



Sexual abuse of children and youth in residential care: An international review



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ABSTRACT

This paper reports the results of an international review of academic literature on sexual abuse in residential child and youth care, 1945–2011. The review focusses on questions related to the nature and scope of sexual abuse, on personal and institutional factors providing either protection or risk, and on how residential institutions have responded to signals of sexual abuse. Empirical research did not appear until the 1990s, and is still scarce. A variety of research designs and of definitions of sexual abuse obscure the prevalence of sexual abuse in residential care. Sexual abuse by peers is often overlooked, while this accounts for almost half of the known cases. Histories of sexual abuse prior to placement, group dynamics, institutional culture and insufficient knowledge of professionals on how to address issues of sexuality, appear to be crucial factors in peer abuse. Gender also plays a significant role: most, though not all, victims are females, most, though not all, perpetrators are males. Instead of understanding sexual abuse as a phenomenon related to individual characteristics, it is important to address both institutional factors (culture) and group dynamics in order to provide children in residential homes with the care they need.

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1. Introduction

This review discusses the research literature on sexual abuse in residential child and youth care. Empirical research on this issue did

not get off the ground until the 1990s, after the sexual abuse ‘scandals’ that came to light following enquiries by national governments. There were several cases in particular that attracted huge publicity: in the UK (including the 2000 Lost in Care: Waterhouse Report on sexual abuse in residential institutions in Wales in 1970 and 1980), in Ireland (the 2009 Murphy Report), but also in the US, Canada and Australia. These countries showed particular concern for children of Aboriginal or First People origin, who were often placed in institutions by governments to be taught ‘white standards’ (Hawkins and Briggs, 1997).

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The reports on sexual abuse have played a major role in alerting people to the problem and in raising awareness. They showed that the sexual abuse of children and young people in care was an entrenched phenomenon in some children's homes. However, the scope and methods of these reports vary widely which makes it difficult to draw general conclusions about the nature and extent of sexual abuse in residential care, or to analyse it more closely.

One drawback of the succession of cases and scandals is that it has coloured our perceptions of sexual abuse in residential child and youth care. The focus on sexual abuse by adult men, for example, has detracted attention from other forms of sexual abuse, such as abuse involving peers. What is more, the reports by government commissions have a strong judicial focus, with little concern for analysis and explanations. The recommendations are primarily aimed at improving the care and support of victims, better training of residential childcare workers, measures to counteract perpetrators, more rigorous codes of conduct, improved security within the buildings, greater cooperation between institutions, etc. From this view, sexual abuse is an expression of individual pathological behaviour. However, as some authors have pointed out (Stanley, Manthorpe, & Penhale, 1999), an individual-centred approach presents an incomplete picture of the problem because institutional factors also play a role in sexual abuse, which occurs in all institutionalised environments where children and adolescents reside (Deutsches Jugendinstitut, 2010).

In order to get a better view on the complexity of factors influencing sexual abuse, we have conducted a review of all relevant, peer-reviewed research literature 1945–2011. This paper starts with methodological considerations and a description of the search method and strategy, followed by a review of research articles on sexual abuse in residential child and youth care. In the conclusion we will reflect on the prevalence and contexts of sexual abuse.

2. Method

The first academic studies addressing sexual abuse in residential care were conducted in the 1990s, often in response to the first scandals & commission reports. Several studies have been conducted since then, usually of a small-scale & exploratory nature. For these reasons, the present review is necessarily a scoping review study (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). Scoping studies address research that uses a range of qualitative and quantitative study designs, whereas systematic reviews usually involve studies addressing a specific research question and specific topics of research (Stalker & McArthur, 2012).

To identify relevant studies we formulated five research questions: (1) What is known about the nature and scale of sexual abuse of children in residential care settings? (2) What is known about institutional risk factors? (3) What is known about sexual abuse by peers? (4) Are there any victim and perpetrator profiles? (5) How did and do the residential institutions respond to signals of sexual abuse?

