

Population & Societies

Sexual violence against men is committed by other males, mainly during childhood

Lucie Wicky*

Men and boys may be victims of sexual violence—although less so than women and girls—but their experiences are still poorly documented. Encouraged by the #MeToo movement and the public interest it aroused, male victims of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church, at school, or within the family have started to speak out. How many men and boys report sexual violence? Who are their abusers? Where does this violence occur? Lucie Wicky uses data from the VIRAGE survey to shed light on these questions.

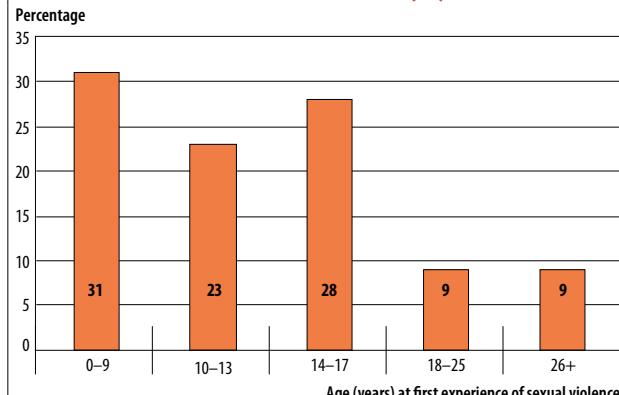
Females are 4 times more likely than males to experience sexual violence. Adopting a broad definition (see Box 1), 14.5% of women and girls have been abused in their lifetime versus 3.9% of men and boys [1]. While girls are particularly vulnerable during childhood [2], women's exposure to violence, often perpetrated within an intimate relationship, in a public space, or in the workplace, continues throughout adult life; while for men this is much more rarely the case [1; 3]. Most perpetrators are men (96%), sexual violence being an expression of gender domination.

Over the last decade, however, male victims have also started to speak out. Encouraged by the #MeToo movement and increased public awareness of sexual violence in general, men have started opening up about their experiences in a variety of settings, such as the Catholic Church and its institutions, in schools, in sports clubs, or within the family. The VIRAGE survey provides an opportunity to explore the main characteristics of sexual violence against men and boys. This article focuses on a limited selection of acts of sexual violence (Box 1)—those that belong to a legal category: sexual assault, rape, and attempted rape.

Most men were abused as children or adolescents

Four times fewer men than women reported lifetime experience of sexual violence corresponding to a legal category (1.4%

Figure 1. Age at men's first experience of sexual violence (%)



Lucie Wicky, *Population & Societies*, 633, May 2025, INED.

Interpretation: Among men reporting lifetime experience of sexual violence, for 30% it occurred or began (when recurrent) at ages 0–9, and for 23% at ages 10–13.

Coverage: Men aged 20–69 living in metropolitan France in an ordinary household who reported lifetime experience of sexual violence (excluding 'rubbing/pressing').

Source: INED, VIRAGE survey, 2015; weighted percentages.

vs. 5.5%, respectively, with the same definition). In 8 out of 10 cases, men who reported sexual violence were minors when the acts took place (Figure 1), under age 14 for half of them, and under age 10 for one-third. Among men reporting sexual violence after age 18, very few were aged over 25 when it occurred. For males, experience of sexual violence thus concerns a much shorter period than for women, who are exposed throughout their lives [1; 2]. At young ages, lack of knowledge about sexuality and the absence of systematic child protection

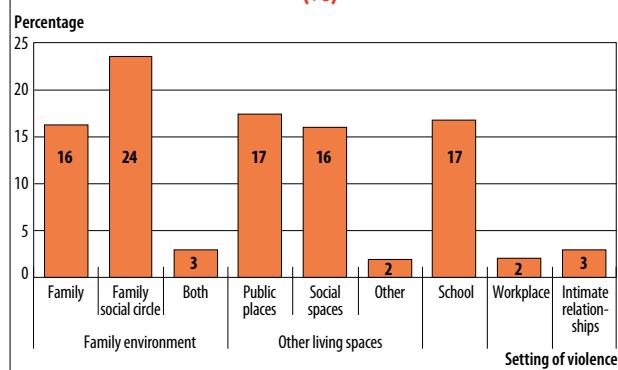
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(for boys and girls alike) often forces victims into silence. Sexual violence against boys is not easy to identify. Even many years after the fact, men remain reluctant to name them [3; 5].

