

# Ideal Victims and Monstrous Offenders: How the News Media Represent Sexual Predators

Rebecca A. DiBennardo<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Drawing on content analysis of 323 *Los Angeles Times* articles published between 1990 and 2015, this article examines how news reports represent sexual predator victims and offenders in order to examine how such narratives construct images of the sexual predatory. Results demonstrate that representations of the sexually predatory are aged and gendered: stories about child victims encompass more sexual violence, graphic descriptions of that violence, more male victims, and older offenders. Articles use child victims as a rhetorical tool to emphasize the “predatory” nature of offenders and justify retributory violence or harsh legal punishment against sexual predators. Narratives about adult victims focus mainly on women, framing them as responsible for their victimization and minimizing their importance relative to child victims. The cumulative effect of this coverage narrows representations of victims and violence, contributing key dynamics to both the social and legal predator template.

## Keywords

media, deviance, crime, sexuality

Although several recent, high-profile sexual assault and harassment cases have sparked a national dialogue about “sexual predators,” the rise of predator discourse predates the series of events leading up to the #MeToo movement. In fact, over the past 15 years, predator discourse has become central to how people conceptualize and discuss sexual violence, both constitutive of and reflective of expanding and increasingly punitive sex offender laws in the United States (Meiners 2009). Janus (2006) points out, “There is increasingly myopic focus on the ‘predator’ as personifying the danger to [communities]. . . the predator template [has become] more and more central to how we think and talk about sexual violence” (p. 131). But how do various institutions (legal, cultural, and otherwise) lend meaning to this term?

Legally, California’s 1996 Sexually Violent Predator Act categorizes and defines “sexual predators” as pathological, repeat, and violent offenders. Legal descriptions of criminal sexual acts provide a framework for the public to interpret deviant sexuality: the language they use is imbued with meaning (Jenkins 2004). The use of the term *sexual predator* sets up a polarizing and extreme image from the very beginning, “convey[ing] a medieval image that has never entirely been eliminated from Western images of the frightening, the

disgusting, the horrible, the dangerous, and the unbearably, and erotically, fascinating” (Douard 2008).

Yet through colloquial use, legal terms also come to take on social and cultural meaning, particularly in the case of sex crimes and sexual offenders. The term *pervert*, for example, first a legal category, now brings to mind any number of seemingly depraved sexualities. Similarly, the term *pedophile* has become “our most frequented cultural and linguistic toilet,” used to symbolize a variety of revulsions (Kincaid 1998). Although legal language thus sets the stage for exaggerated interpretations of sexual predators (Janus 2006), other cultural arenas likely reflect and shape how this term comes to be understood.

News media represent one such arena. As a domain through which meanings of crime and deviance are “constructed, attributed, and enforced” (Ferrell and Websdale 1999), the way news media use the term *sexual predator* (both the stories they select and the language used within

<sup>1</sup>University of California, Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA, USA

## Corresponding Author:

Rebecca A. DiBennardo, University of California, Los Angeles, 264 Haines Hall, 375 Portola Plaza, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1551, USA  
Email: redibennardo@ucla.edu



those stories) constructs part of its socially structured meaning (Hartley 2013). Yet although research documents news media emphasis on sensational sex crimes (Greer 2012; Kitzinger 2004) and the legislative and political results of the “panic” this can create (Krinsky 2016; Lancaster 2011; Leon 2011), studies have yet to examine how media representations of sex crimes can lend symbolic meaning to sexual violence itself.

In contrast, in this study I systematically investigate how news reports represent sexual predator victims, crimes, and offenders, constructing specific images of the sexual predator in the process. Drawing on content analysis of 323 *Los Angeles Times* articles published between 1990 and 2015 that use the term *sexual predator* anywhere in their text, I demonstrate that aged and gendered narratives contribute key dynamics to the sexual predator template. Stories about the youngest victims encompass more sexual violence and graphic descriptions of that violence, more male victims, and the oldest offenders. News media use these same child narratives as a rhetorical tool to emphasize the “predatory” nature of offenders and justify retributory violence or harsh legal punishment. In contrast, narratives about adult victims (which often originate from legal and police discourse) focus mainly on women, often framing them as responsible for their victimization and effectively removing them from predator discourse.

## Literature

### *Sex Offender Laws, Symbolic Meaning, and Media*

“Inappropriate” sexual desire has long been a societal “vector of oppression,” marking the deviant and different (Nardi and Schneider 2013). Yet what defines sexual deviance and perversion, the way the law controls them, and what constitutes various sexual identities, varies across history (Chauncey 1994; D’Emilio 2014). California’s Sexually Violent Predator Act reflects general trends in increasing sex offender regulation in the United States over the past 25 years, which include augmented mandatory minimum sentencing, expanded probation requirements (including Global Positioning System monitoring, polygraph tests, and Internet use bans), and required public registration in all 50 states for convicted adult sex offenders (37 states require juvenile sex offender registration) (Jenkins 2004; Meiners 2009).

“Moral panic” theories posit that media amplification of fear and deviance has led to these reactionary and extreme political and legal responses (Ferree et al. 2002; Jenkins 2004). More contemporary understandings of moral panic point out the increasingly blurred divide between media and society, particularly with the advent of social media. Such understandings emphasize that it may be more useful to think of the ways in which the media socially organizes

problems, rather than how it distributes or amplifies them (Fischel 2016).

Sexually violent predator (SVP) laws highlight the complicated relationship of timing and directionality between media and law. Use of the term *sexual predator* in media discourse grew most after the implementation of SVP laws. Between 1950 and 1992, the term’s nonlegal use was rare (practically nonexistent). However, newspaper articles, television shows, Internet watchdog and advocacy forums, and political candidates now frequently mention sexual predators (Filler 2002).<sup>1</sup>

Fischel (2016) points out that in prevailing theories of media influence and moral panic (Cohen 2011), the law acts as the end point: it is the ultimate formalization of social outrage. But, according to Fischel, this view does not allow for the notion that the law may also shape “prevailing mythologies, stigmas, and stereotypes.” Specifically, the law itself can frame and identify sexual harm:

The presence of the law makes the problem of sexual violence one of criminal justice, rather than, say, public health, social structures, inequality, or gender enculturation. Violence is individuated, pathological, and most importantly, punitively fixable through the juridical arm of the state, and by extension, the juridical view of the [public]. (p. 37)

The law has the potential to thus be productive, rather than simply reactive.

Yet the news media also influence how the law operates across bodies by shaping popular understandings of victims and offenders; the way news media construct and reconstruct the criminal as social and political concerns to the public attribute symbolic meanings to crime (Ferrell and Websdale 1999; Fischel 2016). This process generates both its own images and “images of images,” as media incorporate and reproduce narratives filtered through police, legal representatives, politicians, and others (Ferrell and Websdale 1999). Because the public is largely distant from crime and criminal subcultures, these subcultures can come to be defined by media coverage, particularly in the case of sexual predators, as SVP laws remain obscure to the public (Cohen and Jeglic 2007; Ferrell, Milovanovic, and Lyng 2001). In contrast to a moral panic understanding of media’s role, this process is constant and evolving. Thus, how media construct understandings of crimes, victims, and offenders in the context of the “sexual predatory” can tell us how this term takes on symbolic meaning, and in more nuanced ways.

<sup>1</sup>My own data analysis of the *Los Angeles Times* indicates that of the 323 articles that used the term *sexual predator* within the sample period (1985–2015), none appeared between 1985 and 1990. From 1990 to 1995, that number rose to 26, then to 123 between 1996 and 2000 (the peak amount over any five-year period of the sample), then 102 between 2000 and 2005, and finally to 72 for the remainder of the sample time period.

### *Media, Sex Crime Victims, and “Entertainment”*

Yet although the news media present crime and crime control as social and political concerns, they also present them as entertainment (Fishman and Cavender 1998). Sex crimes in particular receive vast amounts of “lowest common denominator” journalism coverage, which highlights violent, “depraved” sexual conduct (Jewkes 2015; Kitzinger 2004). The further a crime departs from cultural norms, the more newsworthy or intrinsically entertaining media tend to consider it (Bok 1998; Pritchard and Hughes 1997). Jewkes (2005) calls this “oversaturation of the extraordinary”: extremely rare crimes, such as random stranger and sexual violence, and victims perceived as more vulnerable (women, children, etc.), receive disproportionate attention (Lynch 2002; Naylor 2001; Quinn, Forsyth, and Mullen-Quinn 2004; Wilson and Silverman 2002). Within such stories, media focus on the most extreme cases: serial rape, extremely old victims (Meyers 1996), multiple child victims (Chermak 1998), and the abduction of children by strangers (Wilczynski and Sinclair 2016).

Such reporting evocatively and graphically describes violence and victims (Ferrell and Websdale 1999). For example, discussions of child victims tend to equate violence with sexual violence, even if evidence of the latter does not exist (Levine 2006). News media prioritize stories of child victims over those of adult victims (Jenkins 2004), presenting them as blameless, asexual, and androgynous (Kincaid 1998; Krinsky 2016). In contrast, adult victims are primarily women, and are held accountable for being in the wrong place at the wrong time, “questionable” sexual histories, or poor judgement (Meyers 1996). Failing to perform hegemonic femininity—by being “oversexualized,” working outside of the home, or having same-sex relationships (Collins 2004)—exacerbates the likelihood of this framing (Greer 2007; Jewkes 2015).

Classic literature on victimization points out that the term *victim* is not objective, and that both individual and social-level understandings of crime influence how victims are perceived. The public tend to give certain “ideal victims”—those that possess various socially desirable characteristics—more legitimate victim status (Christie 1986). Best (1997) argues that ideas about “ideal” victims transform such victims into symbolic figures that help explain various social ills and problems, influencing societal perceptions of intimate violence and individual responsibility (Dunn 2010).

Perceptions of victim agency influence the degree to which victims evoke sympathy or are considered ideal. “Pure” victims without agency are portrayed as blameless, but victims perceived as “impure” can be judged for this same lack of agency. In contrast, victims portrayed as having agency (often called survivors) tend to evoke public admiration and appeal to broader audiences. The degree to which victims meet these expectations influences the extent to which they are able to establish or access victim identity (Dunn 2004, 2008). Lu (2016) adds that race further

influences understandings of victim blameworthiness. For example, news media depictions of Asian Americans as “model minorities” allows them to access “legitimate” victim status by transforming their experiences into community trauma and shared loss. In contrast, victims of color who do not fit into this model remain “outsiders,” preventing access to status as ideal victims.

