

## **Sociological Factors Influencing Sexual Abuse Among Secondary School Adolescents in Rivers State, Nigeria: Implications for Counselling**

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### **Abstract**

This study investigated sociological factors influencing sexual abuse among secondary school adolescents in Rivers State, Nigeria with a view of establishing implications for counselling. Two research questions and four hypotheses were answered and tested respectively. The study adopted ex-post facto design. As at the time of the study, the marginal estimate of the population of adolescents in Rivers State was about 1,587,864. The sample of the study comprised 1,000 adolescents. The study adopted multi-stage sampling procedure firstly, to select 10 Local Government Areas out of the 23 Local Government Areas in Rivers State, Nigeria. The instrument for the study is Contact and Non-contact Sexual Abuse Inventory (CNSAI). This is a non-cognitive instrument which was adapted from Finkelhor's Sexual Abuse Scale (SAS) and Odemelam's Students' Sexual Behaviour Inventory (SSBI). The instrument was validated by three experts and the reliability was established using Cronbach Alpha method. CNSAI had reliability coefficient of 0.71. Mean and Standard deviation were used in answering the research questions while 2-way ANOVA was used to test the hypotheses. The study established that adolescents from both low and high socio-economic status were involved in sexual abuse as well as those in their early and late adolescence. However, adolescents from low socio-economic status are more at risk as well as those in their early adolescence. Among the recommendations made were that the government should make provision for stipends to indigent adolescents to assist them in taking care of their personal needs. Again, parents should start early to introduce sexuality education as well as discuss the menace of sexual abuse with their children. Furthermore, government should hasten court proceedings involving sexual abuse so that the offenders can be promptly subjected to the full weight of the law.

*Keywords:* sexual abuse, socio-economic status, age

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## Introduction

Children are heritage from God and so require love, care and affection. They are fragile, hence depend on adults for welfare and survival. Their fragile nature makes them in need of special protection and care. It emphasizes the responsibility of family members, guardians and significant others towards their upkeep. Some parents and guardians have handled this responsibility with much levity as we hear of incidences of sexual abuse of children in the media. In low and middle-income nations like Nigeria, children and adolescent sexual abuse is often underestimated, underemphasized and most times not reported (Bukola et al., 2021). In a study among the three main ethnic groups in Nigeria (Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa), it was discovered that sexual abuse on a child below the age of 18 by an adult male was common among the three ethnic groups (Aderinto, 2010).

Gonzalez et al. (2023) gave a very comprehensive definition of child sexual abuse as the involvement of dependent, developmentally immature children and adolescents in sexual activities which they do not fully comprehend, to which they are unable to give consent, or that violate the social taboos of the family roles. It is also sexual activity between a minor and the older person in which the dominant position of the older person is used to coerce or exploit the younger (Robyn in Ernest-Ehibudu, 2021). Here sexual abuse is viewed as a matter of age and the use of force. In a situation where there is much age disparity and force is applied in the issue of sex then it tantamount to sexual abuse. World Health Organization (WHO) in Regional Committee for Africa, 54 (2011), estimates that globally some 40 million children aged 0-14 years suffer some form of abuse and neglect requiring health and social care. According to Van Horne et al. (2018) each year, millions of children are investigated by Child Protective Services for child abuse and neglect. In 2014, over 3.2 million children were subjects of child maltreatment reports, of those, 20% were found to have evidence of maltreatment. Bukola et al. (2021) reports that one in 10 children would be sexually abused before their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday/ about one in seven girls and one in 25 boys would be sexually abuse before they turn 18.

The clinical definition of sexual abuse is related to the definitions given so far but the guiding principle is whether the encounter has traumatic impact on the child. It is not all sexual encounters experienced by adolescents that do have traumatic effects. According to Ernest-Ehibudu (2009), there are three factors that are useful in clinically differentiating abusive from non-abusive acts - power differential, knowledge differential and gratification differential. These three factors are likely to be interrelated. However, the presence of any of these factors should raise concerns that the sexual encounter is abusive.

Power differential was defined by Ritch in Ernest-Ehibudu (2021) as implying that one party (the offender) controls the other (the victim) and that the sexual encounter is not mutually conceived and undertaken. Power can be derived from the role relationship between offender and victim. For example, if the offender is the victim's father, the victim will usually feel obligated to do as the offender says. Similarly, persons in authority positions, such as a teacher, minister, Boys' scout leader, coach etc, are in roles that connote power. Thus, sexual activities between these individuals and their charges are abusive. According to Patrick and Caroline in Ernest-Ehibudu (2021), power can also be derived from the larger size or more advanced capability of the offender, in which case the victim may be manipulated, physically intimidated or forced to comply with the sexual activity. Power may also arise out of the offender's superior capability to psychologically manipulate the victim (which in turn may be

related to the offender's role or superior size). The offender may bribe, cajole or trick the victim into co-operation.

