


Lifetime Prevalence and Characteristics of Child Sexual Victimization in a Community Sample of Spanish Adolescents

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the lifetime prevalence and characteristics of self-reported child sexual victimization and associations between sexual victimization and sociodemographic characteristics and victimological profiles in community adolescents in Spain. The Juvenile Victimization Questionnaire (Finkelhor, Hamby, Ormrod, & Turner, 2005) was applied to a sample of 1,105 community adolescents ($M = 14.52$ years, $SD = 1.76$). Experience of sexual victimization (with or without physical contact) was reported by 8.8% of the sample, at a mean age of 13 years old. Sexual victimization was more prevalent in girls (14.2%) and in older adolescents (10.6%). Offenders were mainly male (87.6%) and were mostly friends, neighbors, or schoolmates (52.6%). No injuries resulted from victimization (4.3%), although the percentage of penetration or attempted penetration was very high (30.6%). Only 9.3% of victims reported the incident to the police or the justice system. In regard to victimological profiles, sexual victims also experienced other forms of victimization ($M = 7.16$; $SD = 3.39$): boys reported more conventional crimes, peer and sibling victimization, and witnessing community violence than other victims, whereas sexually victimized girls reported more caregiver victimization and property crimes. Sexually victimized youth present a distinctive sociodemographic and victimological profile. Professionals need to be aware of these characteristics in order to conduct adequate prevention programs. We also need to assess a wide range of victimization experiences when treating sexual abuse victims in order to make adolescents less vulnerable to violence.

The wide extent of childhood sexual victimization has been confirmed in meta-analyses, which have reported rates of sexual abuse ranging from 7.6% for boys to 19.7% for girls (Pereda, Guilera, Forns, & Gómez-Benito, 2009; Stoltenborgh, Van Ijzendoorn, Euser, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2011). Indeed, in all the societies studied to date, the sexual victimization of children has emerged as a serious problem.

In Spain, few studies have asked victims directly about their experiences of abuse. Most research has focused on the retrospective analysis of information provided by adults. From an epidemiological perspective, López, Carpintero, Hernández, Martín, and Fuertes (1995) surveyed a representative sample of 1,821 adults in Spain and found that 15% of men and 22% of women had experienced sexual victimization before the age of 17. The authors found that the most frequent behaviors were fondling below (58%) and above the waist (59%), followed by the propositions of sex and exhibitionism (both 33%). Sixteen percent of men and 15% of women reported having suffered oral, anal, or vaginal penetration at some point during the abuse. In just over half of the cases (56%), the sexual abuse occurred only once. The aggressors, mostly men, might be strangers (45% in the case of males and 27% in females) or known to the victim (31% in males and 42% in females). In contrast to other authors, López and colleagues found that intrafamily child sexual abuse occurred more frequently in men than in women (12% versus 4%). Most of the perpetrators in cases of child sexual abuse were 30 to 50 years old (López, 1994), although some offenders were under 20 years of age (in 15% of male victims and 10% of female victims).

However, retrospective studies cannot establish the true extent of child sexual victimization and do not allow an analysis of the phenomenon at the time it is happening (Goldman & Padayachi, 2000). In this regard, recent studies have emphasized the need to ask the children themselves about their experiences of victimization during childhood to enable them to share their perception of the situation and also to allow these incidents to be reported, in some cases for the first time (Morris, Hegarty, & Humphreys, 2012). Proponents of this methodology argue that the child's perspective must be included in order to obtain information that is relevant to the prevention and treatment of the problem (Becker-Blease & Freyd, 2006; Carroll-Lind, Chapman, Gregory, & Maxwell, 2006). This methodology has been applied in studies in community populations in the United States (Finkelhor, Shattuck, Turner, & Hamby, 2014), in Canada (Cyr et al., 2013), in the United Kingdom (Radford, Corral, Bradley, & Fisher, 2013) and in Spain (Pereda, Guilera, & Abad, 2014).

