

Child abuse increases risk for later sexually coercive behavior in some men

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Boys who experienced childhood physical or sexual abuse are more likely to use sexually coercive behavior against an unwilling female partner when they are adolescents and young adults.

Researchers trying to identify factors that put men at risk for committing sexual coercion have found that being victims of both childhood physical and sexual abuse made them 4 ½ times more likely to engage in sexually coercive behavior than men who were not abused, said Erin Casey, a University of Washington Tacoma assistant professor of social work.

She emphasized that this study focused on sexually coercive behavior, defined in this study as insisting on or making someone have sex when they didn't want to.

"Although there can be physical force involved in sexual coercion, it more often involves such tactics as pressure, persuasion, insistence, manipulation and lying to have sex with an unwilling female partner."

Men who experienced some form of childhood abuse accounted for less than 30 percent of the nearly 5,650 males surveyed, but they accounted for 45 percent of the group reporting sexually coercive behavior, added Casey, the lead author of a new study appearing in the online edition of the *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. Men who experienced only physical abuse were half again as likely to engage in sexual coercion as those who were not victimized. The number of men who experienced only sexual abuse as a child was too small, less than one-half of 1 percent, to make any valid statistical conclusions.

"The higher the frequency of childhood abuse the more likely an adolescent or young adult was to engage in sexually coercive behavior," she said. However, Casey stressed that this study and

previous research have found that the majority of child abuse survivors do not use abusive behavior in adulthood.

The study also found that 55 percent of the men who reported coercive behavior did not experience any childhood sexual or physical abuse.

"There is a lot of evidence indicating sexual coercion and aggression is a complex behavior with an array of risk factors. There is this whole group of men for whom we have yet to fully understand what their risk factors are. They are relatively 'average' men without terrible childhood histories, but who engage in this hurtful behavior," Casey said.

UW researchers used data collected in the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, which is a representative survey of more than 20,000 young people. These youth were interviewed three times over a six-year period, starting when their average age was 16.

For the sexual coercion study, the sample consisted of 5,649 young men surveyed when they were 22 and who reported they had had sex at least once in their lifetimes and were exclusively heterosexual. A total 5.6 percent reported perpetuating sexual coercion with a female intimate partner.

The UW researchers found two other factors – delinquent behavior and the age they first had sex – that, coupled with childhood abuse, were risks for committing later sexual coercion. Men who experienced childhood sexual abuse were more likely to report becoming sexually active at a young age and going on to sexually coercive behavior. Physical abuse in childhood was associated with delinquency among a small number of adolescent boys. Previous research has found that delinquent peer groups may engage in such behaviors as "trash-talking about girls and having impersonal attitudes about sexual relationships," Casey said.

In addition, the study found no link between alcohol problems or the coexistence of drinking and sex in early adolescence and subsequent sexually coercive behavior.

"Although we have prevention programs for general populations, like college students, those programs don't reliably change attitudes, and so far have had very little success in reducing rates of sexual assault. We need to understand more about what allows 'average' guys to use this hurtful behavior in order to enhance our prevention efforts. We really don't have all the data we need to understand the true prevalence of this behavior," she said.

Source: University of Washington

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