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The Prevalence of Unfounded Suspicions of Child Sexual Abuse in Finland

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### Abstract

Scholars and investigators of child sexual abuse (CSA) have long pointed out that some CSA allegations may be unfounded. However, no population-based estimates of the occurrence of false allegations has previously been undertaken. The present study presents the first population-based prevalence estimates of unfounded allegations of CSA. We analyzed two data collections: first, a representative sample of adolescents ( $N = 11,364$ ; aged 12 or 15 years), and second, a representative sample of adults ( $N = 2,484$ , mean age 34 years). Experiences of CSA were reported by 2.4% of adolescents and 8.9% of adults. Unfounded suspicions of CSA (e.g., someone falsely believing CSA had taken place) were reported by 1.5% of adolescents and 1.9% of adults. Of the unfounded suspicions, 14.5% and 9.1%, for adolescents and adults, respectively, had been reported to the authorities. The prevalence of CSA seems to decrease while more and more allegations reach the authorities. Whereas a low threshold for reporting suspicions of CSA to authorities is in the interest of protecting as many actual CSA victims as possible, more research is needed to separate unfounded vs. founded allegations to minimize the risk of erroneous conclusions in investigations of CSA.

*Keywords:* Child Sexual Abuse, False Allegations, Investigations of Child Sexual Abuse, Sexual Abuse, Forensic Investigations, Allegations of Child Sexual Abuse

### The Prevalence of Unfounded Suspicions of Child Sexual Abuse in Finland

Child sexual abuse (CSA) emerged in the public debate in the 1980's and has since been acknowledged as a serious problem with often detrimental consequences for the victims (Molnar, Buka, & Kessler, 2001; Rehan, Antfolk, Johansson, Jern, & Santtila, 2017; Rehan, Antfolk, Johansson, & Santtila, 2016). During the last decades, a large number of studies estimating the prevalence of CSA have been published. According to a meta-analysis by Stoltenborgh and colleagues (Stoltenborgh, van Ijzendoorn, Euser, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2011), the overall prevalence of CSA across 217 studies was 12.7% (18.0% for women and 7.6% for men). The authors concluded that there were some regional differences and that prevalence estimates vary largely due to differences in both research methodology and local definitions of CSA (see also Pereda, Guilera, Forns, & Gómez-Benito, 2009). Accurate prevalence estimates are crucial for decision making in CSA cases (e.g., Faust, Bridges and Ahern, 2009; Tadei, Pensar, Corander, Finnilä, Santtila, & Antfolk, 2017).

According to a systematic review (Kloppen, Haugland, Svedin, Mæhle, & Breivik, 2016), current prevalence rates of contact abuse vary slightly between the Nordic countries, with abuse being reported by 2.1% of boys and 7.3% of girls in Finland (Ellonen, Kääriäinen, Salmi & Sariola, 2008), 4% of boys and 17% of girls in Denmark (Helweg-Larsen, Schütt, & Larsen, 2009), 6.3% of boys and 17.6% of girls in Iceland (Gault-Sherman, Silver, & Sigfúsdóttir, 2009), 3.2% of boys and 18.3% of girls in Norway (Steine et al., 2012), and 5.1% of boys and 20.5% of girls in Sweden (Svedin & Priebe, 2009). Studies of prevalence in the US (e.g., Finkelhor & Jones, 2012) and in Finland (Fagerlund, Peltola, Kääriäinen, Ellonen & Sariola, 2014; Laaksonen, Sariola, Johansson, et al., 2011) suggest that although the number of CSA suspicions reported to authorities has increased, the actual prevalence is *decreasing*.

For instance, large school surveys conducted in Finland indicate that between the years 1988, 2008, and 2013, experiences of CSA have decreased markedly (Fagerlund, Peltola, Kääriäinen, Ellonen & Sariola, 2014). During the same time period, more cases of suspected CSA have come to the attention of Finnish authorities, according to crime statistics (2014). This is likely due to increased awareness of the prevalence and consequences of CSA also reflected in legal changes in Finland making it obligatory for all personnel working with children to make police reports when suspecting CSA (Child Welfare Act), as well as to other changes in responding to CSA allegations (see for instance, Korkman, Pakkanen & Laajasalo, 2017).

