

# Prevalence of Various Forms of Child Abuse Among College-Going Young Adults in Urban Chennai—A cross sectional Study

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** Child abuse is violation of the basic human right. It leaves behind a negative impact on the child's physical and mental health. In developing countries like India where the focus is on control of communicable diseases, child abuse goes unnoticed and grossly under-reported.

**Aim of the study:** To estimate the prevalence of child abuse and its various forms, neglect, emotional abuse, physical abuse and sexual abuse among college-going young adults (18-24 years) in urban Chennai.

**Materials and Methods:** A cross sectional study was conducted among 485 young adults (18-24 years) in colleges of three zones of Chennai, Tamil Nadu, selected by multistage sampling method. Data was collected using a self-administered, semi-structured questionnaire based on 'A study on child abuse in India 2007 by Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India'. Descriptive statistics were analyzed using Statistical package for Social Sciences software version 21.

**Results and Discussion:** Of the 485 participants, 85.4% reported abuse when they were less than 18 years old. Neglect was experienced by 52.5% of participants, emotional abuse by 35.5%, physical abuse by 62.7% and sexual abuse by 36.3%. Though the findings of many studies done on abuse did not complement each other, the overall prevalence of abuse was found to be higher as in this study.

**Conclusion:** Multi-dimensional approach is needed to combat the problem of child abuse. Steps to improve prompt reporting of child abuse and further explorative research on its risk factors in various settings would provide opportunities for early intervention, thus preventing its long term impact on children.

**Key words:** Child abuse · Neglect · Emotional abuse · Physical abuse · Sexual abuse

## Introduction

Children are country's future human resource. The Convention on the rights of the child, UNICEF (Article 1) defines a 'child' as a person below the age of 18, unless the laws of a particular country set the legal age for adulthood younger [1]. According to the 2011 Census, there were 440 million children below the age of 18 years who constitute 42% of India's total population. In Tamilnadu, 30.5% of people are aged below eighteen years.

According to WHO: "Child abuse or maltreatment constitutes all forms of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment or commercial or other exploitation, resulting in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power"[2]. The experiences during childhood have an impact on development of intelligence, emotions and personality.

Global status report on violence prevention developed by WHO reports that 25% of all adults were physically abused, 36% were emotionally abused and 20% of women and 7.7% of men were sexually abused as a child. It also estimated that the prevalence of child maltreatment in South East Asian region was 88% [3].

A study among children and young adults of 13 states in India conducted by Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD) in 2007 reported that

48.4% of children experienced emotional abuse, 69% physical abuse and 53.2% sexual abuse [4]. A study done among school-going adolescent girls in a semi-urban area of Delhi in 2016 by Daral et al. reported prevalence of at least any one form of abuse as 70%, neglect- 40.1%, emotional abuse- 37.9%, physical abuse- 42.6% and sexual abuse- 26.6% [5]. Another study conducted in Thrissur city among school-going adolescent students in 2019 by Manoj Therayil Kumar et al estimated the life time prevalence of abuse as 91%, Neglect- 66.9%, emotional abuse-73.4%, physical abuse-73.9% and sexual abuse- 19.9% [6].

Though violence against children is preventable, it exists in every country of the world and is considered as a way to discipline children. Large number of child sexual abuse goes unnoticed and unreported because of the innocence of the victim, abusers are usually in the trust worthy position of the child, stigma attached to the act, inaccessibility of reporting authorities and insensitivity of the investigating and the law enforcement agencies [7].

Only handful of studies are done in Tamilnadu on child abuse and those studies have focused on child sexual abuse. As the magnitude of all forms of abuse in Tamilnadu is not known, this study will throw light in that area.

## Materials and methods

The study was conducted as a college based cross sectional study among young adults (18-24 years) in three selected zones of Chennai, Tamil Nadu from July 2015 to December 2015. The aim of the study was to estimate the prevalence of child abuse and its various forms, neglect, emotional abuse, physical abuse and sexual abuse.

