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Suspect Confession of Child Sexual Abuse to Investigators

Tonya Lippert,[1,2] Theodore P. Cross,[3] Lisa Jones,[4] and Wendy Walsh[4]

Abstract

Increasing the number of suspects who give true confessions of sexual abuse serves justice and reduces the burden of the criminal justice process on child victims. With data from four communities, this study examined confession rates and predictors of confession of child sexual abuse over the course of criminal investigations (final $N = 282$). Overall, 30% of suspects confessed partially or fully to the crime. This rate was consistent across the communities and is very similar to the rates of suspect confession of child sexual abuse found by previous research, although lower than that from a study focused on a community with a vigorous practice of polygraph testing. In a multivariate analysis, confession was more likely when suspects were younger and when more evidence of abuse was available, particularly child disclosure and corroborative evidence. These results suggest the difficulty of obtaining confession but also the value of methods that facilitate child disclosure and seek corroborative evidence, for increasing the odds of confession.

Keywords

child sexual abuse, confession, criminal justice, disclosure, evidence, children's advocacy centers

Suspect confession is a highly desirable outcome of criminal investigations of child sexual abuse. If true confessions are made, they establish the veracity of the allegations, reduce the burden on child victims to testify, and facilitate a speedy, just criminal justice response. Research finds a clear link between confession and guilty pleas and between confession and all convictions (see Cross, De Vos, & Whitcomb, 1994; Smith & Goretsky-Elstein, 1993). In one Texas county, suspect confession increased the likelihood of a guilty plea or conviction by 250% (Bradshaw & Marks, 1990).

Suspect confession is likely to benefit child victims apart from its criminal justice effects. If suspects confess, child victims may be less likely to blame themselves for the abuse, and when father figures admit sexual involvement, mothers are more likely to support their children (Everson, Hunter, Runyon, Edelsohn, & Coulter, 1989). In the current study on four jurisdictions, the authors report the frequency of suspect confessions of child sexual abuse to investigators and examine what factors predict confessions. The results are compared to other confession research pertaining to both child sexual abuse and felonies generally.

Despite its importance, very little research examines suspect confessions of child sexual abuse. A few studies of the prosecution of child sexual abuse report the percentages of suspects who confessed, although what was counted as a confession was somewhat different across these studies. In their study of 350 cases referred to one Texas district attorney's (DA's) office, Bradshaw and Marks (1990) reported that 21% of suspects gave some kind of admission of the sexual abuse

"including, but not limited to, a signed confession" (p. 280). In Gray's (1993) study of eight jurisdictions, suspect admission of child sexual abuse was reported as a reason for charging 37.2% of the cases that had charges filed. In a study of sexual abuse cases referred to 10 DA's offices across 5 states, Smith and Goretsky-Elstein (1993) found that 34% of suspects confessed. The analysis of Cross et al. (1994) on four jurisdictions found that 32% of cases referred to prosecutors had suspect confession as a form of evidence. These studies reveal the frequency of confession but leave unanswered the question of what factors increase their frequency.

The research of Faller and colleagues on males charged with child sexual abuse by one suburban Michigan county DA's office is a noteworthy contrast to other research for two reasons. First, their research found a much higher confession rate. Faller and Henry (2000) examined 323 criminal sexual conduct cases prosecuted between 1986 and 1999, which included children's disclosures of abuse or strong medical evidence and reported that 64% of suspects confessed to the abuse at some point during the investigation. Because few of the cases Faller

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and Henry examined went to trial, as is often true with child sexual abuse cases (see, e.g., Cross, Walsh, Simone, & Jones, 2003), they concluded that victims' obtaining justice "derives almost entirely from effective intervention by professionals with offenders so they confess and plead to their crimes" (p. 1223).

