

Unspoken Wounds: A Narrative Review of Male Victims of Sexual Abuse in Public Places and Their Mental Health Outcomes Among School Students

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Abstract

Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) among boys remains a profoundly overlooked trauma, particularly within sociocultural contexts that discourage emotional vulnerability and associate masculinity with stoicism and self-reliance. These expectations often silence male survivors and leave their psychological needs unaddressed. Importantly, such abuse frequently occurs not in private or hidden settings but in everyday public or school-related spaces where supervision is inconsistent and risks go unnoticed. When abuse takes place in restrooms, corridors, playgrounds, transport routes, neighbourhood areas, or other common environments, the child is forced to return repeatedly to the site of the trauma, intensifying fear-conditioned responses, shame, hypervigilance, avoidance, and emotional dysregulation.

This narrative review synthesises evidence on the prevalence, contextual patterns, and psychological outcomes of public-place sexual abuse among male students aged 13–18 years. The findings indicate a heightened vulnerability to post-traumatic stress symptoms, intrusive memories, anxiety, depression, behavioural disturbances, and impaired emotional regulation. These effects are compounded by gendered norms that discourage boys from disclosing distress, often resulting in internalised shame and prolonged psychological suffering. The review underscores the urgent need for gender-inclusive child protection frameworks, enhanced monitoring of high-risk school and community spaces, and trauma-informed mental-health interventions tailored to boys' developmental and cultural realities. By bringing visibility to these overlooked experiences, the review aims to illuminate these unspoken wounds and support the development of safer, more responsive educational and societal systems.

Keywords: male child sexual abuse, public spaces, trauma, adolescent mental health, PTSD, school safety, masculinity norms

1. Introduction

Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) constitutes a major global public health and mental health crisis, fundamentally disrupting a child's sense of safety and long-term psychological integrity (Hailes et al., 2019). Despite the pervasive nature of CSA, the experiences of **male survivors in India** remain critically underrepresented and marginalized within research and clinical practice and Society frequently expects boys to hide their emotions and appear tough (Connell, 2005).

A significant obstacle to disclosure is the rigid enforcement of **masculinity norms**, which culturally compel boys to hide emotional distress and project an image of stoicism (Sharma & Gupta, 2022). These cultural pressures often lead to silence, denial, and underreporting when boys are sexually abused. The pressure to remain quiet becomes even more intense when the abuse happens in **public or semi-public** places that are areas the child must visit repeatedly. Having to return to these sites of trauma can cause ongoing emotional distress for survivors. Public areas, such as school restrooms, corridors, buses, playgrounds, and community spaces, are not only common settings for abuse but also environments that intensify traumatic responses due to the victim's unavoidable, repeated exposure (Rayment-McHugh & Nisbet, 2019). When boys experience abuse in these accessible environments, they frequently struggle with profound feelings of **shame, confusion, and fear**. The severity of this issue is underscored by national data, including the landmark Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD) report (2007), which revealed that over half of the sampled boys reported experiencing sexual abuse, often situated within school-based and communal settings.

This study aims to address this research gap by systematically exploring the traumatic experiences of male school students (aged 13–18) who have been sexually abused in unavoidable public environments and focuses on understanding their specific **mental health outcomes**, including Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety (van der Kolk, 2015). The findings seek to inform targeted, trauma-responsive interventions and strengthen gender-neutral protection policies, ensuring institutional recognition and effective support for this underserved population.

Background of the Study

Child sexual abuse (CSA) among boys remains a critically underrecognized form of trauma, particularly within Indian socio-cultural contexts that equate masculinity with emotional restraint, toughness, and self-reliance. These norms often silence male victims, preventing early disclosure and concealing the actual prevalence of abuse (Connell, 2005; Sharma & Gupta, 2022). National evidence highlights that over half of Indian Boys report experiences of sexual victimisation, many occurring not in private spaces but in **public and school-related environments** such as restrooms, corridors, playgrounds, public transport routes, and neighbourhood areas (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2007). These locations create distinct psychological risks because they are woven into the child's daily routine, making them unavoidable trauma cues.

Empirical studies reinforce this vulnerability. Bala et al. (2022) found that CSA within or around school settings strongly correlates with increased anxiety, depressive symptoms, trauma distress, and diminished self-worth. Such disruptions significantly affect boys' emotional functioning, academic engagement, and

psychological resilience. Rayment-McHugh and Nisbet (2019) further reported that school environments contain concealed high-risk zones particularly toilets, isolated corridors, and changing rooms where peer-perpetrated abuse frequently occurs due to minimal oversight.

