Life-Course Persistent Offenders and the Propensity to Commit Sexual Assault

Abstract
Moffitt’s (1993) developmental theory has garnered an extensive amount of attention from scholars across a range of disciplines, and the results generated from this body of literature have been consistently supportive. Specifically, the segment of the population predicted by Moffitt to be chronically aggressive—called life-course persistent offenders—has been found to account for a disproportionate number of serious crimes. What remains less certain, however, is whether this same group of offenders are also responsible for perpetrating acts of forced sex. The authors examined the tendency for life-course persisters to sexually assault using a nationally representative sample of individuals. Our findings suggest that life-course persisters are disproportionately more likely to be sexually coercive compared to other individuals.

Article
In recent years, Moffitt’s (1993) developmental taxonomy has emerged as one the primary perspectives guiding research in the area of antisocial and criminal behavior (Barnes, Beaver, & Boutwell, 2011; Beaver, DeLisi, Vaughn, & Wright, 2010; Beaver, Vaughn, DeLisi, & Higgins, 2010; Boutwell & Beaver, 2008; Moffitt, 2006; Moffitt & Caspi, 2001; Moffitt, Caspi, Dickson, Silva, & Stanton, 1996; Piquero & Brezina, 2001; Vaughn, DeLisi et al., 2011; Vaughn, Fu et al., 2011). Numerous scholars have scrutinized virtually every facet of Moffitt’s (1993) taxonomy, and the resulting body of evidence has been largely supportive. Indeed, the central tenets of the theory have been replicated cross-nationally (Barnes et al., 2011; DeLisi, 2001; Moffitt, 2006) and across racial and gender classifications (Moffitt, Caspi, Rutter, & Silva, 2001).

In articulating her theory, Moffitt suggested that two primary groups of offenders exist and can be identified in the population: adolescence-limited (AL) and life-course-persistent (LCP) offenders. These groups are thought to arise via alternative developmental pathways and engage in qualitatively different forms of antisocial behavior. AL offending develops in conjunction with the onset of puberty and results from a disjuncture between biological and social maturity (Barnes & Beaver, 2010). AL offenders are considered normative because they engage in aggressive and impulsive behaviors that are quite widespread during adolescence (i.e., smoking, drinking, breaking curfew, property crimes, etc.). More important, these individuals eventually desist once their social and biological development returns to a point of equilibrium (Moffitt, 1993).

LCPs, on the other hand, begin to evince signs of antisocial behavior very early in childhood. As these individuals age, their actions tend to escalate in severity, eventually including violent interpersonal acts of aggression (Moffitt & Caspi, 2001). Owing to their chronic antisocial tendencies, LCPs are responsible for a disproportionate number of the most serious and egregious crimes committed in the general population (DeLisi, 2001). Some estimates, for example, suggest that although LCPs account for between 5% and 10% of the population, they are responsible for more than 50% of all crimes (DeLisi, 2001). Despite the burgeoning literature concerning the involvement of LCPs in a variety of violent and aggressive behaviors, little remains known concerning LCPs’ tendency to perpetrate sexual assault.

The lack of research in this area is surprising given the interest on the part of social scientists in examining the correlates and causes of both rape and rape victimization (Brownmiller, 1975; Franklin, 2010a, 2010b; Koss, Bachar, Hopkins, Carlson, 2004; Tellis & Spohn, 2008; Tillyer, Wilcox, & Gialopso, 2010). Given their general predisposition for engaging in a range of antisocial actions, including intimate partner violence and sexual promiscuity (Moffitt, Caspi,
Harrington, & Milne, 2002), it is likely that LCPs also possess a high propensity to force sex. The possibility becomes underscored given research suggesting that early onset behavioral problems—a hallmark of LCP offending—are often employed in actuarial risk assessment tools used to predict the risk of recidivism in sex offenders (Hanson & Thornton, 2000). To this point, however, there is an absence of evidence concerning the involvement of LCP offenders in acts of rape. The purpose of the current study is to fill this gap in the literature.

