



UNIVERSITAT DE
BARCELONA



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

SEXUAL VICTIMIZATION IN ADOLESCENCE: A NATIONAL STUDY FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF SPANISH YOUTH

GREVIA 

Grup de Recerca
en Victimització
Infantil i Adolescent

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The document presented only contains data on sexual victimization and is part of the original study, funded by the Social Observatory of the “la Caixa” Foundation SR21-00381, titled *V-O: Does violence beget violence? Victim-offender overlap in Spanish adolescents*.

About the Authors

The Research Group on Child and Adolescent Victimization (GReVIA) at the University of Barcelona aims to shed light on the reality of violence against children and adolescents, supported by academic rigor, while also ensuring the applicability of the results to the real-life contexts of children, adolescents, their families, and the professionals who work with them.

The design and development of studies that quantify violence against children and adolescents are essential tasks to demonstrate to society the existence of a problem that is often difficult to see and accept, yet can severely damage the development of many children and adolescents in our country.

Because what is unknown cannot be prevented.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THIS STUDY ARISES FROM THE NEED FOR CIVIL SOCIETY TO ADDRESS SEXUAL VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS IN OUR COUNTRY. VARIOUS ORGANIZATIONS REPRESENTING VICTIMS AND ADVOCATING FOR THE RIGHTS OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS HAVE PARTNERED WITH ACADEMIA TO REQUEST EVIDENCE-BASED RESOURCES FOR EFFECTIVE ACTION.

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Many of these teams collaborated in the design of the project and/or in the development of the evaluation instrument.

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We want to extend our special thanks to the participating schools, whose tremendous motivation and willingness to engage in the prevention of violence against children and adolescents in our country have contributed selflessly to this study.

Finally, THANK YOU to the boys and girls who answered our questions sincerely, sometimes having to recall very difficult experiences. We dedicate this study to them and hope to contribute to ensuring that many other young people do not have to live in contexts of violence.

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PRESENTATION

SEXUAL VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS IS A SOCIAL, PUBLIC HEALTH, AND HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUE WITH A HIGH PREVALENCE IN ALL COUNTRIES OF THE WORLD¹. ACCORDING TO RIGOROUS REVIEW STUDIES, IT AFFECTS OVER 1 BILLION CHILDREN AGED 2 TO 17 ANNUALLY².

It has been demonstrated that violence, particularly sexual violence, has adverse health consequences, both physical and mental³, for children and adolescents. These include suicidal behavior⁴. There are also social consequences, such as an increased risk of further victimization⁵, specifically sexual exploitation⁶, as well as antisocial and criminal behavior, and violent tendencies⁷. Additionally, there are socio-economic consequences, including poorer academic⁸ and occupational performance, and lower levels of financial well-being⁹, which result in significant losses of human capital¹⁰.



However, in Spain, only a few studies have attempted to quantify the extent of the problem. Some findings from these studies call for reflection:

1. In the first national prevalence study¹¹ in 1994, it was found that 18.9% of the 1,821 individuals aged 18 to 60 who were interviewed reported having experienced sexual abuse during their childhood. This percentage was higher among women (22.5%) but also significant among men (15.2%).

(1) Pereda, N., Guilera, G., Forns, M., & Gómez-Benito, J. (2009). The prevalence of child sexual abuse in community and student samples: A meta-analysis. *Clinical Psychology Review, 29*(4), 328-338.

(2) Hillis, S., Mercy, J., Amobi, A., & Kress, H. (2016). Global prevalence of past-year violence against children: A systematic review and minimum estimates. *Pediatrics, 137*(3), e20154079.

(3) Maniglio, R. (2009). The impact of child sexual abuse on health: A systematic review of reviews. *Clinical Psychology Review, 29*(7), 647-657.

(4) Devries, K. M., Mak, J. Y., Child, J. C., Falder, G., Bacchus, L. J., Astbury, J., & Watts, C. H. (2014). Childhood sexual abuse and suicidal behavior: A meta-analysis. *Pediatrics, 133*(5), e1331-e1344.

(5) Widom, C. S., Czaja, S. J., & Dutton, M. A. (2008). Childhood victimization and lifetime revictimization. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 32*(8), 785-796.

(6) De Vries, I., & Goggin, K. E. (2020). The impact of childhood abuse on the commercial sexual exploitation of youth: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse, 21*(5), 886-903.

(7) Fitton, L., Yu, R., & Fazel, S. (2020). Childhood maltreatment and violent outcomes: A systematic review and meta-analysis of prospective studies. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse, 21*(4), 754-768.

(8) Fry, D., Fang, X., Elliott, S., Casey, T., Zheng, X., Li, J., Florian, L., & McCluskey, G. (2018). The relationships between violence in childhood and educational outcomes: A global systematic review and meta-analysis. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 75*, 6-28.

(9) Currie, J., & Widom, C. S. (2010). Long-term consequences of child abuse and neglect on adult economic well-being. *Child Maltreatment, 15*(2), 111-120.

(10) Henkhaus, L. E. (2022). The lasting consequences of childhood sexual abuse on human capital and economic well-being. *Health Economics, 31*(9), 1954-1972.

(11) López, F. (1994). *Los abusos sexuales de menores. Lo que recuerdan los adultos*. Ministerio de Asuntos Sociales.

2. A similar study¹² conducted in 2022 through an online survey of 1,071 adults found that the prevalence of childhood sexual violence ranged from 2.8% to 18.5%, depending on the type of experience, with exposure to pornography being the most common.
3. Another study¹³ conducted in 2023 through personal and online surveys of 1,323 adults nationwide indicated that 18.6% of participants reported some form of sexual violence with physical contact before the age of 18, with percentages of 9.2% in males and 22.1% in females.



