



ONE IN FIVE? CHILD SEXUAL VICTIMISATION IN SPAIN

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Si bien la extensión de la victimización sexual infantil sigue siendo un tema de controversia, numerosos estudios internacionales confirman que se trata de un problema altamente frecuente, que afecta a un importante porcentaje de la población. El objetivo de esta revisión es presentar aquellos trabajos publicados en España sobre la epidemiología de esta problemática. Para ello, los trabajos se han clasificado en estudios de incidencia, estudios retrospectivos de prevalencia y estudios con muestras de menores. Los resultados indican que, a pesar de las voces contrarias a su reconocimiento, la victimización sexual infantil es muy frecuente, como se obtiene de las posibles víctimas mediante estudios de autoreporte. Como conclusión, se alerta a los profesionales que trabajan con niños y niñas de su papel en la detección y notificación de estos casos, así como se subraya la responsabilidad de la Administración en la subvención de estudios de alcance nacional.

Palabras clave: Epidemiología, Abuso sexual, Incidencia, Prevalencia, Victimización sexual.

While the extent of child sexual victimisation remains a subject of controversy, numerous international studies confirm that it is a highly prevalent problem that affects a large percentage of the population. The objective of this article is to review the studies about the epidemiology of child sexual victimisation published in Spain. The studies were classified into the following groups: studies of reported incidence, studies of prevalence and studies in which the data are obtained directly from children. The results indicate that, despite the voices that refuse to recognise it, child sexual victimisation is a frequent problem. In conclusion, the role of the professionals who work with children in the detection and reporting of these cases is emphasised as well as the responsibility of the government to fund national-level studies.

Key words: Epidemiology, Sexual abuse, Incidence, Prevalence, Sexual victimisation.

Establishing the extent of child sexual victimisation remains a subject of controversy, even though the constant publication of rigorous studies and meta-analyses worldwide has led to the conclusion that this is a problem that affects a large percentage of children and adolescents. However, many critics still refuse to recognise this reality.

To date three meta-analytical studies have been published, conducted with community samples, which have very similar figures and allow for a reliable description of the phenomenon. The first was published in 2009 by Pereda, Guilera, Forns and Gómez-Benito and states that 7.9% of men and 19.7% of women report having been the victim of some form of sexual abuse or assault, with or without physical contact before the age of adulthood. This study comprised 65 articles published between 1965 and 2006, with samples from 22 different countries, including Spain. Similarly, Stoltenborgh, van IJzendoorn, Euser and Bakermans-Kranenburg (2011), analysing 217 papers published between 1980 and

2008 and concerning countries on five continents, show a percentage of sexual victimisation that affects 7.6% of men and 18.0% of women throughout their childhood. The most recent one by Barth, Bermetz, Heim, Trelle and Tonia (2014) presents the results of 55 studies, published between 2002 and 2009 with samples from 24 countries. The authors found that 8% of men and 15% of women have been victims of sexual abuse with and without physical contact.

These notable works have confirmed that the sexual victimisation of children is a serious problem that affects all societies that have been studied, at a rate that does not vary greatly between studies and stands at 8% of men and about 20% of women. However, it is true that for many professionals these studies may seem far from the Spanish reality, so this review aims to show the results obtained in Spain regarding the extent of the sexual victimisation of children, in order to present, objectively and rigorously, the reality of this problem in our society.

THE INCIDENCE AND PREVALENCE OF CHILD SEXUAL VICTIMISATION

It should be noted that the studies that have analysed the extent of sexual victimisation of children use different

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methodologies that are often interpreted wrongly, giving rise to confusion in understanding the results and hindering their correct analysis. To overcome this difficulty, it is essential, first, to differentiate between incidence studies and prevalence studies.

STUDIES ON THE INCIDENCE OF CHILD SEXUAL VICTIMISATION

Incidence studies in this area show the number of new cases that are reported to the authorities or detected by them (e.g., hospitals, social services, police, justice) over a period of time, usually one year (Runyan, 1998; Wynkoop, Capps & Priest, 1995). The underestimation of sexual victimisation with this method of study must be emphasised. The incidence does not provide in any case, the actual occurrence of victimisation (Leventhal, 1998). Factors such as the secrecy that characterises the situation, the embarrassment experienced by the victim in relating what happened, the criminal sanctions involved in the reporting of these cases, and the young age and dependence on the adult that characterise these victims, result in only a small number of minors reporting what happened at the time it occurs, it being more than likely that the official statistics underestimate the real dimension of the problem (Goldman & Padayachi, 2000).

