

Profile of child sexual assault cases reported within 24 hours of incidence: Prospective observational study at a tertiary care center in Western Maharashtra, with special observations related to age groups.

■ ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## Profile of Child Sexual Assault Cases Reported within 24 Hours of Incidence: Prospective Observational Study at a Tertiary Care Center in Western Maharashtra, with Special Observations Related to Age Groups

HV Vaidya<sup>1</sup>, AA Taware<sup>2</sup>, HS Tatiya<sup>3</sup>, VT Jadhav<sup>4</sup>, AL Bandgar<sup>5</sup>

### ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** Cases of child sexual assault are rising day by day and it remains one of the serious offences against children of tender age. However, its reporting within 24 hours is yet to improve and needs betterment in various aspects.

**Material and Methods:** This is a prospective observational type of study conducted on alleged cases of sexual assault with ageless than 18 years, during the study period, where valid consent to participate in the study was present after approval from the institutional ethics committee.

**Results:** Out of total 534 victims, 217 (40.64%) victims registered the complaint within 24 hrs of the incidence and females constituted the majority of the cases (89.40%). The majority of the victims (65.90%) were from urban-dwellings and percentage of casereportingwashighest(100%)intheagegroupof0-6years,which declinedwithanincreaseinage.Reportinginurbanpopulationwashigher(42.68%) andmotherwastheprimarycomplainantinmajoritycases(41.47%).Inmajorityof cases,theassailantwasknownntothetictimandboyfriendwasmostcommonassailant (37.33%)withpredominancein12-18yearsagegroup(88.89%);whileknownfamily members were significant assailants (35.08%) for age group 6-12 years.

**Conclusion:** It seems that, rather than strangers, known members are more often involved in such cases and parents along with children from such vulnerable age groups should be actively made more aware of related facts through education and other means.

**Keywords:** Child sexual assault; Reporting within 24 hours; Vulnerable age group; Early reporting; Known assailants.

### Author's Credentials:

<sup>1,3,5</sup>Assistant Professor,  
<sup>2,4</sup>Associate Professor,  
Department of Forensic  
Medicine and Toxicology,  
Pune, Maharashtra 411001,  
India.

### Corresponding Credentials:

**H. S. Tatiya:** Assistant  
Professor, Department  
of Forensic Medicine  
and Toxicology, Pune,  
Maharashtra 411001, India.

**e-mail:** [hstsnk7@gmail.com](mailto:hstsnk7@gmail.com)

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## INTRODUCTION

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Child sexual abuse has existed in almost all societies throughout history in one or another form. The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012 defines a child as any person below 18 years age.<sup>1</sup> Even though both sexes are affected, women outnumber men as victims. In a shocking revelation, a government-commissioned survey in the year 2005 has found that more than 53% of Indian children are subjected to sexual assault i.e. four out of every ten persons.<sup>2</sup> Overall crimes against children have increased steeply over six times in the decade over 2008 to 2018, from 22,500 cases in 2008 to 1,41,764 cases in 2018. According to the recently released National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data, under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act (POCSO), 32,608 cases were reported in 2017 while 39,827 cases were reported in 2018.<sup>3</sup>

It is stated that most of the cases are reported late or go unreported because victims fear retaliation and humiliation.<sup>4</sup> Barrier to reporting incidents of sexual assault also include poor access to the police by victims, fear of not being believed, fear that confidentiality will not be respected by society, poor treatment by personnel in the criminal justice system, and anticipation that the reporting will not result in conviction of perpetrators.<sup>5,6</sup>

The earlier reporting of cases for examination helps in proper forensic sample collection, as the sperms are mostly found in the vagina or the endocervical mucosa examination till five days only.<sup>7</sup> The medicolegal evidence taken from a sexually assaulted woman may be used in determining the occurrence of recent sexual activity, identifying the assailant, establishing the use of force or resistance.<sup>8,9</sup> Also the interval between incidence of sexual violence and presentation is crucial for adequate medical assistance and treatment. If the victim presents no earlier than 72 hours after the assault, post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) against HIV infection, the presumptive treatment for sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and contraceptive against unwanted pregnancy are less effective.<sup>10</sup> This is why victims with delayed presentation of sexual violence incidents do not usually benefit from these prophylaxes.<sup>11</sup> The present study is carried out to analyze the reporting of child sexual assault cases within 24 hours, concerning the age of the victim,

region of residence, complainant, and relation with the assailant.

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## MATERIAL AND METHOD

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The present study is a prospective, observational type of study. It was conducted at the Department of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology of B.J.G.M.C and S.G.H. Pune, from November 2015 to September 2017, after obtaining approval from the institutional ethics committee. The study population consisted of total 534 alleged victims of sexual assault who gave written and informed consent and were of age less than 18 years. A standard pre-designed proforma was filled after obtaining the information from the victim and investigating officer, accompanying relatives, and records which included details regarding the preliminary information such as stated age, sex, educational status, the time of assault, and time of reporting to authority, etc. Out of all this information, cases which were reported within 24 hours of incidence, for medical examination, were further analyzed according to different age groups, region of residence, details of complainant and relation with the assailant.