Violence perpetrated mainly by men known to boys

Most sexual violence against boys is perpetrated by people known to them (family, friends, at school, etc.): more than 4 in 10 men reported that the perpetrator was a member of their family or family social circle (43%) (Figure 2). Of the men reporting experience of sexual violence, 16% were victims of such violence committed by a family member. Relations with members of the family and family social circle are based on trust, and the loss of trust associated with sexual violence can have long-term effects on an individual's relations with others. For example, these men reported more often than others not talking with their family, as adults, about their personal problems [4].

Figure 2. Settings of sexual violence against males (%)



Lucie Wicky, *Population & Societies*, 633, May 2025, INED.

Interpretation: Among men who reported lifetime experience of sexual violence, for 24% it occurred in the family circle and 16% within the family. **Coverage:** Men aged 20–69 living in metropolitan France in an ordinary household who reported lifetime experience of sexual violence (excluding 'rubbing/pressing').

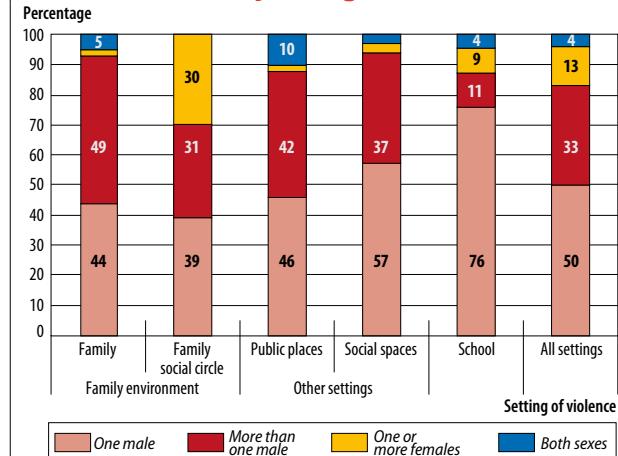
Source: INED, VIRAGE survey, 2015; weighted percentages.

Fewer than 1 in 5 men reported sexual violence at school (17%), public spaces (17%), or social spaces (16%). Contrary to women, who are more exposed to sexual violence by (former) partners or boyfriends, this is very rarely the case for men [1]. Among men who reported experience of sexual violence, 8% were victims in several different settings. An initial incident may engender a state of vulnerability that increases the risk of further exposure.

At very young ages (0–9 years), boys are exposed to sexual violence mainly within the family and close family circle, perpetrated by people they see almost every day. At ages 10–13, the perpetrators belong to a wider social circle, such as the more distant family (cousins, for example) or family friends (i.e. neighbours). In adolescence, when boys develop a social life outside the family, sexual violence is more frequent at school, in public places, among groups of friends, during leisure and sports activities, or in settings associated with religious observance.

Sexual violence against males is mainly perpetrated by other males (Figure 3). Perpetrators hold positions of structural and social power (through the differences in social and legal status between adults and minors), institutional power (through the exercise of parental authority at home or educational authority at school), and, in most cases, situational power (related to the circumstances of the moment, such as being alone), thereby exercising and maintaining dominance over the boys they abuse. Such violence undermines the position of these victims—future adult men—in the dynamics of masculinity [4]. Sexual violence thus sends powerful signals of male domination, and given that the perpetrators are other, older males—as are the abusers of women—these signals can be interpreted as gender-based violence in the broad sense.

Figure 3. Sex of perpetrators of sexual violence by setting (%)



Lucie Wicky, *Population & Societies*, 633, May 2025, INED.

Interpretation: Among men reporting lifetime experience of sexual violence, 50% reported being abused by one male and 33% by several males.

Coverage: Men aged 20–69 living in metropolitan France in an ordinary household who reported lifetime experience of sexual violence (excluding 'rubbing/pressing').

Source: INED, VIRAGE survey, 2015; weighted percentages.

