Sexual Abuse: Social Inequality and Poverty

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Abstract

Introduction: Sexual violence is a very big social and health issue, it sets up also as a gender and race problem, as it affects mainly girls and black girls; in addition, the crime is committed more than 90% of times by males. Sexual abuse is a harmful, humiliating, and traumatic experience to the physical and mental health of men and women with immediate and late consequences.

Methods: A systematic literature search was performed according to guidelines in the PRISMA statement. Searches were conducted in PubMed. Keywords included combinations of the words "sex offenses" and children and Brazil.

Results: The search strategy yielded 121 hits in PubMed, after applying exclusion and inclusion criteria, and after manual selection were retrieved 15 publications.

Discussion: Machismo is still a very big social problem. It affects all social spheres of most of the Latin-American countries. Due to this matter, we can explain the underreporting of CSA in boys. The low notification of sexual violence against men is partly due to the toxic masculinity.

Conclusion: More studies are needed, so health professionals, teachers and especially families can recognize early signs of CSA, besides that, public policies need to be implemented urgently in order to reduce these egregious cases.

Keywords
Childhood, Violence, Psychological repercussions, Children victims of sexual abuse

Introduction

Sexual violence is an enormous social and health issue. It is a difficult crime to investigate as well as to prove it, mainly when its victims are children and adolescents. Most of the time, the victims feel ashamed and embarrassed of denouncing this kind of tragedy. This creates an unfavorable scenario and increases the difficulty to help the victims and their families with their multiple pains, including the physical as well as the emotional harms [1]. Child Sex Abuse (CSA) sets up also as a gender and race problem, because it affects mainly girls and black girls; in addition, the crime is committed more than 90% of times by males [2-8].

Every day, thousands of children are abused in places that were supposed to be safe. Several studies show that the most common places where this kind of crime occurs were at home and school, not to mention that such atrocity is perpetrated by those who are close to the victim [1,3,4,6,7,9].

Sexual abuse is a harmful, humiliating, and traumatic experience to the physical and mental health of men and women with immediate and late consequences. When it comes to immediate repercussions victims usually experience suicidal thoughts, mental disturbs, behavioral disturb, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) [10], and regarding the late consequences, they stumble upon senile depression, and high risk of suicide in elder individuals [11]. Thus, the aim of this study was to analyze the psychiatric and psychological repercussion of children and adolescents, victims of CSA in Brazil.

Methods

A systematic literature search was performed
symptoms or disorders following CSA in Brazil were included.

Results

The search strategy yielded 121 hits in PubMed. Titles and/or abstracts of these records were screened, and 84 did not meet eligibility criteria. Out of the remaining 38 full-text articles, 22 were excluded for various reasons. Thus, our systematic review includes 15 publications (Figure 1 and Table 1).

