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Typologies of sex offenders: An umbrella review

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English summary

Sexually transgressive behavior and sexual violence are pervasive societal issues. The "National Action Program for Addressing Sexual Boundary Violations and Sexual Violence" [Nationaal Actieprogramma Aanpak seksueel grensoverschrijdend gedrag en seksueel geweld] aims to prevent such behavior and to minimize harm by quickly identifying and stopping it, by providing support and assistance to victims and their communities, and by taking appropriate action against (suspected) perpetrators. This report therefore provides insights into the characteristics of different types of offenders involved in sex offenses.

The scientific literature frequently distinguishes between various types of offenders based on the specific form of sex offenses, victim characteristics, offender-victim relationships, modus operandi, or underlying motives. These typologies often describe offenders based on individual, situational, or contextual risk factors and offense characteristics. Classifying perpetrators of sex offenses into typologies assists researchers in understanding potential differences in background and personal characteristics, and in making informed assessments of the risk of reoffending. Furthermore, typologies can inform differentiated approaches to manage the risk of reoffending. However, the available (inter)national literature on typologies of sex offenders does not provide a consistent picture and a comprehensive overview of typologies covering all types of sex offenses is lacking, limiting the understanding of differences and similarities between different typologies. This research utilizes an umbrella review approach to systematically summarize existing literature and systematic reviews on typologies of adult perpetrators of sex offenses.

This report aims to address the following questions:

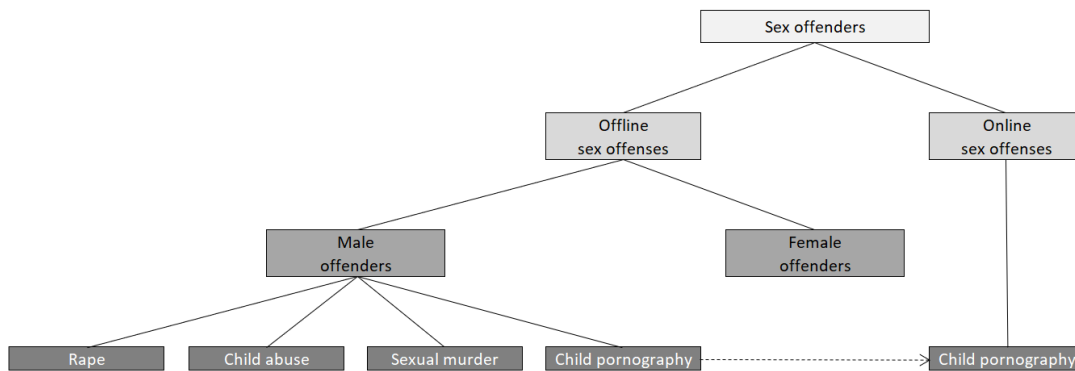
1. What are the most commonly used or most promising and scientifically supported classifications of adult perpetrators of sex offenses that can be distinguished in the literature?
2. What is known about the profiles of different types of offenders (offense type, motives, modus operandi, offender characteristics, victim characteristics)?
3. What are the similarities and differences in the profiles of different types of offenders?

4. Based on the reviewed literature (questions 1-3), what can be said about the approaches to manage offenders (preventive measures, treatment, etc.) that align with the identified typologies?

In the umbrella review we analyzed all published literature reviews and systematic reviews on typologies of sex offenders available in Dutch or English, with complete texts, published in or after 1990. These studies covered typologies of adult perpetrators (18 years or older) involved in sexual assault, rape, child abuse, child pornography, as well as online forms of sex offenses such as sextortion and grooming. In January 2023 the following databases were carefully searched: Clarivate Analytics/Web of Science Core Collection, Elsevier/Scopus, Ebsco/Criminal Justice Abstract (CJA), and Ebsco/APA PsycINFO. A total of 3054 studies were found initially, among which 31 studies met the inclusion criteria, comprising five systematic reviews and 26 literature studies. However, it is reasonable to assume that most recent studies on typologies of sex offenders are rarely discussed in earlier literature studies and systematic reviews, simply because they were not published during the data collection period of those studies. Therefore, an additional search was conducted in the same databases to identify the most recent primary studies (published in 2020 or later) on typologies of sex offenders. A total of 2721 studies were found among which nine met the inclusion criteria. These nine additional empirical studies were analysed separately. These two methods aim to provide a comprehensive overview of the available literature in this field from 1990 to the present and consolidate all existing knowledge on these typologies in this report.

