

Prevalence of Child Contact Sexual Abuse in the Spanish Region of Andalusia

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to analyze the prevalence and characteristics of child sexual abuse (CSA) in Andalusia, Spain's most populated region. A sample of 817 adults (281 male; M age = 34.7; SD = 13.86) completed the Child Sexual Abuse Experiences Questionnaire. Because the sample was unbalanced, we performed post-stratification by gender, resulting in 562 participants (50% male). Overall, 38.8% of the sample reported at least one type of contact abuse experience, with prevalence ranging from 22% for being fondled to 3.9% for being forced to perform a sexual act involving penetration. The first episode of CSA most commonly occurred between age 6 and 11 years, except for penetration. The majority of reported experiences were repeated and perpetrated by a male. More than half of the victims did not label their experience as sexual abuse, and this apparent lack of awareness about what constitutes abuse was particularly evident among male victims. The prevalence of CSA in Andalusia is higher than for Spain as a whole, highlighting the need to raise public awareness through prevention programs.

KEYWORDS *Victimization; perpetrator; child maltreatment; childhood; CSA*

Child maltreatment refers to all forms of physical or mental violence, neglect or negligent treatment, sexual abuse or exploitation to which individuals younger than 18 may be subject (World Health Organization, 2014). Research conducted over decades indicates that it is a worldwide problem that may have lifelong consequences for victims (Fernández et al., 2020; De la Rosa Santana et al., 2020; Marques-Feixa & Fañanás, 2020).

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is a specific type of maltreatment in which a child is involved in sexual activity that he or she cannot fully comprehend, is unable to give consent to, or for which he or she is not developmentally prepared, and which violates the laws or social taboos of society (World Health Organization, 2003). This activity, which is intended to gratify or satisfy the sexual needs of another person, occurs between a child and an adult or another child who by age or development is in a relationship of responsibility, trust or power. The consequences of CSA may persist into adulthood and beyond, and they include emotional and sexual problems, social withdrawal and difficulty relating to others, and behavioral disturbances and suicidal ideation (Canton- Cortes et al., 2020; Okeafor et al., 2018; Pereda, 2010).

Although CSA may involve physical contact between the child and the perpetrator, as in the case of rubbing, fondling or penetration (Lago & Cespedes, 2006), it can also take non-contact forms such as indecent exposure or exposure to pornography (Murray et al., 2015). Abuse may take place within or outside the family (Alves et al., 2013; Costa et al., 2018), although perpetrators are most commonly a male within the child's immediate social network (Ferragut et al., 2021a, 2021c; Gallagher et al., 2008). Indeed, the empirical evidence suggests that most perpetrators are known to the victim, be it a relative, family friend or neighbor (David et al., 2018; Selengia et al., 2020). Abuse within the family tends to be more serious than when it is committed by an acquaintance or stranger, and it is more likely to involve physical contact, to begin at an earlier age, to go on for longer, and to have more severe health consequences (Cortes et al., 2011; Ferragut et al., 2021a; Guziak, 2020). Another aspect to consider is that CSA may involve a single episode (occurring in a moment of opportunity), be systematic (i.e., it is not an isolated incident but does not become chronic) or chronic (i.e., repeated episodes occur over a prolonged period; López-Sánchez, 1994). Research suggests that the more frequent and persistent the abuse is, the greater the negative consequences for the victim (Fuentes, 2012; Hornor, 2010).

The prevalence of CSA is defined as the proportion of the population that has experienced some form of sexual abuse during childhood, and studies in this regard are generally retrospective in nature. A point to consider is that CSA is generally a hidden problem because disclosure is often a significant challenge for victims, whether due to shame, feelings of guilt, lack of perceived support, or because they do not recognize their experience as abuse (Echeburúa & Corral, 2006; Ullman, 2007). This silence makes it difficult to study the prevalence of maltreatment and highlights the need to analyze the real prevalence through direct questions and not only with official data. It also underlines the importance of implementing CSA detection and awareness programs from an early age.

Although prevalence rates vary considerably across studies, there is agreement that CSA is an international problem. Studies with large samples, such as the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study in the USA, report a prevalence for CSA of 20.7%, with a higher ratio in women (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2022). Meta-analyses report a mean prevalence of around 8% among men and 18% for women (Finkelhor, 1994; Pereda et al., 2009; Volnovich, 2002). A higher prevalence was

documented in the studies by Pan et al. (2020), who found a pooled overall rate among women of 24%, and Chen et al. (2006), who reported that 21.9% of women had experienced at least one type of CSA, with physical contact being involved in 14% of cases. All meta-analyses note the high variability in prevalence across studies. The most recent estimates for Spain, the country of focus for this paper, range from 2.8% to 18.5% when considering different types of sexual abuse (Ferragut et al., 2021b), while overall, 27.82% of Spanish adults report having experienced at least one type of contact sexual abuse during childhood (Ferragut et al., 2021c).