Finkelhor and colleagues (2014) reported that 26.6% of girls and 5.1% of boys among 2,293 respondents from the United States aged 15 to 17 years had experienced lifetime sexual victimization. In that study, most of the perpetrators were juveniles who were acquaintances of the victims, followed (in this order) by adults, family, and strangers. The rate of penetration increased with age in girls, rising from 2.4% at 15 years to 6.1% at 17 years. For males, the rate of penetration was 0.7% at 15 years and 0.4% at 16 years. In a study in Canada, Cyr and colleagues (2013) recorded lifetime sexual victimization in 8% of their sample of 2,801 respondents, ages 2 to 17 years (5.7% in boys and 11.2% in girls). The most common forms of

victimization were verbal sexual harassment (4%) and flashing and sexual exposure (3%), usually committed by other youths known to the victim.

In Europe, in a sample of 2,275 respondents from the United Kingdom, Radford and colleagues (2013) found that 12.5% of males and 20.8% of girls, aged between 11 and 17, had been victims of some form of sexual victimization by an adult or peer at some time during their lifetime. In Spain, in a sample of 1,107 respondents between 12 and 17 years of age, Pereda and colleagues (2014) recorded sexual victimization rates of 4.1% in boys and 13.9% in girls. However, neither study analyzed the specific characteristics of sexual victimization.

Establishing the characteristics of sexual victimization has important implications for the prognosis and treatment of victims (Loeb, Gaines, Wyatt, Zhang, & Liu, 2011). The severity of the abuse (estimated on the basis of a range of variables—age of onset, the relationship to the perpetrator, the number of perpetrators, the duration and frequency of the abuse, the use of threats or force, and penetration) has been associated with significant psychological problems in victims (e.g., trauma symptoms such as anxiety, depression, anger, posttraumatic stress, dissociation, and sexual concerns; Fortier et al., 2009), which may persist into adulthood (Chen et al., 2010). The experience of multiple forms of sexual victimization has also been linked with poorer mental health outcomes (Ackard & Neumark-Sztainer, 2003).

The age of the offender at the time of the abuse, however, does not seem to influence the psychological state of the victim (Shaw, Lewis, Loeb, Rosado, & Rodriguez, 2000), although some authors indicate that more severe abuses are carried out by younger offenders (Allard-Dansereau, Haley, Hamane, & Bernard-Bonnin, 1997). In turn, the victim's own demographics such as gender (Dube et al., 2005; Feiring, Taska, & Lewis, 1999; Garnefski & Diekstra, 1997) or age at the onset of abuse (Feiring et al., 1999; Ruggiero, McLeer, & Dixon, 2000) appear to influence the subsequent emergence of maladjustment. The experience of multiple forms of abuse also increases the level of distress (Clemmons, Walsh, DiLillo, & Messman-Moore, 2007), especially in victims of sexual abuse (Lacelle, Hébert, Lavoie, Vitaro, & Tremblay, 2012). The child's reporting of the offense is another variable to take into account (Arata, 1998), although the reaction of the victims' environment after this revelation or discovery seems to be the most influential variable in the development of psychological symptoms (Ullman, 2002).

Purpose of the present study

Given the importance of establishing the characteristics described, this study aims to assess the lifetime sexual victimization committed against children and youth in Spain and the associations between these experiences and sociodemographic and victimological variables. To do so, we obtained

information from a large group of adolescents using an instrument that favors comparisons with other international studies (Cyr et al., 2013; Finkelhor et al., 2014). We hypothesize that the prevalence of sexual victimization would vary depending on sociodemographic variables such as the sex and age of the victim and the family structure (Black, Heyman, & Smith Slep, 2001; Finkelhor, 1993) and that these victims would present higher levels of victimization in other areas of life than victims of other events (Finkelhor, Ormrod, Turner, & Holt, 2009).

