



Child Sexual Abuse: A cursory Review of Risk and Protective Factors for Victimization and Perpetration

Prepared for the Association of Alberta Sexual Assault Services

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1. Introduction

Child sexual abuse is a serious and prevalent problem, generating increasing concern among the public, media and various professionals over the past two decades.¹ While research suggests that sex crimes against children have declined since the early 1990's,² there is recognition that the prevention of child sexual abuse is a serious public health concern.³

Researchers argue that the development of appropriate and effective prevention, assessment, treatment and policies are reliant on understanding the risk and protective factors related to child sexual abuse.⁴ However, this is complex due to: 1) the variety of definitions of child sexual abuse victimization and perpetration,⁵ 2) the challenges of assessing variables associated with sexual offending,⁶ and 3) the ways in which child sexual abuse differs from other forms of trauma and maltreatment (e.g., most perpetrators are known to child victims, but are not immediate family members; males far more likely to be perpetrators, etc.).⁷

Regardless of these challenges, there is a significant body of literature investigating child sexual abuse risk and protective factors. The following report provides an overview of risk and protective factors for both child sexual abuse victimization and perpetration and provides recommendations for consideration.

1.1 Methodology

A review of both published and unpublished national and international reports, documents and articles was undertaken, with two main search strategies employed:

- Database searches employing particular search terms in this area from 2000 – 2013.¹
- The search was conducted using Google Scholar and the following EBSCO databases: Academic Search Complete, Social Work Abstracts, Master File Premier, SocIndex, ERIC, LGBT Life, MEDLINE, OmniFile, Family & Society Studies Worldwide, Criminal Justice Abstracts, and Education Research Complete.
- Search terms included *sexual abuse, sexual violence, sexual assault, children, kid, girl, boy, youngster, pediatric population, perpetrators, sex offenders, pedophilia, molesters, victims, protective factors, risk factors and determinants, prevention and preventative factors.*
- Searches of government, non-government and research institute websites for additional articles and reports (e.g., American Psychological Association, National Sexual Violence Resource Center and World Health Organization).
- Over 40/50 articles and reports were reviewed.

Given the finite time and resources available and the large amount of relevant literature in this field, the review focused mainly (although not solely) on existing reviews (rather than literature reporting evidence from a single study or intervention). This primarily included publications

¹ Sources in this report that were published before 2000 were not generated by the database searches: rather they were background documents provided to the authors from outside sources or those found through website searches.

that review the theory and/or evidence for specific determinants (e.g., Meta-analyses and systematic reviews).

2. Risk Factors

Understanding risk and protective factors for child sexual abuse victimization and perpetration allows practitioners, researchers and policy makers to better understand how to develop and implement prevention and intervention strategies.⁸ However, the literature suggests that to clearly identify the risk and protective factors related to child sexual abuse victimization and perpetration is difficult and complex, as research identifies multiple factors and pathways involved in victimization and perpetration.⁹ In addition to the lack of understanding around risk factors, there is even less known about protective factors.¹⁰ This dearth of knowledge limits the effectiveness of any primary prevention effort.

Risk factors for child sexual abuse can be defined as characteristics, experiences, or events that, if present, are associated with an increase in the probability (i.e., risk) of a particular outcome (i.e., child sexual abuse victimization or perpetration) over the probability of the outcome in the general population.¹¹

Protective (or resilience) factors also play a role in influencing child sexual abuse victimization and perpetration. In the same way that some factors increase the probability or susceptibility of victimization or perpetration, there are factors that offer a protective effect.¹² These factors can alter the relationship between a risk factor and outcome.¹³

In general, “psychological theories on child sexual abuse have dominated the etiological landscape”,¹⁴ influencing prevention, treatment and policy responses. This approach has not focused as much on the impact and influence of societal culture on child sexual abuse.¹⁵ Thus, unlike other areas of interpersonal violence (e.g., domestic violence, sexual violence), larger macro variables (e.g., ideologies of male sexual entitlement, traditional gender norms, etc.) have not been as deeply considered beyond feminist theories examining child sexual abuse.¹⁶ Current research points to the need to examine issues of cultural sensitivity, biological, sociocultural and psychological factors in relation to sexual abuse.¹⁷