It has been suggested (Pereda et al., 2009) that these differences in reported prevalence may be due to sample characteristics, the method of data collection, and the type of questions asked (general questions about the experience of abuse, specific questions about experiences with and without contact, etc.). Indeed, studies that use anonymous online surveys comprising questions about specific kinds of experiences report much higher prevalence rates, in some cases reaching 40% of respondents (Guziak, 2020). These differences notwithstanding, research has consistently found that the majority of victims are female and the majority of perpetrators male (Pereda et al., 2009; Volnovich, 2002). Some meta-analyses (Pan et al., 2020) have also observed differences across geographical regions, reporting notable difference between the highest and lowest rate by region (32% for North America vs. 8% for Africa). This highlights the importance of studying the prevalence of CSA across different regions, insofar as it may be influenced by sociocultural factors.

In Spain, the majority of studies aimed at determining the prevalence of CSA have been based on surveys of university students (Cantón & Justicia, 2008; De Paúl et al., 1995; Pereda & Forns, 2007) or solely women (Ferragut et al., 2021a). Only two reports present prevalence results from a representative sample of the general population (Ferragut et al., 2021b; López et al., 1995), and only one analyzes (also in a representative sample) the characteristics of victims and perpetrators of contact sexual abuse (Ferragut et al., 2021c). The study by López et al. (1995), conducted almost thirty years ago, used both personal interviews and questionnaires to assess the prevalence of CSA in the general population. The results suggested that 15% of men and 22% of women had experienced some kind of sexual abuse as a child, most commonly involving physical contact (fondling). In the more recent study, Ferragut et al. (2021b) gathered data from a representative sample through an online survey comprising specific questions, thus enabling them to determine prevalence rates for different types of CSA experiences. The rates obtained for CSA contact were as follows: being fondled in any part of the body (16.9%), perpetrator rubs private parts against the victim (14.6%), kissing (11.2%), asked to touch another person's private parts (10.5%), having their private parts touched by the perpetrator (10%), and forced to perform a sexual act involving penetration (2.8%). A common finding across these studies was that the victim was usually female and the perpetrator male, and also that the abuse was most likely to be a repeated experience (Ferragut et al., 2021c; López et al., 1995). In addition, Ferragut et al. (2021b) noted that only 27.5% of victims told someone about the abuse at the time (usually their mother or a friend/peer). This highlights the wall of silence that often surrounds this type of child maltreatment, and underlines the need for up-to-date data so as to raise public awareness about the problem.

To our knowledge, there are no published data on the prevalence of CSA in Andalusia, the second largest and most populated region in Spain (8,464,411 inhabitants;

INE [Spanish Office for National Statistics], 2020). It is important to note that this region is below the national average on socioeconomic indicators, especially as regards income and equality (Consejo Económico y Social de Andalucía [Economic and Social Advisory Board of Andalusia], 2019). According to data published by the Advisory Board for Equality and Social Welfare in Andalusia (Consejería para la Igualdad y Bienestar Social, 2021), there were 6,183 notifications of child maltreatment in the region in 2020, with 4.9% of cases involving sexual victimization. These figures, coupled with the socioeconomic challenges in the region, underscore the need for a specific analysis of the prevalence of CSA in Andalusia so as provide data that can be compared with that for Spain as a whole and which would help the relevant authorities to identify the scale of the problem and develop appropriate action strategies.

The aim of the present study was therefore to determine the prevalence of CSA in the Spanish region of Andalusia, focusing specifically on contact sexual abuse, due to its greater impact on the physical and mental health of victims (Murillo et al., 2021). To this end, we conducted an online survey using the Child Sexual Abuse Experiences Questionnaire (Ferragut et al., 2021b), a tool that explores different types of abusive experiences and which has been used previously in a representative sample of the Spanish population, thus allowing comparison of results. We also analyzed gender differences in CSA prevalence, the age at which each type of abuse first occurred, how often it had taken place, and perpetrator characteristics (gender and relationship to the victim). Finally, we explored what percentage of victims labeled their experience as sexual abuse. In sum, the goal was to provide new data on the prevalence and characteristics of CSA in the region of Andalusia.

Method

Participants

The sample comprised 817 Spanish adults (281 male, 536 female), all residents in the region of Andalusia and ranging in age from 18 to 82 years ($M = 34.7$, $SD = 13.86$). Because the sample was unbalanced, we performed post-stratification by gender, calculating individual-level weights. This weighting ensures that the two genders are equally represented. As a result, the sample for analysis (post-stratification) included 562 adults from Andalusia, 281 male (50%) and 281 female (50%), with an age range of 18 to 82 years ($M = 34.98$, $SD = 14.23$). Table 1 shows the sociodemographic characteristics of participants post-stratification.

