

## ABSTRACT

The study aims to generate insights from sexual offenders on the influence of internal states and how they perceive risks of apprehension and difficulties in the context of *noncompleted* sexual offences, that is when offenders initiated the offence but were stopped or discouraged either before or during sexual contact. Adult males incarcerated for sexually offending completed a self-report questionnaire. Regression models, including interaction effects, were estimated. Two interaction effects were found providing insights into which and how internal states, such as intoxication to alcohol, may influence perceived difficulties related to crime. Future research should promote the investigation of noncompleted sexual offences, which could provide a real opportunity to generate new or complementary insights for better understanding and guiding prevention initiatives.

Keywords: Sexual offences, attempted offences, noncompleted offences, risks of apprehension, difficulties of committing crime, crime prevention

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## Introduction

Empirical studies in criminology often provide insights that can be useful for preventing crime, or at the very least, better understanding it. These insights are typically extracted from a variety of sources including victim surveys, police reports, aggregated crime statistics, publicly available data, and offenders themselves, who are arguably the most informative source for developing crime prevention initiatives (Bernasco, 2010; Jacques & Bonobo, 2016; Cornish & Clarke, 1986; Leclerc & Savona, 2016; Leclerc & Wortley, 2013).

However, preventing crime events is one field that continually requires fresh ideas and novel approaches to gather new empirical evidence, accumulate knowledge and maintain relevance (Ekblom & Tilley, 2000). Research on why offenders *don't* commit crimes can offer unique insights and build evidence into what measures might be taken to deter potential offenders in the future (Lindgaard, Bernasco & Jacques, 2015). However, to our knowledge, little research has explored sexual offences that the offenders had initiated but were *stopped or discouraged* during the process of committing a crime, resulting in a noncompleted sexual offence. This absence of research may be partly due to the difficulties of accessing these offenders and obtaining data on noncompleted crimes in the first place.

In this study, we follow a promising and relatively new line of inquiry led by researchers in the Netherlands who examined attempted robberies with the view to building empirical evidence for informing stimulating crime prevention initiatives (Lindgaard & Bernasco, 2016; Lindgaard et al., 2015). Specifically, we examine how sexual offenders perceive the risks of apprehension and difficulties associated with the commission of a sexual offence in cases in which the offence was in fact *noncompleted*, resulting in an attempted offence. In this context, the offence was initiated but stopped or discouraged before or during sexual contact. Therefore, the study offers two main contributions: (a) it investigates and

highlights the importance of examining noncompleted sexual offences; and (b) it examines internal states in this context thus clarifying how offenders might be perceiving risks of apprehension and difficulties related to crime commission in the context of noncompleted sexual offences. This study represents one of the first critical steps towards generating offender-based insights on what may impact offender decision-making during sexual offences in order to ultimately prevent or reduce crime commission.

### **Previous Criminological Studies on the Rationales Underlying Sexual Offenders' Decision-Making (Risks of Apprehension and Internal States)**

The application of a criminological framework for understanding sexual crime events now goes back more than a decade (e.g., Beauregard, Proulx & Rossmo, 2005; Leclerc, Carpentier & Proulx, 2006), yet it is still scarce when it comes to generating insights for prevention initiatives (e.g., Wortley & Smallbone, 2006; Leclerc, Proulx & Beauregard, 2009; Leclerc, Wortley & Smallbone, 2011). Beauregard and Leclerc (2007) conducted a comprehensive study on sexual offenders' decision-making by examining the rationales of offenders before, during and after the crime event. They found that around 30% of sexual offenders gave no thought to the risks of getting caught before or during the crime. For offenders who reported thinking about the risk of getting caught (70%), nearly half perceived this risk to be low (41%). In this regard, the absence of a witness (43%), the presence of a favourable environment (i.e., isolated/easy get-away crime location) (27%), and a 'cooperative' victim (50%) were reported as the main reasons underlying offenders' perception of low risks. Offenders who perceived high risk of apprehension were concerned by whether the victim had some information about them (41%), whether the immediate environment was risky (e.g., public location and daytime) (45%), and whether a potential guardian (i.e., third-party) may have had the possibility of interfering during crime (24%). Following up on this study, Beauregard, Leclerc and Lussier (2012) found that offenders against women were more likely

than offenders against children to report offending in riskier circumstances, for example in the presence of a third party who could potentially interfere. Although important, these studies *did not* examine the rationales of sexual offenders specifically in the context of noncompleted sexual offences.

