



A critical review of available data on sexual abuse of children in Denmark[☆]

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Abstract

Objective: To describe different data sources that may illuminate the incidence and character of child sexual abuse (CSA) in Denmark in the late 1990s.

Method: Data concerning alleged sexual abuse of children below 15 years of age in the 1990s were retrieved from the Danish National Patient Register and the Danish National Criminal Register. In addition, all police files concerning reported CSA in 1 year (1998), were reviewed.

Results: The average annual incidence of CSA was .06 per 1,000 children, based on data in the National Patient Register; however, it was .5 per 1,000 based on data in the Criminal Register. In the Criminal Register, significant annual differences were found in cases of sexual offence against children below 12 years. The police reports comprised very comprehensive information about the victims and the character of CSA. Based on this information the incidence of police reported CSA in 1998 was 1.0 per 1,000 children, and .6 per 1,000 excluding reported cases of indecent exposure. Half of intra-familial CSA resulted in a conviction compared to 40% of extra-familial CSA and 16% of indecent exposure.

Conclusions: In Denmark, criminal statistics contain the most systematic collection of data on CSA. However, data reflect the reporting behavior by parents or other closely related adults, which may be influenced by changes in public awareness of the problem. Consequently, register data should be supplemented by data obtained from self-reported surveys on CSA.

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Introduction

In the 1990s, cases of child sexual abuse (CSA) in Denmark triggered a major reaction in the Danish media, resulting in an increased public attention towards CSA. There was a general acknowledgement of the need for accurate data on the extent of CSA in Denmark. The latest available rate of CSA was obtained from a national survey in 1987 (Leth, Stenvig, & Pedersen, 1988), which comprised a random sample of 2,000 adults aged 18–50 years. It acquired a response rate of 66%, and reported that 14% of women and 8% of men had experienced any sexual abuse before the age of 18. The reported abuse occurred in the period 1955–1987, when the respondents were children.

Internationally, epidemiological data on CSA are gathered from studies with differing designs. The studies are carried out with different data collection methodologies, most of these being based on retrospective approaches. Lack of distinct definitions of childhood and sexual abuse in many studies, as well as a low response rate are described as important obstacles to trend studies and cross-national comparisons (Feldman et al., 1991; Finkelhor, 1994; Leventhal, 2000; Wyatt & Peters, 1986).

Trends in CSA can rarely be deducted from population-based surveys, as the surveys are seldom repeated at regular intervals. Hence, data in national registers may be the best instrument to monitor trends in CSA. However, register data are presumed to measure only a minor part of CSA. Also, the knowledge about whether the relative proportion of for example intra- and extra-familial sexual abuse is similar in register-based studies and in surveys is limited.

In Denmark, the national registers are commonly used in epidemiological studies. They cover the entire population and are based on well-defined classification systems and coding practices. Information about CSA is found in two registers, the Criminal Register and the National Patient Register. All police reported criminal acts appear in the national criminal statistics, as cases of police-reported CSA are registered in the Criminal Register by codes that specify the type of offence. In addition, all contacts to hospital, including in-patient, outpatient and emergency department contacts, are registered in the National Patient Register. Hospital contacts due to verified or suspected CSA are registered by WHO's International Classification of Diseases and Related Disorders that specify different types of child abuse.

The validity and reliability of register data is based on the comprehensiveness of data, and on the application of an accurate and standardized classification, coding and data registration. A number of studies have assessed the data quality of the Danish National Patient Register, recently reviewed by Nickelsen (2001). Previously, neither the quality of criminal statistics nor the comparability of information on CSA in different registers has been assessed.

The purpose of the present study is to describe and compare a number of available Danish data sources on CSA; to estimate the incidence of CSA reported to the authorities or known in the health care system, and finally, to suggest possible ways of gaining more knowledge about the amount and the character of CSA in Denmark based on register data. We acknowledge that register data might only cover a small proportion of all cases of CSA.

Method

We retrieved data from two different registers: the Danish National Patient Register from 1994 to 1998, and the Danish National Criminal Register from 1990 to 1998. All the data were retrieved according to the specific directives for each register concerning access to and linkage of data, and in accordance

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