However, the reviewed studies are retrospective, meaning they ask adult participants about experiences that occurred during their childhood and adolescence. This approach limits our understanding of the current reality of child sexual victimization and ability to analyze the phenomenon as it unfolds. Therefore, it is necessary to survey children and adolescents themselves to grasp the current reality of sexual violence in our country.



4. Recently, a study conducted by the Defensor del Pueblo¹⁴ surveyed 8,013 adults aged 18 to 90 through telephone interviews. It found that 11.7% of those interviewed reported being victims of childhood sexual abuse, with 17% being women and 6% men.
5. Studies conducted with samples of adolescents from Catalonia¹⁵ and Valencia¹⁶ also indicate that the issue of sexual abuse remains prevalent in our country, with percentages ranging from 5.3% to 12.8% of young people reporting incidents within the past year. This problem affects significantly more girls, although these studies only pertain to young people from specific regions and do not allow for generalization to the national level.

(12) Ferragut, M., Ortiz-Tallo, M., & Blanca, M. J. (2022). Prevalence of child sexual abuse in Spain: A representative sample study. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 37(21-22), NP19358-NP19377.

(13) Pineda, D., Muris, P., Martínez-Martínez, A., & Piqueras, J. A. (2023). Prevalence of child sexual abuse in Spain: A survey study. *European Journal of Psychology Applied to Legal Context*, 15(2), 83-88.

(14) Comisión Asesora sobre los abusos sexuales en el ámbito de la Iglesia católica y el papel de los poderes públicos (2023). *Informe sobre los abusos sexuales en el ámbito de la Iglesia Católica y el papel de los poderes públicos. Una respuesta necesaria*. Defensor del Pueblo.

(15) Pereda, N., Guilera, G., & Abad, J. (2014). Victimization and polyvictimization of Spanish children and youth: Results from a community sample. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 38, 640-649.

(16) Játiva, R., & Cerezo, M.A. (2014). The mediating role of self-compassion in the relationship between victimization and psychological maladjustment in a sample of adolescents. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 38(7), 1180-1190.

6. In addition, the figures from helpline calls, such as those to the Fundación ANAR¹⁷, show an increase in the use of this service in recent years, rising from 273 cases in 2008 to 1,093 cases in 2020. However, 90% of cases of violence suffered by children in Spain are not reported. Furthermore, the ANAR Foundation does not collect data from all autonomous communities, which hinders a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon¹⁸.

Therefore, research based on surveys of young people is crucial to understand the reality of sexual violence in our country and to advance in the design of more effective prevention and treatment programs for victims.



Understanding the extent of various forms of sexual violence faced by young people in Spain through their own responses to a survey constitutes a first step toward prevention and early intervention, not only for the victim but also within their environment.

JUSTIFICATION

CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS ARE VICTIMS OF MULTIPLE FORMS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN ALL COUNTRIES AROUND THE WORLD¹⁹, INCLUDING SPAIN.

Most studies conducted to date in Spain have focused on a significant number of children and adolescents whose experiences need to be brought to light and acknowledged so that they can be provided with the necessary resources and support. However, these studies have often been limited to a single region, making it challenging to generalize the results to the national level. Moreover, they have typically surveyed adults about their childhood experiences, which hinders current knowledge of the problem. Only by obtaining national data directly from children and adolescents can we shed light on a problem that, to date, remains largely unknown to the public.

The literature review conducted highlights the need for studies addressing the issue of violence against children and adolescents in Spain. It emphasizes the benefits of preventing this violence, particularly through the implementation of evidence-based public policies²⁰.

Therefore, the study presented combines the demands of civil society, the rigor and solidity of academia, and the support of the Spanish national and regional Governments to understand the reality of sexual violence.

(17) See <https://www.anar.org/estudio-anar-los-abusos-contra-menores-de-edad-se-han-multiplicado-por-4-en-la-ultima-decada/>

(18) Pereda, N., Abad, J., & Guilera, G. (2016). Lifetime prevalence and characteristics of child sexual victimization in a community sample of Spanish adolescents. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse, 25*(2), 142-158.

(19) Stoltenborgh, M., Bakermans- Kranenburg, M. J., Alink, L. R., & van IJzendoorn, M. H. (2015). The prevalence of child maltreatment across the globe: Review of a series of meta- analyses. *Child Abuse Review, 24*(1), 37-50.

(20) Sethi, D., Bellis, M., Hughes, K., Gilbert, R., Mitis, F., & Galea, G. (2013). *European report on preventing child maltreatment*. World Health Organization. Regional Office for Europe.

The main objective is to demonstrate, for the first time in Spain, the prevalence of sexual victimization in a representative sample of school-aged boys and girls in our country, with the ultimate goal of providing a solid and rigorous framework from which to develop realistic, evidence-based proposals to intervene in this serious social problem.



The study presented is crucial as a diagnosis of the situation regarding sexual violence against children and adolescents in Spain, within the framework of the Organic Law 8/2021, of June 4th, on comprehensive protection of childhood and adolescence against violence.

METHOD

The Procedure

THE STUDY FOLLOWED A DESIGN IN WHICH A SAMPLE OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN SPAIN WAS ASKED ABOUT THEIR EXPERIENCES OF SEXUAL VICTIMIZATION IN THE PAST YEAR.

Random sampling was conducted among young people aged 14 to 17 enrolled in secondary education centers in Spain. A stratified cluster sampling method was used. The strata were defined by autonomous community, type of school (public, private, and subsidized), and academic grade.

The units were selected following a two-stage sampling process. In the first stage, educational centers were randomly selected, using a replacement list of centers if necessary. In the second stage, class groups were randomly selected when there was more than one class per grade. The assignment of centers was proportional concerning the type of education, the ownership of the center, and the autonomous community, while data were collected from all students in the selected class group²¹.

