

stated that “with second victim, he was with two accomplices and they were getting high and wanted to have a girl.” David stated that he was “confused because he was high on drugs, and drunk, and he needed more money to pay for more.” Paul explained that he was “intoxicated all the time, always feeling ready to party.”

Rationale for Possessing or Using Particular Weapons

In the quantitative analyses weapon possession was associated with victim injury/death, with certain types of weapons used more frequently by offenders. In addition, the weapons used had varying effects in terms of victim injury or death. Interview data available explaining weapon selection and use during sexual assault were explored to gain greater understanding of the function of various weapons. The most common explanation of weapon possession was to threaten the victim, being reported by 14 of the 18 offenders who gave an explanation for why they used weapons. For example, Matthew stated that he “used a weapon found on the spot—the kitchen knives on the counter to intimidate the victim and to make her submissive to his requests.” Donald stated that he used “ropes, handcuffs and chains because it is part of fantasies . . . wanted the victims to be slaves.” He used these weapons “to threaten the victims and attract them to my place and to scare them and avoid resistance.” Patrick stated that he “threatens with a firearm or a knife, depending on the distance from her. When she is really close, a knife is better because she is still and scared of being cut by it.” When using a firearm, this offender stated, “I get a few feet from victims and threaten them verbally and with a gun.” Clifford used “a utility knife to threaten the victim and in one case used it to keep the victim’s friend away during the rape and prevent victim’s friend from interfering.”

Several offenders explained weapon possession for nonassault related activities including work-related usage, for protection, or for use in other crimes (i.e., for use during “breaking and entering”). For example, David provided both work-related and crime-related explanations for possessing a knife, stating he “had knife for work and used it during crimes to threaten and intimidate the victims.” Barry gave protection as his rationale for carrying a knife and also stated that he “did not use the knife with first victim because she was smaller . . . used knife to kill second victim.” Curt, who committed sexual assaults when burglarizing residences, stated that he “used a knife to cut off the victim’s underwear . . . used it to unlock the door . . . used it to threaten victim’s kids.” Other comments regarding specific weapons and their function during assaults were linked to reducing the chance of being heard during the assault or leaving evidence of the crime. For example, Brian explained he “always has knife when hunting for victims but killed the first victim by strangling her with the phone cord . . . a knife is a good weapon for threatening the victim but did not use it during

the assault because the blood from the wounds would leave too much evidence on the scene.” Similarly, Robert stated that “weapons make efficient without noise . . . used hammer and a screwdriver.”

Victim Resistance

In the bivariate analyses victim resistance was associated with victim injury/death. In the multivariate analysis, victim resistance resulted in higher odds of victim injury. In addition, varying effects of verbal and physical resistance on victim injury/death were observed in the quantitative analyses. Interview data regarding victim resistance and offender reaction to resistance were reviewed to gain greater understanding of the association of victim resistance to victim injury or death, including insight into the chronological order of events. First, offender rating of how the assaults unfolded, with 10 being closer to how they planned and 0 being very different from how they planned, were examined. The 34 offenders with at least one assault resulting in victim injury or death rated the unfolding of assaults as ranging from 1 to 9 ($M = 6.29$, $SD = 2.21$). There were significant differences in the ratings of the unfolding of assaults ($F(2,118) = 8.05$, $p < .01$) between assaults with no victim resistance ($M = 6.76$, $SD = 2.41$), assaults in which the victim verbally resisted ($M = 7.20$, $SD = 2.01$), and assaults during which the victim physically resisted ($M = 5.57$, $SD = 2.05$).⁸

During the interviews, several offenders provided descriptions of their emotional reactions to victim resistance. Barry reported killing a victim because “she was fighting back vigorously . . . and was afraid for my life.” Patrick was the only offender to report that “the level of resistance from women would sometimes be a turn on.” Two offenders described their indignation at victim resistance. Phillip reported that when “a victim gave a triumphant look because she managed to resist . . . hit her on her forehead with the knife handle.” Buddy reported that he felt “insulted and frustrated and hit a victim with her cellphone when she tried to call the police.” Several offenders reported indifference to victim resistance. For example, Paul, who was “high” on drugs all day, stated that his first victim whom he killed “tried to escape and resist the assault.” But he thought to himself, “It’s already too late.”