We begin first by examining prior research suggesting that life-course persisters may be disproportionately likely to engage in sexually aggressive behavior.

Despite a paucity of knowledge concerning the relationship between LCP offending and sexual assault, there is reason to suspect that the offending patterns of LCPs include forced sexual behavior. A number of studies examining criminal careers, for example, have consistently revealed that severely antisocial individuals do not tend to specialize in specific criminogenic behaviors (DeLisi, 2001; DeLisi & Piquero, 2011; DeLisi et al., 2008). Rather, chronic criminality encompasses a wide spectrum of interpersonal, violent, and aggressive crimes (Bouffard, 2010; DeLisi & Piquero, 2011; Straus & Luis Ramirez, 2004; Widman & McNulty, 2010). In short, research on the issue of criminal careers has yielded reason to suspect that chronically antisocial individuals may possess an increased probability of committing sexual assault (‘t Hart-Kerkhoffs, Vermeiren, Jansen, & Doreleijers, 2011). It logically follows, then, that sexual assault and rape may also lie within the behavioral repertoires of LCP offenders.

More directly, DeLisi (2001) examined a sample of convicted offenders in order to determine which participants accounted for the majority of violent offenses over their criminal career. The analysis presented by DeLisi was unique in that the goal was to contrast the criminal careers of serious offenders—including those who committed murders, kidnappings, and rapes— with those of other chronic criminals (i.e., property offenders). The results suggested that those who committed rape (as well as those who committed murder and kidnappings) were among the most severely antisocial offenders in the sample, engaging in a variety of harmful behaviors. Indeed, DeLisi suggested that the individuals convicted of rape closely embodied Moffitt’s (1993) conception of the life-course persistent offender.

In a more direct examination of LCP offenders, Moffitt et al. (2002) assessed the developmental trajectories of life-course persisters using data from Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health and Development Study. Not surprisingly, LCPs were the most aggressive and antisocial members of the sample. These individuals appeared to be especially prone to sexual promiscuity, generally lacking in concern for others, and less capable of regulating impulsive and reactionary behaviors. In other words, LCPs possessed a constellation of adverse traits, all of which could increase the likelihood of forcing sexual intercourse. Of particular interest for the current study, however, was the finding that persistent offenders were disproportionately likely to violently aggress against the women residing in their homes.

Most recently, Cale and Lussier examined the recidivism risk for violent sexual offenders using a sample of convicted individuals in Canada. The goal of the study was to test whether a history of early onset antisocial behavior was predictive of recidivism for sex crimes, net of other actuarial risk assessment tools. The results suggested that early behavioral problems were indicative of increased risk for recidivism for future sex crimes. Put differently, sex offenders who also possessed a history of early onset of criminality, one of the hallmarks of LCP offending, were most likely to reoffend compared to other types of sex offenders (Cale & Lussier, 2012). Not surprisingly, early onset of antisocial behavior has been included as a predictor variable in certain actuarial tools. In short, however, the limited body of evidence outlined thus
far suggests that LCP offenders, in conjunction with a higher propensity to be violent and aggressive, may also possess an increased proclivity for raping and forcing sex. To date, no research has directly addressed this issue.

The Current Study
This study is intended to examine the tendency for LCP offenders to engage in acts of forced sexual behavior. To this end, we examine data drawn from a nationally representative sample of young adults residing within the United States. Our primary hypothesis is that sexual assault should be especially prevalent in the small segment of the population termed LCP offenders. In addition, we offer a glimpse into the frequency of LCP sexual aggression.

Method
The data analyzed in the current study were drawn from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health; Harris, 2009). The Add Health is a prospective longitudinal study that features a nationally representative sample of adolescents selected from middle and high school during the 1995 academic year. The first wave of data collection took place within schools and included information collected from approximately 90,000 students. Following the completion of the in-school portion of Wave 1, a subsample of participants were then selected (along with their primary caregivers) and asked to participate in the in-home portion of Wave 1 interviews. The in-home interviews included a variety of items related to parent–child relationships, behavioral outcomes, aspects of the respondent’s temperament, and involvement in acts of delinquency.

