Confronting Child Sexual Abuse

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CHAPTER ONE

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

Reading a book to learn more about child sexual abuse and its prevention is commendable. Child sexual abuse (CSA) is a very emotional and upsetting topic, and parts of this book may be hard to read. I suspect, however, that you have chosen to read this because you know that CSA has a profound impact on individuals, families, and society at large. Perhaps you are a teacher, parent, or coach who wants to protect the kids in your care. Or maybe you are working in criminal justice and want to get a better understanding of CSA and its prevention. Or it’s possible that you just want to be an informed citizen who can contribute to the debate about the best policy responses to CSA. Regardless of your purpose, the book is designed to provide readers with a wide range of current information from fields that include psychology, sociology, communications, criminology, and political science. When done reading, you should have a good sense of why and how CSA occurs, what its costs are, and which prevention strategies work.

While this book draws on research from many disciplines, its approach is primarily sociological. Sociology is a critical perspective, questioning commonly held assumptions about the way the
world works. In broad terms, sociologists are interested in how the organization of society impacts individual lives. One example is how people choose careers. Does one simply choose an area that matches their talent, or do race and gender have an impact? Do friends and family make a difference? Sociologists aren’t suggesting that people are merely robots—certainly choices are made among various career options—and people can work toward changing social structures as well. I might, for example, join a social movement looking to make more occupations open to women. The point is that sociologists ask about how individual choices, actions, and beliefs are affected by interactions with others and by the social context in which one lives.

What does it mean to approach the topic of CSA sociologically? First, a sociological perspective calls on us to interrogate our own assumptions. This is because, as discussed in the preface, knowledge about CSA is socially constructed. In other words, the interactions had with other people—like teachers, family members, or the media—guide people toward particular beliefs. This does not necessarily mean those beliefs are wrong, but sociology demands deep investigation before accepting beliefs as truth. Second, a sociological perspective towards CSA focuses on trends rather than individual cases. The advantage to this approach is that it provides a big-picture view of CSA. What does a typical case look like? Are particular categories of children more at risk? Is CSA increasing or decreasing? Third, a sociological perspective considers how the organization of society plays a role in when, why, and how CSA occurs. Psychological explanations are certainly important, and I will cover them at some length, but they tell only one part of the story. A sociological perspective suggests that all individual action is affected by social factors.
Let’s start by taking a short quiz:

**Answer the following questions on the following scale:**

1=I am very sure this is **false**.
2=I am somewhat sure this is **false**
3=Neutral or don’t know
4=I am somewhat sure this is **true**
5=I am very sure this is **true**

1. Most sex offenders were sexually abused as children. (pg. 90)
2. Children who change their mind about the abuse probably lied at first (pg. 84)
3. Boys are less likely than girls to be emotionally traumatized by the experience of abuse. (pg. 71)
4. Most sexual abusers are homosexual. (pg. 44)
5. Child sexual abuse takes place mainly in poor families. (pg. 78)
6. Adolescents and even preadolescents are sometimes sex offenders. (pg. 87)
7. Penalties should be increased for sex offenders. (pg. 133)

The questions in the quiz are derived from scales that measure CSA knowledge and attitudes. The answers are in later chapters, although clicking the linked questions will also provide them. I assume that readers already know something—maybe a lot—about CSA. Where did that knowledge come from? Research suggests that the primary source of CSA information for most is

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the internet, magazines, newspapers, and other media outlets. As discussed in chapter 7, however, an increasing number of people also get information from prevention training programs provided by schools, churches, and other organizations. On an even larger scale, various social movements work to bring attention to abuse. Of course, some of the most important knowledge about CSA comes through interactions with other people. Sometimes people might talk about the topic directly, but silence about abuse also carries meaning. This chapter covers all of these intertwined social forces and looks at how they have come to define what many know and believe about CSA. As you read, you may recognize some of the forces that drive your own responses.

