

The Next Wave: Male Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse

by David Lisak, Ph.D.*

***Editor's Note:** Over the past decade or two, as we've seen a growing number of exposes of institutionalized child sexual abuse, such as in the Catholic Church, the Horace Mann school, and the Penn State/Sandusky case, it becomes increasingly clear that while child sexual abuse is inflicted most often on little girls, it certainly has happened and is happening to a large volume of boys. As child sexual abuse expert David Lisak points out in this article, with each new revelation of another institution found to have enabled the sexual abuse of children under their care, another wave of victims is bound to come forward—and more and more of these victims happen to be boys. Dr. Lisak explores the particular ways that sexual abuse can negatively affect the male psyche, undermine a boy's sense of himself as a male and ultimately leave its fingerprints on virtually all aspects of a the male's future adult life.*

Cultural change is a very hard thing to measure when it is actually happening, especially when you are sitting squarely in the middle of that culture. But consider the following events of the past decade, each of which has raised public consciousness about male victims of childhood sexual abuse:

- The ongoing sexual abuse scandal in the Catholic Church, which has spread to other religious institutions;
- The sexual abuse scandals that have rocked other major institutions, such as the Horace Mann School and The Citadel;

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An earlier version of this article appeared in *Sexual Assault Report*, March/April 2014.

- The Sandusky case and Penn State University;
- Disclosures about personal sexual abuse experiences by public figures such as Greg Lemond, Sheldon Kennedy, R.A. Dickey, Don Lemon, Tyler Perry, and Scott Brown.

The cultural change that we appear to be witnessing, and taking part in, is a momentous shift in our collective perception and definition of masculinity. We are being confronted with, and finally acknowledging, something that has been utterly obvious but which nevertheless has long been denied and actively suppressed: boys, like all children, are vulnerable and therefore are targeted by sexual predators. And they are sexually abused in vast numbers.

Exactly what those numbers are is still subject to argument because research on the sexual abuse of males lags far behind research on the sexual abuse of females. And, crucially, it is also subject to a vexing limitation: men are extremely reluctant to disclose sexual abuse histories. They are also very prone to suppressing and denying those experiences. As a result, our methods for assessing the prevalence of childhood sexual abuse, which have largely

been refined on female population samples, do not work as well when applied to men.

As a result, prevalence estimates vary widely, from the low single digits to more than 20% of the adult male population. In general, studies in which more questions are asked, and which steer clear of labels such as “sexual abuse,”

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find higher numbers. Many of these latter studies find prevalence rates in the neighborhood of 15%, which is why the “1 in 6” statistic is now commonly referenced. Regardless of where the prevalence rate precisely falls, it is clear that there are millions of men in the United States who suffered sexual abuse as children. (A discussion and summary of research on prevalence rates is found at <https://1in6.org/the-1-in-6-statistic/>.)

Those men, like their female counterparts, suffer the long-term consequences of the childhood trauma that befell them. Male survivors are at greater risk for depression, anxiety disorders, substance abuse, sexual dysfunctions, and suicidal thoughts and impulses. Their sexual abuse histories are associated with lower academic achievement and greater difficulties in the work environment. Like so many survivors of interpersonal trauma, they are more likely to have difficulty trusting others, particularly in intimate relationships, which therefore suffer.¹

¹ Studies of the long term impact of sexual abuse on men include, for example: Boudewyn, A.C. & Liem, J.H. (1995). Childhood sexual abuse as a precursor to depression and self-destructive

In addition to these now commonly understood vulnerabilities, male survivors suffer other unique consequences. To be male and sexually abused is to grow up in a culture that defines your gender, and masculinity, as the embodiment of power and strength; that defines your gender as the antithesis of vulnerability and powerlessness, while simultaneously experiencing yourself as precisely that: utterly vulnerable and powerless. This is the conflict that confronts every male child who is sexually abused, and it is a conflict that very often haunts his life for decades. It is a conflict that often steers male survivors into a pressured denial of their vulnerability, a denial of the reality of what happened to them.²

That denial complicates everything, particularly when it intersects and actually colludes with the larger, societal denial of men's vulnerability. Male survivors are less likely than their female counterparts to willingly seek help for their difficulties. To seek help is to tacitly admit one's vulnerability. And when men do seek help, often at the behest of a partner or mandated by a court order, they are likely to encounter a service provider who shares their denial of men's vulnerability. Men's psychological and psychiatric problems are less likely to be seen as symptoms of childhood sexual abuse. Even when their depression, substance abuse, and anger are rooted directly in those traumatic events, the connections are less likely to be made.³