The second factor is knowledge differential. Eva in Ernest-Ehibudu (2021), opined that the act is considered abusive when one party (the offender) has a more sophisticated understanding of the significance and implications of the sexual encounter. Knowledge differential implies that the offender is either older, more developmentally advanced or more intelligent than the victim. Generally, clinicians expect the offender to be at least five years older than the victim for the act to be deemed predatory. When the victim is an adolescent, some persons define the encounter as abusive only if the offender is at least 10 years older (Kelly in Ernest-Ehibudu, 2021). Thus, a consensual relationship between a 12-year old and a 16-year old would not be regarded as abusive, if other case factors support that conclusion. Generally, the younger the child, the less able he/she is to appreciate the meaning and potential consequences of sexual relationships, especially one with an adult.

The third factor is gratification differential. Ethol in Ernest-Ehibudu (2021), defined this as "the sex offender attempting to sexually gratify or satisfy him/herself". In most but not all sexual victimizations, this is actually the case. The goal of the encounter is not mutual sexual gratification, although perpetrators may attempt to arouse their victims because such a situation is arousing to them. Alternatively, they may delude themselves into believing that their goal is to sexually satisfy their victims. Nevertheless, the primary purpose of the sexual activity is to obtain gratification for the perpetrator.

There are two types of sexual abuse- contact and non-contact sexual abuse. Sexual abuse can happen in person or online. Contact sexual abuse is where an abuser makes physical contact with a child's sexual organs. This includes:

- Touching or fondling the child's body, attempts to have the child arouse the adult, or touch his or her body or kissing in a sexual way.
- The adult rubbing his or her genitals against the child's body in a sexual way.
- Touching the child's genitals with the mouth or having the child touch the adult's genitals with the mouth.
- Having anal or vaginal penetration by penile or other body parts or digital object and complete anal or vaginal intercourse.

Non-contact sexual abuse is where a child is abused without the sexual organs being touched by the abuser. This can be in person or online. It includes:

- Exposing or flashing
- Showing pornography
- Exposing a child to sexual acts
- Making them masturbate
- Forcing a child to make, view or share child abuse images or videos
- Forcing a child to take part in sexual activities or conversations online or through a smartphone

Child sexual abuse can occur in a variety of settings including home, school, church, sports arena etc. most sexual abuse offenders are acquainted with their victims: approximately 30% are relatives of the child, most often fathers, brothers, uncles, cousins, around 60% are acquaintances such as friends of the family, baby sitters, neighbours. Strangers are the offenders in approximately 10% of child sexual abuse cases (Whealin & Barnett, 2007).

Gonzalez in Ernest-Ehibudu (2009) opines that the greatest risk to children do not come from strangers but from friends and family relations. Most children are abused by someone they know and trust. Abuse typically occurs after the “grooming stage”. This is a period when the offender often develops a relationship with the targeted victim and his/her family, enjoying family activities, gaining acceptance, earning trust and waiting for time alone with the child. The word pedophile is commonly used indiscriminately to anyone who sexually abuses a child but child sexual offenders are not pedophiles unless they have strong sexual interest in pre-pubescent children (Blaney & Millon, 2009).

Studies on the prevalence of sexual abuse have been conducted. Boys can be victims of sexual abuse, their perpetrators can be males or females. Many people believe that male victimization is more under-reported than female, in part because of societal failure to identify the behaviour as abusive. Moreover, the boy himself may not define the behaviour as sexual victimization but as sexual experience, especially, if it involves a female offender. American Association of University Women (1998), found out that boys were less likely than girls to report sexual abuse because of the fear of retribution, the social stigma against homosexual behaviour, the desire to appear self-reliant and the concern about loss of independence following disclosure.

Pagare (2004) conducted a study to assess the magnitude and pattern of sexual abuse among inmates of observation home in Delhi. A total of 189 boys aged 6-18 years were assessed for sexual abuse using Finkelhor’s scale and Child Maltreatment History Self-Report followed by clinical examination using American Medical Association’s guidelines. On clinical examination, 61.1% showed physical signs and 40.2% showed behavioural signs of sexual abuse. In a study of male college students, Fromuth and Burkhart in Ernest-Ehibudu (2009), found that prevalence estimates of childhood sexual abuse were directly related to the definition of abuse. Prevalence was 22% when either a graded age differential or coercion was required, 14% when only the former was required and 10% when both were required. Prevalence fell further to 8% when physical contact sexual abuse was included.