Method

Participants

Seven schools located in neighborhoods with low, medium, and high socioeconomic status in northeast Spain were selected for the study. Similar numbers of students in the age range of interest were enrolled from each socioeconomic group. The different classroom groups within each school were randomly selected. For inclusion in this study, participants had to be between 12 and 17 years of age. Subjects with linguistic comprehension difficulties or cognitive problems that might reduce the validity of their responses (fewer than 1% of the sample) were not included, nor were those who left more than 4 questions unanswered in the victimization questionnaire (0.4%). The total study sample comprised 1,105 adolescents, 590 males and 515 females ($M = 14.52$ years, $SD = 1.76$), whose main sociodemographic characteristics are shown in Table 1.

Procedure

This observational, cross-sectional, multicenter study complied with the basic ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association, 2008) and the Code of Ethics of the Psychologists' Association of Catalonia (COPC, 1989). The research was approved by the Bioethics Committee of the University of XXX (IRB00003099). The study complied with Art. 131 of the Spanish Legal Protection of Minors Act of 1996 regarding citizens' obligations and confidentiality, which establishes the obligation to notify the competent authorities of any situations of risk or possible neglect of a minor. Accordingly, parents or primary caretakers of children were provided with information on the study, its objectives, and the voluntary nature of their participation. Parents or caregivers gave passive written consent in accordance with the method suggested by Carroll-Lind and colleagues (2006), and participants gave verbal assent. They were told that refusal to participate would have no repercussions of any kind. Fewer than 3% of the final sample refused to participate in the

Table 1. Sociodemographic Characteristics of the Study Sample.

Variable	Male		Female		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Age						
12–14	283	48.0	266	51.7	549	49.7
15–17	307	52.0	249	48.3	556	50.3
Country of origin of the child						
Spain	568	96.3	480	93.2	1048	94.8
Other	22	3.7	34	6.6	56	5.1
Don't know or refuses to answer	0	0.0	1	0.2	1	0.1
Family structure						
Two biological or adoptive parents ^a	495	83.9	410	79.6	905	81.9
Single parent	60	10.2	67	13.0	127	11.5
Parent and stepparent or partner	27	4.6	32	6.2	59	5.3
Other ^b	3	0.5	4	0.8	7	0.6
Don't know or refuses to answer	5	0.8	2	0.4	7	0.6
Socioeconomic status						
Low	7	1.2	9	1.7	16	1.4
Middle-low	38	6.4	30	5.8	68	6.2
Middle	70	11.9	65	12.6	135	12.2
Middle-high	180	30.5	171	33.2	351	31.8
High	233	39.5	191	37.1	424	38.4
Doesn't know or refuses to answer	62	10.5	49	9.5	111	10.0

^aIncludes married couples, couples living together, and shared custody in separated or divorced couples.

^bIncludes living with other relatives (e.g., grandfather, adult brother) or at a child protection center.

study. The instruments were applied in a class session by two members of the research team, who were trained both in the area of study and in the collection of data on violence against children (UNICEF, 2012).

Measures

Interpersonal victimization

Interpersonal victimization was assessed using the Spanish self-report version of the Juvenile Victimization Questionnaire (JVQ; Finkelhor, Hamby, Ormrod, & Turner, 2005) translated by the research group with permission of the authors. The instrument comprises 36 types of child and adolescent victimization grouped into six modules: conventional crime, caregiver victimization, victimization by peer or siblings, witness or indirect victimization, electronic victimization, and sexual victimization. The six questions used to study sexual victimization relate to: (a) sexual victimization with physical contact (sexual abuse or assault by known adult [S1], sexual abuse or assault by unknown adult [S2] or by peer or sibling [S3], and forced sex, including attempts [S4]) and (b) sexual victimization without physical contact (flashing or sexual exposure [S5] and verbal sexual harassment [S6]). Participants were considered to have suffered sexual victimization when they answered yes to any of the six questions. In the case of an affirmative response, the individuals were asked to specify their age at the time of the first episode and to state how many times the abuse occurred. In addition, with regard to the last victimization episode, the individuals were asked to identify

the perpetrator, provide their age and sex, whether they (the victims) were injured as a result, whether penetration occurred, and whether the events were reported to an official authority (e.g., the police or the courts). The instrument has been applied in its complete self-report form in earlier European studies in the United Kingdom (Radford et al., 2013) and in Spain (Pereda et al., 2014).