Rationale for Injuring or Killing the Victim

Finally, offender rationale for injuring or killing one victim and not another victim were examined. In comparison to the quantitative data, the interview data provided a more comprehensive purview into the interaction between the offender and the victim that may inform victim survival strategies. As noted, offenders were asked to rate how the assaults unfolded, with 10 being closer to how they planned and 0 being very different from how they planned. Among the 34 offenders with at least one assault resulting in victim injury there was little difference ($F(2,118) =$

4.13, NS) in the ratings of assaults with no injury ($M = 6.11$, $SD = 2.22$) assaults with victim injury ($M = 6.44$, $SD = 2.13$), and assaults with victim death ($M = 6.57$, $SD = 2.44$).^b

Victim Injury or Death Linked to Victim Resistance. The interview data contained information related to victim resistance and victim injury or death. Of the 34 offenders, 30 reported using physical force in response to victim resistance during at least one assault. Paul, who was intoxicated “sniffing coke and glue” prior to assaults, stated that he was “trying to have consensual sexual relationships with the victims and when the victims refused, the assault started.” John reported “with second victim he hit her until she dies because she was resisting him too much and struggled with him . . . set the store on fire after the crime to make all evidence disappear.” Similarly, Harry reported that he “used physical violence when the victims resisted sexual assaults and killed them.” Sam stated that with his first victim he “hit her (banged her head on the wall) when she resisted.” Dick stated that he “used force with only one victim (the one who resisted and struggled most).” Brian described using physical violence “to subdue them when they struggle and try to resist.” He described two different violent assaults. With the first victim, Brian “used force to make it clear to victim she has to remain submissive and not try to escape again,” and when “the second victim tried to jump out of the car and I held her back by grabbing on to her hair and threatened to kill her so she remains quiet.”

Conversely, 5 offenders reported that they used force to prevent victims from resisting, inferring that use of physical force and victim injury occurred prior to or was unrelated to victim resistance. For example, Jimmy stated that he “used more force than necessary to make sure the victim does not resist or attempt to escape . . . to break them from the start.” Frank stated that he “hit her, tied her up to subdue her to prevent resisting.” Ted stated that he used force to “make sure the victims would not resist . . . I wanted them to fear death.” Explaining this further, he stated that he “often strangled them unconscious, so there was time to do what wanted with them.” Ray, who assaulted and killed two out of three victims, including an 8-year-old girl and a 68-year-old woman, stated that he “used more force than necessary to scare the victims.”

Victim Suffering and Death as Part of Plan or Fantasy. There were also several offenders who reported that they killed victims because that was part of their plan or fantasy. Robert, who reported that he would have “a beer to give him courage,” stated that killing was part of his deviant fantasies and from “the start he knew it would end in killing and dismembering her.” He went on to say that the sexual assault was satisfying “but not as much as the killing.” Donald stated that he “tortured them and found it sexually exciting to see them suffer.” As previously noted, Paul stated his first victim

“tried to escape and resist the assault.” But he thought to himself, “It’s already too late.” He reported part of his rationale for killing the victim was that he did not want the child to tell but at the same time he had a fascination with death and wanted to know “how it felt to kill and take someone’s life.” Brian stated that with the first victim, “sexually abusing the victim evolved into a desire for killing . . . strangled her with the phone cord.”

Other Reasons for Killing a Victim. David reported that his first victim had escaped and he killed the second victim because he did not want to go back to jail, so he had to “eliminate her.” Harry stated that the “victim refused sexual advances, got angry and decided to kill the victim . . . killing felt good.” Barry, who reported that he was on drugs (pot, speed, cocaine) and in need of money for more drugs, became enraged and injured the first victim because he thought she had stolen his drugs.

DISCUSSION

The study purpose was to investigate predictors of victim injury and victim death during sexual assault by strangers. As projected, the use of both quantitative and qualitative data resulted in a more dynamic depiction of the interaction between offender and victim as well as offender decision making related to injuring or killing a victim. Utilizing this sample of repeat offenders, the study examined whether previously documented risks for victim injury during sexual assault similarly impacted risk of victim death. The study findings align with prior research regarding the impact of offender alcohol or drug use on victim injury. More specifically, the study found that offender alcohol use, but not drug use, increased the risk of victim death. These findings corroborate the conclusions of Mieczkowski and Beauregard (2010, 2012), who note that the effect of alcohol in sexual assault is more definitive, while the function of drug use in violent or lethal sexual assault is less clear. Perhaps the unclear findings related to drug use are due to varying psychotropic effects, as some drugs are sedatives and some are stimulants. Additionally, it is interesting to note that even among habitual drug users alcohol was selected to provide the sought-after boost of courage needed to perpetrate sexual assault. As suggested by Abbey et al. (2004), with these sex offenders “the desire to commit sexual assault” was a common reason for or “cause of the perpetrators’ alcohol consumption” (p. 276), casting further doubt on offender deflection of responsibility for sexual assault due to substance use (Parkhill, Abbey, & Jacques-Tiura, 2009).