Wave 2 data collection began between 1 and 2 years after the completion of Wave 1 and included similar items compared to those included in the first round of surveys. Respondents at Wave 2 were asked a number of questions related to their relationship with family, peer interactions, instances of criminal victimization, and involvement in delinquency. The third wave of data collection (Wave 3) began approximately 6 years after the initial completion of Wave 1. At this point, the survey instruments were redesigned in order to include more age-appropriate items for the respondents. Specifically, participants were asked about items related to sexual involvement, marital status, and instances of contact with the criminal justice system. The current study will analyze data gleaned from Waves 1 (N = 20,745; ages 11-21), 2 (N = 14,738; ages 11-23), and 3 (N = 15,197; ages 18-28). In line with prior research on LCP offending, only male participants were included in the final analytical sample.

Measures
Sexual assault. During Wave 3 interviews, respondents were asked to report on their history of romantic relationships since the summer of 1995 (approximately 6 years from the date of the interview). Each respondent was asked to list their relationships, and then questions were asked about each one. One question tapped sexual assault: “How often have you insisted on or made <PARTNER> have sexual relations with you when {HE/SHE} didn’t want to?” Responses were coded as 0 = never, 1 = once, or this hasn’t happened in the past year, but did happen before then, 2 = twice, 3 = 3 to 5 times, 4 = 6 to 10 times, 5 = 11 to 20 times, and 6 = more than 20 times. Participants were asked this question for each relationship that they indicated was sexual.

The data were originally formatted so that relationships were nested within respondents (i.e., long format where each relationship was a row in the data). As a result, it was necessary to reshape the data into wide format so that each relationship appeared as a variable in the data set. After reshaping the data file, two variables were generated.

The first variable measured whether the respondent had ever reported a sexual assault (i.e., forcing sexual activity) across any of his relationships since 1995. This variable was coded
dichotomously where 0 = no sexual assault reported and 1 = at least one instance of sexual assault reported. Approximately 7% of all men reported sexually assaulting a partner (384/5,633).

The second variable was coded as a continuous measure of the total number of times the respondent reported having committed sexual assault. To generate this variable, participants’ reports for all relationships were summed together so that higher scores indicated more frequent occurrences of forced sexual activity. This continuously coded variable ranged from 0 (i.e., no forced sexual activity) to 12. Note that values greater than 2 may not correspond to the actual number of occurrences (see coding scheme above) but that higher values do correspond to more frequent incidences.

Life-course persistent offenders. Recently, a group of researchers developed a way to identify life-course persistent offenders in the Add Health data set (Barnes et al., 2011). In short, the identification of life-course persistent offenders follows four steps.

First, a delinquent/criminal involvement scale was created at Wave 1 by summing respondents’ answers to 17 questions asking about their involvement in various delinquent and criminal activities (α = .86). Responses were coded so that 0 = never, 1 = 1 or 2 times, 2 = 3 or 4 times, and 3 = 5 or more times. By summing the responses to the items, participants were given a score that ranged between 0 and 47, with a 0 indicating no involvement in Wave 1 delinquency and a nonzero score indicating some involvement in delinquency. Higher values indicate more involvement in Wave 1 delinquency.

The second step was to generate a Wave 2 delinquency/criminal involvement scale. The same questions (coding scheme was also identical) asked at Wave 1 were repeated at Wave 2. By summing across the 17 items, a Wave 2 delinquent/criminal involvement scale was generated (α = .84). As before, a 0 indicated no involvement in Wave 2 delinquency and a nonzero score indicated some involvement in Wave 2 delinquency. Higher values tapped more frequent involvement. The third step was to calculate a Wave 3 criminal behavior scale (coding scheme was identical to the Wave 1 and Wave 2 scales). By summing across the 12 criminal behavior questions, a Wave 3 criminal involvement scale was generated (α = .74). Higher values tapped more frequent criminal involvement at Wave 3.