The umbrella review reveals that typologies of sex offenders have been separately developed for different subgroups (e.g., perpetrators of rape, child abuse, sexual murder, and online sex offenses, and female perpetrators of sex offenses), as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Overview of existing typologies of sex offenders



Typologies of perpetrators of rape often distinguish between perpetrators with sexual and non-sexual motives. An overarching typology emerging from multiple studies identifies five types of rape offenders. Compensatory and sadistic perpetrators are primarily motivated by sexual desires. Compensatory offenders are unable to form normal relationships with partners of their own age and engage in rape to compensate for feelings of inadequacy, using minimal physical violence. Sadistic offenders are often psychopathic and derive sexual satisfaction from the pain and fear inflicted. These rapes can also result in sexual murders. The primary motivation of the remaining three types of perpetrators is non-sexual. Anger/retaliation perpetrators are motivated by power, anger, aggression, and hatred. They hold negative attitudes towards women and employ significant physical and sexual aggression to seek revenge against women. Power/control perpetrators seek power and dominance over their victims and use aggression to compensate for their insecurity regarding their own masculinity. Lastly, opportunistic/antisocial perpetrators are situational offenders with poor impulse control and an impulsive and adventurous lifestyle. They commit impulsive rapes, often while engaging in other criminal activities.

Within typologies that distinguish between different types of child abusers, the primary distinction is made between offenders with a primary sexual preference for children and offenders who are not primarily attracted to children. The first group is referred to as preferential perpetrators and is characterized by a persistent and compulsive attraction to children. This attraction often emerges during adolescence, and they do not progress to finding adults attractive. They are frequently diagnosed with pedophilic disorder. The second group is referred to as situational perpetrators, and they prefer social and sexual interactions

with adults. However, due to stressors that undermine their self-confidence and self-esteem, they develop a secondary sexual preference for children during adulthood. They often abuse children who are easily accessible to them, such as their own children.

Within these two types of child abusers, three subtypes can be distinguished according to the reviews. Within the group of preferential perpetrators with a sexual preference for children, these are manipulative, introverted, and sadistic perpetrators. Manipulative perpetrators do not use weapons or aggression but groom vulnerable children over a longer period to reduce their resistance. They provide affection and gifts to maintain the sexual relationship. In contrast, introverted perpetrators lack the skills to groom or manipulate children but desire affection from children. Sadistic perpetrators employ aggression and violence to gain access to children and become sexually aroused by inflicting pain on children. Within the group of situational perpetrators with a primary sexual preference for adults, distinctions are made between the subtypes of inadequate, indiscriminate, and experimental perpetrators. Due to their negative self-image and insufficient social skills, inadequate perpetrators are unable to engage in sexual relationships with adults. Therefore, they abuse children as a substitute for adult sexual relationships. The indiscriminate perpetrators are more antisocial in general and exploit children for their own interests, engaging in both physical and sexual abuse. The experimental perpetrators are driven by the desire to experiment with sexual behavior and may abuse children out of boredom.

Similar to typologies for perpetrators of rape, typologies of perpetrators of sexual murders are primarily based on the motives of these offenders. The sexual murders committed by angry perpetrators are characterized by an intense outburst of anger preceding an unplanned, explosive, and violent attack, often targeting someone known to the offender. These perpetrators typically use limited means of coercion and weapons, often leave the victim at the crime scene, which is frequently an outdoor location. Sadistic perpetrators are motivated by sexual excitement and satisfaction derived from killing the victim. Their modus operandi reflects their sadistic fantasies and often involves unusual acts such as inserting objects, dismembering the body, and keeping "trophies." The victim is often unknown to the perpetrator and the body of the victim is frequently moved after the crime. For witness-elimination perpetrators the goal of the offense is to commit sexual violence, but the killing itself is unplanned. The killing of the victim, who is often young and unfamiliar, serves an

instrumental purpose, such as restraining the victim or eliminating witnesses. The crime is typically committed at the location of the initial encounter between the perpetrator and the victim, where the body of the victim is also often left behind.

For female perpetrators of sex offenses, separate typologies have been developed, distinguishing between women who commit sex offenses alone and those who do so in conjunction with a male perpetrator. This distinction is also reflected in the overarching typology comprising five types of female perpetrators. Teacher/lover perpetrators exploit adolescents from a position of power (e.g., as a teacher or mentor) to fulfill their intimate and sexual needs. Male-coerced/male-accompanied perpetrators are subordinate women with low self-esteem, low intelligence, and feelings of helplessness who are either coerced or accompanied by a male accomplice. Some of these women witness the abuse without intervening, while others take a more active role in the abuse of children. Predisposed/self-initiated perpetrators have experienced physical or sexual abuse as a child and may exhibit symptoms of PTSD, depression, addiction, and suicidal tendencies. They may also be motivated by sadistic fantasies. The group of homosexual criminal perpetrators are motivated by financial gain and are involved in the exploitation or forced prostitution of other (young) adult women. They are often previously arrested for non-sex offenses. Finally, aggressive homosexual perpetrators commit sex offenses against adult women, often as part of domestic violence. They are motivated by anger, revenge, and jealousy.