Yet such analyses of media victim coverage and understandings of victims tend to be partial, focusing on one type of victim only (e.g., adult victims only, adult women only, children only, or high-profile cases) (Cheit 2014; Christie 1986; Dunn 2008; Levine 2006; Meyers 1996). Greer (2012) notes that existing scholarly work in this area thus tends to make general conclusions on the basis of pieces of data rather than a complete picture. In addition, this type of partial inquiry does not fully account for the impact of age and gender differences in victim representation. Meyers’ (1996) research on media coverage of violent crime against women notes that framing in this instance reinforces stereotypes that blame women for the violence enacted against them but does not look at media coverage of men or of child victims. Anastasio and Costa (2004) analyze media treatment of both men and women who are sex crime victims and find that men tend to be more personalized in media coverage, which is associated with increased empathy, but they do not include child victims in their analysis. Correspondingly, research on media coverage of child sex crimes finds that violent coverage of extreme crimes distracts from more prevalent sources of harm to children and reduces child sexual autonomy, but lumps all child victims together by gender, neither looking at how this coverage compares with that of adult victims (Kincaid 1998; Kitzinger 2004), nor the way that increasingly child-centric narratives may influence news media focus on adult victims.

But Fischel (2016:50) points out that “sex across age means different things for differently gendered and sexual subjects,” noting that to understand differences in how people construct meaning regarding what constitutes violence and consent, research must take into account the age, gender, and sexuality of both victims and offenders. Thus, examining the intersecting role of victim age and gender in sexual predator narratives can contribute important information regarding how victim hierarchies are created and reproduced, why some victims are valued over others, and how those hierarchies may reflect and feed back into law and understandings of “ideal” victims.

### *Media and “Monster” Offenders*

Such narratives can also contribute information about how the public comes to view certain categories of sex offenders. Much news media research focuses on victim framing only, without examining how it may shape representations of offenders (Kitzinger 2004; Meyers 1996). When news media do discuss sex offenders, they tend to conflate



violence and pedophilia (Lancaster 2011; Levine 2006) and perpetuate the “bogeyman fallacy” that those who commit sex crimes have unique, unknown, and monstrous identities (Leon 2011). These predatory pervert discourses highlight the dangers of stranger offenders (Greer 2003; Lancaster 2011) and can thus act as vehicles for community togetherness (Jewkes 2015) and facilitate coded and implicit racism via discussions of “safety” and “quality of life” (Nagel 2003).

Discussions of “specialized sexual perversion,” such as pedophilia, highlight white male offenders (Kitzinger 2004; Lancaster 2011; Lotz 1991). Yet the language of predatory sexuality is often associated with black men (Callanan 2012; Horeck 2013; Lundman 2003), and the 1990s “superpredator” dialogue presented young, inner-city (black) male adolescents as violent, dangerous, and morally depraved (Moriearty 2009). News media coverage of sexual predators lies at the intersection of these two potentially competing frames, and it remains unclear which they fall into. Such coverage thus provides the opportunity to better understand how offenders are represented to the public and the potential ways in which those representations contribute to racialized and aged generalizations about sex offenders, in addition to victims.

### Constructing Sexual Predators

Overall, although research documents news media emphasis on sex crimes (Greer 2007, 2012), types of victims (Greer 2007; Kitzinger 2004), and the impact of news media in shaping the overall “discursive field” of sex offender punishment (Krinsky 2016; Lancaster 2011; Leon 2011), studies have yet to examine how media coverage of sexual predators, crimes, and victims contributes to evolving discourses of sexual violence. In particular, previous work is partial, in that it tends to disconnect or isolate concepts that are better understood together: victims and offenders, types of victims, age and gender, and legal and social institutions.

Motivated by research on cultural criminology (Ferrell and Websdale 1999) and news media framing (Benson and Saguy 2016), in this article I examine how news reports frame the sexually predatory by drawing attention to various characteristics of violence, victims, and offenders, and minimizing others.

### Data and Methods

Data for this article come from 323 news reports that used the term *sexual predator* published between 1990 and 2015 in the *Los Angeles Times*. The year 1990 is an ideal time to begin this sample, as it predates the rapid growth of new sex offender legislation between 1994 and 1996, as well as growth in the use of the term *sexual predator* (Filler 2002). As a widely read, but also regional, publication, the *Los Angeles Times* is an ideal source to examine the way in

which the term *sexual predator* intersects with both California and national politics. The ProQuest News database contains a full, searchable electronic archive of *Los Angeles Times* issues dating back to 1985. To create my sample, I searched for articles that used the term *sexual predator* anywhere in the text and were published any time between January 1, 1990, and October 5, 2015, when the search was conducted. This required using two databases: the pre-1997 full-text *Los Angeles Times* database, for results found between January 1, 1990, and December 3, 1996, and the *Los Angeles Times* full-text database, for results found between December 4, 1996, and October 5, 2015. The former search produced 60 results and the latter 345 results, for a total preliminary sample of 405 articles. The *Los Angeles Times* searches occasionally produced multiple versions of the same article (for local editions of the paper), and my search produced a fair amount of nonrelevant and redundant topics. As a result, I manually reviewed and eliminated duplicates, as well as unrelated entertainment reviews, science and animal articles, and news headline and byline summaries. After eliminating these articles, my final sample encompassed 323 articles.

### Coding

I combine qualitative and quantitative analyses of media content to look both at general coverage and at framing of sexual predators. Scholars note that media analysis requires substantial interpretation and choice, in what counts as “important” text to analyze, which qualitative examples to select, and what narratives authors identify as meaningful and salient (Entman and Rojecki 2001). Combining quantitative and qualitative analysis mitigates this bias to some extent: quantitative analyses allow me to make broader claims, examine trends, and determine to what extent news media emphasize different ideas and concepts, while qualitative analyses capture the nuances in language and description in media representations of sexual predators.

I used my existing knowledge of literature about the relationship among the media, crime, and sexuality, as well as California laws and policies, to create 79 variables with which to quantitatively code my analysis.<sup>2</sup> I coded at the article level for all 323 of the articles in the sample. All variables in the sample were constructed as dichotomous, coded for whether the article about sexual predators mentioned that particular variable; thus, all codes are independent of one another. Where applicable, I coded and created variables matching the categories used in national crime data, while also accounting for legal specifics that shape the definitions of certain crimes (e.g., anyone age 18 or older is considered an adult, legally speaking, and was coded as such). Matching

<sup>2</sup>Not all of these variables came up when I coded the articles, and many that did come up appeared only minimally. I discuss the variables relevant to my findings.

variable categories to national crime data also facilitated comparison between the results of my analysis and official statistics on crime, which I discuss in more depth at the end of this section. To confirm intercoder reliability, a colleague randomly selected and coded 20 variables from 20 articles. I then compared each of these variables to my own coding using Reliability Calculator (Freelon 2010), which calculates Krippendorff's  $\alpha$ , currently considered the standard measure of reliability for media content analyses (Hayes and Krippendorff 2007). Results confirmed associations between .8 and 1 for all variables, interpreted as "near perfect" agreement.

To evaluate the types of crime and the degree of violence in articles that discussed sexual predators, I used several crime category variables in my initial analysis. Initial categories included whether an article mentioned—in the case of either an adult or child victim—kidnapping or abduction, battery or physical assault, abuse of any sort, sexual harassment, robbery, and a variety of sexual crimes, including sexual battery, nonconsensual oral sex, rape, or serial rape. I also coded for crimes with child victims, including molestation, child pornography, and lewd conduct with a child.

On the basis of the incidence of appearance and the definition of "violent crime" according to the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) and Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) (the two main national crime reports collected by the U.S. Department of Justice), I condensed these categories into four major areas of violent crime: murder, kidnapping (considered violent under California law but not included in the NCVS or UCR), physical abuse or assault, and sexual assault. In California, all sexual crimes against adults fall under the larger legal category of "sexual assault." Similarly, all sexual crimes against children, including child molestation, fall under the category of "lewd or lascivious acts with a minor." For this reason, a condensed variable for all sexual crimes for each age group proved to be ideal.

I used three additional variables to measure the incidence of violent crime in the data. The first variable measured whether the article mentioned a repeat offender. The second was whether the article mentioned multiple victims (whether from the same offender or other offenders). Finally, I created variables to measure the relationship between victims and offenders: stranger, if the offender was unknown to the victim (which was often specifically mentioned), and friend or family, if the offender was a family member or acquaintance. The stranger variable is particularly important to the analysis, as understandings of what constitutes "predatory" behavior in SVP diagnoses and violent behavior in other contemporary sex offender laws are tied to victim-offender relationships (D'Orazio et al. 2009). Research indicates that generally, stranger violence is considered more serious and "criminal" than violence between intimates (Hessick 2007).

In addition to crime variables, I constructed age, gender, and race variables that encompassed the major age categories

of victims and offenders in the analysis. Because of the corresponding legal definition, any victim age 18 or older was coded as an adult. Often, adult victim age was specifically mentioned, although sometimes the victim was simply referred to as an "adult." If a victim was identified as "college-aged," I put them in this category as well. I also created variables for victims below age 12 and for victims aged 12 to 17. When specific age was not mentioned, anyone called a "child," "young child," "young boy," or "young girl," in the analysis fell into the under 12 category. In an effort to be conservative, anyone described as a "teenager" fell into the 12 to 17 category, and cases in which victim age was unclear or not mentioned were coded as "missing." These categories align with NCVS and UCR data collection; the NCVS collects data on individuals age 12 or older only, while the UCR has select data available on victims below age 12.

Similarly, I created three age variables for offender age categories in the analysis: offender under age 30, offender age 30 to 39, and offender age 40 and older. These categories correspond generally with data from the UCR (Greenfeld 1997) but are slightly more broad (data there separate offender age into categories spanning five years, but for the purposes of the analysis, this level of detail was not necessary). I also created variables for victim and offender gender (male, female, or whether both male and female victims or offenders appeared in the same article) and variables for offender race. I coded for whether articles mentioned or pictured in photos if offenders were white, black, Hispanic, or "other" race (including Asian and mixed-race individuals). Because pictures required visual interpretation of race, I double-checked this variable by looking up offenders by name on the California sex offender registry to confirm my results, coding any instances in which I could not confirm an offender's race, or when race remained ambiguous, as missing. Although I also created categories to code for victim race, I found that this was mentioned rarely, if ever.

