new research commissioned by the Justice Department.

Juveniles are 36% of all sex offenders who victimize children. Seven out of eight are at least 12 years old, and 93% are boys, says the study by the Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire.

The report comes as states toughen penalties for adult sex offenders and wrestle with how to handle juveniles.

"They are different from adult sex offenders," says study co-author David Finkelhor. They are more likely than adults to commit sex offenses in groups, and their victims are younger and more likely to be male.

Finkelhor says only about 10% of juvenile offenders have signs of "sexual preoccupation," an indicator of a pedophile. He says teen offenses include date rape. In the case of offenders age 12 or 13, it is often sexual experimentation with younger kids.

Early sex education is key to teaching boundaries and preventing such experimentation, Finkelhor says.

The study, based on 2004 law enforcement data, finds that juvenile sex offenders commonly target children younger than they are. Their numbers increase sharply at age 12 and plateau at 14. Female offenders are younger.

"I've seen the whole spectrum," from serious and even sadistic crimes to 16-year-old boys having sex with 13-year-old girlfriends, says psychiatrist Fred Berlin, founder of the Johns Hopkins Sexual Disorders Clinic. He says research shows the vast majority of juvenile sex offenders don't become adult ones.

He says too many end up on sex offender registries. "They shouldn't be stigmatized for the rest of their lives," Berlin says.

Some states have tried to lessen punishment for older teens having consensual sex with underage ones. Most do not list juveniles on their online sex offender registries.

The Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act, however, requires states to adopt uniform registry rules or risk losing certain federal funds. The act, passed in 2006, requires teens 14 and older to register if they commit serious sex crimes, which can include touching the genitals of someone younger than 12.

Offenders have to register every three months; failure to do so is a felony. The Justice Department says only Ohio has put the law into effect.