Female children are much more likely than their male counterparts to be sexually abused. The 2006 WHO Report on violence against children estimated that in 2002, approximately 150 million girls and 73 million boys were subjected to contact sexual abuse worldwide (Bukola et al, 2021). According to Audu in Onyishi (2022), in a study from Maiduguri, North-East of Nigeria, sexual assault rate of 77.7% was reported among female children, with sexual assault being more likely in girls younger than 12 years. Maduakolam et al. (2023), carried out research on knowledge and experience of sexual violence among female adolescents in Enugu State during the Covid-19 Pandemic and found out the majority of perpetrators were uncles (40.4%) and cousins (28.6%).

Sexual abuse is illegal in all countries about which information is available. The laws may differ in details but, all set an age-typical between the typical onset of puberty and the age of maturity under which all sexual contacts with an adult is termed abusive. Notwithstanding, above this age, sexual contact may be judged abusive depending on the use of violence, coercion or the type of relationship involved. Child sexual abuse is a social problem with adverse consequences to the abused child and the society at large. It can cause infections and sexually-transmitted diseases. Depending on the age, size of the child and the degree of force used, child sexual abuse may cause internal lacerations and bleeding. In severe cases, damage to internal organs may occur, which may cause death in some.

According to Onyekuru (2021), adolescents are people in the period of transition from childhood to adulthood, starting from around 10-12 years old, up to 18-21 years old. He opines that they are people in their adolescent period which can be defined biologically as the physical transition marked by the onset of puberty and the termination of physical growth, cognitively, as changes in the ability to think abstractly and multi-dimensionally or socially, as a period of preparation for adult roles (Obidigbo & Obidigbo in Onyekuru, 2021). Adolescents in secondary schools do not have the same age. Some could be in their early adolescent period while others are in their late adolescent period. They come from different parental backgrounds with different levels of income and status. Hence, the variables of this study are socio-economic status and age.

Socio-economic status can be defined as the grouping of people with similar occupational, educational and economic characteristics (Santrock, 2005). It is also defined as the unequal distribution among members of society of attributes, qualities, possession that are regarded within the society as desirable (Iwuoha, 2000). Socio-economic status carries with it certain inequalities. Generally, members of a society have

1. Occupations that vary in prestige with some individuals having more access than others to higher status occupations,
2. Different levels of educational attainment with some individuals having more access than others to better education,
3. Different economic resources, and
4. Different of powers to influence a community's institutions. These differences in the ability to control resources and to participate in society's rewards produce unequal opportunities for adolescents. (Bornstein & Bradley, 2003)

The number of visible different socio-economic statuses depends on the community's size and complexity. In most investigators' description of socio-economic status two categories low and middle are used although as many as five categories can be delineated. Sometimes low socio-economic status is described as low-income work class or blue collar, for example factory, manual labourer, welfare recipients, maintenance worker. Sometimes the middle category is described as middle income managerial or white collar for example sales person, manager, and Professionals (doctor, lawyer, teacher, accountant etc). Professionals at the pinnacle of their field, high-level corporate executives, political leaders and wealthy individuals are among those in the upper set/category.

The incidence of sexual abuse is very rampant both in told and untold stories. It is a serious problem in many countries across the globe. This can pose harmful effects and hamper adolescent's propensity to learn. Therefore, it is against this background that the researchers conceived the idea to investigate sociological factors of sexual abuse among adolescents in Rivers State, Nigeria with a view of proffering counselling implications.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions were answered in this study.

1. What is the influence of socio-economic status (low and middle) sexual abuse among secondary school adolescents?
2. How does age (early and late adolescence) influence sexual abuse among secondary school adolescents?

## Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses which were tested at 0.05 level of significance, were formulated to guide the study.

1. Secondary school adolescents from low and middle socio-economic status do not differ significantly in their experience of sexual abuse as measured by their mean scores.
2. The interaction effect of socio-economic status on sexual abuse is not significant.
3. Early and late adolescents do not differ significantly in their experience of sexual abuse as measured by their mean scores.
4. The interaction effect of age on sexual abuse is not significant.