The inclusion criteria for participating in the study were: (I) being between 14 and 17 years old, and (II) having sufficient cognitive and linguistic abilities to understand the questions in the survey. Young people with disabilities or impairments were not excluded as long as they met these two requirements.

Initially, contact was made with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Agenda 2030, which provided

(21) A detailed description of the sample design of the study carried out by D'EP Institut can be requested at gr.grevia@ub.edu. D'EP is an organization specializing in the social field that conducts sociological research, consulting, and services related to the collection, management, and dissemination of information. See <https://www.dep.net/>

official support for the study through a letter. This letter was sent to the education departments of the different autonomous communities and cities, along with an explanatory document outlining the study and its objectives.

Out of all the education departments contacted²², positive responses were received from the Junta de Castilla y León, the Junta de Extremadura, the Generalitat Valenciana, and the Government of the Canary Islands. They facilitated access to educational centers in their respective communities.

For the rest of the autonomous communities and cities, individual contact was made with the schools of interest. If a particular school did not respond or responded negatively, the next group of schools in the second wave of randomization was approached.

(22) See <https://osf.io/qa298/files/osfstorage/65b3b9a399d01007fe626558>

Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of centers by autonomous communities and cities.



Figure 1.
Number of educational centers participating in the study.

Contact with the educational centers began via email, but due to the low response rate, contact continued via telephone. After the initial phone call, during which the study was introduced and schools were encouraged to participate, an email address was requested for further communication with the center. Once the school had agreed to participate, a brief explanatory video was sent²³ to ensure that teachers understood the study and its objectives and could engage their students in participation. Additionally, documents outlining the study procedure and information for parents or legal guardians of the students were provided to the center. Schools were also asked to specify the exact date or dates on which the survey would be conducted to facilitate better monitoring of each center's participation.

Once the survey date or dates were agreed upon, a new video was sent for participants to watch in the classroom before responding to the battery of questions.

The questionnaires, as well as all documentation sent to the schools, including the videos for teachers and students, were translated into the three co-official languages of the respective autonomous communities according to their Statutes:

- A. CATALAN/VALENCIAN IN CATALONIA, BALEARIC ISLANDS, AND VALENCIAN COMMUNITY**
- B. BASQUE (EUSKERA) IN THE BASQUE COUNTRY AND BASQUE-SPEAKING AREAS OF NAVARRA**
- C. GALICIAN (GALEGO) IN GALICIA.**

The documentation was translated into Catalan by the research team and reviewed by the Language Service of the Universitat de Barcelona²⁴.

(23) See <https://www.powtoon.com/ws/gdbTAfrhzV4/1/m>

(24) See <https://www.ub.edu/sl/es/>

(25) See <https://auladidiomes.cat/>



Meanwhile, the translation of documents into Basque and Galician was handled by the cooperative Aula d'Idiomes SCCL²⁵. Each school received the information and documentation in their preferred language.

Data collection extended throughout the 2022–2023 school year.

The response format for the questionnaires was primarily electronic (computer, tablet, or phone) (95.4%). In cases where schools preferred paper surveys (4.6%), they were received in sealed envelopes to ensure confidentiality of the data. Subsequently, a member of the research team entered the data obtained through these means into the electronic database.

Before starting the survey, the study was briefly presented to the participants on the response platform, and their explicit consent was requested. The electronic response platform used was eAlicia²⁶, which has been used for previous studies by the team.

The Instrument

AN ADAPTATION OF THE SPANISH VERSION OF THE JUVENILE VICTIMIZATION QUESTIONNAIRE (JVQ)²⁷ WAS USED FOR THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY.

Several questions on child and adolescent sexual exploitation^{28,29} were added to the original instrument due to their social relevance and the lack of prevalence studies for the general population in Spain. Additionally, to capture experiences of victimization online, questions from the Juvenile Online Victimization Questionnaire (JOV-Q)³⁰ were included.

The final questionnaire that underpins the presented results covers 14 items evaluating different forms of sexual victimization: (a) sexual victimization (4 items related to sexual violence with physical contact by known and unknown adult figures; and 5 items related to sexual violence with physical contact by peers of similar age to the victim, both known and unknown), (b) electronic sexual victimization (2 items evaluating sexual solicitations and online grooming); and (c) sexual exploitation (3 items asking about sexual victim-

ization, with and without physical contact, in exchange for money, alcohol, drugs, or gifts).

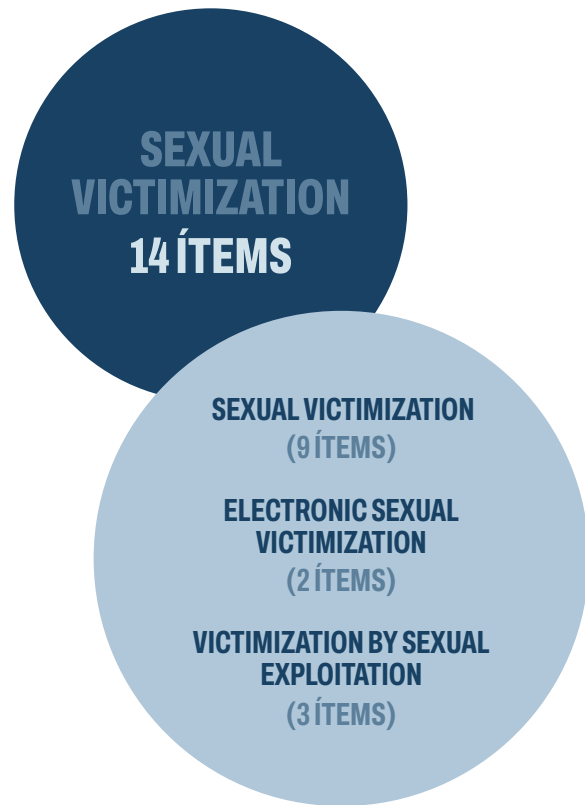


Figure 1. Forms of sexual victimization assessed in the study.

