

# ***Statements for Journalists:***

## ***Adolescents Who Have Engaged in Sexually Abusive Behavior***



- Sexual abuse is a public health issue that impacts everyone – individuals, communities, institutions, and society as a whole. Too frequently our current cultural response to this important problem tends to focus on intervention and prevention *after* sexual abuse has already occurred. ATSA encourages and supports a public health approach to sexual abuse as this focuses our efforts on prevention of sexual abuse both *before* and *after* it happens. Comprehensive public health approaches also ensure the health of an entire population, not just individuals.
- To prevent sexual abuse, having a common definition is integral. Sexual abuse is a broad term that includes any sexual or sexually motivated behavior that results in someone being forced, coerced, or manipulated into witnessing or experiencing unwanted sexual activity without their consent.
- Although adolescents (age 13–17) account for approximately 25% of all sexual crimes, and one third to one half of sexual crimes against other youth and children, research has shown that the majority of these youth do not continue to engage in sexually abusive behavior nor are they on a life-path for repeat offending. The majority of these adolescents are male, with females representing approximately 7% of juveniles adjudicated for sexual crimes.
- Adolescents adjudicated for sexual crimes are not “mini-adults” and they differ from adults convicted of sexual crimes in many ways. Adolescents are not fully developed, emotionally, physically or mentally, and their behavior is not only impacted by these developmental factors, but also by their family environment, school/social environment, and dependence on caregivers/adults. The fluidity of these factors not only influences the behavior of adolescents, it also increases the potential for successful intervention with these youth – research has shown that, once detected, the majority of these youth respond well to interventions and do not continue to engage in sexually abusive behavior.
- Adolescents who engage in sexually abusive behavior are a diverse population who present with complex and often interconnected motivations for engaging in sexually abusive behavior. Studies have revealed that factors related to general delinquency in adolescence (e.g., violence within the home, neglect, physical/emotional abuse) are also related to sexually abusive behavior by youth. Research has also shown that adolescents adjudicated for sexually abusive behavior have higher rates of sexual victimization than non-offending youth, as well as youth who have offended with non-sexual crimes, and have often been exposed to pornography at an early age, two factors which may impact a youth’s understanding of sexual boundaries and healthy sexual relationships.

- **The vast majority of adolescents adjudicated for sexual crimes do not continue engaging in sexually abusive behavior (i.e., reoffend), and the rate of sexual reoffense (i.e., arrest and/or reconviction) is low. According to an extensive 2010 study which looked at the sexual recidivism rates for over 10,000 youth, approximately 7% recidivated over a five year follow-up period. A 2012 retrospective study also revealed that approximately 10% of youth continued to engage in sexually abusive behavior in adolescence and adulthood, whereas 90% of the sample desisted.**
- **Adolescents who engage in sexually abusive behavior are a diverse population - they differ in a variety of ways including, but not limited to, the motivation for their behavior, age and maturity level, family background, learning styles and learning problems, mental health issues, history of adverse childhood experiences and risk factors for reoffending. Due to this diversity, evaluations and risk assessments for adolescents are integral to identifying the most effective interventions to reduce risk and facilitate rehabilitation. Assessment of the adolescent should be developmentally appropriate and provide relevant information about the youth's risk level, intervention needs, and individual factors which influence delivery of services while also identifying strengths. The high level of diversity within this population also indicates that the intervention needs of individual youth will likely be very different from one adolescent to another. Thorough assessments will best determine whether additional interventions are necessary and, if so, the appropriate type, intensity, and duration of interventions.**
- **As our goal is to prevent sexual abuse and ensure there are no more victims, it is vital to provide treatment and support services for adolescents who have engaged in sexually abusive behavior. Assisting these youth to discontinue their abusive behavior, hold them accountable for their behavior (past and current), and teach them the necessary skills to engage in appropriate (i.e., non-abusive) behavior is an important component of a comprehensive system to prevent sexual abuse. Key to this process is ensuring treatment services are provided in an evidence-based, individualized, and developmentally appropriate manner.**
- **Treatment programming for adolescents who have engaged in sexually abusive behavior is not the same as sexual offense specific treatment for adults as the treatment needs of youth differ from those of adults. Optimal treatment for youth requires specialized programming that incorporates family involvement, and takes into account that only a small minority of adolescents have abuse-related sexual interests. Treatment should also be individualized based upon the specific needs, developmental level, and risk for other forms of crime or misconduct by the adolescent. Community based treatment programming has been identified as the most effective for the majority of these youth, indicating that residential treatment should be reserved for the minority of youth with higher levels of immediate risk and need. Research has additionally shown that adolescents who received family focused, individualized treatment recidivated at a lower rate than adolescents who received no treatment (7.37% versus 18.93% respectively).**
- **Sexual abuse is a complex and emotional issue which impacts us all. The prevention of sexual abuse requires not only a well-planned and comprehensive response founded on research, but also the involvement of every individual, family, and community. It is only through education, collaboration, and the involvement of everyone – community members, violence prevention professionals, victim advocates, law enforcement professionals, treatment professionals, journalists, and policy makers – that the prevention of sexual abuse can become a reality.**

To learn more about the above topics, please see:

[Adolescents Who Have Engaged In Sexually Abusive Behavior](#)

[8 Things Everyone Should Know about Sexual Abuse & Sexual Offending](#)

To learn about children (age 12 and under) with sexual behavior problems, please see:

[Children with Sexual Behavior Problems](#)

[Report of the Task Force on Children with Sexual Behavior Problems](#)

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