## Methodology

The research design of this study is ex-post facto design because it involves collecting and analyzing data from variables which are already in place without manipulating any of them in order to find out how some of them relate to the variables under study. The population of the study consists of all the adolescents residing in Rivers State, Nigeria. As at the time of the study, the marginal estimate of the population of adolescents in Rivers State is about 1,587,864. The sample of the study comprised 1,000 adolescents. The study adopted multi-stage sampling procedure firstly, to select 10 Local Government Areas out of the 23 Local Government Areas in Rivers State, Nigeria. The schools in Rivers State were grouped according to their Local Governments Areas where they are located. Using the disproportionate sampling technique, the researchers drew three schools from the 10 Local Government Areas thereby arriving at 30 schools from which the sample was drawn for the study. The instrument for the study is Contact and Non-contact Sexual Abuse Inventory (CNSAI). This is a non-cognitive instrument which was adapted from Finkelhor's Sexual Abuse Scale (SAS) and Odemelam's Students' Sexual Behaviour Inventory (SSBI). The instrument consists of two sections A, B, and C. Section A is designed to elicit demographic data from the students on socio-economic status and age. Section B contains 20 items, which focus on contact dimension of child sexual abuse. Out of these 20 items, 5 items are negatively keyed while 15 items are positively keyed. Section C contains 20 items, which focus on non-contact dimension of child sexual abuse. Out of these 20 items, 5 items are negatively keyed while 15 items are positively keyed. The items of the instrument were responded to on a 5-point likert scale of Always, Often, Sometimes, Rarely and Never weighted 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 respectively for the positively-keyed item and vice versa for the negatively-keyed ones. The instrument was validated by three experts and the reliability established using Cronbach Alpha method. CNSAI had reliability coefficient of 0.71. The instrument was administered and collated. Mean and Standard deviation was used in answering the research questions while 2-way ANOVA was used to test the hypotheses.

## Results and Discussion

The results and discussion were made following the research questions.

Research Question 1: What is the influence of socio-economic status (low and middle) on sexual abuse among secondary school adolescents?

This research question was analyzed using mean and standard deviation. The results obtained were presented in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Mean Score and Standard Deviation of Low and Middle Socio-Economic Status on Sexual Abuse of Secondary School Adolescents*

Socio-economic status	Number	Mean	Std. D.
Low	618	64.12	20.13
Middle	382	50.04	15.14

Table 1 shows that adolescents from low socio-economic status of adolescents had a mean score of 64.12 and standard deviation of 20.13 while the adolescents from middle socio-economic status had a mean of 50.04 and standard deviation of 15.14. the mean of adolescents from low socio-economic status is higher than that of their counterpart from middle socio-economic status. This indicates that adolescents from low socio-economic status are more prone to sexual abuse compared to those from middle socio-economic status home. This finding is in agreement with the study carried out by Bolen (2001) which established that children and adolescents from low socio-economic background are at a high risk of experiencing sexual abuse. This result was anticipated since poor parents who are facing hardship may not be able to carter for their children's needs. Those children may be vulnerable to sexual abuse perpetrators who may want to provide for their material needs.

Research Question 2: How does age (early and late adolescence) influence sexual abuse among secondary school adolescents?

This research question was analyzed using mean and standard deviation. The results obtained were presented in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Mean Score and Standard Deviation of Early and Late Adolescence on Sexual Abuse*

Age	Number	Mean	Std. D.
Early Adolescence	308	60.68	17.603
Late Adolescence	692	51.70	20.053

Table 2 shows that the respective mean score and standard deviation for early adolescence were 60.68 and 17.60 while that of late adolescence were 51.70 and 20.05. These mean values indicate that the early adolescence had a higher mean score than the late adolescence. This finding corroborates the findings of Bolen (1998) which stated that risk of sexual abuse for Caucasians increase almost yearly over time with slight increase during pre-adolescence and early adolescence. This research finding is not surprising to the researchers because adolescents within the early period of adolescence normally experience identity problems. They are also faced with a lot of decisions to take on relationship. Some of them would expect to be treated as adults and thus could predispose them to sexual abuse.

Hypothesis 1: Secondary school adolescents from low and middle socio-economic status do not differ significantly in their experience of sexual abuse as measured by their mean scores.

These null hypotheses were analyzed and tested using 2-way ANOVA. The result obtained were summarized in Table 3.

