Understanding Sexual Abuse Risk: A Brazilian School-Based Study

Guilherme Welter Wendt, PhD.

Department of Medical Sciences, Health Sciences Center, Western Parana State University, Francisco Beltrão, Brazil

INTRODUCTION & AIM

Sexual abuse is a major problem in Brazil, posing destructive, often irreversible consequences for its victims. Estimates point to an average number of 8 children and adolescents that are sexually abused each hour[1]. Research shows that long-term consequences of sexual abuse may encompass psychosocial problems of variable intensity, such as anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, complex trauma, or other types of afflictions, as well as physical problems ranging from chronic pain to reproductive and chronic diseases[2-3].

Among risk factors linked to sexual abuse, international investigations have showed the role of several factors, including early age, gender, as well as experiences of other types of aggression, such as bullying and cyberbullying[4-5].

Consequently, the current study explored factors predicting sexual abuse in a nationally representative sample of Brazilian students.

METHOD

This is cross-sectional study based on secondary data from the 2019 National School Health Survey (PeNSE)[6], conducted by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) in partnership with the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education.

PeNSE is the largest school-based survey in the country and uses complex sampling to ensure national representativeness of adolescents enrolled in the 9th grade of elementary school and in high school. The target population consisted of students from public and private schools in all federative regions.

Data were collected through self-administered questionnaires applied in the classroom, without the presence of teachers, in order to preserve confidentiality and increase the honesty of responses. Ethical procedures were strictly observed, including informed consent from guardians and assent from students. Specific protocols were established to refer participants who reported situations of immediate risk.

Logistic regression models were developed in order to examine the predictors of sexual abuse. The following independent variables were examined: age, gender, race, urban vs. rural place of residence, public vs. private school type, experiences of cyber victimization and traditional victimization by bullying.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Most youth reported living in urban areas (95.0%), with a balanced gender distribution (51.2% female and 48.8% male). Also, 66.0% were between 13 and 15 years old, and 34.0% were between 16 and 17 years old. In terms of race, 43.8% identified as mixed race (*pardo*), 39.2% as White, 10.4% as Black, 3.5% as Asian, and 3.0% as Indigenous. Approximately half of the students attended public schools (49.7%), while 39.9% reported having been victims of bullying and 12.4% of cyberbullying.