The fourth step involved generating a new variable that utilized information from all three delinquent/criminal behavior scales. This variable was created by assigning a 1 to any respondent who scored a 2 or higher across all three delinquent/criminal behavior scales (i.e., persistent offenders). Next, respondents who did not score a 2 or greater across the three scales were assigned a 0, thereby identifying them as nonpersistent offenders. Finally, for participants who had a missing value for any of the four delinquent/criminal behavior scales, a missing value for the persistent offender variable was assigned. About 9% of the total sample (1,062/11,156) and 14% of males (747/5,169) were identified as persistent offenders. It is important to note that none of the items contained in the delinquency scales at Waves 1, 2, or 3 referred to the commission of overt sexual assault.

As noted by Moffitt (1993), about 10% of all men will exhibit LCP-like offending patterns. This proportion of high-rate offenders has been supported in criminological research (DeLisi & Piquero, 2011), suggesting that our classification scheme outlined above is an appropriate operationalization. We also note that prior life-course researchers have drawn on very similar operationalizations of LCP offending (Turner, Hartman, & Bishop, 2007).
Covariates. As mentioned above, a host of evidence suggests that the antisocial involvement of most individuals tends to peak in adolescence and decline shortly thereafter (i.e., AL offending patterns) (Moffitt, 1993). In order to account for the agegraded nature of most antisocial behavior, we included age—coded continuously in years—as a covariate in the current study. In addition, a consistent body of research has repeatedly demonstrated that African Americans are disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system, for a range of possible reasons (Rushton & Templer, 2009). In order to avoid possible confounding due to race, then, we included this item as a dichotomous indicator, which is coded as 0 = non-African American and 1 = African American.

Plan of Analysis
The analytical process for the current study unfolded in a series of interrelated steps. First, we examined whether LCP offenders are more likely to force sexual contact with a romantic partner. Second, we further explored the LCP tendency to commit sexual assault by examining the total number of times that persistent offenders reported engaging in forced intercourse. Finally, we examined the predicted probability of forcing sex based on being classified as either a chronic offender or not.

Results
Table 1 presents summary statistics and the correlation between persister status and the measures assessing sexual coercion (i.e., ever forced sex and total times forced sex). As can be seen, both variables are significantly associated with a tendency to sexually assault. Persistent offenders were both more likely to force sex, and to do so more often, when compared against other individuals in the sample. A cross-tabulation of the persister status variable and the sexual assault variable, presented in Panel 1 of Table 2, revealed that persistent offenders were significantly more likely to have forced sexual behavior on at least one partner compared to other respondents in the sample. The predicted probability of ever forcing sex based on offender group status (predicted probabilities were generated after accounting for the respondent’s race and age in a multivariate logistic regression model) was nearly double for persistent offenders (predicted probability = .11) compared to other respondents in the sample (predicted probability = .05). In addition, logistic regression models revealed that being classified as an LCP offender corresponded to a more than twofold increase in likelihood of committing sexual assault (Odds Ratio = 2.24).

Table 1. Summary and Correlation Statistics for Add Health Males n M (%) SD Minimum Maximum Correlation With Persister Persister status 5,169 0.14 (14) 0.35 0 1 — Nonpersister 4,422 — — — — — Persister 747 — — — — — Ever forced sex 5,633 0.07 (7) 0.25 0 1 .08* No 5,249 — — — — — Yes 384 — — — — — Total times forced sex 5,633 0.17 0.80 0 12 .08* *p < .05, two-tailed.