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of the Sample.

| Variable | N | % |
|--------------------------------|-----|------|
| Age | | |
| 18–35 | 335 | 59.6 |
| 36–50 | 129 | 22.9 |
| 51–65 | 79 | 14.0 |
| >65 | 20 | 3.5 |
| Level of education | | |
| Elementary | 4 | 0.7 |
| High school | 200 | 35.6 |
| College | 358 | 63.7 |
| Marital status | | |
| Single | 312 | 55.6 |
| Married or living with partner | 213 | 37.9 |
| Separated or divorced | 33 | 5.8 |
| Widowed | 4 | 0.7 |
| Employment status | | |
| Student | 155 | 27.6 |
| In work | 256 | 45.6 |
| In work and studying | 66 | 11.7 |
| Unemployed | 57 | 10.1 |
| Retired | 28 | 5.0 |
| Perceived socioeconomic status | | |
| Low | 28 | 5.0 |
| Low-Medium | 119 | 21.3 |
| Medium | 291 | 51.7 |
| Medium-High | 115 | 20.4 |
| High | 9 | 1.6 |

Instruments

Child Sexual Abuse Experiences Questionnaire (CSAEQ; Ferragut et al., 2021b). This instrument gathers demographic information (age, gender, education, nationality, town/city of residence, marital status, employment status, and perceived socioeconomic status), and also includes a series of questions (Yes/No) about sexual experiences both with and without contact during childhood and adolescence. For the present study, we only used the six items referring specifically to contact sexual abuse. Specifically, participants were asked if, when they were still legally a minor (younger than 18), an adult or another person at least 5 years older than they were (or who, by development, was in a relationship of responsibility, trust or power) had: rubbed his/her private parts against them, touched or fondled any part of their body, touched their (the victim's) private parts, asked them to touch their (the perpetrator's) private parts, kissed them or asked to be kissed, or forced them to perform a sexual act involving penetration. If participants answered yes to any of these questions, they were then asked to provide further information about the experience: age at which it first occurred (before age 6 years, 6–11, 12–15, or 16–18); how often it had taken place (just once, 2–3, 4–5, or more than 5 times); and characteristics of the perpetrator, namely gender (male, female or both), whether, in the event that the experience had occurred more than once, it had been the same perpetrator, and what their relationship to the perpetrator was or had been. For the latter question, they were given the following response options: a) father or mother, b) another adult relative, c) teacher, instructor, someone responsible for child care, d) adult acquaintance, e) adult stranger, f) another minor (at least 5 years older or who, by development, is in a relationship of responsibility,

trust or power). Finally, at the end of the questionnaire, respondents were asked: “*Do you consider that you suffered some type of sexual abuse when you were a child or adolescent?*”

Procedures

The study was carried out in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of our university. Participants were recruited through a snowball sampling strategy. They were informed about the aims of the study (i.e., to gather information about unwanted sexual experiences in childhood) and told that all data would remain anonymous and be used solely for research purposes. Informed consent was signed prior to any data collection. The questionnaire (CSAEQ) was hosted online in Google Forms and required between 5 and 15 minutes to complete, depending on the respondent’s experiences. The survey was available online from January to July 2020, with a call for respondents being made through social media platforms and mass emailing. The questionnaire could not be submitted (electronically) unless all the questions had been answered, and hence there were no missing data.

Data analysis

We began by computing the prevalence for each of the six types of contact sexual abuse. Respondents were considered to have suffered abuse if they answered yes to any of these items. The association between the experience of contact sexual abuse and the victim’s gender, perceived socioeconomic status, and level of education was analyzed using the χ^2 test.

To analyze the characteristics of CSA experiences, we calculated percentages for the victim’s age when the abuse first occurred, how often it took place, whether it had been perpetrated by the same person or different people, and the perpetrator’s gender and relationship to the victim. Finally, we computed the percentage of victims who also labeled their experience as sexual abuse. The association between these variables and the victim’s gender was then analyzed using the χ^2 test.

Results

Prevalence of contact sexual abuse

Table 2 shows the percentage of participants who had had at least one experience of contact sexual abuse during childhood, as well as the percentage for each type of abuse, both overall and by gender. It can be seen that 38.8% of the sample as a whole had experienced some type of contact abuse, with prevalence by type of experience ranging from 22.2% (someone had touched or fondled any part of the victim’s body) to 3.9% (forced to perform a sexual act involving penetration). Prevalence was significantly higher among women for all except two of the six experiences: being kissed and sexual acts involving penetration. There was no association between any type of contact CSA and the victim’s perceived socioeconomic status or level of education.

Table 2. Percentage of victims for each type of contact sexual abuse, overall and by gender.

| Variable | Total | Male | Female | χ^2 |
|--|-------|------|--------|----------|
| Had experienced at least one type of contact sexual abuse | 38.8 | 27.0 | 50.5 | 32.64*** |
| Somebody rubbed his/her private parts against them | 21.5 | 11.7 | 31.3 | 31.85*** |
| Somebody touched or fondled any part of their body | 22.2 | 12.1 | 32.4 | 33.42*** |
| Somebody touched their (the victim's) private parts | 12.6 | 8.5 | 16.7 | 8.52** |
| Somebody asked them to touch their (the perpetrator's) private parts | 13.9 | 10.3 | 17.4 | 5.95** |
| Somebody kissed or tried to kiss them | 14.2 | 11.7 | 16.7 | 2.85 |
| Forced to perform a sexual act involving penetration | 3.9 | 3.2 | 4.6 | 0.75 |