Various sociodemographic variables were considered, including personal participant information (8 items related to gender, sexual orientation, age, country of birth, ethnic or racial group, autonomous community of residence, current school year, household composition). These questions were created ad hoc for the study's objectives and were approved by the supporting entities.

(26) The eAlicia platform was chosen for its reliability in measurement, which allows for data collection in compliance with all national and European regulations regarding the gathering of sensitive information. See <https://www.ealicia.com/educacion/research-education/>

(27) Finkelhor, D., Hamby, S. L., Ormrod, R., & Turner, H. (2005). The Juvenile Victimization Questionnaire: reliability, validity, and national norms. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 29*(4), 383-412.

(28) Averdijk, M., Ribeaud, D., & Eisner, M. (2020). Longitudinal risk factors of selling and buying sexual services among youths in Switzerland. *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 49*, 1279-1290.

(29) Fredlund, C., Svensson, F., Svedin, C. G., Priebe, G., & Wadsby, M. (2013). Adolescents' lifetime experience of selling sex: Development over five years. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse, 22*(3), 312-325.

(30) Montiel, I., & Carbonell, E. (2012). *Cuestionario de victimización juvenil mediante internet y/o teléfono móvil [Juvenile Online Victimization Questionnaire, JOV-Q] Patent number 09/2011/1982*. Registro Propiedad Intelectual Comunidad Valenciana.

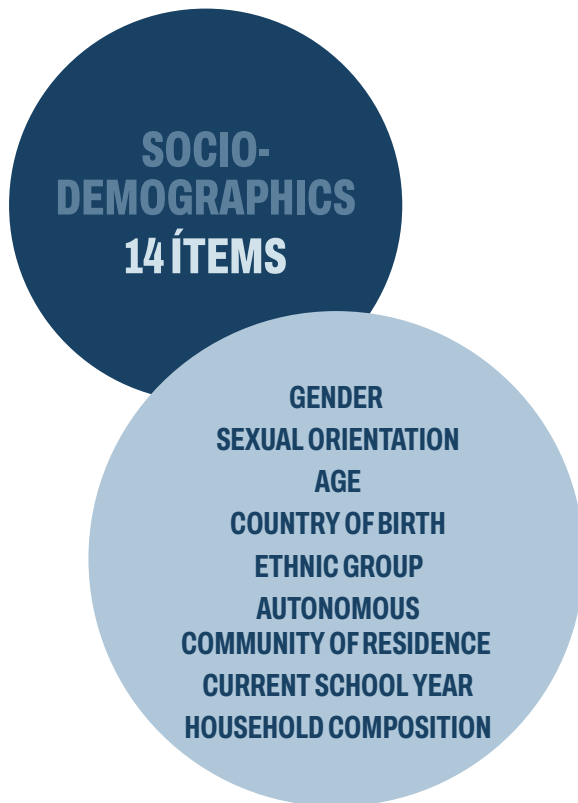


Figure 2. Sociodemographic variables assessed in the study.

At the end of the evaluation, participants were provided with the hotline for children and adolescents, 116 111, as well as links to the Fundación ANAR's website and chat, in accordance with international standards regarding the information to be provided in studies on violence³¹.

The Data Analysis

THE STATISTICAL SOFTWARE SPSS (VERSION 27), R SOFTWARE, AND THE MICROSOFT EXCEL PACKAGE WERE USED TO PERFORM THE DATA ANALYSIS AND GENERATE TABLES AND GRAPHS.

Firstly, since the data did not perfectly match the distribution of the Spanish population, a post-stratification procedure was employed. This involved weighting the data according to the age and gender of the participants. Therefore, each survey respondent was assigned a weight based on whether their demographic category (age and gender) was underrepresented or overrepresented in the sample.

Subsequently, a descriptive analysis of socio-demographic variables and the environment of the young person, as well as reported sexual victimization, was conducted. For this purpose, frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations, medians, and ranges were calculated, depending on the nature of each variable.



(31) United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF). (2012). *Ethical principles, dilemmas and risks in collecting data on violence against children: A review of available literature*. UNICEF. Statistics and Monitoring Section, Division of Policy and Strategy.

The Sample

THE TOTAL SAMPLE CONSISTED OF 4,319 ADOLESCENTS. HOWEVER, INDIVIDUALS YOUNGER THAN 14 YEARS OR OLDER THAN 17 YEARS, THOSE WHO PROVIDED INCONSISTENT RESPONSES, OR WHO DID NOT PROVIDE COMPLETE DATA FOR THE VICTIMIZATION QUESTIONNAIRE WERE EXCLUDED (N = 295; 6.8%). THIS RESULTED IN AN EFFECTIVE SAMPLE SIZE OF 4,024 STUDENTS.

The participants were distributed by gender as follows: 2,061 girls (51.2%), 1,858 boys (46.2%), 36 who identified with another gender (0.9%), and 69 (1.7%) who preferred not to respond. The average age of the young people was 15.42 years ($SD = 1.03$).

Regarding sexual orientation, 81.9% of the sample reported being heterosexual, 9.4% bisexual, and 2.9% homosexual.

The majority of adolescents were born in Spain (90.8%), while 8.4% were of foreign origin. The most represented ethnic groups in this study were European (87.0%), followed by Latino (10.1%), and Arab ethnicity (5.4%).