Second, their research represents the only in-depth examination of the explanatory factors of confession (Faller, Birdsall, Henry, Vandervort, & Silverschanz, 2001; Staller & Faller, 2009). These researchers considerably detailed this county's investigation methods, particularly via a book-length case study (Staller & Faller, 2009). This county is notable for its energetic, multiagency collaborative response to child sexual cases, including joint child protective services (CPS)–law enforcement child forensic interviews. In the cases studied, children were interviewed and, if deemed appropriate, medically examined. Child interviews were videotaped, and suspects were shown the videotape and then interrogated. Law enforcement sought suspect confessions and endeavored to obtain details from suspects that corroborated children's disclosures. A number of U.S. jurisdictions have used similar methods, particularly with the spread of children's advocacy centers (CACs; see, e.g., Cross et al., 2008; Walsh, Jones, & Cross, 2003).

Suspects who made no confession after being shown the child interview videotape and interrogated were offered a polygraph to exonerate them on the question of sexual abuse; 58% of these nonconfessing suspects submitted to polygraph tests. Although most scientific analyses find no evidence for the validity of polygraph tests' use for detecting deception (National Research Council, 2003), considerable police science and social psychology research suggests that the polygraph can lead to confessions, and several studies have found that offenders on probation who are polygraphed admit to more sexual offending (Cross & Saxe, 2001).

Data on polygraph testing and confession were available for the vast majority of the original sample ($N = 319$; Kathleen Faller, personal communication, April 27, 2009). Of the suspects administered polygraph tests ($n = 121$), 59.5% ($n = 72$) confessed. In the total 319 cases, 63% (201) of suspects confessed, which can be broken down into 40.4% of the total who confessed without a polygraph test and 22.6% of the total who confessed during or after taking a polygraph test.

In a follow-up analysis, Faller and colleagues (2001) computed a logistic regression model to explain suspect confession and found four conditions that significantly increased the likelihood of confession: the involvement of state versus local police, having a retained versus court-appointed attorney, more severe abuse, and a younger suspect. Consistent with recent criminological studies showing that contextual factors best account for suspect confessions (Deslauriers-Varin & St-Yves, 2006; Deslauriers-Varin, St-Yves, & Lussier, 2009; St-Yves & Tanguay, 2009, as cited by St-Yves & Deslauriers-Varin, 2009), two of these were contextual factors.

The publications by Faller, Staller, and colleagues illustrate one community's apparently successful response to child sexual abuse cases. This community is unlikely to be representative of every jurisdiction, however. Further research is needed to develop a broader knowledge base on confession of sexual abuse. Additionally, more recent data are necessary, because the existing research dates from the late 1980s to early 1990s, and the investigation of child sexual abuse has changed over the years. A wider range of predictors of confession needs to be examined, and additional multivariable models explaining confession need to be developed.

Through a secondary analysis of case data from an evaluation of CACs (see Cross et al., 2008), the current article examines confessions of child sexual abuse, using data collected from 2001 to 2003 from four communities. This article also examines predictors of confession, using some of the same variables as Faller et al. (2001) and some unexamined by Faller et al. Confession was considered a complex social–psychological event potentially influenced by characteristics of the suspect and the suspect's reaction to the child, the nature of the crime, the investigation, and the available evidence. For our choice of confession variables, we relied on the work of Faller and colleagues, our research on predictors of children's full disclosures of sexual abuse, which are hypothetically related to suspects' confessions (Lippert, Cross, Jones, & Walsh, 2009) and the knowledge of CAC staff, including child abuse prosecutors. Specific variables examined include the use of a CAC and related investigation factors; the community; child, abuse, and Suspect characteristics; child disclosure factors; and forms of evidence available (Table 1 identifies all examined variables). The current research, therefore, increases our knowledge of confession by expanding the range of predictor variables and communities studied and using more current data.

Furthermore, two of the four communities studied here used CACs, allowing a comparison between more traditional and newer, more integrated models of criminal investigation. CACs are specialized organizations that, since 1985, have brought together multiple agencies to collaborate to support child victims and improve the investigation of child sexual abuse (see Cross et al., 2008; National Children's Alliance, n.d.; Walsh et al., 2003). CACs typically conduct joint interagency investigations and team interviews using a trained forensic child interviewer and a special child-friendly facility. Multiagency collaboration may increase the likelihood of confession by increasing the effectiveness of evidence collection, improving child disclosure and testimony, and increasing support for the child and family as justice is pursued.