WAVES OF ATTENTION TO CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

For most of US history, people simply didn’t talk about child abuse. This was partly because children were considered the property of their parents. This gave parents a wide berth to do as they pleased with them. Starting in the late 1800s, however, certain acts, like extreme beating, became socially unacceptable. The idea that abuse could and did occur within families began to grow. Mary Ellen McCormick was a young girl in New York City who was repeatedly beaten by her foster mother. The abuse was so severe, a church worker sought to remove her from her home. When social work organizations refused to intervene, her case was presented to the Society for the Protection of Animals. Ultimately, Mary Ellen was moved out of her home and her case became the inspiration for the founding of the first Society for the Protection of Children in 1874.3


As part of the growing awareness of child welfare, social workers began to recognize cases of child sexual abuse and brought them to the attention of the legal system and the media. Interestingly, the temperance movement also pushed for the recognition of incest and other types of abuse as a social problem. Temperance advocates believed that if men stopped drinking, they would abuse women and children less.⁴ In reality, however, the attention that reformers paid to incest paled in comparison to their attention to prostitution. Prostitution was understood to be the way that most men and, subsequently, their wives got sexually transmitted diseases. Although there were also many cases of gonorrhea in young girls, most medical professionals declared them to be a result of non-sexual transmission (toilet seats and soiled bedsheets, for example). Incest was defined as an aberration, most frequently found among the lower classes, and many reformers simply refused to acknowledge that it could be the cause of so much sexually transmitted disease.⁵ Interest in incest waned even further after 1920 as the problem was largely reframed as one of weak mothers and sexually provocative daughters. Incest continued to be portrayed as rare, and girls and women who accused their family members were seen as liars.⁶

A second period of attention to incest, also sparked by social activism, began in the 1970s. The nascent women’s liberation movement identified the abuse of women and children as a key issue. Along with domestic violence and marital rape, activists called attention to incest. In “consciousness raising groups,”

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women got together and talked about their childhood experiences. For many, it was the first time they were able to put words to what had happened to them. The media paid attention and began to take sexual violence much more seriously. Reporters relied less on sexist myths to explain abuse than they had in the past. This wave of media attention reached a group of people who had no access to other sources of information about CSA. Most of the media coverage during this period framed incest as an important problem that society had denied for too long.

Public interest in incest continued into the 1980s with the publication of a number of popular novels. These included *Flowers in the Attic* (1979), *The Hotel New Hampshire* (1981), and *The Color Purple* (1983). All three were later adapted into movies. There were also made-for-TV movies such as *Something about Amelia* (1984), which focused on a middle-class thirteen-year-old girl who was being sexually abused by her father. Over time, however, coverage of incest gradually decreased as the public’s attention was drawn to other issues. For example, events at the McMartin preschool located in Manhattan Beach, California, began to dominate the headlines. In September 1983, a mother of a two-year-old boy told the police that she believed her son was being abused by his teacher Raymond Buckey. The police responded by sending a letter to all school parents detailing the accusations of sexual abuse and requesting leads to other victims. This letter caused many panicked parents to talk to their children and call the police to report suspicions of abuse.

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Ultimately, a social worker was hired to interview the children and criminal charges were extended to include Virginia McMartin, who owned the school, as well as five other women who were teachers (charges against the latter five were dropped before the case went to trial).  

As the McMartin case progressed, children and parents made new allegations, including animal sacrifice, satanic rituals, orgies, and the use of underground tunnels to abuse children. Today, these accusations may seem bizarre, but they made more sense in the context of the 1980s. The founding of the Church of Satan in San Francisco in 1966 set off a media firestorm, and the public began to believe that satanism posed a real threat to the United States. By the time of the McMartin case, there was a significant antisatanist movement composed of various groups, including fundamentalist Christians and anticult activists. These groups generated media coverage about satanism. Satanism, however, was not the only issue creating cultural anxiety during the 1970s and 1980s. Increasing numbers of mothers were entering the workforce, and critics of this rapid social change stoked fears that day care could result in lasting damage to children. In some ways, the McMartin case represented the convergence of perceived threats to both the traditional family and to Christianity.