The following sections outline risk factors for victimization and then moves on to risk factors for perpetration, highlighting specific sub-populations of offenders that warrant special consideration in the literature. This review focuses primarily on those risk factors prior to *initial* victimization and perpetration and does not include risk factors for reoccurrence of child sexual abuse. Research that has identified risk and protective factors pertaining to re-offending or re-victimization are not covered in this report.¹⁸

2.1 Risk Factors for Victimization

Much of the research conducted two decades ago regarding child sexual abuse focused on child characteristics in seeking explanations for the abuse by examining the victim's role in permitting the abuse.¹⁹ Little evidence to support this approach has been produced, although research has identified some individual risk factors that heighten risk for victimization.

2.1.1 Gender

Studies have consistently found that victims of child sexual abuse are disproportionately female.²⁰ A recent longitudinal Canadian study of Ontario children and youth show that child sexual abuse was substantially higher among females than males.²¹ Other studies have identified that compared to male children; female children are at two to three times' higher risk of child sexual abuse victimization.²²

2.1.2 Age

Research has pointed to the increased risk of child sexual abuse of teenagers.²³ Generally speaking, risk of child sexual abuse victimization tends to increase as children age.²⁴ There is some suggestion that age as a risk factor operates differently for girls and boys, in that girls may be at heightened risk starting earlier and lasting longer than for boys.²⁵

2.1.3 Family Constellation

There is literature pointing to the increased risk of child sexual abuse victimization for children living with only one parent as compared to two.²⁶ The presence of a stepfather in the home doubles the risk of victimization for girls,²⁷ and older children from father-only families are at increased risk of victimization.²⁸ Not living with one's natural parents for extended periods of time increases risk of victimization by non-biological family members.²⁹

2.1.4 Parental Characteristics

Childhood sexual abuse often co-occurs with adverse family conditions.³⁰ There are a number of characteristics that have been associated with increased risk of child sexual abuse victimization. Marital discord between parents,³¹ absent and emotionally detached parenting,³² and parental substance abuse³³ have all been found to be associated with increased risk of victimization. Low maternal education has also been found to be associated with the sexual assault of girls, although the reasons for this are unclear.³⁴ Research suggests that with low educational attainment comes the possibility of low income and inability to afford safe environments.³⁵ Lower family income (poverty)³⁶ and living in communities (environment) with high rates of violence³⁷ have also been identified in the literature as risk factors, although there is lack of consensus around these risk factors in the literature.

2.1.4.1 Witnessing Domestic Violenceⁱⁱ

While many studies identify experiencing parental “marital discord” as a risk factor for sexual abuse victimization, more targeted research suggests that children exposed to domestic violence are more likely to experience other forms of maltreatment (such as child sexual abuse) within their family setting.³⁸ Prevalence and incidence studies have shown that youth who were victims of sexual abuse by a known adult had also witnessed domestic violence.³⁹ A 2010 study found that women who experienced child sexual abuse were significantly more likely to have also experienced physical abuse and been exposed to domestic violence than women who were not sexually abused as children.⁴⁰

Research has pointed to the concept of ‘poly-victimization’ in order to understand a group of children who suffer from particularly high levels of different types of victimization, such as physical abuse, sexual abuse, witnessing domestic violence, bullying, etc.⁴¹ Furthermore, research has pointed to adverse childhood environments generally as being related to multiple problems later in life.⁴² A more comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon is required to fully and effectively inform prevention efforts at a multitude of levels.

2.1.5 Bullies, Victims of Bullies and Bully-Victims

A study that analysed self-reported bullying behaviours and victimization on 689 fifth-grade students showed that bullying is associated with heightened risk of child sexual abuse.⁴³ The most striking finding states that 32.1% of bully-victims (children who are both victims and perpetrators of bullying) reported being sexually victimized within the last year in comparison to 12.1% victims, 10.6% bullies, and 3.1% of no status youth.⁴⁴

2.1.6 Populations at Risk of Victimization

In addition to the risk factors outlined above, there are certain populations at heightened risk of child sexual abuse victimization.