Relevant Criminological and Psychological Research on Confession

Although there is limited research on confession of child sexual abuse, there is a sizeable body of research on confession to crimes generally. Immediately relevant is the research that reports confession rates among suspects. Gudjonsson (2003) reported that a mean confession rate of 50% has been relatively consistent for the last four decades. It seems, however, very

Table 1. Confession Rates by Predictor Variables

Variable	N	Percentage Confessed	χ^2	p
Overall	282	30		
CAC vs. comparison			2.04	.154
CAC	170	33		
Comparison	112	25		
Individual community			2.86	.413
Alabama A (CAC)	79	35		
Texas A (CAC)	91	31		
Texas B (comparison)	54	22		
Texas C (comparison)	58	28		
Child characteristics				
Child sex			0.549	.459
Female	249	31		
Male	33	24		
Age at onset[a]			3.39	.184
0–6	70	27		
7–12	113	32		
13–17	70	41		
Age at forensic interview[b]			**10.59**	**.005**
0–6	72	16		
7–12	104	31		
13–17	103	39		
Suspect–child relationship			**5.94**	**.015**
Intrafamilial	162	24		
Extrafamilial	120	38		
Abuse characteristics				
Vaginal or anal intercourse			**7.40**	**.007**
Yes	95	43		
No	158	27		
Duration of abuse			1.18	.278
One week or less	84	34		
More than 1 week	94	42		
Frequency of abuse			3.65	.056
Once	84	30		
More than once	94	44		
Suspect characteristics				
Suspect age[c]			**10.98**	**.012**
18–30	123	40		
31–40	96	23		
41–50	39	18		
51+	24	25		
Suspect race			1.88	.171
White	184	33		
Non-White	97	25		
Disclosure and caregiver support characteristics				
Child disclosure			**23.58**	**<.001**
Yes	187	39		
No	73	8		
Time to disclosure			2.65	.270
Hours after	49	45		
Days after	50	32		
Months after	55	31		
Nonoffending caregiver support at disclosure			2.46	.116
Yes	178	33		
No/ambivalent	47	21		
Evidence				
Material			1.05	.306
Yes	35	37		
No	244	29		

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

Variable	N	Percentage Confessed	χ^2	p
Medical			2.15	.143
Yes	26	42		
No	256	28		
Mental health				.491[d]
Yes	10	40		
No	260	29		
Behavioral			**4.41**	**.036**
Yes	43	16		
No	236	32		
Sexual abuse against another child			**7.10**	**.008**
Yes	22	55		
No	258	28		
Eyewitness			3.41	.065
Yes	40	43		
No	239	28		
Corroborating witness			**12.84**	**<.001**
Yes	91	44		
No	187	23		
Investigation				
Joint CPS and LE			0.94	0.33
Yes	55	33		
No	10	25		
Videotaped interview			2.35	0.13
Yes	56	34		
No	20	24		

Note: CAC = children's advocacy center, CPS = child protective services, LE = law enforcement. Statistically significant χ^2 tests at α = .05 are given in boldface.
[a] Mean child age at onset: confessors = 9.98; non = 9.04, $t(240)$ = 1.71, p = .09.
[b] Mean child age at forensic interview: confessors = 11.42; non = 9.84, Welch-Satterthwaite $t(193.551)$ = 3.16, p = .002.
[c] Mean suspect age: confessors = 29.79; non = 34.41, $t(280)$ = 3.29, p = .001.
[d] Fisher's exact test.

difficult to establish an average confession rate across studies because of their different sampling procedures and definitions of confession (e.g., whether partial admission is counted). Illustrative of this difficulty, Kassin and Gudjonsson (2004) reported a range of 42–55% across studies, whereas Leo (1996) reported a confession rate of 64%, citing a range from 32% to 67%.

Other relevant research examines the role of interrogation and the psychological process of suspect confession. Confessions rarely arise spontaneously but instead result from police interviews/interrogations of suspects. In typical U.S. practice (see Kassin & Gudjonsson, 2004), police seek to interrogate individuals they suspect of the crime because of initial evidence and because of an initial information-gathering interview. In the United States, however, interrogation can proceed only if police inform suspects of their Miranda rights to remain silent and to consult an attorney (based on the Supreme Court's Miranda v. Arizona case of 1966), and suspects then waive these rights. The act of suspects' invoking their Miranda rights forestalls interrogation, and research shows that consulting an attorney dramatically decreases the likelihood of a confession (Pearse, Gudjonsson, Clare, & Rutter, 1998; Moston, Stephenson, & Williamson, 1992). However, research suggests that investigators are skilled at

influencing suspects to waive their Miranda rights, and the majority do (Leo, 1996; Leo & White, 1999).