The family nucleus with whom the participants were generally living consisted of the biological or adoptive mother (91.8%), the biological or adoptive father (75.4%), and siblings or stepsiblings (63.2%). Less common cohabitants included the current partner of the mother (7.8%), the current partner of the father (3.0%), and other relatives such as grandparents or uncles/aunts (8.9%). Out of the total number of young people surveyed, 26 (0.6%) were residing in a care facility.



**2.061
GIRLS**

**1.858
BOYS**

The Ethical Aspects

THE STUDY WAS GUIDED BY THE BASIC ETHICAL PRINCIPLES OF THE DECLARATION OF HELSINKI REGARDING ETHICAL PRINCIPLES FOR RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS (2013)³² AND BY THE DEONTOLOGICAL CODE OF PSYCHOLOGISTS (2010)³³ OF THE SPANISH GENERAL COUNCIL OF PSYCHOLOGY. THE STUDY ALSO COMPLIED WITH THE PROVISIONS OF THE GOOD RESEARCH PRACTICES CODE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF BARCELONA (2010)³⁴.

The research group adhered to current national and international legislation related to research at all times, maintained ethical conduct, and minimized any risks associated with the study for both researchers and participants. They ensured voluntary participation and provided adequate information about the study's objectives, purpose, and benefits to the participants³⁵.

The generation of ethical evidence was carried out in accordance with UNICEF's publication³⁶. The purpose was always to ensure that the best interests of the child were respected, thus promoting and protecting their well-being.

Rigorous review studies have confirmed that the prevalence of child and adolescent victimization can be responsibly and ethically gathered through self-reports from young people, ensuring their health and well-being are protected. Moreover, it is rare for them to express concerns about answering questions about violence in self-report surveys³⁷. However, due to the sensitive nature of the research project, a clinical psychologist collaborating with the research team was available for consultations.

The study received approval from the Bioethics Committee (cbub@ub.edu) of the Universitat de Barcelona. After evaluating the methodological, ethical, and legal aspects of the project, they issued a favorable resolution on February 28, 2022.



(32) This document, along with its various updates, can be reviewed at: <https://www.wma.net/es/politicas-post/declaracion-de-helsinki-de-la-amm-principios-eticos-para-las-investigaciones-medicas-en-seres-humanos/>

(33) This document, along with its latest amendments, can be accessed at the following link: <https://www.cop.es/index.php?page=CodigoDeontologico>

(34) The document is available at: <https://diposit.ub.edu/dspace/handle/2445/28543>

(35) Pereda, N. (Dir.). (2019) *Guía práctica para la investigación ética en violencia contra la infancia y la adolescencia*. Federación de Asociaciones para la Prevención del Maltrato Infantil (FAPMI).

(36) Berman, G. (2020). *Ethical considerations for evidence generation involving children on the COVID-19 pandemic*. *Innocenti Discussion Paper 2020-01*. UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti.

(37) Laurin, J., Wallace, C., Draca, J., Aterman, S., & Tonmyr, L. (2018). Youth self-report of child maltreatment in representative surveys: A systematic review. *Health promotion and chronic disease prevention in Canada: Research, Policy and Practice*, 38(2), 37-54.

The Data Protection Law

Throughout the study, efforts were made to ensure the confidentiality rights of the participants and compliance with current legal requirements, especially under Organic Law 3/2018, of December 5, on the Protection of Personal Data and Guarantee of Digital Rights, and Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council of April 27, 2016, on the protection of individuals with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data (GDPR), repealing Directive 95/46/EC.

The legitimacy of the study was based on data collection through informed consent (Article 6.1.a of the General Data Protection Regulation, GDPR),

and the data processing as described was the only way to fulfill the study's objectives (Article 6.1.e of the GDPR). The informed consent for the survey explicitly, accurately, and unequivocally informed participants of the inclusion of their data in a computer database, solely for research purposes. The data obtained are hosted on a server physically located in Spain to ensure security and compliance with local regulations.



RESULTS

The prevalence of self-reported sexual victimization

17.8% OF THE SAMPLE (N = 715) REPORTED HAVING EXPERIENCED SOME FORM OF SEXUAL VICTIMIZATION IN THE PAST YEAR, WITH 11.2% OF BOYS AND 24.0% OF GIRLS AFFECTED.

Electronic sexual victimization proved to be the most prevalent form of victimization, affecting 12.1% ($n = 486$) of the total sample, particularly through sexual solicitations (11.1%; $n = 447$). Sexual victimization involving physical contact was also quite common, affecting 9.9% ($n = 397$) of all participants. The most frequent forms included sexual violence by a partner (4.5%; $n = 182$).

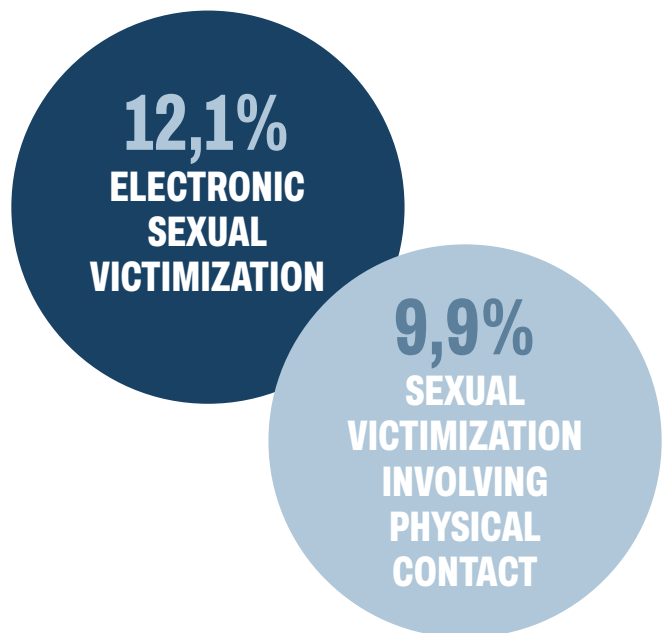
Differences in victimization experiences were analyzed among different age and gender groups³⁸. Regarding age groups, differences were found only in the module of sexual victimization involving physical contact, which was more prevalent among adolescents aged 16–17 years (10.8% compared to 8.9% among adolescents aged 14–15 years).