*** $p < .001$ ** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$

Characteristics of contact sexual abuse

Tables 3–8 show, for each of the six types of experience, percentages according to the victim's age when the abuse first occurred, how often it took place, whether it had been perpetrated by the same person or different people, and the perpetrator's gender and relationship to the victim. The first episode of abuse usually occurred when the victim was aged 6–11 years, the exception being acts involving penetration, which were more common during the 12–15 years age range. All six types of abusive experience were more likely to be repeated than a single occurrence, with the proportion of reoccurrence by type of experience ranging from 62.1% (being asked to touch the perpetrator's private parts) to 77.2% (sexual acts involving penetration). The large majority of victims reported that the perpetrator was male, although there were some gender differences depending on the type of experience. Specifically, the proportion of male (compared with female) victims reporting a female perpetrator was significantly higher for the following experiences: perpetrator rubbed private parts against them (9.1% of male victims vs. 1.1% of female victims), touched or fondled any part of their body (23.5% vs. 2.2%), and being kissed (60% vs. 6.7%). For all six types of experience, the single most common perpetrator was another minor. However, if the categories of known adults (i.e., father/mother, adult relative, teacher/instructor, and adult acquaintance) are pooled, then an adult was most likely to be the perpetrator for all types of experience, with the exception of sexual acts involving penetration, for which the perpetrator was equally likely to be another minor.

Awareness of being sexually abused

Table 9 shows the percentage of victims who considered that their experience constituted CSA, both overall and by gender. More than half of the victims did not label their experience as sexual abuse, and this was particularly the case among male victims.

Table 3. Percentages, overall and by gender, for characteristics of the experience “having someone rub their private parts against you.”

| Variable | Total | Male | Female | χ^2 |
|-----------------------------------|-------|------|--------|----------|
| Age | | | | 0.99 |
| Before age 6 years | 14.0 | 9.1 | 15.9 | |
| 6–11 years | 41.3 | 45.5 | 39.8 | |
| 12–15 years | 27.3 | 27.3 | 27.3 | |
| 16–18 years | 17.4 | 18.2 | 17.0 | |
| Frequency | | | | 2.17 |
| Just once | 24.8 | 33.3 | 21.6 | |
| 2–3 times | 34.7 | 27.3 | 37.5 | |
| 4–5 times | 10.7 | 9.1 | 11.4 | |
| >5 times | 29.8 | 30.3 | 29.5 | |
| Perpetrator | | | | 4.05 |
| Same person (repeated experience) | 24.0 | 30.3 | 21.6 | |
| Different people | 51.2 | 36.4 | 56.8 | |
| Only happened once | 24.8 | 33.3 | 21.6 | |
| Perpetrator’s gender | | | | 5.99* |
| Male | 93.4 | 84.8 | 96.6 | |
| Female | 3.3 | 9.1 | 1.1 | |
| Both | 3.3 | 6.1 | 2.3 | |
| Relationship to perpetrator | | | | |
| Father or mother | 5.0 | 3.0 | 5.7 | 0.35 |
| Another adult relative | 17.4 | 15.2 | 18.2 | 0.15 |
| Teacher, instructor, etc. | 14.0 | 21.2 | 11.4 | 1.92 |
| Adult acquaintance | 24.6 | 21.2 | 25.8 | 0.27 |
| Adult stranger | 43.0 | 42.4 | 43.2 | 0.00 |
| Another minor | 52.9 | 60.6 | 50.0 | 1.08 |

*** $p < .001$ ** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$

Table 4. Percentages, overall and by gender, for characteristics of the experience “being touched or fondled in any part of the body.”

| Variable | Total | Male | Female | χ^2 |
|-----------------------------------|-------|------|--------|----------|
| Age | | | | 1.47 |
| Before age 6 years | 14.4 | 8.8 | 16.5 | |
| 6–11 years | 40.8 | 47.1 | 38.5 | |
| 12–15 years | 30.4 | 29.4 | 30.8 | |
| 16–18 years | 14.4 | 14.7 | 14.3 | |
| Frequency | | | | 0.79 |
| Just once | 24.2 | 26.5 | 23.3 | |
| 2–3 times | 37.1 | 32.4 | 38.9 | |
| 4–5 times | 10.5 | 8.8 | 11.1 | |
| >5 times | 28.2 | 32.4 | 26.7 | |
| Perpetrator | | | | 1.21 |
| Same person (repeated experience) | 32.8 | 38.2 | 30.8 | |
| Different people | 43.2 | 35.3 | 46.2 | |
| Only happened once | 24.0 | 26.5 | 23.1 | |
| Perpetrator’s gender | | | | 15.56*** |
| Male | 91.2 | 76.5 | 96.7 | |
| Female | 8.0 | 23.5 | 2.2 | |
| Both | 0.8 | 0.0 | 1.1 | |
| Relationship to perpetrator | | | | |
| Father or mother | 5.6 | 2.9 | 6.6 | 0.62 |
| Another adult relative | 18.4 | 14.7 | 19.8 | 0.42 |
| Teacher, instructor, etc. | 15.2 | 20.6 | 13.2 | 1.05 |
| Adult acquaintance | 24.0 | 17.6 | 26.4 | 1.03 |
| Adult stranger | 28.8 | 32.4 | 27.5 | 0.28 |
| Another minor | 51.6 | 47.1 | 53.3 | 0.38 |