Interrogation then proceeds. Authors describing U.S. practice describe this as a confrontational psychological process aimed at inducing suspects' confessions (Kassin & Gudjonsson, 2004). In the United Kingdom, however, a recent criminal justice initiative aims for a less confrontational process and labels the interaction as *interview* rather than *interrogation* (see, e.g., Moston & Fisher, 2007).

The factor analysis of Gudjonsson and Sigurdsson (1999) on a 54-item self-report measure of past confessions given to inmates suggests some of the psychology underlying confessions. Suspects confessed because of their perception of proof (the belief that denial was futile because of the evidence), external pressure to confess (related to interrogation methods and a hope for leniency), and internal pressure to confess (related to their guilt). The most influential factor was perception of proof. In this study, child molesters perceived the strength of evidence against them as weakest compared to violent offenders and rapists but also reported the greatest internal need to confess of the three groups.

Studies of criminal investigations have identified a number of correlates of confession. Younger suspects are often found more likely to confess than older ones (Baldwin & McConnell,

1980; Leiken, 1970; Medford, Gudjonsson, & Pearse, 2003), and one study found that suspects were more likely to self-incriminate when the evidence against them was rated as strong versus weak (Moston et al., 1992). In a British study, confession was less likely when a legal adviser was present and when there was a prior incarceration and more likely when suspects reported having used illegal drugs within 24 hour of arrest (Pearse, Gudjonsson, Clare, & Rutter, 1998).

False Confessions

The current study focuses on true confession. It should be acknowledged, however, that much recent research and writing concerns the risk of false confessions. Several high-profile cases have highlighted the risk of false confession, including the ''Central Park Jogger'' case. In 1989, five juveniles falsely confessed to beating and raping a woman jogging through the park (see, e.g., Kassin, 2008) and were convicted and served time until exonerated by DNA evidence and a confession from the actual assailant. Advocacy work such as the Innocence Project and recent work by researchers such as Kassin and Gudjonsson (see, e.g., Kassin, 2008; Kassin & Gudjonsson, 2004) suggest that false confessions are both more common than previously thought and a risk of commonly-used interrogation methods. In the current study, methods were chosen to guard against their inclusion, and the fact that 96% of the suspect confessions were accompanied by a child disclosure of the sexual abuse (93% of these full disclosures) suggests that here the risk of false confession is low. Three suspects confessed despite the absence of a child's disclosure, but for all three cases, there were other forms of evidence (at the very least a corroborating witness or eyewitness) implicating the suspect.

The current study examines suspect confession rates within the context of an investigation of child sexual abuse. It examines the likelihood of suspect confession among four communities, two with and two without CACs, and uses bivariate and multivariate methods to examine which child, suspect, evidence, and investigation factors predict confession.

Method

This is a secondary data analysis from a larger project, the Multisite Evaluation of Children's Advocacy Centers, which was designed to evaluate the impact of CACs on children, families, systems, and communities and was funded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (for more information and a more detailed report of methods, see Cross et al., 2008; Simone, Cross, Jones, & Walsh, 2005; Walsh et al., 2003). The Crimes Against Children Research Center (CCRC) research team at the University of New Hampshire (UNH) coordinated and directed research teams at four sites across the country, each consisting of a CAC community and one or two matched comparison non-CAC communities.

Sample

For this research on confession, we limited our analysis to communities that had a sufficient number of prosecuted cases for analysis and we included only adult suspects, as investigation and prosecution dynamics likely differ for juvenile and adult perpetrators. We analyzed only cases of suspects known to have been interviewed or interrogated. The final sample consisted of $N = 282$ cases.

