

Original article

Childhood Abuse as a Risk Factor for Adolescent Pregnancy in El Salvador

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Abstract

Purpose: To determine whether having been abused as a child increases the risk of adolescent pregnancy in El Salvador and whether intimate partner violence during adolescence affects the association.

Methods: Using data from 3753 women between the ages of 15 and 24 from a nationally representative household health survey of Salvadoran women (FESAL 2002/2003), the association between history of childhood abuse (emotional, physical, or sexual abuse, and witnessing abuse of one's mother) and adolescent pregnancy was explored using multiple logistic regression analyses. The effect of intimate partner violence during adolescence on the relationship was explored among a subgroup of 15–19-year-olds.

Results: The risk of adolescent pregnancy was significantly higher among women abused as children. Women who were sexually abused, physically abused, or who experienced any type of abuse had a 48%, 42%, and 31% higher risk, respectively, of adolescent pregnancy than those without a history of abuse, after adjusting for confounding factors. Intimate partner violence during adolescence was also strongly and significantly linked with adolescent pregnancy risk.

Conclusions: This is the first study from a Latin American country to demonstrate a relationship between childhood abuse and adolescent pregnancy. Greater efforts are needed to promote detection of abuse, expand knowledge about sexual and reproductive health, protect vulnerable youth, and to advocate for greater rights and social protections to Salvadoran children and adolescents. © 2008 Society for Adolescent Medicine. All rights reserved.

Keywords:

Adolescent pregnancy; Child abuse; El Salvador; Intimate partner violence

Rates of adolescent pregnancy in El Salvador are alarmingly high, with 40% of women interviewed in the national household health survey (FESAL 2002/2003) reporting that their first birth occurred before they were 20 years old [1]. Childbearing during adolescence is associated with serious consequences for young mothers, their infants, and society in general. Adolescent mothers have a higher risk of pregnancy complications, which can lead to maternal morbidity and mortality, as well as adverse perinatal and infant outcomes [2,3]. They are

also more likely to drop out of school, to have fewer employment opportunities, to have fewer socioeconomic resources, to be single mothers, to have higher fertility rates, and to have fewer options to remove themselves from poverty [4,5].

Understanding the risk factors for adolescent pregnancy is an important step in preventing its occurrence and the associated consequences. Previous research has explored a variety of risk factors for adolescent pregnancy, including the role of childhood abuse on the risk of adolescent pregnancy, and some researchers have found a significant association, although the evidence is inconclusive [6]. With the exception of a recent study, in which researchers found that the odds of having an adolescent pregnancy increased with

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greater exposure to adverse childhood experiences, even after adjusting for ethnicity, education, and age [7], most studies have found that the associations between physical and/or sexual abuse and adolescent pregnancy no longer remained significant after controlling for confounding factors [8], or they did not control for confounding factors [9–11]. Some researchers have studied school-based samples [12], excluding those who dropped out of school and who might have been at higher risk for adolescent pregnancy, whereas other researchers studied pregnant teens without comparing them to a comparison group [13–17]. In addition, most of the research has been conducted in the United States and Western Europe, and little evidence is available from Latin America.

Existing theoretical frameworks provide a basis for understanding the mechanisms through which different forms of child abuse can lead to adolescent pregnancy. For example, some researchers have found that adolescents who were sexually abused had more sexual experiences due to their identity being shaped around early sexualization [8,9,14]. Either they sought affection through sexual relationships, felt unable to refuse unwanted sexual advances, [9,14], or developed a premature interest in sexual behavior [18]. These reactions can lead to a greater number of sexual partners and higher risk of adolescent pregnancy [9,14,19–21]. Similarly, physically and sexually abused girls may wish to escape from an abusive childhood home by creating their own family and intentionally becoming pregnant prematurely [9,14], or they might suffer adverse consequences on their cognitive and emotional development that affect decision making and self-esteem, leading to repeated victimization experiences [1,14,22]. In addition, increased substance use and depression resulting from childhood trauma could adversely affect sexual risk taking [23].

The study described here makes a unique contribution to the understanding of the association between child abuse and adolescent pregnancy by exploring the association among a nationally representative sample of women in El Salvador using the national household health dataset (2002/2003 FESAL). Multivariate regression models are used to control for the effect of confounding factors, making this the first study from Latin America, to our knowledge, to do so. Multiple forms of childhood abuse have been operationalized, including emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and witnessing of abuse. Studies exploring all of these forms of childhood abuse are rare in the existing literature [7]. This study also explores the role of partner abuse during adolescence as an intermediate variable in the pathway between childhood abuse and adolescent pregnancy, which is a factor that has not been adequately explored in relation to childhood abuse and adolescent pregnancy.

Methodology

The analyses presented here are based on the Salvadoran family health survey (FESAL 2002/2003), a national survey that used a multistage, probabilistic, random selection process to interview 10,689 women between 15 and 49 years old in their homes, achieving a 91% response rate [1]. A standard questionnaire was used to ask participants about their sexual and reproductive health, contraceptive use, experiences of family violence, children's health, children's education, and knowledge, attitudes, and practices surrounding HIV/AIDS. The study was conducted by the Salvadoran Demographic Association (ADS) with the participation of a committee of national and international institutions. Although the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) provided technical oversight, the study was exempted from review by CDC's institutional review board because it was categorized as public health surveillance. However, all participants gave informed consent verbally and the dataset contained no personal identifiers.

This study focuses on a subgroup of 3753 Salvadoran women between the ages of 15 and 24 years old for whom information on age of first pregnancy was available. Prior to conducting the analyses, the subgroup was compared to the group not included in the analysis (women 25 to 49 years old) on selected sociodemographic and fertility-related characteristics to show how representative the subgroup was of the entire population of Salvadoran women interviewed.

A woman was considered to have had an adolescent pregnancy if she answered positively that she had been pregnant or found out she was pregnant at the age of 19 or earlier. Several forms of child abuse were studied—sexual, physical, emotional, or witnessing of abuse. The sexual abuse variable includes sexual abuse both with and without penetration before the age of 18 years, before any pregnancy, and by someone other than her spouse, partner, boyfriend, or ex-boyfriend (partner abuse will be discussed shortly). Physical abuse was classified as physical punishment before the age of 18 years old, including having been hit with a belt, stick, or rope; burned or injured in some part of the body; and/or tied up or locked up. Emotional abuse was classified as punishment before the age of 18 years old, including having been locked up, left alone, not allowed to leave or interact with others, threatened, yelled at, humiliated, or ridiculed in front of others. A woman was classified as having witnessed abuse if she had witnessed a woman being abused by a man in the home where she lived before the age of 18 years old. Socioeconomic status and education level were also controlled for in the multivariate analyses based on number of household goods and services, and whether a woman had at least some secondary school education or not.

To further investigate the relationship between childhood abuse and adolescent pregnancy, and a possible mechanism through which the factors could be related, a subanalysis

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