

SEXUAL VIOLENCE, JUVENILE DELINQUENCY, AND PSYCHOSOCIAL HARM: IMPACTS OF VICTIMIZATION IN CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE

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Abstract

Sexual violence against children and adolescents represents one of the most serious violations of human rights, with profound repercussions for victims' mental health, identity formation, and social integration. This qualitative study, based on a literature review, aimed to analyze the impacts of sexual victimization during childhood and adolescence, highlighting the relationship between sexual violence, juvenile delinquency, and psychosocial harm. The literature review demonstrated that the immediate effects of sexual violence manifest as symptoms of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder, impairing cognitive functioning and hindering academic performance. When left undiagnosed and untreated, these consequences extend to broader social dimensions, including social isolation, stigmatization, and weakened emotional bonds. The findings further indicate that juvenile delinquency may emerge as a possible outcome of early victimization experiences, particularly in contexts characterized by social exclusion and a lack of institutional support. It is concluded that sexual violence should be understood as a structural phenomenon requiring interdisciplinary responses and integrated public policies capable of preventing, identifying, and intervening effectively. Addressing this issue requires not only accountability but also qualified, trauma-informed support and the promotion of the dignity of children and adolescents.

Keywords: Adolescence, Juvenile Delinquency, Psychosocial Harm, Sexual Violence.

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INTRODUCTION

Sexual violence against children and adolescents constitutes one of the most serious violations of human rights and remains a persistent phenomenon across diverse social contexts. In Brazil, data from the Brazilian Public Security Forum (Fórum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública—FBSP) (2023) reveal that approximately 70% of reported victims are under 18 years of age, the majority of whom are female, highlighting the structural vulnerability of this population and the persistence of asymmetrical power relations. By affecting individuals who are still in the process of cognitive, social, and emotional development, sexual violence causes profound disruptions to life trajectories, interfering not only with victims' immediate mental health but also with their ability to establish interpersonal relationships, achieve academic success, and integrate into society.

Scientific research indicates that early victimization is associated with the development of various psychological disorders, including depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, eating disorders, and suicidal ideation (Habigzang; Koller, 2012; Macari et al., 2024). These psychosocial harms directly affect academic performance and community participation by impairing cognitive and emotional functions that are essential for learning and socialization. At the same time, evidence suggests that sexual violence may be associated with engagement in risk-taking behaviors and juvenile offending during adolescence, thereby increasing vulnerability to pathways leading to juvenile delinquency (Patias; Silva; Dell'Aglio, 2016; Widom; Maxfield, 2001).

The relevance of investigating this topic lies in the need to understand sexual violence not merely as an individual traumatic event but as a structural factor that perpetuates cycles of social exclusion and marginalization. Accordingly, this study is justified by the importance of examining, in an integrated manner, the relationship between sexual violence, juvenile delinquency, and psychosocial harm in order to broaden both academic and societal understanding of the issue and to provide a foundation for the development of effective public policies to address it.

This study is based on the hypothesis that sexual victimization during childhood and adolescence contributes to the development of severe psychosocial consequences, including emotional disorders, educational difficulties, and social isolation, while also increasing the likelihood of involvement in delinquent behavior—not as an inevitable outcome, but as the result of the interaction among multiple risk factors. Accordingly, the objective of this article is to analyze the impacts of sexual violence on the development of children and adolescents, emphasizing its repercussions for mental health, psychosocial harm, and the potential for juvenile delinquency. By adopting an interdisciplinary perspective, the study seeks to contribute to strengthening the scientific debate and to the development of prevention and intervention strategies aimed at disrupting the intergenerational reproduction of violence.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

Sexual violence is one of the most complex and devastating forms of human rights violations, with consequences that extend beyond the physical domain and profoundly affect victims' emotional, social, and identity development. It is a multifactorial phenomenon shaped by power relations, gender inequalities, sociocultural contexts, and structural factors, making it an inherently interdisciplinary subject of analysis (Minayo, 2017). In the case of children and adolescents, its severity is even greater because it involves individuals undergoing psychological, cognitive, and social development, whose consent is legally invalid and whose vulnerability makes them particularly susceptible to victimization (Habigzang; Koller, 2012).

The concept of sexual violence encompasses a range of abusive practices, including rape, sexual harassment, commercial sexual exploitation, child pornography, and incest. In the context of children and adolescents, the literature indicates that most cases occur within environments of trust, such as the family or institutional settings, and are perpetrated by individuals known to the victims through a process referred to as child grooming (Finkelhor, 2014). This dynamic reinforces power asymmetries and

contributes to the victim's silence, as victims frequently experience fear, shame, or confusion regarding the abuse they have suffered.

