

Current Information on the Scope and Nature of Child Sexual Abuse

David Finkelhor

Abstract

Approximately 150,000 confirmed cases of child sexual abuse were reported to child welfare authorities in the United States during 1993. This number represents about 15% of the more than one million confirmed cases of all child abuse and neglect. But the true scope of this problem is better reflected in retrospective surveys of adults, and this article summarizes data from 19 of these surveys. Considerable evidence exists to show that at least 20% of American women and 5% to 10% of American men experienced some form of sexual abuse as children. The rates are somewhat lower among people born before World War II, but there is little evidence of a dramatic increase for recent generations. The studies provide little evidence that race or socioeconomic circumstances are major risk factors. They do show elevated risk for children who experienced parental inadequacy, unavailability, conflict, harsh punishment, and emotional deprivation.

Adult retrospective studies are also good sources of information about the characteristics of abuse. Most sexual abuse is committed by men (90%) and by persons known to the child (70% to 90%), with family members constituting one-third to one-half of the perpetrators against girls and 10% to 20% of the perpetrators against boys. Family members constitute a higher percentage of the perpetrators in child protective agency cases because the mandate of these agencies generally precludes their involvement in extrafamily abuse. Around 20% to 25% of child sexual abuse cases involve penetration or oral-genital contact. The peak age of vulnerability is between 7 and 13.

Studies of the criminal justice processing of sexual abusers suggest that, compared with other violent criminals, slightly fewer are prosecuted, but of those prosecuted, slightly more are convicted. Studies conducted in the 1980s also showed that, once convicted, relatively few sexual abusers receive sentences longer than one year, while 32% to 46% serve no jail time. Overall, there is little evidence to suggest that either the child welfare system or the criminal justice system abandons its usual standards of operation and acts hysterically when confronted with sexual abuse.

Sexual abuse has been a prominent topic of public concern for more than a decade, but many basic facts about the problem remain unclear or in dispute. This article reviews current knowledge about some of the most frequently asked questions: How many children are sexually abused? Is abuse increasing? And who is at risk? Unfortunately, research has provided few definitive answers to these questions. Fortunately, new knowledge is accumulating rapidly.

David Finkelhor, Ph.D., is research professor of sociology and co-director of the Family Research Laboratory at the University of New Hampshire.

Incidence: Measuring Sexual Abuse That Comes to the Attention of Professionals Each Year

The term *child sexual abuse* covers a wide range of acts. In general, legal and research definitions of child sexual abuse require two elements: (1) sexual activities involving a child and (2) an "abusive condition" such as coercion or a large age gap between the participants, indicating lack of consensuality. (See Box 1 for a discussion of the elements of child sexual abuse and some examples of definitional controversies.)

Because sexual abuse is usually a hidden offense, there are no statistics on how many cases actually occur each year. Statistics cover only the cases that are disclosed to child protection agencies or to law enforcement.

About 15% of all substantiated cases concerned sexual abuse, representing approximately 150,000 children.

There are three official sources of data on the incidence of child sexual abuse cases coming to professional attention: (1) the National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS), a federally funded research project, (2) state child protection agencies, and (3) law enforcement agencies. (See Box 2 for further discussion of these three official data sources.) Although official statistics do not provide an accurate count of all instances of child sexual abuse, they do indicate the burden of cases falling on agencies and professionals.

■ *NIS data.* Possibly the most reliable figures for annual incidence come from the National Incidence Study. The NIS figure is an important one because it includes an estimate of cases known to professionals but not reported to child protection agencies. (See Box 2.) Unfortunately, the most recent NIS figures¹—133,600 cases of sexual abuse known to professionals in the course of a year, or a rate of about 2.1 cases for every 1,000 American children—are for 1986, and updated figures will not be

available until late 1994. Because reported cases of sexual abuse were growing very quickly prior to 1986, these 1986 numbers are seriously out of date.

■ *Child protection data.* There are two quasi-official sources for national statistics based on compilations of reports made to state child protection agencies. One is the Fifty-State Survey of Child Abuse and Neglect,² an aggregation of state data collected by the National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse from interviews with state child protection administrators. The data in that report for 1993 suggest that about 11% of all child abuse and neglect reports concerned sexual abuse, representing approximately 330,000 children. About 15% of all *substantiated cases* concerned sexual abuse, representing approximately 150,000 children. Typically, substantiation means that the child protective investigation found sufficient evidence to conclude that abuse occurred. Reports without substantiation are not necessarily false or groundless (evidence may simply be insufficient to judge), but the estimate of substantiated cases—150,000 cases or 2.4 cases per 1,000 children—is the more appropriate and conservative one to cite as a measure of the number of actual cases coming to the attention of child abuse authorities.

Another estimate for substantiated cases of sexual abuse known to child protection agencies—130,000 for 1992—comes from a separate official source, the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System.³ Unfortunately, it is based on incomplete data that omit the states of California, Maryland, and West Virginia. Thus, the most current and relatively accurate estimate of sexual abuse cases coming to the attention of child protection authorities in the United States is the 150,000 figure from the Fifty-State Survey.

In spite of some perceptions, sexual abuse is not the most frequent kind of child abuse that is reported or substantiated. Neglect is the most common, making up about 47% of substantiated cases, followed by physical abuse, which makes up 25%, and sexual abuse at 15%.² Compared with other forms of child abuse and neglect, however, a higher percentage of sexual abuse reports are substantiated.² This is probably because sexual abuse is such a serious allegation that reporters wait until they have a high level of confidence before they report. Sexual abuse

Box 1.

Definitions of Child Sexual Abuse

In general, legal and research definitions of child sexual abuse require two elements: (1) sexual activities involving a child and (2) an "abusive condition."

Sexual Activities Involving a Child

The term *sexual activities involving a child* refers to activities intended for sexual stimulation. These activities exclude contact with a child's genitals for caretaking purposes. They are generally categorized as contact sexual abuse and noncontact sexual abuse.

CONTACT SEXUAL ABUSE is touching of the sexual portions of the child's body (genitals or anus) or touching the breasts of pubescent females, or the child's touching the sexual portions of a partner's body. Contact sexual abuse is of two types:

Penetration, which includes penile, digital, and object penetration of the vagina, mouth, or anus, and

Nonpenetration, which includes fondling of sexual portions of the child's body, sexual kissing, or the child's touching sexual parts of a partner's body.

NONCONTACT SEXUAL ABUSE usually includes exhibitionism, voyeurism, and the involvement of the child in the making of pornography. Sometimes verbal sexual propositions or harassment (such as making lewd comments about the child's body) are included as well.

Abusive Conditions

Abusive conditions exist when

the child's partner has a *large age or maturational advantage* over the child; or

the child's partner is *in a position of authority or in a caretaking relationship* with the child; or

the activities are carried out against the child *using force or trickery*.

All of these conditions indicate an unequal power relationship and violate our notion of consensuality.

Definitional Controversies

While there is clear societal consensus that certain acts constitute sexual abuse, some definitional controversies remain. For example, should abuse by peers (like date rape) be considered child sexual abuse? Many researchers count peer assaults as sexual abuse,^a but others exclude it unless there is a significant age difference.^b

Definitional controversies also extend to parental caretaking and discipline. For example, is it sexual abuse to expose a child repeatedly and neglectfully to parental intercourse or to subject the child to multiple intrusive enemas or genital examinations? Parents may engage in activities which violate community standards and which may traumatize a child's sexual development, even if the parents are not consciously using the child for purposes of sexual arousal or stimulation.

Some people favor calling such events sexual abuse if the event had an abusive impact on the child's sexual development. Others, however, would consider the same act a form of emotional maltreatment rather than sexual abuse, absent an explicitly sexual purpose on the part of the parent. So long as there is a lack of societal consensus concerning these issues, no clear-cut, uniform definition of child sexual abuse will emerge.

^a Russell, D. The prevalence and seriousness of incestuous abuse: Stepfathers vs. biological fathers. *Child Abuse & Neglect* (1984) 8:15-22.

