

Expert report

SEXUAL ABUSE OF CHILDREN

Definitions and prevalence

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Foreword

The task of the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare includes supporting the knowledge-based development of social services. This is to take place within the framework of a development project (the KUB project) one of whose themes is child sexual abuse. Around 20 reports have been commissioned from experts in various fields. These expert reports form the basis of the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare's position on questions of child sexual abuse.

Assistant professor Carl-Göran Svedin, consultant at the Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinic BUP Elefanten at Linköping University Hospital has been commissioned by the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare to compile information on how the term "child sexual abuse" is defined in various contexts and what is known about the incidence of the problem. The aim is to provide a brief and illustrative introduction to the field.

Carl-Göran Svedin's report has been reviewed by Dr Erik K Normann, director of the Child and Family Welfare Service of Oslo City Council, former consultant at the National Resource Centre for Sexually Abused Children, Akers hospital in Oslo, Norway.

It is our hope that this report will contribute to increased knowledge and understanding of the problems associated with defining child sexual abuse and its incidence.

Under the system governing expert reports for the KUB project, the authors bear responsibility for the content and conclusions of the report.

Lars Pettersson
Director General

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Child maltreatment

Child maltreatment can be defined as “behaviour towards another person which is outside the norms of conduct and entails a substantial risk of causing physical or emotional harm. Behaviours included will consist of actions and omissions, ones that are intentional and ones that are unintentional” (Christoffel et al, 1992).

Child maltreatment can be divided up into various subgroups. Normally the concept is divided into four different groups: sexual abuse, physical abuse, psychological abuse and neglect. The distinctions between the various forms can sometimes be a little unclear and several different forms may arise at the same time. For example from the point of view of definitions, it is possible to claim that psychological abuse is always present among other forms of child maltreatment.

These classifications also depend on how and by whom the damage is inflicted and where the age limit between children and adults is drawn. In addition, there is the fact that the maltreatment may vary in seriousness from minor to life threatening and in intensity from a single occasion to repeated occasions over a long period.

As an example the authorities in England and Wales recommend the following categories when registering child abuse (DHSS 1980, 1986):

A. Physical abuse

All physically injured children under the age of 17, where the appearance of the injury does not comply with the report of how the injury arose or where there is definite knowledge or reasonable suspicion that the injury was caused by some person who has the care, responsibility or custody of the child. This includes cases where there is a suspicion that the child has been intentionally poisoned.

B. Physical neglect

Children under the age of 17 who have been persistently or severely neglected, e.g. by being exposed to various types of risk including cold and starvation.

C. Failure to thrive and emotional abuse

Children under the age of 17 who have been medically diagnosed as suffering from non-organic failure to thrive or whose behaviour and emotional development has been seriously affected and where medical and social reports find evidence either of long-term, continuing, serious neglect or rejection of the child.

D. Children who live in the same household as a previously abused child (potential abuse)

Children under the age of 17 who live in a household with or are regularly visited by a parent or other person who previously abused a child and where there is judged to be a risk of abuse.

E. Sexual abuse

Children under the age of 17 who are involved in sexual activities which they cannot fully understand and to which it is impossible for them to give their informed consent as a result of their dependent position or developmental maturity. These include activities – of parents or carers – which ignore social taboos in the family or are illegal.

The US APSAC “Handbook on child maltreatment” (1996) describes the maltreatment of children rated according to the frequency these are reported to the Child Protection Services (CPS), namely neglect including physical and emotional neglect, physical abuse including Münchhausen’s syndrome by proxy, sexual abuse and psychological maltreatment. Based on previous research (Claussen & Crittenden, 1991, Vissing, Straus, Gelles & Harrop, 1991) Hart et al claim (1996) that psychological maltreatment is a sub-phenomenon of all maltreatment of children but that this also causes the majority of the trauma caused by maltreatment of children.

How is child sexual abuse defined internationally?

Many definitions and terms are used when talking about child sexual abuse. In overall terms, sexual abuse of a child or a teenager can be defined as all actions or situations with a sexual content where an adult exploits a minor. In dynamic terms one could say that the abuser, normally an adult, is seeking to satisfy his or her sexual needs or other needs through the child.

In Sweden cases are always seen as child sexual abuse if the child or young person is under 15 or if he or she is under 18 and in a position of dependence on the adult. This applies for example where the abuser is a parent, stepparent, foster parent or a member of care staff in a unit or a children's home.

Schechter & Roberge

The most commonly used and cited international definition of child sexual abuse is that of Schechter & Roberge (1976):

“The involvement of dependent, developmentally immature children and adolescents in sexual activities that they do not fully comprehend, are unable to give their informed consent to, and that violate the social taboos of family roles.”

There are many other definitions of sexual abuse. Most however, share one or more components such as:

- the adult exploits the child's dependent position
- the act infringes the privacy of the child
- the act is one which the child cannot understand, for which the child is immature and to which the child cannot give his or her informed consent
- the act is based on the needs of the adult

All these are included in Schechter & Roberge's definition. It is important to emphasise the position of dependence of the child and the fact that the child is unable to understand either the meaning of a sexual act or the short-term or long-term consequences of sexual relations with an adult. This is important to remember, as one of the defences an abuser often uses is that it was the child who sought or initiated the sexual acts. It is always the adult who bears full responsibility for the acts and it is the child who, through legislation, needs the protection of society against exploitation.

Finkelhor and Korbin

Finkelhor and Korbin (1988) have proposed a more wide-ranging definition: “sexual abuse has been defined as any sexual contact between an adult and a

sexually immature (sexual maturity is socially as well as psychologically defined) child for the purposes of the adult's sexual gratification; or any sexual contact to a child made by use of force, threat or deceit to secure the child's participation; or sexual contact to which a child is incapable of consenting by virtue of age or of power differentials and the nature of the relationship with the adult."

In this way Finkelhor and Korbin intend to include children exploited through child pornography or child prostitution at the same time as excluding certain acts which are of a sexual nature but which are not intended for the sexual pleasure of the adult, such as the tradition in some cultures of calming a child by placing a hand over the genitals. However, the above definition will exclude unwanted sexual contact between children/teenagers of the same age despite the increasing tendency to define such contact as abuse. This has led Bagley (1990) to find that sexual abuse at least consists of unwanted physical touching of the child's breasts or genitalia.

