

Childhood sexual abuse linked to higher death rates later in life

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Sexual abuse during childhood is associated with higher death rates into mid-adulthood, according to research from Swinburne University of Technology.

According to the recent Australian Child Maltreatment Study, more than one in four Australians have experienced child sexual abuse. Swinburne researchers have been conducting a [longitudinal study](#) of the devastating impacts of this preventable public health problem. The [paper](#), "Sexual abuse during childhood and all-cause mortality into middle adulthood: an Australian cohort study," has been published in the *Medical Journal of Australia*.

They found that the all-cause mortality rate into mid-adulthood was 8.25 times higher for people sexually abused as children than for the general population. For internal causes, such as cancers, circulatory and [respiratory diseases](#), the rate was 5.92 times higher, and for external causes, such as suicide, accidents and assault, it was 12.6 times higher.

"Our findings show that exposure to sexual abuse during childhood may be a risk marker that identifies people at greater risk of premature death," says lead researcher Dr. Nina Papalia.

"So, preventing child sexual abuse and intervening early to reduce the damage it inflicts is not only critical for the safety and welfare of the child, but could also help avert avoidable deaths later in life."

Researchers also found that external-cause mortality rates were particularly high for people who had experienced penetrative sexual abuse (14.9 times higher than the general population).

The longitudinal study involves 2,759 people who experienced sexual abuse in Victoria while aged 16 years or younger from 1964–1995, as recorded in the Victorian Institute of Forensic Medicine records. The researchers followed up those who had been sexually abused as children and linked them to the National Death Index to see who had died over the years 1980–2020. They compared this data to the general Victorian population.

"Sexual abuse during childhood is unfortunately not a rare occurrence in the Australian community. Data from the Australian Child Maltreatment Study showed that 37.3% of women and 18.8% of men reported they had experienced sexual abuse as children."

"We know that [childhood sexual abuse](#) can have devastating consequences for survivors and has been linked to greater risks of mental illness, health risk behaviors, and negative social outcomes. But its relationship with [premature death](#), apart from suicide, has not been as thoroughly investigated."

"We need much more research to understand the underlying causes of early death in this group, and the processes that support resilience, to help inform opportunities for prevention."

More information: Nina Papalia et al, Sexual abuse during childhood and all-cause mortality into middle adulthood: an Australian cohort study, *Medical Journal of Australia* (2023). [DOI: 10.5694/mja2.52089](https://doi.org/10.5694/mja2.52089)

Provided by Swinburne University of Technology

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