The literature on typologies of online sex offenders predominantly focuses on the production, possession, and distribution of child pornography material, as well as grooming. A crucial distinguishing factor that emerges in many typologies is whether the sex offense occurs solely online (i.e., fantasy-driven perpetrators) or if the offender also has or intends to have offline contact with the victim (i.e., contact-driven perpetrators). However, one of the most commonly used typologies does not directly differentiate between these characteristics. This typology consists of three main categories of online sex offenders, each containing three or four subtypes.

The first main category refers to situational perpetrators, who possess child pornography material but do not have sexual motives or pedophilic interests. This category includes "normal" adolescents/adults (who search for pornography online and unintentionally encounter child pornography material, including adolescents involved in

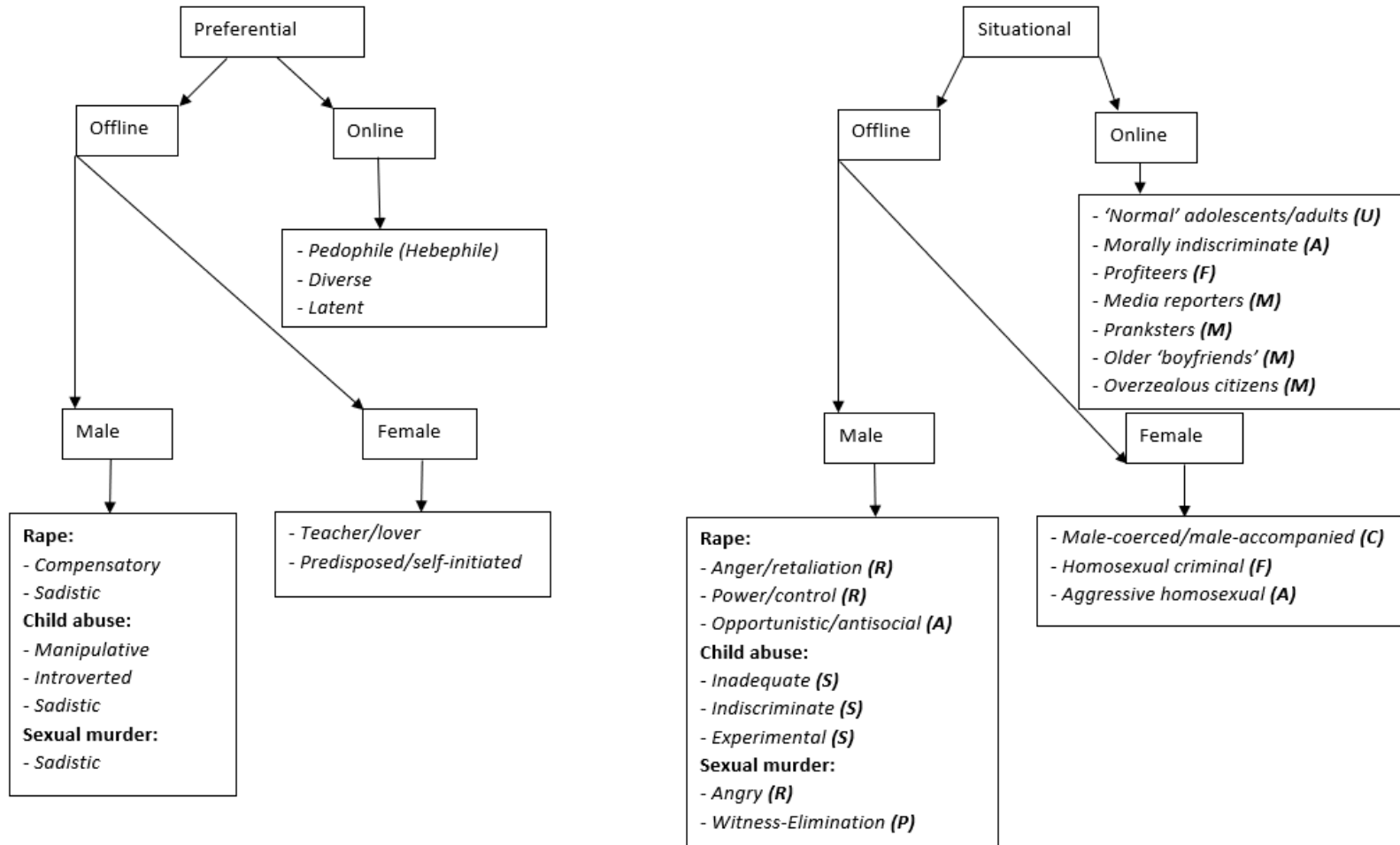
"sexting"), morally indiscriminate perpetrators (with antisocial traits and a criminal history, including parents who make their children available for online sex), and profiteers (who engage in the trade of child pornography material for financial gain, including perpetrators who blackmail victims after subjecting them to sexual contact). The second main category comprises preferential perpetrators, who have a sexual preference for children and often commit multiple offenses against multiple children ('child sex rings') or through collecting, producing, and distributing child pornography material. This category includes subcategories of pedophile (hebephile) perpetrators (with a sexual preference for minors), diverse perpetrators (with a wide range of sexual interests without a strong preference for minors but willing to try anything), and latent perpetrators (whose sexual interests in minors are intensified and inhibitions weakened after online contact with like-minded individuals). Finally, there are miscellaneous perpetrators who break the law by accessing child pornography material but typically do not do so with malicious intent. This category includes subcategories of media reporters (who mistakenly believe they can trade child pornography material online to expose it in the context of media reporting), pranksters (who disseminate false or compromising images to embarrass victims), older "boyfriends" (in their late teens or early twenties attempting to engage in sexual activity with adolescents), and overzealous citizens (who initiate their own investigations into online child sexual abuse).

