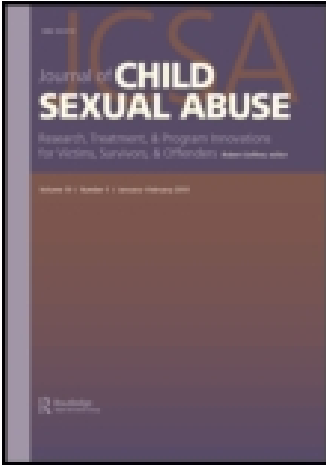


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“It All Depends on the Guy and the Girl”: A Qualitative Study of Youth Experiences with Statutory Victimization Relationships

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RESEARCH ON VICTIM AND PERPETRATOR RESPONSES TO SEXUAL ABUSE

“It All Depends on the Guy and the Girl”: A Qualitative Study of Youth Experiences with Statutory Victimization Relationships

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The purpose of this exploratory study was to examine youths' perceptions of statutory victimization relationships and youths' experience interacting with professionals. In-person qualitative interviews were conducted with 22 youths identified as statutory rape victims by two child advocacy centers. Using grounded theory, interviews were coded thematically using constant comparison analysis. The discussion of the relationship dynamics suggested a great deal of variation. Some youths described the relationships in exploitive terms. However, more typically, the interviewed youth described the relationship as reciprocal, even some time after it had ended. The professional intervention often resulted in feelings of helplessness for the youth. The results suggest creative and flexible protocols are needed for handling these cases that recognize adolescents' developing autonomy.

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Statutory rape victims are minors, primarily young adolescents, who consent in some way to sexual activity with an adult (Berliner & Lanning, 2003). “Statutory rape” is the legal term used for these cases, but since rape often does not reflect the nature of the victim’s experience, others have used terms such as “compliant victim” or “statutory relationship victim” (Berliner & Lanning, 2003; Hines & Finkelhor, 2007). Research suggests that such sexual relationships can have negative effects on youths who are victimized, even if they consented at the time (Leitenberg & Saltzman, 2000; Young & d’Arcy, 2005). The age of victims is seen as increasing their vulnerability to coercion by someone older and more powerful, and therefore these youths raise concerns from a child protection, criminal justice, and therapeutic perspective. Yet each of these professional communities have struggled to understand when and how to best intervene in cases involving sexual activity between young adolescents and older individuals when compliance is a factor. Few studies have explored variations in statutory sex crimes or have focused on understanding how youths themselves think about the relationship and the professional response to it. The purpose of this exploratory study was to examine youths’ perspectives of these relationships and their experience interacting with professionals after the incident became known.

STATUTORY SEX CRIMES

Hines and Finkelhor (2007) defined statutory relationships as sexual relationships “between a juvenile and an adult that are illegal under age of consent statutes, but do not involve the degree of coercion or manipulation sufficient to qualify under criminal statutes as a forcible sex crime” (p. 203). Age of consent laws vary from state to state, although generally the age of consent is 16 years old, with some states specifying a minimum age difference between the youth and older individual (Glosser, Gardiner, & Fishman, 2004). Generally, the juvenile also shows signs of voluntary participation in the sexual behavior (Berliner & Lanning, 2003; Hines & Finkelhor, 2007). Data from a survey of 15–24 year olds conducted between 2006 and 2008 found that around 9% of girls and 5% of boys reported a first sexual experience at age 15 or younger with an individual three or more years older (Child Trends, 2012). Younger teens (13 or younger) versus older teens were more likely to report their first sexual experience was with someone three or more years older.

Studies find that adolescents involved in statutory sexual relationships are at greater risk for a range of concurrent or subsequent psychosocial problems (Hines & Finkelhor, 2007). The incidence of statutory victimization is higher among teens who do not live with two biological parents and among teens whose parents have lower educational attainment (Child Trends, 2012). Females in statutory relationships are more likely to have intercourse at a younger age, are less likely to use a condom, and have increased rates of pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases (Child Trends, 2012; Miller, Clark, & Moore, 1997). Furthermore, a longitudinal study (Young & d'Arcy, 2005) found that having an older sexual partner increased adolescents' risk for problematic outcomes such as early pregnancy and STDs, even after accounting for a range of associated psychosocial risk factors (problem drinking, drug use, difficulty in school, and delinquency). Adolescent girls who have an older sexual partner are also more likely to have a higher rate of previous suicide attempts and drug and alcohol use (Leitenberg & Saltzman, 2000; Lindberg, Sonenstein, Ku, & Martinez, 1997).

CURRENT STUDY

Although illegal under state statutes, prosecution of these cases, known as "statutory rape," has been applied unevenly across history and jurisdiction. There are multiple sources for the difficulty in knowing the best response in these cases: societal conflict over adolescent sexuality, changing perceptions of child and adolescent development, concerns about teenage pregnancy and parenthood, and a growing understanding of different forms of coercion in sexual relationships. In order to develop appropriate professional responses for statutory victimization, it is critical to better understand adolescents' perspectives on these relationships. More data is needed to better understand the range of statutory sex crimes, including (a) how these relationships vary, (b) how youths themselves experience these relationships, and (c) the extent to which the professional response is meeting the youths' needs.

