



The impacts of adolescent sexual abuse: A briefing on the literature

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Key messages

- 1) There is very limited research on the mental health and wellbeing impacts of experiencing sexual abuse *in adolescence*.
- 2) There is literature on the impacts of child sexual abuse (CSA) on adolescents, but often these studies do not report the age of onset of CSA. This means it is difficult to know if differences in impacts exist where abuse occurs at younger, versus older, ages.
- 3) An emerging evidence base on child sexual exploitation (CSE), a form of CSA predominantly experienced in adolescence, highlights that victims have significant mental health needs. However there are not yet any studies designed to robustly investigate the scale and nature of these impacts.
- 4) There is evidence that the impacts of sexual abuse across childhood and adolescence, as well as experiences of other adversities, may be cumulative. In other words, the more abuse experienced, the more likely an adolescent will be to demonstrate mental health or behavioural impacts or

impacts of CSA, for example, describes adverse outcomes which span physical, emotional and mental health, inter-personal relationships, socio-economic domains, religious and spiritual beliefs and vulnerability to revictimisation.

2.4 Findings on the mental health impacts of CSA must be considered in light of more general patterns of mental ill health within the adolescent population. Whilst we lack robust and up-to-date health within the UK, Hagell (2017) warns that observed trends are not positive, pointing to rising rates of hospital admissions and referrals to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services.

3. Brief overview of methodology and summary of relevant papers

3.1 Given the aims of the review (see Methodology) and the time constraints

specific. That is, some impacts are more likely to be relevant for, or emerge during, certain points in the life course.

4.2 Fisher and colleagues (2017) point out that it is not possible to be certain about developmental (age) differences in impact because of the many challenges that the literature presents. Because of the way many studies of impact are designed, it can be impossible to assess if an impact is **caused** by CSA, either directly or indirectly, or whether it is **linked to it** in some way.

included post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) with particular differences in relation to avoidance and hyperarousal. These findings suggest that harm may be cumulative.

4.7 Fergusson, Boden and Horwood (2008) analysed data from a 25-year longitudinal study on health and development in Christchurch, New Zealand. The authors analysed data points of cohort members at age 18 and 21. They found that cohort members who had experiences of CSA were at increased risk of later mental health problems, including depression, anxiety, conduct and anti-social personality disorder, suicidal ideation and suicide attempts. Cohort members exposed to CSA had rates of mental health problems that were 2.4 times higher than their non-abused counterparts.

symptoms in female respondents, with results for suicide attempts approaching statistical significance. For males, adolescent dating violence was marginally associated with binge-eating and suicidal ideation. The analysis of the research findings, however, combined experiences of physical and sexual dating violence, which limits what can be known specifically about impacts of sexual violence in adolescent dating relationships.

Behavioural impacts

4.10 Behavioural impacts such as substance use and other so-behavi

In comparing behaviour differences between young people who were commercially sexually exploited and those who experienced other forms of abuse, Cole et al. (2016) observed that the former reported greater involvement in the juvenile justice system (measured by rate of involvement in detention centres) and more behavioural difficulties (measured by skipping school, sexualised behavior, alcohol use, drug use, criminal activity and running away) than those who had experienced other forms of sexual abuse. The authors concluded that exposure to commercial sexual exploitation in adolescence disproportionately affects young people emotionally, developmentally, psychologically and behaviourally. The differences identified amongst the commercial sexual exploitation group may relate to the accumulated experiences of trauma (as Hébert and colleagues (2008) suggest) or to impacts of childhood abuse that increased their

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