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A survey of sexually abusive experiences in childhood amongst a sample of third level students

The issue of child sexual abuse has concerned child welfare professionals and the public since the early 1980s in Ireland. A succession of high profile child sex abuse cases throughout the mid 1990s has ensured that this topic continues to receive ongoing media and public attention. Yet, epidemiological work has matched neither media coverage nor policy initiatives. This being the case, one wonders whether we have an accurate perception of the nature and incidence of child sexual abuse in Ireland in the face of disturbing reports such as the Kilkenny incest inquiry (McGuinness, 1993), the Madonna House Report (Department of Health, 1996) and their associated publications? Two early surveys in particular were important in drawing our attention to the prevalence of child sexual abuse in Ireland. The first of these was carried out by the Marketing Research Bureau of Ireland (MRBI, 1987) and the second by the Irish Society of the Prevention of Cruelty to Children/Irish Market Surveys (ISPCC/IMS, 1993). The purposes in carrying out the present study were twofold. Firstly, to collect incidence data of non-consensual childhood sexual experiences. Secondly, to compare the incidence of reported child sexual abuse data with that gathered in 1987 (MRBI) and 1993 (ISPCC/IMS) to examine whether the 1990s have seen a change in the reported incidence of child sexual abuse.

Methodological considerations

The study of the epidemiology of child sexual abuse is an area fraught with methodological difficulties. After all, the primary goal of such research is to elicit, from people who have been sexually abused, information which may be embarrassing, shameful or distressing. Common methodological concerns include sampling, response validity and ethical considerations. The result of such methodological difficulties, and the steps taken by different researchers to address them, is the range of estimates of the prevalence of child sexual abuse in the general population, as reported in the literature. For example,

Kersher and McShane (1984) reported that 3% of male and 12% of female licensed Texas drivers had been “sexually abused” as a child. Bagley and King (1990) reported that 32% of a sample of 750 Canadian women aged 18-27 years had “unwanted sexual contact before age 17.” Seven per cent had experienced prolonged sexual assault before age seventeen. Kilpatrick (1986) reported that 55% of a sample of 501 women reported “undesirable sexual experiences during childhood.” Whilst this figure may seem high, Miller, Johnson and Johnson (1991) point out that studies which question respondents about coerced or forced sexual contacts typically report rather low prevalences. However, such low rates “may drastically underrepresent the prevalence of influential, deleterious early sexual experiences which were not necessarily violent or threatening” (Miller et al., 1991, p. 44). The challenge therefore, is to survey a sufficiently broad range of experiences whilst avoiding vague definitions such as “child sexual abuse.”

Miller et al. (1991) avoided the possibility of respondents’ own interpretations of phrases such as ‘child sexual abuse’ from confusing or distorting their results by employing a ‘check list strategy.’ Using this method, they reported higher levels of severe incidents (unwanted oral, anal or vaginal sex (20%)) than previous studies. This was attributed to the checklist where an explicit variety of experiences was assessed, with no reference to the respondents’ own perceptions of ‘abuse’ or ‘molestation.’ The authors concluded that “a checklist of explicit behaviors described in simple terms is likely to elicit the most accurate and valid reporting of past experiences” (Miller et al, 1991, p. 50).

Sexuality in general, and sexual abuse in particular, are undoubtedly sensitive issues. Goyder (1987), in an analysis of non-respondents in sample surveys, found that respondents reported misgivings about questions regarding their sexual or financial affairs more so than for other topics. This, of course, poses potential problems of validity for child sex abuse surveys. Perhaps the best-known attempt to investigate the incidence of sexually abusive experiences in childhood in a non-clinical population is Finkelhor’s (1979) seminal study. He reported child sexual abuse incidence levels of 19.2% and 8.6% respectively among female and male college students. What was perhaps most encouraging for a survey of this kind was the response rates. Ninety two per cent of the

sample completed an anonymous questionnaire. Of the 796 students that completed the questionnaire, 78 (or 10%) refused to answer the questions relating to childhood sexual experiences. This was a very satisfactory response rate given the topic under investigation. By way of contrast, Haugaard and Emery (1989) distributed questionnaires on child sexual abuse to students and asked them to return them at a later date - only 61% did so. Thus, an anonymous, confidential check-list questionnaire that is completed immediately would appear to yield high response rates when epidemiologically surveying child sexual abuse in a non-clinical sample.

