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THE INTERNATIONAL EPIDEMIOLOGY OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

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Abstract—Surveys of child sexual abuse in large nonclinical populations of adults have been conducted in at least 19 countries in addition to the United States and Canada, including 10 national probability samples. All studies have found rates in line with comparable North American research, ranging from 7% to 36% for women and 3% to 29% for men. Most studies found females to be abused at 1½ to 3 times the rate for males. Few comparisons among countries are possible because of methodological and definitional differences. However, they clearly confirm sexual abuse to be an international problem.

Key Words—Sexual abuse, Prevalence, Surveys.

INTRODUCTION

THE PROBLEM OF child sexual abuse has received a great deal more attention in the United States than in other parts of the world. This has led some observers to presume that it was disproportionately common there, especially in light of the high U.S. crime rate and reputation for violence. Such a presumption that sexual abuse was peculiarly American has frequently posed a problem for professionals trying to raise awareness about it in other countries with many fewer reported cases.

The danger of such a presumption, however, is clear even from the recent history of sexual abuse within North America. Until the late 1970s in North America, it was also thought to be minor because so few cases were reported. Subsequent epidemiological research has now demonstrated that it was widespread even during this period when sexual abuse generated little interest (Finkelhor, Hotaling, Lewis, & Smith, 1990). This suggests that lack of professional attention and small numbers of official reports are not necessarily indicators of low underlying prevalence.

Suspecting that similar masking may exist elsewhere, researchers and child welfare authorities in a variety of other countries have now begun to undertake the kinds of epidemiological studies that revealed the extent of sexual abuse in North America. In general these studies have produced findings similar to the North American research, undercutting the assumption of North American exceptionalism.

It is the goal of this paper to review the findings of a number of these surveys to assess

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Table 1. Characteristics of Prevalence Studies in 20 Countries

	Population				Mode Admin.	Sample Size	Response Rate	Definition
	Type	Area	Gender	Sampling				
Australia	Stud.	Loc.	M/F	NP	SAQ	991	90%	B
Austria	Stud.	Loc.	M/F	P	SAQ	1125	56%	B
Belgium	Gen.	Nat.	F	P	I (Hh)	956	71%	B
Canada	Gen.	Nat.	M/F	P	SAQ	2008	94%	N
Costa Rica	Stud.	Loc.	M/F	NP	SAQ	497	99%	B
Denmark	Gen.	Nat.	M/F	P	PQ	1280	66%	B
Dominican Rep.	Stud.	Loc.	M/F	P	SAQ	893	?	?
Finland	Stud.	Nat.	M/F	P	SAQ	7435	96%	N
France	Gen.	Loc.	M/F	NP (Q)	SAQ	1511	?	B
Germany	Stud.	Loc.	M/F	NP	SAQ	1018	97%	N
Greece	Stud.	Loc.	M/F	NP	SAQ	746	95%	B
Great Britain	Gen.	Nat.	M/F	P	I (Hh)	2019	?	B
Ireland	Gen.	Loc.	M/F	P	SAQ	500	?	B
Netherlands	Gen.	Nat.	F	P	I (Hh)	1054	49%	N
New Zealand	Gen.	Loc.	F	P	PQ, I	1376	71%	B
Norway	Gen.	Nat.	M/F	P	PQ	1017	48%	B
South Africa	Stud.	Loc.	M/F	NP	SAQ	967	92%	B
Spain	Gen.	Nat.	M/F	P	I (Hh)	2000	83%	B
Sweden	Gen.	Nat.	M/F	P	SAQ	938	93%	B
Switzerland	Gen.	Loc.	M/F	P	I	421	72%	B
U.S.	Gen.	Nat.	M/F	P	I (Tel)	2626	76%	B

Type: Stud. = Student; Gen. = General.

Area: Loc. = Local; Nat. = National.

Sampling: P = Probability; NP = Non-Probability.

Mode: SAQ = Self-Administered Questionnaire; PQ = Postal Questionnaire; Q = Quota; I = Interview (Hh = Household, Tel = Telephone).

Definition: B = Broad (includes exhibitionism and propositions); N = Narrow; ? = Not Reported.

what they may say about the nature of sexual abuse internationally as well as the state of comparative research.

