



THE ISSUE OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

BY DARKNESS TO LIGHT

What is child sexual abuse?

Child sexual abuse and assault (CSAA) is a complex problem that has impacted all nations; however, it has been difficult to come to a consensus on the proper definition of the issue. Darkness to Light has adopted the definition developed by Mathews and Collin-Vézina (2019) while also including the word “assault” to account for the offenses conducted by juvenile/peer offenders.

- 📌 Mathews and Collin-Vézina (2019) defines child sexual abuse as:
 - a. An act that involves a child defined by both legal age (under 18 years) and developmental capacity;
 - b. Where the child is unable to give true consent or, ability exists but consent not given (true consent requires “full, free, voluntary, and uncoerced participation”);
 - c. An act (whether contact or noncontact) is considered “sexual” when it is done for the purpose of sexual gratification (immediate or deferred);
 - d. An act where there is a power differential with victim in a position of inequality in which their vulnerability is exploited.

What is the magnitude of the problem?

Child sexual abuse and assault is far more prevalent than most people realize. CSAA occurs in every community and across all ethnic, socioeconomic, and religious backgrounds (Mathews & Collin-Vézina, 2019). Actual prevalence of CSAA is likely to be underestimated by official reports (Finklehor et al., 2013); however, based on the data that is available we know that 1 in 10 children experience CSAA nationally (Department of Health and Human Services, 2022; Downing, 2021). 📌

How does this impact different racial groups?

With the limited data available and up to date research on prevalence by demographic groups, the answer to this question is complex. Before we can list out the different statistics available, we have to acknowledge that the variations in the extent of substantiated child abuse and neglect cases. These variations can be due to characteristics of the residents, qualities of neighborhoods, policies and practices of local child welfare agencies, underreporting, economic hardship and violence, structural racism that has disenfranchised non-white and Latino communities, access to quality childcare, and the list goes on.

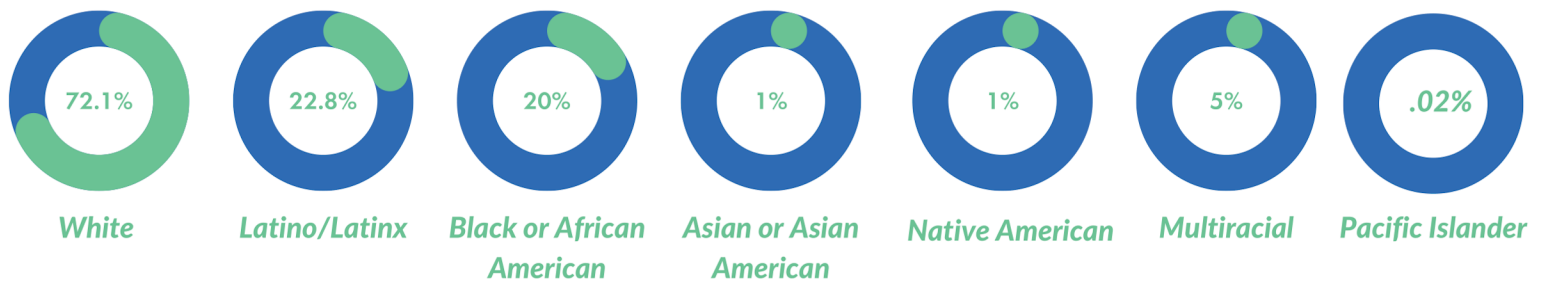


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CSA Victims by Race

Data based on 2018 National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System and state-level population estimates from the US Census Bureau



How does this impact the LGBTQ+ community?

The absence of safe spaces and safe adults has historically put LGBTQ+ youth at a higher risk of childhood trauma. Many youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender are at greater risk of various types of traumas including bullying, child sexual abuse, homelessness, sexual exploitation, suicidal thoughts, and teen dating violence.

- Lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) youth are almost 4 times as likely to report child sexual abuse than heterosexual youth (Friedman et al., 2011).
- About 1 in 4 transgender youth are abused before their 18th birthday (Newcomb et al., 2020).
- 18% of LGB teens report being forced to have sexual intercourse (Kann et al., 2016).

LGBTQ+ youth face unique challenges that place them at greater risk. They are more vulnerable to bullying and harassment, leading to feeling isolated, unsafe, and depressed – conditions that potential harm-doers may take advantage of through the grooming process. However, the good news is that according to the CDC, youth who feel connected at school or at home is as much as 66% less likely to experience violence (Steiner et al., 2019).

How does this impact children with disabilities?

Children with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities are 3 to 8 times more likely to be abused than their nondisabled peers (Byrne, 2017; Jones et al., 2012). Similar to other vulnerable populations, many children with disabilities lack a support system in which they can confide about the abuse. On top of the taboos around discussing sex and sexual abuse that persist throughout society, children with disabilities are provided no sexual education or sexual abuse awareness education resulting in a lack of language that allows them to understand what happened.



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How often do children disclose abuse?

Research shows that many children do not disclose sexual abuse immediately after the abuse occurs. In fact, many children do not disclose the abuse for years, if at all.