Saetre

Saetre (1997) states that a definition cannot be too wide or too narrow in itself but only in relation to something else. If we wish to document the scope of all types of abuse, we need definitions, which are sufficiently broad for the purpose, but if the aim is to study one type of victim, a narrow definition may be more suitable. If we want to study abuse in relation both to background variables and prognoses, it will be important to have broad definitions, which include different types of abuse as well as the frequency and duration of the abuse. The reason for this is that we know too little about how the individual child comes to terms with various types of experience and trauma.

Terminology

The terms used in international literature which are often used synonymously with child sexual abuse are:

- child sexual abuse
- child sexual misuse
- child sexual exploitation
- child sexual victimisation
- child sexual assault
- child sexual maltreatment
- child sexual molestation
- child rape

The reason for this mass of terms is partly the lack of unambiguous, generally accepted definitions and partly the need of various authors to describe the various meanings abuse can have for a child.

Incest

Incest defines a sexual relationship between relatives in a direct vertical plane and between full siblings. The term incest is thus considerably narrower than the term sexual abuse and is becoming less frequent in the literature. The term has also disappeared from the statute book in terms of child sexual abuse.

Organised sexual abuse

In recent years a need has arisen to divide sexual abuse into a further sub-category: *organised sexual abuse*. This category includes sex rings, child prostitution, child pornography and ritual abuse (Bibby, 1996).

Paedophilia

Just as the term incest was the most common term in the “incest debate” in the mid 1980s (Martens, 1989), the term paedophilia has come to be central in the mid 1990s. Sometimes, for example, the term paedophilia is used almost as a synonym for sexual abuse. This may be due to high profile child pornography cases in Sweden but also to the macabre cases in Belgium in 1996 and the daycare cases in Sweden in 1997 which received mass-media attention.

The term paedophile refers to the adult and is often used as an overall term (Taylor 1981) for an adult emotionally and sexually attracted to children. In fact, however, *paedophilia* denotes an interest in children below puberty while *pederasty* refers to an interest focused on pubescent children. *Ephebophilia* is interest in children in puberty or early adolescence while *hebephilia* is interest focused only on young people. All these terms are a subset of the term *paraphilia*, which indicates a deviant sexual orientation.

Sexual acts

The acts covered by the term sexual abuse vary considerably, see Sgroi (1982). Milder forms of non-physical contact, which, however, can be seen both as unpleasant and frightening for the child, may, for example, be verbal comments of a sexual nature, flashing in front of the child or watching porn films/videos with the child. Fondling the breasts and genitals, including masturbation, of the child or the adult forcing the child to fondle or masturbate the adult are other common acts. The most serious cases may involve full genital, anal and oral intercourse, which, if carried out under force, violence or the threat of violence, may be seen as gross rape.

In cases involving small children, intercrural intercourse in which a man has intercourse between the legs/thighs of the child is not uncommon, and nor is interlabial intercourse, where the penis is moved backwards and forwards between the labia of a small girl. In both these cases the child may believe that penetration has taken place without this being the case and medical examination in such cases produces no results. Children may also be forced to have sex with each other to stimulate the sexual fantasies of the adult or to be documented as child pornography. In child pornography children may also be forced to be photographed with various objects such as pens, candles, safety pins, pennants and cigarettes inserted in the vagina or anus.

Acts can also vary in intensity and over time from one individual assault to many assaults in a short period or many assaults at considerable intervals over many years, sometimes throughout childhood.

To summarise, sexual abuse can thus include:

non-physical contact in the form of:

- exhibitionism
- voyeurism
- sexual allusions, comments, suggestions
- exposure to pornographic material

physical contact in the form of:

- touching the breasts
- touching genitalia/anus
- masturbation
- oral sex
- inserting objects or fingers in the anus or vagina
- inserting the penis in the anus or vagina
- encouraging the child to perform sex on the abuser

involving the child in activities with the intention of producing child pornography or for the purposes of child prostitution

How is child sexual abuse defined in Sweden?

Legal definitions (Swedish Penal Code, Chapter 6)

Chapter 6 of the Swedish Penal Code describes sex crimes against children setting out both conditions and sanctions. Sections 1 and 2 do not specifically apply to children but apply to all ages. Sections 4 and 7 only concern children, while sections 3 and 6 only concern adults.

Rape

Section 1

A person who by violence or threat which involves, or appears to the threatened person to involve an imminent danger, forces another person to have sexual intercourse or to engage in a comparable sexual act, that having regard to the nature of the violation and the circumstances in general, is comparable to enforced sexual intercourse, shall be sentenced for *rape* to imprisonment for at least two and at most six years. Causing helplessness or a similar state of incapacitation shall be regarded as equivalent to violence.

If having regard to the nature of the violence or the threat and the circumstances in general, the crime is considered less serious; a sentence to imprisonment for at most four years shall be imposed.

If the crime is gross, a sentence to imprisonment for at least four and at most ten years shall be imposed for *gross rape*. In assessing whether the crime is gross, special consideration shall be given to whether the violence involved a danger to life or whether the perpetrator caused serious injury or serious illness or, having regard to the method used or the victim's youth or other circumstances, exhibited particular ruthlessness or brutality.¹

The sexual act can consist of genital, anal or oral sex. The term sexual act also includes using the sexual organ for touching the sexual organs or touching another part of the body (e.g. anus, mouth, between the legs) and also touching the other person's sexual organs with the fingers unless this touching is extremely brief. From 1 July 1998 assault using objects, such as candles, necks of bottles or similar has been included under this section as the nature of the offence is to be taken into account in the legal process.

Violence refers to every form of violence, which seeks to restrict the freedom of movement of the victim. The perpetrator pressing down the victim with his weight, holding the victim or parting the victim's legs are to be seen as violence. Causing the victim to be helpless is seen as equivalent

¹ All quotations from the Swedish Penal Code apart from that of section 10a, are from Norman Bishop's translation published by the Swedish Ministry of Justice, Ds 1999:36

to violence, i.e. a perpetrator who uses drugs (e.g. alcohol or psychoactive drugs) or other substances to render the victim helpless against his or her will. Rape of children is generally seen as gross rape, which in the letter of the law is indicated by stating the low age of the child. Some consider that all sexual abuse of children, which can be considered sexual intercourse should be seen as rape as the small child, is threatened or caused to be helpless in relation to the adult.