The good news is that we do seem to be in the midst of a momentous cultural shift in our collective definition and understanding of masculinity, and therefore of men. When Scott Brown, a male U.S. Senator—surely an exemplar of traditional masculine power—discloses that he was sexually abused as a child, we are witnessing a clear, surface manifestation of a tectonic shift. This shift has also seen increasing numbers of male athletes—

behavior in adulthood. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 8, 445–459; Briere, J. & Elliott, D.M. (2003). Prevalence and psychological sequelae of self-reported childhood physical and sexual abuse in a general population sample of men and women. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 27, 1205–1222; Briere, J., Evans, D., Runtz, M. & Wall, T. (1988). Symptomology in men who were molested as children: A comparison study. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 58(3), 457–461; Holmes, W. & Slap, G. (1998). Sexual abuse of boys: Definition, prevalence, correlates, sequelae, and management. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 280, 1855–1862.; Lisak, D. (1994). The psychological consequences of childhood abuse: Content analysis of interviews with male survivors. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 7, 525–548; Lisak, D. & Luster, L. (1994). Educational, occupational and relationship histories of men who were sexually and/or physically abused as children. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 7, 507–523; Martin, G., Bergen, H.A., Richardson, A.S., Roeger, L. & Allison, S. (2004). Sexual abuse and suicidality: Gender differences in a large community sample of adolescents. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 28, 491–503.

² See, e.g., Lisak, D. (1994) *supra* note 2; Lisak, D. (1995). Integrating a critique of gender in the treatment of male survivors of childhood abuse. *Psychotherapy*, 32, 258–269.

³ See, e.g., Gartner, R. B. (1999). *Betrayed as Boys: Psychodynamic Treatment of Sexually Abused Men*. New York: Guilford Press; Holmes, G.R., Offen, L. & Waller, G. (1997). See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil: Why do relatively few male victims of childhood sexual abuse receive help for abuse-related issues in adulthood? *Clinical Psychology Review*, 17, 69–88; Lisak, D. (1995), *supra* note 2; Sorsoli, L., Kia-Keating, M. & Grossman, F.K. (2008). “I keep that hush-hush”: Male survivors of sexual abuse and the challenges of disclosure. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 55, 333–345.

equally exemplars of masculine strength and power—publicly disclose their abuse histories.

And it is not only celebrities who are manifesting this cultural shift. The Bristlecone Project, <https://1in6.org/men/bristlecone/>, a public awareness campaign of the organization 1 in 6, <https://1in6.org>, features the full names, portraits and biographies of ordinary men from across the U.S., men who were sexually abused as children and who are willing to publicly tell their stories, eyes fully focused into the camera lens. Such a project, a public casting off of the shame and stigma associated with being a man and being sexually victimized, would have been unthinkable ten years ago.

Of course the good news, that increasing numbers of men are coming forward to seek help and services, is also a challenge. One crucial legacy of the modern women's movement is a national network of agencies that provide services to individuals who have been sexually traumatized. For decades, these agencies have provided services to women. Are they prepared for the wave of traumatized men that is now on the horizon? How many of those men will walk through the doors of an agency that is called a "rape crisis center," or a "women's health center"?

Many agencies will need to provide specialized training for staff members on the unique issues that pertain to male survivors. Fortunately, there is a body of expertise at the ready. There are organizations, now well established, that focus on the psychology of men, on specific treatment issues, and on male survivors of childhood sexual abuse.⁴

But will men walk through those doors to receive the treatment available from well-trained service providers? Anecdotal evidence from the field suggests that simply being ready to serve men will not suffice. Many men view rape crisis centers as inhospitable at best, hostile at worst. We—collectively—will need to change the perception of our network of service agencies, and that will require active outreach.

In Los Angeles, the LA Commission on Assaults Against Women (LACAAW) chose to rename itself Peace Over Violence (POV) in part to demonstrate its openness to all victims of violence, men included. POV also has launched specific initiatives aimed at inviting and serving male survivors, and now runs support groups for men.

Including men who have been sexually victimized, not just passively, but by reaching out to them, and ensuring that service providers are specifically trained to respond to male survivors; these are crucial steps that must be taken, and they are also acts of hope. The cultural shift that is allowing increasing numbers of men to acknowledge their victimization experiences, and to seek help to overcome them, holds enormous promise for positive change not only for millions of individual men, but for all of us. A culture in which men can be fully human—both strong and vulnerable—will itself be stronger.

⁴ Some resources for treating men, and specifically male survivors, include: <https://1in6.org>; <http://www.malesurvivor.org>; and <http://www.division51.org>



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