Table 2. Bivariate Analyses Between Persister Status and Sexual Assault Variables Persister Status Nonpersister (%) Persister (%) Panel 1 Ever forced sex? No 3,304 (94.43) 530 (88.93%) Yes 195 (5.57) 66 (11.07%) $\chi^2 = 25.82^*$ Panel 2 Nonpersister Persister Mean Difference Total times forced sex 0.14 0.31 0.17* *p < .05, two-tailed.

Having presented evidence suggesting that persistent offenders are more likely to commit sexual assault than nonpersistent offenders, the next step in the analytical process was to examine the tendency for persistent offenders to engage in multiple acts of forced sex with varied partners. Panel 2 in Table 2 contains the results from this phase of the analysis. The findings presented in Panel 2 indicate that persistent offenders, on average, forced sex more often than nonpersistent offenders. Indeed, the average number of forced sexual acts was significantly higher than that of
nonpersistent offenders. The substantive results were identical when controls for the respondent’s race and age were included in a multivariate model.\textsuperscript{2,3}

**Discussion**

Moffitt’s taxonomy has elicited an impressive amount of scrutiny among researchers in a broad array of disciplines. The current study was an attempt to expand this body of literature by examining the tendency of life-course persistent offenders (LCPs) to engage in acts of forced sexual aggression (Moffitt, 1993). Not surprisingly, our findings indicated that LCPs were disproportionately involved in acts of rape and sexual coercion. In addition, the average number of self-reported incidences of sexual coercion for persistent offenders was more than double that of other respondents (though neither was very large). In light of these results, we are left to examine possible explanations for the tendency of LCP offenders to engage in forced sex. The field of biosocial criminology offers one lens with which to view the current analyses.

Recently, Barnes et al. (2011) presented findings gleaned from the Add Health concerning the genetic underpinnings of LCP offending. These researchers found that genetic factors accounted for most of the variance in group membership for life-course persisters. Indeed, about 80% of the variance in whether an individual was classified as a persistent offender was attributable to genetic factors. What this necessarily means is that differences in the population for the constellation of traits common to LCPs—low empathy, lower intelligence, sexual promiscuity, violence, aggression, and so on—are likely tied to genetic influences. Shared social environments (i.e., parenting, schools, etc.) had virtually no impact on whether an individual was classified as being a chronic offender. For the current study, then, it is possible that the heritable influences that correspond to chronic criminality also underpin the tendency to be sexually aggressive.

An alternative, yet related, hypothesis concerns the role of psychopathy in the perpetration of rape. Lalumière and colleagues (Lalumière, Harris, Quinsey, & Rice, 2005), for example, provide convincing reason to suspect that the constellation of traits common to psychopaths may also correspond to an increased likelihood of committing sexual assault. As a result, it is possible that the results of the current study reflect the tendency for psychopaths to not only perpetrate sexual assault, but to also engage in chronic acts of delinquency.

On a different, yet potentially related note, Larsson and his colleagues (Larsson, Andershed, & Lichtenstein, 2006) have provided evidence that psychopathy is also a heritable trait. It may be the case, then, that the same suite of genes that influence psychopathy also overlap with LCP offending and sexual assault. Future research, however, will be needed to further examine the covariation among genetic factors, psychopathy, and life-course persistent offending.

It is important to mention that the line of reasoning outlined above stands in stark contrast to traditional explanations for sexual assault. In the past, most social scientists have relied exclusively on social influences to account for why some men perpetrate sexual assault. Moreover, the mere mention that biological factors might be implicated in the origins of rape has been met with derision and charges of sexism for the researchers proposing such ideas (Pinker, 2002; Thornhill & Palmer, 2000). Although informative, prior socialization research has failed to account for the distinct possibility that rape, like every other human behavior, is biologically underpinned (Pinker, 2002; Rhee & Waldman, 2002; Thornhill & Palmer, 2000). Put differently, given the far-reaching impact of biology for human outcomes, it is unlikely that rape constitutes the only human behavior that has escaped genetic influence.

