

DARK SECRETS: INCEST

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DARK SECRETS: INCEST

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Abstract

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The purpose of this paper is to illustrate the prevalence of incest and child sexual abuse in the United States as well as to identify the characteristics of the victims, the type of abuse, perpetrators, date, times, seasons and the places where the incest and/or sexual abuse took place. The paper also hopes to bring to light the negative emotional, psychological and behavioral effects of incest and child sexual abuse in an attempt to promote a greater understanding of the issue as well as to encourage a more positive and productive manner in which the adult survivor of incest and child sexual abuse is treated to promote healthy recovery.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Studies (Finkelhor, Hammer & Sedlak, 2008) have destroyed many myths about sexual abuse. Incest can occur at any age from infancy through adulthood. However it usually begins when the victims are very young. Eighty-one percent of incest occurs before puberty and 42% before age seven. It is generally not a one-time event. The average duration of incest abuse is five years (Bill & Solomon, 1986). In the correctional facility for women where the author works, approximately 90% (self reporting) of the women that participate in the AODA program have been the victims of sexual abuse. Of that 90% the majority report that the sexual abuse was done at the hands of a close relative. Understanding this issue will help professionals to be equipped to assist these women work through this issue as left unaddressed it does and will continue to hinder the effectiveness of AODA treatment.

Statement of the Problem

The problems to be addressed stated as a question is, “What are the emotional and psychological effects that on incest victims that must be addressed and overcome to assist victims of incest can move from victim to survivor?”

Definition of Terms

Incest: contact of a sexual nature, ranging from that involving non-body contact such as solicitation to engage in sexual behavior and exhibitionism, to that involving body contact such as fondling, intercourse and/or sex (Wyatt, 1985).point of type font and double space needed

Victim: one that is subjected to oppression, hardship, or mistreatment (Merriam-Webster Online, 2006)

Survivor: to continue to function or prosper despite (Merriam-Webster Online, 2006)

Emotional: of or relating to emotion (Merriam-Webster Online, 2006)

Psychological: directed toward the will or toward the mind specifically in its cognitive function (Merriam-Webster Online, 2006)

Effects: to cause to come into being (Merriam-Webster Online, 2006)

Long-term: occurring over or involving a relatively long period of time (Merriam-Webster Online, 2006)

Delimitations of Research

The references used for the review of literature were collected over a period of 15 days using resources from the Karrmann Library at UW-Platteville. The search engines used were Ebscohost, Eric and the Wilson database. The key search terms used were incest, emotional, psychological, survivor and effect. References used for additional literature reviews were found in the following journals and books:

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Prevalence of Incest in the United States Population

One of the few known cultural universals is incest within the family. Sexual intercourse between a two closely related persons such as father/daughter, siblings, and first cousins is the traditional definition of incest (APA). Although mother/son, father/son and mother/daughter incest is rarely mentioned it does take place. The definition given above identifies the dysfunctional familial relationships; however it does not completely describe what the children are experiencing.

According to Blume (McClendon, 1991), childhood sexual abuse is not only sexual abuse it is the abuse of power. Her definition goes on to explain that the abuse is a form of violence that does not necessarily use force. It is characterized by the exposure of children to sexual activity through word or deed.

This includes but is not limited to the child being forced to participate in, watch or listen to acts that are sexual in nature. In situations such as this the needs of the perpetrator are met with no regards for the needs of the child. The power differentials which can be age, size, status or relationship, allows for victimization of the child. The child also becomes the victim of abuse when he cannot or believes that he cannot refuse the sexual advances of the perpetrator.

This definition of childhood sexual abuse (incest) not only acknowledges the familial bond it takes into consideration the emotional bond between the victim and the perpetrator and relies more on the experience of the child and less on the blood bond between the victim and the

perpetrator. Worth noting: incest has been identified as the most prevalent and damaging form of childhood sexual abuse (McClendon, 1991). Childhood sexual abuse and incest transcend all ethnic, racial, educational, religious and socioeconomic backgrounds.

There were over 56,000 substantiated cases of childhood sexual abuses in the United States (USDOJ). Of that number, 93% of the victims knew the perpetrator. The majority of perpetrators are acquaintances however as many as 47% are family members or extended family members. The victims of sexual abuse are both male and female ranging in age from infancy to eighteen years of age however the median age for reported abuse is age nine and more than 20% of children are abused by age eight. Before reaching 18 years of age, 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys will be sexually abused. Meanwhile 1 in 5 children will be solicited for sex over the internet (darkness to light). Children age's infancy through age 12 years account for nearly 50% of victims that were forcibly sodomized, forcibly fondled or sexually assaulted with an object of some type. It is estimated that 39 million US adults are survivors of childhood sexual abuse (Darkness2light). The type of sexual offenses perpetrated range from rape to fondling to exposure to sexual explicit comments, material or videos.