Although the scientific body of knowledge on CSA prevalence rates in a variety of populations grows, no studies assessing the prevalence of *unfounded* suspicions of CSA on representative samples have been published. When attempting to improve decision making in CSA investigations, it would be important to have even rough estimates of the prevalence of unfounded suspicions (see also Herman, 2009).

### **Unfounded Allegations of Child Sexual Abuse**

Some authors have suggested that false or unfounded suspicions may be rather common (Faust, Bridges & Ahern, 2009), and that forensic evaluators may assess a high proportion of wrongful suspicions to be true, that is, make false positive mistakes (see Herman, 2009). In fact, the larger the proportion of unfounded CSA suspicions is among all CSA allegations, the greater is the risk that children and suspects become wrongly assessed as CSA victims and perpetrators. For children, their families, and persons wrongfully accused of committing CSA, the consequences of wrongful suspicions can be very harmful.

Unfounded suspicions are situations where adults (e.g., parents, teachers or authorities) suspect that a child has been sexually abused when, in fact, no abuse has taken place. Unfounded suspicions may come about for various reasons. Parents or other adults may mistakenly suspect CSA and interpret a particular behavior on the part of the child as confirming the suspicion, or adults may engage in suggestive discussions with their children which may unintentionally result in a false allegation being created (see e.g., Korkman, Juusola & Santtila, 2014). There are even cases where a parent may intentionally coach a child to claim that they have been sexually abused for monetary gain or in an attempt to influence, for example, custody proceedings. In fact, 80% of professionals working with CSA allegations report having encountered cases where they believed that a child had been coached by someone to say that they had been abused (Faller, 2007). A majority of these professionals believed that the coaching was related to a custody dispute. Finally, children themselves may by mistake give a statement that indicates abuse where no abuse has taken place by mistake (Hershkowitz, 2001). No previous study has, to our best knowledge, attempted to assess the prevalence of unfounded CSA allegations based on information provided directly by the individuals these allegations have concerned.

### **The Current Study**

In the current study, we investigated the prevalence of unfounded allegations of CSA. To do this, we used data from two different population-based cross-sectional samples in Finland to assess the occurrence of unfounded CSA suspicions. In Study 1, we analyzed responses from a representative sample of adolescents (12- and 15-year-olds). In Study 2, we analyzed a sample of adults providing retrospective information.

We believe that sampling both children and adolescents as well as adults is advantageous. The way in which children and adolescents understand and interpret CSA experiences may differ from that of adults (London, Bruck, Wright & Ceci, 2008; Malloy, Brubacher & Lamb, 2011), that is, they might not interpret as abuse at the time something that they would later come to understand differently. Also, while an adolescent sample could be perceived as preferable to an adult sample due to memory issues – with the event of interest being more recent and the memories thereof thus likely more accurate – it might also be that young participants are unaware of unfounded suspicions and only come to know them at a later point.

The analyses of the two data collections are reported separately. In both studies, participants were asked about experiences of CSA and also about experiences of unfounded allegations, that is, situations where adults have suspected that the respondent had been sexually abused, although this was not the case.

## **Study 1**

### **Method**

#### **Participants**

The adolescent data collection consists of 11,364 responses from the Finnish Child Victim Survey (FCVS) 2013 (Fagerlund et al., 2014; Fagerlund & Ellonen, 2016), previously conducted in 2008 (e.g., Ellonen et al., 2008; Ellonen & Pösö, 2011). Parts of the questionnaire, including questions about parental violence towards their children and experiences of sexual abuse were first asked in 1988 (Sariola, 1990; Sariola & Uutela, 1994). A stratified cluster sampling was used to collect responses from Finnish- and Swedish-speaking sixth and ninth graders (approximately 12 and 15 years old, respectively) separately and using class as the sample unit. The four

samples were stratified according to province, municipality type, and school size. Depending on the school size one to three classes were asked to provide responses. Sampling and weighting of the data were conducted by Statistics Finland (Tilastokeskus).