^b Bagley, C. The prevalence and mental health sequelae of child abuse in a community sample of women aged 18-27. *Canadian Journal of Community Mental Health* (1991) 10, 1:103-16.

may also receive more intensive investigation from child protection officials.⁴

The number of reported cases of sexual abuse has risen faster in recent years than the number of reported cases of other forms of child abuse and neglect. Between 1980 and 1986, according to the National Incidence Study, sexual abuse cases known to professionals grew approximately 166%, or more than 17% per year, a much higher rate of growth than child maltreatment as a whole, which grew about 10% per year.¹ The rate of growth of overall child abuse and neglect reports slowed in the late 1980s and early 1990s, down to about 6% per year.² But in 1990, the number of sexual abuse reports increased at a rate greater than that of the overall child abuse rate.⁵

■ *Criminal justice system data.* The two current national crime data systems are not capable of tracking sexual abuse because the National Crime Survey collects no data on children under 12, and the Uniform Crime Report does not break down crimes by age of victim. (See Box 2.)

■ *Cases outside official statistics.* Of course, the most serious problem in determining the scope of child sexual abuse concerns cases that do not come to the attention of agencies or professionals. This is a problem that cannot be easily resolved with current methodologies for collecting either child protection or criminal justice data. Because of the secrecy and shame that surround sexual abuse, many instances are never disclosed.⁶ As the next

The number of reported cases of sexual abuse has risen faster in recent years than the number of reported cases of other forms of child abuse and neglect.

section of this article describes, surveys of adults concerning their experiences as children (prevalence statistics) probably provide the most complete estimates of the actual extent of child sexual abuse. (See Table 1 for a comparison of incidence and prevalence statistics.)

If rates of sexual abuse among children today are as great as what is reported by adults in retrospective surveys, approxi-

mately 500,000 new cases occur each year. (See Box 3.) The incidence figure of 150,000 cited earlier means that less than one-third of all occurring cases are currently being identified and substantiated by child protection authorities, in spite of ongoing efforts. Of course, some unknown number of additional cases is being handled exclusively in the criminal justice system. Nevertheless, the large discrepancy between prevalence and child protection numbers suggests that much abuse is not being addressed by authorities.

Prevalence: Estimating the Number of People Who Suffer Sexual Abuse at Some Point During Childhood

Because so much sexual abuse remains undisclosed, many researchers have concluded that the best picture of the scope of the problem is obtained by asking adults about their childhood experiences. (See Table 2 for a summary of 19 such adult retrospective surveys.⁷⁻²⁵ The chart contains most of the adult retrospective surveys completed in the United States and Canada since 1980 using community samples and random sampling techniques. Surveys of college students were not included.)

Prevalence studies vary greatly in their definition of abuse, methodological approach, and quality. One problem is the lack of a common definition of abuse: for example, the use of different ages (16 or 18) to define the end of childhood, and the inclusion or exclusion of noncontact experiences or abuse by peers.

The percentage of adults disclosing histories of sexual abuse in these studies ranges from 2% to 62% for females and from 3% to 16% for males. Of these, five were national random samples. The *Los Angeles Times* survey reported sexual abuse of 27% of the women and 16% of the men of all ages in the United States.^{13,26} A national survey of the correlates of women's problem drinking estimated a history of sexual abuse in the backgrounds of 19% to 23% of all women over age 21, depending on which definition of sexual abuse was used.²³ The National Survey of Children found a history of rape or forced sex in 8% of women and 1% of men in a national sample of 18- to 22-year-olds.¹⁷

Box 2

Official Sources of Data on Child Sexual Abuse

There are three official sources of data on child sexual abuse: (1) the National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS), a federally funded research project, (2) child protection agencies, and (3) law enforcement agencies. Significant overlap exists between child protection and law enforcement data.

National Incidence Study (NIS)

Possibly the most reliable figures for annual incidence come from the federally funded National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect.^a This study is based on an intensive effort (repeated every six or seven years) to count cases in a representative sample of counties and extrapolate to the national level. NIS data vary significantly from statistics collected by child protection and law enforcement because this survey not only counts in an unduplicated fashion all cases reported to either of these agencies, but also interviews mandated reporters (doctors and other health care and mental health providers, educators, and child care providers) to obtain an estimate of the number of cases of which these professionals are aware, but which were not reported to child protection or law enforcement. (There may also be unreported cases of which professionals are aware, which they do not reveal to NIS researchers.) The NIS also applies uniform definitions of abuse, which include some forms of noncontact abuse, such as the use of children in child pornography, and some forms of peer abuse, if negligent actions by a caretaker were involved. In both 1980 and 1986, the NIS found that about 40% of the cases of sexual abuse of which professionals were aware were never reported to child protection agencies or to police.

Child Protection Data

Child protection agencies (noncriminal child welfare investigatory units) collect data only on cases where the child's caretakers are alleged to have been abusive or to have neglectfully allowed abuse to occur. Their specific mandate—to intervene when a child is known to be living or cared for in an unsafe environment—affects the scope of sexual abuse they encounter. These agencies often do not count or investigate abuse in which no caretaker (broadly defined in most states to include teachers, baby-sitters, or extended family) was involved at least indirectly. Thus, estimates provided by these authorities can exclude sexual assaults by strangers, gang rapes or peer rapes, or even numerous seductions by adult or adolescent acquaintances of the child where the parents were not neglectful. Any such incidents may or may not be known to police.

Child protection agency records reflect the number of reports received and the outcomes of investigations. These records are difficult to compare from state to state because of differences in standards and terminology, and differences in definitions of abuse and levels of substantiation. The Fifty-State Survey^b and the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System^c both aggregate these data from the states, but both acknowledge the crudeness of the resulting numbers, given the heterogeneity of state data. Efforts are being made to obtain more uniformity across states, but progress is slow because compliance is voluntary and the incentives for states to reorganize their data gathering are few.

Criminal Justice System Data

Child sexual abuse is a crime, and many cases in which the parents are abusive or neglectful are also prosecuted by the criminal justice system. Cases of child sexual abuse in which caretakers were neither abusive nor neglectful are handled exclusively by the criminal justice system.

There are two sources of national crime data. The Uniform Crime Report^d is the FBI's national aggregation of local crime statistics, but it does not break down any crime, including sexual offenses, by the age of the victim, except for homicide. So sexual assaults against adults cannot be distinguished from sexual abuse against children. The National Crime Survey^e produces annual estimates of crime by interviewing large representative samples of the population each year. But the NCS does not interview and does not report on crimes against persons under age 12.

There are plans under way to implement a National Incidence Based Reporting System as a replacement to the Uniform Crime Report, which will be capable of breaking down reported crimes by their characteristics like age of victim and the nature of the victim-perpetrator relationship.^f This system will, however, only count cases reported to law enforcement, thus possibly missing some cases within the child protection system. Moreover, it will not be operational on a national basis for many years to come.

Thus, there is not yet yearly compilation of national criminal justice data that provide useful information about the incidence or characteristics of child sexual abuse.

^a Sedlak, A. *National Incidence and Prevalence of Child Abuse and Neglect: 1988*. Revised report. Rockville, MD: Westat, 1991.

^b McCurdy, K., and Daro, D. *Current Trends in Child Abuse Reporting and Fatalities: The Results of the 1993 Annual Fifty-State Survey*. Working Paper No. 808. Prepared by the National Center on Child Abuse Prevention Research. Chicago: National Committee for Prevention of Child Abuse, 1994.

^c U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect. *National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System: 1992 Summary Data Component*. Working Paper No. 3. Washington, DC: DHHS, 1994.

^d Federal Bureau of Investigation. *Uniform Crime Reports for the United States*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office. Each yearly edition is kept up to date by quarterly cumulated releases.

^e Bureau of Justice Statistics, Department of Justice. *National Crime Survey Reports*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office. Produced annually.

^f Bureau of Justice Statistics, Department of Justice. *National Incidence Based Reporting System Handbook*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1988.

Table 1

| Comparing Incidence and Prevalence | | |
|--|--|---|
| | Incidence | Prevalence |
| Definition of incidence and prevalence | Incidence: number of cases of sexual abuse that come to the attention of professionals during a year. | Prevalence: proportion of the adult population that have been victims of sexual abuse at some time in their childhood. |
| Sources of data | Primarily child protection agencies and, to a lesser extent, law enforcement and medical or mental health professionals. Data are available only on cases that come to the attention of professionals. | Surveys of adult members of the public, asking about their childhood experiences. |
| Most reliable statistics | Approximately 150,000 were reported and substantiated by child protection agencies in 1993. | Approximately 20% of adult women and 5% to 10% of adult men experienced sexual abuse at some time in their childhood. |
| What ages of children are included? | Varies by state law. Cutoff age is generally 16 to 18. | Varies by study. Generally includes up to ages 16 to 18. |
| What events are included in the statistics? | Statistics are collected on events that are <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • disclosed to child protective services, and in some cases to other authorities like police, • disclosed by professionals to NIS but not disclosed to child protective services or police. | Includes events that meet the criteria for incidence reports, plus events that were <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • never disclosed to a professional, • never disclosed by professionals to child protective services, • outside the definitions used by child protective services. (e.g., date rape). |
| Are noncontact sexual experiences included? | Usually not, but some episodes of exhibitionism are reported to police and counted in some incidence studies. | Varies by study. Two researchers reported prevalence rates both ways (a rate for contact abuse only, and a rate for contact and noncontact abuse combined). ^{a,b} |
| What percentage of cases involves penetration? | Up to 50%, including object penetration and oral-genital contact. | About 20% to 25% of childhood episodes reported by adult women involved vaginal penetration or oral-genital contact. |

^aRussell, D.H. The prevalence and seriousness of incestuous abuse: Stepfathers vs. biological fathers. *Child Abuse & Neglect* (1984) 8:15-22.