The consequences of sexual violence are multidimensional. From a psychological perspective, they include the development of disorders such as depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, suicidal ideation, and dissociative states (Habigzang; Koller, 2012). In addition, there are significant social consequences, including social isolation, difficulties in establishing healthy emotional relationships, declining academic performance, and stigmatization (Dell'Aglio; Koller, 2011). From a legal and public policy perspective, sexual violence requires a coordinated response involving multiple sectors—including the justice system, healthcare, education, and social assistance—to ensure comprehensive protection for victims, as established by the Child and Adolescent Statute (Estatuto da Criança e do Adolescente—ECA) (Brazil, 1990) and the guidelines of the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020).

Another key aspect concerns the perpetuation of cycles of violence. Research indicates that children and adolescents who have experienced sexual victimization are more vulnerable to engaging in risk-taking behaviors, psychoactive substance use, and even juvenile delinquency (Patias; Silva; Dell'Aglio, 2016; Belsky et al., 2020). This phenomenon, often described as the intergenerational transmission of violence, demonstrates that sexual violence is not limited to an isolated episode but may shape life trajectories and perpetuate social inequalities (Assis; Constantino, 2020).

Therefore, understanding sexual violence and its consequences requires moving beyond the individual dimension and situating the phenomenon within a broader context characterized by structural inequalities, patriarchy, the absence of effective public policies, and shortcomings in the child protection system. In this regard, academic research plays a fundamental role not only in examining the effects of sexual violence but also in informing prevention, intervention, and recovery strategies capable of breaking the cycles of vulnerability affecting children and adolescents across diverse social contexts.

JUVENILE DELINQUENCY AS A POSSIBLE CONSEQUENCE

Juvenile delinquency is a complex and multifactorial phenomenon that cannot be reduced to a matter of individual choice or merely a lack of discipline. Rather, it is a socially constructed process shaped by structural vulnerabilities, socioeconomic inequalities, and adverse early-life experiences, among which sexual violence occupies a prominent place. The literature indicates that children and adolescents who have experienced sexual victimization are at greater risk of engaging in delinquent behavior and other risk-taking activities, owing both to the psychological impacts of trauma and to the absence of adequate social support (Patias; Silva; Dell'Aglio, 2016).

Criminological theories contribute to understanding this process. The cycle of violence perspective, for example, argues that experiences of victimization may be internalized and later expressed through aggressive or delinquent behavior (Widom; Maxfield, 2001). This hypothesis is supported by longitudinal studies demonstrating a significant association between childhood sexual abuse and an increased likelihood of involvement in criminal offenses during adolescence and early adulthood (Lalor; McElvaney, 2010). Furthermore, longitudinal research indicates that early trauma and severe victimization leave profound marks on fundamental developmental processes. From this perspective, adolescents affected by such forms of violence are more vulnerable to engaging in risk-taking behaviors, psychoactive substance use, and, in more severe cases, juvenile delinquency (Belsky et al., 2020).

Within the Brazilian context, research has shown that the life trajectories of adolescents in conflict with the law are closely associated with experiences of multiple forms of violence, with sexual violence being among the most devastating (Assis; Constantino, 2020). This reality demonstrates that juvenile delinquency should be understood as a possible consequence of the interaction between early victimization, failures within the child protection network, and structural inequalities. Moreover, the criminalization of these adolescents, rather than the implementation of policies centered on care and prevention, tends to reinforce cycles of social exclusion and recidivism (Batista, 2011).

Another important aspect concerns the relationship between sexual victimization and psychoactive substance use, which is frequently observed among adolescents serving socio-educational measures. Drug use often emerges as a strategy for numbing psychological pain or seeking acceptance within alternative social groups; however, it ultimately increases vulnerability to involvement with the juvenile justice system (Dell'Aglio; Koller, 2011).

Accordingly, juvenile delinquency should not be interpreted as the inevitable destiny of victims of sexual violence but rather as one of the possible manifestations of life trajectories marked by disrupted emotional bonds, the absence of institutional support, and social exclusion. Recognizing this connection is essential for moving beyond reductionist perspectives and for developing public policies that integrate the justice system, healthcare, education, and social assistance, promoting both accountability and social reintegration while prioritizing the prevention of new cycles of violence.

PSYCHOSOCIAL HARM

The psychosocial harm resulting from sexual violence during childhood and adolescence extends far beyond immediate trauma, constituting long-term impacts that significantly interfere with human development, socialization, and identity formation. These consequences affect cognitive, emotional, relational, and social dimensions, potentially compromising both the victim's mental health and their opportunities for social integration (Dell'Aglio; Koller, 2011).