Sexual coercion

Section 2

A person who, under circumstances other than those defined in Section 1, makes someone engage in a sexual act by unlawful coercion shall be sentenced for *sexual coercion* to imprisonment for at most two years.

If the person who committed the act exhibited particular ruthlessness or if the crime is otherwise considered gross, a sentence of at least six months and at most four years shall be imposed for *gross sexual coercion*.

Sexual exploitation of a minor

Section 4

A person who engages in a sexual act with someone under eighteen years of age and who is that person's offspring or for whose upbringing he or she is responsible, or for whose care or supervision he or she is responsible by decision of a public authority, shall be sentenced for *sexual exploitation of a minor* to imprisonment for at most four years. This also applies to a person who, in circumstances other than those mentioned previously in this Chapter, engages in a sexual act with a child under fifteen years.

If the person who committed the act exhibited particular lack of regard for the minor or if the crime by reason of the minor's young age or otherwise is regarded as gross, imprisonment for at least two and at most eight years shall be imposed for *gross sexual exploitation of a minor*.

The former sections 4 and 5 have been combined to form section 4. The first paragraph prohibits sexual acts with those under the age of eighteen for a number of people to whom the child is normally in a state of dependence, i.e. parents, grandparents, step-parents and adoptive parents and also others charged with the upbringing of the child, e.g. foster parents and institutional staff. In other cases the age limit of 15 applies. The act is often considered to be gross if exploitation takes place repeatedly or if the child was exploited at a young age.

Sexual molestation

Section 7

If a person sexually touches a child under fifteen years of age otherwise than as previously provided in this Chapter, or induces the child to undertake or participate in an act with sexual implication a fine or imprisonment for at most two years shall be imposed for *sexual molestation*.

A sentence for sexual molestation shall also be imposed on a person who by coercion, seduction or other improper influence induces a person who has attained the age of fifteen but not eighteen to undertake or participate in an act with sexual implication if the act is an element in the production of pornographic pictures or constitutes pornographic posing in circumstances other than those relating to the production of a picture.

This shall also apply if a person exposes himself or herself in such a manner that the nature thereof gives offence or otherwise manifestly behaves indecently by word or deed towards the latter in a way that flagrantly violates a sense of propriety.

Sexual molestation may be flashing, sexual allusions and invitations but in the case of children more often involves some form of cursory touching.

If there is little difference in age between the perpetrator and the child, a public prosecution is not to be brought unless this is in the public interest (section 13). This may, for example, concern a 16 year-old boy who has had sex with a 14 year-old girl. However, one must not forget that abuse by a teenager of a younger child may be very traumatic, particularly if there is a considerable difference in age, development and body size (Ryan 1991). Sometimes some investigations have used an age difference of five years as a definition of abuse but this has been criticised, as abuse of a small, slender 10 year-old girl by a 14 year-old well-developed boy can be a very traumatic experience. Others have considered that sexual coercion between children and young people is always abuse irrespective of age.

In cases involving perpetrators under the age of 15 the prosecutor passes the case on to the social authorities. If the young perpetrator is between 15 and 18, the prosecutor may bring a case. However, the most common scenario is for the prosecutor to withdraw the case and the consequence in such cases is for the matter to be passed on to the social authorities.

Child pornography

Chapter 16, section 10a of the Penal Code lays down provisions on spreading and, since 1 January 1999, *possessing child pornography*.

Section 10a

A person who portrays a child in a pornographic picture with the intention that such a picture is disseminated or who disseminates such a picture of a child shall be sentenced, unless the act is defensible with regard to the circumstances, for *child pornography crime* to a fine or imprisonment for at most two years.

Limitation on sanctions

The periods after which the above crimes may not be subject to sanction are laid down in general in Chapter 35, section 1 of the Penal Code. In general the following relationship applies between the length of sentence and the limitation on sanctions for crimes under the Penal Code, see table 1 below.

Table 1. Maximum sentence and limitation on sanctions

Maximum sentence	Limitation on sanctions
Up to 1 year	2 years
Greater than 1 year but less than 2 years	5 years
Greater than 2 years but less than 8 years	10 years
A certain period greater than 8 years	15 years
Life	25 years

Chapter 35, section 4 of the Penal Code however makes exceptions for crimes under Chapter 6, sections 1 to 4. For sexual crimes against children under 15 the limitation on sanctions is counted from the day the plaintiff reaches the age of 15 and for a further ten years. For example a young woman in her twenties who for the first time reports abuse which took place in her childhood before the age of 15 can report the crime to the police and a case can be brought until her 25th birthday. However, the person to whom she relates the offence is under no obligation to report it under section 71 of the Social Services Act.

National Board of Health and Welfare definition (General Guidelines 1991:3)

Social Services' General Guidelines (1991:3) contain a broad definition of the concept of sexual abuse. The text under the heading *What is sexual abuse?* (page 17) includes the following:

“The term child sexual abuse includes all forms of sexual act forced on a child by an adult.

The abuse may include everything from the child being forced to look at pornographic magazines with the adult to oral, anal and vaginal intercourse. Sexual touching and kissing, masturbating in front of the child or forcing the child to masturbate the adult, and exposing oneself to the child are some other examples of sexual abuse. Child sexual abuse also includes child prostitution and exploitation of children in the context of pornography.

The abuse can take place on an individual occasion or on several occasions. However, it may also involve repeated abuse over several years.”

Comments

In Sweden there is still no clear definition of various forms of child maltreatment. We have relatively wide-ranging legislation on certain defined forms of abuse but this conceptual apparatus is not sufficient in

terms of in-depth understanding or research. There is currently a lack of systematic collation of reports to social authorities on children who are ill-treated in Sweden. This could either take place on an ongoing basis, e.g. as in the UK or through repeated surveys, as in the US.

It is also my opinion that we have focused to far too great an extent on sexual abuse as the only explanation for child traumatising and to far too little an extent studied (in research) or addressed (in designing protection and treatment) the child's entire living situation including the incidence and degree of psychological abuse and neglect. It is also important that attention is paid to the problem of young abusers and that this is investigated. This particularly applies to young boys (under 15) who molest smaller children. A proper investigation which would allow intervention at an early stage should be an important preventive initiative as we know that many paedophiles begin their development as early as puberty (Abel et al, 1987, Marshall et al, 1991).

