

Exhibitionism

Findings From a Midwestern Police Contact Sample

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This study used a police sample to examine offense characteristics, recidivism rates, and other types of sexual offending among individuals suspected of exhibitionism. The sample consisted of 202 incidents of indecent exposure perpetrated by 106 identified individuals. Demographic information showed that one quarter of the sample had symptoms of a mental illness and one quarter had a history of substance abuse. More than 84% of the sample had other nonsexual criminal charges. Approximately 30% of the perpetrators were charged for more than one exposure incident. Masturbating during the offense, exposing to child victims, and speaking to the victim did not show any relationship to the occurrence of more sexually aggressive behaviors. However, individuals who had subsequent rape or molestation charges (16.9%) were more likely than those who did not to have had multiple exposure incidents and a history of physical assault charges.

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Exhibitionism, the act of exposing one's genitals to an unsuspecting stranger, remains an understudied paraphilia. Although most authors agree that exhibitionists are likely to repeat the behavior (Bartosh, Garby, Lewis, & Gray, 2003; Doren, 2002; Firestone, Kingston, Wexler, & Bradford, 2006; Marshall, Anderson, & Fernandez, 1999), few studies have examined recidivism rates or the co-occurrence of other types of sexual offending. Furthermore, most research on exhibitionists has been limited to small clinical samples. The present study attempts to expand on the existing literature by examining the offense characteristics, recidivism rates, and prevalence of other types of sexual offending in a nonclinical sample of individuals suspected of exhibitionism.

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Incidence

Estimating the incidence of exhibitionism remains a difficult task for researchers. Some authors have suggested that exhibitionism is the most common sexual offense (Abel, Becker, Cunningham-Radmer, Minehan, & Rouleau, 1988; Bartosh et al., 2003; Firestone et al., 2006). Unfortunately, these opinions have been drawn from clinical samples and may consequently represent only perpetrators with chronic and serious sexual offense histories or comorbid psychiatric illness (Murphy, 1997). In one of the largest nonclinical studies of exhibitionism to date, a representative national sample of 2,450 Swedish adults was surveyed about their health and sexual behaviors. More than 4% of males and 2% of females indicated that they had engaged in exhibitionistic behavior for the purposes of sexual arousal during their lifetime (Langstrom & Seto, 2005). One difficulty in estimating the incidence of exhibitionism is significant underreporting. Abel et al. (1988) approximated that acts of exhibitionism occur up to 150 times more often than what is reflected in police statistics. Consistent with this report, Riordan (1999) found that 43% of her sample of exhibitionism victims did not report the crime.

Demographic Figures and Comorbidity

Although many studies during the 1960s and 1970s examined demographic and psychological correlates of exhibitionism, fewer descriptive studies have been published recently. As Murphy's (1997) review showed, these earlier studies were informed by psychodynamic formulations instead of cognitive or behavioral models. Furthermore, these earlier studies did not use structured interviews and some used selective samples, limiting their generalizability. Consequently, Murphy argues that many of these earlier findings are less informative than current descriptive research would be.

Many of these earlier studies suggested that exhibitionism perpetrators had significant psychopathology. For example, exhibitionism was often explained as a narcissistic ego deficit or a symptom of an interrupted latency period (Rosen, 1996; Silverstein, 1996). Based on his review, Murphy (1997) found no support for these hypothesized relationships between exhibitionistic behavior and personality functioning or psychopathology as diagnosed today. Research has suggested that exhibitionism perpetrators do have many of the same features seen in other sexual offenders such as depression, poor social skills, and difficulty managing anger or hostility (Lee, Pattison, Jackson, & Ward, 2001; Raymond, Coleman, Ohlerking, Christenson, & Miner, 1999).