A few additional variables of note to the analysis were those measuring spaces classically thought of as "dangerous" within contemporary discussions of sexual assault and violent crime, such as the Internet, schools, college campuses, and even churches (because of large clergy abuse scandals during the study time period). I also included a variable indicating whether the article discussed that sex offender laws should be less or more punitive, to gauge the tone of the dialogue about sexual predators in media discourse. I exported and merged coded articles from Google Forms to Excel, then imported that data set into Stata statistical software for analysis.

For qualitative analysis, I use discourse analysis to examine major frames that appeared when discussing sexual predators, specifically choices of words and quotations that demonstrated ideologies surrounding victims and sex offenders in the articles. This approach allowed me to critically examine the ways in which key themes—such as innocence, guilt, and deviance—influence conceptions of sexual

predators. I created Excel sheets organized by theme with quotations relevant to key concepts such as age, violence, gender, sexuality, and culpability.

### Comparative Statistics

To evaluate the quantitative trends in this analysis, it is helpful to use comparative statistics, but important to note both the limitations of national statistics on crime, and of comparisons themselves. First, the NCVS and the UCR contain methodological and definitional differences: the NCVS includes estimates of both reported and unreported crimes from a nationally representative sample of U.S. households, while the UCR collects data on crimes recorded by the police and is based on the actual counts of offenses reported by law enforcement. The NCVS also excludes crimes against children under 12 years, although victimizations against these persons may be included in the UCR. The crimes measured in each are overlapping, but not identical; most importantly, the UCR does not include sexual assault, a variable extremely relevant to this analysis (Barnett-Ryan et al. 2014). Finally, and more sociologically speaking, reporting of crime depends upon a number of factors, including the socioeconomic, racial, and gendered characteristics of police, victims, neighborhoods, and so on. When viewing any crime statistics, it is important to keep these limitations in mind.

There are also several important limitations when comparing the data set in this analysis to national crime data. First, these data sets essentially measure separate things: the sample data look at media framing, which we should expect to be substantively different than actual crime rates. Second, the sample data set covers a range of 25 years, but there are not enough observations in any single year to break down my data into a yearly unit of analysis for comparison. Finally, although I do my best to match all variables to national data, the strongest comparison for this analysis would be a uniform, consistent data set. This simply does not exist. Regardless, the comparisons I include provide a way in which to conceptualize generally how media representation of crime, victims, and offenders compares with actual recorded incidences of violence, victimization, and crime perpetration, providing a useful starting point for analysis.

### Findings

In the following section I examine how *Los Angeles Times* articles represent sexual predator victims, crimes, and offenders. In the first section, I introduce overall statistics on the type of coverage included in articles using the term *sexual predator*, showing that they most often encompass violent, sexual crimes committed by repeat offenders, containing multiple victims, and committed by strangers. In the

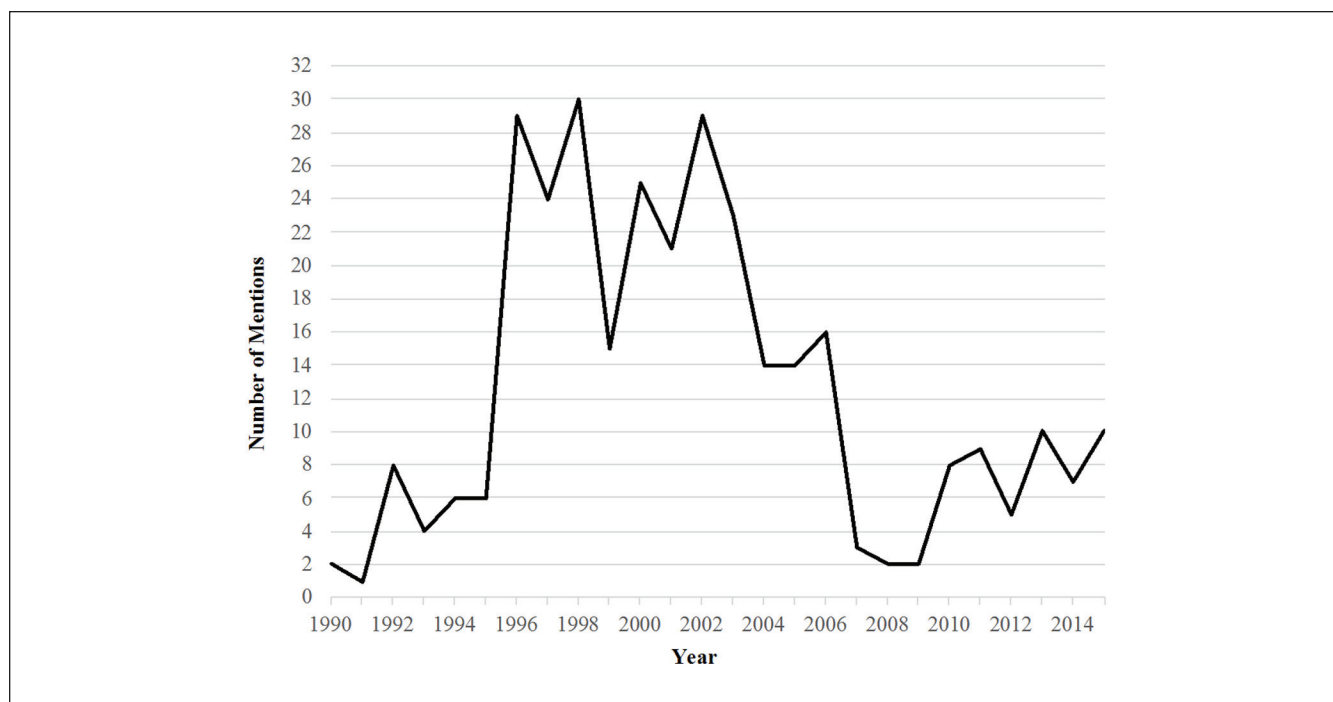
second section, I show that articles overemphasize crimes against children (younger children in particular), relative to crimes against adults. They sexualize crimes against child victims, using graphic depictions of violence to do so. Narratives present adult victims (the majority of whom are women) as responsible for their victimization, yet discuss the protection of children as a collective national responsibility. The final section shows that articles use these same child victim narratives as a rhetorical tool to justify violence against sexual offenders. The cumulative effect of these results illustrates how media construct and reinforce hierarchized victimhood using child victims, and use child victim narratives to dehumanize and generalize all offenders as pedophilic.

### Persistent and Graphic Sexual Violence

Figure 1 shows trends in the number of overall mentions of the term *sexual predator* over the sample time period. The number of mentions peaks in 1998, followed closely by 1996 and 2002. Table 1 provides overall statistics on all major relevant variables from the sample, which give an overall idea of major trends regarding age and gender of victims and offenders, as well as the distribution of crimes covered in the sample. From these initial trends, I move to more detailed qualitative and quantitative analyses of age, gender, and crime, discussing the way in which these factors intersect to produce a particular image of a “sexual predator.”

Table 1 shows that articles in the sample focus on four major categories of violent crime: 83 percent discuss sexual assault, 67 percent discuss murder, 48 percent discuss kidnapping, and 30 percent discuss physical abuse of some kind. Seventy-two percent of articles discuss repeat offenders, 79 percent of which mention sexual assault as a corresponding crime. However, as shown in Figure 2, when broken down by crime, repeat offenders showed up relatively evenly within each category, in fact appearing most (87 percent of the time) within articles about physical abuse. Similarly, while 69 percent of articles mention multiple victims, 79 percent of which mention sexual assault as a corresponding crime, Figure 3 shows that the distribution of articles discussing multiple victims was almost identical within the four most frequent crime categories that appeared in the analysis. National crime statistics from 2002 provide some perspective with which to view these results. In 2002, murder and forcible rape, which appear most in the sample data, accounted for less than 1 percent of the offenses that made up the UCR (Federal Bureau of Investigation 2002). Aggravated assault, which does not include child abuse, made up 7.5 percent of overall crime reported, a marked contrast to the 30 percent of articles about physical abuse in the data (which do include child abuse).

Although previous research suggests that predator discourse may be racialized (in that it might focus on black



**Figure 1.** News reporting on sexual predators, *Los Angeles Times*, 1990 to 2015 ( $n = 323$ ).

offenders), 67 percent of articles discuss white offenders. This closely mirrors Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) data from 1996 to 2007 on the perceived race of offenders, both in terms of cumulative crimes of violence and in terms of rape and sexual assault specifically. On average, in both these categories, white offenders make up between 60 percent and 65 percent of total offenders reported. Black offenders make up about 20 percent to 25 percent, while other and unknown make up the rest (Bureau of Justice Statistics 1997–2006). Victim race was rarely identified in the sample data.

Within the total number of articles that identify the relationship between offender and victim, 60 percent discuss offenses by strangers or those unknown to victims, while 40 percent identify family members, friends, or acquaintances as offenders—a distortion of reality. National statistics on victimization show that offenders known to victims on average actually commit about 67 percent of murders (Federal Bureau of Investigation 2002) and committed between 70 percent to 80 percent of sexual assaults each year between 1993 and 2016 (Bureau of Justice Statistics 1993–2016), indicating a potentially exaggerated focus on attacks by strangers relative to their actual occurrence. Figure 4 shows the percentage breakdown of victim-offender relationship within each crime category. When broken down by crime, the percentage of articles featuring stranger offenders increases even more, to 86 percent and 82 percent, respectively, within kidnapping and murder stories, and to 63 percent within stories of sexual and physical abuse.

Further analysis of article text demonstrates that graphic verbal descriptions accompany media emphasis on violent crime. In describing the murder of Anthony Michael Martinez, a child victim, several articles highlight his “naked” or “partially clad” body, “the duct tape used to bind [his] mouth, legs and hands,” and his “bound body, pulled naked from a sun-blasted desert ravine” (Becerra 2002; Panzar and Serna 2015; Pugmire and Verhovek 2005; Reich and Simon 1997). Another story lists the names and details of crimes committed by sexual predators in Minnesota:

Richard Enebak committed at least 37 sexual assaults between 1955 and 1969, many on young girls. In one rape, a 16-year-old girl suffered internal injuries, severe cuts and broken vertebrae that left her paralyzed. . . . Charles Stone, a pedophile, admitted molesting as many as 200 young girls. . . . Donald Martenies savagely raped a 7-year-old girl, then sewed up her wounds without anesthesia. (Kuebelbeck 1993)

Yet another article describes the “bloody form” of 12-year-old Robert Smith Thompson, who was raped, thrown out of a car, and run over (Becerra 2002). Graphic depictions of violence against children in particular appear regularly throughout the sample (Chu 2012; Louise Roug and Haldane 2000).