Before concluding, it is necessary to make note of certain limitations in the current study. First, and perhaps most important, the measure of sexual assault used in our analysis was based on
self-reported items provided by the participants. We were unable, in other words, to examine similar hypotheses using official records for criminal prosecutions or convictions of rape. Second, although we posit a genetic component to rape, we were not able to test this prediction directly. Studies that employ either behavioral or molecular genetic techniques will be helpful in elucidating the magnitude of genetic influence on the origins of sexually coercive behavior. Third, it is possible that individuals may desist from crime well into their early 20s (Moffitt, 1993). Given that Wave 3 data were collected while the participants were between the ages of 18 and 28, it may be that some individuals who were classified as LCPs actually desisted shortly after the time of interview. Additional long-term follow-up will be necessary to determine whether a significant number of individuals desisted from crime following the completion of Wave 3 data collection.

Fourth, it is possible that the observed correlation between LCP offending and sexual assault could be inflated due to an increased likelihood of some respondents’ (i.e., LCP offenders) willingness to openly report sexual assaults. Future research, if capable of controlling items such as social desirability and willingness to report sexual behavior, may be able to address this possibility. For now, however, it is worth mentioning that the current results are not likely to reflect systematic bias unless there is reason to believe that LCPs are more likely to report sexual assault. Given the potential for punishment and the low threshold for tolerance of such behavior among U.S. citizens, it is unlikely that any person—LCP or not—will be overanxious to report their involvement in sexual assaults to researchers. Nonetheless, this remains an issue in need of future inquiry.

Fifth, and finally, it is possible that additional offending groups (other than ALs and LCPs) also exist in the population yet were not assessed in the current study. At least some evidence exists, for example, indicating that one segment of the population may not begin offending until adulthood (Nagin & Land, 1993). Alternatively, Moffitt has suggested that these “late-starters” may represent individuals who were highly antisocial, yet simply avoided detection of the police until later in life. If this is indeed the case, it is possible that the propensity for rape among late onset offenders would be similar to that of LCPs. At this point, however, it would be premature to speculate further. Ultimately, any efforts aimed at extinguishing rape from among the population will necessarily hinge on understanding both the social and biological factors that contribute to sexual assault and rape.

Authors’ Note
This research uses data from Add Health, a program project directed by Kathleen Mullan Harris and designed by J. Richard Udry, Peter S. Bearman, and Kathleen Mullan Harris at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, which was funded by Grant P01-HD31921 from the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, with cooperative funding from 23 other federal agencies and foundations. Special acknowledgment is due to Ronald R. Rindfuss and Barbara Entwisle for assistance in the original design. Information on how to obtain the Add Health data files is available on the Add Health website (http:// www.cpc.unc.edu/addhealth). No direct support was received from Grant P01-HD31921 for this analysis.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes
1. It is important to point out that Moffitt (1993) originally suggested that, during adolescence, the behavior of adolescence-limited (AL) and life-course persistent (LCP) offenders should mirror one another closely. Moreover, she was clear in stating that AL offenders were capable of engaging in serious forms of aggressive and aberrant behavior. In this regard, the aberrant conduct of LCP and AL offenders is likely to be very similar, at least until the majority of AL offenders reach an age of social maturity.

2. We further investigated the strength of our original findings by estimating a series of Poisson regression models in order to examine in greater detail the relationship between LCP offending and the commission of self-reported sexual assault. The results of this analysis, controlling for respondent age and race, indicated that LCP offending corresponded to repeated instances of forced sex. Moreover, we tested the relationship between delinquency and the sexual assault variable. These findings indicated that higher levels of delinquency on the part of respondents also predicted increases in self-reported measures of sexual assault.

3. Preliminary investigations also indicated that the relationships highlighted by the current study also hold true for female LCP offenders. In short, female LCPs were more likely to report having forced sex at least once ($\chi^2 = 25.18, p < .001$) and reported a significantly greater number of forced sex incidents ($t = 3.39, p < .001$).

References


