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Boys and Sexual Abuse: An English Opinion

By: D.J. West, in: Archives of Sexual Behavior, 12/1998

INTRODUCTION

The upsurge of public anxiety about threats to children from sexual predators began with concern for the safety of girls. Influenced by feminist protest against the perceived tendency of males to dominate and exploit females, research on child sexual abuse at first concentrated on victimization of girls by fathers, stepfathers, or other males in the family circle. Research on the sexual abuse of boys developed later (Hunter, 1990). Awareness that women also may offend with minors, especially boys, came later still (Elliott, 1993). In view of the popular stereotype of priestly pederasts chasing after choir boys and the many newspaper reports of scoutmasters and the like "interfering" with boys under their care, the initial lack of professional interest seems odd, but probably reflects a tradition that boys should be able to look after themselves.

The experience of child care professionals is generally limited to incidents serious enough to lead to a complaint to police or social services. The impression gained from such cases is that any kind of sexual incident involving a child is likely to cause great and lasting harm (Wyre and Tare, 1995). The emotive terms adopted in professional discourse - abuse, perpetrator, victim survivor - have reinforced this idea and introduced a tone of moral revulsion alien to scientific inquiry. The highlighting by the media of horrendous cases of sexually motivated abductions and killings of children has spread the notion that all sexual interest in children is likely to be violent and life-threatening. The result has been an unprecedented public outcry against pedophiles and the introduction of extra penal measures. In Belgium, following the discovery in 1996 of the bodies of gifts who had been kidnapped, imprisoned and left to die by the murderous pedophile Dutroux, a quarter of a million protesters marched through the capital demanding reform of police and judicial practice.

In the United Kingdom, following similar legislative moves in the United States, the Sex Offenders Act 1997 requires everyone, male or female, who is convicted or cautioned for one of a schedule of sexual offenses, including any involving a minor, to register with the police and report where they are living. Police have authority to reveal the whereabouts of registered offenders to school heads, potential employers, and others in the community, including, when considered necessary, immediate neighbors. No other types of criminal, not even drug dealers or armed robbers, have been thought to require such measures. The provisions have to be enforced without discrimination and apply to offenders as young as 10 years. The Guardian (25 Oct. 1997) reported that a boy of 14 had been included following a conviction for misconduct with two even younger boys. The Sex Offenders Act 1993 lowered to 10 years the age at which a boy can be charged with rape. Had the four boys ages 10 and 11 tried at the Old Bailey for rape and then for indecent assault been found guilty, they too would have been placed on the register (Guardian, 17 Feb. 1998). In January 1998, when seven men were convicted for group sex