*** $p < .001$ ** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$

Table 5. Percentages, overall and by gender, for characteristics of the experience “having one’s private parts touched.”

| Variable | Total | Male | Female | χ^2 |
|-----------------------------------|-------|------|--------|----------|
| Age | | | | 2.32 |
| Before age 6 years | 21.4 | 12.5 | 26.1 | |
| 6–11 years | 44.3 | 45.8 | 43.5 | |
| 12–15 years | 22.9 | 25.0 | 21.7 | |
| 16–18 years | 11.4 | 16.7 | 8.7 | |
| Frequency | | | | 1.65 |
| Just once | 25.4 | 20.8 | 27.7 | |
| 2–3 times | 26.8 | 20.8 | 29.8 | |
| 4–5 times | 11.3 | 12.5 | 10.6 | |
| >5 times | 36.6 | 45.8 | 31.9 | |
| Perpetrator | | | | 0.54 |
| Same person (repeated experience) | 38.0 | 37.5 | 38.3 | |
| Different person | 36.6 | 41.7 | 34.0 | |
| Only happened once | 25.4 | 20.8 | 27.7 | |
| Perpetrator’s gender | | | | 1.95 |
| Male | 90.1 | 83.3 | 93.6 | |
| Female | 7.0 | 12.5 | 4.3 | |
| Both | 2.8 | 4.2 | 2.1 | |
| Relationship to perpetrator | | | | |
| Father or mother | 7.0 | 4.2 | 8.5 | 0.45 |
| Another adult relative | 18.3 | 12.5 | 21.3 | 0.81 |
| Teacher, instructor, etc. | 12.7 | 20.8 | 8.5 | 2.17 |
| Adult acquaintance | 26.8 | 16.7 | 31.9 | 1.88 |
| Adult stranger | 21.1 | 37.5 | 12.8 | 5.83* |
| Another minor | 57.7 | 58.3 | 57.4 | 0.00 |

*** $p < .001$ ** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$

Table 6. Percentages, overall and by gender, for characteristics of the experience “being asked to touch someone’s private parts.”

| Variable | Total | Male | Female | χ^2 |
|-----------------------------------|-------|------|--------|----------|
| Age | | | | 2.35 |
| Before age 6 years | 19.0 | 10.3 | 24.0 | |
| 6–11 years | 39.2 | 41.4 | 38.0 | |
| 12–15 years | 29.1 | 34.5 | 26.0 | |
| 16–18 years | 12.7 | 13.8 | 12.0 | |
| Frequency | | | | 1.38 |
| Just once | 38.0 | 44.8 | 34.0 | |
| 2–3 times | 26.6 | 20.7 | 30.0 | |
| 4–5 times | 8.9 | 10.3 | 8.0 | |
| >5 times | 26.6 | 24.1 | 28.0 | |
| Perpetrator | | | | 0.79 |
| Same person (repeated experience) | 34.6 | 31.0 | 36.7 | |
| Different people | 26.9 | 24.1 | 28.6 | |
| Only happened once | 38.5 | 44.8 | 34.7 | |
| Perpetrator’s gender | | | | 2.72 |
| Male | 89.9 | 82.8 | 94.0 | |
| Female | 7.6 | 13.8 | 4.0 | |
| Both | 2.5 | 3.4 | 2.0 | |
| Relationship to perpetrator | | | | |
| Father or mother | 3.8 | 3.4 | 4.1 | 0.02 |
| Another adult relative | 19.2 | 24.1 | 16.3 | 0.71 |
| Teacher, instructor, etc. | 7.7 | 10.3 | 6.1 | 0.45 |
| Adult acquaintance | 25.3 | 24.1 | 26.0 | 0.03 |
| Adult stranger | 28.2 | 34.5 | 24.5 | 0.89 |
| Another minor | 52.6 | 55.2 | 51.0 | 0.12 |

*** $p < .001$ ** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$

Table 7. Percentages, overall and by gender, for characteristics of the experience “being kissed by or being asked to kiss someone.”