Sociodemographic variables

A questionnaire created ad hoc for the study was used to compile information on the subjects' sociodemographic variables (age, sex, and country of origin) and on their family (family structure, parents' education, and occupation). Socioeconomic status (SES) was calculated from the information obtained using an adaptation of the Hollingshead Index (1975).

Statistical analysis

The prevalence of different forms of sexual victimization during the young person's lifetime was estimated. Comparing sex (male versus female) and age groups (12–14 versus 15–17), we calculated the odds ratio (OR) to quantify the association between these two demographic variables (sex and age) and the rate of sexual victimization. The OR was considered statistically significant when the 95% confidence interval (CI) did not include the value of 1. Using chi-square tests, rates of sexual victimization were also compared in terms of family structure (two biological or adoptive parents, single parent, parent and stepparent or partner), the adolescent's country of origin (Spain, other), and socioeconomic level (high, medium-high, medium, medium-low, low). The size of this association was quantified by obtaining the OR for dichotomous variables or Cramer's V for polytomous variables.

Males and females were compared in relation to the characteristics of the last sexual victimization episode (offender's age, offender's sex, type of relation victim–offender, presence of injury resulting from victimization, penetration or attempted penetration, and reporting to police or court). The OR and its associated significance were obtained.

Finally, sexual victims were compared with victims of other events (conventional crimes, caregiver victimization, peer and sibling victimization, witnessing and indirect victimization, and electronic victimization) with regard to sociodemographic characteristics (sex, age, country of origin, family structure, and socioeconomic status) to obtain the OR. Comparisons were also made with regard to the presence of other types of victimization using the common OR calculated by the Cochran-Mantel-Haenszel statistic to control for the effect of family structure. The number of victimizations over the lifetime was compared between the two groups of victims through an ANCOVA, also controlling for sex and family structure. The Statistical

Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software version 21 (IBM Corporation, 2012) was used to run the analyses.

Results

Prevalence of sexual victimization

In all, 8.8% of the sample reported experiencing one or more of the types of sexual victimization defined in the questionnaire at some point in their lives (see Table 2). Among the victims, 87.6% had experienced one of the six types and 10.3% had experienced two different types. Being the victim of three or four types was infrequent (2.1%).

Statistically significant differences were found according to participants' sex, with higher levels of sexual victimization among girls ($OR = 3.89$, 95% CI [2.42–6.28]). This differential pattern was observed both in forms of sexual victimization involving physical contact, including sexual victimization by a known or unknown adult or peer and attempted or full intercourse, and in forms of sexual victimization without physical contact such as exhibitionism and sexual harassment.

In regard to age, significantly higher rates of sexual victimization were found ($OR = 1.60$, 95% CI [1.04–2.44]) in the older age group (range 15–17 years).

With regard to the type of family structure (two biological or adoptive parents, single parent, and parent and stepparent or partner), significant differences were found only for the item of abuse or aggression by an unknown adult ($\chi^2 = 6.766$, $p = .034$; *Cramer's V* = .079) and for total sexual victimization ($\chi^2 = 7.798$, $p = .020$, *Cramer's V* = .085). These differences indicate higher prevalence in families comprising a parent and a stepparent or partner than in those formed by two biological or adoptive parents. In contrast, no significant differences were found with regard to the subject's country of origin or the socioeconomic status of the household.

Table 2. Lifetime Prevalence of Sexual Victimization.