The sample consisted of 686 schools, 987 classes and 21,825 pupils. Before and during the data collection 61 schools refused to participate, mostly because participation was seen as being too time-consuming. In addition, some of the schools did not provide their pupils the opportunity for participation regardless of their enrollment, and the expected number of responses is thus derived from the number of children in the participating 483 schools. Compared to the expected participation, 75% of the pupils responded. The schools that did not participate are from all over Finland and represent all statistical municipality types. After the school's decision to participate, children themselves made the final decision on whether or not they wanted to respond to the questionnaire.

### **Ethical Permission**

The procedure followed the guidelines of Finnish research ethics in anonymous social research conducted in a school setting (Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity, 2009). For a full ethics statement, see the Appendix.

### **Measures and Procedures**

The data collection was executed as an internet-based questionnaire. The questionnaire was published on the website of the research project that also provided information about several help organizations for children. The children answered the questionnaire during a class held by a teacher who had received specific instructions for presenting the questionnaire.

The questionnaire was developed for the Finnish Child Victim Survey 2008 and repeated with only minor changes in 2013. In developing the FCVS 2008 study design, several internationally validated question modules were utilized to create measures particularly suitable for Finnish children (e.g., victimization Finkelhor, 2007; 2008; witnessing violence Mossige & Stefansen, 2007; and sexual and physical victimization Helweg-Larsen, 2008, Sariola 1990). The questionnaire was commented by experts on children's psychology and rights, as well as tested and commented by 60 children before the actual survey.

The use of a computer-based self-administered questionnaire has been seen as supportive of the respondent's privacy and anonymity, since the children did not have to report their experiences to an interviewer (Helweg-Larsen & Larsen 2003). Since the survey was last conducted in 2013, the website created for this purpose does not exist anymore. It was, however, available for the children to look for more information and supportive organizations almost a year after surveying.

Both data collections included items concerning various socio-demographic factors as well as items concerning experiences of physical and sexual abuse. In the adolescent data collection, the question assessing experiences of CSA was "Do you have experiences of sexual advances or sexual interaction with an adult or a person who is at least 5 years older than you?" and could be answered "yes" or "no". The question did thus not explicitly ask whether the respondent regarded the experience as abusive and, consequently, the responses are likely to include sexual experiences from voluntary relationships. The questions thus reflect the Finnish penal code (RL 20. chapter, §6), which legally defines CSA. Because the age of consent in Finland is 16 and all children answering the survey (aged 12 or 15) are under that age a sexual experience with anyone five years or older constitutes a clear case of CSA.



In light of the legal definition it was deemed that excluding the cases where the adolescent did not regard the event as abusive (such a question was also posed) would be too exclusive. Considering the fact that child sexual abusers often may succeed in becoming very close to their child victims and the victim may re-evaluate the experience as abusive only at a later stage. Those who answered "yes" to having sexual experiences with an adult got a follow-up question "What happened?" with the possibility to choose multiple options ranging from suggestions, exhibitionism and touching to sexual intercourse.

The five-year-rule also excludes sexual experiences between children of the same age, which in some jurisdictions could, nevertheless, be regarded as sexual abuse<sup>1</sup> (notably some US states; see, for example Gurley, Kuehnle & Kirkpatrick, 2009; Zilney & Zilney, 2009).

The participants were also asked if they had told anyone about the experience ("Have you told anyone about this first sexual experience with the more than five years older person?") The participant could choose one or several of the following response options: mother, father, sister, brother, friend, teacher, police, school nurse, school welfare officer, social worker, I have not told anyone, someone else, who?). The participants were then asked how the person they had told had reacted, and the response options to this question included making a report to the CPS or the police. Responses indicating that the participant had either her/himself told a social worker or the police or that someone else had made a report to CPS or the police were classified as a case having been reported to the authorities and assessed.

The question assessing experiences of being subject to unfounded suspicions was phrased "Has any adult at any time suspected you had been sexually abused even

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<sup>1</sup> There were a few cases where the child and the other part both were under puberty but an age difference of 5 years was reported (e.g., 7 years and 12 years) and these were not counted as CSA experiences.

though this has never happened?" The response options were "Yes, but the matter was clarified and was not reported to the authorities", "Yes, the matter was investigated by the authorities" and "No".