- The average age for disclosing CSAA is about 52 years (Spröber et al., 2014).
- 86% of CSAA goes unreported altogether (Kilpatrick, Saunders, & Smith, 2003).
- Younger children (e.g. ages 1 through 6) are likely to have more difficulties disclosing sexual abuse compared to older children (Middleton, 2017).
- The majority of child sexual abuse victims who disclose their abuse delay disclosure until adulthood (McElvaney, 2015; Reitsema & Grietens, 2016).
- Older children and female victims are more likely to disclose CSAA than younger children and male counterparts which may be due to social stigma, limited vocabulary/knowledge, and cultural norms attached to masculinity (Azzopardi et al., 2019).
- Even when disclosures occur, a very small amount (16%) of them are formally disclosed directly to authorities (McGuire & London, 2020). The majority of disclosures are made initially disclosures to peers, then parents or trusted adults who can then help them report to a person of authority (Manay & Collin-Vezina, 2021).

What helps children tell?

A meta-analysis of the literature (N=20) found 6 key themes that help children disclose (Brennan & McElvaney, 2020):





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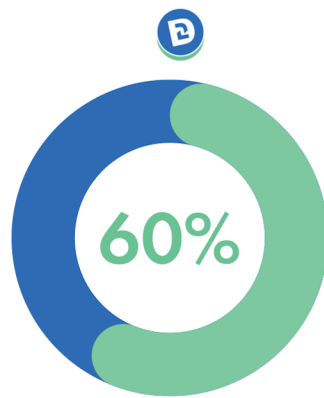
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Who are the perpetrators of child sexual abuse?

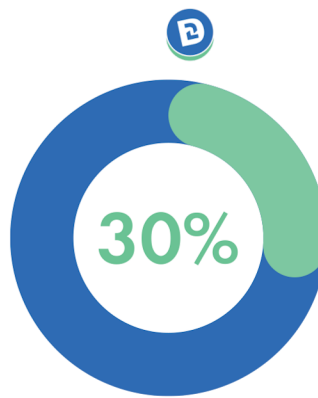
Abusers can be neighbors, friends, and family members. People who sexually abuse children can be found in families, schools, churches, recreation centers, youth sports leagues, and any other place children gather. Many abusers are youth themselves or are situational offenders.



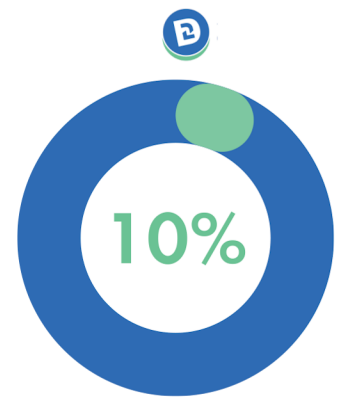
About 90% of children who are victims of sexual abuse known their abuser (Finklehor & Shattuck, 2012).



60% of abusers are acquaintances, teachers, neighbors, or community leaders (Finklehor & Shattuck, 2012).



30% of children are abused by immediate or extended family (Finklehor & Shattuck, 2012)



Only 10% of children are sexually abused by a stranger (Finklehor & Shattuck, 2012).



More than 70% of children who are sexually abused, are abused by a peer

It is important to note that not everyone who sexually abuses children is a pedophile. Child sexual abuse is perpetrated by a wide range of individuals with diverse motivations.



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Are abusers primarily male?

Most people picture a man when they think of an abuser and although it may appear this way, female abusers exist. The majority of studies available on female perpetrated abuse rely on cases disclosed to child protective services and police and incarcerated female perpetrators (Curti et al., 2019). Studies have shown that the majority of abusers are men (Essabar et al., 2015; Gerke, 2021); however, women are 4.5 times more likely than men to offend against their own biological children (McLeod, 2015). There are many reasons why it appears that the majority of abusers are male:

- victims who were abused by women may not have perceived or recognized that the incident was abuse (Ford, 2006),
- the majority of victims are male and they may delay disclosure due to fear of shame or not being believed or even feeling like less of a “man” (Sable et al., 2006),
- victims are less likely to be believed (Etherington, 1999),
- female perpetrated abuse is also often not taken seriously due to the socialized view that adult female sexual interactions are every teenage boy’s fantasy.

However, the research shows that victims of female-perpetrated sexual abuse have the same serious negative consequences on victims with the addition of mockery and abuse being downplayed. Research shows that victims of female-perpetrated abuse experience the same or greater consequences as victims of male-perpetrated abuse including depression, anger, suicidal thoughts, and problems with substances, relationships, and sexual functioning (Tsopelas et al., 2011).

What is the rate of peer-on-peer abuse?

A large portion of offenses are committed by other juveniles and acquaintances. More than 70% of children who are sexually abused are abused by a peer (Gewirtz-Meydan, & Finklehor, 2020). 

Almost half (45.8%) of peer sexual assault on adolescents were committed by a friend, 18.5% were by someone the victim knew but not well, a girl/boyfriend (15.4%), someone the victim just met (8.2%), and a casual date (2.5%). Two of three victims of peer sexual assault knew the perpetrators in some manner with 50% of perpetrators being friends. (Young et al., 2009).



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