Below are two proposals for possible categories to stimulate continued debate. The first covers child maltreatment and the second child sexual abuse.

Proposal for classification of child maltreatment

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| Neglect/lack of care | – child neglect |
| Psychological maltreatment | – child psychological abuse
emotional abuse
non-organic failure to thrive |
| Physical maltreatment | – child physical abuse
battered child syndrome
shaken baby syndrome
Münchausen's syndrome by proxy |
| Sexual abuse | – child sexual abuse |

Proposed classification of child sexual abuse

There is also a need for better sub-categories. The term "child sexual abuse" should be the overall term for all sexual acts towards children. The main sub-groupings should, for example, be special forms such as non-organised and organised abuse. The sub-groupings could delineate the crimes, the intensity and period of abuse, the existence of documentation, relationship with the perpetrator and the social support available surrounding the child. Today preliminary police investigations and the crime statistics focus on the perpetrator and the act and the victim to become easily invisible (Martens, 1990. Svedin, Back, 1996).

DESCRIPTION OF ACT

Non-organised abuse

With bodily contact

Rape

Sexual coercion

Sexual exploitation

Sexual molestation

Organised abuse

With bodily contact

Rape

Sexual coercion

Sexual exploitation

Sexual molestation

Without bodily contact

Sexual molestation/flashing

Without bodily contact

*Sexual molestation/
flashing*

Additional information

Intensity

Period over which abuse took place

Existence of documentation

Relationship to perpetrator

Social support surrounding the child

How common is sexual abuse?

Common questions asked of those who works with children who are the victims of sexual abuse are: How common is child sexual abuse? Has the number of children who are the victims of abuse increased and if so, what is this due to? These questions are not easy to answer.

The terms we have available when describing the occurrence of child sexual abuse are *incidence*, i.e. the number of cases of child sexual abuse discovered per year, and *prevalence* (the frequency of the problem in the population) i.e. the number of people who have been the victims of sexual abuse during childhood.

Calculating the incidence and prevalence of a phenomenon such as child sexual abuse is problematic. The largest problem is to do with estimating the *hidden figures*. Figure 1, which shows the links between prevalence and incidence, makes it clear that prevalence is the greater part. Today incidence can only be estimated by the cases, which come to the knowledge of the police over a certain period of time. The measurements we have available are the number of cases of suspected sexual crimes against children reported to the police and judgements on sexual crimes against children. The latter may be derived from police reports made several years earlier. Similarly, police reports may date back to sexual activities dated several years earlier.

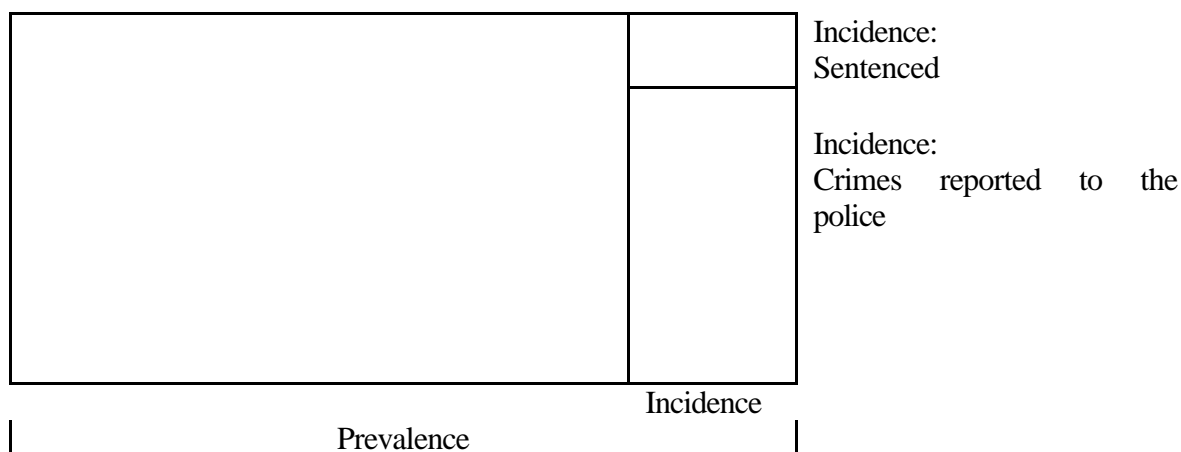


Figure 1. Link between incidence and prevalence

Hidden figures

It is likely that sexual crimes are one of the categories of crime in which a large proportion of the crimes are hidden. Attempting to estimate these hidden figures for sex crimes is particularly difficult (Olsson, 1996). Martens (1990) lists three factors which are usually cited as crucial to the likelihood of a crime being reported: the severity of the crime, the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim and the visibility of the crime. This means that more serious crimes are reported to a higher extent than less serious crimes, that crimes committed by strangers are reported more than crimes committed by relatives or acquaintances and that crimes committed in a public place are reported to a greater extent than crimes committed in the private sphere, e.g. in the home. When it comes to sexual crimes committed against children, the issue is complicated by the fact that the maturity and dependent position of the child tend to prevent the child from being able to report the crime him or herself to the social services or the police. Martens (1990) describes a number of factors preventing children from reporting sexual crimes to the police, which can explain why recorded and visible crime differs from actual crime in terms of number of cases and types of crime.

Research from the United States shows that less than half of all victims report/reveal the crime in immediate conjunction with the abuse while a large proportion do not reveal it until they are part of a research study (Finkelhor, Hotaling, Lewis & Smith, 1990, Elliot 1993). Similar results were found by Edgardh in her study of Swedish teenagers (1992). Several American studies also show that when abuse is revealed only 6 %-12 % of cases are reported to the police (Elliot, 1993, Russell, 1984, Saunders, Kilpatrick et al; 1992). In addition trauma and memory research indicates that it is likely that prevalence is underestimated in studies based on self-reporting. In a study by Williams (1994) it proved to be the case that over a

third of the girls who were somatically examined in hospital for sexual abuse did not remember this when studied 17 years later. Other studies, particularly in the US, also show that a large proportion of all suspected cases of sexual abuse are not reported (DHHS, 1988, Zellman, Antler, 1990).

