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## Research article

## Prevalence of child abuse in school environment in Kerala, India: An ICAST-CI based survey

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## ABSTRACT

Very few studies focus on childhood abuse in developing countries and only a small fraction of such studies explicitly deal with abuse in a school environment. The purpose of this study was to estimate the prevalence of sexual, physical, and emotional abuse in a school environment in a developing country. Abuse history was collected using the International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (ISPCAN) Child Abuse Screening Tool – Children's Institutional Version (ICAST-CI). Demographic variables were also collected. Student supportive measures were provided both during and after the survey. 6682 school attending adolescents in Thrissur, Kerala participated in this cross sectional self report study. One year and lifetime prevalence of physical (75.5%, 78.5%), emotional (84.5%, 85.7%) and sexual (21.0%, 23.8%) abuse was high. Abuse was considered to be present even if an individual item from these three categories was reported. Most abuse was reported as occurring 'sometimes' rather than 'many times'. More males than females reported being victims of abuse; figures for one-year prevalence were: physical abuse (83.4% vs. 61.7%), emotional abuse (89.5% vs. 75.7%), and sexual abuse (29.5% vs. 6.2%). Various factors significantly increase the likelihood of abuse—male gender, low socioeconomic status, regular use of alcohol and drugs by family member at home, and having other difficulties at school. Children tended to report abuse less frequently if they liked attending school and if they always felt safe at school. The results highlight the urgent need to address the issue of abuse in the school environment and minimize its impact.

## 1. Introduction

Childhood maltreatment is a serious global public health problem. Global studies suggest that 25–50% of children experience physical abuse; around 20% of girls and 10% of boys experience sexual abuse (WHO, 2006). Childhood abuse is known to have long-lasting negative consequences on the mental, physical and social wellbeing of children (Kelly-Irving et al., 2013; Flaherty et al., 2006). High rates of childhood abuse are reported in most adult patients with mental disorders and childhood sexual abuse is a nonspecific risk factor for psychopathology (Carr, Martins, Stingel, Lemgruber, & Jurueña, 2013).

The prevalence of abuse, as estimated in epidemiological studies, varies widely. Differences in definitions, measurement methods,

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sample characteristics, and socio cultural context account for much of these differences. The need for comparative research among nationally representative samples, highlighted almost two decades ago, remains pertinent even today (Barth, Bermetz, Heim, Trelle, & Tonia, 2013; Finkelhor, 1994).

Nearly 20% of the world's children, i.e. 440 million children, live in India. Few studies from India have examined the prevalence of childhood abuse; most such studies are limited by small sample sizes, non-representative participants and non-validated survey questionnaires. A recent meta-analysis (Barth et al., 2013) of global prevalence of childhood abuse included only two studies from India (Banerjee, 2001; Hasnain & Kumar, 2006). However, even these two studies are constrained by the limiting factors mentioned above. Available studies generally show high rates of abuse. A study on street children in Jaipur reported that a considerable proportion of children (61.8%) had faced “moderate” abuse while 36.6% children indicated abuse in the “severe” and “very severe” categories (Mathur, Rathore, & Mathur, 2009). Among illiterate runaway adolescents in New Delhi, 62% boys experienced domestic violence, 72% reported physical abuse, and 35% reported being subjected to sexual abuse (Bhat, Singh, & Meena, 2012). Forty-eight percent of college students in Puducherry reported being mocked because of their physical appearance; 56% reported being beaten during their childhood, with 13.4% of such cases requiring medical treatment; 10% reported being exposed to the private parts of another individual (10%); and 6.4% reported being forced to expose their private parts to another individual (Bhilwar et al., 2015). A study conducted on a representative sample of 1060 adolescent school going girls in Delhi to elicit abusive experiences not limited to school, found that 43% experienced physical maltreatment, 40% faced neglect, and 27% were subjected to sexual abuse (Daral, Khokhar, & Pradhan, 2016); this study used a semi-structured locally developed questionnaire. There are no Indian studies that focus exclusively on the experience of abuse in a school environment. Studies in other countries have found socio-economic marginalization, poor family interactions, parental dysfunction, and neighborhood violence to be the most predictive risk factors for childhood maltreatment (Patwardhan, Hurley, Thompson, Mason, & Ringle, 2017). In India, comprehensive information on the prevalence of childhood abuse or the associated risk factors is not available to inform policy or practice.

## 2. Objectives

To study the prevalence of childhood abuse in India by using internationally accepted and validated questionnaires and by surveying a large, representative sample. Specific objectives of the study were: (a) to discover one year and life time prevalence of sexual, physical and emotional abuse in a school environment; (b) to identify gender differences in the prevalence of all three categories of such abuse; and (c) to ascertain the demographic factors associated with such abuse.

## 3. Methods

### 3.1. Participants

A survey was conducted among high school students in Thrissur, a central city in the southern Indian state of Kerala. The city (corporation) has a population of 315,957, covers 100 sq. km area, and has an average literacy of 97%. There are 39 high schools in Thrissur Corporation with 15,150 students studying in classes 8–10.

Fifty percent of the schools in the city area were randomly selected to participate in the survey. All students who attended the selected schools, on the day of the survey, were approached to participate in the survey. Prior to the survey, all high school teachers in the selected schools were trained on child protection issues. Furthermore, support systems were established in each school to assist children who sought help after the survey.

### 3.2. Survey procedures

Detailed information about the survey was given to students and parents, beforehand. The survey was administered during school hours and within a class room setting. On the day of survey, teachers read out standardized survey-related information in each class room. Students could opt out of the survey by refusing to participate or by returning blank forms. All the students participated in the survey and none of the forms returned were blank.

Due to the sensitive nature of the study, the survey was conducted anonymously and it was designed to avoid collecting information that would reveal personal identities. Students were also advised on the procedures to contact the support service at school. Each school had a trained teacher to provide support and counselling. The teachers could contact a resource team for further assistance, if needed; the resource team consisted of psychologists and psychiatrists. The teachers also had direct access to the local child help line. The survey took 15–20 min to complete.

### 3.3. Measures

We used International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (ISPCAN) Child Abuse Screening Tool—Children's Institutional Version (ICAST-CI), developed by ISPCAN in association with WHO and UNICEF. ICAST-CI assesses all forms of abusive experiences in the school environment. The ICAST-CI tool is designed for use with children aged 12–17 years. The questions cover various types of verbal, physical and sexual violence as well as experiences of neglect; respondents are also asked about their own experiences of victimization (over their lifetime and during the past year). The tool has 19 items for physical abuse, 12 items for emotional abuse, and 10 items for sexual abuse. ICAST-CI is an internationally validated tool developed to assess child victimization

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