The following search term clusters were used to search for international research literature on sexual abuse in residential child and youth care: 'sexual abuse' + 'peers', 'sexual abuse' + 'institutional care' and 'sexual abuse' + 'residential care'. The last two clusters were then specified by combining them with the search terms 'child' and 'youth'. These search terms ignore the research literature on child abuse, except where these studies include 'sexual abuse' as a specific aspect of child physical abuse.

Searches were conducted in the following major databases for research publications: EBSCO Host Complete, Web of Science, ERIC, IBSS, Dissertation Abstracts International and Picarta. A search was also made in Daphne projects, the European database for commission reports (http://ec.europa.eu/justice_home/daphnetoolkit). All databases were searched for publications from 1945 to 2011.

A separate search was carried out for each of the terms, after which the results were compared to remove any duplications. The publication abstracts were then checked for relevance. Articles that did not address

the topic of this review were left out, e.g. publications on sexual abuse in a non-residential setting or on sexual abuse of adults etc. Internal references within the articles (the snowball method) yielded various other relevant publications that had not been identified through the first search method. This search produced a total of 66 relevant publications, for the most part from the 1990s and early 2000s, directly following on from the first scandals that attracted public attention.

3. Research literature: findings

The findings of the search will be presented according to the five research questions mentioned above.

3.1. Nature and scale of the problem

In his review of academic and professional journals 1980–1992, Bloom failed to find a single publication on sexual abuse in residential care despite the fact that in 1978 the US National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect (NCCAN) had expressed their concern about the abuse of children (Bloom, 1992). Twenty years from then, our review in 2012 shows that the number of academic publications on sexual abuse, relating to the scale of the problem in residential child and youth care, is still modest. Nevertheless some patterns, relating to the nature and scale of sexual abuse in residential care, emerge.

Westcott and Clement (1992) surveyed children who had experienced sexual abuse in the child and youth care institutions with which the NSPCC had contact. Eighty-four cases of sexual abuse were identified over a 12-month period. Barter (1997) interviewed all NSPCC care professionals who in the period 1994–1995 had conducted an internal investigation into a case of physical abuse in a residential setting. Seventy-six accusations of physical abuse emerged during this two-year period, made by 67 children and adolescents (34 boys and 33 girls) against 50 carers (40 staff and 10 peers). Twenty-four of these complaints involved sexual abuse. Boys more frequently reported physical violence, girls more commonly reported sexual abuse. Although much more women than men are working in child and youth care, in nearly all cases the perpetrators were men.

Hobbs, Hobbs, and Wynne (1999) conducted research among doctors in Leeds. Over a six-year period, 158 incidents of abuse in residential and foster care were reported, involving 133 children. Although abuse was more often reported in foster care, in residential care physical abuse was reported twelve times, sexual abuse was reported six times, and both forms of abuse were reported six times. However, the study's conclusions have been strongly criticised on the grounds of methodological shortcomings (Ainsworth & Hansen, 2000).

Apart from research among professionals, several studies were conducted among children. MacLeod (1999), for example, catalogued the number of cases of sexual abuse by staff working in residential care that children themselves reported via Childline (the UK national child helpline, also part of the NSPCC). Over the years 1992–1997, sexual abuse was mentioned in 1.6–2.8% of the calls. Low numbers of sexual abuse, as reported by children and adolescents also appeared in other studies (Cawson, Berridge, Barter, & Renold, 2002; Gibbs & Sinclair, 2000; Lindsay, 1999). Girls reported up to three times more incidents than boys, as well as more serious forms of sexual abuse.

Case-file analysis was the method used in Gallagher's (2000) study, into sexual abuse of a child under the age of eighteen by an adult working with that child in a residential institution (Gallagher, 2000). In the period 1988–2003, 20,000 case files from child protection agencies and the police were examined, in eight regions, representative of England and Wales. The case files showed proven sexual abuse in 65 cases, which comes to 1.6 per region per year. These figures are not high, but are based solely on proven cases.

Research into sexual abuse began about ten years earlier in the United States. These studies often looked at a broad spectrum of abuse or neglect, rather than sexual abuse specifically (Blatt, 1992; Blatt &

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