To respond to this gap in the literature, our study collected qualitative data from 22 in-depth, in-person interviews with compliant victim youths from two child advocacy center (CAC) sites. We sought to examine the following questions: How do youths perceive these relationships? How do they define them? Are they aware these relationships are illegal? What was their experience with professionals investigating the crime? Did the adolescents feel supported during the investigation? Answers to these questions will improve the field's understanding of the diverse dynamics in these cases, the risks for youths, and youths' experiences of agency and community interventions.

METHOD

Sample

Potential interview subjects were drawn from two CACs: the National Children's Advocacy Center (NCAC) in Huntsville, Alabama, and the Georgia Center for Child Advocacy (GCCA) in Atlanta, Georgia. CACs are multidisciplinary agencies that coordinate forensic interviews, investigations, and service referrals for child sexual abuse cases. Cases meeting eligibility for the current study were those involving an adolescent 13 to 16 years old who was reported to the CAC as a victim of nonforcible sexual assault by a nonfamilial offender at least 2 years older. This definition is consistent with the majority of statutory rape state codes, with most states specifying an age of consent as 16 and many states specifying other factors, such as age differentials, minimum age of the victim, and minimum age of the defendant (Glosser, Gardiner, & Fishman, 2004).

For each of the two participating CACs, letters were sent to the caregivers of the youths whose case met criteria for the study and had been closed to investigation. The letter provided a general description of the project and provided information for families to contact the researchers if they were interested in scheduling an interview. NCAC project staff examined case files and identified 70 cases over a prior two-year period meeting study criteria (case records from 2006 and 2007). Four subjects contacted researchers and were interviewed from this agency. At the GCCA, we added a follow-up informational phone call from a project staff member to increase recruitment. The initial letter sent to families stated that a staff person would be following up with a phone call to discuss the project further. GCCA project staff examined case files and sent 87 letters to families meeting study criteria. The follow-up phone call, occurring approximately 1–2 weeks after the letter was delivered, further explained the project, outlined central issues including confidentiality and consent procedures, and invited follow-up questions from the caregivers. Project staff was unable to make phone contact with 27 of the families (31%; letters were also returned to the project for 4 of these families). At the GCCA, 18 participated in the study (21%).

Most of the interviewed youths had been 14 or 15 at the time of the forensic interview (63%), although another 8 youths had been 12 or 13 years old when interviewed at the CAC (see Table 1). Half of the offenders were between 16 and 19 at the time of the forensic interview, but 3 (14%) were over 30. The median age difference between the youth and the offender was 5 years. In 20 out of the 22 interviews, the youth was female and the offender male, but in one case the youth and offender were both male, and in another the youth and offender were both female. The majority of youths (63%) were African American. This represents the racial demographics of youths at the participating CACs. A third of the cases (36%) involved a single

TABLE 1 Sample Characteristics ($N = 22$)

Characteristic	% (n)
Youth age at forensic interview	
12	18.2 (4)
13	18.2 (4)
14	31.8 (7)
15	31.8 (7)
Offender age at forensic interview	
16–17	22.7 (5)
18–19	27.3 (6)
20–29	27.3 (6)
30+	13.6 (3)
Missing ^a	9 (2)
Median youth–offender age difference (years)	5
Youth sex (female)	95 (21)
Youth race	
Black/African American	63.6 (14)
White	13.6 (3)
Hispanic	4.5 (1)
Missing	18.2 (4)
Who does the youth live with?	
Both biological parents	9.1 (2)
One biological parent and a stepparent	9.1 (2)
One biological parent	50 (11)
Caregiver, but not parent	9.1 (2)
Missing	22.7 (5)
Offender sex (male)	95 (21)
Offender race	
Black/African American	72.7 (16)
White	9.1 (2)
Missing	18.2 (4)
Duration of sexual activity	
One single incident	36.4 (8)
One week or less	9.1 (2)
Multiple months	31.8 (7)
Missing	22.7 (5)

^aIn these cases the specific age was missing but the case fit the selection criteria.

incident of sexual activity, and nearly a third (32%) involved at least several months of sexual activity.

Procedures

The informed consent of participants was obtained prior to the collection of data. Parental consent for their child's participation was obtained from caregivers first. Informed consent was then obtained from the adolescent prior to beginning the interview. In-person, semistructured interviews were conducted at the CAC in a private room by CAC research staff specially trained to conduct these interviews. All research interviews occurred after the completion of the case investigation. Therefore, interviewed youths were

looking back on their relationships after some period of time. Generally about one year had passed between the research interview and the forensic investigation at the child advocacy center, although the amount of time that had passed varied. Youths were told at the beginning of the interview that the purpose of the study was to learn what happens when young teenagers and someone older have sexual involvement (without the use of terminology such as sexual offense or rape or the terms “victims” and “offenders”). This enabled youths to describe a variety of relationships and to use their own words to define the involvement and relationship.

