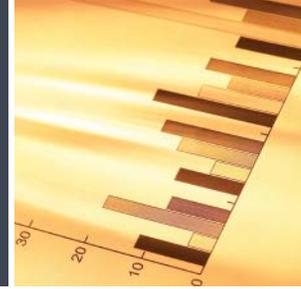


Screening Volunteers for the Risk of Child Sexual Abuse



QUESTION

How can volunteer organizations identify applicants at risk for committing child sexual abuse?

BACKGROUND

Volunteering is important for civic society. Approximately half of all Canadians engage in volunteer activities each year, and many of these activities involve services to children (e.g., sports, education, arts).

Tragically, some volunteers have used their position of trust to access children for sexual abuse. Although the proportion of volunteers who commit sexual abuse is small, even a single instance leads to careful scrutiny and concern as to whether the risk could have been identified and the abuse prevented.

During recent decades, volunteer organizations in Canada and elsewhere have become increasingly aware of the need to screen applicants for the potential to abuse children. Criminal record checks are now a key element of the screening process, and have been widely used by Canadian volunteer organizations since 2000.

Criminal records checks, however, should be only one part of a comprehensive screening process. Most instances of sexual abuse within youth service organizations are committed by individuals with no official history of sexual crime. Consequently, it is important to consider other factors when evaluating applicants' potential for sexual behaviour that is inappropriate or outright criminal.

Previous surveys of screening procedures used by volunteer organisations in Canada and the United States have found wide variation in practice. Furthermore, the effectiveness of the diverse screening procedures is largely unknown. Consequently, with the goal of identifying best practices, we conducted a new survey of screening procedures used in the United Kingdom.

METHOD

Managers from 20 UK youth charities completed semi-structured interviews concerning screening procedures. These organizations included local service clubs as well as large national organizations (range of 1 to 11,000+ employees; 1 to 10,000 volunteers).

As well, we reviewed the professional literature on sexual abuse screening procedures and the research on risk factors for child sexual abuse perpetration.

ANSWER

For all the organizations surveyed, the primary focus for prevention efforts was limiting the opportunities where abuse could occur (e.g., not allowing volunteers to be alone with children).

In terms of screening, all the organizations required criminal record checks, as well as assurances that the candidate had the skills and personal attributes necessary for the position. Otherwise, there was wide variation in the depth and sophistication of the screening procedures of sexual abuse potential.

One promising practice was Value Based Interviewing, promoted by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. This structured interview addresses the values, motives and attitudes of applicants wanting to work with children. Although its effectiveness has yet to be formally evaluated, it is consistent with the research literature on the individual factors that place individuals at risk for perpetration of child sexual abuse.

The risk factors for sexual abuse perpetration include poor social adjustment (loneliness; having children as friends), negative family background (harsh discipline, victim of sexual abuse), psychological distress (low self-esteem, depression), sexual problems, and antisocial orientation (risk taking, substance abuse, interpersonal aggression).



POLICY IMPLICATIONS

1. Organizations' duty to care requires the use of screening procedures. Organizations are not obliged to accept everyone who wants to volunteer.
2. Organizations wishing thorough screening procedures should not only check criminal histories, but examine the match between the applicants' psychological characteristics and the risks inherent in the position.
3. Further research is needed to establish screening procedures for sexual abuse potential that have been validated by empirical research.

SOURCE

Price, S.A., Hanson, R.K., & Tagliani, L. (2013). Screening procedures in the United Kingdom for positions of trust with children. *Journal of Sexual Aggression*, 19(1), 17-31.

See also: The 2012 Screening Handbook at <http://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/res/cor/rep/scrnnng-hndbk-eng.aspx>

For further information:

R. Karl Hanson, Ph.D.
Corrections Research, Public Safety Canada
340 Laurier Avenue West
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0P8
Tel 613-991-2840
Fax 613-990-8295
Email Karl.Hanson@ps-sp.gc.ca