In the end, both Buckey and McMartin were exonerated—largely because the jury questioned the tactics that had been used to interview the children (for a description of these tactics, see chapter 3). The closing of the McMartin case, however, did not put an end to fears of satanic activity. Other day-care centers faced


allegations, and there were many more rumors about children being kidnapped by satanic cults. National television shows (such as 20/20) covered the supposed satanic threat, and local papers often reported on rumors of satanic activity. By graphically covering these stories, the media contributed to an air of fear.¹³

During the same period that the McMartin investigation was taking place, public attention was drawn to a second issue involving CSA. Repressed memory was based on the idea that people who suffer extremely traumatic events can unconsciously protect themselves by repressing their memories. Therapists reported that these memories could surface on their own years later or that they could be extracted by a psychologist. One of the first legal tests of this idea came in the widely reported 1990 case of George Franklin Sr., a California man whose daughter accused him of abusing and murdering her friend. While the murder had occurred more than twenty years earlier, the daughter claimed that she had repressed the memory of it. Franklin was convicted on the basis of her testimony and was sentenced to life in prison.¹⁴ Following Franklin’s case, many other people came forward, claiming repressed memories of childhood sexual abuse.

One of the primary ways that people came to know about repressed memory was a book called Courage to Heal by Ellen Bass and Laura Davis. Published in 1988, the book was intended to help women who had experienced sexual abuse. It strongly validated the idea of repressed memories by saying, “If you are unable to remember any specific instances like the ones mentioned above but still have a feeling that something abusive happened to you, it probably did.”¹⁵ The authors encouraged women to delve deeply

into their memories, confront their abusers, and take care of their “inner child” by reenacting parts of their childhood. Repressed memories were pushed further into the public spotlight in 1991 when actor Roseanne Barr claimed that she had recovered memories of her parents abusing her as an infant and toddler.

It is not clear how many people have claimed repressed memory, but a professor at Brown University keeps a list of court cases where it is mentioned. As of this writing, there are over fifty cases. Check it out at https://blogs.brown.edu/recoveredmemory/case-archive/legal-cases/.

Public attention to repressed memory began to slow after several influential psychologists published studies showing that adult memory is malleable, that people actually tend to remember trauma quite clearly, and that infants do not have the capacity to form memories (although seeing photos of an event that took place when someone was an infant can create the sensation of memory). Criticism was leveled against therapists who suggested to clients that they might have repressed memories of abuse. For example, some therapists told clients that there was a high rate of child abuse in society, and that abuse was often linked with the particular mental health symptoms they reported. Because memory is malleable, these adults had the capacity to “remember” events that did not happen.


Figure 2. Roseanne Barr. “File:Roseanne Barr in 2010.jpg” by Leah Mark is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0.
Another important force turning the public against the idea of repressed memory was the False Memory Syndrome Foundation (FMSF). This group was formed by family members who felt that they had been falsely accused through therapist-induced repressed memories. They engaged in public-information campaigns and paid for the legal defense of people accused of abuse through recovered memories. Finally, the media began to run articles questioning the reliability of repressed memory. This was a significant turn in the framing of the story, with the accused people being quoted far more often than the people making the claims of abuse. The media began to highlight the emotions of accused parents as a way to illustrate their innocence, while coverage portrayed some of the accusers as “hysterical.”

The False Memory Syndrome Foundation is still in existence. You can check them out at http://www.fmsfonline.org/.

Five years after George Franklin was convicted, his sentence was overturned because of the lack of corroborating evidence and because so many doubts had been raised about the reliability of repressed memory. At the same time, many people continue to believe in the idea. In a set of surveys conducted in 2012, researchers found that over 80 percent of undergraduates agreed that “traumatic memories are often repressed.” They also looked at the attitudes of PhD-trained therapists and were able to compare the results with survey data collected in 1990. They found that therapists became much more skeptical of repressed memory over the period. At the same time, in 2012, more than 9 percent reported that hypnosis could recover memories “back to birth.”

The repressed memory issue is complex and still highly controversial. Check out a recent *This American Life* radio broadcast about an adult woman trying to find out why her mother lost custody of her when she was young. The episode involves the work of Elizabeth Loftus. She is a well-known psychologist cited elsewhere in this chapter. The story is in act 2: https://www.thisamericanlife.org/676/heres-looking-at-you-kid.