^bWyatt, G.E. The sexual abuse of Afro-American and white American women in childhood. *Child Abuse & Neglect* (1985) 9:507-19.

The National Women's Study reported forcible rape before age 18 to 9% of American women.^{20,27,28} The Badgley Commission⁷ revealed sexual abuse to 18% of women and 8% of men in Canada.²⁹

In the past decade, at least 20 adult retrospective studies have been conducted in countries outside North America, including Australia, Austria, Great Britain, Greece, New Zealand, Spain, and the Scandinavian countries. These studies reveal a distribution of findings similar to the North American studies, with a range of 7% to 36% for women and 3% to 29% for men.³⁰

In a review of the findings of 19 surveys, including some student samples, Peters, Wyatt, and Finkelhor³¹ concluded that the most dramatic variations were not primarily explained by the definitions used, the sampling techniques, the response rates, the socioeconomic status of respondents, or whether subjects were interviewed by phone, in person, or with self-administered questionnaires. Most important was the number of specific questions that were asked to ascertain a possible history of abuse. Five of six studies asking women only a single question had rates under 13%. Seven of eight studies asking two or more questions had rates over 19%. The review concluded that multiple questions were more effective in gaining disclosures because they gave respondents more cues regarding the various kinds of experiences that the study was asking about and because they gave the respondents a longer time and more opportunities to overcome embarrassment and hesitation about making a disclosure.

These prevalence studies have led most reviewers to conclude that at least one in five adult women in North America experienced sexual abuse (either contact or noncontact) during childhood.^{31,32} This conclusion is based on the fact that the more methodologically sophisticated studies using multiple screen questions and random samples have had findings this high or higher.

The most commonly cited specific figures for females are 27% from the *Los Angeles Times* study because of its national scope and 34% (contact abuse only) from the Russell study because of its careful methodology. These findings are not without limitations. The *Los Angeles Times* survey included questions that were vague with regard to the exact types of experi-

ences being asked about, making it far from ideal. (For example, one preliminary screener asked about "anyone trying or succeeding in having any kind of sexual intercourse with you *or anything like that*" with no follow-up questions about the details of the activities to see what "anything like that" might have meant to the respondent.) The often-cited Russell study, which was among the most meticulous in its methodology (it employed explicit definitions, a good questionnaire design, and extensive interviewer training), was limited to a sample from San Francisco.^{33,34} A national study using the Russell definition of sexual abuse (although somewhat different screening questions) put the national prevalence at 19%.²³ Enough credible figures cluster around or exceed 20% to suggest that the number of female victims has been at least this high.³⁵

Prevalence studies have led most reviewers to conclude that at least one in five adult women in North America experienced sexual abuse during childhood.

The number of male victims is more problematic because it has been the subject of fewer quality studies. The 16% prevalence estimates from the *Los Angeles Times* survey (often cited as one in six males) is among the highest in the literature based on community surveys¹³ and is subject to the limitations mentioned earlier. The range of other community studies about males tends to be between 3% and 11%,^{16,18,24,36-38} but many of these studies used the inferior format of a single question. In light of the limitations of these other studies, use of the 16% *Los Angeles Times* figure is defensible as the only truly national estimate, but it has less corroboration from other studies than the estimate for women. A more conservative estimate for men of 5% to 10% would have support from a variety of studies.

When interpreting prevalence findings, most researchers have warned that all percentages based on adult retrospective reports are probably underestimates, although not so far off as the official incidence studies cited earlier. For comparison, see Box 3. It has generally been presumed that a certain percentage of

Table 2

| The Prevalence of Child Sexual Abuse: 19 Adult Retrospective Surveys ^a | | | | | | |
|--|--|--|--|---------------|--|-------------------------------|
| Author | Geographic Area | Sample Size | Sampling Method | Response Rate | Mode of Administration (SAQ, FFI, TI) ^b | Number of Screening Questions |
| Bagley, Allard, McCormick, et al. (1984), reanalyzed by Bagley (1988) ⁷ | Canada | 1,006 women and 1,002 men | Probability sample ^c from 210 communities | 94% | SAQ | 4 |
| Bagley and Ramsay (1986) ⁸ | Calgary | 401 women | Stratified random sample of western city | 74% | FFI | 1 |
| Bagley (1991) ⁹ | Calgary | 750 women aged 18 to 27 | Random sample from reverse telephone directory listings taken from 5 neighborhoods representing 5 different SES levels | 66% | FFI | 1 |
| Elliott and Briere (1992) ¹⁰ | United States | 2,963 professional women | Surveys mailed to random sample of women in 12 professions | 55% | SAQ | 9 |
| Essock-Vitale and McGuire (1985) ¹¹ | Los Angeles | 300 white non-Hispanic middle-class women ages 35-45 | Random digit dialing | 66% | FFI | 1 |
| Finkelhor (1984) ¹² | Boston metropolitan area | 334 women and 187 men | Probability sample of households with children 6-14 yrs | 74% | FFI + SAQ | 2 |
| Finkelhor, Hotelling, Lewis, and Smith (1990) ¹³ | United States | 1,374 women and 1,252 men | Random digit dialing | 76% | TI | 4 |
| George and Winfield-Laird (1986) ¹⁴ | North Carolina (rural and urban areas) | 1,157 women aged 18-64 | 3-stage stratified random sample; neighborhoods stratified for age, sex, race, and urban/rural characteristics | 79% | FFI | 1 |
| Keckley Market Research (1983) ¹⁵ | Nashville area | 603 adults | Random phone dialing within Davidson County | 61% | TI | 1 |
| Kercher and McShane (1984) ¹⁶ | Texas | 593 women and 461 men | Random sample of persons with Texas driver's license | 53% | SAQ | 1 |

^a This chart contains information on most of the adult retrospective surveys completed in the United States and Canada using community samples and reported since 1980.

^b TI: telephone interview; FFI: face-to-face interview; SAQ: self-administered questionnaire.

^c A probability sample is a sample in which every member of the population has an equal probability of selection.

^d A quota sample is one in which people are selected into a sample based on characteristics such as gender and race.

(See notes nos. 7-25 in the endnote section of this article for complete citations.)

| Definition: Age limits | Definition: Age differential required? | Definition: Contact abuse only? | Definition: Unwanted contact only? | Reported Prevalence Among Females | Reported Prevalence Among Males |
|---------------------------|--|---|---|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Before 18 | No | Sexual acts including exposure | Unwanted | 18% | 8% |
| Before 16 | 3 years | At least manual assault on child's genital area | Unwanted | 22% | n/a |
| Before 17 | No | *Touch or interfere with sex parts of your body* | Unwanted | 32% | n/a |
| Before 16 | 5 years | Contact only (from fondling to intercourse) | Wanted or unwanted | 27% | n/a |
| Before 18 | No | *Raped or molested* | *Raped or molested* | 17% | n/a |
| Before 17 | No | All types of contact and noncontact abuse | Respondent considered the experience to be sexual abuse | 15% | 6% |
| Before 18 | No | All types of contact and noncontact abuse | Respondent considered the experience to be sexual abuse | 27% | 16% |
| Before 16 | No | *Contact with the sexual parts of your body or their body* | *You were pressured into doing more sexually than you wanted to do, that is, someone pressured you against your will into forced contact* | 2% | n/a |
| *During childhood* | *Excludes playing among peers and dates* | *Ever asked to participate or do anything sexually as a child that you did not want to do or felt uncomfortable about, excluding playing among peers and dates* | *Anything that you did not want to do or felt uncomfortable about* | 11% | 7% |
| *As a child* | *Between a child and an adult . . . or person in the position of power or control* | *Sexual abuse . . . includes contacts or interactions* | Unwanted | 11% | 3% |