DATA SOURCES

Through reviews of the literature and personal contacts with researchers in a variety of countries, this author has been able to identify nearly two dozen epidemiological surveys conducted on large nonclinical populations outside of North America. Only four of these studies were reported in easily accessible English-language journals or books. Because it is clear that many such studies do not appear in the English scientific literature and may not even be well-publicized in their country of origin, it is very probable that other studies exist that have escaped detection.

The studies (Table 1) come primarily from English-speaking and Northern European countries, a fact that may reflect both the level of resources for social science research in these countries and their access to the North American source material. However, studies have also been done in at least three Spanish-language countries (Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, and Spain) and in Greece.

The studies are extremely variable in their scope and quality, and range from sophisticated national probability samples and household interview studies to local convenience sample studies of university students using self-administered questionnaires. Considering that in the U.S. there have been only two, and in Canada only one, national survey, it is impressive that

eight other countries (Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Great Britain, Netherlands, Norway, Spain, and Sweden) have done surveys with national probability samples.

In Sweden there have been three such studies, and two in Norway. For these countries, as well as for the United States and several other countries noted in the Appendix, a single study has been selected for comparison purposes—in each case the study that was largest in its scope of geography and population, and thus closest to being truly national, not necessarily the best study.

COMPARATIVE FINDINGS

All of the studies revealed sexual abuse histories in at least 7% of the females and at least 3% of the males, ranging up to 36% of women (Austria) and 29% of men (South Africa). They all confirm the existence of sexual abuse in far greater rates than would be suggested by official reports alone.

Unfortunately, it is not possible or appropriate to make direct comparisons among the rates from different countries. The variation in rates between countries probably does not reflect variation in true prevalence. Similar wide variations in rates have been found in studies within the U.S., and these have been shown to be explained by methodological factors, such as the survey methodology, the questions asked, and the definition of sexual abuse (Peters, Wyatt, & Finkelhor, 1986). For example, the high rate for women (33%) in the Dutch study (Draijer, 1990) almost certainly stems from the numerous detailed screening questions and sensitive interviewing, modeled after Russell's (1986) San Francisco study that produced similarly high estimates. The low rates in the British study (Baker & Duncan, 1985) are probably related to its much cruder, market-survey methodology using a single, vague screening question. Other high rates, such as to the 29% for South African men (Collings, 1991), are due to extremely broad definitions, such as this one under which two-thirds of experiences involved no actual physical contact. Other low rates, such as in the Irish study (Irish Council on Civil Liberties, n.d.) or the Greek study (Agathonos, Alexandridis, & Fereti, 1992) may be due to social environments where candid disclosures of sexual behavior are still very problematic. Unfortunately, not enough comparable information was available in the studies to usefully analyze the sources of variation in a formal meta-analysis.

Direct comparison is more warranted in two instances that were explicit replication efforts. Draijer (1990) adapted much of Russell's methodology to the Netherlands and obtained similar rates for intrafamilial (15% vs. 16%) and extrafamilial (27% vs. 31%) abuse. Goldman and Goldman (1988) replicated Finkelhor's (1979) U.S. student study in Australia and obtained estimates that were identical in the case of males but 50% higher in the case of females.

The international studies are generally consistent with the North American literature in the profile of the sexual abuse problem they provide from the epidemiological samples. For example, in the apparent ratio of female to male victims, they mostly show rates for females to be 1.5 to 3 times that of males. They also show intrafamily abuse to be consistently more common for girls than boys, constituting about one-third to one-half of girls' experiences (Table 2). All the studies reporting such information showed offenders against girls to be disproportionately male (above 90%), while boys were abused by males in proportions that varied from study to study, not unlike variations found in North American studies (Finkelhor, 1984). Across the studies, only about half the victims disclosed the experiences to anyone. Finally, all the studies that looked at long-term effects also found a history of sexual abuse associated with adult mental health impairments.

Table 2. Sexual Abuse in 20 Countries: Prevalence Rates and Proportion Intrafamily Abuse

	Prevalence per 100		% Intrafamily ^a	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Australia	28	9	35%	17%
Austria	36	19	26%	9%
Belgium	19	—	34%	—
Canada	18	8	44%	6%
Costa Rica	32	13	43%	19%
Denmark	14	7	42%	25%
Dominican Republic	—33%—		—39%—	
Finland	7	4	?	?
France	8	5	23%	6% (nuclear only)
Germany	10	4	—50%—	
Greece	16	6	33%	23%
Great Britain	12	8	14%	13%
Ireland	7	5	—37%—	
Netherlands	33	—	46%	—
Norway	19	9	—24%—	
New Zealand	32	—	38%	—
South Africa	34	29	30%	17%
Spain	23	15	16%	4%
Sweden	9	3	18%	0
Switzerland	11	3	56%	0%
U.S.	27	16	29%	11%

^a Generally includes blood relatives and parent figures like stepparents and adoptive parents.