Sparked by a spate of CSA cases that involved abductions, “stranger danger” emerged as a public concern in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In 1989, five boys were abducted in four separate incidents in Washington State. Two were sexually assaulted and a third was recovered before an assault could take place. Three of the boys were murdered. In one of the cases, the perpetrator had previously served time for sexually assaulting two teenage girls. In 1993, Polly Klaas, a twelve-year-old living in California, was abducted from a slumber party and murdered and, in 1994, seven-year-old Megan Kanka was killed by a sex offender who lived in her New Jersey neighborhood. The fact that these terrible events were heavily reported over just a few years gave the impression of a wave of violence against children.

Heavy media coverage of CSA cases involving strangers, like those above, has been instrumental in forming public opinion and driving legislation to try and prevent it. In chapters 4 and 5, I will discuss the many laws that came out of this period, often pushed forward by activists. Marc Klaas (Polly’s father) became a child advocate and appeared on many news stories. He also started a foundation to prevent and solve child abduction cases. It still exists today (check it out at https://klaaskids.org/ if you are interested in the work they do). There were at least three television shows about Polly Klaas’s murder (including one on A&E and one on the

Figure 3. John Walsh has hosted a number of shows about missing children. Most recently he hosted *In Pursuit with John Walsh*. Source: Everett Collection at Shutterstock.
Discovery Channel). Running for four seasons starting in 1995, a show called Missing Children reenacted child abductions with the goal of solving them. It is not surprising that, in line with this kind of media coverage, the public has come to overestimate the proportion of assaults on children that are committed by strangers and are violent.22

Abuse in organizations is the most recent wave of public attention to CSA. In 1985, a Roman Catholic priest in Louisiana was convicted on several hundred counts of child sexual abuse. The National Catholic Reporter (a major Catholic news outlet) subsequently published an article about his case and about child sex abuse in the Church more generally. The public did not seriously focus on the topic, however, until a 2002 Boston Globe series revealed widespread abuse of children by priests and seminarians. Vocal groups of victims began to press the Church for accountability (the most visible of these groups—still in existence today—is called the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, or SNAP). Since 2002, numerous domestic and international cases of abuse have been revealed. For example, between 1950 and 2002, at least 4,392 priests in the United States were accused of abusing 10,667

minors. Media coverage of Catholic abuse cases hit a high in 2002, and then again in 2010 when there were accusations that then Pope Benedict had covered up cases of abuse when he was a bishop in Germany. In 2018, the Diocese of Pittsburgh released the names of ninety-nine priests who had credible allegations made against them. Many other dioceses have followed suit, generating a great deal of publicity.

The media has covered many other large-scale cases of abuse in organizations. Notably, in 2012, the Boy Scouts of America (BSA) was forced to release the contents of 1,247 confidential files that contained information about CSA accusations against its employees and volunteers. The files, created between 1965 and 1985, showed that the Scouts often did not contact law enforcement and even allowed some accused molesters to continue within the organization. Between 1985 and 1991 (when background checks became widely available), the BSA allowed two hundred and thirty adults with arrests or convictions to work with children. The BSA has been particularly aggressive in its legal defense. In one notorious 2010 case of a repeat offender, the BSA lawyer argued that the parents of victims were at fault for not supervising their


children properly. In another case prosecuted in 2002, a different lawyer argued that a thirteen-year-old had sex “consensually” with a thirty-year-old leader.27 In February of 2020, however, the BSA filed for bankruptcy, citing 275 pending lawsuits and fourteen hundred other potential lawsuits.28

USA Gymnastics and the US Olympic Committee are other groups that have come under intense scrutiny because they employed Dr. Larry Nassar to care for their athletes. An investigation by the Indianapolis Star in 2016 led to hundreds of women and girls coming forward and accusing Nassar of sexual abuse. Ultimately, he was arrested, and over one hundred women and girls gave televised victim-impact statements at his trial, mesmerizing the nation. It became clear that Nassar had been allowed to continue his work with the Olympics and with Michigan State, even though some top officials at both institutions were aware that there were allegations against him.29

IMAGES OF THE TYPICAL CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE CASE

Periods of attention to CSA, like those discussed above, are important because they help shape perceptions. But even when CSA is not a “hot topic,” it does not disappear from view. What are some of the broader trends in how people talk about and understand CSA?