Table 2 (continued)

| The Prevalence of Child Sexual Abuse: 19 Adult Retrospective Surveys ^a | | | | | | |
|---|----------------------------|-------------------------------|---|---|--|-------------------------------|
| Author | Geographic Area | Sample Size | Sampling Method | Response Rate | Mode of Administration (SAQ, FFI, TI) ^b | Number of Screening Questions |
| Moore, Nord, and Peterson (1989) ¹⁷ | United States | 1,100 young adults ages 17-23 | National probability sample ^c of young people first identified and interviewed in 1976 | 82% | TI | 1 |
| Murphy (1987) ¹⁸ | Central Minnesota | 415 women and 403 men | Random digit dialing | 71% | TI | 1 |
| Russell (1983) ¹⁹ | San Francisco | 930 women | Probability sample | 64% | FFI | 14 |
| Saunders, Kilpatrick, Lipovsky, et al. (1991) ²⁰ | United States | 4,009 women | Random digit dialing | 82% | TI | 4 |
| Siegel, Sorenson, Golding, et al. (1986) ²¹ | Los Angeles | 1,623 women and 1,459 men | Area probability sample | 68% | FFI | 1 |
| Springs and Friedrich (1992) ²² | Rural Midwestern community | 511 women ages 18-50 | Random sample of female patients ages 18-50 who had used outpatient family practice clinic for any reason in 1988 or 1989 | 39% | SAQ | 1 |
| Wilsnack, Klassen, Vogetanz, and Harris (1994) ²³ | United States | 1,099 women over 21 | Probability sample with oversample of heavy drinkers | 85% (completion rate for women 31 and older followed up from 1981 survey) 91% (completion rate for new sample 21-30) | FFI | 8 |
| Wolf (1992) ²⁴ | Kentucky | 354 women and 283 men | Probability sample | 73% | TI | 1 |
| Wyatt (1985) ²⁵ | Los Angeles County | 248 women ages 18-36 | Random digit dialing to compose a quota sample ^d | 75% | FFI | 8 |

^a This chart contains information on most of the adult retrospective surveys completed in the United States and Canada using community samples and reported since 1980.

^b TI: telephone interview; FFI: face-to-face interview; SAQ: self-administered questionnaire.

^c A probability sample is a sample in which every member of the population has an equal probability of selection.

^d A quota sample is one in which people are selected into a sample based on characteristics such as gender and race.

(See notes nos. 7-25 in the endnote section of this article for complete citations.)

| Definition: Age limits | Definition: Age differential required? | Definition: Contact abuse only? | Definition: Unwanted contact only? | Reported Prevalence Among Females | Reported Prevalence Among Males |
|---------------------------|--|---|--|--|---------------------------------|
| Before 18 | No | *Have sex ... or were raped?* | *Have sex against your will, or were raped* | 8% | 1% |
| Before 18 | *By an adult* | *Unwanted sexual contact such as unwanted sexual touching of the person's body or unwanted intercourse* | *Using physical or psychological force to engage in any unwanted sexual contact* | 13% | 3% |
| Before 18 | No | Separate statistics calculated for contact only and for combined contact and noncontact | Included both wanted and unwanted incidents, if the child was 13 or under, or if the perpetrator was a family member; extrafamilial incidents involving children ages 14-17 were included only if they involved rape or attempted rape | 54% including noncontact abuse, 38% contact abuse only | n/a |
| Before 18 | No | *Rape, forced sexual contact, or attempted sexual assault* | *Rape, forced sexual contact, or attempted sexual assault* | 9% | n/a |
| Before 16 | No | *By sexual contact, we mean their touching your sexual parts, your touching their sexual parts, or sexual intercourse.* | *Has anyone ever tried to pressure or force you to have sexual contact?* | 7% | 4% |
| Before 18 | 5 years or force involved | *Important sexual experiences* | If client was at least 15 at the time of the incident, only incidents involving force were included | 22% | n/a |
| Before 18 | For Intrafamily (Russell definitions); for under 13 (Wyatt definition) | Including forced exposure of respondent and exhibition by perpetrator | Included both wanted and unwanted if the perpetrator was a family member 5 or more years older (Russell definition); included both wanted and unwanted if child was under 13 and respondent 5 or more years older (Wyatt definition). | 19% (Russell definition), 23% (Wyatt definition) | n/a |
| Before 16 | No | *Any act directed toward the respondent that the respondent now views as a form of sexual abuse,* including noncontact, touching, and rape. | Unwanted or now viewed as abuse | 27% | 9% |
| Before 18 | 5 years or coercion involved | Separate statistics calculated for contact only and for combined contact and noncontact. | Included all wanted or unwanted sexual events for children 12 years or under; included only unwanted events for children over 12 | 62% including noncontact abuse, 45% contact abuse only | n/a |

sexual abuse victims would fail to disclose their victimization in retrospective studies—no matter how methodologically sophisticated the approach—because of embarrassment, privacy concerns, or simply because they did not remember. The literature on victimization surveys suggests that it is difficult to remember more than a year previously, not to mention the 20- and 30-year time spans required to recall childhood events. Indeed, Williams,³⁹ in a follow-up of 100 girls who were seen in a hospital emergency room with diagnoses of child sexual abuse prior to age 13, found that 38% failed to disclose this episode in a study 17 years later, even in response to a very detailed history-taking questionnaire. Although Williams's abuse victims were younger on average, more seriously abused, and more socioeconomically disadvantaged than typical abuse victims, her finding that 17% of abused women were misclassified as nonabused suggests that prevalence surveys do underestimate abuse and especially the extent of more serious abuse at younger ages.

In the more representative adult retrospective surveys around 20% to 25% of the episodes reported by women involved vaginal penetration or oral-genital contact.

On the other hand, the question should also be asked whether adult prevalence estimates could be subject to inflation, as well. In other words, do some respondents possibly fabricate or enlarge trivial episodes in a way that exaggerates prevalence estimates? Although this may occur occasionally, no evidence suggests that fabrication is a major threat to the validity of victimization surveys. The weight of evidence from victimization surveys and from studies of sexual behavior and other sensitive subjects is that the withholding of disclosures is a much larger problem than the fabrication of disclosures.⁴⁰

It needs to be remembered that, even if in present-day America there may appear to be some "secondary gain" to considering oneself a "survivor of sexual abuse," many of the prevalence surveys were completed in an earlier epoch when the climate was quite different. Kinsey's finding from the World War II era that

24% of women had preadolescent sexual contact with older males is consistent with the findings of more recent studies.⁴¹

In conclusion, there is considerable accumulated evidence that at least 20% of American women and 5% to 10% of American men experienced some form of sexual abuse as children.

Sexual Abuse Involving Penetration

The proportion of sexual abuse cases involving penetration depends on whether we are discussing all sexual abuse that occurs or just that which is reported to child protection or law enforcement. As might be expected, reported cases are more serious and more frequently involve penetration. Estimates for penetrative acts (including penile and object penetration and oral-genital contact) run as high as 50% among cases reported to either child protection or criminal justice officials.⁴² In the more representative adult retrospective surveys^{7,25,43} around 20% to 25% of the episodes reported by women involved vaginal penetration or oral-genital contact.

Acts of penetration tend to be more common among postpubescent victims and in abusive relationships that have continued over an extended period of time. Although the criminal code and, hence, law enforcement, places a lot of emphasis on distinguishing between sexual crimes that do involve penetration and those that do not (for example, the statutory distinction between rape and attempted rape is based on whether penetration occurred), child protective and mental health professionals have been less concerned with this distinction. In part, their attitude reflects research (and clinical experience) that has found non-penetrative abuse frequently to have an equally serious impact on the children.⁴⁴ It also reflects an awareness that penetration is only one among several other aspects of the abuse—the betrayal of trust, the amount of violence, and the attendant psychological coercion—that must be evaluated to judge the seriousness of an episode.

Fabricated Reports of Sexual Abuse

Fabricated reports of sexual abuse do occur, and some highly publicized cases that resulted in acquittals or dropped

Box 3

Relating Incidence Figures to Prevalence Figures

Child sexual abuse is measured in two ways, incidence and prevalence (see Table 1). These statistics come from very different sources and are based on slightly different definitions. Still, one can relate the two. For example, converting prevalence figures into annual rates can give a crude indication of to what extent child sexual abuse is underreported.