The four groups available for this analysis were (a) Dallas, TX CAC cases, (b) Texas Comparison Community A cases, (c) Texas Comparison Community B cases, and (d) the National CAC (Huntsville, Alabama) cases. It should be noted that all the Texas groups were from Dallas County and were served by the same DA's office, although the police and child welfare agencies were distinct.

Data Collection

Data were collected between December 2001 and December 2003 from both CAC and comparison communities. Case file data were abstracted from case records by research team members at each site, including data on the victim, suspect, family, alleged abuse, disclosure, investigation, interviewing, service delivery, and child protection and criminal justice outcomes. No data were collected on whether a polygraph was used, although interviews conducted with criminal justice personnel on site visits (see Cross et al., 2008; Walsh et al., 2003) revealed that no site had a policy of routine polygraph testing and that it was only used occasionally. Cases were included based on systematic sampling (e.g., every third case) from all sexual abuse cases coming through the CACs during the enrollment period. Cases from comparison sites were selected through a similar sampling method from all police and CPS investigations of sexual abuse initiated during the enrollment period. This analysis uses a subsection of the case data. The UNH Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the informed consent procedures and protocols for protecting participants' rights for the research conducted at each site.

Data on suspects' confessions were drawn from case records at all sites using a data collection form developed for this project. Table 1 lists examined variables. Data collection for CAC cases drew from files from CACs (100% of these cases), CPS (63%), police (59%), prosecutors (38%), and other agencies (e.g., mental health, medical, and school; 31%). Data collection for comparison cases drew from files from CPS (74%), police (62%), prosecutors (26%), and other agencies (34%). Of the 282 cases comprising the final sample, 72% (203) were from the Texas groups and 28% (79) from the National CAC (Huntsville, Alabama). CAC cases made up 60% (170) and comparison cases made up to 40% (112) of the sample.

Male suspects made up the majority of the sample (94%), and 67% of the suspects were White, versus non-White ($n = 279$). On average, suspects were 33.10 years of age ($SD = 11.24$, $n = 269$; range 18–75). Over half the cases (57%) involved intrafamilial abuse. In 79% of the cases,

caregivers appeared supportive of the child (*n* = 225). Over a third of the cases (37.5%) contained allegations of attempted or actual vaginal or anal intercourse (*n* = 253). Children were, on average, 9.36 years of age (*SD* = 4.08) at the time of abuse onset (*n* = 242) and 10.31 years of age (*SD* = 4.22) at the time of first interview (*n* = 279), and 88% were female. Child age at abuse onset and at first interview were highly positively correlated, $r(239) = .875$, $p < .01$, with an average difference of 1.52 years (*SD* = 2.05, *n* = 231).

Data abstracted from case records included documentation about suspect interviews/interrogations. Suspect interviews and interrogations are purportedly distinguished by the degree of accusation and confrontation involved, where interviews are described as intended to assess guilt or innocence and interrogations are intended to elicit confession once a suspect is believed to be guilty (Kassin & Gudjonsson, 2004). For the purposes of the current study, no distinction was made between interviews and interrogations because both permit an opportunity for confession. There were no videotapes or transcripts collected for the research; only case documentation by the police (or, less often, the CPS) investigator obtaining the confession was available, noting what the suspect confessed and other details about the interview (e.g., how long it lasted). A confession was defined as a suspect's communication to an investigator (law enforcement or CPS) of any sexual acts with the alleged victim. Full confessions and partial confessions (admission of some of the acts or incidents disclosed by the child or an eyewitness) were combined and compared to nonconfessions, which included denials and neither admitting nor denying sexual abuse.

The definition and measurement of most of the variables analyzed here was straightforward because most represent concrete events based on specific documentation contained within case records. Other publications from this research project discuss the definition and measurement of disclosure and evidence variables (Lippert et al., 2009; Walsh, Jones, Cross, & Lippert, 2008). Lack of resources precluded formal reliability assessment, although this is mitigated by the concrete nature of most variables.