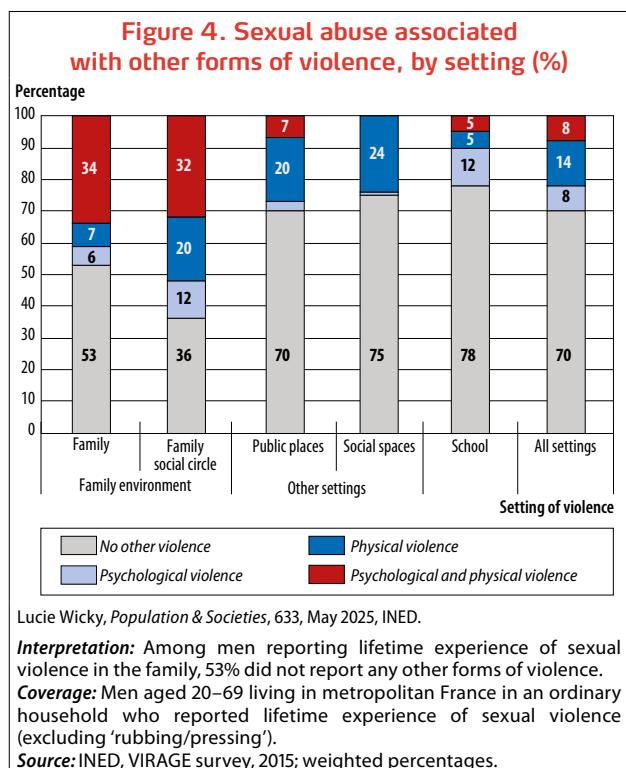
In many cases, boys are abused by adult men and, as such, are objects of male and adult domination. Indeed, children live under the authority of adults, and their autonomy is limited [6]. The difference in social and legal status between adults and minors reinforces this domination over boys (and girls), exploiting their presumed vulnerability and innocence [7]. Children's freedom to speak out is limited; silence is often seen as the only option, especially when it comes to denouncing sexual violence [5; 8]. The interviewed men reported often being ignored as children, notably when they spoke out about violence but also in other settings, and their experiences often remained unmentioned until adulthood [3; 4]. This was especially true for the older generations of men [5]. The interviews show that men are taken more seriously as they increase in age. When they recount their experiences as adults, they are rarely met with disbelief [5], although this is not always the case for women.

In most cases (83%), the respondents were abused by one or more males, sometimes by females (13%), and very rarely

by people of both sexes (Figure 3). When perpetrators were family members, in 44% of cases the abuse was perpetrated by one male, and in 49% of cases more than one. The interviews revealed that when there were several perpetrators, the abuse occurred sequentially, with each aggressor acting alone at different times. Within the family, which follows its own rules while also influenced by social norms, filial relationships and parental authority play a central role in the domination exerted over children. It is very difficult for victims to identify violence when the perpetrator is a family member. The relationship of authority, trust, and affections creates an additional reason to remain silent and heightens the risk of appropriation of children's bodies by the dominant male family members [8]. Last, while most perpetrators are males, it is in the family setting that men most often reported being abused by a female (30% of men in this setting) but not a family member; no male respondents in the VIRAGE survey reported abuse by their mother, grandmother, or sister.

Male victims of sexual violence are exposed to other types of violence

Almost one-third of men who reported experience of sexual violence were also exposed to other forms of violence (Figure 4). The family social circle is the setting in which men reported the largest cumulative experience of sexual and other violence. More than half experienced other forms of violence: 13% reported psychological violence, 14% physical violence, and 26% both psychological and physical violence. A first experience of violence may give rise to difficulties, notably in interpersonal relationships, that foster the recurrence of sexual abuse by other perpetrators or to other forms



Box 1. Measuring sexual violence reported by men

The VIRAGE quantitative survey

The VIRAGE violence and gender relations survey (*Violences et rapports de genre*, INED, 2015), carried out before the #MeToo movement, asked a representative sample of 15,556 women and 11,712 men aged 20–69 residing in metropolitan France about their lifetime experience of interpersonal violence. The survey recorded sexual violence via three questions, the first of which differs by sex:

Positive answer to one of the questions	
Question 1	
For women: 'Has anyone, against your will, touched your breasts or your buttocks, cornered you in order to kiss you, rubbed or pressed against you?'	M: 3.9%
For men: 'Has anyone, against your will, rubbed or pressed against you?'	W: 14.5%
Question 2: 'Has anyone forced you to perform or submit to sexual touching; has anyone attempted to have sexual intercourse with you against your will, or succeeded in doing so?'	M: 1.4%
	W: 5.5%
Question 3: 'Has anyone ever forced you to engage in other sexual acts or practices?'	

The analysis presented here concerns men's lifetime experience of sexual assault, rape, and attempted rape, i.e. positive answers to Question 2 and/or Question 3. Men who reported being 'rubbed or pressed against their will' are not counted as having experienced sexual violence (see Online Appendix* for the reasons for their exclusion).

The respondents were asked about the settings where sexual violence occurred, i.e. at school, in the workplace, during current or previous intimate relationships, among 'the family and family's social circle', which includes incest and violence perpetrated by someone familiar to the family, such as a neighbour or friend.

