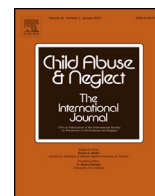




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## Child Abuse & Neglect



Research article

# Prevalence, contexts, and correlates of child sexual abuse in Cyprus<sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

It is well documented that child sexual abuse (CSA) may be one of the major public health problems in the world, especially due to the co-occurrence with other types of abuse and negative developmental outcomes. The aim of the current study was the comprehensive examination of CSA with respect to its prevalence, its contexts of occurrence and its correlates. The sample included 1852 adolescents and young adults (15–25 years old; 441 males), recruited through schools, universities and other youth organizations across Cyprus. Participants were administered an online questionnaire assessing multiple forms of abuse, with a focus on sexual abuse, solicitation, and trafficking, as well as personality traits. The study's results supported previous findings in Europe that 1 in 5 children may experience sexual abuse or solicitation, with females being more likely than males to be the victim of CSA. Findings also indicated that the different types of sexual abuse were more likely to occur during adolescence than other developmental stages. In addition, perpetrators were more often identified to be adolescent or adult males who were strangers or friends/acquaintances with the victims. Moreover, findings suggested that experiences of sexual abuse and solicitation co-occur with neglect, physical, and psychological abuse. Regarding personality traits, sexual abuse was found to be specifically related to grandiosity, whereas sexual solicitation was related to both impulsivity and grandiosity. The current study has practical and policy implications for intervening with sexually maltreated individuals.

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## 1. Introduction

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is recognized as a major public health problem due to its prevalence, incidence, and consequences (Maikovich-Fong & Jaffee, 2010). According to Article 18 of the Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (CETS No. 201), CSA involves engaging in sexual activities with a child who has not reached the legal age (i.e., 18 years of age) for these activities and where coercion, force, or threats are used, or the offender is in a position of trust or the child is in a vulnerable position. Epidemiological studies over the past two decades have attempted to map the prevalence of violence against children, although yielding differential patterns of results. Differences

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in sample characteristics (i.e., clinical or community), cultural background and geographic location, procedural factors (e.g., sampling), study focus (e.g., incidence or prevalence), and operational definitions of CSA (i.e., broad vs. specific) across studies contribute to disparate findings and conclusions (Lalor & McElvaney, 2010; Pereda, Guilera, Forn, & Gomez-Benito, 2009a). In addition, studies have also examined the co-occurrence of CSA with other types of abuse, as well as potentially associated risk factors and negative outcomes pertaining to emotional, social, and personality development (e.g., Howard, Kimonis, Munoz-Centifanti, & Frick, 2012; Kimonis, Frick, Munoz-Centifanti, & Aucoin, 2008). The goal of the current study was the comprehensive examination of CSA with respect to its prevalence, its contexts of occurrence, its co-occurrence with other types of abuse, and its connection with the development of socially and behaviorally unproductive personality traits in a large community sample of adolescents and young adults in Cyprus.

### 1.1. CSA prevalence and methodological issues

Despite the apparent consensus of CSA's status as a global and persistent phenomenon, prevalence rates vary greatly from 0.1% (Mackenzie, Blaney, Chivers, & Vincent, 1993) to 71% (Everill & Waller, 1995) adding to the controversy on the matter. Studies primarily in Europe and North America have revealed ranges from 15% to 33% among adolescent and adult females (Fergusson & Mullen, 1999) and 3% to 10% among males (Pereda, Guilera, Forn, & Gomez-Benito, 2009b). One reason for the differential patterns of results regarding CSA prevalence is that some studies have relied on self-reports while others have relied on other informants (Lalor & McElvaney, 2010). The rates reported in self-report studies are significantly higher than those reported in informant studies whose data derive from actual reported cases of CSA (Stoltenborgh, van Ijzendoorn, Euser, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2011). However, informant studies tend to face problems of underestimation of prevalence, since formally recorded cases represent only the most severe cases of CSA (Manly, 2005). On the other hand, self-reports from general population samples rely on people's anonymous disclosure of incidents and experiences that may not have been disclosed previously in any other context (ISPCAN, 2008). In this case, anonymity and the higher number of sexual victimization questions tend to result in higher reporting rates (Fricker, Smith, Davis, & Hanson, 2003).