Turning to the role of internal states of offenders, Wortley and Smallbone (2014) examined the relationship between emotional arousal, including sexual excitation, and child sexual offending. They found that most offenders (77%) made the decision to sexually offend spontaneously or just a few minutes before the offence. Perhaps counter-intuitively, sexual excitation just prior to the offence was stronger for offenders who had made a premeditated decision to offend compared to those who acted on the spur of the moment. This finding suggests that the role of sexual excitation in child sex offending varies depending upon the offender level of premeditation, which in turn is likely to be related to the strength of his dispositional attraction to children. In a study on the impact of crime precipitators on sexual offences, Leclerc, Wortley and Dowling (2016) found that penetration was associated with the presence of general deviant sexual fantasies in combination with a perceived low risk of apprehension. ‘One possibility to explain this finding is that general sexually-deviant fantasies before the offense are indicative of a sexual deviant lifestyle and dispositional deviance and so are also associated with longer term planning. Those offenders who are dispositionally deviant are more likely to engineer low risk encounters with potential victims; offenders who are not dispositionally deviant are more likely to offend opportunistically, including in circumstances of relatively high risk’ (Leclerc et al., 2016, p. 1613). This explanation touches on the notion of implicit planning in sexual offending whereby some offenders may adopt certain behaviours that put them into high risk situations but without conscious anticipation of sexually offending (Ward & Hudson, 2000).

Some other studies showed that the decisions made by sexual offenders are ‘bounded’ by factors, such as intoxication and sexual excitation, which means that offenders are unlikely to make an accurate assessment of risks and efforts related to the commission of a crime as explained under a rational choice approach (e.g., Ariely & Lowenstein, 2006; Leclerc et al., 2016; Marshall & Barbaree, 1990; van Gelder, Elffers, Reynald & Nagin, 2014). For instance, Ariely and Lowenstein (2006) found that male college students were more likely to report that they would have sex with someone they hated, and that they would keep trying to have sex after the woman says ‘no’, when the students were sexually aroused compared to when they are not aroused. These findings highlight the impact of internal states, such as sexual arousal to disinhibit offenders into having non-consensual sex.

In summary, previous research has highlighted that internal states influence sexual offenders’ decision-making. However, the precise role that these factors play in sexual offenders’ decision-making and their perceptions of opportunities is still unclear. Research on how sexual offenders against children or women perceive the risks and difficulties associated with the commission of a crime is scarce. Aside from the focus on risks of apprehension and difficulties associated with crime commission in general, the most innovative aspect of the current study is that data were collected on offences that the offenders had initiated but were *stopped or discouraged*, resulting in attempted sexual offences. To our knowledge, empirical evidence on noncompleted sexual offences is currently non-existent. The current study aims to start addressing this knowledge gap.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### *Rational Choice and Situational Precipitators*

Within the rational choice framework, it is assumed that potential offenders make purposive and rational decisions to commit crimes to benefit themselves in some way (Cornish &

Clarke, 1986). They aim to make decisions that will help them fulfil certain desires, such as revenge, money, sexual gratification and/or excitement. These decisions are considered against the backdrop of opportunities and constraints. Offenders are assessing criminal opportunities based on the perceived risks, efforts and rewards associated with the commission of a crime. This does not mean that their choices are objectively 'rational'. Decisions can be situated on a continuum ranging from carefully planned on one end, to impulsive on the other. Assessments of opportunities may be rudimentary and their subsequent decisions sub-optimal, because of factors such as drug or alcohol use, a lack of criminal experience, and heightened emotional states (Cornish & Clarke, 1987; Felson, 2013; Leclerc & Wortley, 2013; van Gelder et al., 2014). Felson (2013) points out that "Ill-considered decisions rather than inner compulsions result in behaviours that seem irrational to the objective observer" (p.21) (see also Tedeschi & Felson, 1994). Irrespective of the limits on human rationality (Hastie & Dawes, 2010), one would expect offenders to try to maximise the 'payoff' while avoiding getting caught (Clarke, 2008). Examining offender decision-making *through* the eyes of offenders is consistent with the rational choice approach and can lead to strategies for making a contemplated crime less rewarding and riskier to carry out as perceived by a potential offender (e.g., Ekblom, 2007; Jacques & Bonobo, 2016).

Understanding offender decision-making is further facilitated by examining offender motivations in interaction with their environments, which points to the relevance of examining internal states during crime commission. For better understanding the interaction between an offender and its immediate environment, Wortley (e.g., 2001) introduced the concept of situational precipitators. A precipitator is 'any aspect of the immediate environment that creates, triggers or intensifies the motivation to commit crime' (Wortley, 2001, p. 63). Wortley identified four types of precipitators: prompts; pressures; permissions; and provocations. First, individuals can be prompted to commit a crime when thoughts and

feelings that would not have had emerged in other situations are brought to the surface by cues in the immediate environment (e.g., feelings of aggression primed by the sight of a weapon). Second, individuals can be pressured to offend through their social affiliations and obligations (e.g., conforming to peer pressure). Third, individuals are 'permitted' to engage in normally proscribed behaviour when their moral prohibitions have been weakened (e.g., blaming alcohol for violent altercations). Fourth, individuals can be provoked to engage in criminal behaviour under very stressful conditions (e.g., road rage due to frustration).