DISCUSSION

Studies from a variety of countries suggest that sexual abuse is indeed an international problem. In every locale where it has been sought, researchers have demonstrated its existence at levels high enough to be detected through surveys of a few hundred adults in the general population. These rates are far higher than anything suggested by the level of reported cases in these countries. As such epidemiological findings are available for more and more countries, the responsibility of proof shifts to anyone who would argue that sexual abuse is rare or nonexistent in their locale.

It is nonetheless true that we have not been able yet to locate equivalent epidemiological studies for the African, Middle Eastern, or Far Eastern countries that have cultures and family structures very different from the predominantly Caucasian, western, and Christian countries represented in the studies reviewed here. However, a Japanese student survey suggests possibly very high rates of stranger molestation in that country (Ikeda & Satoh, 1992). Other observers have asserted the existence of extensive sexual abuse in other non-Western settings—for example, in Western and Southern Africa (Ebigbo & Abaga, 1990; Russell, 1990) and in China (Ho & Kwok, 1991; Yuan, 1990)—not to mention the well-documented presence of the closely related problem of child prostitution in places like the Philippines (Mydans, 1989), Thailand (Salayakianond, 1985), and Sri Lanka (Bond, n.d.). But these reports need to be supported with more thorough and scientifically credible epidemiological research.

Overall, then, in the context of the international evidence, there is not much basis for arguing that the problem is more severe in North America. It is true that some of the highest rates come from U.S. studies—for example, Russell (1986) and Wyatt (1985). But the high rates in some North American studies could well be due to their more sophisticated and sensitive methodologies. High rates are also found outside North America when such methodologies are used and the variation in North American studies overall seems to parallel the variation

internationally. Even if future comparative studies find that North American rates are truly higher, the current figures suggest that the difference will probably be modest, not like the differences in homicide, for example, where the U.S. rate is six times higher than the average for developed countries overall, and three times higher than even the next highest country (Gartner, 1990).

More international comparative research about sexual abuse is badly needed, in part to facilitate international awareness, but perhaps more importantly to answer questions about how social and cultural variables may affect the problem. Unfortunately, the research reviewed here fulfills this need only superficially. To enhance this objective, researchers on the international scene need to develop more methodological sophistication. For one thing, they need to select methodologies and instruments with international comparison in mind. This would mean simultaneous studies in different countries or studies that replicate those used in some other country. At the least, they need to select definitions of sexual abuse and questionnaire items that represent an advanced level of knowledge. Current experience, for example, suggests that the best way to screen for sexual abuse is to ask multiple questions with very specific language about a variety of contexts in which abuse could have occurred, as opposed to a single screening question that asks about sexual abuse or some other general concept that the respondent is left to define (Peters et al., 1986). International researchers also need to report more systematically on their findings in categories that allow for comparison to other studies.

However, the most meaningful comparative research needs more than methodological sophistication. It also needs grounding in theory, so that cross-national comparisons can test specific hypotheses about social factors related to sexual abuse. For example, paternal caretaking has been theorized to be a possible inhibitor of father-daughter sexual abuse (Parker & Parker, 1986). Such a theory might be well-tested by comparing societies with differing levels of paternal involvement, but it would require a study specifically tailored to this issue.

CONCLUSION

DeMause (1991) argued in a recent paper that while anthropologists have in the past theorized about the so-called universality of the incest taboo, suggesting the rarity of actual incest, the real cultural universal has been the presence of widespread incest and child molestation "in most places at most times." The available international surveys appear to support his assertion. In every country where researchers have asked about it, they have found that an important percentage of the adult population—measurable in simple survey of adults—acknowledges a history of sexual abuse. These include countries where there has been a great deal of publicity about the problem as well as those where publicity has been limited. This suggests the scope of the work that remains for those who wish to understand the hidden sufferings of children in cultures all around the world as well as for those who wish to change it.

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APPENDIX

Annotations to Table 1

Australia. The subjects in this study were first-year social science students in a variety of universities, colleges, technical, and apprenticeship schools in the state of Victoria (Goldman & Goldman, 1986; 1988). The self-administered questionnaire was closely patterned after Finkelhor's (1979).