The collection of data from a child would require consent from the parent and since parental influence on responses of a child is unavoidable, it was decided to conduct the study among young adults. As abuse is an unpleasant experience it remains as an unforgettable memory and hence minimizes recall bias. Data collection in the house among young adults (18-24 years) would again compromise the responses and so a pre-tested, self-administered, semi

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**Received** 05 July 2021; **Accepted** 19 July 2021; **Published** 26 July 2021

structured questionnaire was used to record the responses from students at their colleges.

The students of age 18-24 years from selected colleges who were willing to participate in the study were included and attempts were not made to contact the absentees on the day of data collection and they were excluded.

The sample size was calculated using the formula for cross sectional studies:  $Z_{(1-\alpha/2)}^2 * p * q / d^2$ , where  $Z_{(1-\alpha/2)} = 1.96$  at 95% confidence interval,  $p = \text{Prevalence}$ ,  $q = 1 - p$ ,  $d = \text{Allowable error}$

The combined prevalence (p) of 47.7% was used based on the MWCD study on child abuse [4]. Considering confidence level of 95%, relative precision of 10%, with 15% excess sampling to account for non-response, sample size derived was 485.

Three zones from the 15 zones of the Corporation of Chennai and one college from each zone were chosen randomly by lots method. From each college, one third of the sample size (i.e.) 162 students were chosen by systematic random sampling. Data collection was done in the colleges after obtaining permission from The Dean/ Principal of concerned colleges, Director/ Head of the respective departments, approval from the Institute Ethics Committee and written consent from the participants.

A pre-tested, self-administered, semi structured questionnaire was used for data collection. The questionnaire was developed based on the questionnaire used in MWCD study consisting of socio demographic profile, history of child abuse which includes neglect, physical, emotional and sexual abuse. The questionnaire was modified in content and sequence according to the local needs and validated with the help of expert opinion, peer review & pilot study. It was translated into Tamil and again back translated to English to ensure that the meaning of the message conveyed did not vary.

162 students from each college were divided into batches of 40 students. They were seated with adequate space between them to ensure privacy. They were sensitized to the study topic followed by an interactive session to clarify all their queries. After the data collection, a short lecture about the rights of a child in India, how to suspect abuse in a child and helpline services available was given by the principal investigator. During individual interaction with few participants advice was given on how to overcome the after effects of child abuse and approach life in a positive manner.

The operational definitions of child abuse, neglect, emotional abuse, physical abuse and sexual abuse based on MWCD study [4]. The socio-economic status was classified based on Modified B.G. Prasad Classification, 2015.

The data was entered in Microsoft Excel and exported to Statistical Package for Social Sciences software version 21 for analysis. The answers to questions on child abuse were coded to get binomial response. Descriptive analysis was done for all variables and the frequencies noted.

## Results and Discussion

This cross sectional study conducted in three selected colleges of Chennai included 485 participants. The mean age of the study participants was 19.5 years (SD- 1.1; Range 18-23). Majority (82.1%) of the study subjects were males as data collection was done in two engineering colleges with maximum number of seats allotted to Mechanical and Civil engineering courses which were preferably taken by male students.

The socio demographic profile of the study participants is shown in the Table 1. Majority of them 62.7% lived in urban area, 91.7% followed Hindu religion, 75.7% were from Nuclear family and 77.3% had mothers who were home makers. Only 3.5% belonged to poor socio economic class as the study subjects were recruited from private colleges.

The prevalence of child abuse among study participants was 85.4% (95% CI- 81.86% - 88.14%). Shailaja Daral et al reported prevalence of at least any one form of abuse as 70% [5] while Manoj Therayil Kumar et al estimated the life time prevalence of abuse as high as 91% [6].

The prevalence of various forms of abuse is shown in Table 2. Physical abuse was the most common form of abuse experienced by 62.7% of study participants followed by neglect by 57.5%, sexual abuse by 36.3% and emotional abuse by 35.5%. The young adults in MWCD study responded that 49% had experienced emotional abuse, 46% physical abuse and 48% sexual abuse [4]. The estimated life time prevalence of physical abuse reported by Manoj Therayil Kumar et al was 73.9%, neglect- 66.9%, sexual abuse- 19.9% and emotional abuse-73.4% [6]. A study done by Sibnath Deb et al among school children of 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> standard in 2012 at Agartala observed physical violence in 21.9% of children, psychological violence in 20.9% and sexual violence in 18.1% [8]. Of the 15-19 years old adolescents recruited in a study done in Kerala by Krishnakumar et al in 2013, 35.3% had experienced any one form of sexual abuse [9]. The variation in the results could be due to lack of uniformity in study methodology, study participants, study tool used and case definition followed by different studies.