The conclusions we can draw are that there are a considerable number of hidden cases and attempting to determine the exact prevalence and incidence is an almost impossible task. Instead one should talk about the reported incidence and the reported prevalence. When it comes to comparative statistics between different countries or between different surveys, new difficulties in interpreting data arise. Differing definitions, approaches, inclination to report, ages, etc. make it difficult to draw comparative conclusions.

Incidence

Reported crimes in Sweden

The incidence, i.e. the number of cases discovered each year, is based on the summaries now produced by the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention of reports received by the police in Sweden. Three main categories can be discerned in the statistics on crimes against children: rape, sexual coercion and sexual molestation. Sexual exploitation of minors is included in the statistics under sexual coercion.

Reports of sexual crimes against children have been reported separately in the statistics since 1965. Table 2 shows the development of sexual crimes reported to the police against children under 15 since 1975. Flashing has been excluded from the column on sexual molestation.

It should be noted that the suspected crime is recorded when it is reported and not when it was committed. It is important to bear this in mind, e.g. regarding the dramatic increase in 1993. It is not certain but it is likely that this peak includes suspected crimes spread over several years in the past, for which reason the peak should perhaps largely be seen as increased willingness to report sexual crimes. Furthermore it is important to point out that these figures concern *suspected* sexual crimes rather than actual crimes against children.

Table 2. Number of suspected sexual crimes against children aged 0–15 reported to the police 1975–1997. Flashing has been excluded from the column on sexual molestation.

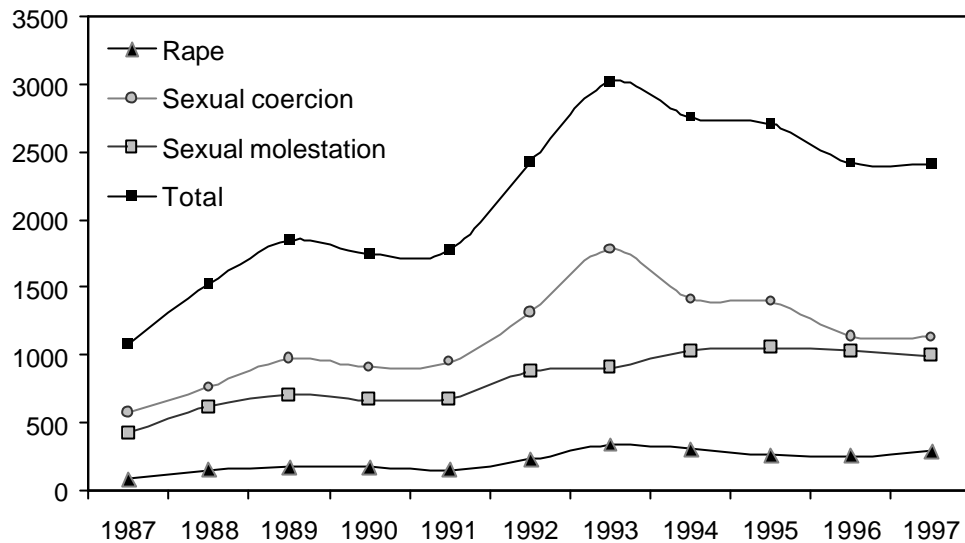
Year	Rape	Sexual coercion		Sexual molestation	Total
		Opposite sex	Same sex		
1975	96	233	44	–	–
1976	85	187	40	–	–
1977	71	164	103	–	–
1978	108	180	92	–	–
1979	91	218	59	–	–
1980	64	175	64	–	–
1981	48	200	69	–	–
1982	62	215	81	–	–
1983	60	252	88	–	–
1984	76	311	130	–	–
1985	108	382	212	–	–
1986	86	345	178	–	–
1987	83	415	159	426	1083
1988	148	602	157	617	1524
1989	176	807	164	699	1846
1990	173	758	150	665	1746
1991	149	760	189	677	1775
1992	229	1025	289	878	2421
1993	338	1498	285	900	3021
1994	309	1119	295	1032	2755
1995	258	1105	290	1057	2710
1996	253	875	261	1029	2418
1997	286	918	211	997	2412

To sum up it can be stated that the number of sexual crimes against children reported to the police fell from the mid 1960s to the mid 1970s. From then on the frequency of reporting stabilised but from 1982 onwards a major increase was seen until 1993. The quantitatively largest increase in the number of cases concerns crimes under the heading of sexual coercion, etc. of a member of the opposite sex, i.e. in practice cases where the suspect was a man and the child a girl. The increase has been somewhat smaller for crimes under the heading sexual coercion, etc. of a member of the same sex, i.e. in practice cases where the suspect is a man and the child a boy.

During the period 1994–1997 reported crimes fell and figures for 1997 in total were the same as that in 1992, i.e. just over 2,400 reports a year. The annual incidence defined as suspected sexual crimes against children under the age of 15 reported to the police is roughly estimated on the basis of the figures for 1992 and 1996 (around 2,400 reports per year) at 1.6 per thousand children in Sweden.

The figure below reflects the trend in the period 1987–1997

Figure 2. Number of suspected sexual crimes against children aged 0-15, 1987–



1997

To sum up it can be stated that the number of crimes reported to the police in total doubled in this period. At the same time it can be seen that reports fell from 1993 onwards when the number of crimes reported was just over 3,000.

Since 1987 suspected crimes of the type sexual coercion, etc. of children have been separated in the statistics according to the type of relationship between the suspect and the victim. During this period the proportion with a close relationship varies between 51 % and 67 %. The changes in the number of police reports were largely attributable to the group with a close relationship between the suspect and the victim, i.e. in practice abuse within the family.

Those accused and prosecuted for crime in Sweden

One weakness of the current statistics is that it is not possible to monitor the proportion of those cases reported to the police, e.g. in 1994, which came to court and the proportion in which a prosecution was achieved.

We can only see the number of crimes reported to the police (irrespective of the year the crime was permitted) which during a particular year concluded with a decision to prosecute or not to prosecute or imposition of a penalty. The summary below of the statistics from the Swedish National Centre for Crime Prevention thus has its deficiencies as it is not possible to link suspected crimes with cleared up crimes or to an even lesser extent prosecutions. With the aim of shedding light on these circumstances, we have chosen to report the figures for a ten-year period, which is likely to reduce the problem of the delay in reporting crimes.