2.1.6.1 Children and Youth with Disabilities

Several studies identify children with disabilities to be at heightened risk for victimization,⁴⁵ with boys appearing to be “overrepresented among sexually abused children with disabilities compared to with their respective proportion of sexually abused children without disabilities”.⁴⁶ Girls with intellectual disabilities may be at greater risk of sexual victimization than their non-disabled peers because research suggests they may be easier to manipulate by sexual perpetrators who consider them to be easier to victimize.⁴⁷

ⁱⁱ For a full exploration of the intersection between domestic violence and sexual violence, please see the Association of Alberta Sexual Assault Services 2012 report *The Intersection of domestic and sexual violence: A review of the literature*.

2.1.6.2 Aboriginal Children and Youth

While research has identified the over-representation of Aboriginal children and youth placed in care,⁴⁸ there are no Canada-wide prevalence studies on rates of child sexual abuse in this community.⁴⁹ A recent literature review analyzed twenty Canadian studies on the rate of child sexual abuse in Aboriginal communities from 1989 to 2007 and determined that 25% to 50% of Aboriginal adults were sexually assaulted before the age of eighteen.⁵⁰ Clearly more work needs to be done in this area to understand the unique risk factors and experiences pertaining to this population.

2.1.6.3 Gender and Sexually Diverse Youthⁱⁱⁱ

A meta-analysis conducted on 26 school-based studies in 11 geographic areas in North America showed that sexual minority adolescents were 2.9 times more likely to report and 3.8 times more likely to experience child sexual abuse than heterosexual youth.⁵¹ Gender was identified as one of the moderators for childhood sexual abuse showing that “the disparity in sexual abuse between sexual orientation groups was greater for males than females”.⁵² Male sexual minority youth were 4.9 times more likely to experience child sexual abuse than female sexual minority individuals.⁵³

2.2 Risk Factors for Perpetration

A review of risk factors for child sexual abuse perpetration is based on an extensive and, at times, disparate body of research e.g., neuropsychological, antisocial behaviour, bullying, emotional maltreatment, etc.⁵⁴ There has been considerable theory and research dedicated to understanding those who perpetrate child sexual abuse and the developmental pathways to offending.⁵⁵ Such work is critical for the development of primary prevention programs and strategies.⁵⁶

In regards to primary prevention of child sexual abuse, it is important to understand the factors leading to the development of initial perpetration of child sex offending.⁵⁷ There are a number of theories developed to describe how the variety of biological, psychological and interpersonal factors may lead to perpetration of child sexual abuse.⁵⁸ These theories highlight the likelihood of multiple factors and causal pathways involved in the development of child sexual abuse, although theory development is far outpacing data collection.⁵⁹ As such, “there are little empirical data to indicate which risk factors are most important, and/or how they interact to produce child sexual abuse perpetration”.⁶⁰

There are a number of challenges in regards to the literature on risk factors for child sexual abuse perpetration because perpetrators are not a uniform group (e.g., adolescent offenders, adult offenders, intra-familial offenders, extra-familial offenders, child pornography offenders, persistent offenders, contact vs. non-contact offenders, etc.).⁶¹

ⁱⁱⁱ Gender and sexually diverse communities/populations and gender and sexual minorities are terms that have been used interchangeably within the literature to define or describe LGBTTIQQ2SA* communities. These communities include lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, transgender, intersex, queer/questioning, 2-spirited (“T” acronym also utilized), asexual and allies.

The following section identifies risk factors for child sexual abuse perpetration. It is important to consider that many of these risk factors would be applicable for risk of nonsexual antisocial (criminal) behaviour,⁶² thus there are many inconsistencies in regards to risk factors.⁶³

2.2.1 Gender

Being male increases the risk of perpetration, as men are more often the perpetrators of child sexual abuse violence.⁶⁴ Research in this area has shown that this holds regardless of whether the victims are male or female – when child sexual abuse victims are female, males are perpetrators in about 94% to 95% of cases.⁶⁵ When males are victims, the perpetrators are also males in about 80-85% of cases.⁶⁶