Using adult prevalence figures, and assuming that there has been no substantial increase or decrease in the amount of abuse over time, one can make a rough estimate of the number of children abused each year.

Assumptions:

- There are 63,000,000 children in the United States currently between the ages of 0 and 17.
- Of women, 20% report at least one episode of sexual abuse during childhood (see text).
- Of men, 7% report at least one episode of sexual abuse during childhood (see text).
- For mathematical simplicity, assume an equal number of boys and girls and only one report per victim.

31,500,000 girls x 20% incidence rate in childhood = 6,300,000 girl victims
 31,500,000 boys x 7% incidence rate in childhood = 2,205,000 boy victims
 8,505,000 total victims

8,505,000 / 17 years equals about 500,000 child victims per year

If approximately 500,000 children become victims of sexual abuse each year and 150,000 of those cases are disclosed to and substantiated by child protection authorities, less than a third of all occurring cases are reflected in the current incidence figures. The discrepancy between the count provided by child protection authorities and the annual incidence estimate derived from prevalence studies can be explained in terms of three factors:

- (1) cases not being disclosed to authorities,
- (2) disclosed cases that meet the research definition of abuse but not the definition of child protection authorities (i.e., abuse by acquaintances, where there was no neglect by the parents), including some cases known to police but not to child protection agencies, and
- (3) disclosed cases that meet the child protection definition of abuse but are either not investigated or not substantiated.

Of these factors, the author believes that the most important one is probably cases that are not disclosed, although no data are currently available to confirm this belief.

charges have raised concerns about a potential epidemic of fabricated reporting. But evidence suggests fabrications constitute a relatively small fraction of the reports received. A review of five studies concluded that fabricated reports occurred in 4% to 8% of all reports.⁴⁵ These estimates are based on in-depth examinations and evaluations of samples of cases reported to child protection agencies or other professionals. The studies appear to suggest, as well, that fabricated reports are more likely to originate from adolescents, perhaps because they have a better capacity to manufacture credible allegations.

These studies refer only to allegations made while the child was still a minor. There have not yet been any studies to measure the incidence of fabrication in reports made by adults who are reporting childhood occurrences retrospectively.

Some confusion about fabricated reports persists, however, because a large number of sexual abuse reports (around 50%) are classified after review by child abuse agencies as "unsubstantiated." Cases are termed unsubstantiated by child protection investigators for a variety of reasons that do not usually involve fab-

rications. Thus a professional, who is required to report even a "suspicion" of abuse, may report a child for a suspicious genital injury that turns out to have another explanation. In some cases, the reports, particularly anonymous reports by nonprofessionals, are so vague and the information about the situation is so sketchy that the report is classified as unsubstantiated because the attendant information is insufficient. It is possible that additional fabricated reports lie hidden among cases that are unsubstantiated for lack of information. These unsubstantiated reports may primarily reflect people reacting to ambiguous symptoms and behaviors in children or trying to be conscientious in the protection of children. It needs to be remembered that most states mandate that professionals report even suspicions of abuse. The reporters are often unsure about whether abuse is really occurring and are not even necessarily making allegations about specific possible

All of the observed increases in reporting could be explained simply by increased awareness and willingness to detect and disclose.

abusers. Thus, it is a mistake to equate an unsubstantiated with a fabricated report. The former involves information that cannot be verified; the latter involves information that is not true and an accusation that is deliberately false.

It is also a mistake to assume, as some have,⁴⁶ that an unsubstantiated report necessarily involves a stigmatizing allegation or an intrusive investigation. Given the work load carried by most investigatory agencies, reports from dubious sources or reports containing few specifics are often declared unsubstantiated with no investigation at all. (In a recent study of 12 counties in five states, 42% of maltreatment allegations were screened out by Child Protective Services (CPS) without any investigation at all, many because the allegation was too vague, some because the event happened too long ago or the perpetrator was not a caretaker, others because the child was no longer at risk, and still others because the family could not be located or

had left the jurisdiction.⁴⁷) Other allegations are resolved after a simple phone call to a family or a brief interview with a child.

Changes in the Rate of Sexual Abuse over Time

The rapidly rising number of reports of sexual abuse (see earlier discussion of National Incidence Study) has prompted some to fear that more children are being abused today than in the past. However, with a large underlying and mostly undisclosed prevalence, as suggested by the retrospective surveys (see Box 3), all of the observed increases in reporting could be explained simply by increased awareness and willingness to detect and disclose.

Some efforts have been made to compare adult prevalence rates from different historical eras,³⁴ but gross differences in the methodology between studies make such comparisons very speculative. One analyst compared the 1953 findings by Kinsey and colleagues with findings from more recent studies and concluded that there had been an increase,³⁴ but another researcher looked at the same data and disagreed.⁴⁸

A different approach to this issue has been to compare the rates of abuse for people of different ages within the same study, that is, among subjects who were recruited the same way and asked the same questions. At least five community studies have reported such age group comparisons for North American women.^{7,13,16,25,43} Interestingly, all five show slightly lower rates for the youngest age group. Moreover, all three that have rates for subjects born before 1935 also show lower rates for this older age group as well. Although these findings are surprisingly consistent, they can be interpreted in several ways. They may reflect an increase in sexual abuse for children born around and after World War II, followed by some decline in more recent times. But the apparent trends may also simply be an artifact of disclosure patterns. Older women may have forgotten their long-ago abuse experiences or may feel more private about them than younger women. The youngest women may not yet have enough distance from childhood events to feel comfortable talking about them.

In either case, however, the surveys do not suggest any very recent upsurge coinciding with the new interest in the prob-

lem that began in the late 1970s. The rise in disclosures at that time and more recent periods is probably explained by changes in public and professional awareness, not increases in true occurrence.

Child Sexual Abuse Hysteria

As reports of sexual abuse have increased and particularly as some cases with false or questionable accusations have been widely publicized, some observers have alleged that the country is caught up in a hysteria of sexual abuse accusations and prosecutions.⁴⁹ A factual basis for this allegation is difficult to ascertain. There may be more controversial cases today than before, but then there are more reported cases of all sorts than before.

A hysteria, if it were occurring, at least at the institutional level, might be signaled by a suspiciously high substantiation rate, as workers abandoned critical evaluation of reports, or by a suspiciously high rate of prosecution or conviction, as prosecutors, judges, and juries railroaded accused individuals.

In fact, however, to the extent that statistics are available, they suggest a fairly balanced operation of the child protection and criminal justice systems. On the one hand, a large percentage of reports—up to 60% in some states⁵⁰ are declared unsubstantiated, belying the idea that reports are automatically believed. Moreover, in spite of claims that child protection workers are naively credulous of every charge lodged against day care operators, Finkelhor and Williams⁵¹ found that investigators dismiss 82% of all such accusations.

The picture of sexual abuse in the criminal justice system also suggests overall a tempered rather than hysterical response. As with most crimes, a large number of cases are dropped before prosecution. One study⁵² found that only about 42% of serious sexual abuse allegations (that is, those substantiated by child protection authorities and/or reported to the police) are actually forwarded for prosecution. Moreover, according to statistics from some selected jurisdictions,⁵³ arrested sexual offenders against children are somewhat less likely to be prosecuted than are other violent offenders. This is because sexual abuse is so frequently a crime without other witnesses or physical

corroboration, and prosecutors are concerned about children's credibility.⁵⁴

When prosecutions occur, the majority—about 75%, according to one study⁵²—result in convictions. However, most of these convictions (over 90%) result from guilty pleas and plea bargains. Sexual abusers are convicted somewhat more often than other violent offenders,⁵³ but this is probably because prosecutors are more selective in the cases they choose to prosecute.

Even when accused sex abusers are convicted, their sentences are not terribly stiff. Studies suggest that 32% to 46% of convicted child sexual abusers serve no jail time.^{52,53,55} Only 19% receive sentences longer than one year, which is about the same as those convicted of other violent crimes.⁵³ (There are no statistics on mandatory treatment.) None of this suggests that the criminal justice system abandons its usual standards of operation when it comes to sexual crimes against children.

In adult retrospective surveys, victims of abuse indicate that no more than 10% to 30% of offenders were strangers.

There is little evidence from court or child protection statistics to suggest that a pervasive climate of hysteria makes it impossible for accused offenders to receive a fair hearing.