| Variable | Total | Male | Female | χ^2 |
|-----------------------------------|-------|------|--------|-----------|
| Age | | | | 3.99 |
| Before age 6 years | 8.8 | 3.0 | 12.8 | |
| 6–11 years | 38.8 | 45.5 | 34.0 | |
| 12–15 years | 35.0 | 39.4 | 31.9 | |
| 16–18 years | 17.5 | 12.1 | 21.3 | |
| Frequency | | | | 2.02 |
| Just once | 36.3 | 42.4 | 31.9 | |
| 2–3 times | 30.0 | 27.3 | 31.9 | |
| 4–5 times | 12.5 | 15.2 | 10.6 | |
| >5 times | 21.3 | 15.2 | 25.5 | |
| Perpetrator | | | | 1.96 |
| Same person (repeated experience) | 30.4 | 33.3 | 28.3 | |
| Different people | 32.9 | 24.2 | 39.1 | |
| Only happened once | 36.7 | 42.4 | 32.6 | |
| Perpetrator’s gender | | | | 25.39**** |
| Male | 72.0 | 40.0 | 93.3 | |
| Female | 28.0 | 60.0 | 6.7 | |
| Both | | | | |
| Relationship to the perpetrator | | | | |
| Father or mother | -3.8 | -0.0 | -6.4 | 2.18 |
| Another adult relative | 12.5 | 12.1 | 12.8 | 0.00 |
| Teacher, instructor, etc. | 10.0 | 15.2 | 6.4 | 1.65 |
| Adult acquaintance | 34.2 | 33.3 | 34.8 | 0.01 |
| Adult stranger | 20.0 | 15.2 | 23.4 | 0.82 |
| Another minor | 51.2 | 48.5 | 53.2 | 0.17 |

*** $p < .001$ ** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$

Table 8. Percentages, overall and by gender, for characteristics of the experience “forced to perform a sexual act involving penetration.”

| Variable | Total | Male | Female | χ^2 |
|-----------------------------------|-------|------|--------|----------|
| Age | | | | 1.67 |
| Before age 6 years | - | - | - | |
| 6–11 years | 31.8 | 44.4 | 23.1 | |
| 12–15 years | 45.5 | 44.4 | 46.2 | |
| 16–18 years | 22.7 | 11.1 | 30.8 | |
| Frequency | | | | 1.67 |
| Just once | 22.7 | 22.2 | 23.1 | |
| 2–3 times | 22.7 | 11.1 | 30.8 | |
| 4–5 times | 22.7 | 22.2 | 23.1 | |
| >5 times | 31.8 | 44.4 | 23.1 | |
| Perpetrator | | | | 0.48 |
| Same person (repeated experience) | 40.9 | 33.3 | 46.2 | |
| Different people | 36.4 | 44.4 | 30.8 | |
| Only happened once | 22.7 | 22.2 | 23.1 | |
| Perpetrator’s gender | | | | 5.01 |
| Male | 86.4 | 66.7 | 100.0 | |
| Female | 9.1 | 22.2 | 0.0 | |
| Both | 4.5 | 11.1 | 0.0 | |
| Relationship to the perpetrator | | | | |
| Father or mother | 4.5 | 0.0 | 7.7 | 0.72 |
| Another adult relative | 17.4 | 22.2 | 14.3 | 0.24 |
| Teacher, instructor, etc. | 4.5 | 0.0 | 7.7 | 0.72 |
| Adult acquaintance | 36.4 | 33.3 | 38.5 | 0.06 |
| Adult stranger | 17.4 | 22.2 | 14.3 | 0.24 |
| Another minor | 63.6 | 66.7 | 61.5 | 0.06 |

*** $p < .001$ ** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$

Table 9. Percentages, overall and by gender, for the question “Do you consider that you suffered some type of sexual abuse when you were a child or adolescent?”.

| Variable | Total | Male | Female | χ^2 |
|-----------|-------|------|--------|----------|
| Awareness | | | | 6.19* |
| Yes | 47.0 | 35.5 | 53.2 | |
| No | 53.0 | 64.5 | 46.8 | |

*** $p < .001$ ** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$

Discussion

The primary aim of this study was to analyze the prevalence of CSA in Andalusia, the most populated and the second largest region of Spain, and to compare the findings with those obtained nationally. Data were gathered about six types of contact abuse: perpetrator rubbed his/her private parts against the victim, touched or fondled any part of the victim’s body, touched the victim’s private parts, asked the victim to touch his/her private parts, kissed the victim or asked to be kissed, and forced the victim to perform a sexual act involving penetration. We also examined gender differences in CSA prevalence, the age at which each type of abuse first occurred, how often it had taken place, and perpetrator characteristics (gender and relationship to the victim). Finally, we analyzed the percentage of victims (both overall and by gender) who regarded their experience as sexual abuse. In sum, the goal was to provide new data on the prevalence and characteristics of CSA in Andalusia, a region of Spain that is below the national average on income and equality indicators.

The results overall indicate that an alarming 38.8% of this Andalusian sample report having experienced at least one of the six types of contact sexual abuse during childhood, a figure higher than that obtained (27.8%) in a representative sample of the Spanish population as a whole (Ferragut et al., 2021c). With respect to specific CSA experiences without penetration, prevalence ranged from 12.6% (perpetrator touched the victim’s private parts) to 22.2% (perpetrator touched or fondled any part of the victim’s body), figures that are also higher than the corresponding rates reported by Ferragut et al. (2021b) in a representative Spanish sample (10% and 16.9%, respectively); it should be noted, however, that the least and most prevalent types of contact abuse were the same in both studies (i.e., sexual act involving penetration and being touched or fondled, respectively).