Exhibitionism is a paraphilia, and high comorbidity among the paraphilias has long been noted (Kafka & Hennen, 1999; Price, Gutheil, Commons, Kafka, & Dodd-Kimmey, 2001). In Freund's (1990) study of 241 exhibitionists, 32% engaged in voyeuristic activities and 30% admitted to frotteurism. Abel et al. (1988) found that 93% of 142 sex offenders who had engaged in exhibitionism also had engaged in pedophilia, voyeurism, or rape. Consistent with these previous findings, the Swedish survey respondents (Langstrom & Seto, 2005) who reported exhibitionistic behavior

were more likely also to report having fantasies about voyeuristic behavior. Often considered a type of verbal exhibitionism, telephone scatologia has been regarded as an analogue behavior because both involve unsuspecting victims but neither act requires physical contact for the perpetrator's sexual arousal (Dalby, 1988; Price et al., 2001). Previous research has suggested an especially high comorbidity between these two types of behaviors. Specifically, Abel et al. found that 63% of his sample of 19 men with a history of telephone scatologia had engaged in exhibitionism. In Bradford, Boulet, and Pawlak's (1992) larger sample, 35% of 37 men with a history of obscene phone calling had exposed themselves.

General Criminal History

Currently, there is some speculation that exhibitionists are often involved in other nonsexual criminal behaviors (Abel et al., 1988; Maletzky, 1997). In a study of 151 men convicted of exhibitionism in Australia during the early 1980s, Berah and Myers (1983) found that 69% of the sample had been convicted of an offense other than exhibitionism. These other offenses included property crime, assault, breach of parole, and driving infringements. They also found a significant positive relationship between the number of exhibitionism convictions and the number of convictions in other offense categories (Berah & Myers, 1983). Other authors have suggested that between 17% and 30% of those engaging in exhibitionism also commit other nonsexual crimes (for a review, see Blair & Lanyon, 1983). Although there is a paucity of more recent research on overlapping criminal behaviors, this research seems to contradict beliefs that exhibitionism offenders are otherwise law-abiding citizens (Abel et al., 1988; Hackett, 1971; Murphy, 1997; Rooth, 1971).

Exhibitionism Recidivism

There has been some agreement that exhibitionists are among the sexual offenders most likely to recidivate (Bartosh et al., 2003; Doren, 2002). Sugarman, Dumughn, Saad, Hinder, and Bluglass (1994) argued that measuring recidivism is especially difficult because perpetrators typically come into contact with legal authorities or treatment programs only if they have committed an offense involving physical contact. In their study of 151 men convicted of exhibitionism, Berah and Myers (1983) found that the number of convictions ranged from 1 to 18. The average number of convictions was 2.9, and 43% of their sample had only 1 conviction for exhibitionism (Berah & Myers, 1983).

Other Types of Sexual Offending

Researchers have also examined whether exhibitionists engage in other types of sexually assaultive behavior. During the 1960s and 1970s, it was generally believed that exhibitionists were neither assaultive nor dangerous (Gebhardt, Gagnon, Ponteroy,

& Christenson, 1965; Hackett, 1975; West, 1987). More recent research, however, has suggested that those with a record of exhibitionism have also engaged in hands-on offenses. Abel et al. (1988) found that 46% of exhibitionism offenders had sexually assaulted children outside the family or engaged in incestuous offenses, and 25% had committed rape. Similarly, Freund (1990) found that 15% of the 241 exhibitionists in his sample admitted to raping an adult. A well-cited article by Sugarman et al. (1994) showed similar findings: In this sample, 26% had one or more convictions for a sexual assault. Raymond and colleagues (1999) found that 13% of the 45 male pedophilic sex offenders in his sample had engaged in exhibitionism.

Some of these more recent studies have also suggested specific risk factors for exhibitionists that may relate to a heightened risk for perpetrating other sexually aggressive behaviors. Sugarman et al. (1994) found that among 249 cases, exhibitionists who touched their victims were more likely to escalate to other sexually assaultive behaviors. Findings from the 1960s corroborate these results and add that masturbating during the offense and communicating with the victim were commonly seen in offenders with numerous exposure incidents and other types of sexually assaultive behavior (Petri, 1969).

Implications for Treatment Planning and Risk Assessment

A key component of any treatment program is accurate assessment of the behavior of interest. Authors have suggested that assessing for the breadth, severity, and frequency of inappropriate sexual behaviors is necessary before treatment providers can therapeutically challenge the denial, distortions, and minimizations common among sexual offenders (Doren, 2002; Marshall et al., 1999). Furthermore, accurate assessment allows some judgment of risk for further offending and treatment targeted at managing this risk. Earlier studies have suggested factors that may be especially valuable to assess in exhibitionists. Specifically, a history of conduct disorder, excessive libido, touching victims during the exhibitionism offense, masturbating during the offense, and communicating with the victim have been cited as important (Petri, 1969; Sugarman et al., 1994). Unfortunately, studies have found that exhibitionists are likely to underreport their offense history, which suggests that accurate assessment with this population may be particularly difficult (Maletzky, 1997; McConaghy, 1993). Consequently, behavioral information that can be easily garnered from victim reports, police reports, and other credible outside sources may be a more reliable method for assessment.