In relation to this underestimation, studies have found that only a small percentage of cases of sexual victimisation are reported to an official service when they occur. As an example, in the work of Priebe and Svedin (2008) on this issue, although the victims say they have talked about the experience with someone close, only a small group of them report having discussed it with a professional (3% of men and 9% of women) or having reported it to the police or social services (4% of men and 7% of women). The review by Ullman (2001) confirms that the vast majority of victims wait until adulthood to reveal the sexual victimisation (42-75%) or never tell anyone about it (28-60%). The fear of negative reactions in the environment, the desire to protect the family and the fear of threats from the aggressor, among other things, are the reasons that make the victim remain silent.

If we focus on the incidence studies published in Spain, it appears that these have been carried out, mostly, using data from the Social Services of the different Autonomous Communities (Moreno Manso, 2002).

One of the few incidence studies of national scope that have facilitated the quantification of this problem is the work by Saldaña, Jiménez and Oliva (1995). These

authors reviewed all (32,483) of the files opened by child protection services for children of the different regional administrations in 1991 and 1992. The total number of children experiencing some form of abuse was 8,565, representing an annual average of 0.44% of all Spanish children. In relation to child sexual abuse, the number of children affected was 359, corresponding to 4.2% of all abused children. Gender differences are evident in these cases, with girls representing 78.8% and boys representing 21.2% of children identified as victims of child sexual abuse.

With a similar methodology, in 2002 the *Centro Reina Sofía para el Estudio de la Violencia* [Reina Sofía Centre for the Study of Violence] published an analysis of 32,741 cases of child protection services in all of the Spanish autonomous regions, between 1997 and 1998. In this study, there were 16,189 detected cases of child abuse at national level (0.71% of the total Spanish population under 18 years), 3.6% had experienced some form of sexual victimisation, defined as any behaviour in which the child had been used as a means for sexual stimulation or gratification (Sanmartín, 2002). In turn, of these victims, approximately 81% were girls and 19% boys.

These percentages, as it can be seen, are significantly lower than those which, according to meta-analysis studies, should be found if the goal is to understand the real extent of child sexual victimisation. Therefore, it can be concluded that incidence studies based on official statistics do not show all cases of sexual victimisation that exist, but only those that are known by the authorities or certain groups of professionals. In turn, these studies do not show the actual characteristics of childhood sexual victimisation, but rather those of a specific sector of society, i.e., the people attended by professionals, such as social services, or the cases are detected more easily since they are already known by them. Thus, incidence studies should never be used as indicators of the extent of the problem of the sexual victimisation of children, but rather as an example of the capacity for professional detection of this phenomenon in a given context.

STUDIES OF THE PREVALENCE OF CHILD SEXUAL VICTIMISATION

Prevalence studies show more realistically the percentage of sexual abuse and violence that exists in society and refer to the number of individuals who have suffered throughout their childhood, usually considered



up to the aged of 18, although this criterion can vary depending on the study (Runyan, 1998; Wynkoop et al., 1995).

In Spain, the studies that have directly asked victims about their experiences of sexual victimisation are relatively numerous and have focused on the analysis of information provided by adults, obtained using a retrospective methodology. From an epidemiological perspective López (1994) and López, Carpintero, Hernández, Martín and Fuertes (1995) surveyed a representative sample of 1,821 adult citizens of the Spanish population and found that 18.9% of respondents, 15.2% of men and 22.5% of women reported having been victims of this experience before the age of 17. Among the characteristics of victimisation, the authors found that the most frequent behaviours were fondling below (58%) and above (59%) the waist, followed by propositions of sexual activity and exhibitionism (33% for each). It should be noted that 16% of men and 15% of women reported having suffered, at any moment during the experience, oral, anal or vaginal penetration.

Other studies, conducted with university students from different areas of the country have very similar figures, including behaviours with and without physical contact.

For example, the study by De Paúl, Milner and Múgica (1995) with 403 university students in the Basque Country shows that child sexual abuse affects 13.4% of the sample (9.7% of males and 14.9% of women). These figures vary depending on the age of onset of the abuse: 3.9% of men and 6.4% of women reported having been victims before the age of 13; 2.9% of men and 3.7% of women after the age of 13; and 2.9% of men and 4.7% of women before and after the age of 13.