These higher prevalence rates in the Andalusian population may reflect characteristics of the sample or of the region itself. A first point to consider here is that in contrast to the two recent studies conducted in Spain by Ferragut et al. (2021b, 2021c), our sample was not representative of the general population and may be subject to self-selection bias, insofar as people who have experienced sexual victimization during childhood might be more likely to respond to a survey of the kind we used here, thus inflating prevalence rates. Social and economic differences with respect to the rest of Spain may also be a factor: Andalusia as a region is below the national average on income and equality indicators (Consejo Económico y Social de Andalucía [Economic and Social Advisory Board of Andalusia], 2019) and has a higher than average rate of unemployment (21.21% vs. 14.41% for Spain as a whole; Observatorio de Desigualdad de Andalucía [Andalusian Equality Observatory], 2021). Inequalities of this kind are known to be associated with an increased incidence of child maltreatment (Pratibha & Chacko, 2016; Solano, 2007), and

they are therefore a risk factor which may account for higher rates of CSA in disadvantaged regions. Further studies involving a representative sample are therefore needed to elucidate the reasons for the higher prevalence rates we obtained here. Whatever the reasons, however, the results show that CSA is an important public health problem in the region, underlining the need for the relevant authorities to develop effective strategies for detecting abuse and providing protection and support to victims.

A further point to note is that the prevalence rates obtained both here and in the recent studies by Ferragut et al. (2021a, 2021b, 2021c) are higher than those reported by other authors who used different data collection procedures, such as face-to-face or pencil-and-paper questionnaires (Cantón & Justicia, 2008; Chen et al., 2006; De Paúl et al., 1995; Pereda & Forns, 2007; Pereda et al., 2009) and personal or telephone interviews (Fanslow et al., 2007; López et al., 1995; Volnovich, 2002). However, the rates obtained are similar to those found in studies that used online surveys (Guziak, 2020), a method that may favor disclosure by allowing respondents to remain anonymous. Another factor to consider is that the questions asked in both the present study and those by Ferragut et al. (2021a, 2021b, 2021c) referred to specific types of experiences, and as Guziak (2020) suggests, this may yield higher prevalence rates than are obtained through more generic inquiry (e.g., Were you ever asked to touch someone's private parts? vs. Did you ever experience any type of sexual abuse as a child?).

Regarding experiences involving penetration, the rate obtained of 3.9% is similar to the figure reported (2.8%) in nationwide Spanish samples (Ferragut et al., 2021b). Research conducted previously in Spain found that 4% of male and 2% of female victims of CSA had suffered anal penetration, and that 5% of female victims had been subject to vaginal penetration (López et al., 1995). Prevalence rates for this type of abuse in other countries vary from 2.6% of female Chinese adolescents reporting vaginal or anal penetration (Chen et al., 2006) to an alarming 11.8% of Polish adult women having experienced vaginal penetration during childhood (Guziak, 2020). At all events, the percentage obtained here suggests that almost 1 in 25 of the population in Andalusia have experienced CSA involving penetration. This implies a considerable number of victims of an experience that is known to have important consequences, both short and long term, for an individual's physical and mental health.

The results also show that women are more likely than men to have been the victims of CSA, with the exception of two experiences: being kissed by the perpetrator and being forced to perform a sexual act involving penetration. Other studies have also found higher rates of childhood sexual victimization in women than in men (Cantón & Justicia, 2008; Ferragut et al., 2021b; López et al., 1995; De Paúl et al., 1995; Pereda & Forns, 2007; Pereda et al., 2009; Volnovich, 2002). However, some authors have suggested that the prevalence of boyhood sexual abuse is likely to be underestimated due to methodological aspects of studies, the type of questions asked by researchers, and the reluctance of male victims to acknowledge or disclose the experience, insofar as help-seeking challenges social norms of masculinity (Alaggia & Millington, 2008; Easton et al., 2014; Mahalik et al., 2003; Pereda et al., 2009).

In the present sample, the first episode of abuse usually occurred between the ages of 6 and 11 years, except for acts involving penetration, where victims were more likely to be aged 12–15 years. These results are consistent with those obtained in previous studies in Spain, which have likewise found that although CSA most commonly begins in pre-

adolescence (Cantón & Justicia, 2008; Ferragut et al., 2021a, 2021c; Pereda & Forns, 2007; Pereda et al., 2009), adolescence is a time of risk for certain types of abuse (Ferragut et al., 2021c). Studies conducted in other countries have reported similar results (Chen et al., 2006; Fanslow et al., 2007).