Sampling differences reflecting the variability of age of consent from country to country constitute another reason for the differences in prevalence results across studies (Lalor & McElvaney, 2010). As a result, the age group in the majority of the studies reported in meta-analyses or systematic reviews tends to be over the age of 15 years (e.g., Pereda et al., 2009a, 2009b; Stoltenborgh et al., 2011). Studies with samples of children under the age of 14 are less frequent due to complications related to issues of informed consent and the potential for causing distress (Lalor & McElvaney, 2010). In addition to the participants' age, recent meta-analytic studies have indicated that gender is another major factor in the variability of prevalence rates (Pereda et al., 2009a, 2009b; Stoltenborgh et al., 2011). Their results indicate worldwide CSA rates of 18–20% for females and 8% for males. Moreover, in a national study by Perez-Fuentes et al. (2013) results indicated that approximately one in ten adults had experienced sexual abuse prior to the age of 18. Although report rates in male respondents were relatively high in this study, CSA was reported higher in women and individuals who had experienced marital issues (e.g., separation, divorce). However, this discrepancy in the findings was partially attributed to possible under-detection or underreporting by male victims in an effort to avoid stigmatization. It is interesting to note that this pattern of gender differences in reporting (more females than males) appears universal with the exception of Africa. In fact, prevalence rates for boys/males have been found to be higher in countries with lower resources and economic development (Stoltenborgh et al., 2011). Tang, Freyd, and Wang (2008) argue that studies comparing male and female disclosure ought to be deemed inconclusive, since males disclose at a lower rate than females possibly contributing to the reported gender differences in exposure rates.

Importantly, the results of studies from different world regions and comparative meta-analyses and reviews highlight CSA as a global problem. Higher prevalence rates were provided for Africa, whereas rates in Europe were found to be the lowest (Pereda et al., 2009a, 2009b). On the other hand, Stoltenborgh et al. (2011) reported highest combined (i.e., mixed types of CSA) prevalence rates in Australia (21.5%) and lowest in South America (13.4%) for females, and highest combined prevalence rates for males in Africa (19.3%) and lowest in Asia (4.1%). European combined prevalence rates tended to be on the lower side where studies reported 13.5% and 5.6% for females and males, respectively. Rates differed between studies due to differences in measures (e.g., standardized or non-standardized measures used) and types of CSA assessed. For example, both Pereda et al. (2009a, 2009b) and Stoltenborgh et al. (2011) included studies that defined CSA both broadly (i.e., including non-contact sexual abuse, such as exposure and propositioning) and narrowly (i.e., only contact sexual abuse), presenting, thereby, different patterns of prevalence.

Concerned with the variability in the rates reported and the disparity in the CSA types examined, Barth, Bermetz, Heim, Trelle, and Tonia (2013) undertook the evaluation of current worldwide trends (post-2000) in CSA prevalence. In their systematic review of 55 studies from 24 different countries, they focused specifically on four types of abuse: non-contact abuse, contact abuse, forced intercourse, and mixed sexual abuse. These categories were selected in an attempt to narrow down and better define distinct types of events that can and do occur within CSA. Their review indicated that prevalence rates ranged between 8 and 31% among girls and 3–17% among boys. More specifically, 9% of girls and 3% of boys under the age of 18 years old reported having experienced forced intercourse. For mixed sexual abuse, pooled prevalence rates for girls were 15%, whereas for boys it reached 8%. In terms of non-contact abuse, pooled rates were 17% and 31% for males and females, respectively, while for contact abuse rates were 6% for boys and 13% for girls under the age of 18. Prevalence within Europe also vary greatly. Prevalence rates for males have been reported as low as 0.6% in France and as high as 13.4% in Spain, whereas for females they were as low as 0.9% in France and as high as 28.1% in Sweden (Pereda et al., 2009a, 2009b).

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