

The Presentation Of Child Abuse And Neglect by Children And Young People: The What's Up Experience

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Abstract

What's Up is a professional telephone counselling service that has been available free of charge to all New Zealand children and young people aged between 5 and 18 years since September 2001. What's Up is available between noon and midnight, seven days a week and receives an average of 1,500 calls every day from an estimated 22,000 individuals each year. Non-identifying information is collected on all calls received. Because calls to What's Up can be made anonymously and confidentially and are always initiated by children and young people themselves, they provide a picture of child abuse from the child's point-of-view. This is an important perspective on child abuse that may differ from that arising from circumstances where adults identify a situation as being abusive towards a child or young person. Approximately 1.7% of the problems presented to What's Up are classified as involving child abuse or neglect. This paper presents data on 1,513 such calls analysed by age, gender, ethnicity, family circumstances, geographical location and outcome. Qualitative data on the nature of the abuse reported in these calls is also presented.

INTRODUCTION

0800 WHATSUP (What's Up) is a professional telephone counselling service that has been available free of charge to children and young people aged between 5 and 18 years throughout New Zealand since September 2001. What's Up is available between noon and midnight, seven days a week and receives an average of 1,500 calls every day from an estimated 22,000 individuals each year. Non-identifying information is collected on all calls received.

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METHODOLOGY

Records of all calls logged between 1st October 2001 and 27th June 2005 that were primarily about sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse, or neglect were selected. These comprised 1,487 (0.37%) of the 399,114 calls recorded during this period.

The distributions of these callers on a number of variables are compared with those for all callers to What's Up.

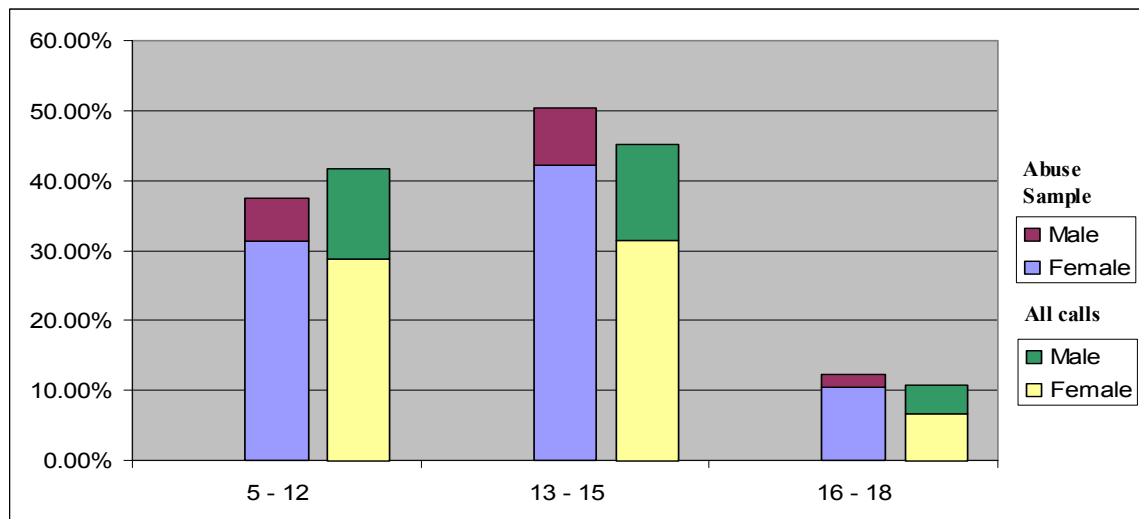
Table 1. Distribution of calls by type and severity of abuse.

Abuse Type	Severity Scale					Total
	Low		High			
	1	2	3	4	5	
Sexual	55	101	438 ^a	34	65	693
Physical	98	77	153	228 ^b	36	592
Emotional	14	21	15	51 ^b	24	125
Neglect	17	27 ^c	22	10	1	77
<i>Severity scale definitions for modal rating on each abuse type</i>						1,487
<i>a. Abuse no longer current but issues remain unresolved</i>						
<i>b. Regular abuse</i>						
<i>c. Occasionally lacking in care</i>						

