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### EDITORIAL ARTICLE

## Group sexual violence in Spain. Characterization of a complex phenomenon ☆

## La violencia sexual ejercida en grupo en España. Caracterización de un fenómeno complejo

Juan José López-Ossorio<sup>a</sup>, Jorge Santos-Hermoso<sup>b,\*</sup>, Alicia Sánchez Camañ<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *Secretaría de Estado de Seguridad, Ministerio del Interior, Madrid, Spain*

<sup>b</sup> *Facultad de Ciencias Jurídicas, Universidad a Distancia de Madrid (CEF- UDIMA), Madrid, Spain*



### Group sexual violence

Sexual offending is manifested in different ways, one of which is group sexual violence (GSV). International studies have used different terms to refer to this phenomenon, for example, *group rape*,<sup>1</sup> *gang rape*,<sup>2</sup> *multiple offender rape*,<sup>3</sup> *multiple perpetrator rape*,<sup>4</sup> *multiple perpetrator sexual assault*,<sup>5</sup> or group sexual assault, in the case of studies in Spain.<sup>6</sup>

Although research on the phenomenon dates back more than three decades,<sup>7</sup> some issues remain under debate. One of the most important issues concerns the number of perpetrators, as some studies<sup>8,9</sup> emphasise that cases with two perpetrators should be distinguished from those with more than two. This is because group dynamics play a more significant role as group size increases, and theories such as de-individualisation seem to better explain assaults involving multiple perpetrators.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, research in this area has proposed research designs in which: cases with more than one perpetrator are analysed specifically; cases with a single perpetrator are compared with those with multiple perpetrators; and cases with two

perpetrators are compared with those with more than two perpetrators.<sup>11</sup>

To understand how these types of cases work, Harkins and Dixon<sup>12</sup> proposed the Multi-Factorial Theory of Multiple Perpetrator Sexual Offending (MPSO). This theory outlines the importance of understanding GSV as the result of different interacting factors that belong to three broad areas<sup>13</sup>: the individual context; the situational context; and the sociocultural context.

In order to raise awareness and begin to systematically analyse this manifestation of sexual violence, the General Directorate of Coordination and Studies of the State Secretariat for Security (SES), of the Ministry of the Interior, developed a research project that resulted in the publication of the report *Violencia sexual ejercida en grupo. Análisis epidemiológico y aspectos criminológicos en España*.<sup>14</sup> (Group Sexual Violence: Epidemiological Analysis and Criminological Aspects in Spain.) The most important results are presented below, highlighting, in particular, the importance of the age of those involved in GSV cases; substance use as one of the most important contextual factors, and, finally, the vulnerability of the victims of this violence.

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\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [jorge.santos.h@udima.es](mailto:jorge.santos.h@udima.es) (J. Santos-Hermoso).

## The significance of age

Reviews, such as those by Bamford et al.<sup>8</sup> or da Silva et al.,<sup>13</sup> have found that perpetrators of GSV cases are very young, with the majority concentrated in their 20s or 30s. As a reference, in the case of Spain, the *Informe sobre delitos contra la libertad sexual en España*<sup>15</sup> (Report on Crimes Against Sexual Freedom in Spain), which analyses all types of sexual crimes, found that the age group with the highest prevalence of perpetrators is between 41 and 64 years old. The importance of age is also observed in the case of the victims, as they tend to be younger than those of sexual crimes committed by a single perpetrator.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, they are also usually younger than the perpetrators of GSV.<sup>8</sup> Victims of GSV are typically around 20 years old and, in many cases, may be minors.

There is evidence that the age of the perpetrators is related to two important factors in these types of cases. First, it has been observed that as the age of the perpetrators decreases, the group size increases.<sup>8,17</sup> Second, younger perpetrators use more violence during the crime.<sup>16,17</sup> These findings have also been supported in the case of Spain, as cases with more than two perpetrators had an average age of 21.8 years, compared to 26 years in cases with two perpetrators. Regarding violence, violence was used in 85.9% of cases involving minor perpetrators, compared to 74.6% in cases involving adults.

## Substance consumption: alcohol and other drugs

Substance use in these types of cases is highly common,<sup>18</sup> occurring in up to 50% of perpetrators and victims.<sup>8,16</sup> This can lead to the total incapacitation of the victim,<sup>19</sup> giving rise to what is known as chemical submission, which can be predatory or proactive (when the perpetrator administers the substance to the victim without their consent), or situational or opportunistic (when the perpetrator takes advantage of the victim's vulnerability generated by voluntary use). Mixed cases can also exist.

In the case of Spain, substance use by one of those involved was present in 43.2% of cases, although the exact number was not known in 39.1%.<sup>14</sup> The most commonly used substance, by both victims and perpetrators, was alcohol. Among other drugs, cocaine and marijuana stand out. It is important to highlight this alcohol consumption because, as seen in the previous section, many of these acts involve very young perpetrators and victims, many of whom are minors. The high consumption level is therefore striking, since the purchase of alcoholic beverages is regulated in Spain.

## Vulnerable victims

What defines this type of crime is that it is committed by at least two perpetrators. This situation will impact the victims, as the presence of multiple perpetrators can create a state of defenselessness in the victim, worsening the consequences, both in the short and medium-to-long term. These crimes, which, as we have seen, involve significant violence and degrading behaviour for the victims, can also

directly contribute to the development of clinical conditions of varying nature and intensity, which will require a very careful professional assessment and specialised care. Furthermore, victimisation can be prolonged, making it difficult for these victims to return to a normal life.<sup>20</sup>

In addition to the presence of multiple perpetrators, other factors that increase the vulnerability of GSV victims should also be highlighted. Here, it is the age of these victims, particularly in cases of underage victims, together with the possible loss of consciousness in cases of chemical subjugation, or simply the alteration of the victim's will, in cases involving substance use that does not completely incapacitate the victim, that will make these types of victims highly vulnerable, and the consequences will be particularly serious.

The prevention of sexual crimes, which are on the rise and highly underreported, requires a greater understanding of their diverse nature and associated caseloads so that more effective prevention actions of varying magnitude and complexity by the relevant institutions in each case may be undertaken.

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## Conflict of interests

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