

# South African epidemic of schoolboy sexual abuse

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By the age of 18 years, two in every five South African schoolboys report being forced to have sex, mostly by female perpetrators. A new study, reported in BioMed Central's open access journal *International Journal for Equity in Health*, reveals the shocking truth about endemic sexual abuse of male children that has been suspected but until now only poorly documented.

Neil Andersson and Ari Ho-Foster, of the CIET trust in Johannesburg, carried out the research in 1,200 schools across the country at the end of 2002. According to Andersson "This study sought to document the prevalence of sexual violence among school-going males. We found a marked difference between the provinces of South Africa, with the least economically developed province, Limpopo, suffering the highest rates and the most developed area, Western Cape, the lowest". There were also systematic differences between rural and urban areas in frequency and type of perpetrator.

Some 28% of victims said a non-family member or teacher was the perpetrator. Another 28% had been forced by a fellow student, while 20% had been abused by a teacher and 18% by an adult family member.

The authors warn that "the likely consequence of all this for South African society is the multiplication of sexual abuse, since it is well established that people who have been sexually abused are more likely to become abusers themselves. One in ten schoolboys who took part in the study admitted they had forced sex on someone else".

The authors pointed out that until to 2007, forced sex with male children in South Africa did not count as rape, but as 'indecent assault', a much less serious offence. They welcomed the change in legislation as a very necessary first step, but they said that "this is far more than a legal issue", and suggested bringing it to the open and raising awareness among South Africans. "Most of all," says Andersson, "the rape of children calls for decisive investment in prevention. Reducing overall sexual violence will likely also pay dividends in reduction of HIV/AIDS."

The authors also observed that, "as it becomes more acceptable for male children to report sexual abuse, we have to expect a massive increase in workload for help services like Childline. They will need support to meet this demand".

Source: BioMed Central

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