The concept of situational precipitators introduces an important layer of complexity to decision-making. Precipitators are concerned with situational effects across numerous psychological domains including emotions, morals, perceptions and thoughts (Wortley, 2001). These internal states are situationally dependent and can lead to behaviours that individuals may not have otherwise contemplated at that time. Precipitators, such as drug and alcohol intoxication, or sexual stimulation, can encourage or increase the motivation to offend and consequently play a role into how an offender may perceive the risks and difficulties associated with the commission of a sexual offence - the primary focus of this study. Examining internal states illuminates how offenders may feel, perceive and think when processing information in relation to the decisions to commit crime, which opens up opportunities to think of prevention from an offender's perspective.

### **The Current Study**

Insights from offenders on noncompleted sexual offences is without a doubt a promising and overlooked avenue when considering crime prevention (e.g., Ekblom & Tilley, 2000; Jacques & Bonobo, 2016; Lindegaard & Bernasco, 2016). How sexual offenders perceive the risks of apprehension and difficulties associated with the commission of a sexual offence could lead

them to a decision to refrain from committing the offence leading to a noncompleted offence. Amassing empirical evidence on these perceptions in the context of noncompleted sexual offences is critical for understanding sexual offenders' decision-making and building knowledge that may be useful in the future about better understanding how sexual offenders think and what may work in the prevention of sexual offences.

We start our inquiry by examining how sexual offenders against women and sexual offenders against children perceived the risks and difficulties when crimes were initiated but resulted in an attempt. We examine if and how internal states are correlated with risks and difficulties for each type of offence. Finally, we estimate regression models of perceived risks and difficulties, controlling for the type of offence and examine the presence of interaction effects. These aims are translated into the following research questions:

Research Question 1: Do sexual offenders against women and sexual offenders against children perceive the risks and difficulties related to crime commission differently in the context of noncompleted offences?

Research Question 2: What internal states are *associated* with perceived risks and difficulties during noncompleted offences and do specific internal states *predict* perceived risks and difficulties in the context of noncompleted sexual offences?

Research Question 3: Are there any interaction effects between internal states in the context of noncompleted sexual offences on perceived risks and difficulties?

The literature on sexual offenders' decision-making during crime events brings us to formulate tentative hypotheses at best. In addressing the first question, we hypothesise that sexual offenders against women will perceive higher risks and difficulties compared to offenders against children simply because sexually abusing a woman is likely to generate

higher risks of getting caught and more difficulties proceeding with the offence compared to sexually abusing a child (e.g., Beauregard et al., 2012). From a rational choice approach, this suggests that offenders would contemplate the possibility for the victim to resist before crime especially with an adult victim. The second question leads us to consider whether internal states, such as being intoxicated, thinking about sex just prior crime and believing that sex is important, could influence how offenders perceive risks and difficulties before crime. Specifically, we anticipate that intoxication and thinking about sex just prior crime will lead offenders to assess the risks and difficulties to be lower due to a cognitive incapacity to think clearly and make sound decisions while intoxicated or thinking about sex (e.g., Ariely & Lowenstein, 2005). We also expect internal states to be negatively associated with risks and difficulties (e.g., higher intoxication, perceived lower risks) in a multivariate model, that is when controlling for other factors.

The last question focuses on interaction effects. Based on the impact of internal states on how offenders can make 'rational' decisions during crime commission, we would expect to see interaction effects with these variables (see Leclerc et al., 2016; van Gelder et al., 2014). Therefore, we anticipate the presence of interaction effects even though it is not possible to formulate an a priori hypothesis in what to expect specifically. Including interaction effects in our analysis is critical to clarify the relationships between alcohol intoxication and sexual stimulation variables on perceived difficulties and risks. Not including interaction effects could lead us to incorrectly interpret the findings and draw false conclusions (Hastie & Dawes, 2010; Leclerc et al., 2016). These research questions highlight the concept of bounded rationality and, therefore, the impact that internal states may have on offender decision-making by reducing the possibility of optimal decision-making (Cornish & Clarke, 1987).

## **Method**

### *Sample*

The sample is comprised of 366 males incarcerated for a sexual offence in Australia. Of those offenders, 223 were convicted for committing a sexual offence against a child and 143 were convicted for sexually offending against a woman. Offenders against children were more likely to be Australian born non-Aboriginal (70.4%) than Australian born Aboriginal (15.2%) or from another ethnicity (14.4%). Offenders against women on the other hand were more likely to be Australian born Aboriginal (49%) compared to Australian born non-Aboriginal (27.3%) and other ethnicities (23.7%). In terms of education, very few offenders had completed secondary school - the proportions were 11.9% and 8.6% for offenders against women and offenders against children, respectively. More than half of offenders were married or in a stable relationship. Of offenders against women, 16.1% were married and 48.7% reported a stable relationship. As for offenders against children, 34.7% were married and 26.2% indicated they were in a stable relationship. Finally, the average age at the time of the most recent offence for the whole sample was 37.99 years old ( $SD = 13.95$ ) for offenders against children and 29.04 years old ( $SD=12.78$ ) for offenders against women.