I will start with messages about what the “typical” CSA case looks like. The media has a powerful role in defining our ideas about what is typical through their selection of stories. An example of this involves crime more generally. We know that crimes are more likely to receive media coverage when the perpetrator is a person of color. In turn, this has caused (or at least reinforced) the public’s belief that people of color are the typical criminal.30

Perhaps not surprisingly, research finds that the majority of CSA cases never appear in the media.31 Those cases that do, however, usually exhibit one or more of the following traits: the accused is somebody perceived to be an upstanding citizen, the case is particularly violent or bizarre, there are multiple victims, a celebrity is either accused or victimized, or there is a cover-up.32 We also know that the media overrepresent cases where the perpetrator is a stranger or an authority figure and they underrepresent incest.33 The media (and most of us) are drawn to stories where good and evil are clearly defined.34 Finally, the media often run stories that resonate with viewers’ cultural beliefs, fears, and attitudes.35 This is related to confirmation bias (described in the preface) as people seek out stories that appear to correspond to their preexisting beliefs.

In addition to what the media choose to present, how they present

that material matters. Most media coverage of CSA is through the lens of a particular case. In other words, they present the story of one crime (or one series of crimes perpetrated by the same person), rarely reporting on the topic of CSA more generally. In the language of media scholars, the coverage is “episodic” rather than “thematic.”

An Example of Episodic vs. Thematic Framing


Episodic framing is popular because it appeals to our emotions. Most people like to read stories about other people’s lives.


37. Kimberly Gross, “Framing Persuasive Appeals: Episodic and Thematic
and our hearts go out to children who are victims. The problem, however, is that episodic framing does not give a representative picture of CSA. The public ends up knowing a lot about particular cases but very little about trends. When this is combined with the media’s tendency to cover only severe cases and those that involve strangers, this skews the vision of what CSA most often looks like.

IMAGES OF VICTIMS

What images do the word child bring to mind? Perhaps you, like many people, think about innocence. Historians have found that people have long made this association. Interestingly, you might also think about victimization. Sociologist Joel Best argues that, since the 1950s, repeated waves of media attention to crimes against children (like those described above) have made victimization a primary lens through which people view children. A good example is local television news. A group of researchers examined the frames that were used in newscasters’ coverage of children and found that the most dominant was the “imperiled child.” In other words, children appear as victims in television news more than they appear in any other role.

The idea of children as victims is easy to accept because it goes hand-in-glove with images of them as innocent, passive, and unable to protect themselves. These characteristics also make them what some scholars call the ideal victim. This term refers to the kind of

people who receive the most sympathy in the aftermath of a crime. Ideal victims have the following characteristics:

1. They are weak in comparison to the offender.
2. They are not doing anything that could be seen as unordinary or of questionable morality at the time that they are victimized.
3. They bear no blame for the crime committed against them.
4. The person who harms them is clearly bad.

Women and children are particularly likely to be seen as ideal victims because they are assumed to be weak and unlikely to be engaged in immoral activities. This is why, when people are asked what image they associate with the word victim, most see a woman or child.

Unfortunately, ideal-victim status is not equally granted to all children. Specifically, children of color are less likely to be seen as innocent victims and therefore are less often featured in media stories about abuse. One study of missing children’s cases found that those involving children of color are less likely to receive attention from the media. Ideal victim imagery also focuses on

42. Best, Threatened Children.
girls, hiding the reality that boys are victims too. Finally, envisioning ideal victims as innocent can overlook particular children. For example, the public tends to be less sympathetic to CSA victims who have engaged in other sexual activities or who seem to have a lot of sexual knowledge.44

IMAGES OF OFFENDERS

What are common images of offenders? In general, the media depicts them as evil and unlike “normal” people. Newspapers often run photos of offenders smirking. Terms like *animals* or *beasts* are used to describe them. The *pedophile* label also serves to separate people who sexually abuse children from other humans—and even from people who abuse adults.45 One researcher describes media depictions of offenders as portraying “compulsive recidivist(s) whose behavior often escalates to lethal violent crime.”46

