

Adolescents with abusive sexual practices: The role of adverse experiences and social maladjustment in the risk of recidivism

Adolescentes con prácticas abusivas sexuales: Rol de las experiencias adversas y desadaptación social en el riesgo de reincidencia

Luis Boris Álvarez Vivar 

Instituto de Psicología, Universidad Austral de Chile, Puerto Montt, Chile (luis.alvarez@uach.cl)

Miguel Salazar Muñoz* 

Universidad San Sebastián, Sede Patagonia, Puerto Montt, Chile (miguel.salazar@uss.cl)

Yonatan Bustamante Cárcamo 

Universidad San Sebastián, Sede Patagonia, Puerto Montt, Chile (yonatan.bustamante@uss.cl)

Ricardo Pérez-Luco Arenas 

Universidad de La Frontera, Temuco, Chile (ricardo.perez-luco@ufrontera.cl)

*Corresponding author.

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Background

Research based on developmental criminology has allowed us to delve deeper into the life trajectories of adolescents who commit abusive sexual practices. From this approach, a complex relationship between stress, life events, social relationships and behavioral problems is proposed as conditions linked to the adaptation process during adolescence. In relation to adverse experiences in childhood, the accumulated evidence indicates that current and past life experiences, and the stressful subjective assessment made of them, have a strong impact not only on the mental health of adolescents, but also on the type of behaviors that they present. Regarding social maladjustment, the evidence suggests that generally those adolescents who only commit abusive sexual practices have fewer behavioral problems and sexual recidivism, compared to adolescents who present abusive sexual practices, added to other types of law violations.

Aims

The aim of this research is to examine the possible relationship that adverse life experiences in childhood and social maladjustment would have on the risk of sexual recidivism in Chilean adolescents who have committed abusive sexual practices. The specific objectives are: a) Analyze the existence and characteristics of adverse childhood experiences in the sample, b) Evaluate the presence and level of social maladjustment in the adolescents in the sample, c) Identify and compare the differences in adverse childhood experiences and social maladjustment between adolescents at low and high risk of sexual recidivism, and d) Explore the relationship between adverse childhood experiences and social maladjustment with the risk of sexual recidivism.

Method & procedures

A quantitative approach was used to analyze 115 adolescent males in specialized treatment for abusive sexual practices. Three instruments were used: Adolescent Social Behavior Self-Report Questionnaire (CACSA), Criminal Engagement Severity Scale (EGED), and Screening Scale for Adverse Childhood Experiences (EEA). The Estimate of Risk of Adolescent Sexual Offense Recidivism (ERASOR 2.0) was used to estimate the risk of sexual recidivism. ERASOR 2.0 was used to segment the sample according to risk of sexual recidivism, establishing low (GRB) and high (GRA) risk groups. Subsequently, both groups were compared using Student's t tests to identify differences in means in each instrument (CACSA, EGED and EEA) according to risk level. After that, the effect size and sensitivity were calculated

for each of the results. In addition, a binary logistic regression analysis was performed to estimate the statistical probability that the independent variables (social behavior, severity of criminal involvement, and adverse childhood experiences) could predict the level of risk of sexual recidivism.

Results & discussion

Regarding adverse experiences in childhood, the results show coherence with various international studies that report high prevalence of adverse experiences and victimization in adolescents with abusive sexual practices. As a result of these experiences, these adolescents may experience mental health problems, including depressive symptoms, suicidal risk, anxiety disorders, sexual problems, interpersonal relationships problems, and personality disorders. Concerning maladaptive behavior, when comparing both groups of adolescents who have committed abusive sexual practices, the results reported by the CACSA suggest that the GRA would have greater possibilities of displaying other types of transgressive behavior, coinciding with research that indicates a greater presence of criminogenic factors in this segment of adolescents. Similarly, it is established that adolescents who commit only sexual offenses report significantly lower rates of sexual recidivism than those who have also committed non-sexual offenses.

Conclusion

The relevance of these results is in their contribution to strengthening the need to develop specialized diagnostic strategies that guide differentiated treatment, especially due to the significant contrasts observed between low and high recidivism risk groups. The findings demonstrate that the problem of abusive sexual practices in the adolescent population is extremely complex, which prevents the application of a generic approach to address this criminal behavior, constituting a group with specific characteristics. It is essential not to lose sight of the possibility that a lack of attention to these problems may exacerbate this type of practice, thus increasing the likelihood of further sexual offenses being committed. Therefore, it is imperative that professionals charged with treating these adolescents are highly trained to appropriately address their needs. The findings of this study contribute to bridging the existing gap in research at the national and Latin American level, given that the bulk of the available evidence comes from European and North American countries.

Keywords: adverse childhood experiences, juvenile sex offenders, risk factors, sexual violence, social maladjustment

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