There are several characteristics common to children that have been victims of sexual abuses. These characteristics include gender, age and ethnicity. Regarding gender, female children are victimized six times more often than male children. In regards to ethnicity, white children are victimized three and a half times more often than black children, seven times more often than Hispanic children and eight times more often than other children from non-specified ethnicities (NISMART-US DOJ, 2008).

The highest percentages of assaults are perpetrated against children between the ages of 15-17 years old. The second highest percentages of assaults are perpetrated against children

ranging in age from 0-5 years. The third, fourth and fifth percentages of assaults perpetrated against children are committed on children in the following age ranges; 12-14 years old, 9-11 years old and 6-8 years old respectfully (NISMART-US DOJ, 2008).

Historically it was believed that sexual abuse crimes were committed only by men. However, more recent data confirms that although male perpetrators are 27 times more prevalent than female perpetrators, women have and do commit sexual assault crimes against children. The highest number of occurrences happens between a child and an acquaintance with 38% of the assaults happening in someone else's home. Other areas identified as areas where children are sexually assaulted include their own homes, vehicles, parks and at the perpetrators place of employment with 46% of the incidents lasting an hour or more. On average the perpetrator age ranges from 18-29 years old. Most reported assaults take place during the summer months with 32% of those assaults taking place in the evening (NISMART-US DOJ, 2008).

Although sexual assault crimes against children are being reported more often by the victims themselves or their caretakers, there are a staggering number of assaults that go unreported. It is estimated that 70% of the assaults are not reported to the police for varying reasons which include but is not limited to the child not wanting to inform the caretaker, the time lapse between the assault and the child reporting the assault being too long, the child wanted to protect the perpetrator and someone's erroneous belief that the assault wasn't serious enough to be reported (NISMART-US DOJ, 2008). The information stated in the previous paragraphs is further illustrated in tables 1-6 in the appendix beginning on page 9.

Psychological Dimensions of Incest

The negative emotional, psychological and physical effects of incest are extensive, varied and are directly related to negative behaviors exhibited by the victims. These effects include but

are not limited to intense feelings of anger, fear of being alone, fear of the dark, fear of touching and intimacy, depression, guilt, anxiety, PTSD, nightmares, grief, isolation, an inability to trust, lack of clear childhood memories, alienation, STD's, flashbacks, regression to infantile behavior, severe weight gain or loss and self-blame. The behavioral manifestations of the above mentioned effects are alcohol and drug abuse/dependence, suicide attempts and other forms of self-harm such as cutting, running away, and inappropriate sexual behavior from victims of both sex (Darkness2light).

For the most part, the negative effects of incest are consistent male and female victims of incest. However there is acting out behavior that is more specific to each sex. For example; boys are more likely to be physically injured during the assault as they are more likely to resist the abuser. Male victims are often physically aggressive toward peers, tend to have poor school performance, more instances of truancy and get into legal trouble. Female victims have higher rates of teen pregnancy, promiscuity, prostitution and eating disorders than do their counterparts (Darkness2light). Worth noting: not all victims of incest will exhibit the emotional, psychological and physical effects described.

The negative effects of incest and childhood sexual abuse can and does have far reaching negative effects that follow the victim into adulthood. Approximately 14% of all men and 36% of all women in United States prisons were abused (this includes victims of incest). In addition to substance abuse, engagement in criminal behavior and having at least one psychological disorder, the abuse negatively impacts the victim's ability to engage in healthy adult relationships, to form healthy attachments and is a possible indicator that the current childhood victim will become and adult victimizer. (Fargo, 2009)

Mood swings, changes in eating habits, trouble swallowing, exhibit unusual fear of new people places, refusal or constant talk about new friend, unexplained gifts and money, age inappropriate comments conversations about sex, and having negative perceptions of their body referring to it as dirty or bad are a few of the warning signs that can alert parents and other interested adults that children may be victims of childhood sexual abuse and incest (USDOJ).

Most victims of incest and/or childhood sexual abuse do not disclose this information. There are several reasons for the lack of disclosure which include fear of being removed from the home, fear of getting the perpetrator into trouble, threats of physical violence or death toward the victim or a member of the victim's family, guilt, shame and self-blame (National child traumatic stress network).

Victim disclosure of incest is a frightening and uncomfortable at best. Children are very unlikely to disclose a second time if the first disclosure is met with disbelief, blame, anger or any other situation that does not demonstrate complete support. That being said, in the event that a child shares the he/she was has been victimized it is very important that the person being told remain calm, listens intently, explain to the child that it is not his/her fault, allow the child to tell the story rather than to lead them, thank him/her for sharing, never blame the child and obtain help immediately (nctsn).