Data Analysis

Bivariate analyses using Pearson χ^2 and *t* tests were conducted to identify variables that differentiated confessors from nonconfessors. The variables that differed between the study's groups were then entered into binary logistic regression equations to determine their unique association with confession (see below). Additionally, because the child age at abuse onset variable was missing 14% of its data, we replaced its missing data with the sample mean unless the value of the sample mean was higher than the child's age at first interview (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003). Ultimately, 4% of the data (10% of the missing data) for child age at abuse onset were replaced. For caregiver support, given that at least 5% of the data were missing, we included "missing" as a category (see Cohen et al., 2003).

Results

Confession Rates

Somewhat less than a third of suspects confessed (see Table 1). Pearson χ^2 analysis showed no significant difference between the CAC and non-CAC communities. The unweighted mean percentage across the four communities was similar, 29%. The rate was substantially consistent across communities, with only a statistically nonsignificant difference between the lowest rate of 22% and the highest of 35%.

Bivariate Relationship of Predictor Variables and Suspect Confession

Table 1 shows the results of Pearson χ^2 tests of categorical predictor variables with suspect confession (see the table note for results of *t*-tests). In bivariate analyses, the variables that were significantly related to confession were child age at first interview, the child–suspect relationship, abuse severity, suspect age, child full disclosure of abuse, a report of sexual abuse by another child, behavioral evidence, and a corroborating witness evidence. Suspect confession was more likely when children were older, the suspect was unrelated to the child, penetration occurred, suspects were younger, children fully disclosed abuse, another child also reported sexual abuse by the suspect, there was no behavioral evidence of abuse (e.g., sexualized behavior, health-risking behaviors such as running away), and there was a corroborating witness. A higher proportion of suspects confessed when abuse was more frequent and when there was eyewitness evidence, but abuse frequency and eyewitness evidence were just marginally significantly related to suspect confessions ($p < .065$).

Multiple Predictor Model

Variables shown by binary analyses to be significantly related to confession were entered simultaneously into a logistic regression model. Table 2 shows the final model along with the adjusted odds ratios. The model correctly classified 72.7% of the cases, 44.2% of the confessors, and 87.3% of the nonconfessors. Suspect confession was uniquely associated with suspect age, children's full disclosures of abuse during a forensic interview, and a corroborating witness.

Discussion

In the sexual abuse cases across the examined communities, 30% of the suspects confessed. The rate per community fell into a fairly narrow range around this, from 22% to 35%, a range very similar to the rates found by other studies: 37.5% (Gray, 1993), 34% (Smith & Goretsky-Elstein, 1993), 32% (Cross et al., 1994), and 21% (Bradshaw & Marks, 1990). Securing confessions from about one of every three sexual abuse suspects may be normal for many communities, and this may have changed little over recent decades. Data from this

Table 2. Final Logistic Regression Predicting Suspect Confession (N = 227)

Predictor	β	SE	Wald	p	Odds Ratio	95% CI
Child age at interview	−0.01	.05	0.053	.82	0.99	0.90–1.08
Extrafamilial relationship	0.27	.33	0.71	.40	1.32	0.70–2.49
Severity	0.48	.34	1.95	.16	1.61	0.83–3.13
Suspect age	−0.04	.02	5.99	.01	0.96	0.93–0.99
Full child disclosure	1.27	.54	5.59	.02	3.54	1.24–10.11
Another abuse report	1.04	.56	3.45	.06	2.82	0.94–8.43
Corroborating witness	0.83	.32	6.52	.01	2.29	1.21–4.32
Behavioral evidence	−0.27	.55	0.23	.63	0.77	0.26–2.26

Note: Confession coded 0 = no and 1 = yes. Severity coded 0 = nonsevere and 1 = severe abuse. Extrafamilial relationship coded 0 = no and 1 = yes. Full child disclosure, another abuse report, corroborating witness, and behavioral evidence coded 0 = no and 1 = yes. CI = confidence interval.

study and others, however, suggest that opportunities exist for law enforcement to increase confession rates using knowledge of the conditions under which confessions are more likely. In this study, consistent with prior research (see St-Yves & Deslauriers, 2009), it appears that these conditions may be more contextual than individual. With the exception of suspect age, all predictors of confession pertained to the strength of the evidence against the suspect, with the most powerful piece of evidence being the child victim's disclosure.