Discussion

As it is known, Child Sex Abuse (CSA) is a difficult crime to investigate and prove. Children and adolescents’ dependence on their parents aggravate the problem, once victims usually take too long to report the crime, and when this occurs, it is still difficult to find physical evidence to confirm the rape. It is important to remember that parents generally have no knowledge
| Article Title                                                                 | Author                                                                 | Methods used in the study                                                                 | Significant outcomes                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Characterization of sexual violence against children and adolescents in school – Brazil, 2010-2014 | Santos, Mascarenhas, Rodrigues, Monteiro | Descriptive study of cases of sexual violence using data from the Notifiable Diseases Information System (SINAN) | The proportion of female victims (77.1%) and those with black skin color (56.5%) was significantly higher among adolescents (p = 0.001). The cases of sexual violence (70.0%) and sexual harassment (33.3%; p = 0.014) were more frequent among adolescents, while the notifications of indecent assault prevailed among children (24.1%; p = 0.001). |
| The impact of CSA on the mental health of victims stands out, since there was a significant difference (p < 0.001) when compared to the control group. | Sena, Silva, Neto. 2018 Ciência e saúde coletiva | Descriptive, retrospective study using data from the Antônio Persimo Cunha Institute of Forensic Medicine | There was an increase in notification of sexual violence in relation to all variables. Rape cases were the most frequent within the analyzed period, going from 54.61% in 2009 to 74.39% in 2013. |
| Sexual violence against children: Authors, victims and consequences           | Platt, Back, Hauschild, Guedert                                      | Cross-sectional, descriptive and analytical study with secondary data from SINAN              | The incidence of sexual violence was 3.2% higher among children, while the notifications of indecent assault were more frequent among adolescents (p < 0.001). |
| Prevalence of sexual violence in Brazil: Associated individual and contextual factors | da Silva & Roncalli 2018 International Journal of Public Health | A multilevel analysis performed with cross-sectional data from 2010                           | Sexual violence is more prevalent in federal units that presented lower years of schooling expectancy at 18-years-old (PR 1.27; CI 95% 1.09-1.48), lower per capita income (PR 1.17; CI 95% 1.01-1.37), higher proportion of poverty-vulnerability (PR 1.18; CI 95% 1.02-1.36) and higher proportion of unemployment (PR 1.68; CI 95% 1.45-1.96). |
| Sexual violence in Brazil: Prevalence and severity of childhood sexual abuse in São Paulo, Brazil | Vertamatti, et al. 2017 Ciência e saúde coletiva                     | Cross-sectional analysis, using secondary data obtained from medical records of the PAVAS of São Bernardo do Campo | Sexual abuse was prolonged among children whose mothers had eight or more years of formal education (PR = 1.65). The time between abuse and reporting was longer when the perpetrator lived in the same household as the child, and when the abuse was reported by a relative or friend. |
| Prevalence of sexual violence in Brazil: Factors associated with reporting delays and severity of childhood sexual abuse in Brazil | Malte, Bernal, Teixeira, Silva, Freitas 2017 Ciência e saúde coletiva | Cross-sectional study conducted using the 2014 VIVA survey data                              | Victims were predominantly male. The most common form of violence was neglect (85%), followed by physical violence and sexual violence, which was reported in 14.9% of cases. |

Table 1: Description and results of the included reviews.
| Title                                                                 | Year  | Journal                                                                 | Methodology                                                                 | Key Findings                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Factors associated with child sexual abuse confirmation at forensic examinations | 2018  | Ciência e saúde coletiva                                                | Cross-sectional, retrospective study using the forensic files of the Nina Rodrigues Institute of Forensic Medicine | In 10.4% of the cases, the forensic physician was able to confirm the sexual abuse based on material evidence (95% CI: 6.7-15.7), and the age of the victims at the moment of the abuse was a significant factor. The results also showed that the likelihood of abuse was higher among males. |
| Descriptive research of a qualitative approach, based on reports from the users of Twitter | 2019  | Revista latino-americana de enfermagem                                  | Descriptive research of a qualitative approach, based on reports from the users of Twitter | The reports revealed that the aggressors expressed desire for the female body during childhood, and their use of the body for the occurrence of sexual abuse. The victims generally suffered from emotional and psychological harm. |
| Prevalence of sexual violence among school-age adolescents was associated with demographics and psychological factors | 2015  | Santos, Mascarenhas, Lima, Silva                                      | Cross-sectional study, with data from the National School Health Survey (PeNSE) conducted in 2015 | Sexual violence among school-age adolescents was associated with factors such as age, gender, and psychological factors. The results showed that males were more likely to report sexual violence than females. |
| Influence of childhood abuse and neglect subtypes on suicide risk beyond depression | 2018  | Behr Gomes Jardim, et al.                                              | Cross-sectional study looking at a sample of 449 individuals 60-years-old or older from the Multidimensional Study of the Elderly of Porto Alegre Family Health Strategy, Brazil (EMI-SUS/POA) | In the multivariate analysis, controlling for age, gender, income, marital status, and other factors, all maltreatment subtypes were associated with an increased risk of suicide. |
| "A boy, being a victim, nobody really buys that, you know?": Dynamics of sexual violence against boys | 2017  | Hohendorff, Habigzang, Koller                                           | Interviews were conducted with four male victims of abuse between the ages of six and 10, as well as four psychologists employed in the health care system and involved in the treatment of sexually abused boys | Proximity between victims and offenders, who were mostly adolescent boys, was a facilitator of abuse. Victims faced significant levels of disbelief and discrimination. |
CSA are strongly and positively linked to PTSD symptoms, which indicates a substantial indirect connection between CSA and the outcome. The direct path from CSA to PTSD symptoms had a borderline significance ($p = 0.066$).