Sexual victimization	Lifetime victimization							
	Victimized		Sex (%)			Age (%)		
	N	%	M	F	OR	12–14	15–17	OR
With physical contact	36	3.3	1.5	5.2	3.57*	2.9	3.6	1.24
S1. Known adult	5	0.5	0.2	0.8	4.61	0.4	0.5	1.48
S2. Unknown adult	11	1.0	0.3	1.7	5.23*	0.7	1.3	1.74
S3. Peer or sibling	13	1.2	0.7	1.7	2.61	1.3	1.1	0.85
S4. Forced sex or attempts	9	0.8	0.3	1.4	4.05	0.5	1.1	1.99
Without physical contact	69	6.2	2.9	10.1	3.79*	4.9	7.6	1.58
S5. Flashing or sexual exposure	40	3.6	0.8	6.8	8.53*	2.7	4.5	1.68
S6. Verbal sexual harassment	34	3.1	2.0	4.3	2.15*	2.7	3.4	1.26
Total	97	8.8	4.1	14.2	3.89*	6.9	10.6	1.60*

* $p < .05$.

Characteristics of sexual victimization

This section focuses on the adolescents in the sample who reported some form of sexual victimization ($n = 97$). The average age at which the first episode of sexual victimization occurred was approximately 13 years (range 6–17 years) in both girls and boys ($M = 13.06$, $SD = 2.20$; $M = 12.76$, $SD = 2.63$ respectively).

In relation to the number of occurrences, 50.5% of victims reported more than one episode, with a range from 1–18 ($Md = 2$, $RI = 2$). It should be kept in mind that we applied a conservative criterion and, if a range of occasions was reported, the lower limit was recorded.

Table 3 displays the characteristics of the most recent episode. In both boys and girls, the perpetrator tended to be a minor and male, although significant sex differences were observed. Boys had more frequently suffered abuse from an underage offender than girls ($OR = 0.26$, 95% CI [.08-.83]), and girls were more frequently victims of adult aggressors ($OR = 7.25$, 95% CI [1.58–33.20]) and of males ($OR = 8.63$, 95% CI [2.31–32.21]). In regard to the type of relationship, perpetrators were most often in the categories friends, neighbors, or classmates (52.6%) or were unknown to the victim (37.1%); there were no differences between boys and girls. The cases in which the victim had a close relationship with the offender merit particular attention: for 4.2% of boys and 8.2% of girls, one or more perpetrators were family members, and for 8.3% and 11.0% respectively, the offender was an ex-partner.

Few events involved injuries as a result of victimization (0.0% in boys and 5.4% in girls), although it should be noted that the nonresponse rate was high, especially for boys. Among the items that involved physical contact (S1 to S4),

Table 3. Characteristics of the Last Sexual Victimization Incident.

	Total (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)	OR
Offender's age				
< 18 years	62.9	83.3	56.2	0.26*
≥ 18 years	32.0	8.3	39.7	7.25*
Offender's gender				
Male	87.6	66.7	94.5	8.63*
Female	13.4	25.0	9.6	0.32
Relation victim–offender				
Family/relatives	7.2	4.2	8.2	2.06
Boyfriend or girlfriend	10.3	8.3	11.0	1.35
Friend, neighbor, or schoolmate	52.6	62.5	49.3	0.58
Stranger	37.1	20.8	42.5	2.81
Injury resulting from victimization (% yes) ^a	4.3	0.0	5.4	1.04 ^c
Penetration or attempts (% yes) ^b	30.6	33.3	29.6	0.84
Reported to police or court (% yes)	9.3	8.3	9.6	1.17

^aComputed taking into account only items that may involve the use of force (i.e., S1, S2, S3, S4, and S5); $n = 69$.

^bComputed taking into account only items involving physical contact (i.e., S1, S2, S3, and S4); $n = 36$.

^cAdjusted by adding 1 to each cell.