Years later, Pereda and Forns (2007) conducted a similar study with 1,033 university students in Catalonia. In this study, the prevalence of sexual abuse before the age of 18 was 17.9%, affecting 15.5% of men and 19.0% of women. These abuses occurred before the age of 13 in 14.9% of the sample and between the ages of 13 and 18 in 3% of the sample.

The most recent prevalence study to date is that by Cantón and Justicia (2008) who after surveying 1,162 students at the University of Granada concluded that 9.5% of their total sample, 6.5% of men and 10% of women had been sexually abused before the age of 13, illustrating the severity of a problem that, as can be seen, affects a significant percentage of the Spanish population regardless of the geographical area analysed.

However, one cannot ignore that these studies are retrospective, i.e., they ask their participants about experiences that occurred in childhood, which prevents us from understanding the current reality of childhood sexual victimisation and analysing the phenomenon at the moment when it occurs (Goldman & Padayachi, 2000).

STUDIES OF SEXUAL VICTIMISATION WITH SAMPLES OF MINORS

Given the above difficulties, recently the need has been emphasised to ask children themselves about victimisation experiences occurred in childhood, producing their perception of the situation and allowing, in some cases for the first time, the reporting of this type of cases. This methodology, which emphasises the importance of asking children about situations of violence, argues that not including the child in such studies makes it difficult to obtain relevant information for the prevention and treatment of this problem (Becker-Blease & Freyd, 2006; Carroll-Lind, Chapman, Gregory & Maxwell, 2006).

It should be stressed that interviewing children and adolescents about these types of experience requires a rigorous methodology, instruments with adequate reliability and validity, taking into account the age of the children, and the technique must be based on a theory in which victimisation is defined properly, by experts on the subject. In turn, clear ethical principles must be assumed, based on which the professional must undertake the obligation to notify upon detection of such cases. It is clear that science and its requirements should always be placed in a lower position than the best interests of the child. To do this, there are several guides whose instructions must be followed throughout the project (e.g., Save the Children, 2004; UNICEF, 2012).

In Spain, one of the publications that included minors in its sample is the report carried out by the Reina Sofia Centre for the Study of Violence, published by the Ministry of Health, Social Policy and Equality (Sanmartín, 2011). After surveying 898 children aged 8 to 17 on multiple forms of victimisation, based on an instrument that was created ad hoc for the purposes of the research, a prevalence of 0.89% of sexual abuse in the previous year was obtained. This prevalence resulted from a single question, which includes being a victim of molestation, harassment, being subjected to sexual exhibitions and sexual advances, and uses the term sexual abuse to clarify or identify the facts.



Unfortunately, the previously cited work does not meet the methodological requirements for the study of sexual victimisation in children. As an example, it has been found that the use of questions with broad definitions is associated with lower prevalence rates than if the questions applied were aimed specifically at evaluating certain forms of behaviour. The number of questions asked also influences the results obtained and shows that the greater the number of questions, the higher the number of reports by potential victims (see the works by Fricker, Smith, David & Hanson, 2003; Goldman & Padayachi, 2000; Wyatt & Peters, 1986 on the characteristics of the questions and their influence on the prevalence of sexual abuse). This may be the reason for the huge discrepancy between the prevalence found in this study, and those obtained in previous retrospective studies.

Therefore, having a solid methodology, which frames the research with minors, is of great importance. In this sense, the works that have emerged from the theory of developmental victimology (Finkelhor, 2007) have yielded a real description of child sexual victimisation in different countries and based on reports from the boys and girls themselves, with all the necessary guarantees of protection and safety.

For this, a fundamental step has been the use of an instrument that evaluates a wide range of forms of victimisation, including sexual victimisation, and that takes different behaviours into account, measured by specific questions, appropriate to the age of the children. Following this perspective, several research teams have established the prevalence of sexual abuse from the reports of the children themselves with the same instrument, the Juvenile Victimization Questionnaire (Finkelhor, Hamby, Ormrod & Turner, 2005), which contains a sexual victimisation module with six items that assess both physical contact behaviours, and exhibitionism and sexual propositions.

In the United States, the study by Finkelhor, Shattuck, Turner and Hamby (2014) shows that sexual victimisation has affected 26.6% of girls and 5.1% of boys, throughout their life, out of the 2,293 respondents between the ages of 15 and 17. Regarding the prevalence in the last year, the authors found 5% of victims out of a total of 4,000 children aged between 0 and 17 by telephone interview with them, or their primary caregivers, depending on the child's age, distributed as 4.1% male and 5.9% female (Finkelhor, Turner, Shattuck & Hamby, 2015).

