Beyond the Tip of the Iceberg: The Multiple Barriers to Disclosure of Child Sexual Abuse
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How prevalent is CSA?

- The problem of child sexual abuse (CSA) is difficult to approximate given the lack of consensus on the definition used in research inquiries, as well as the differences in the data collection systems across areas.

- Rates of CSA for females range from 8 to 31% and from 3 to 17% for males.

- Averages center around 18-20% for females and 8-10% for males, with the lowest rates for both girls (11.3%) and boys (4.1%) found in Asia, and highest rates found for girls in Australia (21.5%) and for boys in Africa (19.3%).

Canadian Prevalence of CSA

- Limited Canadian data on CSA prevalence
  - Only two recent Canadian population-based prevalence studies (Ontario & Quebec studies)

- Ontario Child Health Study
  - Questions focused on CSA experiences prior to age 16 that involved contact (from fondling to rape).
  - Telephone survey: 1893 participants
  - 15% of the participants reported CSA: 8.3% for male and 22.1% for female participants.

Canadian Prevalence of CSA

Quebec study

- Questions focused on CSA experiences prior to age 18 that involved contact (from fondling to rape).
- Telephone interviews: 804 participants
- “In our sample, 21.4% of women and 9.5% of men reported unwanted sexual activities involving touching by an adult or a child 3 years older than them, and 5.2% of women and 2.3% of men reported rape, for an overall CSA prevalence of 22.1% of women and 9.7% of men.”

The tip of the iceberg

- Research findings do, however, clearly demonstrate a major lack of congruence between the high rates of CSA that youth and adults self-report retrospectively and the low number of official reports of CSA to authorities.

Many victims continue to go undetected and their needs unrecognized.
The tip of the iceberg

- Results from a meta-analysis that combined estimations of CSA in 217 studies published between 1980 and 2008 showed the rates of CSA to be **more than 30 times greater** in studies relying on self-reports (127 by 1000) than in official-report inquiries, such as those based on data from child protection services (CPS) and the police (4/1000).

- In other words, while 1 out of 8 people report having experienced CSA, official incidence estimates center around only 1 per 250 children.

Decline in number of CSA cases substantiated by CPS in the US and Canada: 1993 to 2008

Per 100,000 children up to 15 years

- 55.9% decline over 20 years
- 50.0% decline over 15 years
- 48.6% decline over 5 years

Total number of CSA victims

Number of substantiated CSA cases in CPS

Disclosure and Reporting
Retention
Substantiation
The incidence of violent crime in Canada has only minimally dropped from 1998 to 2008: 995 (per 100,000 people) to 951, representing a 4% decline.

Source: Statistics Canada 2010
### Self-reported victimizations

#### Self-reported victimization, 1999, 2004 and 2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Rates per 1000</th>
<th>1999</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2009</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total violent victimization</td>
<td></td>
<td>111</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total household victimization</td>
<td></td>
<td>218</td>
<td>248</td>
<td>237</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theft of personal property</td>
<td></td>
<td>75</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>108</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Per 1000 people

- **Total violent victimization**
- **Total household victimization**
- **Theft of personal property**

Self-reported violent victimizations by type of offense

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rates per 1000</th>
<th>1999</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2009</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>sexual assault</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>robbery</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>physical assault</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
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Rationale for current study

- The alarming numbers of adult reporting CSA clearly call for extensive and powerful policy and practice efforts.

- Yet, the development of effective strategies is hampered by the fact that many victims continue to go undetected.

- Aim: analyze and conceptualize the factors that prevent CSA victims from coming forward with a disclosure, in order to develop powerful practice and policy initiatives that facilitate the telling of CSA.
Current scholarship

- Research findings generally indicate that younger age at the onset of abuse, being male, having a close relationship to the perpetrator, and more severe forms of abuse delay disclosure.

- Disclosure of traumatic events is a very complex, iterative life-long process that cannot be influenced solely by the victim or the abuse characteristics.
Main objective

- The field is still awaiting a model that conceptualizes the multiple barriers to CSA disclosure in a cohesive portrait.

- Dr. Ramona Alaggia (UofT) has suggested analyzing barriers to disclosure from an ecological systemic standpoint, that is to recognize the complexity and interplay of factors acting at all levels to influence the process of disclosure: individual, relational and social.

Method

- Using a constructed grounded theory qualitative approach, semi-structured long interviews were conducted via telephone with adult male and female CSA survivors.

