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Child Sexual Abuse in the United States: Problems, Progress

By Kate Blain

Reports of child sexual abuse are on the increase, and that's a plus. That it still is underreported is a problem. So say experts who deal with abused children.

Getting to the truth is not easy.

David Finkelhor, PhD, director of the Crimes Against Children Research Center (CCRC) at the University of New Hampshire, seems to sum up the problem of evaluating child sexual abuse in the United States in one sentence: "There is no single source for statistics on child victimizations."

The statistics may be improving, but they are still disturbing. According to a 2001 National Crime Victimization Survey, 1.9 of every 1,000 children in the United States are raped or sexually assaulted each year. CCRC studies estimate that from 1990 to 2003, the number dropped from 2.3 per 1,000 children to 1.2. That's a 46 percent drop in substantiated cases, but it still leaves children sexually assaulted at a rate three times higher than that for adults.

Better abuse reporting means "something's working," stated Finkelhor. He attributed the decline in cases to economic improvements, prevention efforts, incarceration of offenders, and the use of psychiatric medications for both juvenile and adult offenders.

Marsha Gilmer-Tullis of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children added to that list the fact that teachers, law enforcement officials, and medical personnel are now mandated reporters—required by law to report suspected abuse.

Education is the key, she said. Where children were once told to avoid strangers, families now understand that abusers are more often known to a child than not.

Charol Shakeshaft, PhD, of Hofstra University, studies sexual abuse by educators and broke down the statistics as follows: 25 percent of child sexual abuse is perpetrated by a parent

or “parent substitute”; another 25 percent is by other relatives; and the rest is mostly by acquaintances. Only a small percentage of abusers are unknown to their victims.

Child sexual abuse crosses all boundaries of race or age. Girls are abused much more often than boys, composing 78-89 percent of victims. A third of those who perpetrate sexual abuse on children are juveniles themselves.

Whether socioeconomic status plays a role in abuse likelihood is debatable; but the experts agreed that whatever factors cause a child to be vulnerable can contribute to sexual abuse. Finkelhor cited parental alcoholism and marital conflict as contributing factors. A major U.S. research project, the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study, pointed out that “household dysfunction” such as domestic violence, mental illness of a parent, or drug use in a child’s home often went hand-in-hand with sexual abuse occurrence—abuse that, in turn, was revealed to “have a powerful relation to adult health a half-century later.”

“If you’re a child being bullied, your family’s struggling, [or] your esteem is not as high as it should be, you’re vulnerable to being groomed or seduced by somebody who’s able to hook into those insecurities,” Gilmer-Tullis concluded.

“Individuals who are going to prey on children are going to put themselves in situations where they have access to children. That could be anything [from] volunteering [to] sports programs,” said Gilmer-Tullis.

Perpetrators of sexual abuse, most of whom are male, speak a language that vulnerable children often want to hear. Gilmer-Tullis recalled instances in which predators acted appalled at a parent’s limits on a child, telling the child, “But you’re so mature.” Abusers also build trust by claiming to understand the child better than anyone else and flattering their victims with compliments.

Shakeshaft split sexual abusers into two categories: fixated abusers, who get their sexual gratification from children and are hard to stop from acting out; and opportunistic abusers, who are less likely to commit abuse when closely supervised.

Programs that focus on teaching children and those around them to guard against sexual abuse seem to be having positive effects. Shakeshaft’s studies on sexual abuse by educators list points to make with children, from avoiding adults who want to spend time alone with them to becoming aware that behavior changes in their friends might indicate that they have been abused.

“Rumors are an important source of information on educator sexual misconduct,” she noted in one study.

Finkelhor believes that better abuse reporting can be encouraged by making the process easier on the victim—“decreasing the burden and trauma of the investigation.”

“Speed up the investigation and trial; make sure the kids are interviewed by sensitive and trained individuals; reduce the likelihood of retaliation [by abusers]; make sure [victims] get counseling in the aftermath,” he added.

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