Girls also experienced more physical or contact sexual victimization (12.6% compared to 6.6% of boys). Specifically, girls experienced more touching by a known adult (1.7% compared to 0.9% of boys), touching by an unknown adult (1.9% compared to 0.8% of boys), touching by an unknown minor (3.2% compared to 1.9% of boys), and dating violence (6.6% compared to 2.3% of boys).

Differences were also observed between boys and girls in electronic sexual victimization (18.3% of girls compared to 5.9% of boys). Sexual solicitations were reported by 17.1% of girls compared to 5.2% of boys, and online grooming by 4.2% of girls compared to 1.8% of boys. Similarly, girls experienced more sexual exploitation through the production of sexual materials (1.2% compared to 0.6% of boys).

However, certain specific types of victimization were significantly more prevalent in boys. These included sexual victimization involving penetration or oral sex by a known adult (1.0% compared to 0.3% of girls) or an unknown adult (1.0% compared to 0.4% of girls), as well as sexual exploitation involving penetration (1.2% compared to 0.5% of girls).

The range of sexual victimizations among the victims ranged from a minimum of 1 to a maximum of 11, with an average of 2 sexual victimizations ($SD = 1.59$).



(38) For gender differences, calculations were conducted only within the major groups, boys and girls, as only 0.9% identified with another gender, and 1.7% preferred not to disclose their gender.

Table 2. Experiences of sexual victimization suffered in the last year.

	Total n = 4.024		Gender n (%) n = 3.919			Age n (%) n = 4.024		
	n	%	Boys (n = 1.858)	Girls (n = 2.061)	OR [IC]	14-15 (n = 2.167)	16-17 (n = 1.857)	OR [IC]
Sexual victimization involving physical contact	397	9,9	123 (6,6)	257 (12,6)	2,04*** [1,63-2,55]	193 (8,9)	201 (10,8)	1,24* [1,01-1,53]
Physical victimization by adults								
Touching by a known adult	59	1,5	17 (0,9)	36 (1,7)	1,93* [1,08-3,44]	30 (1,4)	29 (1,5)	1,13 [0,68-1,89]
Penetration/oral sex by a known adult	27	0,7	18 (1)	6 (0,3)	0,30** [0,12-0,75]	13 (0,6)	14 (0,8)	1,26 [0,59-2,69]
Touching by an unknown adult	28	1,4	15 (0,8)	40 (1,9)	2,43** [1,34-4,12]	29 (1,3)	28 (1,5)	1,13 [0,67-1,90]
Penetration/oral sex by an unknown adult	29	0,7	18 (1)	8 (0,4)	0,40* [0,17-0,92]	17 (0,8)	12 (0,6)	0,82 [0,39-1,73]
Physical victimization by peers								
Touching by a known minor	173	4,3	65 (3,5)	96 (4,7)	1,36 [0,99-1,88]	85 (3,9)	86 (4,6)	1,19 [0,88-1,62]
Penetration/oral sex by a known minor	51	1,3	18 (1)	30 (1,5)	1,5 [0,84-2,72]	24 (1,1)	27 (1,5)	1,32 [0,76-2,29]
Touching by an unknown minor	108	2,7	36 (1,9)	66 (3,2)	1,67* [1,11-2,53]	61 (2,8)	47 (2,5)	0,90 [0,61-1,32]
Penetration/oral sex by an unknown minor	34	0,8	14 (0,8)	16 (0,8)	1,03 [0,5-2,12]	18 (0,8)	16 (0,9)	1,04 [0,53-2,04]
Sexual violence in dating	182	4,5	42 (2,3)	134 (6,6)	3,05*** [2,15-4,34]	85 (3,9)	95 (5,1)	1,31 [0,98-1,78]
Electronic sexual victimization	486	12,1	110 (5,9)	377 (18,3)	3,56*** [2,85-4,45]	252 (11,6)	232 (12,5)	1,09 [0,90-1,31]
Sextortion	447	11,1	97 (5,2)	352 (17,1)	3,74*** [2,96-4,73]	229 (10,6)	216 (11,6)	1,12 [0,92-1,36]
<i>Grooming online</i>	123	3,1	33 (1,8)	87 (4,2)	2,44*** [1,63-3,66]	73 (3,4)	51 (2,7)	0,81 [0,56-1,17]
Sexual exploitation	104	2,6	42 (2,3)	52 (2,5)	1,14 [0,76-1,72]	50 (2,3)	53 (2,9)	1,24 [0,84-1,84]
Sexual material	70	1,7	23 (1,2)	41 (2)	1,66* [1-2,77]	36 (1,7)	34 (1,8)	1,11 [0,67-1,77]
Touching	35	0,9	11 (0,6)	20 (1)	1,65 [0,79-3,44]	17 (0,8)	18 (1)	1,24 [0,64-2,41]
Penetration or oral sex	37	0,9	22 (1,2)	10 (0,5)	0,41* [0,19-0,86]	20 (0,9)	17 (0,9)	0,99 [0,52-1,90]

Note. OR = Odds Ratio. The significance levels are denoted by asterisks: *p < .05, **p < .01, and ***p < .001. Gender differences were calculated among adolescents who identified as male or female, as they were the majority groups (97.4% of the sample).

