

Childhood sexual abuse and its impact on adult well-being

Abuso sexual temprano y su impacto en el bienestar actual del adulto

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Background

Different studies have shown that child sexual abuse has a high prevalence in Chile. This type of child abuse has been observed to have detrimental physical and psychological effects on victims, along with close ties with poverty and lower socioeconomic opportunities. Despite this, there is little information regarding how victims evaluate how early sexual abuse had an impact on their lives, and how they evaluate their well-being during adulthood.

Aims

The main aim of this study was to explain the possible effect of child sexual abuse (before the age of 18) on the current well-being of victims. We also aimed at a) detecting relations with socioeconomic access, b) explaining the effect of different types of abuse on well-being, and c) describing the self-declared impact of abuse-related variables on victims' lives.

Method & procedures

A survey was responded by 653 people older than 18 years old. Participants were part of the study either via face-to-face interviews with anonymous responses, or via online.

The survey assessed the following abuse-related variables: existence of abuse before de age of 18; socioeconomic status; type of abuse categorization (rape, abuse with physical contact, and abuse without physical contact); self-evaluation of the impact of the event on the victim's life, and subjective wellbeing.

Results & discussion

Women reported being victims of the three types of abuse more than men, while none of these was associated with socioeconomic status. Lower wellbeing was reported by people that declared having being victims. Wellbeing was also lower in the case of victims that were part of the lowest socioeconomic group. Finally, wellbeing was negatively explained by the self-evaluation of the impact of abuse and positively by socioeconomic status.

Conclusion

This study adds up to the still little developed research on child sexual abuse and well-being. By doing so, it also presents several questions that should concern scholars and decision makers: concepts and definitions related to sexual abuse are not clear and are far from being shared by different studies, leading to considerable differences in how abuse is understood and assessed. In that same line, the way in which this topic is addressed methodologically is also relevant,

especialmente considerando dificultades técnicas y éticas de hacer ciertas preguntas a los niños. Finalmente, el proceso de victimización y sus efectos está claramente relacionado con el acceso socioeconómico, indicando que las futuras formas de intervención deberían centrarse especialmente en la salud mental de quienes tienen menos oportunidades de recibir tratamiento.

Keywords: childhood sexual abuse, subjective well-being, protective factors, risk factors

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