In light of the relative consistency of empirically-examined confession rates, the rate of 64% observed by Faller and Henry (2000) is particularly striking. To some extent, this reflects the fact that their sample consisted exclusively of cases with child disclosure, except for five cases with strong medical evidence (Kathleen Faller, personal communication, April 23, 2009). However, this is only a partial explanation, because the confession rate of Faller and Henry was still higher than the confession rate here among disclosure cases.

It is difficult to pinpoint exactly what led to the higher confession rate of Faller and Henry, because the community was unusual (see also Staller & Faller, 2009). It had a highly organized, multidisciplinary team with an extraordinary focus on effectively interrogating suspects. It also had a policy of using polygraph testing routinely with initially nonconfessing suspects (Faller, 2009). Note that 22.6% of Faller's sample who confessed only after taking a polygraph test is a large component of their overall confession rate and makes up most of the difference between the identified confession rates of Faller et al. and the current study. Faller (1997) has also, ironically, has also expressed considerable skepticism about polygraph accuracy as part of investigations of child sexual abuse cases based on her research that found no correlation between polygraph results and other case evidence. The polygraph's potential for eliciting confessions has to be weighed against its lack of demonstrated validity for detecting deception and the possibility that reliance on it will help some perpetrators go free, especially if passing the polygraph test leads an investigation of a suspect to be dropped (see, e.g., Cross & Saxe, 2001; Faller, 1997).

The suspect confession rates of 21–37.5% for child sexual abuse across this and other studies are smaller than the 42–55% confession rates for crimes generally (see Kassin &

Gudjonsson, 2004, for a literature review). However, St-Yves and Deslauriers (2009) point out that a fear of losing loved ones is likely greater for individuals suspected of a sexual crime, lowering their motivation to confess. Furthermore, Holmberg and Christianson (2002) found that confessing to sex crimes may be associated with a greater fear of losing dignity and respect. Beyond these fears, a lower rate for child sexual abuse might be expected, given that other evidence beyond a child's disclosure is often lacking. The finding of Gudjonsson and Sigurdsson (1999) that child sexual offenders confessed at a higher rate than perpetrators of other crimes is likely a result of their sample consisting solely of convicted and imprisoned offenders, a much more narrowly defined sample than used by the other studies.

Consistent with the general criminological literature (see Kassin & Gudjonsson, 2004; Moston et al., 1992), evidence was highly associated with confession and may reflect guilty suspects' realization of the inevitability of facing sanction. Confession rates were significantly higher, falling near or within the Kassin and Gudjonsson range, when children disclosed and when certain types of evidence were available. The large effect of disclosure on confession underlines the value of child victims' telling their story and communities securing skilled interviewers and supportive settings to help children who are sexually abused to disclose. Several child variables are probably related to confession partly or wholly because they are correlated with child disclosure, including child age, child–suspect relationship, and vaginal/anal intercourse.

Note that the context surrounding disclosure and nondisclosure may affect confession as well. Prior to an investigation, many children have already disclosed to a member of their family or social network and been believed enough for a report to be made and an investigation initiated. Many other children who were believed to have been abused but remained nondisclosing over the course of an investigation no doubt faced obstacles, internal (e.g., distress, cognitive difficulties) and external (e.g., family opposition, concerns about the suspect), to disclosure, and this context may similarly have supported suspect denials or nonadmissions.

The finding of possibly greatest practical relevance was the relationship of corroborative witness evidence to confession. Corroborative witness evidence was available for about a third

of cases and more than doubled the confession rate. This effect was similar to the effect of corroborative witness evidence on filing charges shown by a study that used a variant of the same sample used here (Walsh et al., 2008). The fact that such evidence was available more often than several other types of evidence and yet had a big effect underscores the importance of collecting such evidence, as experts like Veith (1999) and Lanning (2002) have advocated. The fact that such evidence was more often available also suggests that criminal investigators may recognize its value.

Evidence of abuse against another child was also strongly related to confession. This may be a cause of confession, as this kind of evidence may emerge as other potential victims are questioned or choose to disclose over the course of the investigation. However, this kind of evidence may also be an effect of confession as investigators continue to question confessing suspects, to uncover other crimes they have committed. Although this kind of evidence was infrequent, it changed the odds of confession to such an extent that its effect was marginally statistically significant (at $p = .06$).

