

Dodging justice: Characteristics of repeat child sex offenders

April 26 2023, by Christine Bowley



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Many crimes are obvious, with those responsible soon apprehended, but with most sexual abuse (including child sexual abuse) remaining unreported or undetected, Griffith University researchers have

investigated the characteristics of repeat offenders who evade detection for long periods of time.

The study used police data and case files to differentiate persistent sexual offenders by long or short detection lag, comparing them on demographic characteristics, [lifestyle factors](#), victimization, [psychopathic traits](#), antisocial orientation, atypical sexual interest and descriptive sexual offense variables.

It found offenders with longer detection lags had more psychopathic traits, more pre-pubescent child victims, were more often in professional employment and were less likely to be involved in other [criminal activity](#) than those with shorter detection lags.

Lead author Dr. Sam Nicol from the school of Criminology and Criminal Justice said the findings could go a long way in reducing child sexual abuse through early identification and prevention. The research paper, "Dodging justice: characteristics of men with multiple victims who evade detection for long periods," has been published in the *Journal of Sexual Aggression*.

"I previously worked in the sex crimes area of a police service and it really would've helped to know the key traits of people who abuse a lot of victims but remain undetected, and what it is about them that allows them to fly under the radar for years or often decades," he said.

"Common factors we found were interpersonal psychopathic traits like being good at manipulating and conning people or pathologically lying."

The research showed offenders who evaded detection for longer periods were in significantly higher skilled occupations than their shorter detection lag counterparts (who were generally in lower-level jobs or unemployed long-term) and were often quite successful in their careers

and even personal relationships.

"They'll put themselves in multiple positions or environments where they have access to kids, such as becoming sporting coaches, teachers or other community roles, either where there are no policies or protections in place, or they'll try to break down any protective barriers and make that OK—things like being in the change room or gifting kids toys or giving them lifts home," Dr. Nicol said.

"Of course it can be difficult to differentiate between those who are genuinely doing good in the community, but it's those who are putting themselves in multiple environments, yet not welcoming those protections that could raise some alarm bells."

Although all child sexual [abuse](#) is significantly under-reported, the men with long detection lags tend to have more boy victims than those who are caught quicker, with the research reinforcing the need to engage boys in conversations about [sexual abuse](#) and ensure media prevention campaigns aim to identify concerning behaviors by any adult toward any child.

Dr. Nicol said incorporating these strategies could contribute to earlier prevention strategies, promoting more timely disclosure from young boys and enabling earlier intervention.

"These findings have important practical implications for the way those with child sexual offenses are assessed, treated and supervised in the community.

"Ultimately, by shining a light on the characteristics of these men, the hope is to intervene earlier, therefore reducing victimization or at the very least, the severity and longevity of their offending."

More information: Samuel J. Nicol et al, Dodging justice: characteristics of men with multiple victims who evade detection for long periods, *Journal of Sexual Aggression* (2022). [DOI: 10.1080/13552600.2022.2159555](https://doi.org/10.1080/13552600.2022.2159555)

Provided by Griffith University

Citation: Dodging justice: Characteristics of repeat child sex offenders (2023, April 26) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-04-dodging-justice-characteristics-child-sex.html>

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