Some Characteristics of Sexual Victimization

SOME EXPERIENCES OF SEXUAL VICTIMIZATION WERE EXPLORED IN MORE DETAIL TO DETERMINE WHO THE PERPETRATOR WAS OR THE FREQUENCY WITH WHICH THE VICTIMIZATION OCCURRED.

Regarding sexual victimization involving physical contact by known adults, the main perpetrators (involving touching, oral sex, or penetration) were primarily the father or father figure ($n = 19$) or other adult family members ($n = 20$). In cases of physical sexual victimization by peers or minors, the aggressors were more often schoolmates or friends ($n = 110$) or other boys and girls outside the family circle ($n = 67$).

The characteristics of sexual exploitation were also analyzed. In most cases, instances of exploitation occurred “*once a year*” ($n = 76$), although in 19 cases, the exploitative behavior

occurred *monthly*, in 15 cases *weekly*, and in 7 cases *daily* or *almost daily*.

When analyzing whether boys and girls knew the perpetrator or not, it was more common for them to be individuals previously unknown to the victim in all types of exploitation ($n = 84$). In cases involving the generation of sexual material, 29 victims knew the perpetrator, as did 10 cases involving touching, and 9 cases involving penetration or oral sex.

Finally, the method of contact with the victims was explored, revealing that online contact was most common for the generation of sexual materials ($n = 63$) compared to in-person contact ($n = 43$). In this type of sexual exploitation, contact often occurred through social media platforms like Instagram or messaging apps like WhatsApp. For cases involving touching, penetration, or oral sex, in-person contact was more frequent ($n = 46$) compared to online contact ($n = 35$). These interactions typically occurred in places such as streets, educational institutions, or homes.



CONCLUSIONS

THE STUDY PROVIDES, FOR THE FIRST TIME, DATA ON SEXUAL VICTIMIZATION AMONG A REPRESENTATIVE NATIONAL SAMPLE OF SPANISH ADOLESCENTS, BASED ON THEIR OWN RESPONSES. THIS SHEDS LIGHT ON A HIGHLY SOCIALLY RELEVANT ISSUE THAT REMAINS LARGELY UNKNOWN IN OUR COUNTRY.

A significant 17.8% of the young people in the sample reported experiencing some form of sexual victimization in the last year. This issue affected 11.2% of the surveyed boys and 24% of the girls in Spain.

While the majority of sexual violence victims are girls, as found in rigorous review studies worldwide³⁹, the severity of experiences of sexual violence reported by many boys, including high percentages involving penetration, cannot be overlooked and must be taken into account.

Sexual violence against children and adolescents has expanded into other realms with the use of information and communication technologies by the Spanish population, affecting 12.1% of the study sample, particularly girls.

Review studies have found little or no evidence that the availability of the Internet has increased the global prevalence of in-person sexual violence against children and adolescents. In fact, since Internet use has been increasing, international



It is crucial to emphasize that violence against children and adolescents is rooted in the inequality arising from the age asymmetry between the victim and perpetrator, rather than solely the gender of the victims. However, from an intersectional perspective, gender does increase the risk of sexual violence among girls and adolescents.

crime statistics have shown a steady decline in such incidents⁴⁰. Thus, it appears that the Internet provides a new environment where other forms of sexual violence against children and adolescents can occur, distinct and independent from those occurring in the offline environment.

Sexual solicitations refer to cases where someone has used electronic means to address sexual questions to a boy or girl, or has attempted to discuss sex online when they did not want to. This form of electronic sexual violence was reported by 17.1% of girls and 5.2% of boys.

On the other hand, online grooming involves an adult manipulating or deceiving a boy or girl through the Internet to send sexual material or to meet them in person. In this case, 4.2% of girls and 1.8% of boys had been affected. Both are criminal forms of online harassment where an adult contacts a child or adolescent to gradually gain their trust and then involve them in sexual activity, either online or in person.

(39) Stoltenborgh, M., Van Ijzendoorn, M. H., Euser, E. M., & Bakermans-Kranenburg, M. J. (2011). A global perspective on child sexual abuse: Meta-analysis of prevalence around the world. *Child Maltreatment, 16*(2), 79-101.

(40) Ly, T., Murphy, L., & Fedoroff, J. P. (2016). Understanding online child sexual exploitation offenses. *Current Psychiatry Reports, 18*, 1-9.

An important and under-researched issue in Spain is sexual exploitation, affecting 2.5% of girls and 2.3% of boys. This is a global problem that victimizes children and young people worldwide, with a prevalence ranging between 1.5% and 2% among European adolescents⁴¹ and 4.9% among boys and girls in the United States⁴². Therefore, Spain appears to align closely with the European reality, albeit at the higher end of the range.

This specific form of sexual victimization not only involves the exploitation of the boy or girl as a sexual object but also serves commercial purposes, generating profits for the exploitative figure through the exchange of sex for money, gifts, attention, or other rewards that fulfill the basic needs of young people⁴³. The prevalence of sexual exploitation is higher in developing countries due to systemic and cultural risk factors⁴⁴, but it has increasingly been recognized as a significant issue in developed countries such as Switzerland, Norway, and Sweden⁴⁵, and now also in Spain.



(41) Benavente, B., Díaz-Faes, D. A., Ballester, L., & Pereda, N. (2022). Commercial sexual exploitation of children and adolescents in Europe: A systematic review. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse, 23*(5), 1529-1548.

(42) Ulloa, E. C., Salazar, M., & Monjaras, L. (2016). Prevalence and correlates of sex exchange among a nationally representative sample of adolescents and young adults. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse, 25*(5), 524-537.

(43) McDonald, A. R., & Middleton, J. (2019). Applying a survival sex hierarchy to the commercial sexual exploitation of children: A trauma-informed perspective. *Journal of Public Child Welfare, 13*(3), 245-264.