**Table 3**

*Summary of 2-Way Anova on the Influence of Socio-Economic Status on Sexual Abuse Among Secondary School Adolescents.*

Sources of Variation	Sum of Sq.	Df.	Mean Sq.	Cal. F	Crit. F	Result
Main effects	60218.232	2	30109.116	97.696	3.00	Significant
A	57852.788	1	57852.788	7.717	3.85	Significant
B	12023.958	1	12023.958	9.014	3.85	Significant
Interaction Effect A*B	4035.683	1	4035.683	4.095	3.85	Significant
Explained	64253.915	3	21417.971	69.496	2.61	Significant
Residual	306958.689	996	308.191			
Total	371212.604	999	371.584			

Table 3 showed that the calculated F-value for socio-economic status (A) 7.72 is greater than the corresponding critical F-value of 3.85 at 1 and 996 degrees of freedom at 0.05 level of significance. The null hypothesis is rejected. There is therefore significant influence of socio-economic status on sexual abuse among secondary school adolescents. Table 3 also showed that the calculated F-value for sexual abuse (B) 9.01 is greater than the corresponding critical F-value of 3.85 at 1 and 996 degrees of freedom at 0.05 level of significance. This indicated that there is significant influence of sexual abuse among secondary school adolescents. Furthermore, the table showed that the calculated F-value for interaction effect of socio-economic status and sexual abuse 4.10 is greater than the corresponding F-value of 3.85 at degrees of freedom of 1 and 996 at 0.05 level of significance. Hence, there is significant interaction effect.

Hypothesis 3: Early and late adolescents do not differ significantly in their experience of sexual abuse as measured by their mean scores.

The null hypotheses were analyzed and tested using 2-way ANOVA. The result obtained were summarized in Table 4.

**Table 4**

*Summary of 2-Way Anova on the Influence of Age on Contact and Non-contact Forms of Sexual Abuse Among Secondary School Adolescents.*

Sources of Variation	Sum of Sq.	Df.	Mean Sq.	Cal. F	Crit. F	Result
Main effects	3756.227	2	1778.113	5.091	3.00	Significant
Age (A)	1391.783	1	1290.783	6.210	3.85	Significant
Sexual Abuse (B)	2262.444	1	2265.958	3.982	3.85	Significant
Interaction Effect A*B	4035.683	1	46.177	3.930	3.85	Significant
Explained	3808.404	3	1257.462	23.143	2.61	Significant
Residual	367410.200	996	358.886			
Total	371212.604	999	371.584			



A critical look at Table 4 showed that the calculated F-value for age (A) 6.21 is greater than the corresponding critical F-value of 3.85 at 1 and 996 degrees of freedom at 0.05 level of significance. The null hypothesis is rejected. There is therefore significant influence of age on contact/ non-contact sexual abuse among secondary school adolescents. Table 4 also showed that the calculated F-value for contact and non-contact (B) 9.01 is greater than the corresponding critical F-value of 3.98 is greater than the corresponding critical F value of 3.85 at 1 and 996 degrees of freedom at 0.05 level of significance. This indicated that there is significant influence of contact and non-contact dimension of sexual abuse among secondary school adolescents.

Again, the table showed that there is interaction effect of age on contact/non-contact sexual abuse among adolescents. This is because the calculated F-value of 3.85 is greater than the corresponding F-value of 3.85 at degrees of freedom of 1 and 996 at 0.05 level of significance. Hence, there is significant interaction effect.

Child sexual abuse is a public health and human rights issue that should be given adequate attention. The myriad of effects on the child should necessitate concerns of the international community to this silent emergency. There should be awareness campaigns, advocacy and heightened education. The Child's Right Act should be domesticated and upheld.

## **Conclusion**

### **Implications for Counselling**

The findings of this research has shown that adolescents of all ages and from low and medium socio-economic status are predisposed to sexual abuse. Hence, the counselling implications are:

1. Sexual abuse victims could manifest myriad of behavioural problems. Hence, counsellors should probe more to find out if sexual abuse could be the causal factor for some undesirable behaviours.
2. They should be more supportive, nonjudgmental and establish a safe environment that fosters trust. They can initiate sexual abuse awareness campaigns as a prophylactic intervention.
3. Counsellors can organize seminars and workshops to enlighten adolescents.
4. Counsellors can collaborate with multidisciplinary teams like parents, teachers, healthcare providers to ensure co-ordinated and holistic care. During Parents Teachers Association meetings, counsellors could use that medium to enlighten parents on the prevalence of this social malady.

## **Recommendations**

The following are recommended.

1. The government should establish workable poverty alleviation programmes that would assist parents to make reasonable income to cater for their children.
2. They should make provision for stipends to indigent adolescents to assist them in taking care of their personal needs.
3. Counselling is needed to assist victims of sexual abuse and so establishment of counselling centres should be made compulsory at all educational levels.

4. Parents and guardians should start early to talk to their children about the menace of sexual abuse. They should learn training strategies that would enable them monitor their adolescents properly.
5. The government should expedite any sexual abuse case so that the offenders can be subjected to the full weight of the law without much delay.

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