33.3% of boys and 29.6% of girls reported some kind of penetration or attempted penetration. Finally, around 9% of adolescents stated that the sexual victimization they had suffered had been reported to the police or the courts.

Sociodemographic characteristics and victimological profile of sexual victims

The sociodemographic profiles of the group with some type of sexual victimization during the lifetime and victims of other forms of victimization were analyzed. The adolescents with some type of sexual victimization were most often female ($OR = 4.26$, 95% CI [2.63–6.90]) and were more likely to come from a reconstituted family ($OR = 2.70$, 95% CI [1.33–5.48]). In contrast, no significant differences were observed between the two groups of victims in terms of age, minor's country of origin, or family's socioeconomic status (see Table 4).

With regard to polyvictimization, the group with some form of sexual victimization reported a mean total of 7.16 types of victimization during the lifetime ($SD = 3.39$), a value significantly higher than that obtained by other victims ($M = 3.46$, $SD = 2.36$), controlling for the effect of sex and family structure ($F(1,900) = 179.905$, $p < 0.001$).

The differences between respondents reporting any sexual victimization and other victims were calculated in order to assess the victimological profile of males and females (see Table 5). Sexual victims had more often experienced the different types of victimization analyzed, with statistically significant OR in either males or females in all forms of victimization except for exposure to family violence. Differences were found according to sex; specifically, male sexual victims more frequently suffered physical abuse ($OR = 5.18$, 95% CI [1.76–15.19]), peer violence ($OR = 4.46$, 95% CI [1.52–13.14]), and exposure to community violence ($OR = 7.41$, 95% CI [2.20–24.94]) than other male victims. For their part, female sexual victims more frequently suffered caregiver victimization ($OR = 3.21$, 95% CI [1.88–5.47]), offenses against the person ($OR = 2.83$, 95% CI [1.69–4.75]), and offenses against property ($OR = 1.80$, 95% CI [1.05–3.11]) compared to other female victims.

Table 4. Comparison of Sociodemographic Variables in Sexual and Other Victims.

	Sexual victims (%) n = 97	Other victims (%) n = 819	OR
Child: Female gender	75.3	41.6	4.26*
Child: Age 15–17	60.8	52.3	1.42
Child: Foreign country of origin	7.2	4.4	1.69
Family structure: Parent and stepparent or stepparent or partner	11.5	4.6	2.70*
Family SES: low or medium low	8.7	8.0	1.09

* $p < .05$.

Table 5. Comparison of Victimological Variables in Sexual and Other Victims.

		Sexual victims (%) n = 97	Other victims (%) n = 819	OR ^a
Conventional crimes: Against property	Male	66.7	62.1	1.28 ^b
	Female	68.5	54.0	1.80*
Conventional crimes: Against the person	Male	91.7	51.5	5.18 ^{b*}
	Female	53.4	27.3	2.83*
Caregiver victimization	Male	45.8	25.1	2.08 ^b
	Female	60.3	30.5	3.21*
Peer and sibling victimization	Male	91.7	56.1	4.46 ^{b*}
	Female	72.6	57.2	1.74 ^b
Witnessing or indirect victimization: Family violence	Male	12.5	4.6	2.81 ^b
	Female	17.8	9.4	1.87
Witnessing or indirect victimization: Community violence	Male	100.0	53.3	7.41 ^{b*}
	Female	58.9	55.4	1.16

^aFamily structure effect was corrected by using the Cochran-Mantel-Haenszel test.

^bIn those contingency tables with 0, the OR was adjusted by adding 1 to each cell.

* $p < .05$.

Discussion

This study presents the first report from a southwestern European country of the prevalence and characteristics of sexual victimization in a community sample with data provided by the subjects themselves. Compared with victims of other forms of violence, our subjects showed a distinctive profile with regard to sociodemographic variables and their experience of victimization.