Termination of incestuous relationships

When and how does the incestuous relationship come to an end? The answers to those questions are as varied and complex as the incestuous situations, the victims and the perpetrators of the offense. In some cases the victim was able to distance themselves as they got older. In other cases the victim got to "old" and was no longer desired by the perpetrator. In still other cases the incest was stopped as a result of intervention from another person. The intervening

person is usually a parent, an older sibling, a teacher or another attentive adult. In addition the termination process will be influenced by the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator, the duration of the abusive relationship, the severity of the abuse and the victim's perception of their roll in the abuse (Lorentzen, E., Nilsen, H., & Traeen, B., 2008).

Although the physical side of the incestuous relationship eventually comes to an end, there are two factors that help to sustain the emotional and psychological damage caused by the abusive relationship (Lorentzen, E., et al, 2008). These factors are powerlessness and lack of support. The feeling of powerlessness comes from the perpetrators' psychological control of the victim. The victim often has difficulty refusing other non-sexual requests or demands from the perpetrators as he/she has been conditioned to be obedient. This thinking undermines the victim's ability to develop a healthy sense of self-esteem and can lead to further victimization. The lack of support received also plays an important role in the perpetrator maintaining control of the victim as it isolates, stigmatizes and devalues the victim and their experience (Lorentzen, E., et al, 2008).

As the victims work to become survivors of incest there are several avenues that can assist with the healing process and include the following resources. The Wounded Healer Journal is an online resource that provides peer support through forums and chat rooms. It also provides information on mental health professionals in both the United States and Canada. Another source of support is SIA. Survivors of Incest Anonymous is a support group specific to incest and childhood sexual abuse that is modeled after the 12 Steps of alcoholics anonymous.

Incest and the criminal justice system

Approximately 31% percent of women in the United States prison systems report that they are survivors of incest (USDOJ, 1991). Other studies concluded that 76% of serial rapists,

40% of sexual offenders and approximately one-third of juvenile delinquents report they were sexually abused as youngsters (USDOJ, 1991).

It appears that if the perpetrators of childhood sexual abuse and incest were prosecuted and the victims provided with adequate support and therapy they need and deserve, the percentages mentioned above would be greatly reduced. Unfortunately, research shows that the criminal justice systems as well as child protective services agencies are failing in their effort to do just that. The two-tier system which determined that sexual abuse crimes perpetrated against children by family members be investigated by child protective services and that offenses committed by non family members be investigated by law enforcement does more harm than good. Although there are several contributing factors the most disturbing include but are not limited to the following: there is a mutual distrust between law enforcement and child protective service agencies which prevents collaborative efforts on behalf of the child victims, all child protective service agencies are not mandated to report child sexual abuse crimes allegations to the police, historically the child protective service agencies have long been accused of corruption and botched investigations, law enforcements hesitancy regarding involving themselves on such complex crimes as child sexual abuse and incest which ultimately leads to the percentage of allegations prosecuted being extremely low and the number of convictions being even lower and the additional trauma inflicted on the victim as he/she is disbelieved, blamed or portrayed as the villain rather than the victim of a crime (The unspoken crime, 2010).

CHAPTER THREE: CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This purpose of this paper was to determine the prevalence of incest and childhood sexual abuse as well as to identify the negative effects, the termination process and avenues to healing. The issue is very complex and there are no cookie cutter answers. The number of current victims of incest and childhood sexual abuse is unidentified however research has determined that there is an estimated 39 million adult survivors of incest and childhood sexual abuse in the United States. That number speaks volumes as research has also determined that the number of incest and childhood sexual abuse incidents is severely under reported for a variety of reasons. It has also been determined that the negative effects of do not simply go away once the incestuous relationship has ended and that the effect more often than not reach into adulthood.

As helping professional and productive citizens it is imperative that we take a more proactive role in protecting children from this kind of abuse. That goal will be effectively reached through becoming educated regarding the issue of incest , turning away from the “don’t talk/don’t tell” mentality, refusing to passive in the protection of children and knowing what signs to look for in children that are being victimized. There is great deal more research to be done however there is enough conclusive research to assure that the phenomenon of incest and childhood is real, that more and more children fall victim every day, that the effects can be devastating and potentially life threatening and that it must come to an end.