The current research aimed to replicate and expand on earlier studies by examining the offense characteristics, recidivism rates, and prevalence of other types of sexual offending found in police records of individuals charged with exhibitionism. Because prior research has not investigated psychopathology in a nonclinical sample, this study also examined perpetrators' history of mental illness, substance abuse, and other paraphilic acts.

Method

The current study examined cases of indecent exposure investigated by a midwestern police department. Approval for this study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of the University of Nebraska at Lincoln as well as the police department. The department has 314 sworn officers serving a population of 238,750 people, according to the 2005 annual report (Lincoln Police Department, 2005). Researchers identified all indecent exposure incidents by searching for keywords in the police department's computer database. Exhibitionism was defined as any act involving the exposing of one's genitals to an unsuspecting stranger with implied sexual intent. Therefore, cases of consensual sexual activity in a vehicle, public urination, mooning, or violation of decency statutes in dance clubs were excluded from analysis. All incident reports completed by police officers for indecent exposure incidents that occurred between September 1998 and September 2003 were identified. The inclusive list of incidents contained 202 offenses perpetrated by known persons and 152 offenses perpetrated by unidentified individuals. Because there was no perpetrator information available on these 152 cases and consequently no way of tracing the perpetrators' other offenses, the unidentified cases were excluded from analysis.

Two PhD-level graduate students reviewed all 202 identified cases perpetrated by 106 identified individuals from the specified time frame for a variety of factors including perpetrator demographics, victim demographics, and numerous offense characteristics. Suspects' history of substance abuse was based on charges for possession of drugs or drug paraphernalia, more than two prior charges for driving under the influence, drunk and disorderly behavior reports, or information included in the officer reports. Perpetrators' involvement in other types of paraphilic activity was determined by police charges for related behaviors such as obscene phone call charges or prowling reports that appeared to include voyeuristic behaviors. To assess the reliability of coding activity, 20% of the cases were randomly selected and coded by both raters in an overlapping fashion; κ values were at least .95 across all variables studied.

Results

Sample Demographics

The total sample for this study consisted of 202 indecent exposure incidents perpetrated by 106 identified individuals. Five (4.7%) of these perpetrators were women. The age of the perpetrators at their first identified exhibitionism offense ranged from 16 years to 76 years, with a mean age of 35.6 ($SD = 12.1$). The ethnic breakdown of the sample was primarily Caucasian (81.1%), with 8.5% of the sample described as African American, 4.7% as Asian, and 2.8% as Latino. Although the ethnicity breakdown is similar to the state's demographics, the sample is not representative of the state's correctional population, which is 24% African American and

10% Latino (Nebraska Department of Correctional Services, 2006). Based on the law enforcement reports, nearly a quarter of the sample ($n = 26$) was suspected of having symptoms of mental illness. Four (3.8%) of the perpetrators were identified as having developmental disabilities. In addition, 29 (27.4%) of the perpetrators were suspected of alcohol abuse, and 37 (34.9%) were suspected of abusing illegal drugs.

Perpetrators' involvement in other types of paraphilic activity showed that only 1 participant (0.9%) had charges for voyeuristic behaviors—specifically, he had been charged and convicted for prowling near residential windows on three occasions. Six participants (5.7%) had obscene phone call charges, with the number of obscene phone call charges ranging from one to nine. Four (3.8%) of these perpetrators had charges that lead to convictions for obscene phone calling. An examination of criminal histories revealed that the current sample had an average of 30 ($SD = 44.4$) nonsexual charges. Ninety suspects (84.9%) had charges for crimes other than indecent exposure, and 17 (16.0%) had an outstanding arrest warrant. The nonsexual crimes most commonly seen in this sample included traffic infractions (66.0%), failure to appear citations (65.1%), and disturbing the peace charges (42.4%).