Child sexual abuse research in Ireland

In the last ten years, two pieces of research in particular have been carried out which allow comparisons to be made between the nature and epidemiology of child sexual abuse as it occurs in Ireland and the work of British, American and other researchers.

The MRBI (1987) survey

The MRBI *Child Sexual Abuse in Dublin* study was carried out in 1987. Sexually abusive experiences prior to sixteen years of age were surveyed amongst a sample of 500 18-44 year olds in the Dublin area. The sample was gender, age, socio-economically and geographically representative of the general population. Having first participated in a face-to-face interview concerning their perceptions of a range of issues (alcoholism, Aids, marriage breakdown, child sexual abuse and teenage pregnancy), respondents were requested to complete a confidential questionnaire on the issue of child sexual abuse, place it in a sealed envelope and return it to the interviewer. The results of this survey suggested that some 5% of males and 7% of females “admitted to having been sexually abused as a child within the terms set out in the definition” (MRBI, 1987, p. 5). Other key findings were:

- All abusers were male, although victims were equally male and female.

- Thirteen of the 30 cases of reported sexual abuse happened whilst the child was under thirteen years of age.
- Strangers committed approximately 25% of the abusive incidents. Relatives of the child or others known to the child committed the remainder.
- In two-thirds of the incidents, the offense was committed on two or more occasions.
- Only in two cases (6%) was the abuse reported: one to the police and another to a social worker.
- Ten of the 30 victims had never told anyone of the abuse.
- Ten of the 30 felt they suffered long term damage as a result of the abuse. The remainder felt there had been no long-term adverse effects.

By the standards of subsequent studies, the reported incidence of child sexual abuse amongst the sample was low. Only 30 of the 500 respondents reported experiencing “child sexual abuse.” This was defined as:

“The involvement of dependent and immature children or adolescents in sexual activities they do not fully understand and to which they are unable to give informed consent, and which violate social taboos” (MRBI, 1987, p. 33).

Such low levels of reporting may have been a function of the methodology that was employed. The interviewee had already verbally filled in a questionnaire on social issues, thus, perhaps, creating a rapport with the interviewer that decreased the degree of anonymity required to achieve a higher response rate regarding this very sensitive issue. Also, the low response rate may have been a function of the relative lack of public awareness of this issue in Ireland at this time.

The ISPCC/IMS (1993) survey

In 1993 the Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (ISPCC), in conjunction with its counterpart organisation in the UK (the NSPCC), commissioned Irish

Marketing Surveys to conduct a survey of 1,001 members of the general population regarding, amongst other things, their experiences of child sexual abuse. The results of this survey have not been written up or published but are available in data table form as an Irish Market Survey summary titled *Childhood Experiences and Attitudes* (IMS, 1993). The results elaborate on the picture of child sexual abuse that was described in the earlier MRBI survey. A total of 160 (16%) respondents reported having experienced child sexual abuse. Twelve per cent of the total sample experienced contact sexual abuse. The breakdown of incidence figures can be seen below:

	Total %	Gender	
		Male %	Female %
Any Abuse	16	14	22
Exposure only	4	2	7
Hugged/kissed	5	4	6
Fondling organs	6	4	8
Made to touch organs	4	3	4
Attempted intercourse	2	2	3
Intercourse	1	1	1
Anal intercourse	1	1	-
Oral intercourse	1	1	-
Other	1	-	1

Table 1: Incidence of child sexual abuse reported in ISPCC/IMS (1993) survey.

Fifteen per cent of the females interviewed and nine per cent of the males reported experiencing contact sexual abuse. For most, this involved being hugged/kissed and/or being touched/fondled in a sexual way. Thirty nine per cent of contact sexual abuse victims had experienced this only once. Sixty one per cent of contact sexual abuse victims had experienced the abuse two or more times. Regarding the age of the perpetrator, the majority of contact abuse (86%) was carried out by a person aged sixteen years or older. A surprising result was that 46% of those sexually abused (total number of this sub-sample is 160) reported ‘No real effect’ from the abuse. The corresponding figure for those who had experienced contact sexual abuse (n=120) is 35%. A further 25% of those experiencing contact abuse said they felt upset, but got over it quickly.

