

FACT SHEET



Debunking Popular Misconceptions About Children and Sexual Abuse

REALITY: Studies show an alarming prevalence of child sexual abuse. Prevalence rates are difficult to determine with certainty. They are affected by different definitions of sexual abuse, different methodologies for collecting information (reported versus unreported), and different populations (children versus adult reports of child sexual abuse). What follows is a summary of recent research studies on prevalence rates of sexual violence against children and youth:

- Recent systematic reviews and meta-analysis of child sexual abuse rates conducted worldwide across hundreds of different age-cohort samples have consistently shown an alarming rate of child sexual abuse prevalence. Pereda et al. (2009) reported 18-20% for females and 8-10% for males in a meta-analysis involving 65 articles across 22 countries. In a more recent review, Barth et al. (2013) examined 55 studies from 24 countries finding prevalence rates of 8-31% for girls and 3-17% for boys;
- In Canada, the Badgley report (1984) is the only national study on the prevalence of child sexual abuse ever conducted in Canada. The author reported on survey results from adults and indicated 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 suffered severe sexual abuse;
- The Canadian Centre for Child Protection (2019) conducted research on the prevalence of sexual abuse by K-12 school personnel in the Canadian context. The study found 750 cases involving a minimum of 1,272 students (75% female victims) and 714 offenders, 87% of which were male;
- Canadian police reported data indicates that approximately 14,000 cases of children and youth were the victims of sexual offences in 2012 (Statistics Canada, 2012a). The same report indicates that while Children/youth make up 20% of the Canadian population, they represent 55% of victims of sexual violence;
- Recent Canadian research on sexual cyber-crime has found that 96% of reports to the police involved a person under the age of 18 years old; 10% are under the age of 12 (Statistics Canada, 2012b).

MYTH: Child sexual abuse is rare.

REALITY: The vast majority of the time, children are sexually abused by someone that they know. In 2012, of the 14,000 police reported cases of sexual offences against children and youth, 88% of all sexual offences were committed by an individual known to the child/youth, with the remaining 12% committed by strangers. Of those known, 38% were family members, 44% were acquaintances of the child/youth, and 6% were intimate partners of the youth.¹

- Only 12% of sexual offences were committed by a stranger – 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);
- Of those known, 38% were family members, 44% were acquaintances of the child/youth and 6% were intimate partners of the child/youth;
- Older children were more likely to be assaulted by acquaintances versus family members and younger children were more at risk for assault by a family member;
- Approximately one third of sexual offences against children and youth were committed by another youth.

MYTH: Children are sexually abuse by strangers.

REALITY: Very few children lie about being sexually abused. In child abuse cases reported to Children's Services in Canada in 2008, just 10% of those cases were considered intentional 'false allegations' (Lefebvre, Van Wert, Fallon & Trocmé, 2012). A critical review of the academic literature on false reporting concluded that there is no "precise statement to be made about the rates of false allegations" due to varying methodological problems (O'Donohue, Cummings & Willis, 2018, p. 470). These authors conclude that, 1) most child sexual abuse allegations are true; 2) no research has ever found a sizeable number of false reports; and, 3) false allegations do occur often within the 2-5% range. Noncredible disclosures or false negatives are far more prevalent due to developmental level of the child (Azzopardi et al., 2018).

MYTH: Children often lie about being sexually abused.

REALITY: Most indicators/symptoms of sexual abuse are signs of stress in children's lives. Sexual acting out, injuries to genital areas, sexually transmitted diseases or pregnancy are the indicators that are most obviously connected to sexual abuse but are also often not present in many children. In addition to a lack of physical indicators, research suggests that parents tend to believe that their own children are not at risk (Rudolph et al., 2018) and tend to overemphasize risk for abduction rather than abuse by someone known (Rudolph & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2018).

MYTH: Parents would know if their child was being abused.

¹ 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>

REALITY: Numerous educational programs are available to teach young children about body safety skills and the difference between “okay” and “not okay” touches. This knowledge can be empowering for children and research demonstrates that similar to other safety programs (i.e. fire drills, street safety) children are not more frightened after participating. A Cochrane review of education programs found they are effective in increasing factual knowledge about program content, do not cause harm, increase chance of disclosure and can reduce fear and anxiety in children (Walsh et al., 2016).

Myth: Children do not need to know about child sexual abuse, and talking about it with them will only frighten them.

REALITY: In the majority of cases, individuals who abuse gain access to the individuals they sexually abuse through deception and enticement, seldom using force. The majority of those who perpetrate sexual abuse rarely use violence. They instead gain trust with the family/child, and work towards gaining exclusive access with the child (McCoy & Keen, 2014; NSW, 2016). Abuse typically occurs over a long period of time, within a long-term, ongoing relationship, escalating over time; typically called “grooming” (McCoy & Keen, 2014).

Grooming can be defined as:

- A process by which a person prepares a child, significant others, and the environment for the abuse of this child. Specific goals include gaining access to the child, gaining the child’s compliance, and maintaining the child’s secrecy to avoid disclosure. This process serves to strengthen the offender’s abusive pattern, as it may be used as a means of justifying or denying their actions (Craven, Brown & Gilchrist, 2006, p. 297).

MYTH: Most people who commit child sexual abuse use threats or force to gain children’s compliance.

REALITY: While some people who commit child sexual abuse do seek sexual gratification for the act, other factors such as power and control are also primary motivators. Many people who commit child sexual abuse seek power and control over the children they abuse, especially those who act from a place of opportunity (Shelton et al., 2016; Sullivan & Sheehan, 2016).

MYTH: Sexual gratification is often the primary motivation for a person who sexually abuses children.

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@aasas.ca.