AGE, SEX & ETHNICITY

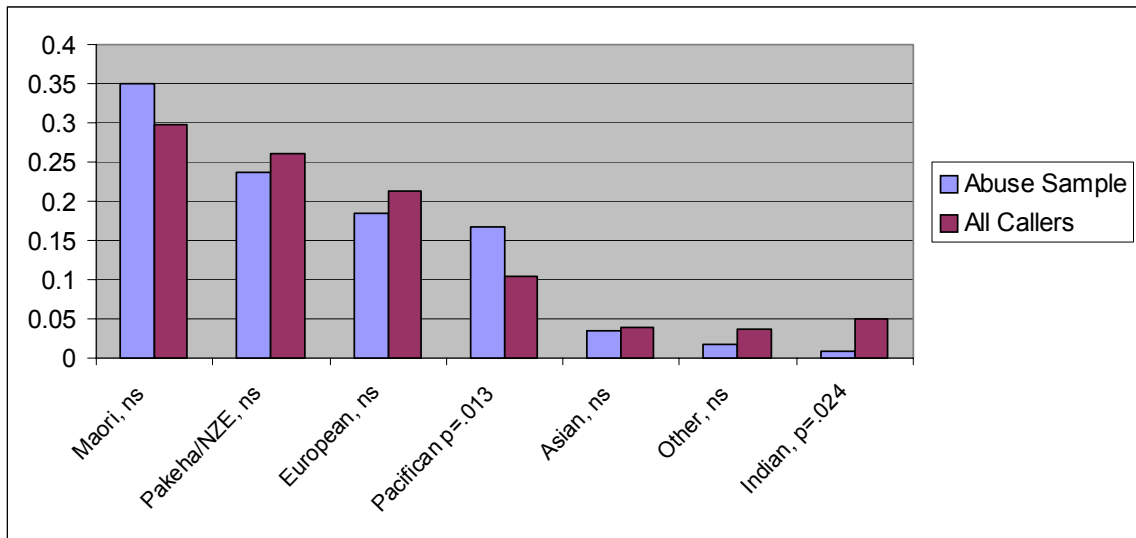
Callers presenting abuse are slightly more likely to be female and in early adolescence than the general population of callers to What’s Up.

Figure 1. Age and sex distribution of child abuse callers compared with all callers



Callers identifying themselves as of Pacific Islands ethnicity were over-represented compared with all callers to What's Up. Callers of Indian ethnicity were under-represented. All other ethnic groups showed no variation from the general population of callers to What's Up.

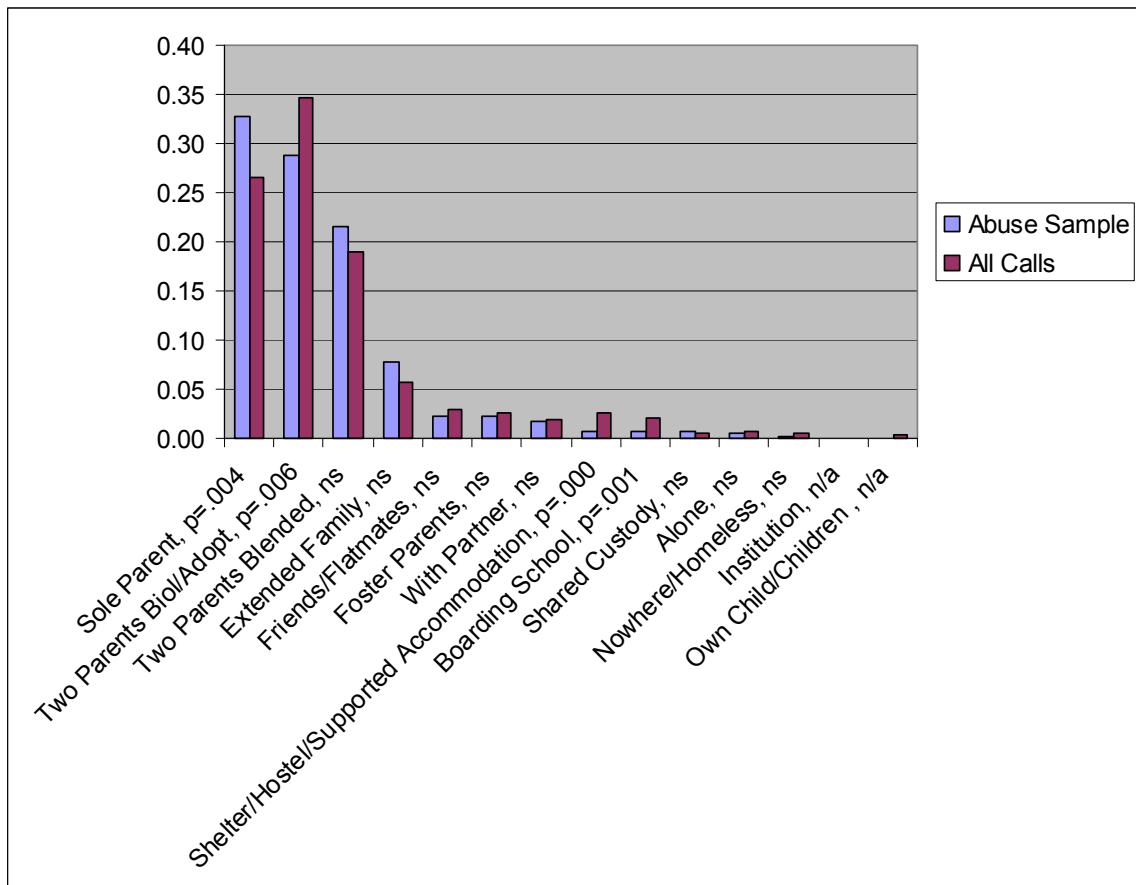
Figure 2. Ethnicity compared with all callers (n = 114).