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The public’s views about offenders tend to correspond with and be shaped by the media.\textsuperscript{47} Thus, while we hold negative attitudes toward all types of criminals, feelings are especially hostile toward child sexual offenders. In one survey, for example, respondents were asked about their levels of fear of sex offenders. They reported the strongest fear of those who offend against children.\textsuperscript{48} Mona Lynch’s analysis of congressional debate about four proposed CSA prevention bills bears out these highly negative feelings. The politicians revealed feelings of disgust toward sex offenders, portraying them as contaminated and polluting.\textsuperscript{49} Even other criminals view CSA offenders as different and more deviant.\textsuperscript{50} This is why people who are convicted for CSA are routinely beaten up and harassed in prison.

It turns out that how we view offenders is linked to our explanations for why they abuse children. Psychologists call these explanations for behavior “attributions,” and they distinguish between those that are external and internal. As the name implies, external attributions locate the reason for behavior somewhere outside the individual. For example, one might say that an offender abuses because he was beaten as a child. An internal attribution identifies some personality or other individual trait as responsible (“He’s an evil person”). Interestingly, across many situations, people tend to use external attribution for

\textsuperscript{47}. Katz-Schiavone, Levenson, and Ackerman, “Myths and Facts about Sexual Violence.”


their own actions and internal attributions for others. This is called the fundamental attribution error. For example, if a stranger is rude to us in a store, we are likely to think that they are a mean person. When we say something rude to someone else, however, we settle on external factors as the cause. We might think about how our car just broke down or how we lost our job.


What are the most common attributions for CSA? One study found that there are four main categories—three internal and one external. In the first internal attribution, offenders are seen as having a particular sexual orientation (pedophilia) that makes them attracted to children. The second internal attribution sees CSA as caused by mental illness. In the third attribution, offenders are portrayed as making a choice to harm kids. The last attribution—and the only one that is external—assumes that offenders abuse children because of their own prior victimization.51 In fact, this “cycle of abuse” explanation is so popular, it leads the public to overestimate the percentage of offenders who were victims.52

While pedophilia, mental illness, choice, and the cycle of violence are the most common attributions for CSA, they are not the


only ones present in public discourse. Emerging from some segments of the feminist movement in the 1970s, gender oppression is one important alternate explanation. This view places CSA into the same category as other forms of violence against women and children, identifying men’s disproportionate power and privilege in society as the cause. The structure of the family, with the male head of household, leads men to feel entitled to sex and, in turn, their very sexuality comes to be defined by the ability to dominate less powerful others like women and children. Obviously this attribution is external since it sees the cause of CSA as embedded in the very structure of society. Although it has not achieved much mainstream success, the gender attribution still appears today, particularly as an explanation for why the majority of CSA is committed by men against girls.

Before leaving the topic of attribution and CSA, it is important to mention a persistent myth that links CSA with homosexuality. While research has thoroughly debunked it, the myth gained traction in 1977, when the Miami city council passed an ordinance that prohibited discrimination in housing, employment, and public accommodation on the basis of sexual orientation. This might have attracted little attention except that a minister at a local church preached about the bill’s passage. Anita Bryant (a popular actor and singer and the spokesperson for Florida orange juice) attended church that day and was very disturbed by what


she heard. She felt that the ordinance infringed on her religious rights. She also believed (without any evidence) that homosexuals were disproportionately child molesters and that the bill would put children at risk. She was quoted as saying, “Some of the stories I could tell you of child recruitment and child abuse by homosexuals would turn your stomach.”58