Austria. A self-administered questionnaire was distributed to a stratified sample of all students at the University of Innsbruck (Kinzl & Biebl, n.d.).

Belgium. This national probability sample was limited to women between ages 30 and 40 who were Belgian citizens. It included 709 Flemish and 247 Walloon (French-speaking) women. Highly trained interviewers gave respondents cards on which were printed various sexually abusive behaviors that women could refer to by letter. Two very detailed reports were made from the data (Vandewege, Bruynooghe, & Opdebeeck, 1988).

Canada. Higher estimates from the national Canadian study completed by the Gallup Organization were originally presented in the Badgley commission report (Badgley et al., 1984). But subsequent analysts detected a number of problems in the analysis and calculation of the prevalence rates. Bagley (n.d.) reanalyzed the data to resolve these problems and make the findings more consistent with other available international prevalence figures.

Costa Rica. The sample consisted of 30 classes of students at the University of Costa Rica in San Jose (Krugman, Mata, & Krugman, 1992). The instrument contained the four questions used in the Los Angeles Times survey (Finkelhor et al., 1990), but in self-administered questionnaire format.

Denmark. The Danish questionnaire (Leth, 1989; Leth, Stenvig, & Pedersen, 1988), distributed by mail, used the

same format as the Norwegian study (Holter, 1990), relying on a single question screener asking if the subject had been exposed to abuse from adults or older children.

Dominican Republic. The estimates come from a questionnaire administered to students aged 16 to 29, who were chosen to be representative of the 100,000 university students in the capital district, Santo Domingo (Ruiz, Valdez, & Garcia, 1986). Although the sample was 46% male and 54% female, the results were not broken down by sex. Four other studies have been done on other student groups using the same questionnaire with comparable results (Ruiz, 1990).

Finland. The Finnish study (Sariola & Uutela, in press) consisted of an anonymous questionnaire given to 9th graders aged 15 to 16 in a sample of 409 classes, chosen to be representative of the whole country. The authors report 18% of girls and 7% of boys had sexual contact with a person at least 5 years older than themselves, but say that most of this was considered sex with boyfriends and girlfriends. They defined sexual abuse narrowly, as only those older partner contacts that involved coercion or violence and genital contact. They report the prevalence of sexual abuse as 5–7% for the girls and 1–4% for the boys, depending on whether the age difference is set at 5 or 10 years.

France. This French survey was conducted among persons 18 to 60 in the Rhône-Alpes region in Southeastern France (Bouhet, Perard, & Zorman, 1992). The self-administered questionnaire contained a single screen question asking if the respondent had one or more experiences of sexual abuse before age 18.

Germany. This student survey, using multiple screen questions, was conducted in the region of Unterfranken, a section of Bavaria in Southern Germany. The figures used in the table are based on a narrow definition of sexual abuse, including only physical contact to children up to age 14 by perpetrators at least 5 years older. If exhibitionism, verbal harassment and pornography exposure are included, the prevalence rate for the whole sample increased from 6.9% to 12.5%. If the age difference between perpetrator and victim is reduced from 5 to 2 years, the prevalence rate goes to 33.5%.

Greece. The sample consisted of university and college students from the greater Athens area responding to a translated version of Finkelhor's (1979) self-administered questionnaire (Agathonos, Alexandridis, & Fereti, 1992).

Great Britain. The cited figures come from the only national population survey, conducted by the Market Opinion Research Institute (Baker & Duncan, 1985). But they are based on a single screen question that was confusingly worded. Nash and West (1985), using several screeners, found much higher rates in samples of the women patients in a general medical practice (42%) and female university students (54%). Kelly, Regan, and Burton (1991) surveyed 1,244 16- to 21-year-olds enrolled at Further Education Colleges with a well-piloted self-administered questionnaire. They found prevalence rates of 59% for women and 27% for men using a very broad scope definition (including attempts, escapes and exhibitionism) and 21% for women and 7% for men using a narrower definition.

Ireland. This survey (referred to as "pilot survey" by the researchers) of adults from 18 to 44 was conducted in Dublin Borough and County by the Market Research Bureau of Ireland (1987). The single-screen question (preceded by a long definition) was included in a self-administered portion of the questionnaire.