METHODOLOGY

For the present study, an anonymous questionnaire was administered to 247 students of the Dublin Institute of Technology. Respondents were not required to decipher words such as ‘abuse’ or ‘molestation.’ Rather, they were required to indicate whether they had experienced specific sexual acts whilst under sixteen years of age that made them feel uncomfortable. Prior to the distribution of the questionnaire, approximately fifteen minutes was spent with the students discussing the research, covering the pertinent ethical issues and allowing for any questions to be answered.

RESULTS

A total of 247 students were surveyed. Approximately 75% were in the 18-20 age group, with smaller numbers of older age groups. Seventy one per cent were female students, which is typical of the student profile in the courses that were surveyed.

	Male	Female	Total
Age 18-20	56	129	185
21-25	10	36	46
26-30	3	9	12
31-35	1	2	3
36-40	1	-	1
Total	71	176	247

Table 2: Sample by age and gender.

Unwanted childhood sexual experiences

Respondents marked either ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to a series of questions regarding whether they had had a range of sexual experiences which made them feel uncomfortable whilst under the age of sixteen. They were further asked to indicate whether the perpetrator was older or younger than 21 years of age. The summary of responses can be seen below:

	Perpetrator 21 yrs.+	Perpetrator <21yrs.	Total sample
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	Male %	Female %	Total %	Male %	Female %	Total %	%
Kissing	4.2	13.4	10.7	4.2	17.5	13.6	21
Fondling	0	15.1	10.7	1.4	16	11.8	19.8
Genital fondling	1.4	11	8.2	2.8	14.5	11.1	17.4
Attempted intercourse	0	4.1	2.9	0	12.2	8.6	10.1
Intercourse	0	1.2	.8	0	4.7	3.3	3.6
Masturbation	0	4.7	3.3	7	10.5	9.5	10.9
Oral sex	0	4.1	2.9	0	5.3	3.7	5.7
Anal intercourse	0	.6	.4	2.8	.6	1.2	1.6
“Flashing”							23.4

Table 3: Unwanted sexual experiences whilst younger than sixteen by age of perpetrator (note: age of perpetrator not specified for “flashing”. Reported incidence levels: males, 11.3%; females, 29.2%; total, 23.4%).

Firstly, it is interesting to note the reported ages of those individuals with whom respondents had “experiences which made you feel uncomfortable” whilst under sixteen years of age. Specifically, respondents were significantly more likely to experience a sexual act which made them feel uncomfortable with somebody younger than 21 years, as compared to somebody 21 years or older. These differences were found to be statistically significant for the following acts: kissing ($p=.037$); attempted intercourse ($p=.001$); intercourse ($p=.0002$);masturbation ($p=.0001$); oral sex ($p=.0004$).

The second point to note is that in all instances, other than anal intercourse with somebody aged less than 21 years, females are considerably more likely to have unwanted sexual experiences than are males. Thirdly, incidence figures decrease as the degree of physical violation increases. Thus, whilst 23.4% of the sample experienced “flashing” which made them feel uncomfortable under sixteen years of age, a far smaller (1.6%) proportion of the sample experienced unwanted anal intercourse.

Frequency

Table four allows us to see the total incidence figure for “experiences which made you feel uncomfortable whilst under sixteen years.”

	Male			Female		
	% of male	% of total	No.	% of female	% of total	No.

	respondents (excl. n/a)	male sample		respondents (excl. n/a)	female sample	
Once only	50	2.8	2	53.5	17	30
Over a period of weeks				14.2	4.5	8
Over a period of months	25	1.4	1	12.5	4	7
Over a period of years	25	1.4	1	19.6	6.25	11
Total	100	5.6	4	100	31.8	56

Table 4: Frequency of unwanted sexual experiences whilst younger than sixteen.

As we can see, 31.8% of the female sample and 5.6% of the male sample had an unwanted sexual experience before the age of sixteen. As we would expect, the largest proportion of respondents had such experiences once only. Specifically, 53.5% of the relevant female sample (n=56) and 50% of the relevant male sample (n=4) had unwanted sexual experiences prior to age sixteen once only. However, a considerable minority experienced unwanted sexual contacts on an ongoing basis. Most worrying, 32% of the abused female sample (that is 10.25% of the entire female sample) have endured unwanted sexual experiences over a period of months or years prior to their sixteenth birthday.

Age at which abuse first experienced

There was a large number of missing responses for this question (32.8%). This is presumably because the question did not apply to the majority of respondents. The figures below refer to that proportion of the sample which experienced child sexual abuse.