2.2.2 Experiencing Child Sexual Abuse

Sexual victimization during childhood is perhaps the most widely researched risk factor for subsequent offending.⁶⁷ While discrepancies do exist, the literature suggests that sexual offenders, compared to other types of offenders, have more likely to have been sexually victimized as children.⁶⁸ Estimates on the prevalence of childhood sexual abuse among sexual offenders range greatly, with researchers reporting varying rates of victimization among this group.⁶⁹ Furthermore, a history of victimization may be more likely for different types of sexual offenders, with child molesters generally showing higher prevalence rates than rapists.⁷⁰ While childhood sexual victimization is generally found to be a strong risk factor for future child sexual abuse perpetration,⁷¹ the research also demonstrates that whether or not the abuse cycle continues depends on specifics of the abuse, resilience of the child and environmental factors.⁷² Greater research into the role the abuse plays as a developmental antecedent to sexual perpetration needs to be conducted.⁷³

2.2.3 Child Physical and Emotional abuse

Other forms of child maltreatment, particularly physical and psychological maltreatment, have been shown to be a risk factor for child sexual abuse perpetration.⁷⁴ Research indicates that sexual offenders and rapists were exposed to a greater degree of violence in their homes,⁷⁵ and that experiencing childhood emotional abuse is a significant contributor as a common developmental risk factor.⁷⁶ It is important to keep in mind that these various forms of child maltreatment and adversity are intertwined.⁷⁷ Generally, sexual offenders have more disturbed family backgrounds typified of neglect, violence and disruption.⁷⁸ There still remains a lack of clarity on “whether physical or sexual abuse in childhood has differential effects on the likelihood of sexual offending later on in life”.⁷⁹

2.2.3.1 Witnessing Domestic Violence^{iv}

There is some research suggesting that even witnessing physical abuse during childhood increases the likelihood of sexual offending.⁸⁰ Some studies examining family constellations as a potential risk factor for sexual abuse perpetration identify the presence of severe marital conflict as increasing risk of perpetration.⁸¹ In studies that compared sexual offenders against children with other types of non-sexually violent offenders, results show that sexual offenders were significantly more likely to report more severe violence in the home.⁸²

Further, experiencing both child sexual abuse and witnessing domestic violence appears to have a relationship to future sexual violence perpetration. Studies examining sexually abused juvenile sex offenders found that they were more likely to have witnessed violence in the home than non-sexually victimized sexual offenders.⁸³ As mentioned in the section on victimization risk factors, more research into the effects and nature of poly-victimization is warranted in order to fully inform prevention efforts.

2.2.4 Psychopathology

Several studies have identified antisocial orientation and other psychopathologies as risk factors for sexual offending.⁸⁴ Greater anxiety, depression and lower self-esteem have been shown to be notable for child sex offenders as compared to non-offenders.⁸⁵ There is also research suggesting that certain psychopathic traits, such as callousness, differentiate sexual offender sub-groups.⁸⁶ Empathy deficits are another proposed risk factor, although “the relationship between empathy deficits and antisocial behaviour and sexual offending is no doubt complex”.⁸⁷ Regardless of the complexity between these variables, most offender treatment programs consider the development of empathy as an important treatment goal.⁸⁸

2.2.5 Poor Childhood Attachment

Much attention has been paid to childhood attachment styles in the literature on sexual offending.⁸⁹ Typically, these attachment styles are classified as secure, insecure and anxious/avoidant,⁹⁰ although recently some researchers have classified four attachment styles: (1) secure, (2) insecure-preoccupied, (3) insecure-dismissive, and (4) insecure-fearful.⁹¹ Studies have reported differences in adult sex offenders in regards to attachment style, in that they are more likely to have insecure childhood and adult attachment styles.⁹²

There are many different theories as to why poor childhood attachments lead to sexual offending, such as poorly attached individuals are more likely to fulfil their intimacy needs through inappropriate relationships and that deficits in empathy are created through poor attachments.⁹³ While there is clinical and theoretical support and interest in the link between poor parental attachment relationships and child sex perpetration, there is much less empirical

^{iv} For a full exploration of the intersection between domestic violence and sexual violence, please see the Association of Alberta Sexual Assault Services 2012 report *The Intersection of domestic and sexual violence: A review of the literature*.

evidence to suggest this is the case.⁹⁴ Further examination of parent-child attachment and its impact on child sexual abuse perpetration is warranted.