CACs were expected to increase collaboration between agencies, with resulting higher confession rates, given the finding of Faller and Henry (2000) of a high confession rate for its jurisdiction's coordinated, multidisciplinary response to child sexual abuse cases. We also thought that there might be a similar effect for the use of joint CPS–police investigations and for videotaping interviews, which also indicate interagency collaboration and/or best practice. None of these variables was a significant predictor, however. It may be that the impact of these practices is usually too indirect to generate effects that are large enough to be statistically significant given the small sample sizes we had available for these variables. They may generate significant effects with a larger sample size.

Effects of CACs on criminal justice outcomes have been inconsistent, both across CACs on a given outcome and within a CAC for different criminal justice outcomes (e.g., charges filed, dismissal, and conviction). In one jurisdiction, Miller and Rubin (2008) reported a higher prosecution rate following the introduction of a CAC, for example, but Edinburgh, Caeyc, and Levitt (2008) found no CAC effect on prosecution. Likewise, the multisite evaluation's different CACs differed greatly on criminal justice outcomes (Cross et al., 2008).

The finding of a positive relationship of suspect age to suspect confession replicates results from several general crime studies (Baldwin & McConville, 1980), and also a similar finding by Faller et al. (2001) for child sexual abuse. The relationship may reflect the inexperience of young suspects with the criminal justice system, greater ability of older suspects to cope with police interrogations (Leiken, 1970), older suspects' greater awareness of their rights (Baldwin & McConville, 1980), detectives' greater ability to convince younger suspects that confessing would be to their benefit, or all the above. Older suspects may also be less likely to confess when faced with the possibility of long prison sentences, given their more limited remaining life span.

Limitations and Future Research

Several aspects of this research limit what we can learn. Most of the cases come from one Texas county, raising concerns about the generalizability of the results. The direction of causality for suspect confession and child disclosures could be ambiguous, because the former could lead to the latter. Most investigations, however, are prompted by child statements, and a child interview typically precedes contact with the suspect, suggesting that this direction of causality would be considerably less common. Another limitation is the lack of data on several aspects of interrogation, such as whether investigators saw the process as one of a suspect being interviewed or interrogated, what interrogation methods were used, whether suspects were represented by counsel, what legal interventions were made on suspects' behalf, and whether a polygraph test was used. In addition, as noted, we were unable to ensure completely that this sample excluded false confessions, though the fact that 93% of the current study's victims gave full disclosures and all the suspect confessions were accompanied by at least one form of evidence implicating the suspects makes false confessions substantially less likely.

Future research on suspect confession to child sexual abuse should include more jurisdictions and areas of the country and collect more detailed data on interrogation and suspects' response. It should also examine more data on the link between child disclosure and evidence on one hand and suspect confession on the other. Future research, for example, could (a) assess how suspects learn about child disclosures, including whether they are shown the videotape of the child interview; (b) explore the timing of suspect confession relative to child disclosure to understand better the causal link between them; and (c) examine what specific forms of corroborative evidence predicted confession. Such research could also collect more data on evidence (e.g., DNA test results), both to explore more thoroughly its link to confession and to account better for the possibility of false confession.

Conclusion

The concealed nature of sexual abuse makes understanding the predictors of suspect confession essential to intervention and prevention. The current study suggests that confessions of child sexual abuse can be difficult to obtain, but there are ways to increase the odds of confession. The fact that the odds of suspect confession were 3½ times greater when children disclosed highlights the value of skilled child forensic interviewers and appropriate supports and settings to help children who are sexually abused to disclose their abuse. The finding that the odds of confession were over twice as great with a corroborating witness shows the value of the special methods for collecting this type of evidence that experts like Lanning (2002) and Veith (1999) teach.

These and other investigation methods should be used as part of a broader effort to uncover the truth rather than a narrow focus on confession, with the knowledge that "it is often

through confession that we can reconstruct part of this truth" (St-Yves & Deslauriers-Varin, 2009, p. 11). Achieving greater justice, curbing demands on the criminal justice system, and, above all, reducing the need to rely on children who have been abused to communicate their abuse, amply justify this effort.

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