Meanwhile, Cyr et al. (2013) in Canada obtained a figure of 8% for sexual victimisation throughout life and 5% in the last year from their 2,801 respondents, aged between 2 and 17 years. In this case, children under 12 were not interviewed, but the interview was carried out with their parents or primary caregivers. If we focus on Europe, Radford, Corral, Bradley and Fisher (2013) show in their study conducted in the United Kingdom that 12.5% of boys and 20.8% of girls interviewed between the ages of 11 and 17 from a sample of 2,275 children had been victims of some form of sexual victimisation by an adult or peer throughout their life. With regards to the past year, the authors obtained a percentage of 9.4%, affecting 6.8% of the males and 12.2% of the females interviewed.

SEXUAL VICTIMISATION STUDIES WITH SAMPLES OF MINORS IN SPAIN

In Spain there have been several studies published from the perspective of developmental victimology using the Spanish adaptation by the *Grupo de Investigación en Victimización Infantil y Adolescente* [Research Group on Child and Adolescent Victimization] from the University of Barcelona of the instrument cited above, showing the percentage of sexual victimisation in different groups of children.

In this sense, it is important to note that there are samples of children with particular characteristics that must be considered to determine their specific risk of victimisation and these samples have been poorly studied at nation level.

With a community sample of 1,107 young people aged 12 to 17 surveyed in seven Catalan schools Pereda, Guilera and Abad (2014) obtained a sexual victimisation rate of 14.7% throughout life, relating to 4.1% of boys and 13.9% of girls. Among the forms of sexual victimisation assessed, there were physical contact behaviours, which affected 3.3% of the sample and behaviours without physical contact, reported by 6.2% of the sample. In turn, 5.3% of the young people said they had been victims in the past year, 2.2% of boys and 8.9% of girls.

Focusing on the past year, Soler, Paretila, Kirchner and Forns (2012) obtained, with a reduced version of the instrument and a sample of 722 Catalan adolescents aged 14 to 18, a prevalence of sexual victimisation in the last year of 10.7% of boys and 22.4% of girls, although the aim of the study was to analyse the effect of



polyvictimisation on self-esteem and post-traumatic symptoms. This high prevalence, which does not correspond to that obtained in any other study that has analysed the general youth population, may be due to the social characteristics of the schools from which the sample was obtained and which limit the results, since they are not comparable with community samples from the same country or other cultural contexts.

In the same vein, Valencia, Játiva and Cerezo (2014), using the full version of the instrument, surveyed 109 adolescents aged 15 to 18 from nine secondary schools and day care centres in areas with social problems and obtained a result in which 12.8% of the sample reported some form of sexual victimisation in the last year, although its primary objective was to analyse the role of self-pity between victimisation and psychological distress.

Focusing specifically on at-risk groups, Pereda, Abad and Guilera (2015b) interviewed 149 adolescents aged 12 to 17 years, who attended 14 child and adolescent mental health centres in Catalonia, obtaining a result of 16.1% of the sample, 5.7% of boys and 21.9% of girls, who reported some form of sexual victimisation. The percentage of sexual victimisation with physical contact was 11.4% and the figure was 10.1% for experiences without physical contact. Regarding victimisation in the last year, this affected 7.4% of respondents, 1.9% of males and 10.4% of females.

In turn, with a sample of 101 young people between the ages of 14 and 17 recruited from three closed juvenile justice centres (77.2%) and five open measure teams (22.8%) in Catalonia, Pereda, Abad and Guilera (2015a) found a rate of sexual victimisation throughout their whole life of 15.8%, relating to 42.1% of girls and 9.8% of boys. The percentage of sexual victimisation with physical contact affected 7.9% of young people, while 10.9% reported behaviours without physical contact. Additionally, 6.9% of the sample reported some form of sexual victimisation in the last year, 21.1% of girls and 3.7% of boys.

With a sample of 129 young people between 12 and 17 interviewed in 18 residential and care centres in Catalonia, Segura, Pereda, Abad and Guilera (2015) found that 29.5% of the adolescents said they had experienced some form of sexual victimisation throughout their lives, 14.1% of men and 44.6% of girls. Of the sexual behaviours included, 21.7% included physical contact and 15.5% referred to abuse without physical contact. Sexual victimisation in the last year was reported

by 12.4% of the youths, 6.3% of boys and 18.5% of girls.

As can be seen, depending on the origin of the sample interviewed, the percentage of child sexual victimisation varies, although in all cases it exceeds the percentages found in the incidence studies based on official statistics.