Research interviews were approximately one hour. Participating youths responded to open-ended questions about (a) the nature of their relationship with the offender (Could you start by telling me about the situation or relationship that led to your coming here? Could you tell me what happened? What did your family know about this?), (b) the victim’s perspective on the sexual involvement and degree of consent and coercion (What kind of sexual activities happened? How would you describe how it first happened?), (c) the experiences of the victim following the report (Could you tell me how you ended up talking to people here? How do you feel about the report being made?), and (d) the perspective of the victim now on the relationship and how it affected their life (How did this and the events that followed affect the ways you feel about yourself? Would you enter into relationships again knowing what you now know?).

In conjunction with each interview, case data were collected on the investigation, service, and criminal justice response and outcomes. Audiotapes and data abstraction forms were mailed to researchers identified only by case numbers. Audiotapes were then transcribed without identifiers by research assistants. All names reported in the results are fictional and were added to provide a connection to the youths’ voices. Parents received \$25 and adolescents received \$20 to compensate them for their time in participating in the research.

Human subjects’ protections for the study were approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the university’s Office of Sponsored Research (OSR). Furthermore, to protect against compelled disclosure of data by legal or other sources we obtained a certificate of confidentiality issued by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Data Analysis

The qualitative analysis was based on the grounded theory approach and focused on constant comparisons (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Constant comparison analysis is a repetitive process in which data are compared, categories are formed, and emerging categories are validated by using them to reexamine the data. The expected product of this process is a

set of generalizations that are interrelated and constitute a theoretical model grounded in qualitative data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

The interviews were coded thematically using a qualitative software program (Atlas.ti 5) following recommended procedures (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). During the first stage each interview transcription was entered as a case into the computer program and open coding was performed, yielding initial categories. More precisely, the cases were broken down into small segments of text, representing discrete "meaning units." Each meaning unit was labeled, and the units were then grouped together as categories according to these labels. Some of these categories were removed or changed and additional code and categories were added as the author read through the cases. For example, several units were defined as "perception of the encounter with law enforcement: loss of control," while others were defined as "perception of the encounter with law enforcement: empowerment." Second, categories and subcategories were classified by their dimensions and properties, and a relationship between them was established (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Third, conceptual themes were suggested along with their interrelationships. For example, the different perceptions of the encounter with the law were combined and further classified under a larger category of "meaning of their encounter with the law enforcement and other professionals." At that stage, when necessary, the authors returned to the transcripts to retrieve additional information needed to develop the categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

RESULTS

The Meaning of the Statutory Relationship

The youths who participated in the study were mostly aware that their relationships were against the law and that they were defined by society as victims while their partners were defined as offenders. Yet, the youths viewed these relationships in more nuanced ways, and analyses revealed that their meaning of the relationship could be largely classified into two categories. The first category consisted of youths who viewed their relationship as exploitive and abusive. In these cases, the older person was seen by the youths as having used manipulation and authority to take advantage of them. The second category of youths, even in retrospect, viewed the relationships as romantic or at least reciprocal, with "statutory rape" acting only as a formally imposed external definition that did not reflect the nature of their experience of the relationship at the time they were interviewed.

"LOSING MY VOICE": EXPLOITIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Eight youths out of our sample of 22 (36%) described their experience of the relationships as exploitive and unilateral, with the adult or older

person having greater power, authority, and knowledge and using these advantages in order to achieve sexual access. Sometimes the case had aggravating circumstances such as blackmail and threats or included offenders who held positions of authority such as school staff. For some of the cases in this category there was also a large age difference between the youth and the offender, but this did not necessarily define the cases falling into this category. The cases in the current category involved several 18-year-old offenders, and in one case a relationship between a 14- and 38-year-old was not perceived by the youth as abusive, even after the relationship had been discovered and had ended.

The youths in this group saw the offender as taking advantage of them. Sometimes this perception had been present during the relationship, and in other cases it developed after the relationship had ended. They described themselves as feeling helpless, a feeling that grew larger as time passed. It often felt increasingly difficult for them to end the relationship. These youths described fearing that others would believe the relationship was consensual. The youths in these cases used terms such as “I was molested” when reflecting back on their relationship in the research interview. The youths described feeling a loss of control and the relationships as inflicting pain and suffering on them.