LIVING CIRCUMSTANCES

Callers presenting abuse were more likely to be living with a sole parent and less likely to be living with two biological or adoptive parents, in a shelter, hostel or supported accommodation, or at boarding school.

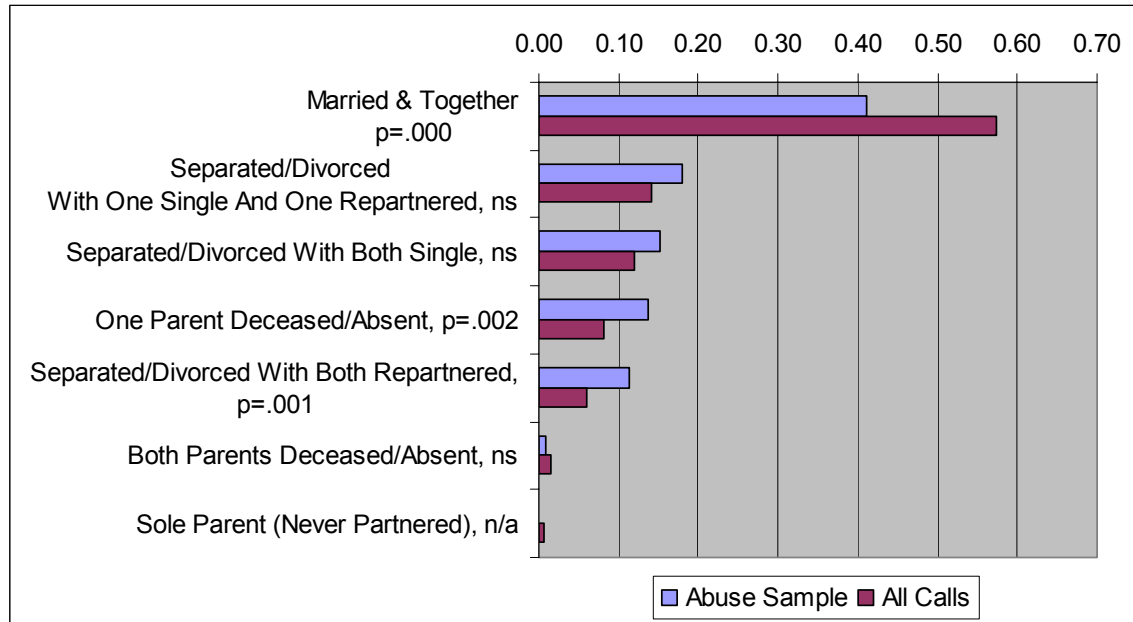
Figure 3. Living circumstances compared with all callers (n = 409).



MARITAL STATUS OF PARENTS

Callers presenting abuse were more likely than What's Up callers in general to be living in a family where one parent is deceased or absent for other reasons, or where both parents are separated or divorced and re-partnered. They were less likely to be living with parents who were married and together.

