

Majority of U.S. Adults Had Troubled Childhoods: CDC.

Study finds nearly 60 percent lived with abuse or other difficult family situations

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Almost 60 percent of American adults say they had difficult childhoods featuring abusive or troubled family members or parents who were absent due to separation or divorce, federal health officials report.

In fact, nearly 9 percent said that while growing up they underwent five or more "adverse childhood experiences" ranging from verbal, physical or sexual abuse to family dysfunction such as domestic violence, drug or alcohol abuse, or the absence of a parent, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

"Adverse childhood experiences are common," said study coauthor Valerie J. Edwards, team lead for the Adverse Childhood Experiences Team at CDC's National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion. "We need to do a lot more to protect children and help families," she said.

About a quarter of the more than 26,000 adults surveyed reported experiencing verbal abuse as children, nearly 15 percent had been physically abused, and more than 12 percent -- more than one in ten -- had been sexually abused as a child.

Since the data are self-reported, Edwards believes that the real extent of child abuse may be still greater. "There is a tendency to under-report rather than over-report," she said.

The findings are published in the Dec. 17 issue of the CDC's journal *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*.

For the report, researchers used data from the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, which surveyed 26,229 adults in Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Tennessee and Washington. Edwards is cautious about extrapolating these results, but based on other data they probably are about the same in other states, she said.

While there were few racial or ethnic differences in reports of abuse, the report confirmed that women were more likely than men to have been sexually abused as children. In addition, people 55 and older were less likely to report being abused as a child compared to younger adults.

One theory why older people did not report as much childhood abuse is that since these takes a toll on health in adulthood, many of these older abuse victims may have died early, Edwards said. The CDC report, for example, notes that adverse childhood experiences are associated with a higher risk of depression, heart disease, diabetes, cancer, substance abuse and premature death. "So [childhood abuse] may be associated with years of life lost," she said.

There was no difference in the number of people reporting childhood abuse in any other age group, Edwards added.

Adverse childhood experiences included in the report included verbal abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, incarceration of a family member, family mental illness, family substance abuse, domestic violence and divorce.

According to the report, about 7.2 percent had had a family member in prison during their childhood and 16.3 percent had witnessed domestic violence in the family home. In addition, about 29 percent grew up in a home where someone abused alcohol or drugs. "These cases occur across all racial groups and ethnicities," Edwards noted.

Almost one in five respondents (19.4 percent) had lived as a child with someone who was depressed, mentally ill or suicidal, the report noted.

Although the volume of abuse and dysfunction is significant, such traumatic experiences cannot be used to describe a person or determine what that person will be, the researchers cautioned. Instead, they said, keeping track of these abusive experiences is important to gain a better understanding of them and their effect on society.

In addition, it's crucial to work harder to prevent abuse and household stress as well as finding better ways to identify and treat children at risk, they said.

"For adults who have had these experiences and feel they are still causing them problems, they are not alone and there is help available," Edwards said.

Dr. Lee M. Sanders, an associate professor of pediatrics at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine said that "one of the things we don't realize when we look around at our neighborhoods and communities is that these problems are so common."

"That's something to be concerned about. That's something to take communal action on," he added.

Identifying and treating abuse early can prevent many serious health consequences later in life. Programs that provide quality care for children, as well as home visitation programs in early infancy and parenting programs, are part of the solution to this problem, Sanders said.

"These interventions are important not just because abuse is so common, but because of the lifelong health implications," Sanders said. "There is a connection of these events to lifelong implications, not just for mental health for adults, but also for physical health."

For example, a person who has several of these events is more likely to get cancer and heart disease, Edwards said. "This is serious and it's not just a quirk of statistics. It's a real relationship."

SOURCES: Valerie J. Edwards, Ph.D., team lead for the Adverse Childhood Experiences Team, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; Lee M. Sanders, M.D., M.P.H., associate professor of pediatrics, University of Miami Miller School of Medicine; Dec. 17, 2010, CDC, *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*