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## RESULT

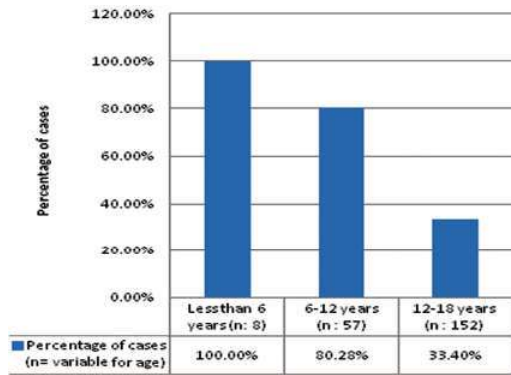
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Out of the total 534 victims included under study, 217 (40.64%) victims registered the complaint within 24 hours of the incidence. Of these 217 cases, females constituted the majority of the cases with 194 (89.40%) cases; whereas males were victims in only 23 (10.60%) cases. Out of 217 cases, majority of victims [143; (65.90%)] resided in urban-dwelling, whereas 74 (34.10%) were from the rural population.

Considering age-wise distribution of these cases, it is observed that percentage of case reporting was highest (100%) in age group of 0-6 years as compared to that of 6-12 years (80.28%) and 12-18 years (33.40%). (Chart-1).

Considering all age groups together, distribution of cases shows that reporting in the urban population was slightly higher (42.68%) as compared to that in the rural population (37.18%). However, considering age-wise distribution, among 6-12 years age group, reporting was higher (96.15%) in rural population than that in the same age group of urban population (71.11%). (Table-1).

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**Chart-1:** Age wise distribution of the cases who reported within 24 hours.

**Table 1:** Region wise Distribution of cases who reported within 24 hours.

Age Group	Urban	Within 24 hrs	Rural	Within 24 hrs
<6 years	8	8 (100%)	-	-
6- <12 hrs	45	32(71.11%)	26	25 (96.15%)
12-<18years	282	103 (36.5%)	173	49 (28.32%)
Total	335	143(42.68%)	199	74 (37.18%)

Considering both rural and urban cases, in majority of cases mother was primary complainant (41.47%) followed by father (26.72%); and in 24.42% percent of cases, the victim herself registered the complaint. (Table-2).

**Table 2:** Distribution of the cases according to complainant.

Region	Mother	Father	Self	Guardian
Urban (n= 143)	57 (39.86%)	40 (27.97%)	32 (22.37%)	14 (9.79%)
Rural (n=74)	33(44.59%)	18 (24.32%)	21 (28.37%)	2 (2.70%)
Total (N= 217)	90(41.47%)	58 (26.72%)	53 (24.42%)	16 (7.37%)

**Table 4:** Distribution of the cases according to relation of the victim with assailant.

Age Group	Boy Friend	Known Family Member (Maternal relative, paternal relative, father and step father)	Family Friend	Neighbour	Other (Teacher, Watchman, Driver)	Stranger	Total
< 6 yrs	-	-	-	5 (62.5%)	1 (12.5%)	2 (25%)	8
6 - < 12 years	9 (15.78%)	20 (35.08%)	1 (1.75%)	16 (28.07%)	5 (8.77%)	6 (10.52%)	57
12 - < 18 years	72 (47.37%)	29 (19.08%)	8 (5.26%)	18 (11.84%)	8 (5.26%)	17 (11.18%)	152
Total	81 (37.32%)	49 (22.58%)	9 (4.14%)	39 (17.97%)	14 (6.45%)	25 (11.52%)	217
Total	Known Assailants: 192 (88.48%)					25 (11.52%)	

**Table 3:** Distribution of cases according to complainant.

Relation	<6 years (n=8)	6-12 years (n=57)	12-18 years (n= 152)	Total (N=217)
Mother	4 (50.00%)	38 (66.66%)	48 (31.57%)	90 (41.47%)
Father	4 (50.00%)	13 (22.81%)	41 (26.97%)	58 (38.15%)
Self	-	-	53 (34.86%)	53 (34.86%)
Guardian	-	6 (10.52%)	10 (6.57%)	16 (7.37%)
Total (N=217)	8 (3.68%)	57 (26.26%)	152 (70.04%)	

Further grouping of these cases as per age groups reveals that, in age group 6-12 years, the percentage of mothers registering complaint (66.66%) markedly exceeds the complaint registered by fathers (22.81%). (Table-3).

Distribution concerning relation with the assailant, considering all age groups together, shows that in the majority of cases, assailant was known to the victim, while in only 11.52% cases assailant was a stranger. Amongst these known assailants, overall boyfriend was most common assailant (37.33%) with predominance in 12-18 years age group. Whereas in 49 cases (22.58%), accused were known family members (like either of father, maternal relative and paternal relatives).

