



Prevalence of sexual aggression among young people in Europe: A review of the evidence from 27 EU countries[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Sexual aggression poses a serious threat to the sexual well-being of young people. This paper documents the available evidence on the prevalence of sexual aggression perpetration and victimization from 27 EU countries, established as part of the Youth Sexual Aggression and Victimization (Y-SAV) project. A total of $N = 113$ studies were identified through a systematic review of the literature and consultations with experts in each country. Despite differences in the number of available studies, methodology, and sample composition, the review shows substantial prevalence rates of sexual aggression perpetration and victimization across Europe. A wide variation was found, both within and between countries. The lifetime prevalence rates of female sexual victimization, excluding childhood sexual abuse, ranged from 9 to 83%, the rates of male sexual victimization ranged from 2 to 66%, the rates of male sexual aggression ranged from 0 to 80%, and the range of female sexual aggression ranged from 0.8 to 40%. One-year prevalence rates showed a similar variability. Conceptual and methodological problems in the database are discussed, and an outline is presented for a more harmonized approach to studying the scale of sexual aggression among young people in Europe.

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1. Introduction

Sexual aggression is a major problem that affects young people all over the world and poses a grave threat to their sexual development and well-being (Vanwesenbeeck, 2008). It violates young people's right to sexual self-determination and thus represents a serious human rights violation. Moreover, sexual victimization has been found to lead to a wide range of negative physical and mental health

outcomes, including eating disorders, depression, and suicidality (Basile et al., 2006; Holmes & Sher, 2013). Most of the available evidence on youth sexual aggression has been collected in the United States, and there is still insufficient awareness of the scale on which adolescents and young adults experience sexual aggression across the world. To address this shortcoming, the present paper provides a comprehensive review of studies on the prevalence of sexual aggression across 27 member states of the European Union (EU), compiled as part of an EU-funded international project called *Youth Sexual Aggression and Victimization* (Y-SAV).

For the purposes of this research, sexual aggression is defined as *behavior carried out with the intent or result of making another person engage in sexual activity or sexual communication despite his or her unwillingness to do so*. This definition was chosen because it covers a broad range of coercive behaviors and sexual acts and is open with regard to the gender and relationship constellations between victim and perpetrator. It is compatible with the widely accepted definition offered by the World Health Organization (WHO), which refers to sexual violence as “any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed against a person’s sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting” (World Health Organization, 2011). Based on the social psychological distinction between aggression (any behavior intended to harm another person) and violence (behavior intended to cause serious physical harm to another person; see Krahé, 2013), we prefer to use the term “aggression” over “violence” to include non-physical forms of sexual coercion, such as verbal pressure and exploiting the victim’s inability to resist. Sexual aggression refers to a pattern of behavior that can be studied both from the victim’s perspective and the aggressor’s perspective, yielding rates of victimization and perpetration, respectively.

Adolescence and emerging adulthood are key periods for the development of healthy sexual relations and behavior patterns (Fortenberry, 2013; Lefkowitz & Gillen, 2006). Experiences made during these critical years create a basis for attitudes and beliefs about sexuality, sexual self-esteem, and self-efficacy as well as sexual scripts that play a sustained role in guiding sexual behavior (Krahé, 2000). Therefore, understanding and preventing sexual aggression in this age group is a task of prime importance.

1.1. Evidence on youth sexual aggression from the international research literature

Several international surveys have been conducted in the last 15 years to document the scale of sexual aggression across country boundaries. The majority of these surveys have examined rates of victimization experiences, particularly but not exclusively of women by male perpetrators. By contrast, the number of surveys documenting the prevalence of sexual aggression perpetration is more limited, and these studies have tended to focus on characteristics of identified sexual offenders rather than providing information about the prevalence of sexual aggression perpetration. In addition, in many studies, prevalence rates are not reported for individual countries or for different age groups, making it impossible to derive conclusions regarding youth sexual aggression in a defined set of countries.

For example, the *World Report on Violence and Health* commissioned by the WHO includes figures of women’s sexual victimization for only three EU countries: Finland, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. Lifetime prevalence rates of attempted or completed forced sex were 5.9, 7.5, and 23.0%, respectively, but these figures included women above the age of 25 (Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi, & Lozano, 2002, p. 152). The report of the 2005 *European Survey of Crime and Safety* provides rates of sexual victimization among women and men aged 16 or above in 18 EU countries (Van Dijk, Manchin, van Kesteren, Nevala, & Hideg, 2011). A broad definition of sexual victimization was used in this survey (“People sometimes grab, touch or assault others for sexual reasons in a

really offensive way”), and the one-year prevalence rates were 1.7% for women and 0.5% for men across all 18 countries. Again, however, the figures are not broken down by age.

Seven EU countries yielded prevalence data on women’s sexual victimization in the *International Violence against Women Survey* (IVAWS) conducted in 2003, but this survey did not report figures specifically for younger age groups either (UN Women, 2011). A recent WHO study included Lithuania and Romania along with nine other European countries outside the EU and presented prevalence rates of women’s sexual victimization, but the findings were reported by region, not by country (World Health Organization, 2013).

The *European Women’s Lobby* (2013) issued an EU barometer on rape, evaluating the state of national statistics and surveys recording women’s sexual victimization in the EU in a country-by-country format. However, this report did not include evidence published in academic journals and, therefore, missed some of the more rigorously conducted studies available on women’s sexual victimization. Finally, the recent EU lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) survey presented data on victimization experiences by LGBT youths and young adults but combined physical and sexual victimization into a single item (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2013).

As this summary has shown, the available knowledge base from international surveys is very limited regarding the scale of sexual aggression among young people in the EU. If at all, only a few EU countries are represented in these surveys, and the figures reported are not broken down by country and by age group. Studies on male sexual victimization are virtually nonexistent, and surveys of sexual aggression perpetration are also notably lacking. Moreover, current summaries of the state of the evidence, such as the 2013 barometer on rape, rely largely on official crime statistics and a few large-scale surveys, missing a substantial part of the available literature.

1.2. Aims of the present review

Given the fragmented picture of the scale of sexual aggression among young people in Europe, a key part of the Y-SAV project was the compilation of a comprehensive database from 27 EU member states on unwanted sexual experiences of young people from both the victim and the perpetrator perspectives.² The purpose of the present paper was to document what evidence has been accumulated about sexual aggression among young people in each of the 27 EU countries. It is the most comprehensive review available to date, both in the number of countries included and in the range of individual studies available in different languages and published in outlets beyond academic journals. Although some international studies have included countries from the EU, no study is available to date that has brought together the evidence across the EU member states. Our review was designed to fill this gap, focusing on the group of adolescents and young adults for whom the development of healthy and self-determined sexual relationships is a key developmental task. Based on the comparative review of the evidence, limitations of the present database will be identified and perspectives for future research on youth sexual aggression will be presented.

2. Selection of articles for inclusion

According to the focus of the review on addressing the prevalence of youth sexual aggression, studies were included in the database if they provided evidence from community samples on victimization, perpetration, or both, in the age group from 12 to 25. The age of 12 was chosen as the lower age limit because it is the lowest age within the EU under which all sexual intercourse is treated as rape

² The study was completed before Croatia joined the EU on July 1, 2013, so the article covers all EU member states at the time of the review.

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