Thus, from the start, articles that mention sexual predators emphasize violent content and narratives. This is not necessarily surprising, but further analyses into how violent coverage intersects with age and gender of victims demonstrate important framing distinctions in these areas.



**Table 1.** General Demographics, *Los Angeles Times* Reports on Sexual Predators, 1990 to 2015.

Variable	n (%)
Victim age (years)	
<12	80 (28)
12–17	60 (21)
≥18	141 (50)
	(n = 281)
Offender age (years)	
<30	34 (19)
30–39 years	51 (28)
≥40	98 (54)
	(n = 183)
Victim gender	
Male	64 (25)
Female	175 (68)
Both male and female mentioned	17 (7)
	(n = 256)
Offender gender	
Male	248 (95)
Female	12 (5)
Both male and female mentioned	2 (1)
	(n = 262)
Offender race	
White	68 (67)
Black	13 (13)
Hispanic	12 (12)
Other or multiple mentioned	8 (1)
	(n = 101)
Crime category	
Sexual assault	266 (83)
Murder	67 (21)
Kidnapping	48 (15)
Physical abuse	30 (9)
	(n = 323)
Repeat offenders	232 (72)
	(n = 323)
Multiple victims	222 (69)
	(n = 323)
Victim-offender relationship	
Acquaintance, friend, or family member	72 (40)
Stranger	107 (60)
	(n = 179)

### *Emphasizing Child Victims: Overall Trends and Sexualizing Violence*

Among coverage of violent crime, articles focus more frequently on child victims than on adult victims. Figure 5 shows that articles are more likely to cover child victims in comparison with adults within three of four violent crime categories. Nonsexual physical assault or abuse is the only category for which the percentage of adult victims exceeds that of children. Articles discussing sexual assault, although still featuring more child than adult victims, also feature the

highest percentage of adult victims among any crime category and are most likely to mention both adult and child victims in the same article. Still, the NCVS indicates that between 1996 and 2007, U.S. adults aged 20 to 34 faced consistently higher rates of violent victimization (including both sexual assault and threats of sexual assault) than did those aged 12 to 19, and children under age 14 made up only 4.8 percent of murder victims overall between 1980 and 2008 (Smith and Cooper 2013). In addition, although national crime data on children under age 12 are limited, official BJS indicate that only 34 percent of child sexual assault victims in the United States are under age 12 (Greenfeld 1997), while representing 57 percent of the news sample (Table 1).

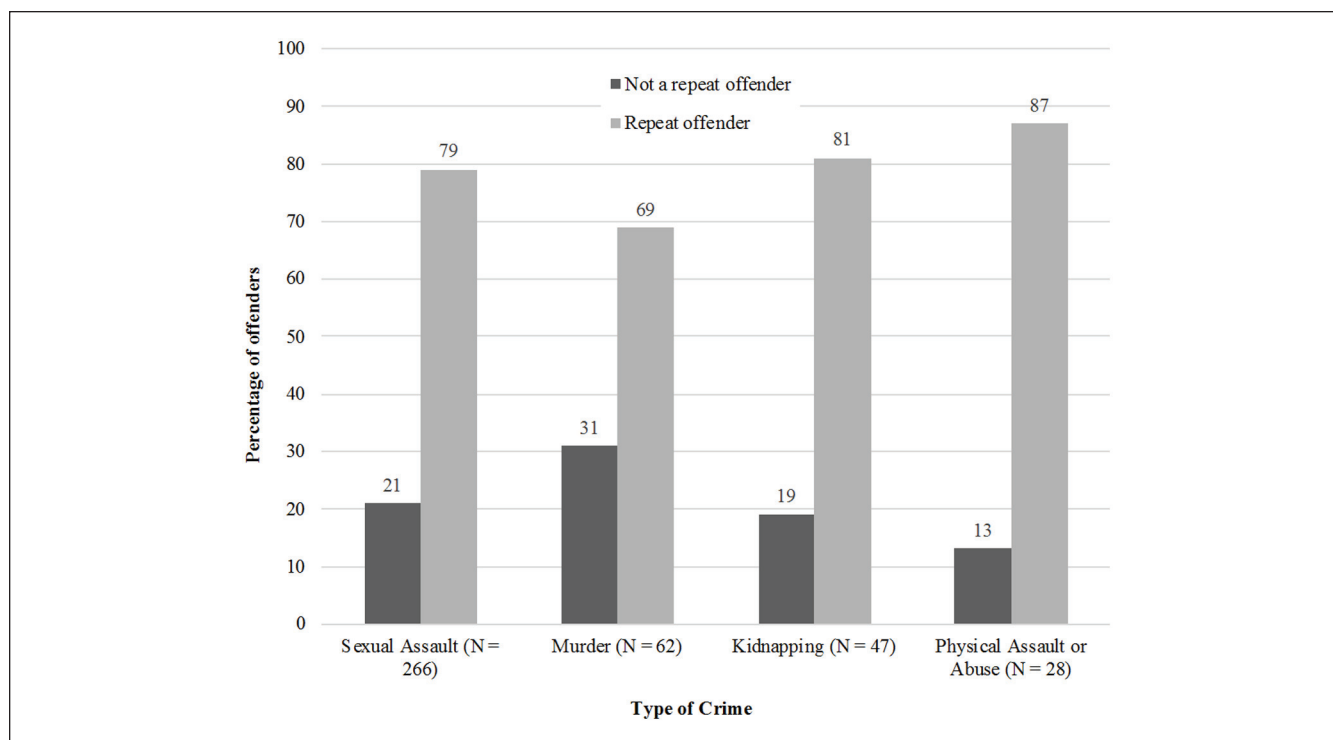
In addition, media emphasize large age gaps between victims and offenders. Overall, the sample is evenly divided between offenders above age 40 and those below 40, with a slightly greater emphasis on the former (Table 1). Aside from two years (1998 and 2001), this focus on older offenders remains consistent throughout the study time period (Figure 6). National data on the age of sex offenders suggest that the sample overrepresents older offenders: those over the age of 30 made up only 40 percent of victim-reported incidences of rape, sexual assault, and verbal threats of rape and/or sexual assault in 2002 (Greenfeld 1997). When victim age is cross-referenced with offender age, articles are most likely to mention the youngest category of victims in conjunction with offenders above age 40: 58 percent of articles about victims under age 12 mention offenders above age 40 (Figure 7).

Results of an additional logit analysis also suggest a potential correlation between coverage of sex crimes, murder, and child victims. Articles that mentioned child murder were 1.77 times more likely to mention child sexual assault ( $p = .000$ ). In contrast, articles that mentioned adult murder were not more likely to mention adult rape (in fact, they were less likely to mention it). Yet in actual cases of child murder between 1980 and 1994, only 3 percent of child murders occurred with or preceded a sex offense (Jenkins 2004).

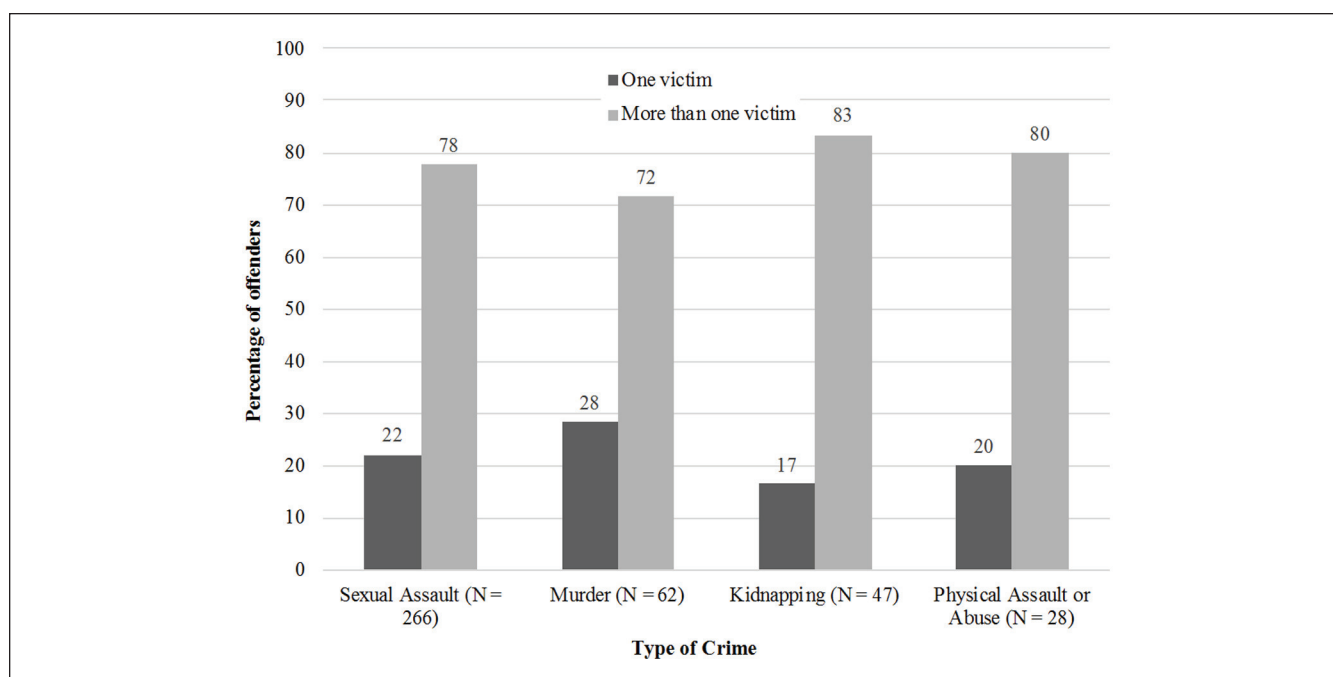
Several articles also assume or imply, without supporting evidence, that child molestation precedes murder or abuse. An article about Michael Anthony Martinez, a 10-year-old victim, points out that even when authorities were unable to say whether he had been molested or not, they “believe[d] the crime was the work of a practiced sexual predator” (Reich and Simon 1997). In a story about a different child assault, a man attacks and beats a 5-year old and runs away. Although the assaulter did not attempt to remove the victim’s clothes or molest her, the article points out that sexual assault was the “likely intent” of the crime” (Garrison 2000).