	0-5 years % (No.)	6-10 years % (No.)	11-12 years % (No.)	13-15 years % (No.)	16-18 years % (No.)	Total % (No.)
Male	0 0	20 (2)	10 (1)	30 (3)	40 (4)	100 (10)
Female	8.5 (7)	20.7 (17)	21.9 (18)	29.2 (24)	19.5 (16)	100 (82)
Total	7.6 (7)	20.6 (19)	20.6 (19)	29.3 (27)	21.7 (20)	100 (92)

Table 5: Gender and age at first childhood sexual abuse experience.

The small numbers in the male sample preclude any general comments. For females, we can see that over 42 of the abused sample (n=82) have experienced an unwanted sexual episode prior to their adolescent years. These 42 individuals constitute a staggering 23.9% of the total female sample. When we extract episodes of indecent exposure (the effects of which may also be very traumatic), we find that 27 of these 42 episodes refer to experiences of contact sexual abuse. That is, 15.34% of the total female sample have experienced contact sexual abuse prior to their thirteenth birthday.

Perpetrators

	Male No. abused by	Female No. abused by	as % of all reported perpetrators
Stranger	2	15	21.8
Relative	0	14	17.9
Neighbour	1	12	16.6
Friend	1	8	11.5
Boy friend	0	8	10.3
Other	0	5	6.4
Brother	0	5	6.4
Friend of parents	0	3	4.2
Baby sitter	0	2	2.8
Teacher	0	2	2.8
Total	4	74	100

Table 6: Perpetrators of unwanted sexual experiences whilst aged under sixteen.

In almost 80% of incidents, the child/adolescent knew the perpetrator of the sexual abuse. After strangers, the largest category was “relatives.” This proved to be a wide selection of people: uncles, cousins, grandfathers, a great uncle, a great aunt and an in-law. Perhaps surprisingly, no fathers were identified as perpetrators of abuse by this sample. It might also be worth noting, given current concern regarding the clergy and child sexual abuse, that none of the 78 perpetrators were reported to be clergy. The category “Other” consisted of an ex-boyfriend, a friend’s father, a friend’s brother (two cases) and an employer.

Reported effects

Unfortunately, there is a high proportion of missing responses (n=48 or 19.4%) for this question. Consequently, the percentages expressed below are of those that responded to this question. Specifically, 45 males and 154 females. A small number (12) of multiple responses were given and these have been included in the total percentages.

	Male %	Female %
None whatsoever. I never think of it	11.1	11
I remember it of course, but it doesn't make me feel bad	2.2	9.7
I occasionally think of it and feel embarrassed	2.2	17.5
I occasionally think of it and feel guilty	0	4.5
I think of every day and feel bad	0	1.9
I frequently have nightmares about the abuse	0	.6
It prevents me from feeling truly comfortable with my boy/girl friend	0	3.2
It makes me feel angry and furious	0	4.5
It makes me feel awkward and inadequate in groups	0	1.3
The abuse made me feel so bad that I attempted to kill myself	0	1.3
I regularly have vivid flashbacks which greatly upset me	0	1.9
N/A	84.4	50

Table 7: Reported effects of unwanted childhood sexual experiences.

Again, the small number of male respondents to this question prohibits generalisation. For female respondents, the most frequently cited effect is one of embarrassment. Smaller numbers felt guilty, angry, uncomfortable and in other ways more acutely affected by their experiences.

Paedophilic tendencies

The questionnaire included a number of questions regarding the respondents' own fantasies of sexual activity with children or direct sexual contact with children. It is interesting to note the very high response rate to these questions (96.7%). Perhaps this was motivated by respondents' desire to distance themselves from such a suggestion. Two of the respondents (a male and a female) reported that they had fantasised about sexual activity with children. The same two respondents also reported having

masturbated to fantasies about sexual activity with children. The female respondent further reported having initiated sexual contact with a person under age twelve “many times.” Interestingly, the male respondent reported no sexually abusive experiences in his own childhood. The female reported that she had experienced unwanted genital fondling with a person under 21 years of age whilst under the age of sixteen. In addition, she had regularly witnessed a “flasher” exposing himself during her P.E. classes in school.

Unwanted sexual experiences with boy friends and girl friends

Respondents were further asked to report whether they had had unwanted sexual experiences within the context of a boyfriend or girlfriend relationship.

