

MSP

MALE SURVIVORS
PARTNERSHIP

Edge Hill
University

SEXUAL VIOLENCE AGAINST BOYS & MEN

A L I T E R A T U R E R E V I E W



FOREWORD FROM OUR CHAIR

The Male Survivors Partnership (MSP) is the National umbrella agency for organisations working with boys and men affected by unwanted sexual experiences. It was established to help prevent sexual violence against men and boys, and to ensure those already affected can access appropriate support.

Our goals are to secure prevention, healing and justice for men and boys through research, advocacy, and capacity building.

Funding evidence-based research is critical to the achievement of our goals. It will help us:

- Better understand what leads to sexual violence.
- Increase awareness of the prevalence of male victims.
- Influence institutions and organisations that should protect men and boys to do it effectively.
- Improve access to effective support for all male survivors.

The research published within this review is a vital first step, the findings are profound and we will use them to drive meaningful change for men and boys affected by sexual violence.

Neil Henderson, CEO Safeline, Trustee, Male Survivors Partnership

INTRODUCTION - ABOUT THIS RESEARCH

This report provides a synthesis of research literature focused on sexual violence against boys and men. When we refer to 'boys and men' we include trans men and boys and intersex or non-binary people who access male centred services.

In the production of this report we have drawn on over 300 distinct sources. However, we've been necessarily selective in the studies and findings we discuss and undoubtedly some significant studies will have been omitted.

As part of its remit to support organisations working with boys and men affected by unwanted sexual experiences, the Male Survivors Partnership (MSP) seeks to identify and disseminate the most current and robust knowledge in this field for the benefit of its membership and the individuals they work with.

The boys and men in need of support, and the communities serving them do not always have access to valuable research findings.

The five key areas covered by this review are:

- Prevalence
- Disclosure
- Risk Factors
- Effects
- Support and Treatment

This report is intended as a resource for – or the basis for the development of resources for – the MSP Board, wider membership, and the communities they serve.

It will help to:

- Challenge myths and misconceptions about sexual violence against boys and men. - Address the lack of awareness of male victimhood in our society.
- Inform institutions that should protect boys and men with the information they need to do it effectively.
- Influence National policy to increase specialist services available to support male victims and improve quality of services provided.

PREVALENCE

Prevalence research over the past 40 years has revealed the extent of sexual violence in our communities. The prevalence of sexual victimisation among boys and men has received less attention than among girls and women.

Prevalence research is important because it provides: an estimate of the current scale of the problem; a baseline against which future studies can be compared; a means of assessing policy interventions; and important detail about sexual violence that can inform strategy.

Self-report studies are critical for understanding prevalence because official statistics only represent a small proportion of actual cases. Such studies are particularly important for estimating prevalence amongst males given high levels of underreporting.

Prevalence research has generally found sexual violence to be a more common experience for females although rates for both males and females are significant.

International meta-analyses estimate up to 15% of boys experience sexual violence in 'high-income countries'. However, many European studies have found much higher prevalence rates.

DISCLOSURE

Disclosure and responses to disclosure are affected by gender scripts or narratives which inhibit boys and men from disclosing sexual violence.

Boys and men frequently delay disclosure fearing they will not be taken seriously, particularly if the perpetrator was female. The average duration between sexual violence and disclosure, for men, is over two decades.

Delayed disclosure or non-disclosure can increase survivors' isolation and susceptibility to mental health problems.

Positive, helpful responses can ameliorate the effects of sexual violence. Negative responses can compound, extend, and intensify the effects.

Contexts that promote and facilitate dialogue about sexual violence and challenge stereotypical notions of masculinity, support the disclosure process for boys and men.

Further research into the disclosure process for boys and men is required, particularly research focused on facilitators to disclosure.

Awareness of gender issues and the unique challenges facing boys and men is crucial for improving disclosure rates, the disclosure process, and the disclosure experience for boys and men.

RISK FACTORS⁷

Risk factors are both individual and situational and are manifest at all levels of society, including macro-levels where wider cultural norms around masculinity present risks for boys and men. Risk factors at different levels combine to increase vulnerability.

Situation or context is related to risk, for example male rape is particularly prominent in prison populations and in situations where the victim/survivor is alone and intoxicated/disorientated in a public or semi-public setting.

Prior victimisation (sexual or otherwise) by family members, or having a parent who was abused as a child, have been identified as highly significant risk factors.

