

CHILDHOOD SEXUAL ABUSE FACT SHEET

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PART 1: HOW MANY CHILDREN ARE THE VICTIMS OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE?

There are many estimates of the number of children who are the victims of sexual abuse.

- One U.S. governmental source counts 78,188 child victims of sexual abuse in 2003. That's a rate of 1.2 per 1,000 American children.
- The 2001 National Crime Victimization Survey, which only covers youth 12-17, estimates that 1.9 per 1,000 children are raped or sexually assaulted.
- National surveys of adults find that 9-28% of women say they experienced some type of sexual abuse or assault in childhood.

All these estimates and others that are available have limitations and should be used with care.

Problems of Estimating the Victimization of Child Sexual Abuse

There are three issues that make it challenging to estimate how many children are victims of sexual abuse.

1. One problem concerns *how abuse is defined*. Generally sexual abuse is thought to involve a young child who is victimized by an adult acquaintance or family member. However, there are many other forms of sexual abuse, such as a 12 year-old being sexually assaulted by a 15 year-old. Some estimates try to count all forms of abuse; others don't.
2. Cases reported by official agencies have generally been investigated by professionals so we know they meet a particular standard. On the other hand, we also know that *many cases never get reported to officials* so these sources of data usually underestimate the number of victims.
3. Numbers are reported for different time periods. Some numbers are based on how many children were *abused in a single year*. Other numbers are based on a lifetime or a full childhood, such as what percentage of all children were *ever* abused. A problem with adults reporting about their childhood is that it reflects the rate of abuse at sometime in the past, but not necessarily the current rate.

What Does the Research Tell Us?

Three types of data sources are used to estimate prevalence of child sexual abuse: (a) one-year prevalence rates using information from officials (i.e., child welfare agencies), (b) one-year prevalence rates using information from children themselves, and (c) lifetime or full-childhood prevalence rates using information from children or adults.

“Official” Data Sources. Many of the most trusted estimates of child sexual abuse come from “official” sources—this usually includes the child welfare and legal systems. The estimate of 78,188 children sexually abused in 2003 is based on a national aggregation of cases that were investigated and substantiated by state child protection agencies. That number equals 1.2 children per 1,000 U.S. children[1]. A very thorough 1993 study that tried to count cases known to other professionals in addition to child protection authorities found that 217,700 children were sexually abused in that year[2]. These estimates encompass abuse by family members and caretakers, but exclude a lot of abuse and assault committed by acquaintances and strangers.

It is also possible to make a crude calculation about the number of child sexual abuse and assault victims known to police. Based on cases that are known to law enforcement agencies in 18 States, approximately 225,000 sex crimes against children were reported to the police nationwide in 2001[3].

One-year incidence rates from survey data. There are widely varying estimates of one-year incidence rates of victimization. The National Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway and Thrownaway Children (NISMAART-2)[4], with a specific Congressional mandate to make a count of sexual offenses against children, estimated that 320,400 children had experienced a sexual assault or other sexual offense in 1999. This is an annual rate of 4.6 per 1,000 children. This rate is higher than another government study, the National Crime Victimization Survey, which

only covers youth 12-17, but estimates the rate as 1.9 per 1,000[5]. On the other hand, a national telephone survey of a broad range of victimizations of children aged 2-17 estimated a sexual assault rate nearly 7 times that of the NISMART-2 (32 per 1000 or over 2 million children for 2002).

For the time being, the NISMART estimate may be the most methodologically sound. It has a larger sample and more detailed questions than other studies. But the NISMART estimate may also be an undercount.

Lifetime estimates. The studies about sexual abuse that have received the most attention are the ones that have estimated “lifetime” prevalence rates. In these studies, adolescents or adults are asked whether or not they were *ever* the victim of childhood sexual abuse or assault. The results of these studies vary considerably.

Researchers using national samples of adolescents or women have found low-end estimates of lifetime sexual abuse that range from 3% to 9%[6-8]. Higher estimates of victimization have included 24% to 32% of adult women who reported sexual abuse during their childhood[9-11].

Finally, a meta-analysis of 22 American-based studies, those done with national samples as well as local or regional representative samples, suggested that 30-40% of girls and 13% of boys experience sexual abuse during childhood[12]. An international meta-analysis of 169 studies found that lifetime prevalence rates of sexual abuse for females is 25% and for males is 8%. This same study found that rates for North America range from 15-22%[13].

Conclusions

- ★ **The U.S. Department of Health & Human Services reports that 88,656 children, or 1.2 per 1,000 children, were sexually abused in 2002.**

Strength

- This estimate is based on cases investigated and evaluated by professional investigators.

Limitations of this estimate:

- This count only represents cases known to and confirmed by child protection authorities.
- This count excludes most cases in which the perpetrator is not a family member or caretaker.
- This count excludes cases not reported to authorities.

- ★ **A national survey of youth and caretakers suggested that about 4.6 children per 1,000, or 320,400 children were sexually abused or assaulted in a recent year.**

Strength

- These are estimates from recent years and include many cases unknown to authorities.

