

## Editorial

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# What Women Should Know About Alcohol Abuse and the Sexual Exploitation of Females of all Ages (Part 3)

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The aim of this paper is to raise our level of awareness on the egregious blight which alcohol abuse has afflicted upon the United States. Given the limitations of space, I shall divide the topic into two specific areas of alcohol abuse: 1) the sexual abuse of children, and 2) the sexual abuse of adolescents in the age group of 17-27.

## CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE: PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL ABUSE, INCLUDING RAPE, AND NEGLECT

Child sexual abuse is a type of maltreatment, violation, and exploitation that refers to the involvement of the child in sexual activity to provide sexual gratification or financial benefit to the perpetrator. It includes contact for sexual purposes, molestation, statutory rape, prostitution, pornography, exposure, incest, or other sexually exploitative activities.<sup>1</sup>

American children are suffering from a hidden epidemic of child abuse and neglect. National child abuse estimates are well known for being under-reported. The 2015 Child Maltreatment Report from The Children's Bureau, published in January 2017 shows an increase in child abuse referrals from 3.6 million to 4 million. The number of children involved subsequently, increased from 6.6 million to 7.2 million. The report also indicates an increase in child death from abuse and neglect from 1,580 in 2014 to 1670 in 2015. Some reports estimate that in 2016, child abuse fatalities in the US have risen to at least 1,740, and possibly even higher.<sup>2,3</sup>

According to a 2015 report by the Center for National Child Abuse Statistics, the United States has one of the worst records for child abuse amongst all industrialized nations, losing on average almost five children<sup>4</sup> every day to child abuse and neglect.<sup>1,5</sup> These figures are three times more than in the neighbouring country, Canada, and a shocking 11 times greater than Italy.<sup>6</sup> Four million general US child maltreatment referral reports were received in 2015,<sup>5,6</sup> but there were 7.2 million specifically identified child abuse reports in 2016.<sup>2,5,7</sup> It is estimated that in 2015, 207,000 children received foster care services due to abusive treatment in their own homes.<sup>5</sup> Statistics reveal that 17.2% of these victims were physically abused, while 8.4% were sexually abused; in the same year, 6.9% of victims were psychologically maltreated.<sup>5,8</sup>

The highest rate of child abuse in children under one was a staggering 24.2% per 1,000, amounting to one quarter of the entire population of that same demographic group of infants under one year.<sup>1,5</sup>

In 2015, just over one-quarter (27%) of children younger than 3 years were abused either physically or sexually, most of whom were females.<sup>2,5,6</sup> It has been observed that 43.9% of child abuse victims die from physical abuse.<sup>5</sup> Statistics reveal that 49.4% of children who die from child abuse are under one year old,<sup>1,5</sup> and 74.8% of child fatalities are under the age of 3 years.<sup>1,5</sup>

Almost five children die every day from physical and sexual abuse,<sup>1,5</sup> and 80% of child fatalities involve at least one parent, predominantly mothers suffering from postnatal depres-

sion and care-taking frustration.<sup>2,4,5</sup> 72.9% of the child abuse victims die from neglect.<sup>5</sup>

### ALCOHOL ABUSE AND SEXUAL ABUSE OF YOUNG CHILDREN

According to other surveys, approximately 60,000 children are sexually abused, most of whom are girls.<sup>4,5,9</sup> One in every nine girls under the age of 18, and one in every fifty three boys under the age of 18 are predicted to experience sexual assault by an adult. In other words, six times as many girls under 18 are forcibly violated than are young boys in the same age group.<sup>10,11</sup> In this sense, it is clear that young girls are the victims who suffer most from the heinous sexual assaults inflicted on them by male perpetrators. To understand why the issue of childhood and adolescent sexual assault is such a problem, we need to identify the aetiology or source of these hideous crimes.

Consider that more than 10% of U.S. children live with at least one parent with a severe alcohol affliction; this parent more likely to be a man than a woman. Given that alcohol abuse has a deleterious effect on the nerve centres of the brain such as the cerebellum, frontal lobes, the hippocampus and the cerebral cortex, each of which has a role to play in self control, sound decision-making, memory retention, and inhibition, the adverse impact on the brain can be progressively devastating, whenever these dimensions of the brain are overrun with alcohol, the compromise of each of these areas and the loss of self control which results in very dangerous situations.<sup>12,13</sup> A man who is sober and thus reliable and socially responsible can, when intoxicated, transform into a completely different person who is uncontrollably aggressive. Unfortunately, one aspect of this transformation leads to *sexual aggressiveness*, so much so that the violation of members of his own family, not to mention strangers, becomes a pathway to the destruction of the lives of innocent children in his own family. Even other children playing in parks or busy malls are vulnerable and can just as easily be physically or sexually assaulted by a person who has in the moments at hand become an abusive alcoholic.

### ADOLESCENTS AND COLLEGE STUDENTS AT PERIL

According to the 2015 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH), an estimated 623,000 adolescents aged 12-17 (2.5 percent of this age group) were afflicted with alcohol use disorder (AUD).<sup>2,5</sup> This number includes 298,000 males (2.3 percent of males in this age group), and 325,000 females (2.7 percent of the females in this age group).<sup>3,9,14</sup> Amongst college students, the alcohol problem is rife, just as are its consequences. For example, in 2015, 696,000 students between the age group of 18 and 24 were reportedly assaulted by another student or friend who was intoxicated.<sup>15,16</sup> It is estimated that in 2015, 97,000 students between the ages of 18 and 24 reported experiencing alcohol-related sexual assault or date rape.<sup>13,17</sup>

So where does this take us? What we see is that 60% of sexual abuse cases of women and children are directly associated with alcohol abuse.<sup>9,13,18</sup> Since alcohol consumption negatively influences inhibition, violent crimes are often perpetrated while the criminal is under the influence of alcohol. These crimes include homicide, all types of assault, especially domestic violence on women, coupled with sexual abuse and rape. Both of these are inflicted on adolescents from 12-17, mostly females.<sup>19,20</sup> About 500,000 of domestic violence reports in 2015, were associated with alcohol abuse consumption. Of these, almost 70% happen in and around the hours of 11 pm, and 20% included the use of a weapon, lethal or otherwise.<sup>16,20</sup> The sexual assault of adolescents and college going females has been called a *Silent Epidemic*, because although it occurs at high rates, it is rarely reported to the authorities.<sup>3,18</sup> Several reasons contribute to the under-reporting of sexual assault cases as many victims do not tell others about the assault, because they fear that they will not be believed or will be derogated, which, according to research findings, is a common and valid concern.<sup>11,12</sup> Other victims who may have been intoxicated may not remember or realize that they have actually experienced a legally defined rape or sexual assault, because the incident does not fit the prototypic scenario of "stranger rape."<sup>21,22</sup>

In 70% of cases that involve child abuse, the abuser (parent or guardian) was reported to have an alcohol or drug abuse problem. With regards to intimate partner violence, about 65% reported that during the act of violence, the abuser was strongly under the influence of alcohol. This equates to more than 450,000 reports of intimate partner violence and rape each year that was caused by alcohol abuse.<sup>3,13</sup>

If ever we are to ameliorate this scourge upon our families and communities, we have to confront the horror and acknowledge the human degradation that alcohol abuse has caused. I have endeavoured in this article to give you something very sober to think about, so as to teach your family about the issues discussed here and remind them to 'think before they drink'.

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