Sexual Abuse Involving Family Members and Other Known Perpetrators

Abusers can be classified by their relationship to the child victim into three categories: family, acquaintances, or strangers. Sexual abuse is committed primarily by individuals known to the child, unlike the child molester stereotype that prevailed until the 1970s. In adult retrospective surveys, victims of abuse indicate that no more than 10% to 30% of offenders were strangers, with the remainder being either family members or acquaintances.¹³

Although offenders are generally known to their victims, whether sexual abuse is *primarily* an intrafamilial problem

is an issue about which there has been much uncertainty. Most of the sexual abuse that comes to the attention of child protection authorities does involve family members, leading some to contend that sexual abuse is primarily a family problem. But in most states, child protection authorities receive reports only about abuse at the hands of family members or custodians, so that much of the extrafamily abuse does not come to their attention or get counted in CPS samples.

The picture is somewhat different in adult retrospective surveys, which give a more comprehensive picture of sexual abuse than data from child protection agencies. These retrospective studies show that intrafamily perpetrators constitute from one-third to one-half of all perpetrators against girls and only about one-tenth to one-fifth of all perpetrators against boys. There is no question that intrafamily abuse is more likely to go on over a longer

Intrafamily perpetrators constitute less than half of the total in retrospective studies.

period of time and in some of its forms, particularly parent-child abuse, has been shown to have more serious consequences.⁵⁶ But it is important to keep in mind that intrafamily perpetrators constitute less than half of the total in retrospective studies. The importance of acquaintance perpetrators—especially neighbors, teachers, coaches, religious leaders, and peers—should not be obscured by an exclusive emphasis on family abuse.

Recent awareness has also been drawn to juvenile perpetrators. These cases, too, tend to be underrepresented among reported cases compared to what is disclosed in retrospective surveys.⁵⁷ It has been estimated from the retrospective studies that about one-third of offenders are themselves under the age of 18.⁵⁷ Of course, this percentage is heavily affected by whether date rape and other sexual assaults against teenagers by their peers are included in the definition of sexual abuse.

Confusion also persists about female perpetrators. Although they constitute a small percentage (under 10%) of cases

substantiated by child protection agencies, suggestions have been made that much abuse by females is undetected, that the number of such cases coming to public attention has been mushrooming recently, and that, when all is revealed, it may turn out that females actually abuse children as frequently as males.⁵⁸

There is no question that women do sexually abuse children, that much of this abuse goes undetected, and that, until recently, it received little professional attention. However, statistics do not suggest that cases of abuse by females have been growing much more rapidly than cases of abuse by males. Finkelhor and Russell⁵⁹ scoured the adult retrospective studies to see if adults recalled large quantities of childhood sexual abuse involving female perpetrators that was escaping detection, even perhaps because it was not labeled by the participants as abuse or exploitation. They focused on sexual experiences (whether or not labeled abusive) which occurred when the child participant was prepubescent and the other participant was postpubescent and at least five years older than the child. Summarizing data from several surveys, the authors concluded that about 20% of the sexual contacts that prepubescent boys have with older partners involve female partners; about 5% of prepubescent girls' sexual contacts with older partners involve female partners. Some student surveys since that review suggest that the 20% figure for boys may be low,^{60,61} although no such findings have yet appeared in a community survey. Even if all of these sexual contacts were defined as abusive, these studies do not suggest that women victimize as many children as men do.

Studies of female perpetrators of child sexual abuse in recent years have documented certain distinct types,^{62,63} including: (1) many women who act in concert with or in the service of abusive boyfriends or husbands, (2) adolescent girls particularly in baby-sitting situations, (3) lonely and isolated single-parent mothers with small children, and (4) some women who develop romantic relationships with adolescent boys.

Sexual Abuse of Boys

Boys are abused at one-third to one-half the rate of girls, according to adult retrospective studies. However, their abuse, particularly cases involving older boys, is

less likely to come to professional attention: cases involving boys constitute only about 20% of cases reported to child protection.⁶⁴

A major difference between boy victims and girl victims is that boys are less likely to be abused within the family. And as indicated earlier, boys are more likely to be abused by females than are girls.

The clinical literature observes that boys are more likely than girls to act out in aggressive and antisocial ways as a result of abuse.⁶⁵ Boys are also seen as having more concerns about gender role and sexual orientation because both victimization in general and homosexual victimization in particular are so stigmatizing to males.⁶⁶ Although these observations may be accurate, outcome studies have actually had difficulty demonstrating consistent differences in symptomatology between abused boys and girls or men and women.⁶⁷ It would appear, based on current research, that there are more similarities than differences in the impact of abuse. One notable exception concerns the apparent greater likelihood that men who were sexually abused as children will express some sexual interest in children.^{66,68} This does seem to confirm another clinical perception that abused boys, more often than girls, are at increased risk to become perpetrators.

Children at High Risk for Sexual Abuse

One of the things that has contributed to the controversial nature of the problem of sexual abuse is that it has few clearcut risk markers. With physical abuse, for example, markers in the child's environment, such as single-parenthood, extreme poverty, and drug abuse in the family, have made the problem easier to identify and target for prevention. (See the article by Daro in this journal issue.) Such markers also give the problem a stereotypical profile. The public appears to believe that child molesters and their victims also fit a stereotypical profile, even though research has not been able to identify reliable risk markers. When the public expects the majority of cases to conform to a profile that research shows is unrealistic, the public is naturally skeptical of large prevalence estimates or disclosures about offenders who "don't seem to be the type."

Some risk markers for sexual abuse, such as gender and age of the child, are seemingly established, but research has found them to be weaker markers than expected. Other presumed risk markers, such as low socioeconomic status, have received little support from research results. What follows is the current knowledge about risk markers.



Girls are victimized more often than boys, as indicated earlier. But retrospective surveys suggest that boys are much more frequently abused than the ratio of reported cases would suggest. Because one-third of all victims are probably boys, the stereotype of the victim as a female likely results in the nondetection of many cases. Parents may supervise boys less closely, and teachers, pediatricians, or other potential reporters may be less likely to suspect abuse of males or to respond to subtle disclosures made by male victims.

In a review of studies, Finkelhor and Baron found peak vulnerability for abuse of both boys and girls to occur between the ages of 7 and 13.

In a review of studies, Finkelhor and Baron⁶⁴ found peak vulnerability for abuse of both boys and girls to occur between the ages of 7 and 13. But victimization can occur at any age, and there is good reason to believe that abuse under 6 is particularly undercounted because young children do not disclose it and because, in adulthood, they may not remember it.³⁹ Clinical studies, for their part, show a large overrepresentation of older children among reported cases,^{69,70} but this is primarily because it is often not until a child develops the independence of adolescence that she or he finds the courage to disclose. Thus, this higher incidence of reporting among older children is not evidence of higher vulnerability at older ages, and one cannot easily describe a typical sexual abuse victim in terms of age.

A similar discrepancy exists between clinical and retrospective studies on the issue of social class and risk. Among cases of sexual abuse coming to the attention of professionals, lower-class families are overrepresented, although less so than for other types of maltreatment. But in adult retrospective surveys, people coming from economically disadvantaged backgrounds report either no more abuse^{36,43,71} or only slightly more abuse than their more socially advantaged counterparts.^{9,17,72} It could be that individuals who are lower on the socioeconomic scale (SES) are less willing to disclose in surveys, masking the

higher risk for lower-SES families that appears in clinical case loads. But a more plausible explanation, consistent with current knowledge about surveys and the child protection system, is simply that sexual abuse is easier to detect and report when it occurs to lower-SES children. Current evidence suggests that lower social class is but a weak risk marker for sexual abuse.

Little evidence exists that minorities are at higher risk for sexual abuse. No studies find higher rates for African Americans,²⁵ and several actually find lower rates.^{17,27,73,74} Two studies that did find higher rates for Hispanic women^{16,43} are counterbalanced by another, specifically targeted to a large Hispanic population, that in fact found rates to be lower among Hispanics than among other ethnic groups.²¹

The risk factors for sexual abuse that do show up most consistently in epidemiological studies are those elements of the child's environment related to parental inadequacy, unavailability, conflict, and a poor parent-child relationship. In many studies, for example, children who lived for extended periods of time apart from one parent have been found to bear elevated risks for sexual abuse.^{17,64,75} Children with alcoholic, drug abusing, or emotionally unstable parents are also at risk, as are those with parents who are punitive or distant.^{8,76} Marital conflict also seems to create vulnerability for abuse. However, the strength of such associations should not be exaggerated. It is still true that many victims of sexual abuse display none of these markers.