When comparing the (overarching) typologies of different subgroups of sex offenders, it becomes evident that there are more differences than similarities. Within each subgroup of sex offenders, the typologies appear to be primarily based on different factors. In the typologies of rape and sexual murders, the distinction is primarily made based on the motives of the perpetrator. In the typologies of child abuse, the distinction is primarily focused on the primary sexual preference of the offenders. In the typologies of female offenders, the focus strongly lies on the presence or absence of a male perpetrator. In the typologies of online offenses, there is a strong emphasis on whether the offender intends to commit physical abuse in real life. As a result, the types of offenders distinguished in the (overarching) typologies within each subgroup of sex offenders are often quite different. However, a commonality that can nevertheless be found is that in all (overarching) typologies within each subgroup of sex offenders, a distinction can be made between offenders who are primarily sexually motivated to abuse a specific type of victim and offenders who are not primarily

sexually motivated and/or do not have a sexual preference for the type of victim they abuse. The first group can be described as preferential offenders, and the second group as situational offenders. The different types of offenders that can be divided between preferential and situational offenders are summarized in Figure 2.

Unfortunately, the examined literature, in both the umbrella review as the additional recent empirical studies, provides relatively little information on the treatment approaches for different types of offenders. While various reviews and studies have addressed treatment possibilities and recidivism risk for the group of offenders as a whole, they rarely specifically focus on the different types of offenders identified in typologies. In general, it is suggested that when offenders are sexually driven (i.e., preferential offenders) and act based on sexual deviations or cognitions (paraphilias), they have a higher risk of recidivism, and these deviations should be the central focus of treatment. Regarding female-specific typologies, it is suggested that they can form a basis for prevention, treatment, and intervention by helping to understand the extent to which female offenders are similar to male offenders and whether gender-specific interventions are necessary.

Figure 2: Overview types of sex offenders from the umbrella review



Note: The motive or cause of the sex offenses of the different types of situational sex offenders is displayed after their names: **R: Rage, anger, aggression and power; A: part of a broader pattern of Antisocial behavior; S: Situational factors; P: Prevent detection of the crime; U: Unintentional offense; F: Financial profit; C: Coerced or accompanied by male Co-offender; M: Miscellaneous other causes.**

The findings should be considered in light of certain limitations of the literature. First, it should be noted that many of these studies were of limited quality. Only five studies were actual systematic reviews, and of those, only one provided a complete description of the number and type of databases searched, the number of studies included, and the search period. The remaining studies were all literature reviews lacking information on the search strategy and appearing to have a less systematic approach. This may have resulted in reviews presenting a selective view of the existing literature. Additionally, the majority of the studies were conducted in the United States, raising questions about the generalizability of the findings to other countries and cultures. Thirdly, it should be noted that the typologies are often based on very small samples derived from clinical practice. This means that sometimes an entire subgroup of offenders is based on only one or a few individuals. Finally, it should be mentioned that virtually every review addresses typologies for a specific subgroup of offenders within the total population of sex offenders. Moreover, the attention given to certain subgroups of sex offenders in the literature does not seem to correspond proportionally to the share of these subgroups within the total population of sex offenders. In the supplementary review, this is less evident, mainly because there seems to be an increasing availability of large comprehensive and longitudinal datasets that can provide data-driven insights into the life course of different groups of offenders.



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