Coverage of the notorious case of Polly Klaas, who was abducted from her bedroom during a slumber party and eventually strangled to death, frequently lumps Klaas together with Megan Kanka (who was raped and murdered),





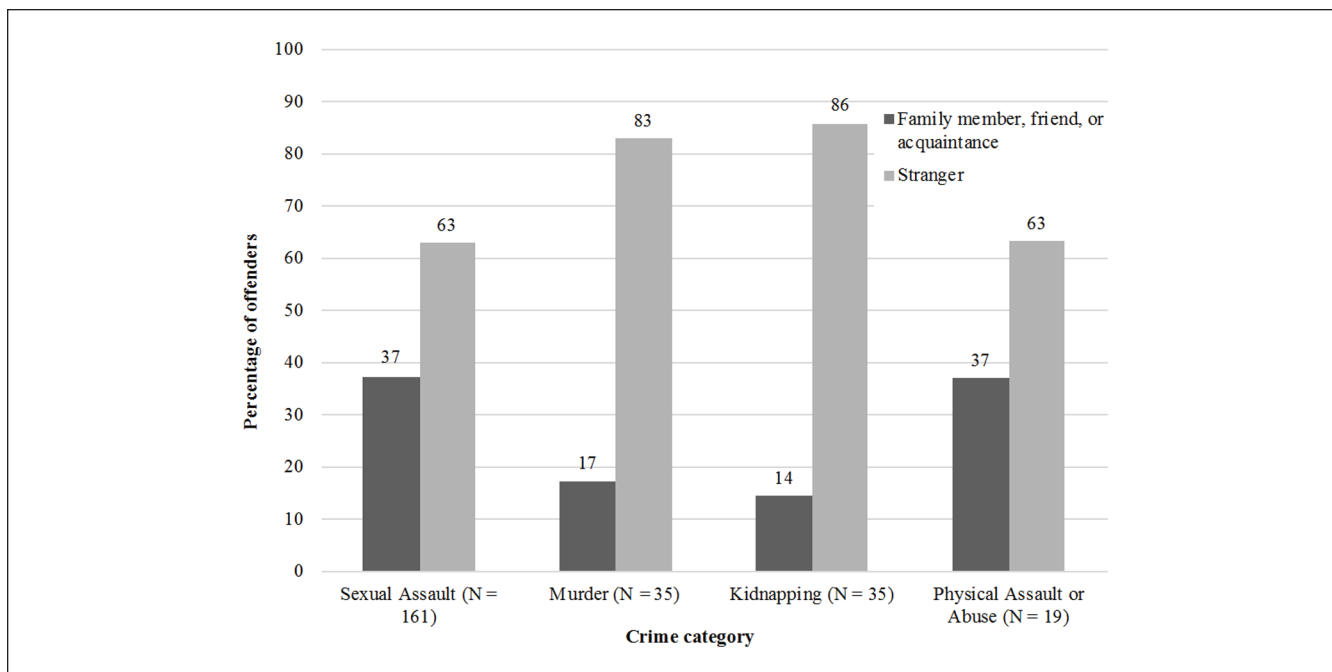
**Figure 2.** Repeat offender percentage within crime category, *Los Angeles Times* reports on sexual predators, 1990 to 2015.



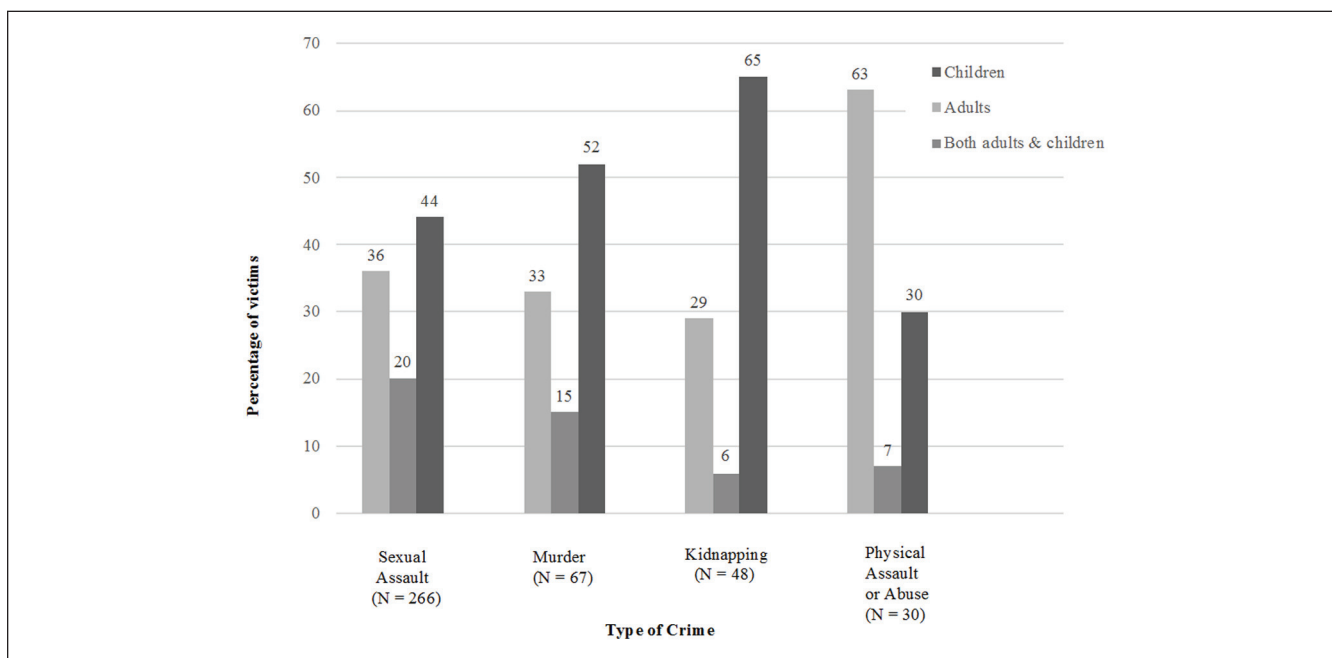
**Figure 3.** Single versus multiple victims within crime category, *Los Angeles Times* reports on sexual predators, 1990 to 2015.

referring to both as “classic” victims of sexual predators (Associated Press 1996; Bornemeier 1996; Geller 1996). However, there was no evidence in the Klaas case that she was sexually assaulted. One article quotes the prosecution’s

argument during the Klaas murder trial, stating that Klaas had to have been molested, despite a lack of physical evidence confirming this: “*Burglars* [my emphasis] don’t go into houses and tie up females with cut-up women’s



**Figure 4.** Relationship of offender to victim within crime category, *Los Angeles Times* reports on sexual predators, 1990–2015.