The responses "Yes, the matter was investigated by the authorities" were added to the previous responses concerning CSA where the participants had indicated they had themselves told a social worker or the police or that someone else had made a report to CPS or the police. All of these responses together were counted to identify the proportions of founded and unfounded allegations that (to the child's knowledge) were brought forward to the authorities.

### Results

Of all the participants, 2.4% reported CSA, as defined by sexual experiences with a person 5 or more years older. The proportion was higher for girls (3.6%) compared to boys (1.0%),  $\chi^2[1] = 79.30, p < .001, Z = .08 [.06, .10]$ .

Only 13.3% of the children answered that the CSA had been reported to the authorities. This proportion did not vary as a function of age group. The proportion of CSA cases that had been reported to authorities was 14.7% among 12-year-olds and 13.1% among 15-year-olds,  $\chi^2[1] = 0.07, p = .793, Z = .00 [-0.01, .02]$ . The proportion of CSA cases that had been reported to authorities did not differ between girls and boys,  $\chi^2[1] = 0.68, p = .409, Z = .00 [-.01, .03]$ .

The prevalence of unfounded suspicions of CSA, defined as situations in which an adult had suspected that the respondent had been sexually abused when this was not the case (according to the respondent) was 1.5%. This includes both cases that were reported to the authorities and cases that were not. The proportion of unfounded suspicions was higher among 15-year-olds (2.6%) compared to 12-year-

olds (0.7%),  $\chi^2[2] = 69.17, p < .001, Z = .08 [.06, .10]$ . The proportion of unfounded suspicions was higher among girls (2.5%) as compared to boys (0.6%),  $\chi^2[1] = 67.22, p < .001, Z = .08 [.06, .10]$ . Of the unfounded suspicions, 14.5% had, according to the respondents, led to an investigation by the authorities.

Table 1

*Number of Founded and Unfounded Allegations of Child Sexual Abuse in Study 1*

	Reported to authorities	Not reported to authorities	Total
Abused*	34	222	256
Non-abused	24	10890	10914

*Note.* \* Defined as the adolescents reporting they have had sexual experiences with persons at least 5 years older. The definition of sexual experiences applied was broad, including suggestions or requests with a sexual content. Eight children had both reported having experienced CSA that had come to the attention of the authorities and been suspected of having been abused when this was unfounded. Therefore, the total number of cases in the table does not match the total number of participants in the present study.

Table 1 shows the proportions of reports to the authorities separately for abused and non-abused children for the adolescent data collection. The prevalence of unfounded suspicions reported to the authorities was 0.2% ( $n = 24$  out of the 10914 non-abused). This suggests that 41.4% ( $24/[34 + 24]$ ) of suspicions reported to the authorities were unfounded. It should be noted that eight children both reported CSA *and* unfounded suspicions which means that these individuals are counted twice in the table.

## Study 2

### Method

## **Participants**

The adult data collection included reports from 2,484 individuals (Mean age = 33.8 years,  $SD = 9.2$ ). Data were obtained from the Finn-Kin study (Albrecht et al, 2014), which gathered information on several sex and family-related topics from a population-based sample of Finnish men and women. In the Finn-Kin study, a random set of addresses were obtained from the Central Population Registry of Finland that keeps records of all individuals living in Finland. An invitation letter (and reminders) were sent to these addresses during the final months of 2013. The invitation letter described the purpose of the study and participation was incentivized by including participants in a gift-card raffle. Of the 3,362 individuals that partook in the study, only a sub-sample were asked the questions pertinent to the current study. The reason for this was simply to shorten the otherwise very long survey. Because the selection of presented questions was not linked to any prior questions regarding sexual experiences, this process is unlikely to have introduced any sampling bias in the study (Albrecht et al, 2014).

## **Ethical Permission**

The Finn-kin study obtained ethical permission from the Ethical Review Board at the Department of Psychology and Logopedics at Åbo Akademi University prior to collection of data.