Table 3 shows the findings of the characteristics of neglect among the 279 study participants who had experienced neglect. 203(72.8%) felt that they were neglected more often by their teachers. More fault finding (18.1%) and giving less appreciation (15.3%) than the siblings were most common form of neglect by mothers. Less appreciation (24.9%), less attention (24.5%) and more fault finding (22.3%) than the other students contributed equally to the negligence of teachers.

The distribution of the characteristics of emotional abuse among the study subjects is shown in Table 4. Of the 172/485 participants who were emotionally abused, 17.1% were commented on their physical appearance, 15.1% were called by dirty or foul names, 13.2% were made fun without any cause and 12.4% were called stupid or idiot. High prevalence of emotional abuse was observed by Bhilwar M et al at Puducherry among college students in 2015 (Mocking physical appearance 47.6% calling idiot 42.8%, foul name 35.8% and made fun without cause 18.2%) [10]. This may be due the difference in the sex composition among the two studies, 17.9% females in the present study vs 55.6% in Puducherry study.

Table 5 shows the various characteristics of physical abuse in the 304 study participants. The frequency of physical abuse in this study was 34.7% responded rarely, 48% sometimes, 13.8% often and 3.3% always. The MWCD study had reported the response frequent in 14.1% and Shailaja Daral et al reported almost every day in 4.7% which are similar this study findings.

This study shows that 45% of participants had experienced physical abuse at home, 29% outside home and the rest (11.3%) both inside and outside home.

Physical abuse at home by mothers was 35.9%, 47.7% by fathers and 16.5% by siblings. In the study by Shailaja Daral et al 66.5% of physical abuse were by mothers and 21% by fathers. 90% of physical abuse outside home was by teacher. The difference may be due the sex difference of the study participants, but overall parents were the common perpetrators. Every parent want their child to excel in academic activities and use physical violence to achieve their goal.

Majority of the physical abuse was beating with stick (86.2%) and slapping (82.3%). Shailaja Daral et al recorded slapping in 97.3% and MWCD study 86% by beating with stick which is consistent with the findings of this study.

10.9% of the participants required medical treatment for physical abuse in the present study similar to 12.5% in MWCD study. 14.2% had scar left behind in their body due to physical abuse and MWCD study had similar finding of 13.5%.

Table 6 shows the characteristics of sexual abuse among 176 study participants. Showing dirty pictures was the form of sexual abuse observed in 80% of study subjects in this study while it was 19.5% in Tulir (West Bengal) study which was conducted among child domestic workers in 2006 [11], 16.8% in Tulir (Chennai) study conducted among school going children in 2006 [12] and 30.2% in MWCD study.

30.7% of the abuser exposed their private parts in this study where as it was 17.5% in Tulir (Chennai) study, 12.6% in MWCD study and 10% in study

**Table 1:** Socio demographic profile of the study participants (n=485).

Socio demographic profile		Frequency n (%)
Native place	Urban	304 (62.7)
	Rural	181 (37.3)
Religion	Hindu	445 (91.7)
	Christian	26 (5.4)
	Muslim	14 (2.9)
Type of family	Nuclear family	367 (75.7)
	Joint family	77 (15.8)
	Three generation family	41 (8.5)
Socio-economic status	Upper High	141 (29.1)
	High	127 (26.2)
	Upper Middle	126 (26)
	Lower Middle	74 (15.3)
	Poor	17 (3.5)
Mother's previous working status	Home maker	375 (77.3)
	Working	110 (22.7)

**Table 2:** Prevalence of various forms of abuse among study participants (n=285)\*.

Forms of abuse	Frequency n (%)	95% CI
Neglect	279 (57.5)	53.1% - 61.9%
Emotional abuse	172 (35.5)	31.2% -39.8%
Physical abuse	304 (62.7)	58.4% - 67%
Sexual abuse	176 (36.3)	32%- 40.6%