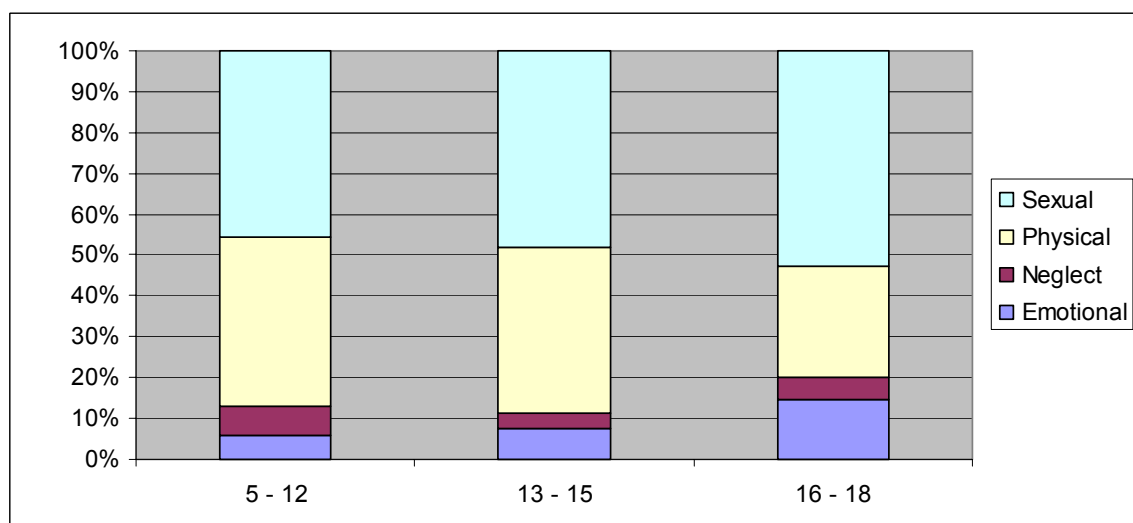
Figure 1. Marital status of parents of child abuse callers compared with all callers. n = 212



TYPE OF ABUSE BY AGE

The proportion of calls about sexual abuse relative to other types of abuse increases with age, as does emotional. Physical abuse calls decrease and neglect shows no clear relationship with caller age.

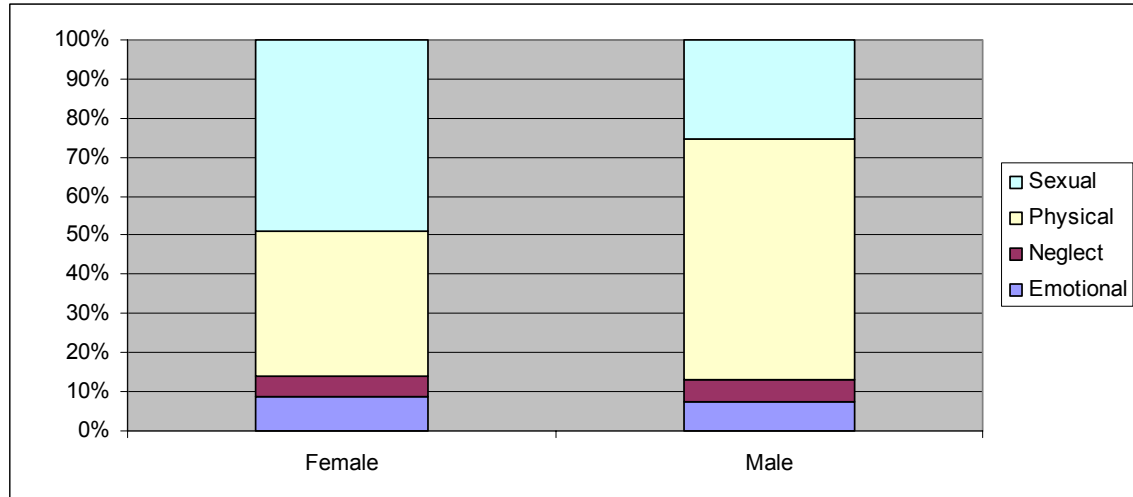
Figure 5. Relative proportions of types of abuse in three age brackets (n5-12 = 465, n13-15 = 611, n16-18 = 148).



TYPE OF ABUSE BY GENDER

Females are much more likely to call about sexual abuse and males to call about physical abuse. There is little association between gender and calls about neglect or emotional abuse.

Figure 6. Relative proportions of types of abuse by gender (nFemale = 1,236, nMale = 244).



CONCLUSION

What's Up appears to be a significant source of information about child abuse as provided by children themselves, especially given that it is unusual for children to report abuse to agencies such as CYF (CYF, personal communication) that gather data on this issue.

The What's Up data is broadly consistent with the picture of abuse gained from other sources (eg. MSD, 2002), suggesting that abuse reported by adults is broadly representative of cases of abuse.

The relative importance of sexual abuse, the association of sole parent families with abuse, and the associations between age and gender and sexual and physical abuse are interesting findings.

The What's Up database is available as a resource for research aimed at better understanding and management of children's issues in New Zealand. Please contact What's Up for further information.

REFERENCE

MSD (2002) Social Report 2002: Safety and Security. Ministry of Social Development, Wellington, NZ.