From a psychological perspective, the literature identifies a strong association between sexual victimization and the development of disorders such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, eating disorders, and suicidal ideation (Habigzang; Koller, 2012; Macari et al., 2024). These conditions tend to impair fundamental cognitive functions, including attention, memory, and concentration, directly affecting academic performance and social interactions. Furthermore, early exposure to sexual violence undermines self-esteem, leading to the internalization of feelings of guilt, shame, and stigmatization (Finkelhor; Browne, 1985).

From a social perspective, psychosocial harm is manifested through difficulties in establishing healthy emotional relationships, social isolation, and distrust of authority figures, all of which may hinder victims' reintegration into institutional settings such as schools and the broader community (Assis; Constantino, 2020). In many cases, the absence of adequate support and the revictimization experienced within judicial and healthcare institutions further reinforce the cycle of social exclusion, increasing vulnerability to risk-taking behaviors such as psychoactive substance use, school dropout, and involvement in delinquent activities (Patias; Silva; Dell'Aglío, 2016).

It is important to emphasize that these consequences are not limited to the individual level but also have broader societal implications. Sexual violence and its psychosocial effects place a significant burden on healthcare, education, and justice systems, while generating substantial social and economic costs associated with reduced productivity, increased demand for specialized services, and the risk of the intergenerational perpetuation of violence (WHO, 2020). From this perspective, understanding psychosocial harm requires an interdisciplinary approach that considers both the subjective dimensions of the traumatic experience and the structural conditions that intensify its effects.

Accordingly, psychosocial harm should not be viewed merely as a secondary consequence of sexual violence but rather as a central element in understanding the cycle of vulnerability affecting children and adolescents who have experienced sexual victimization. A critical analysis of these impacts underscores the urgent need for integrated public policies that ensure prevention, early diagnosis, and qualified psychosocial care, thereby breaking the reproduction of inequalities and creating conditions that support the reframing of traumatic experiences and the promotion of human dignity.

METHODOLOGY

This study is characterized as qualitative research based on a literature review. This methodological approach was selected because it enables the critical analysis of diverse scientific and institutional publications addressing sexual violence against children and adolescents, juvenile

delinquency, and the psychosocial harm associated with these phenomena. As Gil (2019) emphasizes, literature review research makes it possible to compile, interpret, and discuss previously systematized knowledge, making it an appropriate method for achieving an in-depth theoretical understanding of a complex social issue.

To develop the theoretical framework, scientific articles, specialized books, doctoral dissertations, master's theses, and technical reports published by national and international organizations, such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), were selected. These sources were chosen because of the academic and social relevance of the topic, as well as the need to engage with interdisciplinary perspectives encompassing psychology, education, criminology, public health, and law.

The literature search was conducted using the SciELO, Google Scholar, Virtual Health Library (Biblioteca Virtual em Saúde—BVS), CAPES Journal Portal (Portal de Periódicos CAPES), and PubMed databases. The following search terms were used: sexual violence, child sexual abuse, juvenile delinquency, juvenile offending, psychosocial harm, and post-traumatic stress disorder. These terms were combined using Boolean operators (AND/OR) to broaden the scope of the search while refining the results.

The inclusion criteria comprised publications in Portuguese, English, and Spanish published between 2005 and 2025 that addressed, directly or indirectly, the relationship between sexual violence, adolescence, juvenile delinquency, and psychosocial consequences. The exclusion criteria consisted of duplicate publications, opinion articles lacking empirical support, journalistic texts, and studies focusing exclusively on sexual violence against adults, without addressing childhood or adolescence.

Following the initial screening, the abstracts were examined to assess their relevance, after which a selective and critical reading of the full texts was conducted. This analysis was guided by the identification of thematic categories aligned with the objectives of the study: (i) sexual violence and its consequences; (ii) juvenile delinquency as a possible consequence; and (iii) psychosocial harm. A

comparative analysis of the findings sought to identify convergences, gaps, and contradictions within the literature, thereby supporting the development of an integrated and critical discussion.

Accordingly, the methodology adopted provided a solid and up-to-date theoretical foundation for examining the implications of sexual violence for the development of children and adolescents and its relationship with juvenile delinquency and psychosocial exclusion.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the scientific literature demonstrates that sexual violence during childhood and adolescence constitutes a highly traumatic experience whose repercussions extend far beyond the occurrence of the abusive act and may persist throughout the victim's life. In Brazil, data from the Brazilian Public Security Forum (Fórum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública—FBSP) (2023) indicate that approximately 70% of victims of sexual violence are under 18 years of age, the majority of whom are girls, confirming the strong intersection between gender, age, and social vulnerability. This reality reinforces the need to understand sexual violence as a phenomenon that extends beyond the individual sphere and must be situated within the broader context of structural inequalities and the fragility of child protection networks.