Figure 1 shows the results of logistic regression. The model was significant ($\chi 2(11) = 4{,}683.61$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = 0.25$) and identified several factors associated with sexual abuse.
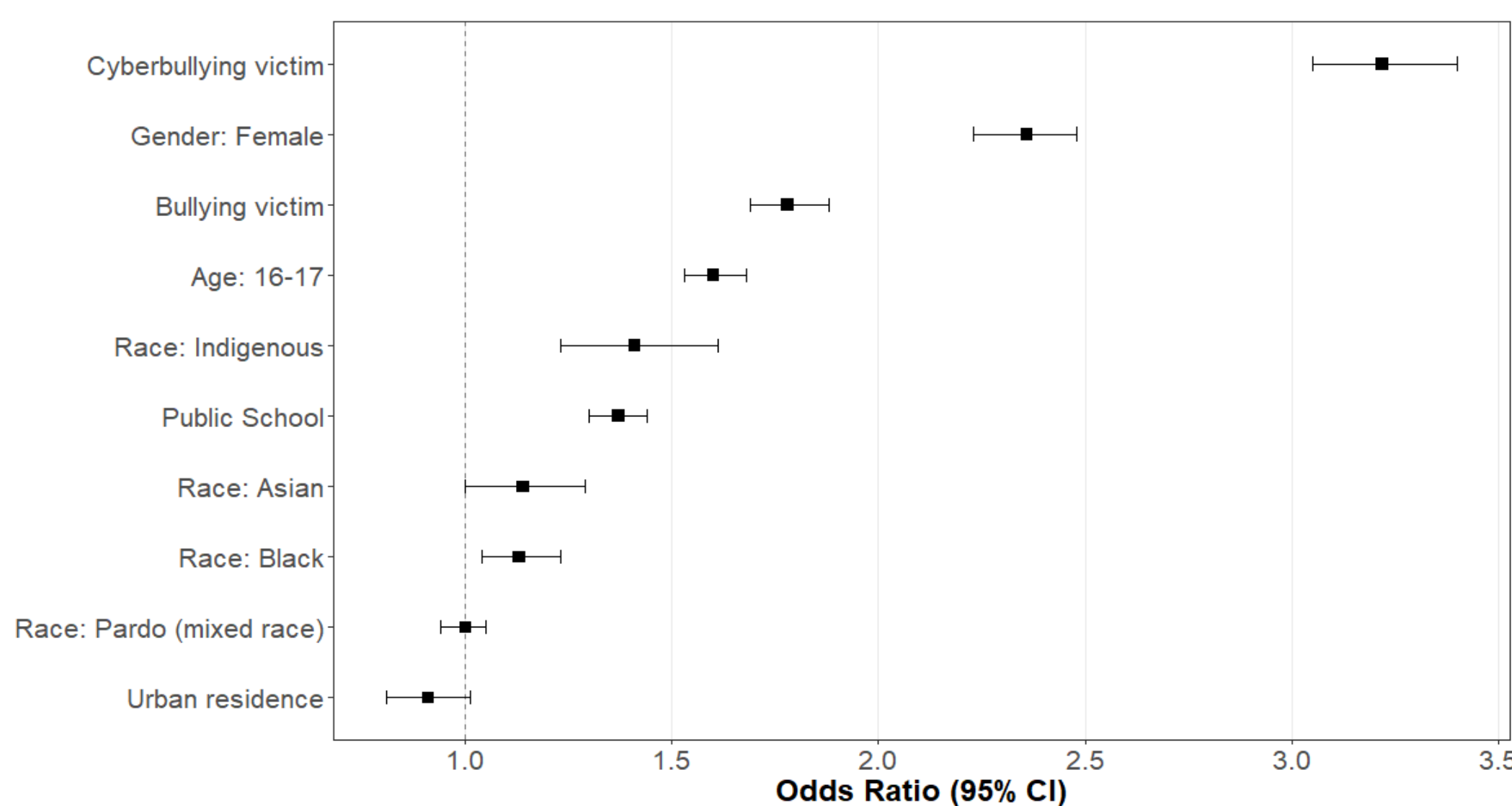
Higher odds of sexual abuse among older adolescents (16–17 years; OR = 1.60, $p < .001$), females (OR = 2.36, $p < .001$), and students identifying as Black (OR = 1.13, $p = .003$) or Asian (OR = 1.14, $p = .045$) were identified. Public school attendance was also associated with increased risk for sexual abuse (OR = 1.37, $p < .001$), as well as experiences of cyberbullying (OR = 3.22, $p < .001$) and school bullying (OR = 1.78, $p < .001$).

CONCLUSION

Findings involving demographic and relational variables provide avenues for identifying risk factors to take preventative measures for at-risk youth. Moreover, empirical data corroborate previous studies.

FUTURE WORK / REFERENCES

1. Redação CBN. Oito crianças ou adolescentes são vítimas de violência sexual no Brasil a cada hora: "temos que parar de passar pano." CBN Brasil [Internet]. 2025 Mar 20 [cited 2026 June 1]; Available from: https://cbn.globo.com/brasil/entrevista/2025/03/20/oito-criancas-ou-adolescentes-sao-vitimas-de-violencia-sexual-no-brasil-a-cada-hora-temos-que-parar-de-passar-pano.ghtml
2. Johansson F, Magnusson K. Sexual harassment, sexual violence, and mental health outcomes: causal inference with ambiguous exposures. American Journal of Epidemiology. 2025 Aug 5;194(8):2336–41.
3. Abdul Latiff M, Fang L, Goh DA, Tan LJ. A systematic review of factors associated with disclosure of child sexual abuse. Child Abuse & Neglect. 2024 Jan;147:106564.
4. Abajobir AA, Kisely S, Maravilla JC, Williams G, Najman JM. Gender differences in the association between childhood sexual abuse and risky sexual behaviours: A systematic review and meta-analysis. Child Abuse & Neglect. 2017 Jan;63:249–60.
5. Kennedy RS, Font SA, Haag AC, Noll JG. Childhood Sexual Abuse and Exposure to Peer Bullying Victimization. J Interpers Violence. 2022 Oct;37(19–20):NP18589–613.
6. Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística. Pesquisa nacional de saúde do escolar [Internet]. Rio de Janeiro: IBGE; 2022 [cited 2026 Jan 6]. Available from: https://biblioteca.ibge.gov.br/visualizacao/livros/liv101955.pdf