2.2.6 Bullying Perpetration and Homophobic Teasing

A 2012 longitudinal study that examined 1391 middle school students in a Midwestern state in the United States showed that bullying perpetration and homophobic teasing at the first wave of data collection significantly predicted sexual harassment in wave 2.⁹⁵ These findings are similar to previous studies⁹⁶ and support the hypothesis that the relationship between bullying and sexual violence “exist starting in early middle school, where traditional bullying perpetration transforms into more gendered harassment and aggressive behaviours in the form of homophobic teasing and sexual harassment.”⁹⁷

2.2.7 Additional Risk Factors

Other risk factors associated with child sexual abuse perpetration have been identified in the literature. They are:

- Atypical sexual interests (e.g., coercive sex)⁹⁸
- Early exposure to sexual interactions (e.g., pornography)⁹⁹
- Social incompetence (e.g., low social skills, difficulties with intimacy, loneliness)¹⁰⁰

2.2.8 Populations at Risk for Perpetration

There is increasing acknowledgement that there are a number of nuanced differences between child sexual abuse perpetrators. Researchers are recognizing the potential in studying adolescent sexual offenders to better understand the onset and course of sexual offending.¹⁰¹ Many sex offenders begin offending in adolescence, and the earlier the age of first offense strongly predicts recidivism.¹⁰²

2.2.8.1 Adolescent Sexual Perpetration (Males)

Recent studies suggest that the age distribution for sexual offenders is bimodal meaning that a peak is observed in early adolescence and then again in the mid to late 30's.¹⁰³ This peak of offending in early adolescence means that greater attention needs to be paid to this group in terms of understanding risk factors and identifying appropriate prevention and intervention strategies,¹⁰⁴ as research suggests this group responds well to treatment.¹⁰⁵ Adolescent sexual offenders do exhibit unique characteristics as compared to adult offenders, such as low incidence of drugs and alcohol during sexual perpetration, less use of weapons and less physical injury to victims.¹⁰⁶ Adolescent offenders are also more likely to have a history of sexual abuse than adult offenders,¹⁰⁷ although overall historic traumatic experiences tend to be higher in this sub-set of offenders.¹⁰⁸ Studies in this area also show that greater attention needs to be paid to factors of social isolation and atypical sexual interests when developing theories of adolescent sexual offending.¹⁰⁹

2.2.8.2 Female Perpetrators of Childhood Sexual Abuse

There is very little research on the nature of female child sexual abuse offenders (adolescent or adult), as much of the literature in this area has focused on males (due to the majority of the perpetration being committed by males). Subsequently, risk factors of sexually abusive behaviour in females are not well known.¹¹⁰

In terms of risk factors for female perpetrators, the literature suggests that perpetrators had been sexually victimized themselves¹¹¹, are younger than their male counterparts who perpetrate,¹¹² are more poorly educated,¹¹³ and are generally more depressive than their male counterparts.¹¹⁴

The following section outlines research in the area of protective factors. Relatively little is known about protective factors for child sexual abuse victimization and perpetration¹¹⁵, thus the research in this area focuses almost exclusively on risk factors or factors that lessen the impact of sexual abuse on a child or youth.¹¹⁶

3. Protective Factors

As stated above, research on protective factors is limited, however, the following factors have been identified that may decrease or buffer against risk of experiencing child sexual abuse:

- Experiencing healthy parenting as a child – children learn problem-solving skills, emotional management and social skills from the people around them. For these reasons, positive and healthy parenting is crucial to the development of positive skills that facilitate healthy relationships,¹¹⁷
- Having participated in a school-based child sexual abuse prevention program¹¹⁸ increases children’s knowledge about sexual abuse, builds their preventative skills and enhances their self-protective factors.¹¹⁹
- Preventative educational programs that are geared towards parents reported mixed results in regards to parents’ knowledge of child sexual abuse and showed little evidence that such prevention efforts increase parents’ motivation to educate and protect their children from child sexual abuse.¹²⁰