In most of these cases the sexual activities were unwanted to begin with, but in few cases the youths were willing to engage in the sexual relationship in order to preserve some relationship (intimate or friendship) with the older person, and the relationship was seen as abusive only gradually. For example, a youth describes a relationship that she eventually came to see as exploitive:

At first it didn't really bother me, because, I mean, I really cared about him a lot and I've known him since I was in the 7th grade. We were really good friends before we started dating. But then it got to be where that's all he wanted from me, and I just kind of, like, I didn't want him to break up with me so I was fine with it. (Kayla, 15, involved with an 18-year-old)

In retrospect, the youth perceived the sexual relationship as unwanted and uncomfortable but was having difficulty differentiating between the sexual demands and the long-term familiarity and friendship with the offender.

“SOMETHING SPECIAL FOR ME”: ROMANTIC, RECIPROCAL RELATIONSHIPS

Alternatively, the remaining 14 interviewed youths (63%) described their relationships as reciprocal and often desired, even months or years after the relationship had ended. The age difference in these cases was not connected to something they defined as an abusive experience. The youths gave several

justifications for dating adults, such as feeling more protected, increasing their popularity, and looking for maturity in the relationship as well as a curiosity defined by them as a normative stage in growing up. As one girl described it, "I guess I was going through that teenage thing where you talk to older people and you lie about your age and stuff like that." (Jessica, 14, involved with a 17-year-old). Some of the relationships falling into this category were long-term, with the youth perceiving them as a romance. Others were very short-term, based on one or a few sexual encounters. But what marked these cases was the youths' characterization of the relationship as reciprocal. The following quotes represent two variations of reciprocal relationships, one focused on the feelings of affection for the offender and the pregnancy that resulted from the relationship, and the other focused on the sexual experience:

I just want to, like, have him here. I want him to actually meet his child, to actually know him. 'Cause I know he did wrong in a way, I know that like it's his own child that I know he will love—and he always wanted children of his own but he never could have them. And it's going to hurt him to never see his child. (Krystal, 14, involved with a 38-year-old).

We saw these boys that we knew and then we like was, you know, went in their house and all that stuff. And it was, like, talking and listening to music and stuff and dancing. And then one thing leads to another so that's when we was having sex with the boys. It was my first experience—I didn't like it. And then another night at like 12 o'clock in the morning we snuck out the house and we went to the store and we saw them again and then we did the same thing again. (Josefina, 13, involved with a 17-year-old)

The first youth expressed longing to reconnect with the offender and a strong desire for him to be part of her life and the life of his child. The ending of the relationship and his arrest were perceived by her as unwanted and she expressed a great deal of concern about his well-being. In the second quote, the youth focused on the sexual activity and described it as her choice to engage in them even though the experience was not positive. This theme emerged in several interviews: even when the youths were mixed or felt negatively about the sexual experience, they did not see themselves as having been exploited or forced. The youths in this group did not use terminology suggesting that they felt abused but defined the relationship and the sexual experience using reciprocal terms such as "I had sexual contact, well let's say sexual activities with a, um, 16-year-old boy. He was 16 at the time and I was 13." And another described, "That's when we were just . . . got a little too carried away." In these relationships, although aware that others saw a victim-offender dichotomy, the youths rejected this definition.

The Meaning of Their Encounter with Law Enforcement and Other Professionals

All of the youths in this study understood that the age difference in the relationship was socially and legally considered deviant. They did not anticipate, however, how far-reaching the encounter with law enforcement would be and the way it was going to affect their lives. For most of them, the encounter with law enforcement and sometimes with other professionals dealing with child sexual abuse (including counselors, lawyers, and medical examiners) was experienced as a crisis. The moment their story was addressed by the formal legal authorities was the moment when the relationships were transformed from private and personal to public. The encounter with the law represented a dramatic shift in their lives and was often described in terms suggesting helplessness and loss of independence and control. As one girl explained, "My brother started going off and he came back and told my mom and I got in trouble and she took my cell phone and called the police." They sometimes described a sense of isolation as others externally defined their relationship as "statutory rape."

This feeling of loss of control appeared to be related to many experiences that occurred once authorities were notified: First, in about half of the cases the youths did not feel convinced that law enforcement needed to be involved in their cases. Some of them had had previous bad experiences with the police, which increased their sense of distrust and fear. Second, the threat of the offender being arrested or questioned by the police was perceived as very stressful by some of the youths, either because they loved the offenders or were afraid of them. In one case, for example, the youth knew the offender had weapons and feared he would harm her or her mother for reporting him to the police. In addition, the youths were asked to provide details about the most intimate aspects of their relationships (sometimes they had to repeat the details multiple times, including testifying in court). In addition, it was sometimes arranged for them to have a forensic anogenital examination following disclosure, a procedure viewed by several as intrusive. In some cases the youths were required to attend therapy by their parents, and many of the youths chafed against the implication that they had emotional problems that needed to be discussed in a professional setting. The requirement to attend therapy often added to the youths' feeling that their intimate relationships were repeatedly exposed to others against their wishes. One youth described:

