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CHILDHOOD SEXUAL ABUSE, ADOLESCENT SEXUAL BEHAVIORS AND SEXUAL REVICTIMIZATION

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The aims of this study were to examine the extent to which exposure to childhood sexual abuse (CSA) was associated with increased rates of sexual risk taking behaviors and sexual revictimization during adolescence.

Method: A birth cohort of 520 New Zealand born young women was studied at regular intervals from birth to the age of 18. At age 18 retrospective reports of CSA were obtained from sample members. Over the course of the 18 year study information was gathered on: (a) childhood, family, and related circumstances; and (b) the young women's history of sexual experiences from 14 to 18 years.

Results: Young women reporting CSA, and particularly severe CSA involving intercourse, had significantly higher rates of early onset consensual sexual activity, teenage pregnancy, multiple sexual partners, unprotected intercourse, sexually transmitted disease, and sexual assault after the age of 16. Logistic regression analyses suggested that the associations between CSA and sexual outcomes in adolescence arose by two routes. First, exposure to CSA was associated with a series of childhood and family factors including social disadvantage, family instability, impaired parent child relationships, and parental adjustment difficulties that were also associated with increased sexual vulnerability in adolescence. Second, there appeared to be a causal chain relationship between CSA and sexual experiences in which CSA was associated with early onset sexual activity which, in turn, led to heightened risks of other adverse outcomes in adolescence.

Conclusions: The findings of this study suggest that those exposed to CSA have greater sexual vulnerability during adolescence. This appears to arise because: (a) the childhood and family factors that are associated with CSA are also associated with increased sexual risks during adolescence; and (b) exposure to CSA may encourage early onset sexual activity which places those exposed to CSA at greater sexual risk over the period of adolescence. © 1997 Elsevier Science Ltd

Key Words—Childhood sexual abuse, Early onset sexual activity, Sexual risk taking, Revictimization, Longitudinal study.

INTRODUCTION

OVER THE LAST two decades there has been increasing research into the prevalence, childhood correlates, and later consequences of childhood sexual abuse (CSA) (Beitchman et al., 1992; Browne & Finkelhor, 1986; Finkelhor, 1990, 1994). Broadly speaking, this research has established that: (a) exposure to some form of unwanted sexual attention during childhood is not uncommon (Bagley & Ramsay, 1986; Finkelhor, Hotaling, Lewis, & Smith, 1990; Mullen, Romans-Clarkson, Walton, & Herbison, 1988; Sedney & Brooks, 1984); (b) those exposed to CSA tend to come from

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family environments characterized by a number of adverse features including parental conflict, family breakdown, step-parenthood, and parental psychopathology (Brown & Anderson, 1991; Fergusson, Lynskey, & Horwood, 1996; Gruber & Jones, 1983; Madonna, Van Scoyk, & Jones, 1991; Mullen, Martin, Anderson, Romans, & Herbison, 1993; Paradise, Rose, Sleeper, & Nathanson, 1994; Russell, 1986; Stern, Lynch, Oates, O'Toole, & Cooney, 1995); (c) those reporting CSA have elevated risks of psychiatric disorders in adulthood (Bifulco, Brown, & Adler, 1991; Briere & Runtz, 1988; Burnam et al., 1988; Fergusson, Horwood, & Lynskey, 1996; Mullen et al., 1993; Rowan, Foy, Rodriguez, & Ryan, 1994; Sedney & Brooks, 1984; Winfield, George, Swartz, & Blazer, 1990). More recently, attention has turned to the extent to which exposure to CSA is a factor that may influence the individual's later sexual adjustment and risks of sexual revictimization. Two lines of evidence have suggested linkages between exposure to CSA and later sexual adjustment and outcomes.

First, a number of studies have found that those exposed to CSA tend to be characterized by higher rates of sexual activity and/or sexual risk taking behaviors. Among the possible consequences of CSA that have been suggested are teenage pregnancy (Boyer & Fine, 1992; Gershenson et al., 1989; Mullen, Martin, Anderson, Romans, & Herbison, 1994; Nagy, DiClemente, & Adcock, 1995; Springs & Friedrich, 1992; Zierler et al., 1991); multiple sexual partnerships (Courtois, 1979; Herman, 1981; Springs & Friedrich, 1992); higher rates of involvement in prostitution (Cunningham, Stiffman, Dore, & Earls, 1994; James & Meyerding, 1977; Zierler et al., 1991); and increased sexual risk taking behaviors (Bartholow et al., 1994). These results clearly suggest the possibility that exposure to CSA may encourage early onset sexual behaviors and sexual risk-taking behaviors. Second, there have been a number of reports in the literature which have suggested that victims of CSA are at increased risks of sexual revictimization as adults (Fromuth, 1986; Gorcey, Santiago, & McCall-Perez, 1986; Russell, 1986). For example, Russell (1986) reported that between 33% to 68% of CSA victims were subsequently raped as adults, compared with an incidence of rape of 17% for women who had not been victims of CSA.

While there is growing evidence to suggest that exposure to CSA may influence later sexual adjustment and increase risks of sexual revictimization, there are a number of limitations in these studies. First, many studies have been based on selected samples recruited because of known sexual abuse or other difficulties (Bartholow et al., 1994; Boyer & Fine, 1992; Courtois, 1979; Cunningham et al., 1994; Gershenson et al., 1989; Gorcey et al., 1986; James & Meyerding, 1977). It is possible that the findings of these studies may be influenced by sample selection biases so that the reported relationship between sexual abuse and later sexual behavior or adjustment is influenced by the processes by which individuals were identified as being eligible for sample membership (Cahill, Llewelyn, & Pearson, 1991; Plunket & Oates, 1990).

A second major threat to validity in such research comes from the possibility of confounding (Cahill et al., 1991; Plunket & Oates, 1990). While the evidence clearly suggests that the sexual adjustment and behavior of those exposed to CSA may differ from the sexual behavior and adjustment of those not exposed to CSA, it is by no means self evident that these relationships arise because CSA exposure influences later sexual adjustment and sexual risk. It may be suggested that the associations between CSA and later sexual outcomes arise from third or confounding factors that are associated with both increased risks of CSA and increased risks of sexual behaviors or adjustment problems (Cahill et al., 1991; Plunket & Oates, 1990).

This view is supported to some extent by findings that the childhoods of those exposed to CSA are often characterized by adverse family features including parental conflict, family change, parental psychopathology, and associated factors that may influence later sexual behaviors and adjustment (Brown & Anderson, 1991; Fergusson, Lynskey, & Horwood, 1996; Gruber & Jones, 1983; Madonna et al., 1991; Mullen et al., 1993; Paradise et al., 1994; Russell, 1986; Stern et al., 1995). Thus, to examine the role of CSA in later sexual adjustment it is necessary to take account of potentially confounding childhood, family, and related factors that may be correlated with CSA

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