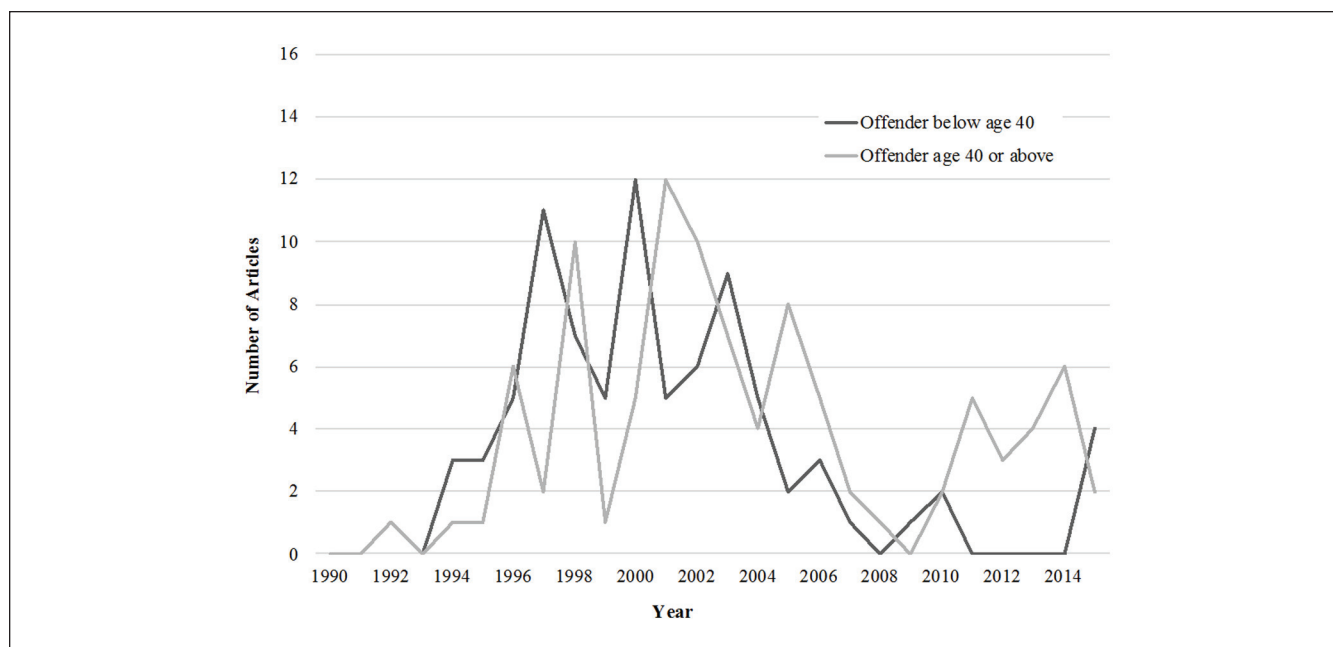


**Figure 5.** Victim age percentage within crime category, *Los Angeles Times* reports on sexual predators, 1990–2015.

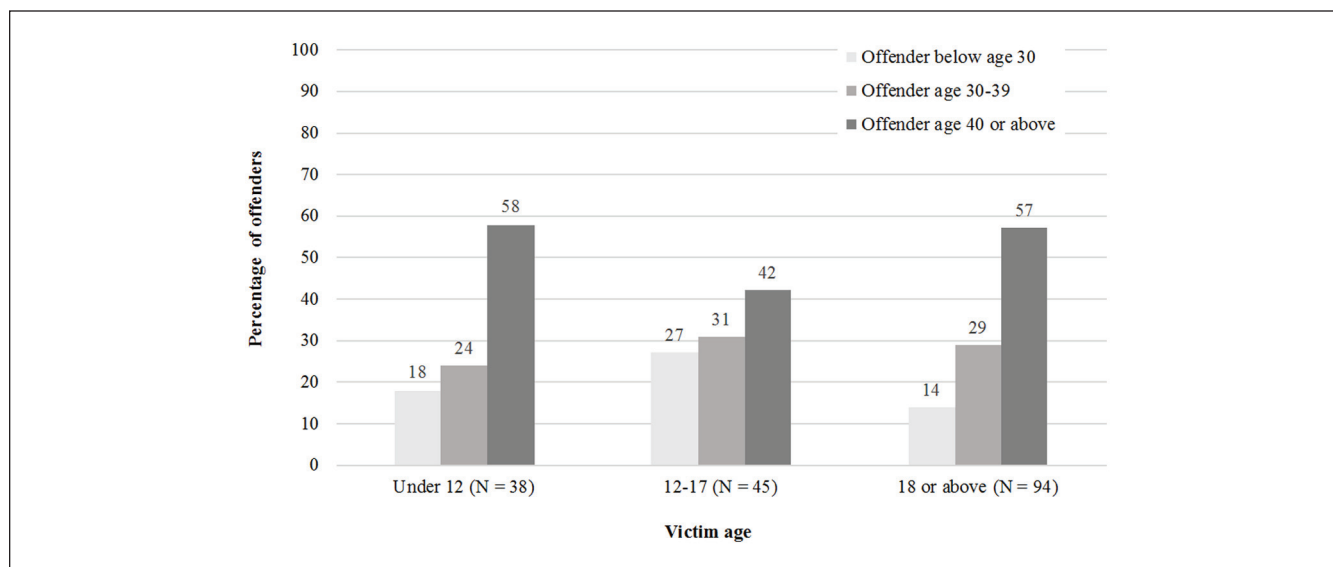
undergarments” (Curtius 1996). The “undergarments” of which the prosecutor speaks were stockings—not necessarily indicative of sexual perversion, and certainly not evidence, in and of themselves, of sexual assault. Regardless, the jury found Allen guilty of murder with special circumstances, including lewd acts against a child, and sentenced him to death.

### *Privileging Child Victims over Adult Women: Collective versus Individual Responsibility*

The emphasis on violence against children comes largely at the expense of adult women. The majority of adult victims in the sample are women (Table 1), which closely matches national data on victimization showing that from 1995 to



**Figure 6.** News reporting on sexual predators, *Los Angeles Times* 1990 to 2015, offenders below age 40 and offenders age 40 and above ( $n = 183$ , number of articles that mention the ages of offenders).

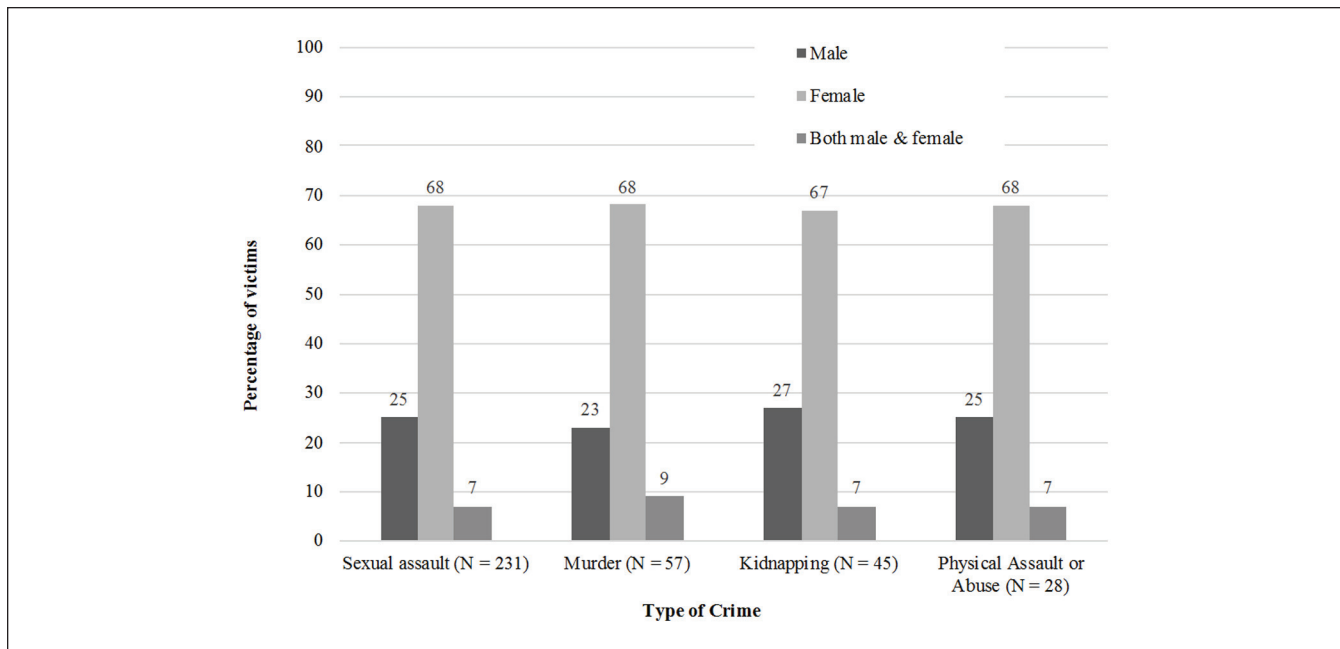


**Figure 7.** Percentage of offender age category by victim age category, *Los Angeles Times* reports on sexual predators, 1990 to 2015.

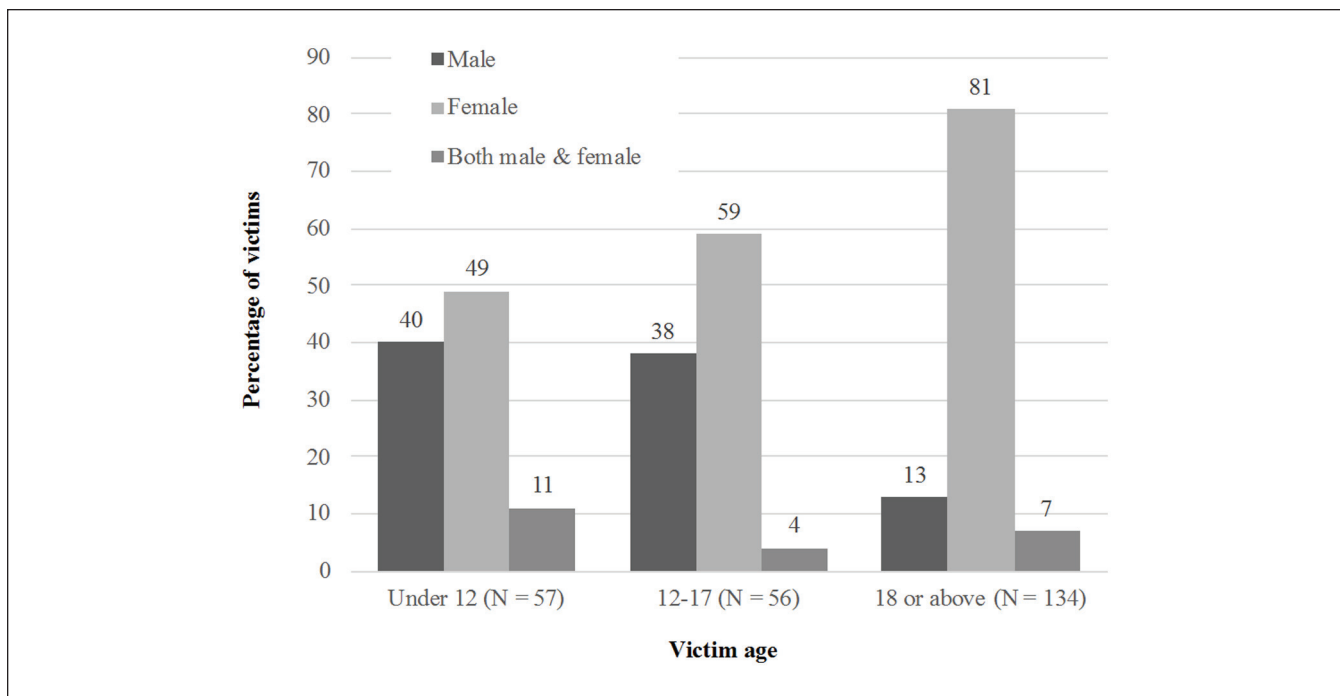
2010, women made up 91 percent of reported sexual assault victimizations (Barnett-Ryan et al. 2014). Although the overall proportion of female to male victims remains relatively constant across crime categories in the sample data (when both gender and crime category are mentioned) (Figure 8), this relationship breaks down when age is introduced into the analysis. Figure 9, which examines the gender division of victims within the three sample age categories, shows that female victims are most likely to be above age 18, making up

81 percent of the victims in that age category, while coverage of child victims in the sample is more evenly divided by gender. Among victims under age 12, 49 percent were female and 40 percent male. This age category also had the highest percentage of articles that mentioned both male and female victims. When the child victim age categories are combined, female victims make up 54 percent of victims under age 18.

Relative to national statistics, the sample demonstrates a greater focus on male victims in every age category. BJS data



**Figure 8.** Victim gender percentage within crime category, *Los Angeles Times* reports on sexual predators, 1990 to 2015.



**Figure 9.** Victim gender percentage within age category, *Los Angeles Times* reports on sexual predators, 1990 to 2015.

indicates that only 27 percent of sexual crime victims under age 12 are male (sample data indicated 40 percent), 18 percent of victims aged 12 to 17 are male (sample data indicated 38 percent), and 5 percent of victims aged 18 and older are male (sample data indicated 13 percent). Nationally, women make up 82 percent of victims under age 18; my news

sample shows almost 30 percent fewer women victims than that (Snyder 2000).

These gendered differences become more salient when viewed in conjunction with textual narratives that present child victims as “universal,” while delegitimizing the experiences of adult women. Articles present such victims as neither



universally representative nor unequivocally innocent. They often detail victims' sexual histories, casting doubt upon their innocence. For example, a story about Chester DeWayne Turner, who raped and murdered at least 10 women, states that four of his victims, "were prostitutes. Relatives said they had been driven to prostitution by drug addiction" (Rocha 2014). This description of the victims is the only one available in the article and presents a stark contrast to the description of the six-year-old murder victim Jeffrey Vargo, killed by Kenneth Rasmusen, as a "precocious, brown-eyed boy" who experienced a "violent death" (Panzar and Serna 2015). Another story about a rape case describes how the attorney for the defendant attempted to seek a mistrial because one of the victims lied about her past as an adult film star (Krikorian 1997). In contrast to universalizing narratives of child victims, these narratives set adult women aside as different.

