



FACT SHEET: Children and Sexual Abuse

Unfortunately, many children experience sexual abuse. One in three Albertans (34%) experience sexual abuse before the age of 18.¹ Just under one in two girls (44%) and one in four boys (24%) in Alberta have experienced child sexual abuse.¹

In Canada, the Badgley report (1984)² is the only representative national study on the prevalence of child sexual abuse ever conducted in Canada. Reporting on survey results from adults, it was found that 54% of girls and 32% of boys were sexually abused before the age of 18. In 1988, Badgley re-analyzed the data from the 1984 report and found that 17.6% of girls and 8.2% of boys experienced severe sexual abuse.³

Research has strongly established that the effects of child sexual abuse can last for years. Aggression, hyperactivity, sexual acting out, depression, anxiety, isolation, self-harm, and PTSD are common outcomes for children following sexual abuse. These negative outcomes can continue into adulthood in the form of addictions, mental illness, and suicidality.⁴

What is Sexual Abuse?

Child sexual abuse is the inappropriate exposure of a child to sexual contact, activity, or behaviour.⁵ This includes:

- Looking at or touching the private parts of a child's body in a sexual way
- Speaking to a child in a sexual way or using sexual language
- Asking a child to look at or touch someone else's private parts
- Showing a child sexually explicit material (such as pornography)

¹ Summary of Key Findings: Prevalence of Sexual Assault and Childhood Sexual Abuse in Alberta (2020). *Association of Alberta Sexual Assault Services*.

² Badgley, R. (1984). *Sexual offenses against children*. Volume 1: Report of the committee on sexual offenses against children and youth. Ottawa, ON: Ministry of Supply and Services.

³ Badgley, R. (1988). *Child sexual abuse in Canada: Further analysis of the 1983 national survey*. Ottawa, ON: Health and Welfare Canada.

⁴ Trask, E., Walsh, K. & DiLillo, D. (2011). Treatment effects for common outcomes of child sexual abuse: A current meta-analysis. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 16(1), 6-19.

⁵ Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act (2021). <https://www.gp.alberta.ca/documents/Acts/c12.pdf>

Who Commits Sexual Abuse?

Most of the time children are sexual abused by someone they know and trust. In 2012, there were approximately 14,000 child and youth who experienced sexual offences and reported to police:⁶

- 12% of the accused were stranger(s) – Older children/youth between the ages of 12 and 17 were more likely to be assaulted by a stranger than younger children (80% of stranger assaults were committed against this older age group).
- 88% of the accused were known to the child/youth.
- Of those known, 38% were family members, 44% were acquaintances of the child/youth and 6% were intimate partners of the parent.

How Common is Child Sexual Abuse?

Children represent over half of all police reported sexual violence. While children/youth make up 20% of the Canadian population, they represent 55% of people who experience sexual violence.⁶ While both boys and girls are vulnerable to sexual violence, girls had higher rates of reported sexual violence (81%).⁶

Children very rarely lie about sexual abuse. In child abuse cases reported to Children's Services in Canada in 2008, just 10% of those cases were considered intentional 'false allegations'.⁷ False denials of sexual abuse (saying it did not happen when it did) and recanting a disclosure (denying it happened after telling someone about being abused) are much more common than false reports.⁸

Children often do not tell others that they have been sexually abused for a variety of reasons including:⁹

- Feelings of shame and embarrassment;
- Fear of being disbelieved;
- Fear of being held responsible or being punished;
- Feelings for the person who abused them;
- Wanting to protect the person who abused them;
- The person who abused them threatens to hurt or kill someone they love;
- Fear of losing the person who abused them as they may be very important to the child or the child's family.

⁶ Statistics Canada (2012). *Police-reported sexual offences against children and youth in Canada* [Data set]. Retrieved from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/85-002-x/2014001/article/14008-eng.htm>

⁷ Lefebvre, R., Van Wert, M., Fallon, B., & Trocmé, N. (2012). *Sexual Abuse Investigations by Level of Substantiation in Canada in 2008*. Toronto, ON: Canadian Child Welfare Research Portal

⁸ Azzopardi, C., Eirich, R., Rash, C.L., Macdonald, S., & Madigan, S. (2018). A meta-analysis of the prevalence of child sexual abuse disclosure in forensic settings. *Child Abuse & Neglect*. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/30579645>

⁹ Alaggia, R., Collin-Vézina, D., & Lateef, R. (2019). Facilitators and barriers to child sexual abuse (CSA) disclosures: A research update (2000–2016). *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 20(2), 260-283.

The legacy of sexual abuse in residential schools in Canada has resulted in generations of Indigenous children and families living with the trauma associated with childhood sexual abuse.¹⁰ There are currently no Canada-wide prevalence studies on the prevalence of child sexual abuse in Indigenous communities.¹¹ However, a recent literature review analyzed twenty Canadian studies on the rate of child sexual abuse in Indigenous communities from 1989 to 2007 and determined that before the age of 18, 25% to 50% of Indigenous Canadians were sexually assaulted.¹²

A recent meta-analysis indicated that children with disabilities are 2.9 times more likely to experience sexual violence. This same review found that for children with intellectual or cognitive impairments, the risk of sexual violence increased 4.6 times compared to that of children without a disability.¹³

AASAS welcomes your suggestions and recommendations about other relevant Canadian research references that could be included on this handout. Please e-mail us at mailbox@aaas.ca

¹⁰ Alberta Association of Sexual Assault Centres. (2005). *A Provincial Response to Sexual Violence Funding Plan*. Calgary, Alberta.

¹¹ K LW Consulting. (2010). *Preventing sexual victimization of children and youth: A review of the literature*. Calgary, AB: Calgary Communities Against Sexual Abuse.

¹² Collin-Vezina, J., Dion, D., Trocme, N. (2009). Sexual abuse in Canadian Aboriginal Communities: A broad review of conflicting evidence. *Pimatisiwin: A Journal of Aboriginal and Indigenous Community Health* 7(1), 27-47.

¹³ Jones, et al. (2012). Prevalence and risk of violence against children with disabilities: a systematic review and meta-analysis of observational studies. *The Lancet*, 380(9845), 899-907.