Child Sexual Abuse, Sexual Exploitation: Is there a Link?

A Research Brief of


April 2011

by

Cordelia Anderson, MA
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**Key Findings and Importance of the Study**

The paper examines the challenges resulting from the use of varying definitions of child sexual abuse (CSA) in research (e.g., unwanted sexual contact, non-contact), as well as the challenges of incidence studies, (e.g., definitions used, differing samples, accuracy of disclosure rates), including national and international data. The authors review studies related to the sequelae of child sexual abuse in terms of both mental health (e.g., low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, anger, aggression, post-traumatic stress, etc.) and health problems. They review several studies that show links between CSA and later sexual re-victimization including a number that replicated findings from Russell’s 1986 study. That study found where there is intrafamilial sexual abuse before age 14; there is more rape or attempted rape after that age than those who hadn’t reported CSA. The authors referenced another study that found sexual victimization in adolescent years appears to increase the risk of rape or attempted rape in their first year of college (Humphrey & White, 2000). They noted that when paired with physical abuse and early more severe CSA, there is an even greater risk for later victimization and those children who were sexually abused were more likely to be abused as adolescents and then sexually victimized as adults (Classen et al. 2005). Those who were victims of CSA and neglect had higher rates of sexual assault as adults. The authors included a reference to one study that did not establish a link.

The authors also reviewed studies that showed links between early CSA and subsequent high-risk sexual behavior including: higher numbers of sexual partners; unprotected sexual intercourse, sexually transmitted diseases; onset of early consensual sexual activity; and prostitution.

Studies that accounted for mediating factors noted that, even allowing for family variables, there is a statistically significant link. One study (Stolz et al. 2007) looked at various forms of child maltreatment and later involvement in prostitution and noted that while CSA isn’t the cause of
being prostituted it is part of a traumatic developmental experience of susceptibility. Other studies point to the perception on the part of youth prostituted that earlier CSA is part of their pathway.

A survey study done in Africa of 10-19 year olds found the more physical and sexual abuse, the more high risk behaviors and therefore the importance of not ignoring intra-familial abuse when attempting to address other problems.

**Methodology**

Literature review including:

- Child sexual abuse incidence and nature
- Links between child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation
- Prevention and intervention strategies

**Importance of other Findings**

The authors cite a Save the Children Norway report, 2005, that speaks to prevention policy needing to not only target children, but potential offenders and to have collaboration and cooperation across multiple discipline sectors. They note prevention studies indicating that both media and school-based programs help increase knowledge and disclosures, but alone don’t get to primary prevention of CSA, particularly intra-familial sexual abuse. However, they like others point out the declining rates of substantiated CSA and the possible role of school-based programs in such a decline.

As part of comprehensive prevention efforts, the authors note the relevance of treating abusers for secondary prevention, but also the need to target adolescents in an attempt to prevent further abusive behavior. They also note that internationally there is a focus on basing efforts on children’s rights and the relevance of putting CSA into this frame and policy action. Like others, the authors conclude CSA is a public health and human rights problem.
Implications

This study is useful to remind those working to prevent all types of child sexual harm that because of the clear links between children being sexually abused and subsequent other types of sexual abuse, exploitation, and violence, prevention efforts need to stay tuned to stopping the earlier forms of abuse before they are perpetrated as well as all subsequent abuse and exploitation. It also supports the need for those who specialize in addressing child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation to work together for children’s rights and to stop the harm.