Alongside the quantitative data, 50 telephone interviews were conducted with VIRAGE survey respondents who reported experience of sexual violence and who agreed to be interviewed. Their interviews complement the analyses presented here [4].

* The Online Appendix is available at: <https://doi.org/10.34847/nkl.7bccrw3p>

of violence during childhood [4]. The interviews suggest that sexual violence at school is linked to bullying, often by other students or school staff.

Acts of violence perceived as serious, whatever their legal category

One-third of the men reporting sexual violence qualified the act as rape, and half as sexual assault (Table 1). When the act was perpetrated by a member of the family or family social circle, it was very often penetrative: almost half of the men reported being raped. Such violence is often recurrent when perpetrated by a family member. In cases of recurrent sexual violence, the interviews show that the gravity of the attacks escalated over time; the perpetrators began with acts of sexual assault, followed later by rape.

While the legal distinction between sexual assault and attempted rape or rape is defined by penetration,⁽¹⁾ it is not

(1) Under the French penal code, rape and sexual assault are distinguished by the presence or absence of penetration. Rape is defined as 'any act of sexual penetration committed with violence, coercion, threat, or surprise'. Sexual assault is defined as 'any other sexual act committed with violence, coercion, threat, or surprise'.

always representative of the perceived gravity of the violence. Almost two-thirds (63%) of the men who were sexually assaulted, and 69% of those who were raped, perceived their experience to be serious and traumatizing. The legal hierarchy of sexual violence does not always reflect these men's perceptions.

Sexual violence against males tends to be perpetrated by other males, at young ages especially. This violence occurs mainly in the family environment, in public places, in social spaces, and at school. Violence is perceived as serious, whatever the legal category of the acts concerned. In this sense, sexual violence against males is similar to that perpetrated against girls during childhood. This analysis suggests that the domination to which they are subject is both gendered and adult. While women remain exposed after age 18, violence against adult men becomes less frequent with age.

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Table 1. Characteristics of sexual violence against males, by setting (%)

	Family environment		Other settings		School	All settings
	Family	Family social circle	Public places	Social spaces		
Type of sexual violence by legal category ^(a)						
Sexual assault	35	39	61	35	72	49
Attempted rape	8	10	8	21	3	9
Rape	46	46	17	37	15	32
Other acts ^(b)	11	5	14	7	10	10
<i>Total</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>
Frequency of violence						
Once	25	55	62	59	51	51
2–10 times	33	31	22	40	28	32
More than 10 times	42	14	16	1	21	17
<i>Total</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>
Perceived seriousness of violence						
Serious and traumatizing sexual violence	50	68	67	69	73	63
Violence not perceived as serious	32	15	25	23	14	24
Other serious and traumatizing form of violence	18	17	8	8	13	13
<i>Total</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>
Numbers ^(c)	32	43	29	28	30	193

Interpretation: Among men reporting lifetime experience of sexual violence (excluding 'rubbing/pressing'), 49% reported acts of sexual assault.

Coverage: Men aged 20–69 living in metropolitan France in an ordinary household who reported lifetime experience of sexual violence (excluding 'rubbing/pressing').

Notes: (a) The most serious act, in legal terms, was considered. (b) The other acts cover a broad spectrum, such as being forced to watch pornography or to take off one's clothes, and do not necessarily correspond to legal categories. (c) The sum is smaller than the total number of respondents due to some missing responses on the setting of violence ($n=31$).

Source: INED, VIRAGE survey, 2015; weighted percentages.

Abstract

The VIRAGE survey shows that while sexual violence against males is 4 times less frequent than against females, it does indeed exist. Unlike women, men are less exposed at adult ages, with most sexual abuse occurring during childhood. Most perpetrators of sexual violence are men who are known to their victims, and abuse mainly occurs in the family environment and in social spaces. The majority of men perceive this violence to be serious and traumatizing, whatever its legal definition.

Keywords

assault, violence, sexual violence, male, gender, VIRAGE survey, rape, childhood, family



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INED: 9, cours des Humanités • CS 50004 • 93322 Aubervilliers Cedex • France
Director of Publications: François Clanché
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Translator: Catriona Dutreuilh
Layout: Isabelle Briançon
Printer: Mérimo Delta Print, Bozouls, France
D.L. 2nd quarter 2025 • ISSN 0184 77 83

Population & Societies • No. 633 • May 2025

DOI: [10.3917/popso.633.0001](https://doi.org/10.3917/popso.633.0001)

Monthly bulletin of the French Institute for Demographic Studies

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