In 94% of the cases, the reason for carrying out the forensic examination was a report of sexual abuse. Less than 1% of the aggressors were female. A ruptured hymen was the finding that confirmed sexual abuse in 172 cases, corresponding to 83% of cases in girls. There were 2 cases of pregnancy. Recent anal or perianal lesions were present in 35 (87.5%) of the confirmed cases involving boys.

| Cross-sectional study at a maternity service for women at high risk for fetal and neonatal complications in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Arch Women's Ment Health |
| The American Journal of Forensic Medicine and Pathology |
| 2016 |
| Oliveira, Reichenheim, Moraes, Howard, Lobato |
| Silva & Barroso Jr. |
| Child Sexual Abuse Confirmed by Forensic Examination in Salvador, Bahia, Brazil |

Despite this, according to Gaspar & Pereira [12] from 2009 to 2013 there was an increase on the number of notifications of CSA. Sexual abuse notification tripled, due to a real increase in the number of cases, to greater awareness of the victims and/or health professionals, or even to better structuring and the number of reporting units. It is clearly observed that girls are the most affected. In almost all the studies, the number of girls who suffered a sexual abuse was bigger than the number of boys [2-8].

Machismo is still -in the 21st century- a very big social problem. It affects all social spheres of most of the Latin-American countries which could explain the underreporting of CSA in boys. The low notification of sexual violence against men is partially due to the toxic masculinity. Men fear having their virility questioned, which leads them not to seeking for health services after having suffered sexual violence [12]. Machismo perpetuates a mistaken conviction that men who are victims of violence tend to homosexuality. This stereotype causes a delay on reporting the abuse. As a result of this delay, they may experience more severe CSA over time [8]. No one believes that boys may be victims of CSA which decreases the visibility of these cases. In the familiar context, the possibility that boys may suffer unbelief and even physical punishment after reporting, shows how difficult it is to individuals to understand that boys may be victims of CSA. In the social context, these cases are permeated by misconceptions regarding gender identity or sexual orientation of the victim, contributing to a lesser visibility of male sexual abuse as a public health problem [13]. Besides that, da Silva & Roncalli [2] affirm that men tend to have less access to health services when compared to women. Although a tremendous amount of men suffers this type of violence, women are still the main victims in all age groups which characterizes a marked gender violence [12].

The socioeconomic conditions of families are a risk predictor for CSA. Significantly higher rates of sexual violence were observed among black-skinned students from public schools, children of mothers with low levels of education, students who did not live with their mother and/or father, and among those who were already working and receiving retribution for that. Associated and protective factors as for the occurrence of CSA included attending to a private school, being son of a highly educated mother, living with the mother and/or father and having family supervision [5].

Victim’s residence was alarmingly the most frequent place of abuse, and the aggressors were mostly men who in most of the cases were known by the victims. Even scarier than this, only the fact that the own
children’s parents were the most common perpetrators [3,4,10]. The violations generally occurred in situations understood as affection, when the aggressor and the child were alone. The moments of play, a characteristic activity of childhood, were favorable situations for adults to practice sexual violence. The aggressors took advantage of childhood situations such as playing to perpetrate the crime. Thus, the victims cannot immediately recognize the violence, which prevents the aggressors from being reported [3]. Home, which should be a place of protection and care, has become a place of violence and child victimization.