- Themes & Questions:
  - Describe disclosure experiences
  - What could have helped you through the experience?
  - What could have helped you to disclose earlier?
  - Is there any person you wished you had told?
Method

- Participant selection
  - Men and women above the age of 19 who were receiving or had recently received treatment for their CSA victimization

- Recruitment in Greater Montreal, Greater Toronto & Ottawa

- Sample description
  - 68 interviews conducted in French (40) & English (28)
  - About a two-thirds of the participants were from Montreal (67.6%); about a quarter were from Toronto (26.5%); and the balance (5.9%) from Ottawa
  - Gender: 75% of the participants were women
  - Age: 45 y.o. on average (from 19 to 69)
The questions asked to the participants did not specifically revolved around describing the CSA events.

Nevertheless, most of the participants disclosed some information pertaining to the abuse events.

The abusive experiences lived by the participants included:

- Intrafamilial and extrafamilial abuse
- Male perpetrators, and a few cases of female perpetrators
- Ranged from single events with one perpetrator to multiple events with multiple perpetrators
- The type of abuse ranged from exposure to pornography to penetration
Sample description: Childhood disclosure

Disclosure before 18 y.o.

- Did not disclose: 38.2%
- Disclosed: 52.9%
- Other: 8.8%

Legend:
- Did not disclose
- Disclosed
- Other
Sample description: Childhood disclosure

To whom have they disclosed

Parents: 76.90%
Friends/Peers: 57.70%
Other family member: 11.50%
Other adult figure: 30.80%
Authorities: 30.80%
Professional (not authorities): 50.00%
Intimate Partner: 34.60%
“Secrets are generally terrible. Beauty is not hidden--only ugliness and deformity.”
— Lucy Maud Montgomery, Canadian author of late 19th-early 20th centuries
Barriers from within

1) Internalized victim-blaming
   ■ Feelings of embarrassment, shame;
   ■ Feeling responsible for the abuse; self-blame;
   ■ Fear of disappointing others;
   ■ Feeling dirty, infected

“I kind of wanted to say but you know still firmly believed that I had gotten myself into the situation and it was my fault you know, and so that was the biggest barrier(...) I felt like I should have known better.”

“When you’re being abused, you don’t have self-respect, you can’t look people in the eye. You feel dirty. It feels like you don’t belong. You feel like you’re not as good as anyone else. You feel like you don’t deserve anything.”
Barriers from within

2) Mechanisms to protecting oneself

- Minimizing the abusive experience;
- Lack of trust in others; over-reliance on self
- Repressed memories

“I was- I was never gonna tell anyone because I- I don’t want- I just wanted to forget about it. If I could deal with it myself… ”

“So ya my trust was destroyed and… it’s all mixed up who you trust and who you don’t trust it’s all confused”
Barriers from within

3) Immature development at time of abuse
   - Lack of understanding of sexuality;
   - Confusion about situation;
   - No tools to disclose

“Will she believe me, will she blame me, will she be angry at me, because there’s also the sense that when it first started... I didn’t really know or understand it was wrong.”

“How do you say it...like how does a nine year old say...this is what’s happening to me”
Barriers in relation to others

1) Violence and dysfunction in the family
   - Feeling unsafe;
   - Fear of escalation;
   - Protection of others/sacrifice of self;
   - Victim-blaming/disbelief of the child

“I couldn’t really talk about it, cause my mum, my mum was being battered at the same time and I didn’t want to cause any trouble in the family”

“My mom actually did come into the room while he was doing something to me and… she punished me… she screamed at me and punished me and just nothing ever stopped”
Barriers in relation to others

2) Power dynamics
- Manipulation – grooming;
- Manipulation – threat;
- Secrecy, containment;
- Complexity of relationship with perpetrator

“(the perpetrator said) I am so sorry, you know, I got really carried away, but you’re so special… nobody else knows how special you are”

“(The perpetrator) threatened to kill me and my family if I told them. So that's why I didn't tell”

“I think that’s what happens sometimes with sexual abuse. That the family doesn’t want to talk about it. And it – that can be handed down… an attitude… can be handed down from generation to generation.”
3) Awareness of impact of telling

- Fear of perceptions and reactions of others;
- Fear of consequences;
- Guarding to avoid subsequent actions from authorities

“Yeah, there have been – there have been several times where I was gonna say something, I was like, ‘No, keep it to yourself, because you don’t want people running away from you, you don’t wanna be alone, you wanna have friends’”

“You don’t know what you’re doing [when you disclose], but you know that you are opening a big whole into the world”
“One of them… my neighbours had reported what was happening to me and had called the CPS. It was horrible they shut the door and there was four or five of them in there (an office at the school) including the school principal… a police officer at the door… um asking me all kinds of questions I don’t remember all the questions…but I remember my parents being brought up…um my parents were brought up and I was told to sign a piece of paper…stating that they knew…were aware (...) it scared me half to death and I thought my parents were going to be arrested ya I thought that they were going to take my parents away so I said nothing's happening to me and I don't know’ where you got your information from but it’s all wrong…cause I just knew that it was so bad.”
Barriers in relation to others