They referred us to a therapist, and when I started going to her, she like, my parents gave her my journals and they locked them in her office. And then, like, she would sit there and go through them with me. And she'd say that she wouldn't talk about things that we talked about with my parents, but then they'd find out. (Josefina, 13, involved with a 17-year-old)

“ON MY SIDE”: LAW ENFORCEMENT INVOLVEMENT AS SUPPORTIVE,
ADEQUATE, AND EFFECTIVE

For some youths, the involvement by police and therapists was felt to be helpful, even sometimes a life-saving event. This theme was most strongly expressed by the youths who saw their relationships as abusive and exploitive. These youths felt that the encounter with the law gave legitimacy to their experiences, and they described finding relief in the conceptualization of themselves as victims and the relationship as abusive. The youths described being treated as individuals whose needs were met. The involvement of law enforcement resulted for them in reduced anxiety, shame, and guilt and enhanced recovery:

I'm 14. My first time was when I was 13. When I was 13 I got two STDs, there was a possibility I could have got pregnant, and it tore me away from my family and my friends and threw me off and now that I'm not sexually involved with anyone it's like I became more mature I'm a stronger person physically and mentally and I have a better social life. (Hanna, 14, involved with an 18-year-old)

This youth expressed her thankfulness for the law enforcement and professionals involved in her case multiple times during the interview.

However, the youths' experience of the professionals they encountered was most typically complex and ambivalent and was not always predicted based on their feelings about the statutory relationship. In two cases in which the youths saw the relationships as exploitive, they were satisfied with the encounter with law enforcements but were upset that it didn't end with the arrest of the offender. In three cases, they were upset by the encounters with the police, but were satisfied with the encounter at the CAC. Even for youths who saw the relationship as positive or mutual, their mostly negative experience was mixed with an understanding that the professionals were trying to help or protect them (“It was fine. It was their job.” “It helped me learn my lesson . . . don't get yourself into anything you don't know what the outcome could be.”)

“GETTING INTO TROUBLE”: LAW ENFORCEMENT INVOLVEMENT AS FORCIBLE,
ARBITRARY, AND INTRUSIVE

Almost all of the interviewed youths struggled with trying to understand why law enforcement involvement had been necessary. Many felt scared, and most experienced their encounter with law enforcement and other professionals as unwanted. When asked to describe the reason for coming to the CAC they used phrases such as “I was forced to come here.” Another youth described her experience:

Well they made me go to the hospital and get an STD check and I had to come here and do an interview for the detective, where he watched on the other end which made me feel really awkward, and now I have to go to therapy because the police told my mom that I should, like kind of what's the word gave a suggestion that I should, and I don't know she's making me go even though she talks more than I do . . . that's about it. (Sofia, 15, involved with a 17-year-old)

In another place during the interview:

I: How come you didn't want to be here?

S: 'Cause I would have rather just avoided all the drama and it never happen in the first place but I just don't like talking to strangers about how I feel.

The encounter with the law enforcement officers and professionals involved in her case was described by the youth as a multiple-stage process that she was obligated to comply with and that involved passiveness and powerlessness on her part ("they made me"). Hence, the consequence of the encounter with the law enforcement was sometimes perceived by the youth as the primary offense while their relationship with the older person was perceived as not problematic at all or only as a secondary offense.

In some instances the involvement with law enforcement seemed to reinforce the connection they felt with the offender, enhancing a romantic fugitive/outlawed relationship narrative:

We were really like Bonnie and Clyde, like we thought it all was like we was really great. Like, I really don't regret it. Like I mean I regret the stuff after but I don't regret ever meeting him or ever knowing him. 'Cause he was with some stuff in my life that I don't think I could have got through by myself. We were great. (Jasmine, 16, involved with an 18-year-old)

In some of the cases, the intervention by law enforcement resulted in what the youths described as a forced ending of the relationships. In other cases, though, the youth was determined to continue the relationship. One girl, for example, was extremely upset when the relationship was disclosed while she was pregnant from sexual activity with her 21-year-old boyfriend. He was sentenced and sent to jail, a consequence that was perceived by her as an injustice since he was not able to be with her during her pregnancy. After he was released from jail, they got married.

Victims Wrestle with External Legal and Social Definitions of Their Relationships

During the interviews, the youths, particularly those for whom the response by law enforcement and other professionals was seen as highly negative,

wrestled with trying to understand the externally imposed legal and social definitions of their relationships with the older person. They compared these definitions to their own internal views about the relationships. In some of these cases the statutory rape laws appeared to these youths as arbitrary, illogical, and one-dimensional, lacking the ability to capture the true context of their relationship: "I love that boy . . . I don't understand. I never understood what was the point, like if I'm happy and he happy and we not doing nothin' to damage the community it was crazy" (Jasmine, 16, involved with an 18-year-old).