Prevalence of sexual victimization

The rates of sexual victimization reported by our adolescent population are within the range established by previous meta-analyses (Pereda et al., 2009; Stoltenborgh et al., 2011) though lower than those found in retrospective studies conducted in Spain (López et al., 1995). In comparison with the results of research in other cultural contexts using very similar methodologies, our prevalence of sexual victimization is the same as that obtained in a Canadian study (Cyr et al., 2013) and similar to that of a U.S. study, especially in the case of males (Finkelhor et al., 2014), but lower than that obtained in the United Kingdom (Radford et al., 2013). It should also be kept in mind that many child victims may not yet recognize themselves as such due to cognitive and emotional processes (London, Bruck, Ceci, & Shuman, 2005); this would explain the higher prevalence of sexual victimization found in older adolescents. Given the similarity of the methodology used, the differences found with respect to some studies in other countries are probably due to cultural factors. Relative to members of Anglo-American cultures, individuals from Latin cultures place special value on several socioemotional behaviours (emotional intensity, warmth and expression of positive emotions; Marin & Triandis, 1985). They are also less idiocentric and more allocentric. This has been related, for example, with differences in physical

aggression between partners (Archer, 2006) and may relate to variation in the occurrence or the reporting of sexual victimization. Conducting new studies in countries in northern and southern Europe may help to shed light on these differences. At present, the scarcity of studies available reduces the robustness of the results.

The risk of sexual victimization is higher in females (Cyr et al., 2013; Finkelhor et al., 2014; Radford et al., 2013) and in young people living in families comprising a parent and a stepparent or partner (Turner, Finkelhor, & Ormrod, 2007). This is especially so with regard to abuse or assault by unknown adults. Reviews have found that nontraditional families show higher rates of child sexual victimization than traditional two-parent biological families (Black et al., 2001; Finkelhor, 1980; Giles-Sims & Finkelhor, 1984), although the differences found in our results are too small to be considered relevant. Living with only one biological parent has been associated with a higher risk of victimization (Lauritsen, 2003), mainly related to poorer caregiving environments (Berger, 2004) and specific social and contextual factors (e.g., family adversity, mother's psychological disorder and parental conflict; Turner, Finkelhor, Hamby, & Shattuck, 2013).

Characteristics of sexual victimization

Interestingly, as previous studies have observed (Gold, Elhai, Lucenko, Swingle, & Hughes, 1998), males and females in our sample did not differ significantly in many of the features of sexual abuse evaluated. The mean age at which the first episode of sexual victimization occurred in our sample was

13 in both sexes. This finding is in agreement with those of other studies in

Spain that report that many aggressions are initiated between the ages of 12 and 15 years (López et al., 1995). The low age of sexual consent in Spain

(13 years of age) has important clinical implications, as it may make it difficult to demonstrate the abusive nature of some of these situations in the criminal context. In turn, the abusers of both boys and girls are mostly

underage, known, and male, as reported by previous studies from other

countries (Finkelhor et al., 2014), although the fact that we asked about the

most recent episode of sexual victimization may have influenced this result.

The occurrence of episodes of sexual victimization is low, although it should be borne in mind that in half of the cases more than one episode occurred. This

rate is similar to, albeit slightly lower than, those reported in Swedish young

adults (Priebe & Svedin, 2009). The finding indicates that in addition to pro-

moting prevention, efforts should be made to develop mechanisms of protection

and detection for these victims and reporting after the first incident.

Among victims of events involving physical contact, the rate of penetration or attempted penetration was high, in line with other studies with samples of young adults from Spain (Pereda & Forns, 2007). In that study,

42.1% of boys and 26.7% of girls reported some kind of penetration or attempted penetration before their 13th birthday. In our present sample, it seems that the severity of abuse was very high in the subjects who reported it since approximately one-third of them indicated some kind of penetration or attempted sexual intercourse; or, alternatively, subjects were more willing to report the cases of greater severity. Our rates were also similar to those reported by Finkelhor and colleagues (2014), who found penetration rates of 0.7% in males and 2.4% in females in the 15-year-old age group, whereas in our sample the figures were 0.8% and 1.6% respectively.