The factors mentioned appear to increase children's risks for abuse in two ways. First, they decrease the quantity and quality of supervision and protection that children receive. Second, they produce needy, emotionally deprived children who are vulnerable to the ploys of sexual abusers, who commonly entrap children by offering affection, attention, and friendship.⁶⁴

In summary, probably the most important markers to look for in identifying children at potential risk for sexual abuse are children separated from their parents or children whose parents have problems that substantially compromise their ability to supervise and attend to their children. But exclusive use of these indicators will cause social workers to miss many victims.

Gaps in Knowledge About Sexual Abuse

Almost all the questions touched on in this brief review are subject to some controversy and debate. To resolve these matters, more definitive information is needed about the incidence and prevalence of sexual abuse, about historical trends, about fabricated allegations, and about factors that point to vulnerability. More definitive information requires improved studies and better data. Currently we have serious shortcomings in our major sources of information about sexual abuse. The following four kinds of studies are needed to remedy this shortcoming:

1. *Improved annual incidence data about reported cases.* This paper earlier discussed the need for systematic annual data collection from all states about sexual abuse cases. Ideally these data need to concern cases reported both to child abuse authorities and to police. These data need to include detailed information regarding the characteristics of the children and perpetrators and the disposition of the cases. To be comparable, these data must be collected using uniform procedures, definitions, and terminology. The answers to important policy questions concerning substantiation rates, fabricated reports, and the state's management of child abuse cases require comparable and reliable data.

2. *Large-scale and ongoing retrospective studies of adults.* Retrospective studies of adults provide the best window on undisclosed abuse and can be important for tracking true historic trends. They are also crucial for understanding the long-term effects of sexual abuse. Among methodological improvements, inquiries about histories of sexual abuse must be refined to maximize the candor and accuracy of recall by participants and to identify all those who were actually victimized. Studies are needed to learn about how the wording and placement of questions, the manner in which the interview is conducted, and

the methods used to train interviewers influence candor and accuracy.

3. *Surveys of children and their caretakers.* Recent studies have illustrated the feasibility of gathering information on child victimization directly from children as young as age 10 and their caretakers for children of all ages.^{77,78} These studies provide much needed information on undisclosed abuse, as well as its short-term effects. They can also be used to understand better how to improve disclosures and to gather consumer-satisfaction information from persons who have been involved in investigations.

4. *Longitudinal studies of children and families.* Studies need to follow children from birth through adulthood with special attention to detecting sexual abuse and other victimizations along the way. Studies of this kind are one of the few ways to test propositions about family and personal characteristics that put children at risk. They also provide the ultimate test of the utility of preventive interventions.

Conclusion

The past 20 years have seen a revolution in public and professional knowledge about child sexual abuse. Most of the prevailing beliefs of a generation ago concerning its nature and prevalence have turned out, in the light of subsequent research, to be wrong or greatly oversimplified. But the knowledge is neither complete nor fully disseminated. In the context of such a rapid revolution, new myths or oversimplifications have undoubtedly been adopted in place of the old. The task of testing these assumptions, sorting through the evidence for the truth in this field, is an active, urgent, and ongoing process. Given the enormous stakes involved in terms of child protection, the inquiry must proceed with haste.

The author would like to thank Donna Terman for her assistance in editing this article and in preparing the table and box materials, and Sara Simon and Kelly Foster for additional help in preparing the article.

-
1. Sedlak, A. *National incidence and prevalence of child abuse and neglect: 1988*. Revised report. Rockville, MD: Westat, 1991.
 2. McCurdy, K., and Daro, D. *Current trends in child abuse reporting and fatalities: The results of the 1993 annual fifty-state survey*. Working Paper No. 808. Prepared by the National Center on Child Abuse Prevention Research. Chicago: National Committee for Prevention of Child Abuse, April 1994.

3. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect. *National child abuse and neglect data system: 1992 summary data component*. Working Paper No. 3. Washington, DC: DHHS, 1994.
4. Ards, S., and Harrell, A. *Reporting of child maltreatment: A secondary analysis of the national surveys of child abuse and neglect*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute Press, 1991.
5. Daro, D., and McCurdy, K. *Current trends in child abuse reporting and fatalities: The results of the 1990 annual fifty-state survey*. Prepared by the National Center on Child Abuse Prevention Research. Chicago: National Committee for Prevention of Child Abuse, 1991.
6. Russell, D.E.H. *The secret trauma: Incest in the lives of girls and women*. New York: Basic Books, 1986.
7. Bagley, C. *Child sexual abuse in Canada: Further analysis of the 1983 national survey*. Ottawa: Federal Department of Health and Welfare, 1988.
8. Bagley, C., and Ramsay, R. Sexual abuse in childhood: Psychosocial outcomes and implications for social work practice. *Journal of Social Work and Human Sexuality* (1985-86) 4:33-47.
9. Bagley, C. The prevalence and mental health sequels of child abuse in a community sample of women aged 18-27. *Canadian Journal of Community Mental Health* (1991) 10,1:103-16.
10. Elliott, D.M., and Briere, J. Sexual abuse trauma among professional women: Validating the Trauma Symptom Checklist-40 (TSC-40). *Child Abuse & Neglect* (1992) 16:391-98.
11. Essock-Vitale, S., and McGuire, M. Women's lives viewed from an evolutionary perspective: I. Sexual histories, reproductive success, and demographic characteristics of a random sample of American women. *Ethology and Sociobiology* (1985) 6:137-54.
12. Finkelhor, D. *Child sexual abuse: New theory and research*. New York: Free Press, 1984.
13. Finkelhor, D., Hotaling, G., Lewis, I.A., and Smith, C. Sexual abuse in a national survey of adult men and women: Prevalence, characteristics, and risk factors. *Child Abuse & Neglect* (1990) 14:19-28.
14. George, L., and Winfield-Laird, I. Sexual assault: Prevalence and mental health consequences. Unpublished final report submitted to the National Institute of Mental Health for supplemental funding to the Duke University Epidemiologic Catchment Area Program, March 1986. Revised December 1986.
15. Keckley Market Research. Sexual abuse in Nashville: A report on incidence and long-term effects. Unpublished paper prepared for WSMV-TV, March 1983.
16. Kercher, G., and McShane, M. The prevalence of child sexual abuse victimization in an adult sample of Texas residents. *Child Abuse & Neglect* (1984) 8:495-501.
17. Moore, K., Nord, C., and Peterson, J. Nonvoluntary sexual activity among adolescents. *Family Planning Perspectives* (1989) 21,3:110-14.
18. Murphy, J. *Prevalence of child sexual abuse and consequent victimization in the general population*. Paper presented at the Third National Family Violence Research Conference. Durham: University of New Hampshire, July 1987.
19. Russell, D. The incidence and prevalence of intrafamilial and extrafamilial sexual abuse of female children. *Child Abuse & Neglect* (1983) 7:133-46.
20. Saunders, B., Kilpatrick, D., Lipovsky, J., et al. Prevalence, case characteristics, and long-term psychological effects of child sexual assault among women: A national survey. Unpublished paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Orthopsychiatric Association. Toronto, March 25, 1991.
21. Siegel, J., Sorenson, S., Golding, J., et al. The prevalence of childhood sexual assault: The Los Angeles epidemiologic catchment area project. *American Journal of Epidemiology* (1986) 126:1141-53.
22. Springs, F., and Friedrich, W. Health risk behaviors and medical sequelae of childhood sexual abuse. *Mayo Clinic Proceedings* (1992) 67:527-32.
23. Wilsnack, S.C., Klassen, A.D., Vogeltanz, N.D., and Harris, T.R. Childhood sexual abuse and women's substance abuse: National survey findings. Paper presented to the American Psychological Association conference on Psychosocial and Behavioral Factors in Women's Health. Washington, DC, May 12-14, 1994.
24. Wolf, J. *Adult reports of sexual abuse during childhood: Results of a statewide telephone survey in Kentucky*. Paper presented at the 47th Annual Conference of the American Association for Public Opinion Research. St. Petersburg Beach, FL, May 15-19, 1992.
25. Wyatt, G.E. The sexual abuse of Afro-American and white American women in childhood. *Child Abuse & Neglect* (1985) 9:507-19.