In this quote the girl reflects on the social consequences of her relationship with the older person: she felt that since it was not harmful to either her or society it should not be a legal offense. Other youths were similarly confused by laws that categorized their sexual relationship as rape:

I didn't understand that and I still don't understand. . . . They said it was like rape. . . . But to me I don't think its rape if, you know I saying, the person go along with it. Rape to me is when the person don't go along with it . . . I'm not gonna stop doing something I don't believe in. But to this day I still don't believe in it. I still don't understand why. (Angelina, 16, involved with 18-year-old)

In the same manner, another youth described the need to acknowledge the context of each individual relationship in order to assess its nature:

It also depends on how many years you've known them, if you were friends first, if you can really trust the person and if they didn't like pressure you . . . and if you're friends with a guy who's older than you and its turns into something more I can understand that, but when a guy . . . hits on a girl and doesn't even friends first, doesn't even try and kiss another person. . . . It all depends on the guy and the girl. (Sofia, 15, involved with a 17-year-old)

This girl included several dimensions that should define, by her perception, the nature of the relationships and whether they should be considered as abusive. These include the duration of the relationship and whether the sexual acts were immediate or whether sexual intimacy evolved gradually as well as whether they included a sense of friendship and closeness.

The youths in our sample disagreed with the automatic labeling of the older person as an offender and the youth as a victim as well as the expectation that the youth would experience negative symptoms typical for sexually abused victims:

I try not to think about it. I try to just move on. I mean I know people think I'm supposed to be like traumatized or anything but they only think

I'm traumatized, like the only thing . . . like I'm not even traumatized. The only thing that really hurts me the most is that there was a video. If there wasn't a video I probably could have gone and kept it a secret for the rest of my life, but I didn't want . . . I really can't stand that there was a video of it. (Brittany, 16, involved with a 38-year-old)

The youth in this case feels that the stereotypical victim experience is being imposed on her and that it does not fit exactly. In this specific case, as well as other cases, the youth was required to engage in therapy, and she drew from that the message that others assumed emotional damage as a consequence of the relationship with the older person. But for this girl, the concept of privacy seemed to be most crucial. The intrusion of privacy during the relationship with the older person (the video recording of the sexual act by her partner) was what made her disclose the relationship. The continued exposure of this relationship in front of law enforcement officers and professionals was perceived as additional harmful intrusions to her privacy.

Youth Recommendations for Better Responses by Law Enforcement and Other Professionals

During the interviews, the youths were asked about ways that professionals and other adults could improve their response. The most common recommendation was a desire to be given more information about the legal procedures and the possible consequences on their lives and the lives of the older person they were involved with. One youth described:

I was like, sometimes I be nervous I don't know what's going to happen or what's going on, what we going to talk about, what they gonna do afterward. I pretty sure they probably would have told me what they were going to do afterward I probably would have been nervous but I wouldn't be as nervous. (Roslene, 13, involved with a 17-year-old)

In her interview, this youth had expressed feelings of helplessness, uncertainty, and distress as a result of police involvement. She saw those feelings as an unavoidable part of the legal procedure yet she believed that being told about the stages of the process and possible outcomes could have served as a source of empowerment.

Youths also suggested that they would feel more empowered during the procedure if they felt like the professionals wanted to hear the story from their perspective and understand their view of the relationships. One girl described:

I would have liked to at least been able to talk to the people about it. 'Cause, I mean, they handled it like as if he were raping me, which was

not happening. But, I mean they didn't even ask, I mean, if we were living together, we bought a house together, I mean we bought a car and everything. (Donna, 16)

As mentioned, the relationships and experiences described by the youths in the interviews were diverse, but the underlying wish expressed by almost all was the need to be understood by others. The girl just quoted felt as though there was no place for her interpretation of the relationship, which got defined externally as statutory rape. The underlying wish was to establish her view of the relationships in front of the professionals.

Finally, some of youths were concerned about their future relationships with their perpetrator. Some felt that the disclosure of their relationship and the intervention that followed did not allow further dialogue with their perpetrators or even a closure of the relationship, as described by one of the interviewed youths:

Now if one of you all was to call my mom and talk to her and say even though they cannot see each other or have contact with each other can they at least still go to counseling together to understand things that we need to know as young kids about our age difference . . . even though we don't have to talk to each other after counseling but at least in counseling we can talk about things that we didn't talk about to the counselor. (Michele, 13, involved with a 16-year-old)