\*The responses are not mutually exclusive

**Table 3:** Characteristics of Neglect (n=279)\*.

S.No.	Characteristics of Neglect	Frequency n (%)
1	Perpetrator of Neglect	
	Parent	177 (63.4)
	Teacher	203 (72.8)
2	Type of Neglect	
	Neglect by Parent	
	Parent provide less attention compared to siblings	51 (10.5)
	Parent give less appreciation compared to siblings	74 (15.3)
	Parent more fault finding	88 (18.1)
	Parent provide less food	12 (2.5)
	Parent give more household work	60 (12.4)
	Neglect by Teacher	
	Teacher provide less attention compared to other students	119 (24.5)
	Teacher gives less appreciation	121 (24.9)
Teacher more fault finding	108 (22.3)	

\*The responses are not mutually exclusive

**Table 4:** Characteristics of Emotional abuse (n=172)\*.

S.No.	Nature of Emotional Abuse	Frequency n (%)
1	Calling stupid or idiot	60 (12.4)
2	Calling by dirty or foul names	73 (15.1)
3	Comment on physical appearance, face or body	83 (17.1)
4	Insult without any cause	48 (9.9)
5	Make fun without any cause	64 (13.2)

\*The responses are not mutually exclusive

by Bhilwar M et al. Child was made to expose their private parts in 18.6% of study subjects, 3.8% in Tulir (Chennai) study and 6.4% by Bhilwar M et al study.

Abuser touched the participants' private parts or made him/ her touch their private parts in 36.9% study participants while it was 54.6% in Tulir (West Bengal) study, 40% in Tulir (Chennai) study and 14.5% in MWCD study.

12.5% of sexually abused had any form of sexual intercourse but Tulir (West Bengal) study reported 20.3%, Tulir (Chennai) study 3.7% and MWCD study 5.7%.

In the present study the abusers were parents in 1.7%, siblings 2.3%, friends 57.4%, teachers 1.7%, unknown person 30.7% and others (auto driver, bus driver, cousin, girlfriend, lover, neighbor, relative, uncle and person living

**Table 5:** Characteristics of physical abuse of study participants (n=304)\*.

S.No	Characteristics of physical abuse	Frequency n (%)
1	Frequency of physical abuse	
	Rarely	106 (34.9)
	Sometimes	146 (48)
	Often	42 (13.8)
	Always	10 (3.3)
2	Place of abuse	
	Home	218 (45%)
	Outside home	141 (29.1%)
	Both places	55 (11.3%)
3	Perpetrator of abuse	
	At home	
	Mother	109 (35.9%)
	Father	104 (47.7%)
	Sibling	36 (16.5%)
	Outside home	
	Teachers	127 (90.1%)
Others (uncle, grandfather & cousin)	14 (9.9%)	
4	Method used for physical abuse	
	Beating with stick	156 (86.2%)
	Slapping	149 (82.3%)
	Pushing	39 (21.5%)
	Kicking	37 (20.4%)
	Using sharps	9 (5%)
Other methods (Beating with hands, belt, slipper, any object in hand, closed fist, pinching and branding)	23 (12.7%)	
5	Severe physical abuse	
	Required medical treatment	53 (10.9%)
	Left behind scar in their body	69 (14.2%)

\*The responses are not mutually exclusive

**Table 6:** Characteristics of sexual abuse among study participants (n=176)\*.

S.No.	Characteristics of sexual abuse	Frequency n (%)
1	Forms of sexual abuse	
	Showing dirty pictures	140 (80)
	Abuser exposed their private parts	54 (30.7)
	Child made to expose their private parts	33 (18.6)
	Abuser touched the participants' private parts or made the him/ her touch their private parts when they were a child	65 (36.9)
	Attempted any form of sexual intercourse	30 (17)
	Had any form of sexual intercourse	22 (12.5)
2	Perpetrator of sexual abuse	
	Friend	101(57.4%)
	Parent	3(1.7%)
	Sibling	4 (2.3%)
	Teacher	3(1.7%)
	Unknown person	54 (30.7%)
	Others (Auto driver, bus driver, cousin, girlfriend, lover, neighbor, relative, uncle and person living in same village)	14 (8%)

\*The responses are not mutually exclusive

in same village) in 8% of the participants who were sexually abused. According to MWCD study, 1.2% of the sexual abuse is by father, 9.8% by brothers, 35.8% by friends, 17.9% by cousin, 9.8% by strangers and 17.9% by others. The variation of prevalence between this study and the other studies may be due to difference in basic characteristics among the study participants in each study.