Other familial risk factors include social isolation, domestic violence, poor parental mental health, or substance abuse, low socio-economic status, low parental educational attainment, inadequate parenting, poor attachments, and low levels of parental affection.

Child characteristics that function as risk factors include disability, drug use, manifesting delinquent behaviour, poor social skills, and being a frequent internet user.

Boys and men with minority ethnic, gender, or sexual identities, as well as those with disabilities or mental or physical health problems, are particularly vulnerable.

Studies of male-on-male sexual violence have found that heterosexual men in their twenties and thirties are at significant risk.

EFFECTS

There are many serious negative effects of sexual victimisation that can have a profound impact on an individual's ability to live a healthy, safe, and fulfilling life. However, it is important to note that victims/survivors of sexual violence contribute to, and occupy positions in all sectors and levels of society despite their experiences.

There are well-evidenced and often long-term correlations between sexual violence (as a child or adult) and poor physical and mental ill-health. Depression, PTSD, anxiety, significant distress, poor self-esteem, self-harm, and suicidal ideation and attempts have been strongly linked with both childhood and adult sexual violence.

Male victims/survivors may experience problems relating to sexuality and gender identity, (i.e. uncertainty about sexual orientation and insecurities around masculinity).

Use of force, abuse by a caregiver, and conformity to masculine norms, may increase or exacerbate mental health symptoms. Boys subjected to sexual abuse often suffer poor educational attainment and may display overly aggressive or sexualised behaviour. They may also experience symptoms like fatigue, insomnia, a fear of sleeping alone, and bed-wetting.

Sexually victimised men may develop a fear of sex and an inability to emotionally connect with others. Alternatively, they may engage in indiscriminate sexual activity with multiple partners, further elevating the risk of repeated sexual or physical victimisation or contracting STDs.

Ambivalence and conflicting feelings are common with both boys and men, particularly if the abuser was close to them, they became sexually aroused, or they blamed themselves for their own abuse.

If the abuser was female, men and boys are more likely to misrecognise, deny, or minimise the experience because of their adherence to traditional constructs of masculinity.

SUPPORT AND TREATMENT

Specialist therapeutic services for boys and men have received only a fraction of the funding provided for services to support women and girls.

Barriers to disclosure simultaneously inhibit access to professional therapeutic support. Challenging adherence to rigid forms of traditional masculinity may be important for both processing the abuse and recovery.

Male survivors may have significant problems in expressing and articulating their feelings and thoughts and may be particularly wary or distrusting of others, particularly those in positions of authority.

Male survivors need support and therapeutic services that are specifically tailored to the male experience of sexual violence.

Peer support can be very powerful and more research is required to develop a robust evidence base for both peer support and other forms of support and treatment modalities.

Research is needed to map, define, and outline current service provision for boys and men who have experienced sexual violence and to evaluate need, both nationally and within front line provision.

This report shows that whilst research on sexual violence against boys and men has, for many years, lagged behind that of girls and women, there is a significant and steadily growing volume of research evidence to draw upon. This research is clear that boys and men who are subjected to sexual violence have distinct needs and that services are required, urgently, that can adequately and effectively provide all male victims/survivors with the support they require.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Funding for service provision should take account of prevalence data from self-report studies.
2. Evidence on sexual violence against boys and men should be more widely disseminated.
3. Professional training and higher education programmes preparing people for a professional role working with children and young people, especially those working with victims-survivors of sexual violence, must ensure the evidence base on boys and men is fully acknowledged and embedded within learning programmes.
4. Gaps in knowledge and understanding about sexual violence against boys and men must be addressed through further consultation with the sector and through further research in this area.
5. Research on sexual victimisation of boys and men must include quantitative and qualitative approaches.
6. Longitudinal prevalence studies of sexual violence against boys and men in male dominated spaces, institutions, and/or sectors (such as organised religion and organised sport) would contribute important knowledge about this problem and form part of a more focused prevention effort.
7. Further research with and for male survivors from groups commonly underrepresented in research is urgently required, including issues relevant for and related to minorities ethnic communities, disabled/disability communities, and minority gender identities and sexualities.
8. The relationship between research on sexual violence against boys and men and service delivery to support male service provision for male victims/survivors should be closer. There is significant added value in long-term collaboration between service providers and research that could be exploited to a far greater degree than it currently is.

AUTHORS

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FOR MORE INFORMATION ...

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