At the individual level, the consequences are multifaceted. Research shows that children and adolescents who have experienced sexual victimization exhibit high rates of disorders such as depression, anxiety, dissociation, and, particularly, post-traumatic stress disorder, which impairs fundamental cognitive functions—including attention, memory, and emotional regulation—and directly affects academic performance (Habigzang; Koller, 2012; Macari et al., 2024). In this regard, the school environment becomes a crucial setting both for identifying warning signs and for providing initial support. However, as Inoue and Ristum (2008) emphasize, the lack of adequate training among educators remains a significant barrier to the early identification of cases, thereby prolonging victims' psychological suffering.

Another recurring finding in the literature is the association between early sexual victimization and juvenile delinquency. Although this relationship is not deterministic, longitudinal studies indicate that adolescents who have experienced sexual abuse are more vulnerable to engaging in delinquent behavior due to weakened emotional bonds, emotional dysregulation, and early exposure to high-risk environments (Widom; Maxfield, 2001; Patias; Silva; Dell'Aglio, 2016). The cycle of violence perspective reinforces the notion that, in some cases, experienced violence may later be reproduced, representing one of the possible pathways through which trauma is internalized.

The psychosocial consequences are not limited to mental health. Studies demonstrate that adolescents who have experienced sexual victimization are more likely to drop out of school, experience social isolation, use psychoactive substances, and engage in risky sexual behaviors (Dell'Aglio; Koller, 2011; Lalor; McElvaney, 2010). The combination of these factors contributes to the perpetuation of trajectories of social exclusion, marginalization, and revictimization, producing a cumulative effect that reinforces the intergenerational nature of violence (Assis; Constantino, 2020).

Therefore, the findings discussed indicate that sexual violence during childhood and adolescence should not be understood as an isolated event but rather as a multidimensional phenomenon capable of profoundly compromising victims' subjective development and social functioning. The association among sexual victimization, juvenile delinquency, and psychosocial harm underscores the need for interdisciplinary responses involving healthcare, education, the justice system, and social assistance in order to break cycles of violence and promote effective opportunities for recovery and social reintegration.

CONCLUSION

The analysis conducted throughout this study has shown that sexual violence during childhood and adolescence cannot be understood merely as an isolated traumatic event but rather as a complex social phenomenon shaped by cultural, structural, and institutional factors that perpetuate cycles of

vulnerability. By affecting individuals who are still in the process of development, sexual abuse compromises fundamental dimensions of human development, leaving lasting effects that are reflected in the body, subjectivity, and social relationships. The findings indicate that immediate consequences, such as anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder, tend to evolve into persistent psychosocial harm when appropriate intervention is lacking, extending their impact to the educational, community, and interpersonal spheres.

One of the most significant findings of this study is the association between sexual victimization and an increased likelihood of involvement in delinquent behavior during adolescence. Although this relationship is not deterministic, the literature indicates that experiences of sexual violence weaken emotional regulation mechanisms, disrupt bonds of trust, and facilitate involvement in high-risk environments, in which juvenile delinquency may emerge as one possible response to the absence of support and opportunities. From this perspective, delinquency should be understood not as an individual's moral failing but as the expression of life trajectories disrupted by violence, social exclusion, and the shortcomings of protective public policies.

From a psychosocial perspective, the impacts of sexual violence are manifested on multiple levels: within the educational setting, through declining academic performance and social isolation; within family relationships, through the breakdown of trust; and within the community, through stigmatization and revictimization. When left unaddressed, this dynamic increases the risk of the intergenerational perpetuation of violence, creating a cycle marked by pain, silence, and the reproduction of abusive practices. Thus, beyond identifying its individual consequences, it is essential to recognize sexual violence as a public health and human rights issue that requires systemic rather than fragmented responses.

The conclusion that emerges is that breaking this cycle requires the implementation of intersectoral public policies capable of integrating healthcare, education, social assistance, and the justice system into coordinated strategies for prevention, victim support, and intervention. This includes

measures ranging from training professionals to identify warning signs at an early stage to establishing community-based protection mechanisms and providing long-term psychosocial follow-up. It is also necessary to strengthen the accountability of perpetrators while ensuring compassionate, trauma-informed care for victims, who often experience institutional revictimization when seeking assistance.

In summary, sexual violence against children and adolescents must be understood in all its complexity. The findings of this study reinforce that early victimization, when left unaddressed, undermines psychological development, contributes to trajectories of juvenile delinquency, and deepens psychosocial harm that is difficult to reverse. The challenge facing society, public policymakers, and the scientific community is to transform this reality through sustained, interdisciplinary action committed not only to redress but also to the effective promotion of human dignity and the comprehensive protection guaranteed by the Child and Adolescent Statute (Estatuto da Criança e do Adolescente—ECA).

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