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The Long-Term Impact of Childhood Sexual Abuse on Incomes and Labour Force Status¹

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Introduction

Childhood sexual abuse (CSA) has been the subject of increasing attention in recent years. Reports such as Ryan (2009) and Murphy (2009) looked at abuse by Catholic clergy. However, in an earlier report McGee et al. (2002) had shown that abusers were often family members. Recent news stories from the UK have served as a reminder that CSA is not just an Irish issue.

Studies on the impact of CSA have tended to be undertaken by researchers in the fields of health and psychology. These studies have shown links between CSA and psychological disorders such as depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and anxiety. Very few studies have been undertaken to look at the economic impact on individuals who have experienced CSA. In this Research Bulletin, we report on a study in which we examined whether people who experienced CSA suffered long-term economic consequences in terms of lower attachment to the labour market and/or lower incomes. Given the paucity of research on this question, this study is important in both the Irish and international contexts.

The Data

The data used in the study come from the first wave of Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA). Between 2009 and 2011, 8,500 people aged 50 and over and living in Ireland were interviewed about a wide range of issues such as income, wealth, labour force status and health. Through a self-completed questionnaire, participants were also asked questions about sexual abuse suffered before the age of 18 and these questions are used to identify which respondents experienced CSA.

Results

Before outlining the key results, it is important to set out the incidence of abuse recorded in the survey. For the full sample, 5.6 percent of men and 6.7 percent of

¹ This research bulletin summarises Barrett, Alan; Kamiya, Yumiko; O’Sullivan, Vincent (2014, online), Childhood Sexual Abuse and Later-life Economic Consequences, *Journal of Behavioural and Experimental Economics*

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women said that they had experienced CSA. In the case of both men and women, less than one percent responded that they had been abused by either of their parents. It should be noted that these figures could well understate the true incidence of CSA if people are reluctant to report such experiences.

Turning to the analysis, the first question to be addressed was whether those who had experienced CSA differed from others in terms of labour force status. In the case of men, 17 percent of CSA survivors were out of the labour force as a result of being sick or permanently disabled. The corresponding figure for men who had not experienced CSA was only 8 percent. For women the comparable figures are 14 percent for CSA survivors versus 6 percent for other women in the sample.

It is known from other research that CSA is associated with depression and that depression is associated with breaks in labour force participation. We used statistical methods to disentangle possible links between CSA, sickness/disability and depression. Specifically, we estimated multivariate models of labour force status and included independent variables capturing CSA and also depression, anxiety and alcohol problems. For men, the results suggest that CSA survivors are 3 times more likely to be sick/disabled compared to other men, even accounting for the impact of psychological difficulties. For women, the estimated impact of CSA on labour force status is much smaller and not statistically significant. This may be the result of weaker labour force attachment among this generation of women generally, thereby making it more difficult to identify a link between CSA and labour force status among women in the data.

Next we looked at household incomes. Based on multivariate models where other factors influencing income such as age and education were controlled for, we estimated that male survivors of CSA lived in households where household income was 34 percent lower.

One final issue that we explored was the living arrangements of survivors of CSA compared to others. Male survivors of CSA are twice as likely to be living alone compared to other men.

Discussion

The effects of CSA on various dimensions of mental health have been shown in earlier research. In this unique study, we have shown (especially among men) that the experience of CSA also led to very long-run effects in terms of labour force participation and incomes. Our analysis was based on people aged 50 and over and the abuse occurred before they were aged 18. Hence, it has been at least 32 years since the abuse was experienced.

A labour force disadvantage among the CSA victims is observed even when we control for depression and anxiety. This suggests that the impacts of CSA are complex and multifaceted. As economists, we are able to identify this labour force disadvantage but we are not qualified to say much more.

One implication of these results arises in the context of compensation for survivors. The results here provide a quantification of the economic impacts on individuals of having experienced CSA. While compensation should cover factors others than economic, it seems that the economic impacts are real and substantial.

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