While the further grouping of cases according to age group reveals that, for age group 6-12 years and 12-18 years, the assailant were known family members in 35.08% and 19.08% cases respectively. (Table-4).

## DISCUSSION

In the present study, female child victims (89.40%) have outnumbered their male counterparts (10.60%). This female preponderance is consistent with the previous studies.<sup>12,13,14</sup> However, it contradicts the study *Child Abuse: India, 2007* by Kacker L. et al<sup>15</sup> (52.94% male and 47.06% female). The reason for more incidence of sexual assault in females than males can be attributed to the fact that, women are disproportionately the victims of gender violence, and sexual assault is the most common form of violence against women and has been a part of the culture which leads to a profound violation of woman's bodily integrity.<sup>12</sup>

In the present study, 217 (40.64%) cases were registered within 24 hours of the incidence. The study by Namita G. et al<sup>16</sup> shows comparable results with 40% cases while Shweta Lal et al<sup>7</sup> reported more number of cases (58%). In the background of very few and scattered studies, we cannot comment whether there is a rising trend, in the percentage of reporting of cases within 24 hours of incidence.

It is noted in this study that, the incidence of reporting of child sexual assault cases within 24 hours is more in urban areas (42.68%) compared to rural areas (37.18%). Studies by other Indian researchers also report similar findings.<sup>17,18</sup> The reason for reporting of more number of cases in urban population can be attributed to distribution of population in the study region. However, further division of urban and rural cases according to age group shows that, for age group 6-12 years, reporting in urban population is significantly less (71.11%) than for rural population (96.15%). We could not find any other similar study to compare this data. Reasons behind this lower reporting in the 6-12 years of age group in the urban population need further evaluation with the larger study population.

The overall proportion of assailants shows that, in majority of cases assailants were known (88.48%) while strangers were assailant in very few cases (11.52%). This is consistent with the studies by other authors.<sup>19,20</sup> While some studies mention strangers as most common assailant<sup>21,22</sup> present study disproves this fact. Hence parents need to be aware of this pattern and should be careful while leaving a child with an acquaintance

or a relative. In the present study, only 33.40% of cases from the age group 12 years to <18 years have reported within 24 hours of the incidence. The reason for this may be bridged as the assailant in this age group is well known or is in relation to the victim. Barriers to reporting of these incidents can also be summarized as fear of retaliation from the perpetrator, fear of not being believed, fear of ruined reputation if the incident is known, consensual sexual intercourse among adolescents and anticipation that the reporting will not result in conviction of the perpetrators.<sup>5,6,23</sup>

Considering all age groups together, the boyfriend was commonest assailant (37.32%). This finding is in agreement with previous studies.<sup>12,19</sup> However, this finding contradicts the observation of statistics of National data of India<sup>24</sup> which reported that in the majority of the cases, assailants were neighbors. In this particular study it is true for victims with age less than 12 years.

We believe that the reason for most common assailants being boyfriend and friend in our study is due to the fact that, in these tender years opposite sex affection and curiosity about relations results into the beginning of the love affairs.

However, when the same observation is further studied concerning age groups, it is visible that, family members (paternal relative, maternal relative, father, and stepfather) if considered together, form a major assailant group with 35.08% in 6-12 years age group. This is much larger when compared to other age groups individually. This may hint toward much lower reporting by fathers in this particular age group (22.81%) compared to that by mothers (66.66%).

Also, in the present study, considering all age groups together, in majority of cases (41.47%), the mother reported the incidence to the authority within 24 hours. This finding however contradicts to the observation by Tamuli R.P. et al<sup>25</sup> where majority of the cases were registered by victim herself. The reason for more reporting from mothers can be attributed to the fact that the, mother and their children are more closely attached due to compassion and love. In the Indian society, as role of mother is to see all matters of the house and father has to look for finances, the trust, love, and care are more in children and mother.

## CONCLUSION

The percentage of reporting of child sexual assault cases within 24 hours is still not acceptable and needs measures to look into causes for the same and demands alternatives to improve this for better judicial outcomes as well as the health of the victim. Even though reporting seems to be better in the urban population, for reporting of cases from age group 06-12 years more attention is needed.

It is also worth mentioning that with an increase in age, there is a significant decrease in reporting within 24 hours. In the majority of cases mother is still the primary complainant, followed by father, but for cases in the age group 6-12 years, fathers are much reluctant to report cases, the reason may be the involvement of known family members in such incidences. Overall, in the majority of cases, the assailant was known to the victim, and boyfriend was the most common assailant with predominance in 12-18 years age group. The study thus highlights that age group of 6-12 and 12-18 years are vulnerable age groups and needs more attention.

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*Ethical clearance:* Taken.

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