Limitations of this estimate:

- This estimate only includes cases that youth or families were willing to disclose to interviewers.
- No independent verification or investigation was made to confirm that these reports were accurate or met some clear criterion for sexual assault or abuse.
- These estimates could vary considerably depending on what different kinds of sex offenses are being counted.

- ★ **National surveys of adults suggest that between 9-32% of women and 5-10% of men report that they were victims of sexual abuse and/or assault during their childhood.**

Strength

- These are estimates directly from victims at a later vantage point, when shame or fears about the consequences of disclosure may be less inhibiting.

Limitations of this estimate:

- This estimate only includes cases youth or families were willing to disclose to interviewers.
- No independent verification or investigation was made to confirm that these reports are accurate or met some clear criterion for sexual assault or abuse.
- These estimates could vary considerably depending on what different kinds of sex offenses are being counted.
- The numbers from these studies apply to persons who grew up in previous generations, and may not apply to the current generation of children. Trend information suggests that sexual abuse and sexual assault have declined by a considerable amount in recent years, so these estimates may be obsolete. [14, 15]

PART 2: WHO ARE THE VICTIMS OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE?

While it is impossible to create a profile of children who will be sexually abused, it is possible to describe characteristics that are more common among victims.

Demographic Characteristics

Gender. It is well known that many more girls than boys are the victims of sexual abuse. This statistic is confirmed regardless of the information that is used. Across different types of research—all reliable studies conclude that girls experience more sexual abuse than do boys. Studies have found that the percent of victims who are female range from 78% to 89% [16].

Age. There is some discrepancy in the available data about whether teenagers are at higher risk or whether the risk is more uniformly distributed. Some data from both agency cases [1, 3] and adult retrospective reports [12] show a relatively uniform risk for children after age 3. Other studies find that older children are more likely to be abused[17]; one study found that over half of the children who were sexually victimized were between 15-17 years old[4]. One national study that uses information from law enforcement agencies found that 14% of sexual assault victims are ages 0-5, 20% are ages 6-11 and 33% are ages 12-17[16]. In the absence of complete agreement on this issue, it is probably best to say that the risk continues across the spectrum of childhood, with teens at possibly higher risk.

Race. The findings about race are also inconclusive. Several national studies have found that black and white children experienced near-equal levels of sexual abuse [2, 4]. Other studies, however, have found that both blacks and Latinos have an increased risk for sexual victimization[6, 18].

Family Characteristics

Some studies have found more sexual assault and sexual abuse among children from lower income backgrounds [3,4]. Among cases coming to the attention of authorities, however, sexual abuse is less related to low income than other forms of child maltreatment. Studies have also found that sexual abuse to be associated with other family problems, for example, parental alcoholism, parental rejection, and parental marital conflict[11].

Other Types of Victimization

Children who experience other forms of victimization are more likely to be the target of sexual victimization [4,7].

Conclusion

Although there are some discrepancies about the conclusions of victim characteristics, some general statements can be made.

- ★ **Females are more at-risk than males.**
- ★ **Children from lower-income families are more at-risk.**
- ★ **Children who are victims of other forms of crime, violence and abuse are more at-risk.**
- ★ **There are discrepancies about the risk factor of age. Some studies find no difference among age groups; others find that older children are more at-risk. There are no studies that suggest that very young children are most at risk.**
- ★ **There are discrepancies about the risk factor of race. Some studies find no difference among race. Others find that minorities are more at risk than whites.**
- *Limitations:*
 - Conclusions about this will vary by data source. Estimates from child welfare sources will likely have information about younger children. Estimates from law enforcement agencies will be more comprehensive, but will only include those cases reported to the police.

PART 3: WHO ARE THE PERPETRATORS OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE?

Just as it is difficult to create a simple profile of who will become victims of sexual abuse, it is equally difficult to create a profile of who will perpetrate sexual crimes against minors.

Gender

The perpetrators of sexual abuse are overwhelmingly male. Studies using the law enforcement as well as victim self-report data found that more than 90% of the perpetrators of sexual offenses against minors were male[15, 16].

Age

Juveniles themselves commit a considerable proportion of sexual offenses against children, with estimates indicating about a third (ranging from 29-41%) are juveniles [5, 7, 17]. Among adult perpetrators, young adults, under the age of 30, are overrepresented.

Relationship to Victim

Acquaintances and family members commit most sexual abuse and assault. Several studies agree that approximately half of offenders are acquaintances [9,12,17]. The studies differ more about the percentage who are family members, the range going from 14% to 47% [7, 10, 15]. A good approximation is that family members constitute a quarter to a third of offenders. Strangers make up the smallest group of perpetrators ranging from 7% to 25% [4, 6, 16-18].

Conclusion

- ★ **Men perpetrate most sexual abuse and sex crimes.**
- ★ **Sex offenders against children tend to be juveniles or young adults under the age of 30.**
- ★ **Most sexual abuse and sex crimes are committed by people who know the victims.**
Acquaintances are most often the perpetrators, followed by family members and then strangers.

- *Limitation:*
 - Conclusions about offenders will vary based on the data source. Cases from child protection agencies are more likely to contain familial perpetrators. Law enforcement information is more likely to be more inclusive, but will only contain information on cases that were reported to the police.

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