## **Measures**

Experienced sexual abuse was measured by responses to the statement “I believe I have been sexually abused”. The participants responded to this question on a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5 where 1 indicated that they had never experienced any kind of sexual abuse in their childhood whereas 5 indicated that sexual abuse had taken place repeatedly. We coded all responses but 1 indicating experienced sexual

abuse, and 1 indicating not having experienced sexual abuse. Whether someone had ever suspected sexual abuse was measured with the question “Has anyone ever suspected that you were sexually abused as a child?” This question had two possible answers: “Yes” and “No”. Individuals who answered “Yes” to this question were also asked “Was the suspected abuse investigated by the police or other authorities?”. This question could also be answered “Yes” or “No”.

### Results

The percentage indicating experiences of CSA in the adult data collection was 8.9%. To compare this percentage with that of the adolescent data collection (2.4%), we used a bootstrapping procedure to obtain confidence intervals (95%CI) for each percentage. The proportion of participants reporting sexual abuse was clearly lower in the adolescent data collection, 95%CI = 2.1 - 2.7, compared to the adult data collection, 95%CI = 7.8 - 10.0. As in the adolescent data collection, the proportion of reported CSA in the adult data was higher among female respondents (10.4%) than male respondents (5.9%),  $\chi^2[1] = 13.72, p < .001, Z = .07 [.04, .11]$ , suggesting a consistent sex-difference across both data collections.

In 13.9% of the cases, the experienced CSA had been reported to authorities. Of the respondents, 4.7% reported that at some point someone had suspected them to have been sexually abused.

Of the 221 individuals that had experienced CSA, 72 (32.6%) reported that someone also had (correctly) suspected the abuse. Of the remaining 2219 individuals reporting no sexual abuse, 44 (1.9%) reported that someone had (incorrectly) suspected abuse. This suggests that 37.9% ( $44/[72 + 44]$ ) of cases where someone had suspected sexual abuse were unfounded. Of participants reporting that someone had

suspected abuse, we also asked whether this suspicion had been reported to the authorities. A total of 14 suspicions had been reported the authorities and 28.6% (4/[10 + 4]) of these suspicions were unfounded.

Table 2

*Number of Founded and Unfounded Suspicions of Child Sexual Abuse in Study 2*

	Someone suspected Abuse	No one suspected abuse	Total
Abused	72*	149	221
Non-abused	44	2219	2368

*Note.* \*In 13.9% of the cases, the experienced CSA had been reported to authorities.

The prevalence of unfounded suspicions did not differ between samples when confidence intervals obtained from a bootstrapping procedure were compared, 95%CI = 1.3 - 1.7 for adolescents, and 95%CI = 1.4 - 2.5 for adults. Also in the adult data set, the likelihood of unfounded suspicions was higher among girls than boys  $\chi^2[1] = 8.28$ ,  $p < .004$ ,  $Z = .06$  [.02, .10]. Of the unfounded suspicions, 9.1% had led to an investigation by the authorities.

## Discussion

The present study contributes the first population-based prevalence estimates for unfounded suspicions of CSA. Concerns about unfounded suspicions have previously been raised internationally (e.g., Trocmé & Bala, 2005), but few studies have investigated their prevalence empirically. In the study, we used two data sets with responses from large-scale cross sectional samples to investigate the prevalence of unfounded CSA suspicions. Although no method is likely to be flawless when

attempting to assess base rates in this context, Faust and his colleagues (2009) argue that the most promising method is through large anonymous retrospective population-based surveys.

### **Prevalence of Unfounded Child Sexual Abuse Allegations**

The key finding of the present study is the prevalence estimate of unfounded suspicions of CSA. The prevalence of all unfounded suspicions of CSA was 1.5% in the adolescent sample and 1.9% in the adult sample. The prevalence of unfounded suspicions reported to the authorities was 0.2% in the adolescent sample and also 0.2% in the adult sample. However, since the questions posed in the two samples were not identical, whether or not the prevalence of unfounded allegations are decreasing cannot be reliably established.

In both samples studied, participants did report experiences of an adult believing they had been abused where this was not the case. The results of study 1 also show that some of the unfounded suspicions reported reached the authorities. It should be noted, however, that the current study provides no information on the authorities to which the suspicions were reported or on the consequences of the reports.