	Male %	Female %
Kissing	3	9.5
Kissing and fondling	0	11.3
Touching genitals	0	13.7
Intercourse	0	6
None of the above	98.5	65.5

Table 8: Unwanted sexual experiences with boyfriends and girl friends (multiple responses recorded).

The responses to this question suggest to us widespread sexual bullying of girls by their boyfriends. For example, 6% of females in the sample have had intercourse with their boyfriends despite requests on their parts to stop. Twenty-three of the females (13.7%) have had their genitals touched by boy friends, despite requests to stop.

DISCUSSION

The responses to this survey seem to indicate that there is a culture of sexual aggression towards teenage girls in Ireland. Boyfriends, same age peers and older boys and men perpetuate this sexual aggression. Responses to this survey indicate that:

- 31.8% of the female sample had an unwanted sexual experience before the age of sixteen
- 23.9% of the female sample have experienced an unwanted sexual episode prior to their teenage years. When episodes of indecent exposure are excluded, we find that 15.34% of the female sample have experienced contact sexual abuse prior to their thirteenth birthday
- 10.25% of the female sample have endured unwanted sexual experiences over a period of months or years prior to their sixteenth birthday
- Whilst under sixteen years of age, respondents were significantly more likely to experience unwanted kissing, attempted intercourse, intercourse, masturbation and oral sex with somebody younger than 21 years, as compared to somebody 21 years or older

These findings suggest that adolescents, particularly female adolescents, should be versed in refusal skills. The newly introduced education programmes at both primary and secondary level school (The Stay Safe Programme and the Relationships and Sexuality Education Programme) will be important in empowering young people to recognise what is and what is not exploitative behaviour. These somewhat controversial programmes are to be commended in that children and adolescents are encouraged to think about and discuss their physical, social and emotional relationships. If we take the view that the sexual abuser's best allies are ignorance and insecurity, such a development is to be welcomed. It is to be hoped that these educational programmes will bring about a decrease in the incidence of child and adolescent sexual abuse.

A stated objective of this survey was to compare the reported figures of child sexual abuse with previous epidemiological studies in Ireland. This is possible only in so far as it is recognised that previous studies were of the general population whereas the present survey was of a sample of third level students. Furthermore, many of the students were students of social care and early childhood care and are thus, it might be argued, more likely to be sensitised to issues such as child sexual abuse. Nevertheless, the differences in reported rates are so large that it is useful to consider the possible

implications. As we can see in Table 9 below, the present study reports higher incidence levels of all comparable varieties of child sexual abuse. Enormous differences from previously reported incidence levels are reported for most categories of child sexual abuse. These differences are probably best explained by the growth in public awareness of child sexual abuse throughout the 1990s and by the methodology employed in the present study. It is to be hoped that we are witnessing a rise in reporting rates rather than incidence rates. In order for us to monitor whether this is the case, ongoing, periodic epidemiological work is justified in Ireland to ascertain at which level reporting rates shall peak.

	1987 MRBI (n=500) %	1993 ISPCC/IMS (n=1,000) %	1997 DIT (n=247) %
Hugged/kissed in sexual way	2.4	5	21
Genital fondling	4.2	6	17.4
Made to touch others genitals	2.2	4	*
Masturbation	*	*	10.9
Attempted intercourse	1	2	10.1
Intercourse	0.2	1	3.6
Oral sex	1	1	5.7
Anal sex	0.4	1	1.6
Exposure of genitals	2.2	4	23.4

Table 9: Relative incidence rates of child sexual abuse across three surveys (* not available).

An encouraging aspect of this survey was the response rates obtained. The “check list” strategy, together with thorough pre-administration briefing, was successful in eliciting high response rates. The response rates to questions relating to unwanted sexual experiences whilst under sixteen years varied from 96.4% to 98.4%. The response rate to questions relating to fantasising, or masturbating to fantasies about children, or initiating sexual contact with children was 96.7%. For questions relating to unwanted sexual experiences with boyfriends or girlfriends, the rate was 95.1%. A small number of questions had very high missing values. For example, the missing value to the question concerning perceived effects of having experienced child sexual abuse was 19.4%. However, given the high response rates to preceding questions, it is felt that such a high

missing value indicates that this question was not applicable to the majority of respondents, rather than respondent reticence. Overall, the response rates suggest an encouraging willingness to report on this most sensitive of research topics.

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