Regarding how often the abuse occurred, the results showed that it was more likely to be repeated than a single occurrence, with the proportion of re-occurrence by type of experience ranging from 62.1% (being asked to touch the perpetrator's private parts) to 77.2% (sexual acts involving penetration). It should be noted that in the case of the victim having their private parts touched or being forced to perform a sexual act involving penetration, the experience was most likely to have occurred more than five times (36.6% and 31.8% of experiences, respectively). This shows how the most serious form of abuse, that involving penetration, may become a chronic experience for the victim, as previously found (Ferragut et al., 2021c). Among studies conducted in other countries, Fanslow et al. (2007) noted that in 24.7% of cases of contact sexual abuse, the experience had been chronic. More recently, Guziak (2020) found that 63.5% of those surveyed reported a repeated experience of CSA, which in the case of some victims went on for as long as eight years. These are important findings to bear in mind, because as Fuentes (2012) points out, the more often the abuse occurs, the greater the consequences and sequelae for victims.

With respect to the perpetrator, and consistent with the findings in Spain (Ferragut et al., 2021a, 2021b, 2021c), most victims in our sample reported being abused by a single person, who was most commonly male for all types of experience analyzed. Other studies have likewise reported that CSA is usually perpetrated by males (Fanslow et al., 2007; Gallagher et al., 2008; López et al., 1995; Volnovich, 2002). We also found, however, that for some CSA experiences the gender of the perpetrator depended on the gender of the victim, with male victims being significantly more likely to report a female perpetrator. This reflects a pattern described in other studies (Ferragut et al., 2021c; Gerke et al., 2020). These findings indicate the importance of not underestimating the proportion of boys who are sexually abused by a woman. In terms of initiatives aimed at preventing CSA, these results underscore the need for sex education and awareness programs in schools to address both males and females.

As regards the perpetrator's relationship to the victim, there were no differences according to the latter's gender. For all types of CSA analyzed, the single most common perpetrator was another minor, which reflects the findings for Spain (Ferragut et al., 2021c). These results show how sexual abuse may occur within the peer group and highlight the importance of prevention programs among youth. It would be interesting in future research to analyze in more detail the relationship between victim and perpetrator when the latter is also a minor (e.g., was this other minor a family member, friend, boyfriend/ girlfriend, etc.), as this could add a layer of understanding to the present results and guide the development of more targeted prevention programs. With respect to CSA within the family, the perpetrator was a parent in between 3.8% and 7% of cases, and another relative in between 12.5% and 19.2% of cases, depending on the type of abuse. Between 24% and 36.4% of sexual abuse experiences were perpetrated by an adult acquaintance from outside the family, and this was the most common identity of the perpetrator for acts involving penetration. If the categories of known adults (i.e., father/mother, adult relative, teacher/instructor, and adult acquaintance) are pooled, then a known adult was the most likely perpetrator for all types of experience, with the exception of sexual acts involving

penetration, for which the perpetrator was equally likely to be a peer. These results are in line with those of other studies showing that the majority of perpetrators are known to the victim (David et al., 2018; Selengia et al., 2020), and also that sexual abuse by peers is an important issue to consider (Ferragut et al., 2021c).

Finally, and as to whether victims considered they had been sexually abused during childhood, more than half of them (53%) did not label their experience as such. This apparent lack of awareness regarding what constitutes sexual abuse was more evident among male victims. These findings underline the need for prevention and awareness programs to provide information about the different forms that sexual abuse may take, while also establishing mechanisms for its early detection (Collin-Vézina et al., 2013). Particular attention should be paid to promoting greater awareness among men, whose difficulty in recognizing or disclosing that they have been sexually abused has been highlighted previously (Easton et al., 2014).

This study has a number of limitations that need to be acknowledged. First, the results are based on retrospective self-reports of adults and may therefore be affected by recall bias. The use of this methodology also means that the results offer no insight into the current prevalence of CSA or how rates may be changing over time, and consequently further longitudinal studies are needed. Some research does nevertheless support the use of retrospective self-reports for determining the magnitude of CSA, a phenomenon that is difficult to explore by other means (Cortes et al., 2011; Paivio, 2001). Another limitation is that our use of a snowball sampling strategy to recruit participants may limit the generalizability of results. A related issue here is the possibility of self-selection bias, insofar as people who have experienced sexual victimization in childhood may be more likely to respond to surveys of the kind used in this study, thus inflating the prevalence of CSA. The present results should therefore be regarded as preliminary, and further studies with a representative sample of the Andalusian population are now required.

Despite these limitations, this is the first study to analyze the prevalence of CSA in a general population sample from Andalusia, Spain's most populated region and one below the national average on socioeconomic indicators. The results suggest that a high number of adults in this region have suffered some form of sexual abuse during childhood. The findings also suggest that almost 1 in 25 respondents have experienced CSA involving penetration, which may become a chronic experience for the victim. Another noteworthy finding concerns the apparent lack of awareness among victims (especially males) about what constitutes sexual abuse. Child sexual abuse is an important public health problem that has serious consequences for the lives of victims, hence the need for professionals trained in prevention and intervention. Public recognition of the extent to which CSA is a problem within society is important for creating a climate in which victims feel able to seek help, and also for encouraging authorities to ensure that adequate help is available. A better understanding of the characteristics of CSA and the associated risk factors is essential for developing education and prevention programs that take these factors into account and which raise public awareness about the problem.

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