22 (12.5%) were sexually assaulted, of which 20 were boys and 2 were girls. In India, about 50% of children are exposed any form of sexual abuse and 20% of them face critical forms of it [13]. Patel et al reported 6% forced intercourse among eleventh standard students in Goa in 2001 [14].

This study reports that 51.7% of sexually abused disclosed it to someone. 87.4% of them disclosed to their friends, 5.3% to parents, 2.1% to siblings and 1.1% to others. The MWCD study reported that 26.8% disclosed about the abuse to someone. 35.6% informed friends, 14.4% brothers, 13.5% to sisters, 25% to others, 9.6% to police and 1.9% to teacher. The higher rate of disclosure in this study than the reference study can be because the major form sexual abuse in this study was showing dirty pictures and exhibition of private parts by the abuser which the child would find it easy to disclose rather than attempt or completed sexual intercourse.

The feelings expressed by sexually abused were hatred (55.1%), anger (33%) and fear (6.3%). Some of the other feelings were irritation, pity,

forgiveness and to beat the abuser with hands, slap or slipper them. The action taken by the victims of sexual abuse as found by Patel et al were 35% did nothing, 17% retaliated verbally, 12% ran away, 10% ended contact with abuser, 6% retaliated physically and 7% disclosed to parent/friend.

Neglect, emotional and physical abuse frequently began between 6-12 years of age in this study. NIS-4 study shows that the most common age of presentation of neglect is 6-8 years. MWCD study reported 5-12 years as most common age of presentation of emotional and physical abuse.

Sexual abuse onset was more common between 13-17 years of age. According to MWCD study, sexual abuse peaks by 12- 15 years and by Tulir (Chennai) study, the peak age was 11-15 years. So, adolescence or onset of puberty is related to onset of sexual abuse.

Child abuse was prevalent equally among both males (85.7%) and females (83.9%). There was no difference in the reporting of occurrence of child abuse between urban (85.2%) and rural (85.6%) areas. Child abuse was equally found in nuclear (85.3%), joint (88.3%) and three generation families (80.5%). The prevalence of child abuse was not influenced by the working status of the mother, home maker (85.9%) or working (83.6%).

## Conclusion

Child abuse is a dark reality and a large iceberg of it still hidden unrevealed in the community and most important is that it is preventable. Survival, health care, nutrition, education, development and safety are most fundamental rights of the child. Child abuse in any form be it mild or severe leads to physical, mental, emotional, sexual, behavioral, developmental and cognitive problem in future.

The teaching curriculum of experts who deal with child or child abuse (teachers, doctors, police, advocates) should include inculcating knowledge about child rights and its protection. The caregivers of a child should be taught about the good parenting skills. Life skill education to enhance the knowledge and capacity to deal with abuse should become an integral part of the school curriculum. Mass media propaganda can be utilized to create awareness of general public on ill effects of child abuse and how to prevent it.

The already existing child protection schemes are to be strengthened to provide prompt support and care services for victims. The punishment for those who indulge in severe forms of abuse should be severe and immediate. The various predictors or risk factors of child abuse needs to be revealed by further studies so that targeted intervention could be planned for prevention.

## Funding

No funding sources.

## Ethical Approval

The study was approved by the Institute Ethics Committee.

## Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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**How to cite this article:** Adhilakshmi AR, Evangeline Mary A, Yamuna Devi R. "Prevalence of Various Forms of Child Abuse Among College-Going Young Adults in Urban Chennai—A cross sectional Study". *Adv Practice Nurs* 6 (2021): 212