For this girl, meeting the older person in the therapeutic environment was suggested as a way to acknowledge her experience, to process what was defined as others as an illegal relationship. In this example the relationship was considered by the girl as reciprocal, and the underlying wish was for the adult world to define them as such (calling both herself and the older person "young kids"), but even when the relationships were considered forcible some youths experienced the desire to close the loose ends of these relationships.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of the current study was to learn more about how youths describe their experience with "statutory rape" relationships and how they perceive encounters with law enforcement and other professionals following the disclosure of the relationship. The youths' discussion of the relationship dynamics suggested a great deal of complexity and variation in their experiences that will need to be better understood if legal, therapeutic, and other responses are going to be improved. The relationships they described ranged from some that were very abusive and controlling, to brief sexual encounters

that they felt were reciprocal or initiated by them, to romantic relationships with boyfriends and in one case a relationship that resulted in marriage. Unfortunately, in some of these cases their experience with law enforcement and other professionals appeared to represent to the youths an even greater disruptive event in their lives than the relationships themselves, something they experienced as a crisis. Some of the youths found the professional response supportive and affirming, but others described it as unwanted, negative, and intrusive. In suggesting how professionals might improve their response, the youths we talked with recommended that professionals provide them with better information about what was happening, why it was happening, and the likely outcomes. They also emphasized their desire to have their perspectives on the relationships listened to and taken into consideration when law enforcement and others were formulating their response.

The Complexity of Statutory Relationships

The narratives around statutory relationships tend to emphasize a young, naïve victim who is exploited by an older offender, but our interviews with youths highlighted the problem with this singular understanding (Hines & Finkelhor, 2007). There were youths who did perceive their relationships as exploitive and abusive. Some of these relationships were marked by intimidation, threats, or blackmail. Some were experienced by the youths as abusive from the start—the youths felt scared, trapped, and unable to turn to anyone for help. For others, it was not always initially obvious to them that the relationship was abusive, but as it progressed, or in retrospect, the youths saw themselves as having been manipulated and exploited by the offender.

More typical in our interview sample, however, was a perception of the relationships or sexual experiences as reciprocal and mutual. Sometimes the youths described the offenders as boyfriends for whom they felt a great deal of affection. For others, the relationship was a series of sexual encounters that the youths either passively took part in or, in some cases, sought out. The youths described these experiences as a way to gain social status, to satisfy sexual curiosity, or as something that just “happened.” But they did not see the offenders as having committed a crime or abused them.

It is also important to note that the stereotype of statutory victim relationships involves a young adolescent girl and much older male offender. But the cases brought to the authorities' attention, even in our very small sample, included the involvement of several 14- and 15-year-olds with 18-year-old offenders. It also included two cases in which the offender was the same sex as the youth—one in which the youth was male, and another in which the youth was female. Such variations in even the basic demographics of statutory victim cases must be included in our understanding if the response by law enforcement and other professionals is going to improve.

The youths' understanding of these relationships is likely to evolve and change over time. Some have suggested that after statutory relationships end, victims better perceive how the power differences in the relationship may have led them to do things that they did not want to do (Higginson, 1999). Yet the youths in this study were interviewed one to two years after the disclosure and after having been separated from the offender. Though some of the youths we interviewed had a developing perception that they had been manipulated, betrayed, and deceived by the offender, most still did not see themselves as victims or define their partners as perpetrators. In fact, in some cases, parents and the professionals' use of a "victim-offender" definition appeared to generate feelings of hostility or helplessness for the youths.

While legal definitions of statutory rape vary by state, most are framed by several core dimensions: (a) the age of the youth (under the age of consent), (b) the age of the offender or age difference between the two, and (c) the lack of force and the voluntary involvement of the juvenile. The last dimension distinguishes statutory rape from other forcible sexual assault. However, it was confusing to the youths we interviewed why their age or the age of the offender justified its definition as illegal by adults and required legal, medical, and therapeutic interventions. The youths felt that the external definitions were preventing them from being understood by others in society (including parents and professionals) and that the youths' meaning of the sexual event was overlooked. Furthermore, the youths' meaning of the event appears to be important to the youths' perception and recollection of the event. The cognitive appraisal of the event is also likely to be dependent on their developmental stage, which includes the evolution of self-concept and sense of identity.

Research suggests that the consequences of statutory rape are often negative for youths (for review see Hines & Finkelhor, 2007): some studies indicate that the effect of these relationships on the youths' psychological well-being in short and long term can be extremely negative and associated with increased risk for psychological problems such as suicide attempts, alcohol or drug use, teen pregnancy, and risky sexual behaviors (Leitenberg & Salzman, 2000; Miller et al., 1997; Young & d'Arcy, 2005). So it is likely that even for many of the youths who perceived their relationship positively there might be emotional consequences that they may not have been able to understand.

The psychological and emotional impact of these relationships is also clearly complex, and the association with a range of correlated risk factors makes it difficult to fully understand the causal impact of the relationships. Research has shown, for example, that youths likely to be involved with older partners are at risk for having already experienced a range of adverse events and victimizations. Mental health and protective responses must take this larger context into consideration to be effective.

