



JDiBrief – Crime

Sexual abuse in schools: CRIME OVERVIEW (2 of 5)

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Child sexual abuse occurs predominantly in domestic settings, most commonly in the offender's or victim's home. A smaller but significant proportion of incidents occur in organisational settings, including schools.

Concerns about sexual abuse in schools have grown as a result of numerous inquiries into institutional child abuse, increased public attention to sexual abuse generally, and some highly publicised cases involving teachers and other school personnel. No reliable data are presently available on the absolute or relative prevalence of sexual abuse in, or related to, schools.

DEFINITION: Child sexual abuse is generally defined by law as any sexual behaviour involving a person under the age of consent – usually 16 years of age. It encompasses a diverse set of problem behaviours, including exposure of genitals, producing or showing sexual images, sexual harassment, grooming and procuring, and contact offences ranging from sexual touching through to violent sexual assaults causing physical injury and in rare cases death.

In schools, sexual involvement of a staff person with any student, regardless of age, is likely to be prohibited by school policy, teacher registration rules, and sometimes also by law.

Sexual activity is common among children and especially among adolescents, and is rarely harmful. It is usually considered sexually abusive when there is a significant age-gap (usually 3-5 years), when it involves violence, aggression, or undue pressure, or when it occurs despite the unwillingness of one or more of those involved.

THE PROBLEM: A clear conception of the problem is the starting point for effective prevention. In schools, the most likely problem will be abuse among students themselves. This is because there will usually be many more students than staff, and particularly in high schools because many students will have reached or be approaching puberty and will not yet have established adequate behavioural controls. Sexual teasing, bullying and 'initiations' have historically been common in schools and other youth-oriented organisations.

Abuse of a student by a known adult is the next most likely problem. Both the opportunity and the conducive conditions are greatest for those adults whose roles involve sustained close involvement with students, particularly those that involve care of especially-vulnerable students (e.g. marginalised, maltreated or disabled children), and those that involve emotional or physical intimacy (e.g. counselling, pastoral, nursing, or coaching roles).

Abuse of a student by a school visitor or passer-by is probably least likely, though perhaps the most dangerous because of possible abduction and physical harm.

It is important to avoid stereotyped conceptions of the problem. Children are much more likely to be abused by someone they already have a close relationship with than by a stranger. It is possible that a determined serial abuser may surreptitiously seek employment or other involvement in the school in order to create opportunities to abuse, but it is probably much more likely that abuse-related motivations arise for the first time during the course of the potential abuser's involvement with a particular child or children.