Although few incidents of victimization resulted in injuries, especially in the case of males, the high nonresponse rate in this group means that we cannot establish whether this finding is in fact accurate or is due to an unwillingness to answer the question. Many males find it difficult to acknowledge having been victims and regard the characteristics traditionally associated with the term as weakness or lack of manliness (Easton, Saltzman, & Willis, 2014). This may have increased the degree of concealment in males, both of their experiences of sexual victimization and of the severity of these episodes (Alaggia, 2005; Sorsoli, Kia-Keating, & Grossman, 2008).

Concerning reports to the police, around 9% stated that the police or the courts had been notified of some of the acts of sexual victimization. Previous studies in Europe with older adolescents found that while a significant percentage of victims spoke about the abuse to someone close to them, especially a peer, only a small group mentioned it to a professional (9% of females and 3% of males) or reported the incident to the police or the social authorities (7% of females and 4% of males; Priebe & Svedin, 2008). Factors such as the secrecy that characterizes the situation of sexual abuse, the shame experienced by the victim in recounting what happened, the criminal repercussions involved in the reporting of these cases, and the young age and dependency on adults of the victims seem to be the reasons for these results (Widom & Morris, 1997).

Victimological characteristics of sexual victims

All subjects in the sample with the experience of sexual victimization also reported having been victims of other forms of violence (Boney-McCoy & Finkelhor, 1995) and were thus classified as polyvictims (Finkelhor et al., 2009). According to victimology theories, the experience of one form of victimization raises the risk of new forms of victimization; it increases the proximity and exposure of the individual to violence, reduces the presence of capable guardianship, and increases target attractiveness (Meier & Miethe, 1993). The presence of sex differences in this explanation of the co-occurrence of sexual victimization with other forms of violence should be noted.

The males in the sample who have experienced some form of sexual

victimization also report higher rates of crimes against the person, peer and sibling victimization, and witnessing community violence than do other victims. These young males are most likely exposed to violent social and community contexts and are in a position of high risk for sexual and other types of victimization. Young females, on the other hand, suffer higher victimization by caregivers and conventional crimes than other victims. This result may explain why sexual victimization in women usually occurs in violent households with low levels of protection against external dangers (Pears, Kim, & Fisher, 2008) or in communities with higher levels of violence (Ramírez, Pinzón-Rondón, & Botero, 2011). In addition, the low level of protection by a capable guardian may increase the person's attractiveness as a target for new offenders. In this regard, our responsibility as professionals is to detect these individuals who are vulnerable to violence at an early stage and to intervene in order to stop this chronic victimization which, as many different studies have demonstrated, can continue into adulthood (see reviews by Arata, 2002; Messman & Long, 1996).

Limitations

This study presents a number of limitations. Adolescents from families with high and medium-high socioeconomic status were overrepresented in our sample, limiting the generalization of the results encountered. Second, the mean age of the respondents is relatively young; as a result, the prevalence of sexual victimization might have been higher if the age group analyzed had been older. Some authors have recommended analyzing the lifetime prevalence of sexual victimization when childhood finishes (Finkelhor et al., 2014). However, interviewing children directly is the only way to identify cases of sexual victimization that are currently occurring, and the importance of this information should not be underestimated (Morris et al., 2012).


Conclusion


Sexual victimization is a common problem in our young Spanish sample. Adolescents most likely to suffer sexual victimization appear to present certain sociodemographic characteristics. Preventing these cases in these contexts must be a priority. Because victims of abuse and other forms of sexual violence also tend to be victims of other types of violence, professionals in the field should be ready to abandon the concept of the victim of a sole type of abuse and consider the concept of polyvictimization. If we do not assess a broad range of victimizations, we will fail to address the high level of vulnerability of these young people, who are at a high risk of becoming chronic victims.

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