Offense Characteristics

Fifty-one (25.2%) of all 202 incidents occurred in a business or business parking lot, 42 (20.8%) occurred on a public street, and 28 (13.9%) of the recorded incidents took place at the perpetrator's residence. Twenty-one (10.4%) of the reported events occurred at local jails and community mental health centers. Forty-two (20.8%) of the incidents involved the perpetrator exposing while in a vehicle. There was no significant difference between the number of incidents and the season of the year, $F(3, 198) = 1.99, p = .21, MSE = 94.49$. Based on the law enforcement reports, 19 (9.4%) incidents involved a perpetrator under the influence of alcohol and 5 (2.5%) incidents noted perpetrator drug use at the time of the exhibiting.

Factors identified in the previous literature were specifically examined. Nearly 57% ($n = 114$) of the exposure incidents involved the perpetrator masturbating. Furthermore, it was found that incidents perpetrated in a vehicle were more likely to involve masturbation, $\chi^2(1) = 12.98, p < .001$, than those not perpetrated in a vehicle. Twenty-nine (14.4%) of the incidents involved the perpetrator speaking to the victim, with 12 (5.9%) of these specifically including sexual language. Because only 2 cases (1.0%) involved the perpetrator touching the victim and no incidents involved any threats toward the victim, these variables were excluded from the analyses.

The 202 reported incidents involved 273 victims. On average, perpetrators exposed to 2.5 ($SD = 3.9$) victims at each incident. Although the total number of victims assaulted by each perpetrator ranged from 1 to 37, the majority of perpetrators in this sample (68.9%) had 1 victim per exposure event, and 15.1% had 2 victims per exposure event. Only 9 (4.5%) incidents were perpetrated against groups of more than 3 victims. Although 15.8% of the incidents occurred in areas where children could have been present, such as business parking lots and parks during afternoon hours, only 9.2% of the victims were under age 18. The age of victims ranged from

8 years to 62 years. The victims were predominantly female (56.4%, compared to 20.1% male), though the gender of 64 (23.4%) victims was unknown.

Exhibitionism Recidivism

The mean number of recorded indecent exposure incidents for each perpetrator in this sample was 1.9 ($SD = 2.9$), with number of incidents per perpetrator ranging from 1 to 29. A majority of the sample (68.9%) had only 1 recorded incident. Perpetrators who committed multiple indecent exposures were more likely than those who had a single incident to have masturbated during the offense, $\chi^2(1) = 6.58$, $p = .01$. There was no significant relationship found between engaging in multiple exposure events and the presence of children during these events, $\chi^2(1) = 0.034$, $p = .85$, or perpetrators speaking to the victim, $\chi^2(1) = 0.02$, $p = .99$. There was also no relationship between committing multiple indecent exposures and police involvement for mental illness, $\chi^2(1) = 0.65$, $p = .60$, or other noncontact paraphilias such as obscene phone calls or voyeurism, $\chi^2(1) = 0.26$, $p = .99$.

Other Sexual Offending

There was some evidence of other sexually assaultive behaviors among this sample. Six perpetrators (5.7%) had one rape charge unrelated to their indecent exposure incidents, and one perpetrator (0.9%) had two rape charges unrelated to the indecent exposure incident. Six of these eight rape charges resulted in conviction. Five perpetrators (4.7%) had one molestation charge, one perpetrator (0.9%) had two molestation charges, and one perpetrator (0.9%) had three molestation charges. Four participants (3.8%) were charged with contributing to the delinquency of a minor that appeared to be sexually motivated.

Further analyses were conducted to examine those indecent exposure perpetrators who also had rape and molestation charges. These perpetrators were more likely to have committed a higher mean number of indecent exposure incidents compared to those perpetrators who did not have rape and molestation charges, $F(1, 104) = 16.42$, $p < .001$. Furthermore, those indecent exposure perpetrators with rape and molestation charges were more likely to also have physical assault charges, $\chi^2(1) = 5.27$, $p = .047$.

Perpetrators who had rape and molestation charges were no more likely to masturbate during the exhibitionism offense, $\chi^2(1) = 0.32$, $p = .75$, expose in the presence of children, $\chi^2(1) = 2.51$, $p = .21$, or have police contacts for other non-contact paraphilias, $\chi^2(1) = 0.52$, $p = .43$. There was also no relationship between rape and molestation charges and talking to the victim during the exhibitionism offense, $\chi^2(1) = 3.65$, $p = .12$. Contrary to previous research findings, an opposite relationship was found in the current sample, such that nine perpetrators charged with rape or molestation did not use any sexual language during their exposure incidents compared to three perpetrators charged with rape or molestation who did use sexual language.

