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NSVRC: AUG. 2012

Understanding child sexual abuse definitions and rates

Child sexual abuse is a pervasive public health problem that affects us all directly or indirectly. Child sexual abuse can cause many short- and long-term struggles for victims, offenders, families, communities, and larger social systems. There is hopeful evidence that rates of child sexual abuse, as well as other forms of child maltreatment, are declining. However, there is equally concerning evidence that the actual rates of child sexual abuse may not be fully known because of significant barriers victims and community leaders face in reporting crimes. Therefore, rates of child sexual abuse remain high.

What is child sexual abuse?

The first step to ending child sexual abuse is to understand what constitutes this epidemic. Child sexual abuse definitions vary across disciplines, social systems, research efforts, and laws. There are many forms of child sexual abuse, including but not limited to rape, fondling, sexual assault, exposure, voyeurism, and the commercial sexual exploitation of children. Sometimes, child sexual abuse is considered a type of child maltreatment, which also includes physical and psychological abuse as well as forms of neglect.

Barriers to reporting skew what we know about true rates of child sexual abuse

Child sexual abuse is a severely underreported crime. People who sexually abuse children are trusted not only by the children they harm; they are often trusted and respected members of their communities. Offenders frequently use “grooming” tactics to build a connection with children. Grooming can include giving children gifts or rewards, taking them on special outings, or simply giving children attention and affection they may be longing for. While not all offenders use physical force, many use threats to ensure that a child will stay quiet—threatening to harm the child, a loved one, or a pet; or by telling the child that no one will believe them, or that their parents won’t love them anymore if they tell.

Often, our society does not make it easy for children to talk about what is happening to them. When children try to tell someone about the abuse they are experiencing, they are often ignored, dismissed, or made to feel ashamed. Ironically, the very power that is used over children to safeguard their well-being is often exploited by offenders who sexually abuse children. This power imbalance also can create barriers to children having a voice and being able to tell their stories.

Barriers to reporting for children

Child sexual abuse is a crime that is perpetuated in silence and secrecy. Children may not feel they have anyone to tell, because the very people who are supposed to protect them are the ones abusing them or allowing the abuse to happen. Some children may not want to get the offender in trouble, or go to jail. These feelings can intensify when the perpetrator is a family member or close mentor. Some children may not think of telling anyone because

sexual abuse and exploitation is seen as "normal"—it has been a part of their larger family systems, environments, and communities. Children may feel guilty and blame themselves for the abuse they endure, or for liking aspects of the relationship with the offender. Children may not tell anyone what is happening because they do not want to get in trouble, or they are afraid of what people will think of them. Some may never tell because they simply do not understand what is happening to them.

Barriers to reporting for adults

Often the adults receiving the disclosure do not know what to do. They may not know who to call or what to say. They may feel like they have to prove that the abuse happened before they make a report—for fear that they are wrong or that the child is making it up. They may worry that it is none of their business and that they will make things worse by reporting the abuse to authorities. They may worry that by reporting a colleague or community member, they will make their school or other social system "look bad." They may worry that by making a report on behalf of a child, that they will lose their job or social status. They may be in utter disbelief because child sexual abuse is not something they have ever had to deal with before.

What are the actual rates of child sexual abuse?

In the U.S. studies show that one in four girls and one in six boys are sexually abused before their 18th birthdays (Finkelhor, Hotaling, Lewis & Smith, 1990). Different research methods used in gathering data (national population surveys vs. reported cases) as well as evolving definitions make it difficult to arrive at a definitive rate of child sexual abuse. For example, data sets such as those from Child Protective Services agencies may count reported cases of child sexual abuse or only cases that have been substantiated with evidence. Given the underreporting of child sexual abuse and the many challenges in producing evidence and successfully prosecuting this crime, these counts are likely much lower than the actual rate.

Continued investment in child sexual abuse prevention is critical

There is evidence that child sexual abuse has actually declined over the past decade. This decline is likely due to a number of factors, including society's increased investment in the well-being of children, economic and legal factors, as well as the combined efforts of social change agents. (However, the rates are still alarmingly high. The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study and others over the past 20 years continues to confirm that childhood sexual abuse puts children at significant risk for a wide range of physical, psychological, and social struggles. 2010 data from the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS) found that 42.2% of female rape victims were raped before the age of 18 and 27.8% of male victims were first raped when they were ten years old or younger. As we move forward, it is critical that we reinvest in preventing child sexual abuse and reaffirm our continued commitment to ensuring that all children have access to the services they need to survive and thrive in their lives.

What can you do?

We can each do our part by believing and supporting the children in our lives; by reporting any and all suspected child sexual abuse to child protective services or to law enforcement; by volunteering or donating to a sexual violence program in your community; and being role models to children by promoting healthy, respectful relationships. For more information, please contact us through resources@nsvrc.org or 1-877-739-3895.

References

Finkelhor, D., Hotaling, G., Lewis, I.A., & Smith, C. (1990). Sexual abuse in a national survey of adult men and women: Prevalence, characteristics, and risk factors. *Child Abuse and Neglect, 14(1)*, p. 19-28.