The study findings indicate that weapons were carried and used for various purposes. Offenders primarily reported carrying and using weapons during sexual assault to threaten the victims. The exploratory analysis of weapons effects suggests that certain weapons may yield disproportionate levels of lethality in general

and in the context of victim resistance to sexual violence by strangers. When the offender possessed a firearm, no victim deaths occurred when there was no victim resistance, victim death occurred in 25% of assaults with verbal resistance, and victim death occurred in 100% of assaults with physical resistance. Conversely, when the offender possessed a knife or sharpened object, verbal and physical resistance resulted in less victim injury or death.

When the offender had no weapon, victim verbal resistance had little to no impact on victim injury or death. However, in these circumstances, physical resistance resulted in a greater likelihood of victim injury and victim death. These study findings support prior studies suggesting that victim physical resistance increased offender violence and victim injury (Leclerc et al., 2010; Prentky, Burgess, & Carter, 1986). On average, these offenders gave higher ratings for the unfolding of an assault, a rating measuring how the assault unfolded in relation to offender expectations, to assaults in which there was verbal resistance in comparison to assaults with physical resistance or no victim resistance. These offender reports suggest that victim verbal resistance does not have the same effect as physical resistance in terms of offender response when the offender is a stranger. As noted by Powers and Simpson (2012), verbal resistance in comparison to physical resistance may not “pose a challenge to an offender’s dominance . . . and therefore do[es] not lead to escalation” (p. 3360). Unlike earlier studies that were unable to distinguish whether the physical injury occurred prior to, during, or after victim resistance, examination of interview data explaining offender violence revealed that the association between victim resistance and victim injury most likely operates in two distinct directions—with some offenders reacting to victim resistance with violence, and some offenders using violence prior to victim resistance that could in turn trigger higher levels of resistance on the part of the victim in order to survive and escape injury. Contradicting prior notions that the association between victim injury and victim resistance may be spurious (Guerette & Santana, 2010; Kleck & Tark, 2005; Ullman, 2007), the results of the qualitative analysis indicated that in a substantive number of cases of sexual assault by strangers, victim resistance—particularly physical resistance—incited the use of physical violence by the offender in order to control the victim and thwart resistance.

Perpetrators of sexual assault in this study reported various motivations for physically injuring or killing victims. Motivations included offender desire to prevent or thwart resistance, to prevent reporting of the crime, injury driven by rage generated from some perceived insult, or to fulfill violent or deviant sexual fantasies. The majority of offenders with at least one assault resulting in victim injury or death reported another assault with a different outcome in

terms of victim injury or death. The utilization of a sample of repeat offenders facilitated the comparison of sexual offenses by strangers that resulted in no victim injury, victim injury, or victim death committed by the same offender allowing for the control of time-stable characteristics of offenders. As previously noted, during in-depth interviews some offenders disclosed that they used greater violence against those victims who struggled and fought back during assaults. Additional offender explanations of variation in assault outcomes in terms of victim injury or death were also observed, such as a desire to avoid detection.

Despite the usefulness of the findings, this study has several limitations. First, the sample utilized for the study was comprised of serious, incarcerated male repeat sex offenders with at least one conviction for an assault committed against a stranger. As a result, the study sample was not a nationally representative sample of sex offenders and is not representative of all types of sex offenders. This limitation also does not allow generalizability of the study findings to sex offenders with only one offense or to those sex offenders who are not detected by law enforcement. Importantly, the study findings are exclusively associated with sexual assaults perpetrated by strangers. Victim-offender dynamics of sexual assaults committed against strangers—including offender reactions to victim resistance—may be very different from the victim-offender dynamics of sexual assaults committed against a person the offender knows. While these limitations possibly restrict the generalizability of the findings, data on sexual offenses involving victim death are not commonly available and, in particular, repeated measures of data are not easily obtainable using victim reporting.