Rape of a person under the age of 15

During the period 1984–1995 2,133 suspected rapes of people under the age of 15 were reported in Sweden. During the same period 1,171 rapes were cleared up, which would mean a rough estimate of a 55 % clear-up rate. In the same period 578 crimes resulted in action being taken (27 %) and the majority of these (92 %) resulted in a prosecution.

Sexual coercion, exploitation, etc. of a person under the age of 15

During the period 1984–1995 11,625 suspected crimes were reported under this heading in Sweden. During the same period 6,912 crimes were cleared up, equivalent to 59 % had these been the same crimes. 3,915 crimes led to action being taken during the period (34 %), the majority of which (96 %) resulted in a prosecution.

Sexual molestation (flashing) of a person under the age of 15

During the period 1987–1995 6,951 suspected crimes of this type were reported in Sweden. During the same period 2,869 cases were cleared up, equivalent to 41 % had these been the same crime. 1,740 led to action during the same period (25 %), the majority of which (92 %) resulted in prosecution.

International

In the *US* there is a lack of collected statistics on police reports. Instead several studies have been carried out of reports to the Child Protection Services. For example, it has been possible to note a marked increase in reported cases of sexual abuse of children in the last 25 years from 7,559 in 1976 (DHHS, 1981) to 133,600 cases in 1986 (DHHS, 1988) corresponding to 2.1 per 1,000 children. Based on repeated studies with reports from 50 states, in the *US* an estimated 2.7 million children in 1990 and 3.0 million children in 1991 were the victims of maltreatment (NCCAN, 1992, 1993). In these two years 16 % and 15 % respectively of reported cases involved suspected sexual abuse. The major increase noted in the *US* primarily in the years 1976–1990 is considered by many to be a consequence of increased attention, an expanded obligation to report and thus an increased inclination to report such crimes.

In *England and Wales* since 1974–1975 a Child Abuse Register has been set up run by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) in which children who have been the victims of sexual abuse are registered. In 1977–1986 suspected sexual abuse accounted for a total of 10.7 % of the children on the register while between 1981 and 1986 the proportion of cases of sexual abuse in the register increased from 3 % to 31 % (Creighton 1988). As in the *US* and *Sweden* a similar trend can be seen i.e. a marked increase in the number of children who come to the knowledge of the authorities because they are suspected to be the victim of sexual abuse. Like in the *US*, the increase in *England and Wales* is considered to be due to a combination of more stringent legislation and increased awareness.

It should be mentioned that sexual abuse, for example, was not included as a separate category in the register until 1986.

Prevalence

As incidence studies of child sexual abuse are associated with a high number of hidden cases, the best picture of the scope of this type of crime in society can be obtained from direct questioning of the public in what are known as prevalence studies or in this context often termed victim surveys. However, prevalence studies in sensitive areas such as crime in general and sexual crime in particular are associated with methodological problems which is why prevalence figures are often seen as being less reliable. Reports on the methodological problems involved can be found in various publications (Peters, Wyatt, Finkelhor, 1986, Martens, 1989).

It is important to draw attention to these problems by interpreting various surveys. The factors affecting the variation in figures are considered to have to do with selection (random selection of the population is recommended), response frequency (the higher the response frequency the more reliable the survey), the definition of abuse (a broad definition increases prevalence), age difference between the victim and the perpetrator (the narrower the difference the higher the prevalence), the data collection method (it is likely that interviews produce higher prevalence figures than questionnaires, the context, the way in which questions are asked, etc.)

Sweden

In Sweden a number of victim surveys have been carried out, some rather a long time ago now. The first two were commissioned from SIFO by Sweden's Save the Children.

The first study was carried out in 1983 from a random selection of the entire adult Swedish population, i.e. ages 18 to 70 (Rönström, 1983). Selected group was 1,015 people, 938 of who responded (444 women and 494 men). The questionnaire contained 10 questions on experience of sexual abuse while growing up, i.e. before the age of 18. The questionnaires were handed out during a personal visit, completed and returned anonymously in a sealed envelope.

The second study was carried out using the same methodology in 1985 and covered 1,002 young people aged 16–24 (Rönström, 1985). Eight questions on sexual abuse were asked, six of which were identical with the questions asked during the investigation in 1983. Rönström found that just over 8 % in the adult female group and just under 7 % in the youth group said that they had been the victim of sexual abuse as a child or young person. Among the men 3 % of the adults and 1 % of the young people responded that they had been the victim of sexual abuse when growing up.

In a third study carried out by Karin Edgardh (1992) of approximately 2,000 Swedish 17 year-olds, 12 % of the girls and 4 % of the boys responded that they had been the victim of sexual abuse/molestation. When flashing was not included the equivalent figures were 7 % and 3 % respectively. Among the young people who were not attending upper secondary school but were the responsibility of the municipalities' alternative education, 26 % of the girls and 4 % of the boys responded that they had been the victims of sexual abuse (excluding flashing). The study showed that a quarter of the cases were cases of interfamilial abuse, i.e. the perpetrator was a parent, sibling or other relative. These abuses tended to be repeated and began at a younger age.

In the extrafamilial cases the perpetrator was either a person known to the parents, a person known to the child but unknown to the parents or a person unknown to the child. Cases of abuse by a stranger were usually one-off cases. Just over half of the young people had talked to someone about what had happened. Those who were the victims of an unknown abuser had to a large extent confided in someone, normally a relative and/or a friend. Only 9 % (no boys) had talked to a professional person such as a teacher, school counsellor, social worker or nurse. The study does not show whether cases were reported to the police.

The Nordic countries

The Swedish victim studies of the adult population (Rönström, 1983) were replicated after some revisions of the questionnaire in *Norway* (Sætre, Holter, Jebesen, 1986) and in *Denmark* (Leth, Stenvig, Pedersen, 1988). In the Norwegian study the questionnaire was sent to a selection of 2,134 adults, 1,017 of whom replied (48 %). 19 % of the women and 14 % of the men responded that they had been the victim of sexual abuse before the age of 18. If we exclude cases where the respondent had not experienced major discomfort during the event, the frequencies were 14 % for the women and 9 % for the men. In the Danish survey 14 % of the girls and 7 % of the boys responded that they were the victims of abuse in childhood.

