



Children Seeking Refuge: A Review of the Escalating Humanitarian Crisis of Child Sexual Abuse and HIV/AIDS in Latin America

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Early identification and intervention for victims of child sexual abuse (CSA) is essential to halting the spread of HIV in Latino populations because children who are sexually abused are at an increased risk of contracting HIV. The recent influx of unaccompanied children into the United States exposed histories of victimization, vulnerability to CSA, and suggested an epidemic of CSA in Latin America. CSA has been identified as a contributory event to HIV infection. The aim of our research was to identify factors associated with CSA and Latin Americans. A systematic review and a document search were conducted on factors associated with CSA in Latin America. Victimization was associated with lifelong risk factors for HIV. Males were consistently underrepresented in the published CSA literature and machismo attitudes may contribute to abuses of sexual power by males and contribute to males not reporting or under-reporting victimization.

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Child sexual abuse (CSA) is a heinous act and a tragic violation of a child's rights; CSA has been identified as a contributory event to HIV infection. Previous exploration of this topic has suggested inadequate representation of CSA research on a global level, a gross lack of evidence to support prevention strategies, and an increasing awareness that sexual

abuse of children is an endemic threat to the health and safety of children worldwide (Veenema, Thornton, & Corley, 2014). The 2014 U.S. southwest border crisis involving the sudden influx of more than 68,000 unaccompanied children fleeing gang-related and interpersonal violence in Latin America gave a face to many victims of CSA. The occurrence of this horrific yet sentinel event provided an impetus for deeper understanding of the phenomenon of CSA occurring in Latin America.

Children are an extremely vulnerable population. Their small stature, restricted personal rights, limited decision-making abilities, and submissive social expectations make them more prone to multiple types of interpersonal violence. Children are more prone to sexually transmitted infections (STIs) due to immature immune systems and sensitive mucosal membranes. Child victims of sexual abuse subjected to mucosal and hymenal tearing are at risk for increased transmission of bacteria and viruses (including HIV) due to this compromise in the protective structures of their genitals (Siegal, Schubert, Myers, & Shapiro, 1995).

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There are believed to be 2.4 million people living with HIV in Latin America, with an estimated 94,000 new HIV infections in 2013, 1,800 of which were in children younger than 15 years (Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, 2014). This is the second-highest prevalence in the world, reaching over 2.4% of the region's population (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2014a). Best estimates suggest that more than 740,000 young people (15–24 years of age) and 50,000 children (<15 years of age) in Latin America are living with HIV (UNICEF, 2014a). Even though the overall prevalence of HIV infection has been decreasing, rates have been increasing in children. Understanding factors that contribute to this problem in Latin America, as well as in Latino populations living in the United States, is essential in halting the spread of HIV.

More than 14% of pubertal and 3% of prepubertal girls who were victims of sexual abuse in a Cincinnati study contracted STIs as a result of the abuse (Siegal et al., 1995). Nearly 15% of children being treated at an AIDS clinic at Duke University were infected due to sexual abuse (Gutman et al., 1991). Of more than 9,000 cases of HIV reported to the U.S. national surveillance system, 26 transmissions were the direct result of sexual maltreatment of children (Lindegren et al., 1998). Still, sexual abuse as a mode of HIV transmission is a largely underestimated phenomenon because the occurrence of either factor is difficult to ascertain (Hammerschlag, 1998).

The threat of HIV is not limited solely to the sexual acts of CSA but is significantly increased due to the sequelae of the trauma. Children who experience sexual abuse exhibit high-risk sexual traits in adulthood, effectively compounding the risk of contracting the disease. An earlier onset of voluntary sexual activity, more lifetime sexual partners, and increased years of sexual activity are associated with sexual victimization (Fergusson, Horwood, & Lynksey, 1997; Greenberg, 2001; Zierler et al., 1991). Additional risks include frequent changing of partners, increased sex with strangers, and more short-term sexual relationships (Zierler et al., 1991). Sexually victimized children of both genders are four times more likely to later work in prostitution (Steel & Herlitz, 2005).

Decreased lifetime condom use and safe sex practices complicate this already high-risk sexual profile

(Lalor & McElvaney, 2010). Brown, Lourie, Zlotnick, and Cohn (2000) found that among sexually active adolescents with a history of CSA, condom usage, knowledge of HIV, and sexual impulse control were significantly lower as compared to nonvictims. Greenberg (2001) found that male victims of CSA were more likely to display sexually risky behaviors, engage in unprotected sex, participate in anal sex, have more partners, and be more sexually coercive.

The risk factors contributing to HIV transmission in sexually abused children can be seen in HIV rates. Men who were sexually abused as children show a twofold increase in HIV infection rates compared to nonabused males, even when substance abuse is controlled for (Zierler et al., 1991). CSA victims show a significantly higher rate of all STIs, including HIV, compared to nonabused adults, and it is thought that these negative consequences are greater for males than females (Greenberg, 2001). It is also understood that statistics of HIV and victimization status are notoriously under-reported due to social stigma of CSA and a lack of knowledge regarding infection status. Statistical reports, thus, drastically underestimate the true scope of the problem.

The complex issue of the recent influx of parentless children from Latin America, the prevalence of HIV in these countries, and the short- and long-term effects of CSA require further investigation. Science has established a link between sexual abuse during childhood and increased risk factors for HIV but currently does not address children from Latin America specifically or explore causative factors for CSA.

Purpose

The purpose of our integrative review of peer-reviewed data and key documents was to (a) elucidate the means by which children are identified as victims, (b) present prevalence data on victimization in Latin America, (c) identify themes contributing to CSA (and ultimately, HIV) in these countries, and (d) compare these data to current literature. Until now, a review that specifically focuses upon Latin American populations has not been published.

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