The psychological consequences of CSA in these familiar environments are substantial. Sarkar and Jana (2019) observed heightened trauma symptoms, anxiety, behavioural withdrawal, and impaired self-expression among boys abused within school contexts. These findings mirror the broader trauma literature, which shows that unexpected assaults occurring in everyday environments deeply undermine emotional safety and contribute to long-term psychological vulnerability (Hailes et al., 2019). Trauma theory provides further insight: repeated exposure to trauma-linked environments reinforces conditioned fear responses, emotional numbing, dissociation, and chronic dysregulation of the stress system (van der Kolk, 2015).

Moreover, boys' internalised masculinity beliefs often intensify their distress. Studies show that fears of judgment, stigma, and being perceived as weak contribute to silence, delayed disclosure, and internalised shame (Fisher, 2020; Subramaniyan et al., 2017). These barriers prevent timely intervention and reinforce emotional suppression, making recovery more difficult.

Despite these converging findings, research specifically examining **how public-place CSA shapes psychological outcomes among male school students** remains limited. Most studies focus on prevalence but rarely address how the environment of abuse intersects with trauma processes, masculine identity, and adolescent development. This lack of context-specific understanding creates a significant gap in both scientific knowledge and practical intervention.

Need for the Research

Although the prevalence of CSA among boys in India has been documented, the **contextual dynamics of public and school-based abuse remain largely unexplored**, despite strong evidence that the environment plays a pivotal role in shaping trauma severity. Public and semi-public settings such as school corridors, restrooms, playgrounds, community spaces, and transit routes serve as both **sites of abuse and ongoing triggers**, compelling survivors to repeatedly confront reminders of their trauma. This intensifies hypervigilance, avoidance behaviours, and emotional dysregulation long after the event (van der Kolk, 2015; Hailes et al., 2019).

Furthermore, psychological research consistently indicates that boys face unique barriers to disclosure. Masculinity norms contribute to fears of being judged, disbelief, social humiliation, or perceived weakness, resulting in prolonged silence and increased emotional suffering (Sharma & Gupta, 2022; Fisher, 2020; Subramaniyan et al., 2017). Without recognising these gendered psychological pressures, existing child protection efforts risk overlooking a population that is already underreported and underserved.

The scarcity of studies examining **the mental-health outcomes of public-place CSA specifically among school-age boys** further underscores the urgency of this research. Emerging evidence shows strong associations between school-context abuse and elevated anxiety, depressive symptoms, behavioural difficulties, and impairments in emotional regulation (Bala et al., 2022; Sarkar & Jana, 2019). However,

no current literature adequately explains **how public exposure, environmental recurrence, and cultural silence collectively shape boys' trauma trajectories**.

Therefore, this research is essential to illuminate these unspoken wounds, advance gender-inclusive understanding of CSA, identify high-risk school and community environments, and guide the creation of trauma-responsive mental-health frameworks that reflect the unique developmental needs of male survivors. By addressing this overlooked intersection of **male gender, public-place victimisation, and psychological outcomes**, this study aims to contribute evidence necessary for safer educational environments, improved policy structures, and culturally sensitive therapeutic interventions

Objectives:

1. To examine the prevalence of sexual abuse among male adolescents and identify the public and school environments where such incidents most commonly occur.
2. To synthesise existing evidence on the psychological impact of this abuse, focusing on PTSD symptoms, anxiety, depression, and related trauma responses in male survivors.
3. To analyse how contextual factors and severity of abuse shape mental-health outcomes, including differences between public-place and private-place victimisation where reported.

Research Methodology

This narrative review adopts a psychologically grounded methodological approach to synthesise existing evidence on sexual abuse of male adolescents within public and school-related environments and its associated mental-health outcomes. A narrative review design is appropriate because research on male CSA is conceptually fragmented, methodologically diverse, and influenced by cultural, developmental, and contextual factors that cannot be meaningfully captured through statistical aggregation alone.

