

A toxic trio of parental problems strongly linked to childhood sexual abuse

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A new study has found that adults who had parents who struggled with substance dependence, intimate partner violence and mental illness are more than 10 times more likely to have been victims of childhood sexual

abuse than those whose parents did not have these problems, once age and race are taken into account.

The study, by researchers at the University of Toronto's Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work and Institute of Life Course & Aging, was published online this week in the journal *Social Work*.

With each risk factor present, the prevalence of childhood [sexual abuse](#) increased dramatically. About one percent of men and two percent of women who were not exposed to parental substance dependence, intimate partner violence, or [mental illness](#) reported that they had been sexually abused during their childhood. For those exposed to one of these childhood adversities, the prevalence of childhood sexual [abuse](#) nearly tripled to 2.7 percent for men and 6.4 percent for women. Exposure to two of the [risk factors](#) was linked to an additional increase in the prevalence of childhood sexual abuse (5.5 percent for men and 15.5 percent for women). For those who came from chaotic homes where all three main risk factors were present, the prevalence of childhood sexual abuse was 11.6 percent for men and 26.4 percent for women.

"The finding of more than a ten-fold difference in the prevalence of sexual abuse from those exposed to three childhood adversities to those with none was quite shocking," says co-author Senyo Agbeyaka, a recent University of Toronto MSW graduate who is a [social worker](#) at University Health Network. "It is rare to see such a big effect and for the effect to be so consistent for both men and women."

The researchers decided to conduct the study a second time in a different population-based independent sample in order to see if they could replicate the findings.

"The findings from both surveys were remarkably similar, suggesting

that the associations are particularly robust and worthy of further investigation," Agbeyaka says.

The study was based on two representative community samples: one study conducted in 2010 with 22,868 adults and the second, in 2012, with a different sample of 29,801 adults. The data were drawn from the Brief Risk Factor Surveillance Survey (BRFSS) and separate analyses were conducted for each sex. Two major limitations of the study are use of retrospective self-report of these early adversities and a lack of information on the exact timing when they occurred. The findings only indicate correlation and cannot be interpreted as causative.

"Our findings have important implications for improved screening for [childhood](#) maltreatment by social workers and other health and education professionals working with children," says lead author Professor Esme Fuller-Thomson, Director of the Institute of Life Course and Aging at the University of Toronto's Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work. "We must not underestimate the negative impact of parental [intimate partner violence](#), mental illness and substance dependence on the children in the household. Children are very vulnerable to sexual abuse in households where parents are struggling with several of these adversities."

More information: Esme Fuller-Thomson et al, A Trio of Risk Factors for Childhood Sexual Abuse: Investigating Exposure to Parental Domestic Violence, Parental Addiction, and Parental Mental Illness as Correlates of Childhood Sexual Abuse, *Social Work* (2020). [DOI: 10.1093/sw/swaa019](#)

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