4) Fragile social network
   - No one to tell;
   - No one equipped to hear;
   - No support in schools

“…but I didn’t have anyone I could go to, to talk about it at that time, and I was a child … I was in some sort of survival mode and really didn’t – didn’t have anyone I could go to…”

“I think like there’s so much information out there, but maybe it’s like information overload and people just don’t wanna hear about that ugly stuff, I don’t know”
Barriers in relation to the social world

1) Labelling

- Homophobia;
- Stigma in seeking services;
- Stigma attached to being a ‘victim’

“I was just ya know I didn’t want anybody to think I was gay or anything cause I didn’t think I was and I didn’t want to keep that in me but it seemed to ya know be the cost of fitting in ya”

“I was always afraid because of what happened to me that I would be locked up when anybody found out like put in a nut house or something that people would think I was crazy”
Barriers in relation to the social world

2) Taboo of sexuality
   - Lack of discussion and understanding of sexuality

“I can remember asking my mother something about sex, and her throwing a big medical book at me and said ‘look it up’. That was the only help I got from my mother when it comes to sex. You know, but there is nothing out there, nothing that I knew of. Again, it would have made a big difference.”

“If I had known that there were predators out there and that adults can do this to children even if it’s like graphically to explain to me because I wouldn’t have understood like a vague concept I know that if somebody had told me…”
Barriers in relation to the social world

3) Lack of services
   - Mainstream education;
   - Access to services and information on help available

“No one even talked at our school. You know, that would be amazing, for people to give talks in schools. To school children and say: ‘If anyone is touching you here, that’s wrong and you don’t need to keep doing that, you have a voice and you got to tell somebody’”

“When I was a young man I don’t think there was anything that was available so if there was anything I didn’t know about it but I don’t I’d be very surprised if there was anything uh it was fifty years ago”
Barriers in relation to the social world

4) Culture/Time period
   - Invisibility of sexual abuse in society

“Sexual abuse was more a secret, even back then. And you- it’s not something you talk about, so it was... at that time, it was hard to, to find someone to actually talk to about it.”

“I do think that the knowledge that teachers have and parents have of sexual abuse I don’t think was the same thirty years ago so...I don’t think it would have crossed teachers mind the same as it might have today...like I don’t think teachers were as aware of warning signs”
Barriers in relation to the Social World

- Labeling
- Taboo of Sexuality

Barriers in relation to Others

- Lack of Services Available
- Culture or Time Period
- Power Dynamics
- Violence and Dysfunction in the Family
- Awareness of the Impact of Telling
- Fragile Social Network

Barriers from Within

- Internalized Victim-Blaming
- Mechanisms to Protect Oneself
- Immature Development at the Time of Abuse
Although the taboo of CSA might not be as prominent as a few decades ago when it was rarely spoken of, veiled issues still prevent victims from reaching out to authorities to reveal the abuse they suffer.

This study points to the importance of using a broad ecological framework when understanding the factors that inhibit disclosure of CSA, as barriers of CSA disclosure do not rest only with the victims.
Discussion and recommendations

- **Intervention programs**: Integrate findings on barriers to disclosure to provide support that will empower victims by recognizing and normalizing the multiple reasons that may have led them to withhold the secret of CSA for a long period of time / not a matter of courage.

- **School-based prevention programs**: Promote a non-blaming discourse towards victims and recognize the multiple barriers at play in holding victims from disclosing / better equipped peers to become sensitive and liable confidants for their friends.
Discussion and recommendations

- **Training programs for professionals**: Include mandatory training on CSA to all professionals working with children and youth, which would strengthen their abilities to facilitate the disclosure of CSA (e.g. creating a safe place for children to talk), and to react appropriately when faced with a disclosure (e.g. having a reassuring and supportive attitude).

- **Media**: Create meaningful media campaigns / mass media can play a vital role in further enhancing awareness towards sexual abuse in our societies, should they provide information free of sexism, prejudice and sensationalism when reporting on CSA.
Concluding remarks

- The burden should not be on the child to navigate a traumatic experience through social and structural obstacles that keep CSA in the dark.

- The burden is on the larger community to create a climate of safety and transparency.

“It wasn’t until I found out that…someone close to me had also experienced something like that on a bigger scale … I just kind of broke free of this feeling of shame because I saw, you know, that they weren’t responsible for it so it liberated me from feeling responsible for it myself...”
Thank you!