Scholars agree that preventative programs for children, parents, and bystanders show some beneficial results; however, “[n]o studies based on strong research designs have looked at the question of preventing [child sexual] abuse.”¹²¹ Recent narrative and a follow up systematic review of school based child sexual abuse prevention programs (included 22 studies) reported such programs increased children’s knowledge, awareness and/or abuse prevention skills; however, little evidence was presented of change in disclosure, limited evidence of actual use and effectiveness of prevention skills, mixed results were reported about the ability to maintain gained skills, and, finally, several prevention efforts reported some negative effects.¹²² Due to the dearth of studies that assess correlation between preventative efforts and rates of child sexual victimization, there is a consensus that additional research is needed to determine if such efforts decrease the occurrence of child sexual abuse.¹²³

Clearly, much more research is needed to identify and understand what factors can buffer or protect against child sexual abuse.

4. Recommendations

4.1 More research is required that explores how societal culture and policies inform and influence child sexual abuse and the contexts associated with abuse – Understanding the sociocultural contexts that contribute to child sexual abuse, such as cultural beliefs that support ideologies of male superiority and sexual entitlement and sexist child rearing strategies are critical to developing prevention strategies that target more than an individual perpetrator.

4.2 Alignment of theory and risk factor research to prevention strategies – As the literature points to, risk of child sexual abuse perpetration and victimization is complex. Clearly, early developmental experiences are key in shaping risk. These experiences cannot be viewed in isolation and as current theoretical frameworks are highlighting, developmental pathways are critical in understanding notions of risk.¹²⁴

4.3 Strategies that target the most commonly cited risk factors should be included in any sexual violence action plan for Alberta – Physical abuse, emotional abuse and poor parental attachments are fairly significant risk factors for perpetration of child sexual abuse. Prevention strategies that focus on supporting parents to develop healthy and warm attachments and positive discipline strategies and capacities are key in any child sexual abuse prevention plan.

4.4 Increased research is required on unique risk and protective factors for Aboriginal populations and child sexual abuse – there is an over-representation of Aboriginal children and youth in care across Alberta, and current national research suggests Aboriginal families are more likely to be investigated for neglect and emotional maltreatment.¹²⁵ More information is required in all areas (e.g., prevalence, incidence, risk factors, etc.) in order to begin to engage in development of strategies for this population.

4.5 Consider prevention strategies that align with particular typologies of child sexual abuse perpetrators – the literature would suggest that child sexual abuse perpetrators are not a uniform group; rather they exist along a continuum of perpetration. Along with this in some cases are unique risk factors for each typology of offender. Understanding the typologies and the relevant risk factors could prove beneficial in development of prevention strategies. For example:

- a. **Male adolescent perpetrators** – the literature does suggest male adolescent offenders to be a distinct group of offenders whose sexual offenses are explained by different factors than offenses of other juvenile delinquents (e.g., higher rates of being sexually and physically abused; earlier exposure to pornography, atypical sexual interests, etc.).¹²⁶ Research increasingly is pointing

to the fact that adolescent sexual abuse perpetrators are not the same as adult offenders, and as such, require greater understanding in the developmental aspects that may affect prevention and treatment strategies.¹²⁷

- b. **Female perpetrators** – the limited research in this area acknowledged some differences between female perpetrators and their counterparts (e.g., are younger - frequently adolescents).¹²⁸
- c. **Distinguishing between extra-familial and intra-familial perpetrators** – Child sexual abuse prevention programs are often pointed to imparting knowledge and self-protection skills.¹²⁹ However, as many child abuse offenders know their victim prior to the abuse, children may have established emotional and loyalty ties to the offender, thereby compromising their ability to identify and exercise the self-protection that they may have learned in the sexual abuse educational program.¹³⁰ These kinds of prevention programs may be well-suited for extra-familial perpetrators who have not had prior contact with their victim, but may not be as effective against intra-familial perpetrators.

4.6 Consider investing in research and training on specialized treatment and supports for children experiencing co-existing conditions – Specialized treatment and support for children/youth who experience co-existing conditions (child sexual abuse, witnessing and experiencing child maltreatment and family violence) is critical to stopping the next generation of abuse.

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