### *Procedure*

The first step involved getting ethics approval for the project. Ethics approval was granted by Griffith University Human Research Ethics Committee as well as by each Corrective Services that participated in this study – Queensland, Victoria and Northern Territory. The second step involved identifying offenders who were eligible to participate. For this purpose, each corrective services department identified individuals in their facilities who were either currently serving or had previously served a sentence for a sexual offence against a child or adult woman. Following this, for offenders who accepted to learn about the research, two strategies for recruitment were adopted based on whether they were participating in a sex

offender therapeutic program or not. Offenders participating in a therapeutic program were approached during a group session and provided with a detailed information sheet and participant consent form. This method was possible because offenders in programs all have committed a sex offence, know each other and have generally overcome the fear of disclosure in front of their group. Offenders not participating in a treatment program were approached individually to maintain their confidentiality.

Offenders who consented to participate completed the self-report questionnaire in the presence of at least one member of the research team. This strategy provided offenders with the opportunity to ask any questions or express concerns regarding the questionnaire. Once the questionnaire was completed, the research assistant checked the responses to make sure nothing had been misinterpreted or omitted to avoid the occurrence of missing data. As participation was voluntary, participants had the option to leave questions unanswered. Even though participants were not interviewed per say, they were told to not disclose any names or personal details to protect them against any subsequent legal action in relation to noncompleted sexual offences. Lastly, to link each questionnaire with its consent form, all offenders were assigned a unique identification number. We did not record any further information that could lead to an individual being identified as having participated in the study.

This study was voluntary and asked offenders to first sign a consent form and then provide self-report data on their crimes. Offenders who were incarcerated for committing an offence against an adult male victim were excluded from recruitment due to the much lower frequency of these events. To be eligible for recruitment, offenders must have engaged in or had the intention to engage in, a contact sexual offence. Applying this definition allowed for the inclusion of sexual acts such as fondling, penetration and oral contact while excluding non-contact behaviours such as exhibitionism or voyeurism.

### *Measures*

Offenders who consented to participate were asked to complete a self-report questionnaire incorporating a crime-script framework specifically designed for this study. The self-report questionnaires developed in this research are, to the best of our knowledge, the first instruments that incorporate a script framework for collecting data specifically for situational crime prevention purposes. Acknowledging the differences between sexual offences against children and sexual offences against women, two self-report questionnaires were developed based on previous literature (i.e., Chiu & Leclerc, 2016; Leclerc et al., 2011). These questionnaires are available upon request.

The questionnaires asked offenders to report the details of their most recent noncompleted offence – the offence that was stopped or discouraged during its course of action. When designing the self-report instruments, we chose to acknowledge that this situation can occur before *or* during physical contact, but not after (i.e. reporting the offence once it has occurred). For consistency, an offence that was noncompleted beforehand was therefore defined as the most recent time the participant was either: (a) stopped or discouraged while in the process of initiating the sexual contact; or, (b) stopped or discouraged during the sexual contact. To illustrate, if an offender had identified a suitable victim but the victim engaged in an immediate resistance which meant the offender could not secure their trust or co-operation, the offence would be considered as noncompleted. If the offender was stopped or discouraged while engaging in sexual contact with their victim (e.g., through witness intervention or the victim fighting back), the offence was also considered noncompleted. Noncompleted offences may have led or not to an arrest and/or conviction of the offender.

Each offender only reported their most recent experience of a noncompleted offence, if any. Our final sample used for the current study was 144 offenders who reported having initiated a sexual offence for which they were stopped or discouraged – 78 events involved a child victim and 66, an adult woman. Table 1 depicts the breakdown of the moments during the crime commission process at which these sexual offences were stopped or discouraged. Most offences were stopped or discouraged during sexual contact regardless of the victim. A proportion of 86.4% of offences initiated against a woman were stopped or discouraged during sexual contact and 66.7% of offences initiated against a child were also stopped or discouraged during sexual activities. In addition, 17.9% of offences initiated against children were stopped or discouraged when the offender and the victim were at the location where sexual contact was supposed to occur, which was also observed in 6.1% of offences initiated against a woman.

INSERT TABLE 1 about here

### *Variables*

The key variables in this study are perceived risks of apprehension and difficulties in relation to a noncompleted sexual offence. Offenders were asked how they had perceived the risks of apprehension when attempting to commit the crime and how they had perceived the difficulties associated with committing the crime. Perceiving a crime as more difficult to commit may involve any situational constraints that could be seen by offenders as obstacles when committing their crime. For each question, offenders were asked to circle an answer ranging from 0-10, that is, from not risky at all (or not difficult) to very risky (or very difficult). Four other questions, also ranging from 0-10, asked about the extent to which offenders were intoxicated by alcohol or drugs when initiating the crime before they were stopped or discouraged, and the degree to which they might have been sexually stimulated just prior the offence (i.e., the extent to which they were thinking about sexual contact, and

how they find the need for sex to be important). These variables were not transformed. Descriptive statistics for all variables are provided in Table 2.