26. Timnick, L. Children's abuse reports reliable, most believe. *Los Angeles Times*. August 26, 1985, at A1. Of those surveyed, 22% were child abuse victims.
27. Kilpatrick, D., Edmunds, C., and Seymour, A. *Rape in America: A report to the nation*. Arlington, VA: National Victim Center, 1992.
28. Saunders, B. *The topography of child rape in America: Results from the national women's study*. Paper presented at the Association for the Behavioral Treatment of Sexual Abusers. Portland, OR, October 7-10, 1992.
29. These figures are different from those cited in the original report (Badgley, R., Allard, H., McCormick, N., et al. *Sexual offenses against children*. Ottawa: Canadian Government Publishing Centre, 1984) or the 1986 review (see note no. 31), but are based on a careful reanalysis and correction performed by Bagley (see note no. 7).
30. Finkelhor, D. The international epidemiology of child sexual abuse. *Child Abuse & Neglect* (1994) 18:409-17.
31. Peters, S.D., Wyatt, G.E., and Finkelhor, D. Prevalence. In *A sourcebook on child sexual abuse*. D. Finkelhor, ed. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1986, pp. 15-59.
32. Leventhal, J. Epidemiology of child sexual abuse. In *Understanding and managing child sexual abuse*. R.K. Oates, ed. Sydney: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Group, 1990, pp. 18-41.
33. Some critics have attacked Russell's study for a response rate of only 50%. However, this response rate was calculated using the most conservative formula possible (treating as nonrespondents all persons whose eligibility could not be ascertained) and is not that much worse than the norm for survey research for such samples. There is not much evidence from the studies on sexual abuse or survey research in general that a relatively low response rate would result in a wildly exaggerated estimate.
34. Leventhal, J. Have there been changes in the epidemiology of sexual abuse of children during the 20th century? *Pediatrics* (1988) 82:766-73.
35. Another review of prevalence studies (see note no. 48) concluded that the prevalence for women was between 10% and 13%. However, this study counted only abuse to girls under age 14 by persons at least five years older. It also excluded from consideration studies such as Russell (note no. 19) and Finkelhor et al. (note no. 13) for questionable reasons and based its conclusion on three studies, including Kinsey (which had a nonrandom, partly volunteer sample) and Siegel (note no. 21, which had a single screener question at the end of a long and tiring general mental health questionnaire).
36. See note no. 12, Finkelhor, pp. 153-56.
37. Murphy, J. Telephone surveys and family violence: Data from Minnesota. Paper presented at the Responses to Family Violence Conference. West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University, January 1988.
38. Cameron, P., Coburn, Jr., W., Larson, H., et al. Child molestation and homosexuality. *Psychological Reports* (1986) 58:327-37.
39. Williams, L. Recall of childhood trauma: A prospective study of women's memories. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*. In press.
40. Koss, M. Detecting the scope of rape: A review of prevalence research methods. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* (1993) 8,2:198-222.
41. Kinsey, A., Pomeroy, W., Martin, C., et al. *Sexual behavior in the human female*. Philadelphia, PA: W.B. Saunders, 1953.
42. Gomes-Schwartz, B., Horowitz, J.M., Cardarelli, A.P., and Sauzier, M. The aftermath of child sexual abuse: 18 months later. In *Child sexual abuse: The initial effects*. B. Gomes-Schwartz, J.M. Horowitz, and A.P. Cardarelli, eds. Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1990, pp. 132-52.
43. Russell, D. The prevalence and seriousness of incestuous abuse: Stepfathers vs. biological fathers. *Child Abuse & Neglect* (1984) 8:15-22.
44. Browne, A., and Finkelhor, D. Impact of child sexual abuse: A review of the research. *Psychological Bulletin* (1986) 99:66-77.
45. Everson, M., and Boat, B. False allegations of sexual abuse by children and adolescents. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* (1989) 28,2:230-35.
46. Besharov, D. The need to narrow the grounds for state intervention. In *Protecting children from abuse and neglect: Policy and practice*. D. Besharov, ed. Springfield, IL: C.C. Thomas, 1988, pp. 47-90.

47. Wells, S. *Screening and prioritization in child protective services intake*. Final report. Grant No. 90-CA-1265. Washington, DC: National Legal Resource Center for Child Advocacy and Protection, 1989.
48. Feldman, W., Feldman, E., Goodman, J., et al. Is childhood sexual abuse really increasing in prevalence? An analysis of the evidence. *Pediatrics* (1991) 88,1:29-33.
49. Rabinowitz, D. From the mouths of babes to a jail cell: Child abuse and the abuse of justice: A case study. *Harper's Magazine*. May 1990, pp. 52-63.
50. Eckenrode, J., Powers, J., Doris, J., et al. Substantiation of child abuse and neglect reports. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* (1988) 56,1:9-16.
51. Finkelhor, D., and Williams, L. *Nursery crimes: Sexual abuse in day care*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1988.
52. Chapman, J., and Smith, B. *Child sexual abuse: An analysis of case processing*. Washington, DC: American Bar Association, 1987.
53. U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics. *Tracking offenders: The child victim*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, December 1984.
54. Whitcomb, D., Runyan, D., De Vos, E., et al. at the Education Development Center. *Child victim as witness, research and development program*. Final report. Prepared for the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 1991.
55. Boston Globe Spotlight Team. Child sexual abuse: The crime of the 80's. *Boston Globe*. November 8-11, 1987, at A7.
56. Kendall-Tackett, K.A., Williams, L.M., and Finkelhor, D. Impact of sexual abuse on children: A review and synthesis of recent empirical studies. *Psychological Bulletin* (1993) 113:164-80.
57. Finkelhor, D. *Sexually victimized children*. New York: Free Press, 1979.
58. Allen, C. *Women and men who sexually abuse children: A comparative study*. Orwell, VT: Safer Society Press, 1991.
59. Finkelhor, D., and Russell, D. Women as perpetrators. In *Child sexual abuse: New theory and research*. D. Finkelhor, ed. New York: Free Press, 1984.
60. Fromuth, M., and Burkhart, B. Childhood sexual victimization among college men: Definitional and methodological issues. *Violence and Victims* (1987) 2,4:241-53.
61. Risin, L., and Koss, M. The sexual abuse of boys: Prevalence and descriptive characteristics of childhood victimizations. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* (1987) 2,3:309-23.
62. Faller, K. Women who sexually abuse children. *Violence and Victims* (1987) 2,4:263-76.
63. Mathews, R., Matthews, J., and Speltz, K. *Female sexual offenders: An exploratory study*. Orwell, VT: Safer Society Press, 1989.
64. Finkelhor, D., and Baron, L. High-risk children. In *A sourcebook on child sexual abuse*. D. Finkelhor, ed. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1986, pp. 60-88.
65. Bolton, F., Morris, L., and MacEachron, A. *Males at risk: The other side of child sexual abuse*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1989.
66. Urquiza, A. *The effects of childhood sexual abuse in an adult male population*. University of Washington, Seattle. Doctoral dissertation, 1988.
67. Finkelhor, D. Early and long-term effects of child sexual abuse: An update. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice* (1990) 21:325-30.
68. Bagley, C., Wood, M., and Young, L. Victim to abuser: Mental health and behavioral sequels of child sexual abuse in a community survey of young adult males. *Child Abuse & Neglect*. In press.
69. Jones, E., and McCurdy, K. The links between types of maltreatment and demographic characteristics of children. *Child Abuse & Neglect* (1992) 16:201-15.
70. Vander Mey, B. *The sexual victimization of boys and girls: A comparative study*. Paper presented at the National Symposium on Child Victimization. Anaheim, CA, October 1988.
71. Peters, S. The relationship between childhood sexual victimization and adult depression among Afro-American and white women. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. University of California, Los Angeles, 1984.
72. Goldman, R., and Goldman, J. The prevalence and nature of child sexual abuse in Australia. *Australian Journal of Sex, Marriage, and Family* (1988) 9,2:94-106.
73. Doll, L., Joy, D., Bartholow, B., et al. Self-reported childhood and adolescent sexual abuse among homosexual and bisexual men. *Child Abuse & Neglect* (1992) 16:855-64.

74. Lindholm, K., and Willey, R. Ethnic differences in child abuse and sexual abuse. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences* (1986) 8,2:111-25.
75. Paveza, G. Risk factors in father-daughter child sexual abuse: A case control study. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* (1988) 3:290-306.
76. Collings, S. Childhood sexual abuse in a sample of South African university males: Prevalence and risk factors. *South African Journal of Psychology* (1991) 21:153-58.
77. Finkelhor, D., and Dziuba-Leatherman, J. Victimization prevention programs: A national survey of children's exposure and reactions. *Child Abuse & Neglect*. In press.
78. Finkelhor, D., Hotaling, G., and Sedlak, A. *Missing, abducted, runaway and throwaway children in America*. Washington, DC: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 1990.