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**The Incidence and Prevalence of Child Sexual Abuse: No Easy Answer**

**Q: How many children are sexually abused each year? What percentage of children are sexually abused each year?**

**A: These seemingly simple questions have no straight-forward answers. Despite numerous studies, solid statistics are not available.**

Incidence

The most recent detailed studies conducted on a national basis of the incidence of child sexual abuse were completed in 1986. These studies based their estimates on a collection of actual reports of sexual abuse, as defined by the child protection system:

1. The American Humane Association estimated 132,000 children were sexually abused annually, based on statistics voluntarily supplied by child protective service agencies in 28 states, and
2. The National Incidence Study estimated 133,600 children were sexually abused annually based on a random sample of 29 counties.

The estimates in these two studies are based primarily on validated reports of child sexual abuse. That validation, however, depends on the skill of the case worker investigating the report.

The National Committee for Prevention of Child Abuse conducts an annual survey of state child protective service agencies based on all reports registered by the agencies, prior to investigations to determine the reports' validity. In 1991, this survey found that 2.7 million reports of child abuse and neglect were recorded nationally by child protective service agencies. Of these, 15%, or 404,100, were child sexual abuse reports. However, this survey does not provide the detailed information of the two earlier studies.

A problem with using child protective service reports as a source for estimates of the incidence of child sexual abuse is that the agencies focus on intra-familial abuse, generally excluding sexual victimization by non-caretakers. Currently, there are no national standards nor federal requirements for cases to be reported to a national database.

Only one incidence study examined reports of sexual victimization by non-caretakers based on reports to law enforcement agencies. The first National Incidence Study of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children was published in 1990. This study found that of an estimated 3,200 to 4,600 non-family abductions reported to law enforcement in 1988, two-thirds or more involved sexual assault.

It is likely that the actual incidence of child sexual victimization is significantly higher than that reflected in these studies. We do not know the ratio of reports of child sexual victimization to the actual incidence. We do not know how many children do not disclose their victimization due to fear, shame, lack of understanding of its wrongfulness, or other factors.

### Prevalence

The first national study on the prevalence of child sexual abuse found that 27% of the women and 16% of the men in their sample had experienced some form of child sexual victimization. This study by David Finklehor and other researchers determined the median age of abuse was 9.9 for boys and 9.6 for girls, with the victimization of 22% of the boys and 23% of the girls occurring before age 8.

Statistics from this and other studies on the prevalence of child sexual abuse have been widely disseminated. Unfortunately, when we attempt to use these studies to estimate the prevalence of child abuse or child sexual victimization, including unreported events (e.g., "one in four girls will be sexually abused"), we find several problems:

1. There is no uniform definition of terms or consistent methodology between such studies. "Children" is defined differently in various studies: some include adolescents up to age 18, others exclude children over age 12. Similarly, the list of sexually abusive acts in these studies varies. Some studies include obscene telephone calls and indecent proposals as well as acts of touching and intercourse, while others include only violent acts. Some researchers have restricted their definition of child sexual abuse to sexual acts committed by adults related to, or caring for, a child; others have had a broader focus and include acts committed by those unrelated to the child.
2. These studies are generally retrospective and depend on the ability and willingness of adults to recall events that may have long been repressed from conscious memory.
3. The studies have used such varied data collection methods as written questionnaires, telephone interviews, and personal interviews. Each technique has its strengths and weaknesses, resulting in disparities among the estimates.
4. The sampling methods used may have created errors due to demographical biases. A study which uses a sample of college students in seeking the number of sexual abuse survivors in the population may underestimate actual incidence: a proportionately high number of survivors may not attend college because of poor high school performance. In addition, estimates based on recruited volunteers may have errors due to the methods of recruitment.

It would seem that firm, knowledgeable statistics about the incidence and prevalence of child sexual abuse should be easily available. Due to a lack of national reporting requirements and similar methods and definitions in the research that has been completed, the firm statistics everyone desires are simply not available. For these "magic numbers," we must look to the future.

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