



Sexual Violence against Children in Brazil - The Importance of Immediate Reporting

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Editorial

The World Health Organization defines sexual violence as any sexual act without consent [1]. It is an important health problem with an impact on the community and individuals. It affects people of all ages, genders and sexual orientations. Anyone can experience or commit sexual violence. The problem becomes more serious when it affects younger children with severe repercussions in adulthood. Lloyd deMause [2] states that in the United States "the most accurate scientific studies, based on lengthy interviews, report that 30 percent of men and 40 percent of women remember having been sexually molested during childhood--defining "molestation" as actual genital contact, not just exposure". Child sexual abuse is a common and impactful crime with significant implications for child victims, adult survivors and the community at large. The real scenario may be even more serious due to underreporting. Victims find it difficult to seek help for reasons of shame or fear of suffering negative repercussions if they expose what happened to health professionals, public safety professionals, friends or family. Silence can also be favored by threats that the victim has received or by the victim's disbelief in the possibility of being helped by others. Although it can be caused by anyone, regardless of their relationship with the victim, it is known that the active subject of the aggression is commonly someone close to the victim, such as a friend, intimate partner or ex-partner, co-worker, neighbor or family member. Among the types of sexual violence can be considered rape, attempted rape, sexual harassment, sexual exploitation, among others. Acts that are considered sex crimes vary between countries, according to their respective laws. A broad definition of rape is the contact between penis and vulva, or penis and anus, involving penetration. Contact between the penis and the mouth, vulva or anus is also considered rape, even if it is not penetrated, as long as without consent. It also includes penetration of the anus or manipulation of the genitalia by the hand, finger or any object that can be used sexually. Regarding the location, sexual violence can happen anywhere, including home, work, school and detention centers. Sexual abuse against children has been known since antiquity. There are reports of its frequency in the Roman Empire.

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Wheeler and colleagues demonstrated evidence of physical abuse in Ancient Egypt [3]. Likewise, its incidence does not respect continents: In the Philippines, some official data demonstrated that 6,506 children were sexually abused between 2007-2009. In Brazil, the situation is not very different in terms of the seriousness of the problem. Martins and Mello Jorge [4] carried out a descriptive and cross-sectional study to learn about characteristics of sexual abuse in children and adolescents from zero to 14 years old, based on cases registered in the Guardianship Councils and care programs in the city of Londrina-PR in 2006. They were 186 cases were reported in that period, including female and male victims. Modelli, Galvão and Pratesi [5] evaluated the prevalence of sexual abuse and the difficulties of examining the genitalia in a retrospective cross-sectional and epidemiological study with 1762 children under 12 years of age attended at the Medico-Legal Institute of Brasília between 2008 and 2009. Of that number, 238 (13.5%) were boys. The average age of the boys studied was 6.5 years and injuries consistent with sexual violence were identified in 9.6%. Still in Brazil, in 2009, Law 12015 was enacted, which establishes a specific category of sexual violence called "vulnerable rape", being considered vulnerable to children under 14 years of age. We recently conducted a survey (not yet published) on the rapes of vulnerable males in the city of São Paulo. We carried out a retrospective and descriptive analysis of direct data collected from medical-legal reports carried out in 2014. Furthermore, we found 167 male victims, with an average age of 6.85 years. Among these, the most prevalent form of sexual violence was anal intercourse (15.37% of cases) and anal manipulation (13.88% of cases). However, what most caught our attention was the fact that 70% of the expert exams were unable to prove sexual assault. This occurred for several reasons, the main one being the delay in taking the victim to medical care or making a complaint (77% of cases), causing the traces of violence to disappear. This is the primary reason why all abuse against children must be reported as quickly as possible. The delay in doing so (because the alleged aggressor is a close relative, or even because it is a case of incest) can cause the impunity of this heinous crime to end up triumphing.

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