A further study was carried out by the National Institute of Public Health in Norway (Tambs, 1994). Here a wide-ranging questionnaire was sent to a random selection of 5,000 people and the response rate was 37 %. 31 % of the women and 16 % of the men responded that they had experienced acts categorised as sexual abuse. If the definition was reduced to touching of genitalia (serious abuse), the frequency was 13 % of the women and 7 % of the men. If the focus was restricted to the fact that the victim was under 16 and the perpetrator over four years older, the figures were 9 % of the women and 5 % of the men. With reservations for the low response rate, the study is a good example of a study with a wide definition and sub-groupings for analysis of the material. For further information see tables 3a and 3b.

In *Finland* (Sariola Uutela, 1994) a study was carried out of 7,435 students in year 9 (ages 15–16). 18 % of the girls and 7 % of the boys reported that they had had sexual contact with someone at least 5 years older than they

were. If abuse was defined as the cases involving coercion, violence and genital contact, the figures were 8 % among girls and 3 % among the boys.

Table 3a. Prevalence of abuse against girls (Tambs, 1994)

Most serious type of abuse	Prevalence of abuse according to various definition criteria				
	All	a	a+b	a+b+c	a+b+c+d
Shown pornography, saw flasher, sex proposed	11.4 %	10.6 %	8.6 %	2.0 %	0.4 %
Sexual touching, intimate exposure of genitalia	5.9 %	5.1 %	5.0 %	2.4 %	0.6 %
Touching genitalia	5.8 %	4.7 %	4.6 %	2.3 %	0.7 %
Intercourse, attempted intercourse, oral or anal sex	7.5 %	5.0 %	4.1 %	2.7 %	1.6 %
Total	30.7 %	25.4 %	22.3 %	9.4 %	3.3 %

Table 3b. Prevalence of abuse against boys (Tambs, 1994)

Most serious type of abuse	Prevalence of abuse according to various definition criteria				
	All	a	a+b	a+b+c	a+b+c+d
Shown pornography, saw flasher, sex suggested	6.2 %	4.8 %	4.5 %	0.4 %	0.1 %
Sexual touching, intimate exposure of genitalia	2.5 %	2.0 %	1.6 %	0.4 %	0.1 %
Touching genitalia	3.8 %	3.0 %	2.9 %	0.7 %	0.4 %
Intercourse, attempted intercourse, oral or anal sex	3.3 %	2.0 %	1.7 %	0.0 %	0.0 %
Total	15.7 %	11.8 %	10.7 %	1.5 %	0.3 %

Inclusion criteria for tables 3a and 3b

- a. Age difference between victim and perpetrator >4 years
- b. Age of victim less than 16
- c. Victim experienced the abuse as “very unpleasant” or terrible or did not reply to questions on how bad it felt.

d. Took place more than once

International

In a summary of most victim surveys carried out before 1986 Peters et al (1986) found that the prevalence figures in the studies included from North America varied between 6 % and 62 % for women and 3 % and 16 % for men. Here the authors discuss various methodological problems which can explain the differing prevalence figures. These have to do with how child sexual abuse is defined (age limits, types of sexual act and age differences between victim and perpetrator), the composition of the survey group (age, socio-economic status, ethnicity, regional differences), statistical selection method, response frequency/attrition, data collection method (including interviews and the way of asking about sexual abuse).

In terms of the data collection method, the prevalence figures varied between 11 % and 34 % for women using standardised questionnaires, between 11 % and 27 % for telephone interviews and between 6 % and 62 % for personal interviews (Peters et al 1986).

Martens (1989) summarises that victim surveys based on questionnaires have a tendency to somewhat underestimate incidence while studies with personal interviews have a tendency to overestimate incidence. The problem which has attracted the greatest interest outside research circles and which is also highlighted in a Norwegian article (Sætre 1997) has to do with the definition criteria. Criteria which have a reducing effect on the prevalence figures are lower age limit for the victim, higher age difference between the victim and the perpetrator, acts which only include body contact, acts which are only seen as unpleasant. The broader the criteria the higher the prevalence figures and vice versa.

The fact that differences in methodology can be significant is shown by a recent metastudy (Gorey, Leslie, 1997) of 16 prevalence studies from *North America*. By checking for variations in methodology and definitions across the surveys it proved to be the case that the differences between the studies were primarily due to response frequency and operational definitions. The survey showed that uncorrected frequencies of experienced abuse on average were 22.3 % for women and 8.5 % for men. If only studies with over an 80 % response rate were included, the corrected figures were 16.8 % for women and 7.9 % for men. If abuse without physical contact was also excluded, the corrected figures become 14.5 % for women and 7.2 % for men. If a correction was also made for the material being systematically skewed, i.e. that no-one in the attrition figures had experienced abuse, the frequencies became 12 % among the women and 5 % among the men. The authors concluded that the incidence of experienced and self-reported sexual abuse is somewhere within the range corrected for attrition of 12 %–17 % for women and 5 %–8 % for men.

In an overview article Finkelhor (1994) presents a selection of 21 international surveys. The prevalence rates vary in these studies between 7

% and 36 % for women and 3 % and 29 % for men. The article discusses the differences between the studies and the author considers that high prevalence figures may be explained by more in-depth questioning (Holland, Draijer, 1990) or broad definitions (South Africa, Collings, 1991) and low prevalence figures by one individual screening question (UK, Baker & Duncan 1985) or where the subject is possibly still socially sensitive (Ireland, MRBI, 1987, Greece, Agathonos et al, 1992).

To sum up, the comparison shows that sexual abuse is an international problem and that the prevalence figures clearly exceed the number of reported cases. The summary also points out that abuse against girls is 1.5 to 3 times as common as abuse against boys and that interfamilial abuse is far more common among girls (14 %–56 %) than among boys (0 %–25 %). Taking all studies into account only around half of the victims of sexual abuse have told anyone about the abuse.

To conclude Finkelhor and staff (1997) carried out an interesting epidemiological study in which 1,000 American parents were asked about discipline and violence in bringing up children. For the first time in the literature parents were also asked if the child (aged 0–17) had been the victim of sexual abuse. The frequency of children stated to have been abused in the past year was 1.9 % or 5.7 % if the entire upbringing was taken into account.

Another way of shedding light on the phenomenon is the Swedish child-line service Barnens Hjälptelefon run by BRIS. Just over 10,000 calls come into BRIS yearly from children, which can be processed statistically (BRIS report 1994–1997). When it comes to sexual abuse, this on average constituted 9 % of all calls, corresponding to just under 1,000 calls a year.