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

## Results

The first part of the analysis outlines how risks of apprehension and difficulties associated with crime commission are perceived during noncompleted sexual offences. Table 3 shows that sexual offenders against children may be more likely to perceive higher risks during noncompleted sexual offences than sexual offenders against women ( $p = .051$ ). In contrast, sexual offenders against women are significantly more likely to perceive greater difficulties for committing the offence during noncompleted offences compared to sexual offenders against children ( $p = .010$ ). The effect size for each statistical result was as follows:  $d = 0.33$  and  $0.438$ , respectively. This analysis supports our decision to distinguish between the two groups of offenders in subsequent analyses. As a result, we also include a control variable for the type of offence during regression analyses.

INSERT TABLE 3

The second part of the analysis examines if and how internal states are correlated with perceived risks and difficulties for each type of offence. Table 4 (Panel A) shows that the variable of perceived risks is strongly and positively related to the variable of perceived difficulties during noncompleted sexual offences against women ( $r = .450$ ). Furthermore, the variable of perceived risks is positively related to the extent of thinking about sexual contact ( $r = .409$ ), while perceived difficulties is positively related to the importance of need for sex ( $r = .372$ ). Finally, a positive correlation can be observed between the variables of intoxication (alcohol and drug) and between the variables of sexual stimulation (extent of thinking about sex and importance of need for sex). Panel B, which depicts correlations for noncompleted sexual offences against children, also show a strong positive correlation

between perceived risks and difficulties ( $r = .439$ ). In addition, in the case of sexual offences against women, intoxication (alcohol and/or drugs prior to the offence) and sexual stimulation are positively correlated with one another.

#### INSERT TABLE 4

After examining these bivariate associations, we ran a series of regression models examining perceived risks of apprehension and difficulties while controlling for the type of offence. To address this last research question, regression models were first estimated to explore for mediation effects. No mediation effects were found. Regression models were then conducted with and without interaction effects. In terms of interaction effects, all potential combinations involving internal states and perceived risks and difficulties were investigated. Before proceeding with interaction effects, the variables involved in the interaction term were also centered (i.e., subtracting the variable by its mean score as recommended by Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). Two interaction effects emerged. However, it was not possible to include both interaction effects in the same model due to the limited sample size. Therefore, in Table 5, we present two separate models for both perceived risks (Models 1 and 2) and difficulties (Models 3 and 4). It should be noted that the variable of risk was also controlled for when predicting difficulties and vice versa to remove any potential impact that each variable may have in each model.

#### INSERT TABLE 5

Table 5 presents the findings of these regression analyses. The models conducted on perceived risks show that drug intoxication and perceived difficulties are both positively associated with perceived risks during noncompleted sexual offences (e.g., Model 2,  $b = .163$  and  $.474$ , respectively). For the former, this suggests that the more offenders consume drugs the higher the perceived risks during noncompleted sex offences. In addition, sex offenders against children are more likely to perceive high risks of committing the offence compared to

sex offenders against women ( $b = 1.756$ ). As for perceived difficulties during noncompleted sexual offences, Model 3 shows that the variable of perceived risks is again predictive of perceived difficulties. In addition, sexual offenders against women are also more likely to perceive high difficulties for committing the offence than sex offenders against children ( $b = -1.608$ ). The interaction effect highlighted in Model 3 indicates that the more offenders believe that the need for sex is important as their intoxication to alcohol increases the more they perceive high difficulties to commit crime during noncompleted sex offences ( $b=.054$ ). Model 4 highlights the same main effect for perceived risks and offence type but also showcases another interaction effect. This interaction effect suggests that the more offenders think about having a sexual contact as their intoxication to alcohol increases, the more they perceive the offence as difficult to commit during noncompleted sexual offences ( $b=.050$ ).

## **Discussion**

### *Sexual Offenders' Perceived Risks and Difficulties During Noncompleted Sexual Offences*

We set out to guide our investigation on sexual offenders' perceived risks of apprehension and difficulties during noncompleted sexual offences. In addressing the first question, and consistent with our first hypothesis, we found that sexual offenders against women and sexual offenders against children do perceive risks of apprehension and difficulties related to crime commission differently in the context of noncompleted sexual offences. However, we anticipated that sexual offenders against women would perceive higher risks *and* greater difficulties than offenders against children. Contrary to our hypothesis, the findings suggest that the latter group perceived higher risks compared to the former. One possibility is that offenders against children perceive higher risks because having sexual contact with children is legally and morally proscribed. Therefore, there is simply no possibility of having sexual contact with a child without running the risk of being arrested.

As hypothesised, sex offenders against women perceived greater difficulties compared to sex offenders against children potentially because a woman can physically fight back and report the offence to authorities, which is less likely to occur with a child. Consistent with this finding, Beauregard et al. (2012) found that the rationales exhibited by offenders against women highlighted the need to physically control the woman and prevent resistance in any way they could. In both scenarios, these findings suggest that offenders may have been stopped or discouraged to some extent from completing their offence because of their perception of the associated risks (for offenders against children) or difficulties (for offenders against women). Consistent with research on the impact of affective states on offender decision-making (van Gelder et al., 2014), another possibility could be that internal states of offenders may have had an impact on their perceived risks and difficulties, which we examined next.

