The face of abuse

Current high-profile cases involving child sexual abuse have put the issue in the spotlight. However, the true number of cases remains unknown.

Recent Acadiana Cases

Bernard Gaffey
Convicted of molesting at least 12 children between ages 3 and 12. He was caught on tape with a victim.

Woodrow Ruiz
Allegedly molested family members for 40 years in New Iberia. Five charges are pending. Four more are beyond the statute of limitations.

Albert Jones
Charged with beating and raping a 5-year-old girl who lived with him in Opelousas.

The Louisiana League for Child Abuse is sponsoring a blue ribbon campaign this month to promote awareness of abuse.

National Statistics

- Girls are sexually abused three times more often than boys. Those most vulnerable are between the ages of 7 and 13.
- At least 20 percent of American women and as many as 16 percent of American men have experienced some form of childhood sexual abuse.
- Nationally, sexual abuse reports constitute about 11 percent of all substantiated child abuse cases.
- Overwhelmingly, an abuser will be male (80-95 percent), and will know his victim (70-90 percent). As many as one half of these who molest girls are related to their victims: only about one tenth of those who molest boys are related. Currently, a dramatic increase is being seen in the number of adolescent molesters.

SOURCE: National Center to Prevent Child Abuse

Thomas Kneip / The Advertiser

Cindy Urrea
Staff Writer

LAFAYETTE — It all started with one crying child, an ugly accusation and an adult who believed it.

Rapidly, the story expanded to include several children—most now grown up—and a Coteau Holmes grandfather who sexually preyed on the children of his family for nearly 40 years.

A few weeks earlier, a New Iberia man was charged with aggravated rape for repeatedly attacking a 12-year-old relative six years ago. A month before that, an Opelousas man was jailed for raping the 5-year-old girl he’d been asked to babysit.

New Iberia will pay more than $400,000 for its police department’s failure to act against convicted child molester and pornographer Bernard Gaffey, who preyed on at least a dozen children between the ages of 3 and 12. Gaffey was arrested only after being caught in the act of taping himself molesting a child — by the child’s parent.

And the entire Acadiana region continues to be rocked by the scandals surrounding convicted pedophile Gilbert Gauteaux, a former priest who molested and raped dozens of local children until being caught in 1983.

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Sid Hebert
Iberia Parish sheriff

From an official standpoint, these figures do not include the number of child sexual abuse cases that are handled by police and sheriff’s officials and classified in their statistics as sexual assault or battery. Cases of standard child abuse in which sexual abuse is believed to be a factor are also not included.

More importantly, official statistics do not include the hundreds of cases that child sexual abuse experts believe occur every year but are never officially reported.

National studies indicate one of every three girls and one of every four boys will be sexually abused before reaching 18. Local experts see no reason to discount that estimate in this area.

“From my experience, for every one case that is reported to us, there are at least 10 more we never hear about.” Iberia Parish Sheriff Sid Hebert said. “There is so much fear and shame involved. It is an impossible topic for anyone to talk about, much less admit may be happening. Particularly when it involves a family member.”

Hebert said his decision to publicize the recent case of Woodrow Ruiz, a grand...
father who allegedly molested several members of his own family, was an attempt to educate the public.

“This was a man who had been molesting the children in his family for close to 40 years or more,” Hebert said. “People need to understand this happens. Sure enough, within two days of the story hitting the newspaper, I got calls from two other families who have been grappling with the same problem and didn’t know how to handle it. People need to understand that not only is this wrong, but there is help available.”

While most parents fear and teach the children to fear — the stranger who may hurt them, understanding child sexual abuse means acknowledging the worst threat to a child may come from within the home. Up to 90 percent of all pedophiles prey on children they know, cultivating their victims from their own families and neighborhoods.

“The thing to understand about pedophiles is they are predators,” said Maureen Brennan, a local psychologist who specializes in treating pedophiles, their victims and families. “They are experts at recognizing a potential victim. They find a vulnerable child, usually someone close to them, whom they can develop a relationship with that isolates them from everyone else.”

Using toys, treats, money or allowing forbidden behaviors such as smoking or swearing, pedophiles often bribe a child into a secret friendship and then warn the child of how angry the parents will be if they find out. Once the child is part of the “conspiracy” to keep the relationship secret, the pedophile is then able to abuse the child with little fear of being discovered.

The results of such a conspiracy can be particularly devastating when a pedophile preys on a family member. The child comes to believe that telling anyone will destroy the family. When the abuse is discovered, other family members blame themselves for not seeing what was happening. When the perpetrator is sent to prison and the family breaks apart, the child blames himself.

That is why Brennan and Benoit insist on treating not only the victim, but also the non-abusing parent. The objective, they say, is to halt a potential cycle of abuse that can continue for generations.

“There are certain dynamics that make this type of thing a possibility in some families and everyone involved needs to recognize what happened so it doesn’t happen again,” Brennan said.
The tendency to keep everything quiet within a family is what makes cases like the Ruiz situation not an isolated incident. It is not unusual when treating a victim of child sexual abuse to discover through family therapy that several other family members may have been abused as well. Often a child is told to treat a child, only to have a tearful mother, grandmother, uncle or sister admit the same thing happened to them.

What many find so hard to understand is how a victim of child-hood molestation often becomes part of the conspiracy of silence surrounding child sexual abuse. "When children are molested, they are gradually taught to ignore their own gut instinct," Brennan said. "A perpetrator shapes a child to accept greater and greater physical invasion and convinces the child they are crazy to think such a thing is wrong. That child learns not to trust himself and... gradually stops seeing it as a problem before he becomes simple denial. That's how a mother who was molested as a child will often not have a problem with leaving her own children alone with the person who hurt her."

And though there are no official statistics comparing rates of child sexual abuse between different areas of the country, Brennan believes there are several factors that may make pedophilia more of a problem here than elsewhere.

"You have a very strong paternalistic tradition here with a lot of families in social isolation," she said. "There tends to be the behavior that we can handle our own problems, or we talked to Pops and he said he wasn't going to do it anymore. Families cannot handle this on their own."

While there may seem to be more public attention paid to pedophiles and child sexual abusers, local authorities do not believe that means it is happening more often.

"I think people and believe that we're hearing more about it because more cases are being reported, not that more are happening," Hebert said.

To raise awareness of child abuse and stress the importance of a community response, the Louisiana Council on Child Abuse is sponsoring a blue ribbon campaign during April. Ribbons are available through local schools, businesses and hospitals and at the local LCCA office.

Parents or caregivers who need help or information are encouraged to call the LCCA's Helpline at 1-800-348-KIDS or the local office at 235-2262. The Office of Community Services sponsors a 24-hour hotline to report suspected child abuse.

Parents or caregivers who need help with resources and support groups are available through The Family Tree at 237-2164.