Professional in the penal system

It is obvious that being convicted of a crime ultimately lead to the incarceration of these women. However as professionals in the penal system it is extremely important to understand

that the journey that lead to the drug and alcohol abuse, crime and ultimately the incarceration began with a desire to escape the feelings of guilt and shame as well as the stigmatism associated with incest. In an effort to be effective treatment providers it is necessary to be able to recognize and diagnosed the underlying issues that are being manifested in the women's behavior. This understanding will provide a reference point in which to begin the healing process. To date the most effect treatment strategies are those that are holistic. Holistic treatment interventions are an integration of developmental feminist formulations, traumatic stress, objective relations, objective attachments, psychodynamics, cognitive-behavioral strategies, and skill building in an effort to treat the whole person (Courtois, 2001).

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Appendix A

Table 1: Estimates of Sexual Offenses against Children

Type of Incident	95% Confidence		Percent
	Estimate	Interval	
Rape	141,400	71,800–211,000	44
Attempted rape	60,400*	13,400–107,400	19*
Other sexual assault	55,900	<100–133,100	17
Attempted other sexual assault	27,600*	3,300–51,900	9*
All rape and other sexual assault	285,400	200,400–370,300	89
Other sex offense	35,000	10,200–59,800	11
All rape, other sexual assault, and other sex offense	320,400	231,900–408,900	100

(NISMART-US DOJ, 2008)

Table 2: Characteristics of Sexually Assaulted Children

Characteristic of Child (n = 285,400)	Sexual Assault Victims Percent of U.S. Child Population (N = 70,172,700)		
	Estimate	Percent	
Gender			
Female	252,700	89	49
Male	32,700	11	51
Age (years)			
0–5	12,300*	4*	33
6–8	9,800*	3*	17
9–11	30,500	11	17
12–14	77,900	27	17
15–17	154,800	54	17
Race/ethnicity			
White, non-Hispanic	182,000	64	63
Black, non-Hispanic	52,200	18	16
Hispanic	26,500*	9*	16
Other	23,500*	8*	6

(NISMART-US DOJ, 2008)

Table 3: Characteristics of Sexual Assault Perpetrators

Characteristic of Perpetrator	All Sexual Assault Victims (n = 285,400)	
	Estimate	Percent
More than one perpetrator		
Yes	64,800	23
No	216,500	76
No information	4,000*	1*
Identity of main perpetrator		
Family member	27,200	10
Father	12,600*	4*
Brother	5,700*	2*
Other relative	9,000*	3*
Acquaintance	183,200	64
Child's friend or acquaintance	148,100	52
Family friend or acquaintance†	23,300*	8*
Authority or caretaker	11,800*	4*
Stranger	72,400	25
Known only by sight	20,200*	7*
Complete stranger	52,200	18
No information	2,500*	1*
Main perpetrator's age		
12 or younger	12,000*	4*
13–17	71,700	25
18–29	124,700	44
30–39	23,100*	8*
40–49	21,600*	8*
50+ 8,100* 3*		
No information	24,100*	8*
Main perpetrator's gender		
Male	272,500	95
Female	10,300*	4*
No information	2,500*	<1*

(NISMART-US DOJ, 2008)

Table 4: Characteristics of Child Sexual Assaults

Characteristic of Episode	Percent of All Sexual Assault Victims (n = 285,400)
Location	
Own home	14
Other home	38
Car or other vehicle	9
Work	6*
Public area	23*
Other location	8*
Duration	
Less than 1 hour	42
1 hour or longer	46
No information	12
Coercive elements and harm	
Perpetrator used weapon	10*
Child was abducted	23
Child was injured	17
Season	
Winter	21
Spring	28
Summer	31
Fall	20
Day of week	
Monday through Thursday	12
Friday	36
Saturday	17*
Sunday	4*
No information	31
Time of day	
Morning	2*
Afternoon	27
Evening	30
Night	32
No information	9*

(NISMART-US DOJ, 2008)

Table 5: Police Contact for Child Sexual Assaults

Police Contact for Episode	Percent of All Sexual Assault Victims (n = 285,400)
Any police contact	
Yes	30
No	70
Why police were not contacted	
Child did not want caretaker to find out about assault or caretaker was told too long after assault occurred	59
Not serious enough	9*
Child wanted to protect perpetrator	4*
Other reason	23
No information	5*

(NISMART-US DOJ, 2008)

Table 6 identifies how the information regarding the sexual assaults against the children was obtained.

Table 6: NISMART–2 Estimates of Sexually Assaulted Children, by Source of Information

Information Source	Estimate	Percent
All victims	285,400	100
Self-report (victims ages 12–17)	181,400	64
Proxy report by caretaker (victims ages 12–17)	51,300	18
Self-report (victims ages 10–11)	7,000*	2*
Proxy report by caretaker (victims under age 12)	45,700	16

(NISMART-US DOJ, 2008)