



New York City Alliance  
Against Sexual Assault

Category: Child Sexual Abuse

## Incest

- The majority of juvenile victims know the perpetrator, and about 34% of perpetrators of child abuse are a relative of the victim. (RAINN, 2017).
- According to the Department of Justice's National Sex Offender Public Website (2014), 1 in 6 boys and 1 in 4 girls will be sexually assaulted before the age of 18.
- In a study of male survivors of child sexual abuse, over 80 percent (80%) had a history of substance abuse, 50 percent (50%) had suicidal thoughts, 23 percent (23%) attempted suicide, and almost 70 percent (70%) received psychological treatment. Thirty-one percent (31%) had violently victimized others. (*Lisak, 1994.*)

### **Introduction**

While the prevalence and severity of child abuse in the United States has been given an increasing amount of attention -- attitudes, definitions and statistics continue to vary. The examination of incest may incite some of the greatest discrepancies, for it remains one of the most under-reported and least discussed crimes in our nation. Although incest has become a more widely discussed type of abuse, victims of such abuse may never come forward because of the unique stigmatization of being sexually abused by a family member and the fear that is often instilled in the victim.

### **Definition**

According to the Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network (2017), they define incest as “sexual contact between family members. Laws vary from state to state regarding what constitutes crimes of incest, child sexual abuse, sexual assault, and rape.” Additional definitions include the following characteristics:

- Sexual contact or interaction between family members who are not marital partners;
- Oral-genital contact, genital or anal penetration, genital touching of the victim by the perpetrator, any other touching of private body parts, sexual kissing and hugging;
- Sexually staring or touching at the victim; disguised touching of the victim; verbal initiations of sexual behavior; reading or showing sexually inappropriate material, and exposure to various sexual acts.

### **Overview**

Incest does not discriminate. It happens in families that are financially-privileged, as well as those of low socio-economic status. It happens to those of all racial and ethnic descent, and to those of all religious traditions. Victims of incest are boys and girls, infants and adolescents. Incest occurs between fathers and daughters, fathers and sons, mothers and daughters and mothers and sons. Perpetrators of incest can be aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, nephews, step-

parents, step-children, grandparents and grandchildren. In addition, incest offenders can be persons without a direct blood or legal relationship to the victim such as a parent's lover or live-in nanny, housekeeper, etc. -- as this abuse takes place within the confines of the family and the home environment (Vanderbilt, 1992). The study of a nationally representative sample of state prisoners serving time for violent crime in 1991 revealed that 20 percent (20%) of their crimes were committed against children, and three out of four prisoners who victimized a child reported the crime took place in their own home or in the victim's home (Greenfeld, 1996).

Estimates of the number of incest victims in the United States vary. These discrepancies can be attributed to the fact that incest remains an extremely under-reported crime. All too often, pressure from family members -- in addition to threats or pressure from the abuser -- results in extreme reluctance to reveal abuse and to subsequently obtain help. Incest has been cited as the most common form of child abuse. The Department of Justice's NSOPW (2014) reports that "An estimated 60% of perpetrators of sexual abuse are known to the child but are not family members, e.g., family friends, babysitters, child care providers, neighbors."

Victims of incest are often extremely reluctant to reveal that they are being abused because their abuser is a person in a position of trust and authority for the victim. Incest victims may fear they will be disbelieved, blamed or punished if they report their abuse. In addition, some recent research suggests that some victims of incest may suffer from biochemically-induced amnesia. This condition can be triggered by a severe trauma, such as a sexual assault, which causes the body to incur a number of complex endocrine and neurological changes resulting in complete or partial amnesia regarding the event. Additionally, if the trauma is publicly revealed to other family members, victims may experience "retraumatization as a result of being rejected by the family, which often rallies to the side of the accused..." (Kluft, Richard P., 2011).

Incest can have serious long-term effects on its victims. According to Melissa Hall and Joshua Hall (2011), symptoms of long-term sexual abuse can include depression, guilt, shame, self-blame, eating disorders, somatic concerns, anxiety, dissociative patterns, repression, denial, sexual problems, and relationship problems. Additionally, there is research which indicates that children who have been sexually abused by a relative suffers from even more intense guilt and shame, low self-esteem, depression and self-destructive behavior (such as substance abuse, sexual promiscuity and prostitution) than children who have been sexually assaulted by a stranger (Matsakis, 1991).

Whether an incest victim endured an isolated incident of abuse or ongoing assaults over an extended period of time, the process of recovery can be exceptionally painful and difficult. The recovery process begins with admission of abuse and the recognition that help and services are needed. There are services and resources available for incest victims -- both children and adult survivors of incest. Resources for incest victims include books, self-help groups, workshops, short and long-term therapy programs, and possible legal remedies (*see end of fact sheet for national resources*).

In addition to believing, listening to, and helping victims of incest in their process of recovery, we need to simultaneously search for ways to prevent future generations from enduring such abuse and from continuing the cycles of abuse within their own family and relationships.

## **Resources:**

### **National Child Abuse Hotline**

1 (800) 4-A-CHILD (422-2253)

### **Stop It Now**

Provides information to victims and parents/relatives/friends of child sexual abuse. The site also has resources for offender treatment as well as information on recognizing the signs of child sexual abuse. Hotline: 1-(888) PREVENT (773-8368)

### **Survivors of Incest Anonymous**

They provide information on how to find incest survivor support groups in your area and empowers individuals to become survivors and thrivers: <http://www.siawso.org/>.

### **National Center for Missing and Exploited Children**

24-hour hotline to communicate information to the authorities about child pornography or child sex trafficking. Hotline: 1-(800) THE-LOST (843-5678).

### **Local/State Child Abuse Hotline & 911 for emergencies**

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## **References:**

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