

Prevalence of child sexual abuse reported by a cross-sectional sample of New Zealand women^{☆,☆☆}

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Abstract

Objective: The objective is to describe the prevalence of child sexual abuse (CSA) among women in New Zealand, document ethnic specific rates, and outline the frequency of abuse experienced and the most commonly identified perpetrators. Associations between CSA and later adverse consequences were also explored.

Methods: Retrospective report from a random sample of 2,855 women aged 18–64 years old in two regions in New Zealand. Face-to-face interviews with one randomly selected woman from each household were conducted.

Results: The overall prevalence rates for CSA were 23.5% for women from the urban region and 28.2% from the rural region. In both urban and rural regions, Māori women more frequently reported experiences of CSA than women from European and other ethnic groups (urban: 30.5% vs. 17.0% and rural: 35.1% vs. 20.7%). The median age of onset of the abuse was 9 years, and the median estimated age of the abuser was 30 years. Half of those who experienced CSA reported that it occurred once or twice, 27% “a few times,” and 23% “multiple times.” Sole perpetrators were involved in 83% of cases. The majority of cases were perpetrated by a family member, most frequently male. Compared with non-victims, victims of CSA were twice as likely to experience later intimate partner violence and violence by others.

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^{☆☆} This study replicates the WHO Multi-Country Study on Women’s Health and Domestic Violence (WHO/EIP/GPE/99.3).

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Conclusions: This study reports on a large, population-based sample in an ethnically diverse population in New Zealand, providing the first ethnic-specific rates of CSA available. Findings suggest important priorities for prevention and intervention activities.

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Keywords: Child sexual abuse (CSA); Women; Ethnicity; New Zealand

Introduction

Experience of child sexual abuse (CSA) has been linked with a variety of later adverse health and social outcomes, including early onset consensual sexual activity, pregnancy prior to age 18, multiple sexual partners, unprotected intercourse, sexually transmitted disease, and sexual assault after the age of 16 (Fergusson, Horwood, & Lynskey, 1997; Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi, & Lozano, 2002). CSA is also associated with later psychiatric adjustment problems (Fergusson, Horwood, & Woodward, 2000; Silverman, Reinherz, & Giaconia, 1996), and an increased risk of eating disorders, drinking problems, and sexual problems (Mullen, Martin, Anderson, Romans, & Herbison, 1996).

Previous estimates of the prevalence of CSA in New Zealand come from a birth cohort study, in which, as part of interviews conducted at ages 18 and 21 years, young people were asked whether, before the age of 16, anyone had ever attempted to involve them in any of a series of 15 sexual activities when they did not want this to happen. Findings indicated that 18.5% of females reported experiencing any form of sexual abuse before the age of 18 (Fergusson et al., 2000). A cross-sectional study of 2,000 NZ women listed on the electoral roll reported that 32% of women had experienced some form of sexual abuse before the age of 16 (Anderson, Martin, Mullen, Romans, & Herbison, 1993). These studies provide important information, but are limited now by their age (with study populations from the 1980s), and because of the ethnically homogeneous populations (predominantly European New Zealander) they drew from.

Internationally, rates of child sexual abuse in the general population have been reported to vary from 7% to 36%, with a mean lifetime prevalence rate of 20% CSA among women. However, comparisons are limited because of methodological and definitional differences between studies (Finkelhor, 1994). The WHO Multi-Country Study of women's health and domestic violence against women (WHO Multi-Country Study) collected comparable data from women in Bangladesh, Brazil, Ethiopia, Japan, Namibia, Peru, Samoa, Serbia and Montenegro, Thailand and the United Republic of Tanzania. The WHO Study reported that the prevalence of sexual abuse of girls before the age of 15 years ranged from 1% in Bangladesh province to 21% in Namibia city (Garcia-Moreno, Jansen, Ellsberg, Heise, & Watts, 2005).

In this study, we use data from a random household survey of NZ women in the general population to: (a) identify recent population-based estimates of the prevalence of child sexual abuse, (b) identify ethnic specific prevalence rates of CSA, (c) outline the frequency of CSA, (d) identify the most common perpetrators, and (e) explore associations between CSA and later adverse experiences, including onset of sexual activity prior to age 15, likelihood of first sexual activity being forced, and likelihood of experiencing violence as an adult (by intimate partners and others). An experimental component was included to determine if there were differences in reported CSA prevalence obtained from face-to-face or anonymous reports. Finally, as the study used a comparable methodology to the WHO Multi-Country Study, it provides internationally comparable information on CSA prevalence that has not previously been available.

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