Table 4. Proportion of phone calls to BRIS, Barnens Hjälptelefon 1995–1997

Year	Number of calls	% physical/psycho- logical abuse	% sexual abuse, etc.
1994	9,709	11.8	9.3
1995	11,532	10.4	9.9
1996	10,951	11.5	8.5
1997	10,225	9.1	8.2
Total	42,417	10.7	9.0

To sum up, tables 5a and 5b provide a summary of a number of studies referred to previously in the text or included in the summaries either of Peters et al (1986) or Finkelhor (1994) and a further two national American studies. From these, only surveys based on a random selection of the population, locally, regionally or nationally have been included.

Table 5a. European prevalence studies on sexual abuse in childhood.

Country/ Author	Year	No. of responde nts	Response rate, %	Women	Incidence, % Men
Sweden	1983	938	92 %	8	3
	1985	1,002	-	7	1
	1992	1,943	92 %	12 (7*)	4 (3*)
Denmark	1988	1,325	66 %	14	7
Finland	1991	6,870	89 %	8	3
Norway	1986	1,017	48 %	19	14
	1994	1,850	37 %	31 (13*)	16 (7*)
Belgium	1988	956	71 %	19	-
UK	1985	2,019	82 %	12	8
The Netherlands	1990	1,054	49 %	33	-
Ireland	1987	500	-	7	5
Switzerland	1993	421	72 %	11	3
	1996	1,116	94 %	39 (20*)	11 (3*)
Spain	1995	1,821	83 %	22	15

* includes only cases involving bodily contact

Table 5b. Non-European prevalence studies on sexual abuse in childhood.

Country/ Author	Year	No. of responde nts	Response rate, %	Incidence, %	
				Women	Men
Canada	1984	2,008	94 %	34 (22*)	13
	1989	1,833	86 %	18	8
	1997	9,953	-	13	4
New Zealand	1993	1,376	71 %	32	-
US	1976	3,185	64 %	14	8
	1983	603	61 %	11	7
	1983	930	50 %	54 (38*)	-
	1984	1,154	53 %	11	3
	1984	521	61 %	15	6
	1985	3,082	69 %	6	3
	1985	2,626	-	27	16
	1985	818	71 %	13	3
	1985	248	55 %	62 (45*)	-
	1990	2,626	76 %	27	16
	1992	391	20 %	34	-
	1995	505	70 %	30	14
	1996	375	48 %	12	1

* includes only cases involving bodily contact

Prevalence in populations in child and adolescent psychiatry

Studies of clinical populations have shown that it is common for children in residential and non-residential child and youth psychiatry to previously have been the victims of sexual abuse. This is partly because they have been admitted due to the abuse and partly because children with problems have had to a wider extent than others several “life events” and traumatic experiences including sexual abuse in their background.

In a survey of child and youth psychiatric residential patients it proved to be the case that 28 % of the patients had been the victims of abuse (Kolko, Moser, Weldy 1988). In another survey of 64 registers from a general non-residential child and youth psychiatric clinic, Lanktree et al found that the method of questioning had significance for the frequency of abuse reported by the patients (Lanktree, Briere, Zaidi, 1991). In records where the child was directly admitted, it had been noted that 6.9 % of the children had been the victims of abuse. If on the other hand experienced staff interviewed the child in a structured manner, 31.4 % of the children stated that they had been the victims of abuse (50 % of the girls and 11.5 % of the boys).

Prevalence in adult psychiatric populations

Studies of adult psychiatric patients provide a similar picture. In an overview article of 15 different studies of residential psychiatric patients in the years 1984–1996, an average 50 % of the patients had been the victim of sexual abuse while growing up (Read, 1997). Among female adult

psychiatric patients in non-residential care, 64 % reported having had this experience (Surrey et al 1990). Studies of men in residential psychiatric care and non-residential care respectively showed high but lower frequencies than among the women. In a study of residential patients, 26 % of the men had experience of sexual abuse during their childhood (Jacobson, Herald, 1990) while 48 % of the men in non-residential care had experience of abuse while growing up (Sweet, Surrey, Cohen, 1990). In studies in residential psychiatric care, which applied both to women and men at the same time, it is constantly shown that more women than men were the victims of abuse while growing up, varying between 38 % and 54 % among the women and between 24 % and 39 % among men (Sansonnnet-Hayden et al, 1987, Jacobson, Herald, 1990, Wurr, Partridge, 1996).

Comments

To sum up it can be stated that around 1-2 per 1,000 children under the age of 15 are annually reported to the police because they are suspected to be the victims of sexual abuse. Only a small proportion of these cases result in a prosecution and a guilty verdict. The Swedish prevalence figures are relatively low in international terms (7 %–8 % of women and 1 %–3 % of men) while they show a relatively good correlation with each other. However, the prevalence figures mean that a not inconsiderable proportion of the Swedish population have experience of sexual abuse while growing up, with its inherent consequences for physical health and subsequent adaptation in society. The fact that sexual abuse is so clearly over-represented among both children and adults in psychiatry is important to recognise. This indicates that sexual traumatisation is one of several important background factors for psychiatric ill-health, something to which insufficient attention has been paid in modern psychiatry.

There are no studies from Sweden regarding willingness to report, which is why the international figures have to be interpreted with care. Thus today we have no idea how large the willingness to report cases to the social services or the police is and whether it varies across the country. It is a weakness that we currently have gathered no knowledge of the reports made to the social services, only statistics on the number of police reports to rely on.

The statistics on suspected sexual crimes against children show a number of deficiencies. The clearest lack is that the age group 15–18 is not included in sexual crimes against children. The statistics to which we have access focus on suspected perpetrators and not on the victim, i.e. children and young people. Other weaknesses are that we lack statistics and thereby knowledge of the extent of the problem when it comes to young perpetrators of sexual abuse (under the age of 15), abuse which takes place in institutions and abuse of the disabled. A further problem is that it is impossible to follow a case from a report to a decision to prosecute or not and if a prosecution is

brought, whether the perpetrator is sentenced. This is a clear deficiency, which needs to be corrected.

From a scientific point of view the most meaningful approach would appear to be broad definitions of sexual abuse with narrower sub-groupings (see e.g. Tambs, 1994), which would make it possible to combine different definition criteria with various background factors, in order, for example to study the consequences of abuse. When presenting research results, it is also important to make these criteria clear.

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