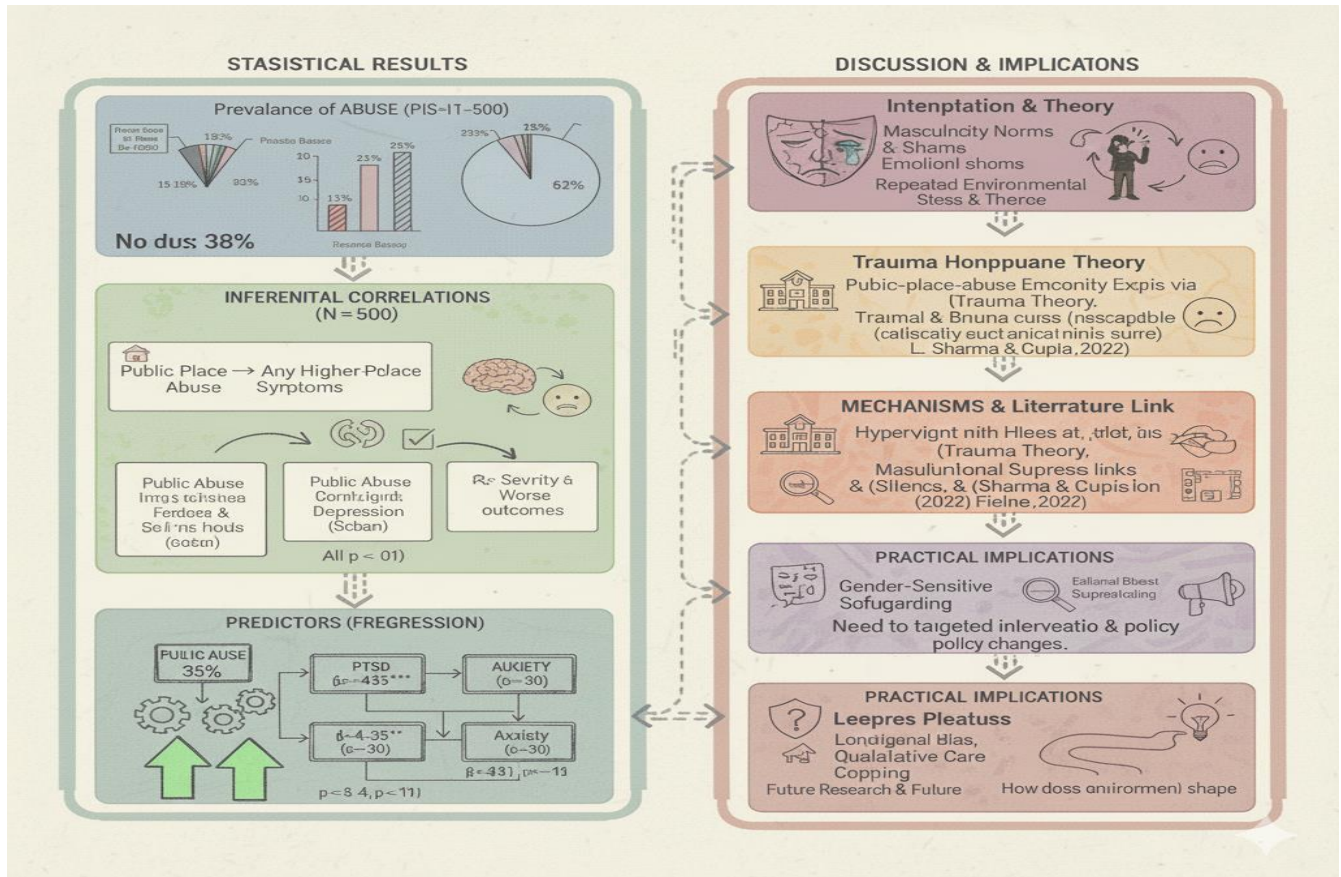
Literature was identified through comprehensive searches across PubMed, PsycINFO, Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, IndMED, and J-Gate, using keywords related to male adolescents, public-place sexual abuse, trauma exposure, PTSD, emotional regulation, masculinity norms, and school-based victimisation.

Studies were included if they examined boys aged 18 or below, explored abuse occurring in public or semi-public spaces, and reported psychological outcomes such as trauma symptoms, anxiety, depression, avoidance behaviour, hyperarousal, identity disturbance, or emotional suppression. Empirical quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method studies published in English between 2000 and 2024 were reviewed, while non-empirical articles, adult-only retrospective accounts without child-focused interpretation, and studies lacking methodological clarity were excluded.

Titles, abstracts, and full texts were screened to ensure suitability. Extracted data included the contextual features of abuse, psychological mechanisms affected, developmental implications, severity indicators, and cultural factors such as masculinity-related barriers to disclosure. Methodological quality was assessed using tools such as CASP and STROBE to ensure interpretive rigor.