Bryant’s outrage sparked a public campaign that came to be called Save Our Children. The group was ultimately successful in helping to convince voters to rescind the ordinance. Her organization also inspired groups in other areas of the country to overturn similar antidiscrimination legislation. At the same time, her actions had the unanticipated effect of prompting gay people and allies to action. Protestors began appearing at her events, and some places refused to host her shows. Some gay bars even refused to sell orange juice, replacing screwdrivers with an apple juice-based drink named after Bryant. Bryant has been credited with the rare feat of mobilizing both Christian fundamentalists and gay activists. More to the point here, however, Save Our Children helped link homosexuality and child sexual abuse in the public’s mind. This was reinforced by the media. Sometimes a story would simply assert that gay people were more likely to abuse children; other times the supposed link was more nuanced. For example, the term homosexual was used to describe abuse when the offender was a man and the victim a boy, but the term heterosexual was never used to refer to abuse between a man and girl. This implicitly suggested that homosexuality is linked to abuse but that heterosexuality is not.59

The Catholic Church has also actively worked to place blame for CSA on gay people. In 2005, the Congregation for Catholic Education, the most important Catholic office prescribing educational standards, published a document with guidelines for admitting men to the priesthood. While the document had been

59. Kitzinger, “Media Coverage of Sexual Violence against Women and Children.”
in preparation for many years, its publication in the wake of the 2002 Boston priest abuse scandal made it appear to be a response. In it, the Church states that ordination should be denied to any man who exhibits “deep-seated homosexual tendencies.” Critics charged that this implicitly placed the blame for CSA on gay men.60 Additionally, in 2009, the Vatican released a statement that attributed CSA in the Church to homosexual priests.61 Even today, high-ranking leaders in the Catholic Church continue to blame gay men for the Church’s CSA crisis. For example, Bishop Robert Morlino of Madison, Wisconsin, wrote a letter in 2018 saying sexual abuse is “deviant sexual—almost exclusively homosexual—acts by clerics. It is time to admit that there is a homosexual subculture within the hierarchy of the Catholic Church that is wreaking great devastation in the vineyard of the Lord.”62

MESSAGES ABOUT CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE PREVENTION
The way that we frame CSA sets the stage for our thinking about appropriate solutions. The gender-based frame described above, for example, leads to societal rather than individual solutions. In fact, many feminists argued that the solution was for women to have more power, both inside and outside of the home. But, as described, the gender-based frame has not been widely accepted, perhaps because it threatens traditional family structures. We much more commonly employ what could be called a “bad apples” frame. In this frame, CSA is attributed to individual bad guys:

people who are aberrations from what is normal. The popularity of this kind of frame likely has something to do with the media’s episodic approach and our tendency to attribute CSA to internal causes. When individuals are identified as the problem, this leads to solutions directed at those individuals. Thus, it should not be surprising that when the media reports on CSA prevention, the proposed solutions most often involve law enforcement (locking up the bad individuals) or education (helping individual parents or children prevent CSA).63

The focus on criminal justice solutions is enhanced by media attention to particular aspects of CSA. For example, most stories are about the crimes and the subsequent legal developments—with a particular emphasis on pretrial events (like arrest, bail, and indictment). This draws attention to the criminal justice process and away from alternatives. Interestingly, sentencing receives relatively little attention, although particularly long sentences are more likely to be covered.64 This may be because the media rely heavily on government sources when choosing what to report (as opposed to asking advocacy groups, family members, or victims).65 Prosecutors and the attorney general are elected positions, and incumbents may want to publicize long sentences to appear to be “tough on crime” to the electorate.66

Social movements have contributed to the definition of CSA as an issue for criminal justice. The victim’s rights movement (VRM) began in the 1970s because of the perception that the few rights victims had in the criminal justice system were being eroded. To support their claims, some early VRM activists pointed to changes

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during the 1960s that increased due-process rights for defendants. The US Supreme Court, for example, ruled that evidence taken without a search warrant could not be used in court. A group called Americans for Effective Law Enforcement was formed to push back against this and other new rights for criminal defendants. They seemed to see rights as a zero-sum game: that if defendants gained rights, victims lost theirs. In 1968, Richard Nixon ran for president on a “law and order” platform, stating that defendants had too many rights and that victims were going unheard.67

There is little question that, historically, victims have had very little control or say in the criminal justice process, especially when it came to sexual assault. They were often not informed about important hearings in their cases, nor were they told when their assailant was released from custody. They were not eligible for any sort of restitution for damages incurred in the crime. Lawyers for the defense routinely asked victims about their past sexual history, treating them as though they, rather than the defendant, were on trial. The odds were so stacked against sexual abuse victims that few were able to win their cases.68 Outrage over these injustices led to an unusual alliance between some segments of the feminist movement and law-and-order conservatives.69 The goal was to find criminal justice solutions to abuse issues.