DISCUSSION

The objective of this review was to present the recent studies on the extent of child sexual victimisation, focusing on those that affect the Spanish population, with the aim of highlighting this reality to the professionals in our country.

It should be noted that the Council of Europe itself, aware of the extent of sexual victimisation of children in different European countries, has promoted an awareness campaign entitled 'One in five', which summarises the percentages obtained in retrospective studies of prevalence and in the different meta-analyses published on the subject. As noted, if this source is taken into account, in Spain between 10 and 20% of the population has been sexually abused in childhood, usually before the age of 13. Studies conducted with community samples and university students confirm these figures, both nationally (López, 1994) and in specific regions (Cantón & Justicia, 2008; De Paúl et al., 1995; Pereda & Forns, 2007).

However, the figures are very different if the only sources of data collection considered are the official statistics. We must be aware that data from these sources only show the detection capability of professionals in a given society (Leventhal, 1998). The detected cases are not representative of the reality of child sexual victimisation, since not all cases are detected at the moment that they take place, but generally the ones that become known to the authorities are often the more serious cases and those from disadvantaged social environments (Runyan, 1998). This does not mean that these studies are not important, especially when they are national in scope, since they allow us to observe the country's level of professional awareness and capacity of detection and reporting; but they should not be taken as an indicator of the extent of the problem, since this would be a misinterpretation of the results.

A new line of study is one that in recent years has focused on directly asking children about their experiences of victimisation, both throughout their life and over the last year (Finkelhor, 2007). It should be noted that the analysis of juvenile records and retrospective



studies prevents us from knowing the true extent of child sexual victimisation, and does not allow us to analyse the phenomenon at the moment that it is happening (Goldman & Padayachi, 2000). However, this new form of work has significant ethical implications which must be respected. The obligation to report the cases that are discovered in the study, the importance of having as a basis a robust victimology theory for interpreting the results properly, and the need for a standardised instrument that has not been created ad hoc for a specific study, are requirements that must be followed if the aim is to obtain a real approach to the problem of child sexual victimisation, and not victimise the child secondarily.

In this sense, the first studies that have been carried out from this perspective, asking children directly about their experiences, show much higher sexual victimisation rates than those obtained from official statistics. It may be added that these percentages vary depending on the origin of the sample analysed and increase as we move away from the community population and interview young people from social problem areas (Játiva & Cerezo, 2014), those who have committed crimes and are in the juvenile justice system (Pereda et al., 2015a), children and adolescents with mental health problems (Pereda et al., 2015b) or minors that have been removed from their families under the protection system (Segura et al., 2015). In all of these cases, the prevalence of sexual victimisation outperforms the EU population and is particularly high in female victims.

The paucity of studies with samples that have some kind of physical or mental disability should be noted. In Spain, the work by Verdugo, Gutiérrez, Fuertes and Elices (1993) on this subject is noteworthy, although child sexual abuse is included only as one of the forms of abuse studied. The research notes the increased vulnerability of these samples to child abuse, especially high in people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, although the few studies carried out fail to establish the reliability of the data (see the review of Verdugo, Alcedo, Bermejo & Aguado, 2002).

It is important to be aware that the study of child sexual victimisation has a number of barriers and one of the biggest is the lack of grants for the investigations that are carried out. In this regard, there have been no studies of nationwide incidence for over ten years, so it is not known if the capacity of professional detection in our country has increased, declined or remained stable. This is important because it allows the evaluation of the evolution of

awareness and training regarding this issue as well as seeing whether the economic crisis has had an influence on the number of reports and cases detected. In turn, there is only one retrospective prevalence study covering the national population, which was published over twenty years ago (López, 1994). We should advocate for national studies from the perspective of developmental victimology that allow us to understand the reality of child sexual victimisation based on reports from the children themselves.

CONCLUSION

In short, the sexual victimisation of children is a serious problem worldwide and also in our country. Denying the evidence encourages the problem to continue to remain hidden and means that thousands of victims do not receive the care and help that they need. The percentages vary mainly depending on the sex of the victim and the origin of the sample under analysis, although we place this experience between 10 and 20% of the EU population. The figures obtained refer to a large group of children whose experiences must be brought to light so that they can be recognised and accorded the resources and support they need. Science, through rigorous epidemiological studies and with a strong theoretical basis, should contribute to make this happen and the government should fund these kinds of studies, and assume that the knowledge of the extent of the problem is a fundamental step for the subsequent intervention with the victims.

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