Although multivariate analyses were attempted, insufficient cell values limited the utility of these findings.

Discussion

Using a police contact sample, the current research was able to expand on some of the findings from earlier clinical studies. This description of demographic and offense characteristics could have valuable treatment implications and possibly aid intervention programs in preventing further exhibitionistic offending and other sexual offending.

The demographic information showed that one quarter of the current sample had symptoms of a mental illness and one quarter had a history of substance abuse. An overwhelming majority had a history of nonsexual criminal charges, whereas less than 10% of this sample had documented charges for other paraphilic behaviors. The current sample also showed some notable differences from previous studies. Specifically, Berah and Myers's (1983) police sample of Australian perpetrators had a mean age close to 25, whereas the current sample was older, with a mean age of 35. Although the present study replicated research that found exhibitionists are often involved in other nonsexual criminal behaviors (Abel et al., 1988; Maletzky, 1997), the current sample was much more criminally involved than previous studies (85% vs. Berah and Myers's [1983] 61%).

In support of findings in the earlier literature, the current study found that exhibitionism perpetrators who masturbated during the offense were more likely to have a greater number of exhibitionism charges. However, contrary to previous research findings, perpetrators with numerous exhibitionism charges were not more likely to communicate with the victim, expose in the presence of children, have prior police contacts for other noncontact paraphilias, or have prior police contacts for mental illness. The current study did not replicate earlier findings regarding other sexual offending by exhibitionists. Exhibitionists who masturbated during the offense, exposed to child victims, and spoke to the victim were not more likely to have charges for other sexually aggressive behaviors. However, those in the current sample with rape or molestation charges were more likely to have had multiple exposure incidents and a history of physical assault charges.

There are limitations inherent in using a police contact sample rather than a clinical sample. Although it is valuable to have data from nonclinical samples, Abel et al. (1988) approximated that acts of exhibitionism occur up to 150 times more often than what is recorded in police statistics. This underreporting may result in only a certain type of case being reported to the police, such as cases perpetrated near a victim's home or cases that result in significant fear for the victim. Furthermore, younger victims may have less ability to report the offense accurately to authorities. Another limitation of the current study stems from the large number of unidentified perpetrators who were not included in these analyses.

Analyses examining mental illness were included in this study. However, this variable was based on the suspect's history of being escorted by police to the local psychiatric emergency room or reports of psychiatric symptoms in the case notes, rather than a diagnosis by a clinician. It is also possible that the current sample may have fewer intrusive or aggressive acts of exhibitionism because perpetrators who coupled exposure with more violent or aggressive acts may have ultimately been charged with sexual assault or other violence charges and therefore were not captured in the case selection process. It is also important to note that because this sample was drawn from a fixed period of time, the recidivism follow-up time varied for each offender. Although offenses committed before September 1998 were included in this study, offenses occurring after September 2003 were not. Consequently, if an offender's first offense occurred in August of 2003, his or her follow-up window was only 1 month.

The findings of the current study have implications for risk assessment and treatment. Following some documented success in treating exhibitionists, offenders with this type of history may benefit from treatment addressing impulse control under a relapse prevention model (Laws, Hudson, & Ward, 2000; Marshall et al., 1999). To be most effective, this treatment needs to be based on an accurate assessment of the offender's inappropriate sexual behavior and tailored to the offender's level of risk for reoffense and management of that risk. For example, a notable number of the perpetrators in this sample have a history of drug- or alcohol-related charges. If perpetrators are using alcohol or drugs as a disinhibitor to commit various crimes, including sexual crimes such as exhibitionism or rape, this would also be an important treatment target.

In conclusion, exhibitionism is a multifaceted, heterogeneous phenomenon that requires more research attention. There remains little empirical research on the possible types of exhibitionism offenders, such as those who masturbate during the offense versus those who do not. The current study is the first to capture any data on female exhibitionists, and more research on this unique group is also needed. Furthermore, more studies on the motivation for and reinforcement of exhibitionistic behaviors are necessary for improved treatment effectiveness.

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