(44) Miller-Perrin, C., & Wurtele, S. K. (2017). Sex trafficking and the commercial sexual exploitation of children. *Women & Therapy, 40*(1-2), 123-151.

(45) Benavente, B., Díaz-Faes, D. A., Ballester, L., & Pereda, N. (2022). Commercial sexual exploitation of children and adolescents in Europe: A systematic review. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse, 23*(5), 1529-1548.

PROPOSALS

THE FINDINGS OF THIS STUDY HAVE IMPORTANT IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIETAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE PROBLEM, AS WELL AS FOR PROFESSIONAL TRAINING, CLINICAL PRACTICE, RESEARCH, AND PUBLIC POLICIES. THIS WILL PROMOTE IMPROVEMENTS IN THE TREATMENT OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE VICTIMS IN OUR COUNTRY

INFORMATION AND GUIDANCE

The high rates of victimization found in the study must translate into specific actions to inform the Spanish population about the reality of sexual violence affecting children and adolescents:

- Clear information about available resources in each region for cases of sexual victimization should be disseminated through formal channels in public administrations, as well as through associations and social entities.
- In Spain, various protocols and guidelines exist for responding to cases of sexual violence, whether one is a victim or a witness. These should be publicized to facilitate immediate protection through the timely activation of state and local reporting and intervention protocols.
- It will be necessary to develop support and accompanying guides for the families of victims, highlighting appropriate actions and words to use, as well as those to avoid.



AWARENESS AND COMMUNICATION

The victimization rates recorded should contribute to raising awareness among the Spanish population about the importance of protecting children and adolescents from sexual violence, whether it is caused by individuals in their environment or arises from the use of information and communication technologies:

- Awareness efforts should focus on conducting a national social awareness campaign that sheds light on the reality of the problem, highlighting its prevalence and the severity of its effects on the development of children and adolescents, utilizing various media channels.
- Local administrations should organize activities in community spaces such as talks, workshops, or film screenings to educate the population about sexual violence. These activities should provide guidelines on how to act in cases of suspicion or confirmed incidents.

TRAINING AND CAPACITY BUILDING

Through the recognition by the European Parliament of sexual abuse and exploitation as serious violations of fundamental rights, and the approval of Directive 2011/93/EU on combating sexual abuse and exploitation of children and child pornography, there is an obligation to train professionals in the field of sexual violence against children and adolescents. This specialized training is further reinforced at the national level, specifically in Spain, by Organic Law 8/2021 on Comprehensive Protection for Children and Adolescents against Violence (LOPVI):

- Training on sexual victimization should be integrated into the national curricula of all university degrees and specialties whose professionals will have contact with minors.
- Teachers and educational staff should receive training to identify signs of sexual victimization and understand how to respond effectively to suspicions. This training should facilitate early detection of these cases and educate them about the reporting process, ensuring that victims are immediately protected through the activation of timely reporting and intervention protocols.
- Comprehensive sexual education programs should be introduced nationwide in the school curriculum. These programs should address topics such as consent, personal boundaries, and prevention of violence, tailored to the age of the children and adolescents.

RESOURCES AND SUPPORT ENVIRONMENTS

Those responsible for designing and implementing public policies must acknowledge the existence of this issue and allocate resources to evidence-based violence prevention and victim treatment strategies:

- Safe spaces should be promoted in contexts where children and adolescents interact, such as educational centers, recreational spaces, or health centers, so that they can freely express their concerns or report instances of abuse. All professionals have the responsibility to ensure that their work environment is physically, psychologically, socially, and digitally safe at all times.
- It will be important to establish comprehensive care centers where a multidisciplinary team of expert professionals works together to provide counseling, psychological support, and legal assistance to victims of sexual abuse and their families. These centers should follow the standards of the Barnahus model⁴⁶.

RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

Article 37, “Actions of the Council of Universities in the fight against violence against children and adolescents,” of Organic Law 8/2021, dated June 4, on comprehensive protection of children and adolescents against violence, places Spain at a timely juncture to undertake studies in this area. Simultaneously, the European Society of Criminology⁴⁷ has underscored the importance of national victimization surveys to evaluate the impact of public policies on victims of violence. These surveys encompass inquiries about the services accessed and the satisfaction levels of children, adolescents, and their families with the resources provided, among other aspects:

- The study presented here should be conducted regularly, enabling the evaluation of the implementation of measures and resources concerning the prevention of sexual violence in Spain. This will also facilitate monitoring any fluctuations in reported cases resulting from these measures, whether these are increases or decreases.

(46) You can find the joint project of the European Union and the Council of Europe titled “Barnahus in Spain - Strengthening child-friendly justice through effective cooperation and coordination between different Barnahus services in the regions of Spain” at the following link: <https://www.coe.int/es/web/children/barnahus-spain>.

(47) Bijleveld, C. (2023). European Criminology needs European Data: The case for a pan-European crime and victimization survey. *European Journal of Criminology*, 14773708231174658.

- Evidence-based prevention and treatment programs that incorporate individual and group therapies customized for various age groups and specific needs should be developed. These should include tailored interventions for children and adolescents with disabilities, sexual minorities, and diverse ethnic and social backgrounds.
- Continuous collaboration between academia and agencies responsible for implementing prevention and treatment policies and programs should be promoted. The aim of such collaboration is to enhance the effectiveness of interventions and public policies through rigorous evaluation and increased availability of data for research. This approach will support ongoing social improvement grounded in evidence.



Children and young people are rights holders, not merely recipients of care, and their voices must be included in victimization surveys conducted in Spain. Hearing directly from them about the various forms of sexual violence they experience is a crucial initial step for prevention and early intervention efforts. This approach not only centers on the victim but also considers their surrounding environment.

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