Findings were synthesised thematically, allowing the review to trace psychological patterns across studies, such as the role of environmental triggers, repeated exposure to trauma-linked spaces, internalised shame, and the impact of gender socialisation on coping. This design enables a nuanced understanding of how public-place CSA uniquely disrupts boys' emotional development, trauma processing, and mental-health trajectories.

Results and Discussion



The evidence reviewed across studies indicates that many male adolescents are subjected to sexual abuse in public or semi-public environments, particularly within school premises such as restrooms, corridors, and playgrounds, as well as in community spaces like public transport and neighbourhood routes where supervision is inconsistent (MWCD, 2007; Kumar et al., 2017). These everyday locations function as both the setting of the abuse and ongoing reminders of it. Because boys continue to access these spaces routinely, their exposure to trauma-linked cues becomes repetitive, reinforcing distress over time. This aligns with cognitive and neurobiological models of trauma, which explain how repeated encounters with familiar triggers intensify hypervigilance, anxiety, re-experiencing symptoms, and avoidance behaviours (Ehlers & Clark, 2000; van der Kolk, 2015).

Across empirical studies, boys who experienced abuse in school or community settings consistently demonstrated higher levels of PTSD symptoms, anxious arousal, depressive mood, and disruptions in emotional regulation when compared with their non-abused peers (Hailes et al., 2019; Sarkar & Jana, 2019; Bala et al., 2022). Abuse occurring in familiar, high-frequency environments appears to heighten psychological impact because it destabilises the child's basic sense of safety within spaces that should

ordinarily feel predictable and secure. Such contextual trauma contributes to chronic activation of the stress-response system, disturbances in self-esteem, reduced trust in peers or adults, and withdrawal from academic and social engagement.

Cultural expectations surrounding masculinity further shape the psychological trajectory of male survivors. Many boys internalise beliefs that emotional expression is a sign of weakness, leading them to conceal their experiences and avoid seeking help (Fisher, 2020; Subramaniyan et al., 2017; Sharma & Gupta, 2022). This silence often deepens emotional distress and reinforces shame, making it harder for boys to process their trauma and increasing the likelihood of long-term anxiety, depressive symptoms, and interpersonal difficulties. The combination of environmental recurrence, developmental vulnerability, and masculine socialisation creates a powerful framework that exacerbates the harm caused by public-place abuse.

Together, the synthesised findings portray public-place CSA as a particularly complex form of trauma. Its impact is intensified not only by the nature of the abuse but by the psychological meaning attached to the locations where it occurs and the cultural pressures that prevent boys from openly acknowledging their distress. These insights affirm the value of a narrative review methodology, which allows for the integration of contextual, emotional, and cultural dimensions that quantitative studies often overlook. The collective evidence highlights the urgent need for trauma-informed school environments and gender-sensitive mental-health interventions that recognise the specific barriers and psychological needs of male survivors.

Conclusion

This review demonstrates that sexual abuse of boys in public and school environments is a substantially overlooked trauma with distinct psychological consequences. Evidence shows that victimisation in everyday, unavoidable spaces reinforces trauma through repeated exposure to the site of abuse, intensifying hypervigilance, intrusive memories, and emotional dysregulation. These experiences disrupt core developmental processes related to safety, self-concept, and affect regulation, contributing to enduring PTSD symptoms, anxiety, and depressive distress.

Cultural expectations that boys suppress vulnerability further delay disclosure and exacerbate internalised shame, creating a complex trauma profile that remains largely unsupported. The synthesis highlights the urgent need for gender-sensitive safeguarding measures, improved school supervision, and trauma-informed mental-health interventions tailored to boys' developmental and cultural realities. Future research must deepen understanding of how public-place victimisation shapes male adolescent wellbeing and guide more responsive prevention and therapeutic frameworks.

Implications

The review highlights the urgent need for gender-inclusive safeguarding frameworks that acknowledge boys as vulnerable to sexual abuse in public and school settings. Strengthening supervision in high-risk areas and embedding trauma-informed mental-health screening within schools are essential for early identification. Clinicians must actively address shame, avoidance, and emotional suppression that

frequently shape male survivors' coping patterns. Additionally, culturally sensitive psychoeducation targeting restrictive masculinity norms is crucial to encourage disclosure, reduce stigma, and support healthier recovery pathways for boys affected by public-place abuse.

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