



Understanding Child Sexual Abuse Definitions and Data

Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) is understood by countless governmental and child welfare organizations to be a public health epidemic (Center for Disease Control 2020; SCCAN Maryland 2018; World Health Organization 2017). To monitor and address an epidemic of any kind, we must be able to define the problem and assess its prevalence. In CSA and other forms of child abuse, these tasks become quite complicated. In an effort to bring transparency to the conversation No More Stolen Childhoods (NMSC) has chosen the definitions and statistics outlined below to guide our work.

Differing Definitions

Addressing the complexities of Child Sexual Abuse requires the concerted efforts of many, and we recognize that different agencies and disciplines utilize specific definitions and data collection techniques that enable them to tackle their piece of the puzzle. Estimates of prevalence will vary depending on how narrow or broad the definition of CSA. NMSC, in seeking to prevent abuse, raise awareness, and support survivors, aligns with the public health approach to CSA. We recognize that our partners in law enforcement and child protective services refer to the legal definition of CSA in Maryland Law (MD Fam. Law § 5-701), while our partners addressing CSA internationally use the World Health Organization's definition, which provides a broader scope and accounts for cultural differences (Latzman, Casanueva, and Dolan, 2017).

Recognizing the Center for Disease Control (CDC) as the foremost public health organization in the United States, NMSC aligns with their definition of childhood sexual abuse, which states: "Child sexual abuse refers to the involvement of a child (person less than 18 years old) in sexual activity that violates the laws or social taboos of society and that he/she does not fully comprehend, does not consent to or is unable to give informed consent to, or is not developmentally prepared for and cannot give consent to" (CDC 2021).

Data Difficulty

Even with a working definition, CSA is largely a hidden epidemic that faces barriers to scientific study. Most fundamentally, this is because the experience of CSA and its aftermath is often so harrowing that survivors may not be able to disclose their abuse until years after it occurred, if ever.

In addition to the inhibiting nature of childhood trauma and problems with definitions, studies often rely on different regions, populations, and questions, in pulling together findings. As a result, even leading public health and child welfare organizations have published statistics that differ from each other. While several scholarly papers have sought to summarize the various studies (Finkelhor and Jones 2004; Finkelhor and Jones 2012; Barth et. al. 2012; Townsend 2016; Latzman, Casanueva, and Dolan, 2017), each has recognized the limitations and complexity of comparing across different sets of data.

Due to the barriers noted above, many studies on CSA cannot be readily generalized to the entire country or might include abuse that occurred in the distant past that does not speak to today's prevalence. Other studies ask questions that may not capture the full scope of CSA that occurs throughout adolescence. Additionally, it is important to acknowledge that prevalence rates differ greatly based on race and disability, a reality that cannot be captured by a single statistic (CHILD USA 2020). Several national organizations have analyzed available studies to determine a prevalence rate of CSA nationwide, as outlined in the table below.

Organization Reporting	Data Collection Methods	Conclusion
Center for Disease Control ¹	Utilizes 2009 systematic review of existing studies.	1 in 4 girls and 1 in 13 boys are victims of CSA
Darkness to Light ²	Utilizes several studies, looking only at 17- and 18-year-old respondents	11%, or about 1 in 10 children, are victims of CSA
CHILD USA ³	Utilizes three systematic reviews (conducted in 2009, 2011, and 2018) of existing studies.	1 in 5 girls and 1 in 13 boys are victims of CSA

Sources: (Pereda, N., Guilera, G., Forns, M., and Gómez-Benito, J. 2009)¹; (Townsend 2016)²(CHILD USA 2020)³

NMSC has aligned our reported statistics with the recently updated report from CHILD USA which state that, conservatively, 1 in 5 girls and 1 in 13 boys will experience sexual abuse before age 18. To reach that conclusion, CHILD USA analyzed 3 systematic reviews, including the one utilized by the CDC. Several of our statewide partner organizations have adopted the data presented by CHILD USA, including the Maryland State Council on Child Abuse & Neglect (SCCAN).

Beyond the Numbers

At No More Stolen Childhoods, we recognize that one child impacted by CSA is too many. Just as it is impossible to quantify the lived experience of survivors of CSA, it is impossible to quantify the value of prevention efforts. To ensure that we act effectively to prevent and address the harms of CSA, NMSC relies on the best available science. Updated statistics do not negate the reality of CSA in the past, but instead provide a benchmark for the progress that has been made and the work that is still needed. NMSC looks forward to, alongside our partner organizations in law enforcement, child welfare, and public health, continuing to make strides in ending this epidemic.

Sources

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