For the second question, we introduced internal states of offenders: 1) being intoxicated by alcohol or drugs; and, 2) being sexually stimulated by thinking about sex prior to the offence or by the importance given to the need for sex. We expected that intoxication and sexual stimulation would lead offenders to assess the risks and difficulties to be lower because of a diminished cognitive capacity to think clearly and make sound decisions under these circumstances. However, the findings do not support this hypothesis. First, at the bivariate level, we only found significant relationships between internal states and perceived risks and difficulties in the context of offences against women. Second, the relationships we found show the opposite of what we were anticipating. The variable of perceived risks is positively associated with the extent of thinking about sexual contact, and perceived difficulties is positively associated with the importance of need for sex. These findings suggest that sexual stimulation may drive in part offenders against women to perceive higher risks and difficulties during noncompleted sexual offences. It makes immediate sense to

observe that perceived risks and difficulties would be higher in the context of noncompleted sexual offences, but the important question is why would offenders against women perceive higher risks and difficulties when more sexually stimulated? Part of the explanation may have to do with the possibility that these offenders were not intoxicated to a point to affect their perception of risks and difficulties - there is no relationship between intoxication and perceived risks or difficulties in committing the offence. This may indicate that even though offenders could have been sexually stimulated before initiating the offence, they were able to refrain themselves to some extent because they were *not* intoxicated, which led to a noncompleted offence. They perceived higher risks and difficulties because they were sexually stimulated by the thought of forcing a woman to have sexual contact but still able to think clearly enough to not pursue with this scenario.

In examining the last question, we were also expecting internal states to predict perceived risks and difficulties in a multivariate model. We also anticipated the presence of interaction effects and controlled for the type of offence (i.e., sex offences against women versus sex offences against children). Examining perceived risks, we found partial support for this hypothesis; drug intoxication was predictive of perceived risks, which indicates that drug intoxication has an impact on offenders' perception of risks. However, contrary to what we expected, this relationship was positive, suggesting that drug intoxication drives offenders to perceive higher risks during noncompleted sexual offences. No relationship was found between variables measuring sexual stimulation and perceived risks. These findings neutralise in some respect what was observed at the bivariate level because drug intoxication did not correlate with any variables. In the end, it makes sense that drug intoxication could be related to perceived risks, but it is difficult to reconcile why drug emerged as significant only when accounting for all the variables in our model. We did examine whether drug intoxication was interacting with other variables but did not find any statistically significant

results. As this study uses a relatively low sample size, it would be interesting to run the same analysis with a much larger sample size to examine whether statistical power could help make sense of these results.

The models on perceived difficulties led to substantially different results than the models on perceived risk. We did not identify a significant main effect for intoxication. We again identified the presence of a positive relationship between perceived risks and difficulties and observed that offenders against women are more likely to perceive greater difficulties than offenders against children, which is not surprising. However, we identified two interaction effects. First, we observed that the more sex offenders consider sex to be important as their intoxication from alcohol increases, the greater the perceived difficulties related to crime commission in the context of noncompleted sexual offences. Second, and similarly, we found that the more offenders think about having sexual contact as their intoxication to alcohol increases, the greater the perceived difficulties in the context of noncompleted sexual offences. Taken together, these two effects indicate that sexual stimulation has an impact on perceived difficulties contingent on alcohol intoxication prior the offence, findings that were not identified in prior studies. Different possibilities may help explain these findings. One possibility is that offenders against women particularly, when sexually stimulated and intoxicated by alcohol, may overestimate the difficulties associated with committing the offence and refrain themselves from completing the offence altogether. This implies that their judgement was impacted by sexual thoughts and intoxication taken together. However, it may be argued that offenders should underestimate rather than overestimate difficulties, based on findings from previous studies (e.g., Ariely & Loewenstein, 2005; van Gelder, 2013).

Another possibility is that offenders may accurately think that they would not be in a physical condition to control the woman if she would resist and thus, perceive the difficulties

to be greater under their current impaired state and, in turn, stop from engaging with her. Furthermore, offenders may have also perceived substantial difficulties but still initiated the offence and then stopped when the victim resisted due to their diminished physical capacity to successfully use force against her because of intoxication. Indeed, it has been suggested that the offender's reaction to victim resistance may be non-violent in nature, such as stopping the offence or running away (Balemba, Beauregard & Mieczkowski, 2012). Under these scenarios, offenders may have proceeded to a somewhat accurate assessment of the difficulties of sexually abusing a woman at some point when sexually stimulated and intoxicated by alcohol and, in turn, got discouraged from pursuing with the offence at a later point. Our analysis does not provide us with the opportunity to be more precise regarding such scenarios, but it fills an important gap left by previous studies by highlighting the value of examining how internal states interact in shaping how offenders are perceiving difficulties related to crime commission.