Why haven’t noncriminal justice solutions gained more traction with the public? One reason is that a large proportion of the public


believes that rehabilitation is ineffective. It turns out that this belief has a long history. One of the first studies to look at the efficacy of treatment programs in reducing recidivism was conducted by Robert Martinson. The article that resulted from his study was published in 1974 and was called “What Works: Questions and Answers about Prison Reform.” It explored whether or not the rehabilitative programming provided in prison was effective at reducing recidivism. Importantly, the study looked at recidivism rates for people convicted for all types of crime, not just CSA. Martinson and his colleagues did not conduct any program evaluations themselves, but instead reviewed 231 published studies that had been conducted around the world between 1945 and 1967. All of these studies evaluated various types of rehabilitative prison programming (like educational programs, vocational training, and therapy).

Martinson’s review led him to conclude that rehabilitative programs are not effective in reducing recidivism. At the same time, however, he strongly cautioned that the methods of the studies he used to draw this conclusion were weak. He also pointed out that many of the rehabilitative programs were underfunded and not implemented properly. In other words, it might have been the delivery of the program that was the problem, not the program itself. Finally, Martinson pointed out that incarcerated people live in a dangerous and isolating environment, raising the risk of long-term mental-health issues. Perhaps the programs were helpful but simply not strong enough to overcome the negative impact of having been in prison.

While the Martinson article was careful about drawing strong conclusions about the efficacy of prison programming, the public


did not receive that message. The study was widely described in the popular press as proof that rehabilitation does not work. Its findings came to be summarized by “nothing works,” a play on its title. It was an important factor leading the public to lose faith in society’s ability to rehabilitate.

In the years following the publication of “What Works,” a number of well-designed studies showed that rehabilitation can be effective in reducing recidivism, but few of those studies received public attention. In 1989, however, researchers published another review of previous studies that appeared to support Martinson’s findings. It included forty-two studies of male sex offenders. Only some of the studies, however, focused on the effects of treatment. Like Martinson, the authors were extremely critical of the studies that they reviewed. They noted significant methodological problems and a lack of comparability due to the use of different populations, time periods, and definitions. At least in part because of these problems, the researchers were not able to conclude that clinical treatment is effective—although they could not conclude that it was ineffective either. Once again, the media did not provide the public with the details of the findings, instead choosing to simply report that treatment does not work. The study was so influential, Senator Orrin Hatch used it to argue in favor of the Lifetime Sentences for Sex Offenders Act of 2003. Of course, Hatch did not mention the methodological flaws or limitations of the study but simply cited it to show that rehabilitation does not work.


CONCLUSION

This chapter has examined how knowledge and attitudes about CSA emerge in a social context. The media is clearly important, although its attention tends to come in waves after a tragedy or in response to a social movement. Most often, media coverage is episodic and is focused on extreme cases involving white victims. Frames used tend to emphasize individualistic explanations for CSA, ignoring possible social causes (like the lack of treatment options).

Media coverage about CSA runs in parallel to public opinion, both reflecting it and helping to create it. The public tends to be very sympathetic toward child victims, at least those who fit the ideal-victim model. Offenders are viewed as monsters, even though many people attribute their actions to previous victimization. Some social movements have had success in promoting particular frames and policy solutions. The victim rights movement, for example, has been successful in emphasizing CSA as a criminal justice issue.

Now, returning to the quiz at the beginning of the chapter: Can you remember where you learned the information you used to answer the questions? Are your views generally congruent with public opinion? If not, why might that be? The next two chapters will give you an opportunity to compare your knowledge with the findings from a variety of research studies. You will see that some popular beliefs about CSA are borne out by the research, while others are not. These discrepancies, more often than not, are a result of the social processes outlined in this chapter.

FURTHER READING