We also note that, the difference in CSA prevalence between the two data collections echoes previous findings suggesting that CSA is decreasing in Finland (e.g., Fagerlund et al. 2014). It should be noted that although the prevalence of CSA has decreased, the prevalence of unfounded CSA is similar across the two studies. This could indicate a lowering thresholds for suspecting and reporting CSA, potentially increasing the relative proportion of unfounded suspicions that reach authorities. Indeed, the proportion of unfounded suspicions of CSA reaching the authorities were higher in Study 1 than in Study 2. This is likely to be a consequence

of the increased attention to the problem of CSA, and while it is positive that there is a growing sensitivity to report suspicions as this increases the likelihood of catching the real cases, it raises high demands on the part of the investigators to correctly identify also unfounded allegations.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

We consider it important that future research investigates the circumstances in which unfounded suspicions arise and aim to understand, for instance, which types of events lead to unfounded suspicions, who the suspecting adult is, and the procedural consequences of these suspicions (i.e., the investigative process and the outcome of that investigation).

Whereas the results of the current study are preliminary and leave many questions unanswered, results indicate that unfounded suspicions *can* be researched through self-report studies and that there is a need to focus on this topic. Further research is needed on the characteristics and dynamics of unfounded suspicions, so that these can be correctly assessed and identified at an as early as possible stage. Also, the validity of questions used to measure unfounded allegations should be investigated in future research.

Importantly, the present results indicate that in the Finnish context, all children that are investigated for alleged CSA have not been abused. Obtaining accurate estimates of the prevalence of unfounded suspicions in various samples as well as further information on the characteristics of unfounded vs. founded suspicions is an important step in attempting to avoid harmful false positive as well as false negative decisions within investigations of child sexual abuse.

### **Limitations**



The results of the current study are preliminary. As the questionnaires used in both studies were constructed for looking at prevalence and disclosure rates of real abuse cases, the number of questions about unfounded suspicions were limited.

These findings from Finland can not be generalized internationally. Legislation, social policies, and societal discussions concerning CSA differ significantly across countries. For instance, the fact that all school children at a young age in Finland receive sexual health classes likely contributes to children's understanding of both actual experiences of CSA and (unfounded) suspicions of CSA. We thus recommend that studies exploring this issue are carried out in various cultural and legislative settings.

Exploring unfounded suspicions of CSA by asking the children themselves is obviously hampered by the fact that children are not always aware of all instances where adults may have suspected CSA but this was not communicated to the children.

In a small number of cases ( $n = 8$ ), the respondent reported both CSA experiences and unfounded suspicions by an adult. This can reflect the true state of affairs, that is, the child has experienced abuse in one instance and an unfounded suspicion in another instance. It could also be that one of the responses is erroneous or that both reports refer to the same event where its interpretation differs between the respondents and adults around them. It should also be noted that in Study 1 there were some respondents who left the question about unfounded suspicions unanswered, and that the population giving this particular information is slightly smaller than the overall sample. This needs to be taken into account, particularly when dealing with such a relatively uncommon phenomenon.

In the adult sample, it could be argued that memory issues hamper the recollection of old experiences, but on the other hand, the respondents do possess an

adult understanding of CSA and CSA suspicions, which also can explain the higher proportion of abuse reported in Study 2 compared to in Study 1. From this point of view, the possibility to use both samples when exploring this question was an asset. The similarity of the unfounded suspicion-rates does seem to indicate that there is a real tendency underlying the results.

### **Conclusions**

The current study presents the first prevalence estimates of unfounded allegations of CSA. The similarity between the two data collections increases the credibility of the estimates presented. The findings of current study also suggest that a relatively high proportion of cases, where someone has suspected that a child has been the victim of abuse, or reported such suspicions to the authorities, may be unfounded. As society has become more aware of CSA as a phenomenon, the threshold for reporting suspicions to the authorities has been lowered. Whereas a low threshold for reporting suspicions of CSA to authorities is in the interest of protecting as many actual CSA victims as possible, and allowing offenders to be prosecuted, this can also result in more unfounded suspicions. More research is needed to separate unfounded vs. founded allegations to minimize the risk of erroneous conclusions in investigations of CSA. We finally note that although unfounded suspicions are relatively prevalent in the currently studied samples, most cases of actual abuse are not reported to authorities.

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