

APSAC Research to Practice Brief

Study Title: Sexual Abuse and Assault in a Large National Sample of Children and Adolescents

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Introduction:

This descriptive study seeks to investigate and characterize the diversity of the problem of child and adolescent sexual abuse and assault (CSAA), based on data from the national Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence.

Research Questions:

The authors intend to characterize how sexual abuse and assault differ for male and female victims. Sexual abuse has traditionally been taken to mean the abuse of a minor by an adult, but the authors emphasize the need to distinguish cases in which the perpetrator is also a juvenile, and particularly a peer, which they term assault. CSAA is thus defined as encompassing forced and unwanted sexual acts with anyone, including inappropriate sexual acts with adults. The authors examine the relationship and identity of the perpetrator, age at onset, the location in which the abuse took place, whether the abuse included penetration, the level of fear during the offense, and whether it was followed by missing school, injuries, and/or medical treatment.

Study Sample and Method:

The sample for this study is taken from The National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence, a U.S. nationally representative sample of 13,052 children and adolescents, ages 0-17 years. The Survey was collected in 2008, 2011, and 2014 via telephone interviews with youths aged 10-17 and caregivers of children aged 0-9. Of the total sample, 506 individuals were found to have been exposed to sexual abuse or assault.

The data were taken from three separate cross-sectional representative samples of U.S. children. Information was collected using the Juvenile Victimization Questionnaire based on the age at earliest abuse.

Findings:

The authors found that most offenses are at the hands of other juveniles (76.7% for males and 70.1% for females), primarily acquaintances, and occurring more frequently for adolescents aged 14-17. Whereas girls are mostly abused by males (88.4%), boys are abused by both males (45.6%) and females (54.4%). Females are more likely to be abused by boyfriends, juvenile male acquaintances, and male adult acquaintances, while males are more likely to be abused by their girlfriends or female juvenile acquaintances. In 15% of cases, penetration (vaginal intercourse, oral sex, or anal intercourse) is part of the abuse. Victims reported being afraid in 37.5% of the episodes, but not at all afraid in 19.8% of the episodes. Lower levels of fear were more often reported in peer victimization, with female perpetrators, and when penetration did not occur, than when the abuse included a penetration attempt and involved an adult or a male perpetrator. Also, female survivors felt significantly more fear than male survivors during the abuse. The sexually abused and assaulted children were more likely to be female, Black (non-Hispanic), of low SES, and residing in a large city.

Recommendations:

The study findings indicate that children and youth are exposed to sexual abuse and assault in varied ways, which require moving beyond conventional stereotypes of the problem.

First, researchers, practitioners, and policy makers need to understand that more than two thirds of the perpetrators of these types of offenses are themselves juveniles. The authors suggest that schools might be ideal locations for initiating prevention efforts of peer-on-peer sexual victimization. Schools could employ sex-education programs and include information about peer-on-peer sexual offenses and stress the importance of disclosure. Prevention programs could also educate youth on the characteristics and warning signs of dating violence and describe positive and normal relationship behaviors.

Second, the victimization of boys and girls differ: 45.6% of boys reported being abused by a male and 11.6% of girls reported being abused by a female. Additionally, it is important to recognize that boys can be victimized by females (54.4%), which may run counter to preconceptions. Girls were two times more likely to have been abused by a romantic partner than boys. Boys' victimization is highest in early childhood, while girls are victimized more in adolescence. Disclosure by boys can be delayed – perhaps due to masculinity ideals of strength and control, and the stigma of homosexuality – which indicates the need for a suited therapeutic approach and recovery journey.

Third, in only slightly more than a third of the cases were high levels of fear reported, although female survivors felt significantly more fear than male survivors during the abuse. The low levels of fear reported underline that abuse often does not occur through physical force, but rather by the use of pressure, surprise, and manipulation. This can contribute to the victims feeling guilt and self-blame, and not reporting encounters that they may not see as meeting an imagined stereotype. The authors therefore suggest that treatment should not automatically be based on the idea that episodes with less fear, such as with peer perpetrators or non-penetrative abuse, are less harmful than episodes with high fear.

Fourth, episodes of victimization are underreported, with 31.0% reported to parents, 33.7% to other adults, and only 19.1% reported to the police. This low level of disclosure may be because victims fail to recognize their encounters as sexual abuse. Underreporting suggests that child protection and police involvement need to be made more child friendly, and that education and anticipatory guidance from educators and health professionals needs to be provided not only to children, but also to parents, teachers, and police, so as to encourage children to feel confident that they will receive a supportive response if they disclose.

Bottom Line:

Based on the findings that the incidence of sexual abuse in children and adolescents is much greater than reported and the majority of offenses are at the hands of other juveniles, the authors suggest that prevention, primarily in schools, and facilitating reporting could help reduce sexual abuse and assault. The authors also recommend further examination of the data to understand the impact of the specific characteristics of abuse on children's mental health and self-concept, so as to guide treatment.

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About the Research to Practice Author:

After being a foster parent for over a decade, Carl Hanson switched from designing management information systems to working to improve life outcomes for children through the rigorous evaluation of interventions. He earned a Master of Science in Public Administration degree from Carnegie Mellon University in 1988 and a Master of Public Policy degree, with a specialization in evaluation, from the University of Maryland, Baltimore County in 2012. After earning his second degree he worked with Child Trends in Bethesda, Maryland, before moving to Nicaragua in 2019.