Netherlands. This national household survey was conducted with Dutch-speaking women aged 20–40 (Draijer, 1988; 1989; 1990). The interviewers were very highly trained. Disclosures about sexual abuse could come in response to 16 different screening questions that covered a wide variety of concrete situations including positive as well as negative experiences. The researcher limited the prevalence estimate to those that involved actual sexual contact to girls younger than 16, including kissing with sexual meaning but excluding exhibitionism and verbal propositions.

New Zealand. The study combined a postal questionnaire in three Dunedin and one adjacent rural electoral districts with a follow-up in-person interview of a subset of subjects (Martin, Anderson, Romans, Mullen, & O'Shea, 1993; Mullen, Martin, Anderson, Romans, & Herbison, 1993). The prevalence rate using a narrower definition requiring genital contact was 20%. Two previous surveys with similar methodologies had produced estimates of 10% for genital contact sexual abuse (Mullen, Romans-Clarkson, Walton, & Herbison, 1988) and 13% for intrafamily sexual abuse (Bushnell, Wells, & Oakley-Browne, 1992).

Norway. The national Norwegian study was based on a postal questionnaire methodology with a relatively low response rate and a single screen question (Holter, 1990). Another probability sample of 118 women with a response rate of 90% was conducted by Schei (1990) in the city of Trondheim, and arrived at a rate of 14% using a broad definition of abuse and 9% if the definition was limited to actual genital contact.

South Africa. The subjects in this study were undergraduate psychology students at the University of Natal, including some of Black, Asian and mixed race background, who filled out a modified form of the Finkelhor (1979) student questionnaire. Another questionnaire study of 94 women psychology students at the University of Cape Town obtained disclosures of sexual abuse from 44% (Levett, 1989).

Spain. This national household survey interviewed adults aged 18 to 60 using a single screener embedded in a longer questionnaire related to opinions about sexual abuse (Lopez, Carpintero, Hernandez, Martin, & Fuertes, in press). An earlier pilot study of 300 subjects in Madrid, Salamanca, and two rural and semi-rural areas around Salamanca yielded slightly lower prevalence rates (Lopez, 1992)

Sweden. Three national surveys have been completed in Sweden. The 1983 study (Ronstrom, 1985) cited in Table 1 sampled people between 18–70; the 1985 study (Ronstrom, 1985) was limited to people 16–24; and the 1992 study (Edgardh, 1992) consisted of 17-year-olds only. The 1985 Swedish study, conducted like the earlier study through household contacts where interviewers gave respondents self-administered questionnaires, had rates somewhat lower than the earlier one (7% vs. 9% for females and 1% vs. 3% for males). The 1992 study (Edgardh, 1992) was part of a comprehensive school based self-administered questionnaire on the sexuality of 1942 nationally representative adolescents. Using a broad definition including exhibitionism, 12% of females and 7% of males reported abuse. For a more restrictive definition excluding exhibitionism, the rates were 7% and 3% respectively. A companion study of 210 school dropouts found rates of 26% for females and 4% for males using the more restrictive definition of abuse.

Switzerland. This study was part of the 10th year follow-up of a Zurich-based sample consisting of males who had been 19-year-old conscripts and females who had been 20-year-old first time voters at the start of this longitudinal study in 1978. The single screen question asked about a sexual experience as a child or adolescent that "you found distressing."

United States. The only national study in the United States was conducted by the Los Angeles Times and used four somewhat ambiguous questions (Finkelhor et al., 1990). Other local surveys have obtained higher rates using clearer and more specific screening questions (for review, see Peters, Wyatt, & Finkelhor, 1986). A more recent national survey found that experiences of forcible rape (penetration and force) prior to age 18 had been experienced by 9% of all women (Kilpatrick, 1992; Saunders et al., 1991).

Resumen—Investigaciones sobre abuso sexual en la niñez han sido realizadas en poblaciones adultas no clínicas por lo menos en 16 países además de los Estados Unidos y el Canadá, incluyendo 10 muestras nacionales probabilísticas. Todos los estudios han encontrado tasas en sentido general comparables a la investigación Norteamericana, que va desde 7% a 33% para las mujeres y 3% al 15% para los hombres. La mayoría de los estudios encontró la proporción de mujeres a hombres de ser alrededor de 1.5–3 a 1. Pocas comparaciones son posibles debido a diferencias metodológicas y de definiciones. Sin embargo, claramente confirman el abuso sexual como un problema internacional.

Résumé—French-language abstract unavailable at time of publication.