Under Wortley's theoretical model of situational precipitators (2001), alcohol intoxication and any sexual thoughts or activities may encourage or increase motivation to offend. Individuals may think that they are 'permitted' to engage in normally proscribed behaviour, such as having a sexual contact without consent with another person when their moral prohibitions have been weakened by alcohol intoxication. Similarly, individuals may be prompted to obtain a non-consensual sexual contact with another person when sexually stimulated under specific circumstances. We found that the combination of alcohol intoxication and thoughts about sexual activities increases offenders' perceptions of the sexual crime as difficult to commit during noncompleted sexual offences. We mentioned that one possibility is that many sexually stimulated offenders perceive the offence as difficult to commit when their level of intoxication increases due to a lack of psychological and physical capacity to force the victim to take part in sexual activities. In this context, they may stop

during the offence feeling unable to overcome certain situational constraints to commit the offence. While intoxication may increase the motivation to offend, it can also reduce one's capacity to commit crime especially if the victim resists. Perhaps this evidence could be used to inform victims on how best to react in situations of sexual victimisation (Ullman, 2007). In this case, maybe victims could be encouraged to physically resist offenders who are highly intoxicated with a better prospect of avoiding victimisation. Obviously, this is not a recommendation at this stage, but these findings allude to the possibility of better informing victims and clinicians with additional empirical evidence on the impact of internal states on how offenders perceive criminal opportunities. Investigating the presence of this interaction effect with a sample of completed sexual offences could also further clarify this potential scenario.

### *Limitations*

To our knowledge, this study is the first to examine sexual offenders' perceptions of risks and difficulties *in a context* where offences were stopped or discouraged, resulting in a noncompleted offence. Despite the novelty and need for such a study, there are limitations to consider. First, our study draws on self-report data collected from incarcerated offenders. This means that offender's responses are subject to a certain social desirability bias and issues related to memory recall. Some offenders may have minimised or not reported sexual stimulation, for instance. Some other offenders may have had difficulties recalling exactly their internal state during the crime event. Considering the latter, and to limit the potential impact of memory recall, the study focused on the most recent crime event. Second, our study is based on a relatively low number of noncompleted sexual crime events ( $n=144$ ), which precluded us from conducting more sophisticated quantitative analyses due to a lack of statistical power. However, collecting data from sexual offenders on noncompleted sexual

offences is a rare practice to date in research that may lead to valuable insights for understanding offenders' decision-making regardless of the nature of the analysis.

## **Conclusion**

Investigating noncompleted sexual offences and what may impact offenders' perception of risks and difficulties in this context with a sample of sexual offenders is non-existent in the criminological literature. The contribution of this study is twofold. It examined noncompleted sexual offences and clarified how sexual offenders might be perceiving risks of apprehension and difficulties related to crime commission in the context of noncompleted sexual offences by looking at internal states. Specifically, we found that sexual offenders against women perceive greater difficulties and sexual offenders against children perceive higher risks of apprehension. Importantly, we also found that the more offenders think about sexual contact or believe sex is an important need to fulfil as their intoxication to alcohol increases, the greater the difficulties to commit the offence as perceived by offenders during noncompleted sexual offences. These findings highlight the complexity of the interplay between internal states and perceptions of risks and difficulties consistent with previous research on offender decision-making (see van Gelder et al., 2014).

Based on the findings, it can be argued that including interaction effects also made a valuable contribution to increase our understanding of sexual offenders' decision-making. In this study, interaction effects specified the situations within which internal states may impact perceived difficulties during noncompleted sexual offences, but also stimulated an area of research that requires more development in the future. Clearly, excluding interaction effects from our analysis would have masked relationships between alcohol intoxication and sexual stimulation variables on perceived difficulties, which could have led us to draw false conclusions (Leclerc et al., 2016). Therefore, interaction effects provided us with a more

accurate and nuanced account of the complexity of decision-making during noncompleted sexual offences.

For future research, there is a need to further investigate noncompleted sexual offences to identify situational cues that may prevent intentions to commit sexual offences from turning into actual offences (Lindegaard et al., 2015). Beyond increasing our understanding of offenders' perception of risks and difficulties in noncompleted sexual offences, this area of research looks promising for prevention purposes by pinpointing circumstances that offenders perceive as deterrents (Cook et al., 2018). This study appears to only scratch the surface on the topic of noncompleted sexual offences and more comprehensive studies are needed to think of the potential of crime prevention. Moreover, a similar study should be conducted to perhaps revisit the findings and counteract some of the limitations. As an agenda for future research, with no particular order, we propose the following: 1) examining situational factors, such as the presence of a third party and the location of the crime, in statistical models to boost our understanding of what may affect how offenders perceive risks and difficulties in noncompleted sexual offences and, 2) conducting a qualitative examination of the reasons why sexual offenders may perceive higher risks and difficulties in noncompleted sexual offences. Taken together, this research agenda offers promise for promoting the investigation of noncompleted crimes and could provide a real opportunity to generate new or complementary insights for guiding future prevention initiatives.