Discussions of adult victims often arise from trial coverage, where articles detail court cases surrounding rapes and other sexual crimes. Media rhetoric in these instances reflects courtroom deliberations and the legal strategy of defense attorneys, which is often to present the victim's behavior as sexually "aggressive." Several articles demonstrate, correspondingly, the way in which defense attorneys use the sexuality of female victims to undermine their credibility. A 2014 story about an alleged sexual assault by a male Army general on a female subordinate officer states, "The defense portrayed the accuser as an ambitious and flirtatious officer who enjoyed sex with a dynamic general, only to react in rage . . . after realizing the general would not divorce his wife" (Zucchini 2014). Another story about the trial of three men for the gang rape of an Orange County woman points out that defense attorneys portrayed the 16-year-old victim as "a would-be porn actress who consented to an orgy and feigned unconsciousness for dramatic effect" (Luna 2005). In 1992, when Mike Tyson was accused of raping an 18-year-old woman, his defense team described his accuser as "a spurned woman [with a lust for money] who sought Tyson's wealth but wound up with a one-night stand" (Gustkey 1992). These examples demonstrate the intersection of law and media: article coverage reflects the content of legal cases, but in the process, it repeats legal narratives that link the credibility of adult and even older teenage victims to their sexuality.

Although the sample rarely discusses adult male victims, a notable exception is extensive coverage of the story of four state prison guards who facilitated the rape of a male inmate by another male inmate as "punishment" for kicking a female guard. As in the stories about adult female victims, the defense attorney for the guards attacks the victim's credibility, calling him a liar: "The only gainful employment [the alleged victim] ever had was as a drug dealer. He is a liar and a violent predator. . . . Are you going to convict these men on [his word]?" (Arax 1999). Subsequent descriptions present the victim in more feminine ways, calling him "small," "slender," and "frail" (Arax and Gladstone 1998). Another story about several men who were drugged, along with their

girlfriends, by a date rapist, describes the men as being "rendered incapable of helping [their girlfriends] fend off attacks" (Krikorian 1997). Such representations emphasize the ways in which male victims (particularly of male offenders) fail to live up classic ideals of masculinity.

In contrast to adult male victims and teenage and adult women, who appear to bear responsibility for their victimization, protecting very young children from victimization is presented as a collective responsibility: "Holding aloft her son's red high-top sneakers, Helen Harlow said: 'He could be anybody's child. He could be anybody's grandchild'" (Seigel 1990). As Bill Clinton signed Megan's law, he stated,

The law named for one child is now for every child. [This law will] tell a community when a dangerous sexual predator enters its midst. There is no greater right than the right to raise children in peace and safety. (Bornemeier 1996)

Articles also emphasize the vulnerability of very young children:

The perils to children are many, not the least of which are adults who prey upon their innocence and, in ways we can only imagine, damage them forever in the blush of infancy, like stomping a flower before it blooms. (Martinez 2004)

Correspondingly, articles use young child victims as a rhetorical tool to emphasize the monstrosity of sexual offenses. One article quotes a defense attorney's closing arguments as to why his client, who kidnapped and murdered an adult woman, should not be deemed a sexual predator, by drawing distinctions between notorious murderers, several of whom killed children, and his client:

"We're not talking about good versus bad acts. We're talking about the worst of the bad acts: Ted Bundy: serial killer [and famed necrophiliac] from the Northwest. Richard Ramirez: The Night Stalker [who raped and murdered at least two children under the age of ten, in addition to many adults]. Theodore Frank: The child sexual predator who killed [two-year-old] Amy Sue Sietz in this county." Pointing to [his client], sitting calmly at the defense table with his chin on his left hand, [the lawyer] proclaimed: "This young man is not in their class." (Bray 1995)

The defense attorney here contrasts his client's acts, which are "bad," with acts he considers worthy of the death penalty, focusing heavily on offenders who raped and murdered young children. A letter to the editor of the *Los Angeles Times* on May 5, 2010, states, "We should treat sexual predators no different than murderers. Sexual predators should be put away for life. Period. . . . Wake up America, and let's protect our children" ("What Prisons Are For" 2010). This comment not only argues that sexual predation is on par with murder, but applies this term to child victims exclusively, appealing to the public for their protection.

## Protecting Child Victims: Justifying Violence and Dehumanizing Offenders

Such appeals feed into discourse that justifies physical violence against sexual predators in the name of protecting children. When asked to comment on the ethics of child sex offenders opting for chemical castration in exchange for release from indefinite confinement, state Senator Brad Owen said, "Voluntary mutilation is too good for sex offenders. It should be mandatory for these creeps" (Marosi 2001). Another letter to the editor states, "Molesting and raping children leaves scars for life; why shouldn't the perpetrator also have scars that remain for life?" ("Sex Offenders" 1997). A local woman speaking in an article about a sexual predator who opted to be castrated in exchange for early release from prison stated,

So what? Even if [the operation] does cleanse him of deviant thoughts, he still has to be punished for his crimes. . . . He still hasn't paid his debt to society for what he did to children. That's the worst crime you could ever do. (Marosi 2001)

Thus, child victims often define the distinction between "bad" crimes and "the worst" crimes, the latter which justify extreme punishment.

In addition to legally sanctioned punishments, several articles also mention the physical assault of sexual predators by everyday citizens: vigilante justice. One discusses the neighborhood apprehension of a man who exposed himself outside of a Roman Catholic high school: two men caught him and held him while the schoolgirls kicked and punched him, ultimately sending him to the hospital (Reuters 2003). Another piece details the trial of a Washington state man who, enraged by the story of a sex offender in Idaho, found and murdered two sex offenders in his hometown using the state's sex offender registry (Tizon 2005). Rather than present these incidences as problematic, the first article almost gleefully discusses the "punishment" of the flasher, pointing out how the schoolgirls "took their revenge" (Reuters 2003), while the second uses the majority of article to discuss the crimes of the sex offender in Idaho that so outraged (and motivated) the double murderer (Tizon 2005).

News articles also use child victims to demonstrate how "sick" offenders are—not to discuss treatment, but, rather, to illustrate that offenders do not deserve it, or are lucky to receive it, however punitive in nature it may be. In one article, a community advocate is asked for her thoughts on the ethics of civil confinement of sex offenders in mental hospitals, and she responds,

I'm always amazed about [questions concerning] the health and fairness for the criminal. . . . My response is, why don't you go ask the children, the victims of these monsters what their lives

will be like? . . . To keep these monsters in a hospital is pretty compassionate to me. (Bond 1996)

A different article chastises the "misguided" efforts of providing treatment to sexual predators: "How much longer will we tolerate misguided judges who refuse to keep sexual predators locked up, instead ordering probation or counseling based on the naive belief that there is a 'cure' for what therapists euphemistically call 'inappropriate sexual urges?'" (Geller 1996). A letter to the editor on August 22, 2002 ("Criminal Excuse" 2002), points out that sexual predators are not "normal" people but "monsters" and should thus be locked "in cages forever" (correspondingly, in quantitative analysis, articles that mentioned child sexual assault were 1.3 times more likely to also mention wanting harsher punishment for sex offenders,  $p = .000$ ).

That many sexual predators were themselves victims of childhood sexual abuse at some point in time does not appear to make them worthy of sympathy; articles present the categories of victim and offender as mutually exclusive. One article discusses the sentencing to death of Jesse Timmendequas for the rape and murder of his neighbor, seven-year-old Megan Kanka (the namesake of "Megan's law," which publicized and expanded sex offender registries across the United States). Despite trial testimony indicating that the defendant was both a sexual assault victim of his father and a physical assault victim of this mother ("Carol Krych, a social worker called by the defense, told the jury that Timmendequas' mother beat him and once broke his arm with a wooden stick that family members called 'the equalizer' . . . Timmendequas' brother, Paul, said he remembered the defendant screaming when he was locked up with his father"; Goldman 1997), the jury sentenced Timmendequas to death, finding no mitigating circumstances for his crime.

## Discussion and Conclusion

These results indicate that media coverage of sexual predators up until recently focuses most frequently on sexual assaults committed by repeat offenders, and containing multiple victims and kidnappings and murders committed by strangers. Coverage also overemphasizes crimes against children under age 12, both relative to crimes against adults in the sample and relative to the incidence of crimes against children reported statistically. Articles frame the protection of children as a type of "collective" responsibility, using narratives of protection to justify violence against sexual predators. Narratives within these articles are graphically violent and often sexual, discussing male children almost 50 percent of the time. In contrast, the media discuss adult women less and, when they do, frame these victims, even victims of serial rape, as responsible for their victimization. Coverage of offenders falls into overlapping predator tropes, both of violent criminals and child perverts.

### Violence, Child Victims, and Sex

Although it may initially appear unsurprising that media coverage of sexual predators focuses on sexual assault, results demonstrate that this coverage also focuses heavily on murder and kidnapping, which, statistically speaking, rarely overlap with sexual assault (Jenkins 2004). Coverage of these violent crimes also overlaps with offender characteristics such as repeat offending, being unknown to victims, and having multiple victims, serving to intensify representations of “extraordinary” violence in this instance (Naylor 2001). In contrast to past research, stranger offenders are most likely to be found in kidnapping and murder stories, not stories about sexual assault (Wilson and Silverman 2002). These results indicate a general conflation of violence with sexual violence in the case of sexual predators, in effect expanding the range of crimes that constitutes sexually predatory behavior (Levine 2006).

In addition, articles about sexual predators, in both covering various types of violence against younger children and narrating stories of child victims in particular ways, produce aged understandings of victims. Although child and adult victims receive equal amounts of total coverage during the entire study period, in years when articles focus more on child victims, they focus less on adult victims (and vice versa). This indicates that media choose between adult and child victims when determining which vulnerable victims to present, rather than, for example, focusing on stories of both adult and child victims during any particular year (Lynch 2002). This finding builds on previous work theorizing the construction of “ideal” victimhood (Christie 1986), demonstrating how child victims fit into this framework. When articles do focus on younger victims, they tend to combine various components of violent crime (murder with multiple victims, murder and rape, kidnapping by strangers, etc.) indicating that reporting of crimes with “notable circumstances” extends beyond adult rape victims (Meyers 1996) and reinforcing tropes that violence against children happens outside of families, rather than within them (Kitzinger 2004).