Implications for Intervention in Statutory Victimization Cases

The goals of professional intervention after a disclosure of statutory rape are varied and not consistent. Law enforcement must follow legal procedures when sexual contact with a minor meets statutory definitions that make it illegal. There are important and valuable reasons for a society to define ages at which youths are unable to consent to sexual activity (Mitchell & Rogers, 2003). The intention is for legal prohibitions to serve as deterrence to exploitation (Donovan, 1997). In practice, however, law enforcement involvement varies significantly by case and jurisdiction, and it is unclear which case characteristics or factors drive law enforcement involvement or outcomes. The response by medical, therapeutic, and other social service systems is likely intended to provide needed help to youths who are seen as engaging in risky activities, but it was clear from our interviews that mandated services framed around the youths' "victimization" failed to engage them.

These findings were particularly notable given that the research interviews occurred approximately one year after the youths' first involvement with law enforcement. In general, the youths' negative impressions of their experiences with professionals unfortunately appear to have persisted. And perhaps even more concerning, the law enforcement interviews occurred at a CAC, which are agencies designed to provide state-of-the-art, sensitive forensic child interviews. This suggests that even highly trained child victimization professionals struggle to connect with this population of youths and highlights the need for improved models of intervention.

The youths' own perception and experience with the statutory relationship had some impact on how they perceived the response by law enforcement and other professionals. Some of the youths who saw themselves as having been abused or exploited had positive views about the professionals that handled their case and saw them as helpers. In these cases, the approach by adult professionals to them as victims gave legitimacy to their distress. Yet youths who perceived the encounters with law enforcements and other professionals as unwanted and negative came from a variety of relationship experiences, both abusive and reciprocal. Their primary distress in reflecting back on their experiences came from being forced to tell their stories to strangers and feeling bad about consequences that affected the offenders, including arrest, sometimes jail time and registration as a sex offender.

The minors interviewed were adolescents, a developmental period that is marked by a tendency to rely on peer groups and to feel somewhat alienated from the adult world. Many of the youths were also ethnic minorities or came from at-risk neighborhoods and families. They may have had previous negative experiences with police or a mistrustful perception of them. Yet the extreme negative encounters with law enforcement and other adults

described by some of the youths cannot be dismissed as just adolescence or mistrust of professional intervention generally. The youths' request for more information and their desire for their perspectives of the relationships to be taken into consideration suggest a need for a more nuanced response and a response that considers the developing independence and autonomy of adolescence.

It is a tricky balance to hold firm to a societal need to make strong statements against youths' victimization and take seriously the need to protect youths against exploitation and at the same time respect that adolescents are moving toward adulthood, are developing sexual interests, and need to be given more information and have their perspectives respected. While adolescents do need to have parents and professionals provide protection when they are in danger or being abused, they do not benefit from assumptions about their naivety. It may be that law enforcement and other helping professionals are failing to connect with these youths not only because they treat them as victims when they may not see themselves as such but also because they approach them as "children" when the adolescent developmental orientation is to be seen and treated as much as grown-up as possible.

Several implications for practice can be drawn from these data: First, more research is needed on the diversity of statutory relationships so that the criminal justice and therapeutic responses can be supported with evidence and not arbitrarily administered. The current study provides some frameworks around which studies could be designed surveying larger and more representative samples. Another is a need for greater education. Few prevention programs incorporate discussions of relationships with older people or adults. There are many reasons why youths might be attracted to these relationships. There are also many risks involved. It would be beneficial for a sexual health or relationship program to involve active discussions about the attractions, risks, and legal ramifications and consequences for such relationships. Such content might even be useful to incorporate into universal high school prevention programs. Many of the youths that we interviewed suggested to us that they might have avoided the relationship in the first place if they had known the outcomes.

Finally, the responses by the youths we interviewed suggest a need for creative and flexible protocols to be developed for handling these cases. Excepting a few situations in which the youths had felt abused by the perpetrator, some law enforcement treatment of the youths as a type of "hostile witness" and the requirement of many of the youths to accept medical and therapeutic treatment as a result of their "victimization" did not appear to have successfully achieved the goal of helping them, at least as they perceived it. We were struck by the youth who expressed the wish that she and the offender could have attended therapy together in order to process their relationship and why they were required to end it. Perhaps, in

situations where youths felt a strong positive attachment to the offender, a modified “restorative justice” model might be offered so that mental health providers could work with the offender and victim to help them understand and resolve the need to end the relationship and any harm that may have occurred to the victim.

Conclusions

Our analysis of the 22 interviews with youth victims of statutory relationships highlighted the diversity of these cases. It is unclear how law enforcement, child abuse professionals, and mental health providers account for such diversity. Most of the interviewed youths described the response by professionals, even one to two years later, as feeling forced and imposing on them an external definition of “victim” when they did not experience themselves or their relationship this way. Although the youths knew the relationships were not legal they did not understand the reasoning for this and suggested that professionals should provide greater information about what is happening and why to the youths during investigations. In general, the youths wished for more respect for their perspectives to be taken into consideration. Implications suggest that these relationships could be the focus of prevention programs and that interventions should be creative and supported by research and evaluation.

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AUTHOR NOTES

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