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Child Abuse & Neglect



Child sexual abuse in China: A meta-analysis of 27 studies[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Objective: To examine whether Chinese studies of child sexual abuse (CSA) in the general population show lower prevalence rates than other international studies, and whether certain features of these studies may help to account for variation in estimates.

Methods: A meta-analysis and meta-regression were conducted on 27 studies found in the English and Chinese language peer reviewed journals that involved general populations of students or residents, estimated CSA prior to age 18, and specified rates for males or females individually.

Results: Estimates for Chinese females were lower than the international composites. For total CSA for females, the Chinese pooled estimate was 15.3% (95% CI = 12.6–18.0) based on the meta-analysis of 24 studies, lower than the international estimate (Stoltenborgh, van IJzendoorn, Euser, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2011) but not significantly. For contact CSA for females, the pooled estimate was 9.5% (95% CI = 7.5–11.5), based on 16 studies, significantly lower than the international prevalence. For penetrative CSA for females, the pooled estimate was 1% (95% CI = 0.7–1.3), based on 15 studies, significantly lower than the international estimate of 15.1%. Chinese men reported significantly less penetrative CSA but significantly more total CSA than international estimates; while contact CSA reported by Chinese and international males appeared to be roughly equivalent. Chinese CSA prevalence estimates were lower in studies from urban areas and non-mainland areas (Hong Kong and Taiwan), and in surveys with larger and probability samples, multiple sites, face-to-face interview method and when using less widely used instruments.

Conclusions: The findings to date justify further research into possible cultural and sociological reasons for lower risk of contact and penetrative sexual abuse of girls and less penetrative abuse of boys in China. Future research should examine sociological explanations, including patterns of supervision, sexual socialization and attitudes related to male sexual prowess.

Practice implications: The findings suggest that future general population studies in China should use well validated instruments, avoid face-to-face interview formats and be careful to maintain methodological standards when sampling large populations over multiple sites.

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Introduction

International meta-analytical studies of childhood sexual abuse (CSA) appear to show comparatively low rates in some Asian countries (Pereda, Guilera, Forns, & Gomez-Benito, 2009b; Stoltenborgh, van Ijzendoorn, Euser, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2011). In a review of CSA studies world-wide, prevalence of any form of CSA among Asian women (based on 11 studies) was 11.3%, compared to 18.0% for women across all countries. For men, the estimates were 4.1% (8 studies) for Asia vs. 7.6% for all countries. Asian estimates were the lowest among six continents (i.e., Africa, Australia, Europe, South America, and North America) (Stoltenborgh et al., 2011). China contributes more studies than most other Asian countries to these summaries, and therefore the all-Asia combined estimates could be heavily influenced by the sampling, designs and methods used in Chinese surveys (Fry, 2012).

On close analysis it is clear that the range of CSA estimates from Chinese studies varies tremendously from 2% (Yen et al., 2008) to 35.2% (Zhao & Li, 2006). Moreover, the full Chinese literature on sexual abuse including studies published only in Chinese has not been accessed in most prior reviews; rather, published meta-analyses tend to include Chinese studies that were published only in English. Three narrative reviews by Chen (2006), Dunne, Chen, and Choo (2008) and Fry (2012) include some, but not all, of the Chinese survey research.

Existing literature speculates that several factors may influence estimates of CSA prevalence in China. It is possible that the actual risk of sexual abuse is low among children in Chinese societies for sociological and historical reasons, like Confucian culture, collectivist values or the one child policy. However, methodological factors might explain some of the difference. Stoltenborgh et al. (2011) suggested that cultural values in Asia could prevent CSA victims disclosing their abuse experiences, especially when the abusers were victims' family members, because reporting of CSA experience would bring shame on the entire family and social group. Moreover, higher estimates of CSA are usually found when studies ask behaviorally specific and multiple child maltreatment questions (Pereda, Guilera, Forns, & Gomez-Benito, 2009a; Stoltenborgh et al., 2011), and it needs to be established how frequently such approaches are used in China. Geographical origin of the samples (with concomitant cultural and socio-economic differences) may also influence the risk of CSA (Stoltenborgh et al., 2011). For example, children in urban areas might be at higher risk than those in rural China due to the effects of migration and social dislocation (Cao et al., 2006) and those in the Hong Kong might have higher risk than those in the mainland due to the influence of western values (Chan, 2012).

To date, there has been no quantitative meta-analysis of the variation in estimates from Chinese CSA surveys. To confirm and better understand the situation of CSA in China this project endeavored to undertake a comprehensive meta-analysis of Chinese studies of CSA that were published in both Chinese and English, finding out whether inhibited disclosure, methodological, geographical or sample characteristics might help explain the levels and variation of CSA prevalence rates in China.

Methods

Study selection

Three search strategies were used for this study: (1) a computer search of databases; (2) checking references that were listed in systematic reviews of CSA in China; (3) contacting authors of CSA surveys or review papers. The criteria we used to select studies were: (1) the study was published in a scholarly peer-reviewed journal; (2) the subjects of the study must have been recruited from a general population of residents or students (i.e., not exclusively clinical, justice system or other special samples); (3) it involved measurement of sexual abuse experienced before 18 years of age, whether the participants were children or adults; (4) the study was not confined to sexual abuse only within specific relationship dyads (e.g., parent-child, teacher-student, etc.); (5) the study used quantitative methods to estimate the prevalence of CSA in a female-only sample, male-only sample, or sample including both male and female respondents; (6) the study reported either prevalence of CSA for females or males; a report that did not stratify data by gender was excluded.

Step 1. Computer search. Chinese National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database was used to search for the articles that were published in Chinese. We first searched using terms “xing nue dai (sexual abuse)” or “xing qin fan (sexual invasion)” in the sub-database of humanism and social science in the (CNKI) database. Our search yielded hundreds of articles, including journalistic reports and medical case-study and clinical treatment recommendations, because CNKI cannot filter the scholarly peer-reviewed journals out to the extent that EBSCO or ISI Web of Knowledge does. Therefore, we used the criteria to select studies manually. During the search it became clear that Peking University Institute of Child and Adolescent Health had published a series of studies on CSA, so we searched for all related publications on CNKI and selected studies that met the criteria for this meta-analysis.

Step 2. Check reference list of systematic reviews of CSA studies in China. We checked the reference lists of several narrative reviews of CSA studies, such as Fry's (2012) systematic review of CSA studies in East Asia and the Pacific, and searched for quantitative studies conducted in China.

Step 3. Contact authors of CSA studies or CSA study reviews. The list of studies found in step 1 and 2 were sent to some authors in the CSA field who were asked whether they knew of more studies that might meet the study criteria. We also contacted authors of specific studies if we had any question about their research methods or findings. For example, we contacted Chinese scholar Jingqi Chen who has published more than ten related studies as the first or minor author. This

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