While the use of data collected from offenders uniquely provided information on assaults resulting in victim death—a key strength of this study—such retrospectively collected data are not considered as accurate or reliable as data collected and documented at the time of its occurrence. Recall and self-report of past life events, particularly criminal activities, can be incomplete or inaccurate. To minimize this limitation of study measures, self-report data provided by the offenders were compared to police documentation of assaults whenever possible. Due to the sample size, the rate of occurrence of certain types of victim resistance and use of certain weapons were very low and as a result, the study findings are exploratory. Due to these limitations, these models should be replicated with larger and varied samples of sex offenders—including female offenders and offenders who only assault victims who are partners, family, friends, or acquaintances.

In summary, the study findings indicate the need for greater understanding of the factors affecting victim survival during sexual assault. In this study, offender weapon possession was the strongest

predictor of both victim injury and victim death when sexually assaulted by a stranger. While the study findings are exploratory, the results from this sample indicated that certain weapons resulted in greater probability of victim injury or victim death within the context of victim resistance against strangers. Crime event order was not uniform, with victim resistance preceding injury in some assaults while in other assaults victim injury or death was unrelated to victim resistance. Nonetheless, in numerous assaults victim physical resistance resulted in the escalation of violence—exacerbating victim injury or death—and therefore may be the least optimal strategy to employ during assault, especially when the offender is a stranger and possesses a firearm.

Perhaps the clearest implication of this study is that promoting the adoption of specific behaviors in order to avoid sexual assault completion (Asdigian & Finkelhor, 1995; Bachman et al., 2002; Heyden et al., 1999; Kleck & Tark, 2005; Ullman, 2007), such as suggesting which resistance strategies are most effective during a sexual assault, may have been given prematurely, particularly for assaults committed by strangers. The collusion of various factors at the moment of sexual assault result in such complexity that predicting victim survival or offender reaction to victim resistance—even offender reaction to no resistance—cannot yet be predicted with a high degree of accuracy. Given the complexity of risks (Clay-Warner, 2002), it may appear that difficulties related to predicting victim risk or survival during sexual assault cannot be overcome. However, gaining substantive knowledge regarding victim survival is not without precedent. In recent years, advances in knowledge of victim risk of injury or death due to intimate partner violence and to stalking have sufficiently progressed to the point of the development of risk assessment tools for use by law enforcement, social service providers, and the public (Campbell, Webster, & Glass, 2009; McEwan, Pathé, & Ogloff, 2011; Messing & Thaller, 2013). Thus, while many questions remain unanswered, the potential exists for improving our understanding of the safest and most effective victim prevention and survival strategies.

NOTES

- a. Scores from the full Grasmick scale and scores of the subset of impulsivity items were analyzed with similar results. Results reported in the text are based on the impulsivity subscale. Results of analysis using the full scale are available upon request.
- b. As model fit indices are not provided with multinomial path analysis, path analysis was first conducted with victim injury coded and specified in the model as an ordinal variable with three possible attributes—no physical injury, physical injury, and death—in order to assess general model fit. The path analysis evidenced adequate fit to the data with a nonsignificant Chi-square, $\chi^2(4) = 4.10$, $p = .39$. All other model fit indices demonstrated good model fit (NC = 1.03; CFI = .99; TLI = .99; RMSEA = .01; WRMR = .46) (Kline, 2005).
- c. A multinomial path analysis model with all 12 predictors was analyzed to see if the results changed when all measures were included. Results showed that the inclusion of the additional predictors did not alter any of the effects (in terms of sign and

- significance) of the other variables. Results available upon request.
- d. There was no significant difference in victim injury/death across assaults with no resistance and assaults with passive resistance ($\chi^2(2) = .48$, NS).
- e. There was no significant difference in victim injury/death across assaults with physical only resistance and assaults with verbal and physical resistance ($\chi^2(2) = 2.28$, NS).
- f. Pseudonyms were used in place of the names of the study participants.
- g. When including only assaults by offenders with varied assault outcomes in terms of victim injury or death, there was no significant change in the results comparing differences in mean ratings. Results available upon request.
- h. When including only assaults by offenders with varied assault outcomes in terms of victim injury or death, there was no significant change in the results comparing differences in mean ratings. Results available upon request.

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POSTSCRIPT

N/A