

Epidemiology of Traumatic Experiences in Childhood

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KEYWORDS

• Traumatic events • Epidemiology • Child maltreatment • Polyvictimization

KEY POINTS

- Understanding the epidemiology of traumatic experiences in childhood is critical to conducting meaningful trauma research, developing effective trauma services and service delivery systems with the greatest reach, and efficiently allocating resources.
- There are many serious challenges to understanding the epidemiology of childhood traumatic events, including the nature of many forms of traumatic experiences, inadequate national surveillance efforts, and conceptual and methodological differences between studies.
- Studies directly interviewing nationally representative samples of older youth are the most useful in understanding the epidemiology of childhood traumatic events.
- Depending on how various traumatic experiences are defined, 8–12% of American youth have experienced at least one sexual assault; 9–19% have experienced physical abuse by a caregiver or physical assault; 38–70% have witnessed serious community violence; 1 in 10 has witnessed serious violence between caregivers; 1 in 5 has lost a family member or friend to homicide; 9% have experienced Internet-assisted victimization; and 20–25% have been exposed to a natural or man-made disaster.
- Exposure to multiple types of victimization and trauma is very common among youth, characterizing 20% to 48% of all youth depending on the number of victimization types measured.
- Clinicians are encouraged to incorporate effective victimization and other traumatic event screening into their everyday practice.

INTRODUCTION

Understanding the epidemiology of traumatic experiences in childhood is critical to conducting meaningful trauma research, developing effective trauma services and service delivery systems, and efficiently allocating resources for both activities. Without an understanding of the basic topography of these events in the lives of youth,

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| Acronyms | |
|-----------|---|
| DAFSA | Drug or alcohol facilitated sexual assault |
| MVA | Motor vehicle accident |
| NatSCEV | National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence |
| NCANDS | National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System |
| NCS-A | National Comorbidity Study-Adolescent supplement |
| NCVS | National Crime Victimization Survey |
| NEISS-AIP | National Electronic Injury Surveillance System All Injury Program |
| NIBRS | National Incident-Based Reporting System |
| NSA | National Survey of Adolescents |
| NSA-R | National Survey of Adolescents-Replication |
| TESI | Traumatic Events Screening Inventory for Children |
| UCR | Uniform Crime Reports |

there is a danger of overfocusing on extraordinary, emotionally gripping, or highly visible types of events and overlooking less obvious or dramatic, but perhaps highly significant forms of trauma. From a public health viewpoint, knowing the prevalence and incidence of trauma types can help increase the reach of interventions, programs, and services. Obtaining even a relatively modest effect with either prevention or intervention services can result in a large public health impact when applied to a highly prevalent form of trauma. Such information can help guide policy-makers as they direct resources, and program and intervention developers as they consider new approaches. Epidemiologic information allows the field to better understand the most critical and most common trauma types, and the most affected populations, thus to achieve the greatest impact with limited resources. Accurate epidemiologic information also can help with the attributive process of explaining associations between traumatic events and outcomes. Without an epidemiologic background on which to place these associations, faulty conclusions may be drawn. As the saying goes, “when you hear hoof beats in Wyoming, think horses not zebras.” Epidemiologic data provide the proper background for research, practice, and policy.

Prevalence and incidence of traumatic experiences among specified groups are the most basic pieces of epidemiologic information. Prevalence denotes the number of individual children experiencing a particular type of traumatic event within a certain time period, such as from birth to age 18 or within the past year. Incidence refers to the number of incidents or cases of a trauma type that occurs within a specified time period, such as within the past year, regardless of the number of affected people. Because children and youth may experience more than 1 incident over a time period, incidence rates usually exceed prevalence rates. For example, in a victimization survey of a nationally representative sample of 4008 adult women, 339 of the women indicated they had experienced at least 1 completed rape before the age of 18 years, a childhood rape prevalence rate of 85 per 1000 women.¹ However, because many had experienced more than 1 assault, the 339 victims described 438 incidents of completed rape in childhood, a childhood rape incidence rate of 109 per 1000 women. Therefore, distinguishing whether epidemiologic reports are describing prevalence or incidence rates occurring in which time periods is important to understanding and comparing results across studies.

Unfortunately, despite the importance of epidemiologic information, obtaining precise estimates of the prevalence and incidence of different types of potentially traumatic events that can occur in childhood is actually problematic. This difficulty is due to several factors, including the inherent nature of some of the types of traumatic

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