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Table 1. Moments during which offenders were stopped or discouraged when trying to commit a sexual offence ( $n=144$ )

Moments during which offenders were stopped or discouraged when trying to have sexual contact	Frequency Yes (%)
<u>Sexual offences vs children (<math>n=78</math>)</u>	
When trying to make the child participate in sexual activity	52 (66.7)
When at the location where sexual contact was supposed to take place	14 (17.9)
When trying to have time alone with the child	7 (9)
When trying to gain the trust of the child	3 (3.8)
When meeting the child for the first time	2 (2.6)
<u>Sexual offences vs women (<math>n=66</math>)</u>	
When trying to make the person participate in sexual activity	57 (86.4)
When trying to make the person go to the place where sexual contact would occur	2 (3)
When at the location where sexual contact was supposed to occur	4 (6.1)
When trying to have time alone with the person	1 (1.5)
When meeting the person for the first time	2 (3)

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Noncompleted Sexual Offences (*n*= 144)

	N	Mean (SD)	Median
Alcohol intoxication	144	4.19 (4.40)	3
Drug intoxication	144	3.11 (4.35)	0
Extent of thinking about sexual contact	142	3.26 (3.19)	3
Importance of need for sex	142	3.41 (3.14)	3
Perception of risks	142	4.70 (3.75)	5
Perception of difficulties	143	3.54 (3.35)	2

Table 3. Comparison of Sexual Offences against Women and Sexual Offences against Children for Noncompleted Offences ( $n=144$ )

	Sexual offences against women	Sexual offences against children	<i>F</i>	<i>P</i> -value
Perception of risks	4.05 (3.87) ( $n=66$ )	5.28 (3.57) ( $n=76$ )	3.882	<b>.051</b>
Perception of difficulties	4.30 (3.41) ( $n=66$ )	2.87 (3.18) ( $n=76$ )	6.729	<b>.010</b>

Note. Mean score and *SD* are presented.

Table 4. Correlations between perception of risks and difficulties and internal states for noncompleted sexual offences ( $n=144$ )

Panel A. Noncompleted Sexual Offences Against Women

Scale	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Alcohol intoxication	-	<b>.328**</b>	.050	-.081	-.015	.165
2. Drug intoxication		-	-.118	.184	.046	.069
3. Extent of thinking about sexual contact prior			-	.238	<b>.409**</b>	<b>.670**</b>
4. Perception of risks				-	<b>.450**</b>	.242
5. Perception of difficulties					-	<b>.372**</b>
6. Importance of need for sex						-

Note: \*\*  $p < .01$  (2-tailed). Significant relationships highlighted in bold.

Panel B. Noncompleted Sexual Offences Against Children

Scale	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Alcohol intoxication	-	<b>.582**</b>	-.198	.028	-.047	-.136
2. Drug intoxication		-	-.107	.089	-.058	-.209
3. Extent of thinking about sexual contact prior			-	.112	-.157	<b>.620**</b>
4. Perception of risks				-	<b>.439**</b>	.150
5. Perception of difficulties					-	-.022
6. Importance of need for sex						-

Note: \*\*  $p < .01$  (2-tailed). Significant relationships highlighted in bold.

Table 5. Regression Analyses of Perceived Risks and Difficulties for Noncompleted Sexual Offences ( $n=140$ )

	Perceived Risks		Perceived Difficulties	
	Model 1 <i>b</i> (CI)	Model 2 <i>b</i> (CI)	Model 3 <i>b</i> (CI)	Model 4 <i>b</i> (CI)
Alcohol intoxication	-.101 (-.269-.067)	-.098 (-.267-.071)	.024 (-.125-.174)	.049 (-.101-.200)
Drug intoxication	<b>.164* (.011-.317)</b>	<b>.163* (.010-.317)</b>	-.037 (-.174-.101)	-.749 (-1.996-.449)
Extent of thinking about sexual contact	.105 (-.128-.329)	.095 (-.139-.329)	-.045 (-.252-.163)	-.025 (-.231-.182)
Importance of need for sex	.101 (-.130-.333)	.104 (-.129-.337)	.091 (-.115-.296)	-.076 (-.130-.281)
Perceived risks	-	-	<b>.381*** (.243-.518)</b>	<b>.382*** (.244-.520)</b>
Perceived difficulties	<b>.486*** (.310-.661)</b>	<b>.474*** (.298-.651)</b>	-	-
Offence against children (vs women)	<b>1.695* (.311-3.078)</b>	<b>1.756* (.372-.3.140)</b>	<b>-1.608** (-2.829-.387)</b>	<b>-1.727** (-2.942--.512)</b>
Interaction alcohol x importance of need for sex	-.024 (-.064-.017)	-	<b>.054** (.019-.089)</b>	-
Interaction alcohol x extent of thinking about sexual contact	-	-.013 (-.054-.028)	-	<b>.050** (.015-.085)</b>
Constant	-.485	-.585	4.502***	4.576***
Adjusted R2	.227	.221	.249	.250

Abbreviation: CI = Confidence Intervals.

Note: \* $p \leq .05$ , \*\* $p \leq .01$ , \*\*\* $p \leq .001$ .