A curious contradiction exists in the literature as to the safety of children at school. While some studies show that the number of cases of CSA within educational institutions is increasing [9] others describe schools as protective factors for CSA [8].

Regarding the types of sexual violence, the following were identified: Rape, sexual harassment, indecent exposure, sexual exploitation, child pornography and others. It was observed that, among the types of sexual violence, rape was the most frequent, possibly related to the fact that other types of sexual violence are not recognized as violence. It seems to be more difficult for children to define harassment, indecency, pornography and other types of violence, which makes complaints and/or explanation of the facts difficult [8].

According to Silva & Barroso-Junior [6], in a study realized from January of 2008 and December of 2009 in the city of Salvador, the most common findings in children bodies were anogenital lesions, hymen ruptured in 82.7% of confirmed cases in girls. There were signs of recent abuse such as hematomas, drops of blood and edema in 30% in which the hymen was ruptured. Two girls of this study, both aged 11, were already pregnant and despite abortion being authorized by law in cases of sexual abuse, there are still a lot of girls who have to carry on with an undesired pregnancy, this because legal abortion in Brazil, has become a religious and moral debate.

It is well known that children who have been sexually abused suffer the negative effects of this throughout their lives. The most common manifestations are inadequate school performance, psychological problems (depression, anxiety, suicide attempt and post-traumatic stress disorder) and personal relationships [3]. Among the immediate consequences, the impact of CSA on the mental health of the victims stands out, according to Platt, et al. [10] From all analyzed children in their study, four of them (1%) attempted suicide; five (1.3%) developed mental disorder; 90 (22.4%) showed behavioral disorders; and 77 (20.0%) had PTSD. CSA also was related positively to another psychiatric traumas, violence perpetrated by a relative during pregnancy and fear of the childbirth, for those victims had to carry on with the pregnancy [14].

Sexual violence was more frequent among students who reported insomnia, feeling alone and having no friends. This type of violence was more reported among school children with risky behaviors, such as smoking, alcohol consumption, drug experimentation and early sexual life. The chances of suffering sexual violence were greater for students who felt insecure on the way between the school and their home and at the school itself, as well as those who reported having suffered bullying [5]. Agreeing with this idea, Fontes, et al. [15] found that abused young people were more likely to use illicit drugs, alcohol and have friends who already did. Sexually abused students appear to be less likely to continue their studies in high school and graduation and are more likely to be already working. The victims of sexual violence avoid staying at home and try to spend as much time as possible outside their house to feel more secure. Insomnia can be explained by the presence of nightmares, fears and mood disorders such as depression. The lack of friends and loneliness can be associated with aggressive behaviors or the withdrawal from the creation of new social bonds, as well as characteristics of low self-esteem and bullying.

Finally, Gomes Jardim, et al. [11] claims that all childhood maltreatment types were significantly associated with the risk of suicide, and an emphasis is placed on sexual abuse, which, unlike other mistreatment subtypes, is more strongly associated with the risk of suicide in the elderly.

Conclusion

CSA is a rarely notified crime, due to this, it is necessary to learn how to identify behaviors that the victims show, in order to be able to act in a precocious way and prevent more serious consequences of this crime. It is necessary to create strategies that can minimize physical and psychological damage than children and adolescents may suffer immediately or belatedly. Children and teenagers represent the future of our countries, the hope that there are better days coming. It is extremely important to remember the importance of preserving their lives and their futures, for which we must take action now. Literature clearly shows us the various and different forms of psychic suffering that abused children suffer. In order to save the future of children and adolescents we must first save their present.

We call for attention from government authorities around the world, as we find that social inequality, poverty, a general lack of education has a direct impact on the lives of children. Without saying that, the religious polarization, surrounding governmental decisions and important debates such as abortion, is being harming and will continue to harm the future of more young people. More studies are needed, so health professionals, teachers and especially families
can recognize early signs of CSA, besides that, public policies need to be implemented urgently in order to reduce these egregious cases.

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