The association found between child murder and child sexual assault in *Los Angeles Times* coverage, combined with associated narratives of graphic violence, further suggests that the media sexualize both crimes against children and child victims. Graphically describing violence against children while speculating about its sexual intent eroticizes attraction to children (while condemning it). Child murders in this context inevitably become sex crimes, as the case of Polly Klaas demonstrates. Levine (2006) pointed out that this same conflation occurred in the abduction and murder of child victim Adam Walsh (who was not mentioned in the sample). After his son’s abduction, Walsh’s father played an integral role in pushing forward federal sex offender laws, even though there was neither “suspicion nor evidence of sex” in Walsh’s case (p. 24). This is significant, because “when we speak of the unspeakable, we keep the speaking

going” (Kincaid 1998). Media coverage of sexual predators, by reporting in this manner, produces its very own narratives of violence and child sexualization. As the Walsh case demonstrates, these narratives have far-reaching impacts, some of them legislative.

### Gender and Hierarchies of Victimhood

Media coverage in this instance is also gendered. Although the vast majority of adult victims in the sample are women, almost 50 percent of victims under age 12 in the sample are boys. This finding, in conjunction with qualitative evidence of how the media emphasize the “universality” of child victims, initially suggests that gender plays less of a role in coverage of child victims than it does in that of adults, supporting notions of the “asexual” child victim (Kincaid 1998). However, when viewed in conjunction with graphic narrative descriptions of violence against children, many of whom are boys, this finding also potentially indicates that media believe this type of assault has more “shock value” than crimes against younger girls. Given that victims younger than age 12 are almost always mentioned in conjunction with offenders above age 40 in the sample, this finding also supports notions that pedophiles are most likely to be men who offend against boys, which is not statistically the case (Kitzinger 2004), and that the term *sexual predator* is, in many ways, synonymous with the term *pedophile*.

Coverage of adult victims adds an additional gendered component to the results by underrepresenting and effeminizing men who are victims of men (Snyder 2000) and “de-universalizing” adult women victims, presenting them as neither broadly appealing nor unequivocally innocent. This finding aligns with understandings that “true” victims of sex crimes must be non-sexual, something of which only children are capable (Krinsky 2016), and suggests that perhaps children represent the “purest” form of blameless victim (Dunn 2008). Given the severity of crimes covered in the sample (murder and serial rape, for example), framing of adult women victims as unsympathetic in this case remains somewhat surprising and indicates that the threshold for victim understanding and empathy has limitations for this group that it does not appear to have for children (Quinn et al. 2004). Thus, adult females are likely to remain “impure” and therefore blamable victims to a much higher degree (Dunn 2008). Masculinity adds an additional layer to constructions of victim legitimacy. To the extent that adult men victims fail to live up to masculine, heterosexual ideals, their victim status is devalued similarly to that of adult women.

Yet it is notable and unmentioned in previous research that the narratives from which discussions of adult victims arise in the sample are, most frequently, legal ones. In recounting the trials of rapists, articles frequently detail defense attorney strategies that sexualize adult victims to undermine their credibility. In so doing, they introduce victim sexual history as a factor that impacts victim innocence, which simply never occurs in the case of child victims.



Although past research notes that media reproduction of political and legal images can define criminal subcultures (Ferrell and Websdale 1999), this result suggests that it can do so for victims as well.

Future research should examine the extent to which recent events are leading to shifts in victim narratives. The surge in use of the term *sexual predator* that arose with the advent of the #MeToo movement, combined with its emphasis on the legitimacy of the stories of adult women victims, could lead to a decrease in this type of “slut shaming.” Catharine MacKinnon (2018) noted that the #MeToo movement has succeeded where the law previously failed in eroding the “disbelief and trivializing dehumanization” of sexual harassment victims. Recent work by Saguy (2018) suggests that French cultural attitudes about sexual consent and coercion shifted in response to 2011 news media reporting about the sexual assault charges brought against presidential candidate Dominique Strauss-Kahn. Changing news media and cultural discussions about what constitutes legitimate victimization and victimhood may thus result in shifting constructions of sexually predatory behavior.

### *Violence, Victims, and Conceptualizing the Sexual Predator*

These changing news media discussions may also result in shifting constructions of sexual predator offenders. *Los Angeles Times* framing of sexual predators presents them as a combination of various “predator” interpretations: “predatory perverts” in their focus on child victims (Lancaster 2011) yet highly violent and dangerous, in line with previous (and more racialized) understandings of “superpredators” (Moriearty 2009). Narratively, it is this combination of vulnerable victims with perceived acts of extreme sexual violence that justifies violent treatment of sexual predators at both the popular and state level. Within this dialogue, sexual predators remain mostly white men. Yet using “innocent” victims as the justification for violence against sexually “deviant” individuals parallels the discourse used to justify the lynching of thousands of black men in the Reconstruction-era South (and up until today). Sexual predator discourse shares other violent elements of that era, most notably an emphasis on castration as a way to “treat” or neutralize the sexual deviance of such individuals (SVPs in California with victims under the age of 13 face mandatory chemical castration [via antiandrogen hormonal therapy] or voluntary surgical castration; Scott and Holmberg 2003).

Within such narratives and policies, protecting children thus becomes a shared practice that

help[s] the white middle class feel a sense of community, exert a sense of sexual hygiene and moral discipline . . . and stake its claim to being the universal class, the one whose sense of danger, morality, and justice will serve as norm for all society. (Lancaster 2011)

As such, children may represent the ultimate symbolic victims, a universally accessible, ideal, and blameless victim frame (Best 1997; Christie 1986). But will narratives about protecting women have the same impact? Inasmuch as adult victims can be impugned, it seems doubtful that they will ever have the same universal appeal.

### *Implications and Moving Forward*

These results have important substantive and methodological implications. California’s SVP law reflects the most extreme regulation in a series of sex offender laws implemented in the state over the past 25 years, yet the California law and others like it continue to withstand legal and political challenges (Brakel and Cavanaugh 2000; Cantone 2008; Friedland 1999). As others have pointed out, “The virulent politics [of SVP laws] make even the study or discussion of alternative approaches to sexual violence seem to be a third-rail issues— instant political death for anyone proposing serious consideration of alternative approaches” (Janus 2006).

The 2003 amplification of California’s SVP law (which reduced the number of qualifying sex offenses from two to one) via voter-enacted Proposition 83 suggests that public opinion can play far more than a peripheral role in sex offender statutes. The way media frame various aspects of sexual crime thus represents more than a “distraction” from cultural and political issues (Dowler, Fleming, and Muzzatti 2006): it constitutes a potentially vital component of how the public construct understandings and make meaning of the sexually predatory. These understandings likely affect victims—diminishing the “right” to victimhood for some, while elevating the victim status of others—as well as offenders, who wind up subject to both community- and state-sanctioned violence. Although this study cannot definitively say whether that is the case, this area warrants further research and analysis.

Methodologically, this study shows that the partial nature of much previous work on media and crime can conceal valuable information about victims and offenders. The combination of qualitative and quantitative methods in this analysis demonstrates that looking at media content alone (without examining rhetoric) and failing to disaggregate categories such as “child victim” and “violent crime,” cannot give a full picture of how news media frame sexual predation. It will be valuable for future studies to look both between and within categories when analyzing crime; we cannot understand offenders without victims, nor can we generalize either of those categories without looking at their nuance. This is particularly important in the case of sex crimes, where victim status has historically been privileged among some groups while denied to others (Collins 2004). In addition, the use of national statistics in this analysis, although not a perfect comparative measure, provides vital sociological perspective with which to view the results. When discussing media coverage as a cultural arena, such



measures indicate how large the differences between actual statistics and media coverage actually are.

It is important to note that these results apply specifically to sexual predator discourse and the news media content analyzed in this study. "Contemporary" media is a broad and evolving category. To study such a long time period, print news provided the most constant source of media coverage in this case. However, scholars point out the ways in which the diffusion of media across communication technologies, particularly the advent of social media, has only further complicated understandings of media influence on "society" (Fischel 2016). Social media also provides an outlet for the perspectives of sexual offenders that did not previously exist, usually in the form of Facebook and online support groups. Future studies should thus look at how electronic and social media both socially organize understandings of deviance and also may provide space for oppositional narratives that major media outlets do not take up.

A number of themes I initially coded for in the data arose little or not at all in content analysis, including several areas in which I theorized that discussions of victims might appear. Fewer than 4 percent of articles mentioned the Internet and fewer than 1 percent mentioned chatrooms, even though Wolak, Mitchell, and Finkelhor (2007) found that 13 percent of youth Internet users received unwanted sexual solicitations in 2005. Although about 10 percent of articles mentioned schools, fewer than 2 percent of articles discussed abuse by teachers or peer abuse or assault, including college sexual assault, yet Kilpatrick et al. (2007) found that in 2006 alone, 5.2 percent of college women were raped. Finally, only about 4 percent of articles discussed abuse of children by coaches and clergy, despite several somewhat infamous abuse stories in these areas occurring within the study time period (e.g., revelations of systematic sexual abuse of children by Catholic priests, as well as the Pennsylvania State University abuse scandal in which former assistant football coach Jerry Sandusky was found to have molested and raped at least 10 young boys over the course of his career). It is possible that these spaces and scenarios are for some reason seen as less "predatory" (sexual assault on campus usually involves adult victims who are close in age), but additional research should examine why news media discussion of sexual predators may not touch upon these issues.

Overall, this study demonstrates that sexual predator discourse, although currently "having a moment," is far from a new phenomenon. News media have set a violent, aged, and gendered agenda for this term, and create images of both victims and sexual predators in the process. These images can feed back into law and political discourse, with potentially far-reaching effects, from the potential for radical feminist change to the ever more extreme regulation of sex and sexuality. As changing cultural events continue to influence dialogues surrounding sexual crime, it is these same images that will both constitute and reflect the "sexual predators" of our time.

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### Author Biography

**Rebecca A. DiBennardo** is a doctoral candidate in the sociology department at the University of California, Los Angeles. Her research interests include the sociology of law, gender and sexuality, and cultural sociology. Her dissertation examines the interactive processes through which institutions and actors construct and regulate deviant sex and sexualities.