

META-ANALYSIS ON THE PREVENTION OF SEXUAL ABUSE OF MINORS IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND IN OTHER INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract

The aim of the meta-analysis was to find evaluation studies on prevention programs on sexual abuse in institutions. Further, the meta-analysis asked for an effect of the prevention programs on the knowledge transfer on sexual abuse, the knowledge maintenance and anxiety and fear of sexual abuse. The meta-analysis included 39 evaluations of programs in the descriptive analysis. The analysis was based on studies with a pre-post comparison and an intervention group as well as a control group. Most of the studies used controlled assignment strategies for the intervention and control group. The analysis showed an effect of participating in a program on the knowledge transfer (0.61 (95 % CI = [0.45, 0.77])), and a long-term effect on the knowledge (0.58 (95 % CI = [0.09, 1.06])). Furthermore, the anxiety and fear to become a victim of sexual abuse was lower in the intervention groups than in the control groups (-0.23 (95 % CI = [-0.37, -0.08])). Therefore, the knowledge on sexual abuse could be increased by participation in a prevention program.

1. INTRODUCTION

Sexual violence against children and juveniles in familiar or institutional contexts is a worldwide problem. Numerous cases of abuse within the framework of the Catholic Church became apparent in Germany in 2010. More and more programs were established aiming at the prevention of sexual abuse of minors. The effects of these programs can be examined by evaluation studies. The aim of the meta-analysis presented in this paper is to analyse whether the programs are effective.

The authors of this paper belong to a research consortium examining the sexual abuse of minors in the Catholic Church on behalf of the German Bishops' Conference. The results were published in September 2018 (Dreßing et al. 2018). The meta-analysis presented here was part of this project and examined the effect of prevention programs in institutions on the knowledge on sexual abuse of children and juveniles and on the anxiety and fear of children and juveniles of sexual abuse.

2. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The aim of the meta-analysis was at first to find evaluation studies on prevention projects on sexual abuse in the institutional context. Exclusively evaluations in German and English language were taken into consideration. A further focus was put on the question how effective the prevention programs are. Object of the analysis are prevention programs of the Catholic Church as well as programs outside the Catholic Church (e.g. programs in state schools).

The included evaluation studies should correspond to the following inclusion criteria:

- The program is exclusively focused on the prevention of sexual abuse of minors and it is addressed only to children and juveniles.
- It is a study with a pre-post-comparison and a control group.
- The study measures the transfer of knowledge by the participation in the prevention program, the maintenance of the knowledge and/or the effect of the participation on the anxiety and fear of the children and juveniles.
- Due to the documentation of the study results, the calculation of effects is possible.

The primary search of prevention evaluations was made in relevant data bases. With the help of 23 keywords in German and English, ten national and international criminological, sociological, psychological and medical data bases were scanned. In addition, evaluations were identified by the snowball procedure and by analyzing conference programs and conference reports. Until the end of 2017, 39 evaluations were identified and could be included in the descriptive analysis. Due to insufficient presentation of the study results in some evaluations, only 25 of the 39 evaluations could be included in the quantitative meta-analysis. A list of the studies included in the meta-analysis can be requested from the authors of this paper.

A quantitative questionnaire on methods and results of the primary studies was created. Since the outcomes are continuous variables, the total results are recorded as weighted standardized mean value differences with a confidence interval of 95 %. The calculation of the total effects was made with the help of the Program Review Manager 5.3.

3. RESULTS

Descriptive Analysis

The evaluation studies were published between 1986 and 2017 whereas the number of evaluations has increased since 2012. Mostly prevention programs implemented in the USA were evaluated. Further programs realized in Germany, Canada, China, Nigeria, Malaysia, Korea, Turkey and the Netherlands were included. In the programs, the knowledge on sexual abuse was transferred among others by naming 'good' and 'bad' touches. In most cases, controlled assignment strategies were chosen for the intervention and the control group. In the majority of the studies, the control group was a waiting group (n=27), that means the participants of the group visited the prevention program at a later point in time. In 12 studies, the control group was defined as a group with alternative intervention, for example fire protection training.

The effect of the prevention program was measured with the variables knowledge transfer (Outcome 1) and maintenance of knowledge in the follow-up (Outcome 2). At first, the state of

knowledge was recorded in a pre-interview before the program start. Outcome 1 refers to the study results of the post-interview which were measured immediately after the participation in the program. The results of the measurement of Outcome 2 refer to a third interview (follow-up). 15 studies used a self-created survey instrument, 20 studies took already published survey instruments, for example the Personal Safety Questionnaire (PSQ). In addition, four studies treated the question whether the participation in a prevention program has an effect on the anxiety and fear of the children and juveniles (Outcome 3). For measuring the anxiety, each study used a different survey instrument, for example the Fear Questionnaire for Pupils. The references of the instruments can be requested from the authors of this article.

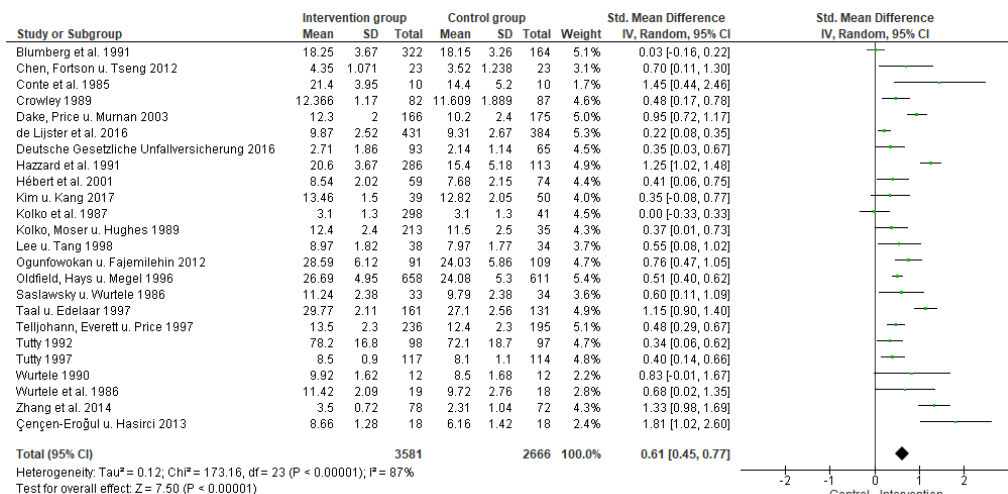
Effects

Due to incomplete presentation of the results in a number of evaluation studies, only 25 out of 39 evaluations found could be included in the quantitative meta-analysis. The results of these 25 studies show, according to the I²-values, a high heterogeneity concerning the outcomes. Thus, for the overall study evaluation, the Random-Effects Model was used (Borenstein et al. 2009, 63 ff.). The studies were weighted according to the number of cases and the size of the confidence intervals.

Knowledge Transfer

The knowledge on sexual abuse immediately after the participation in the prevention program was measured in 25 studies by questionnaires. The analysis of Outcome1 is based on the data of a total of 6.247 study participants. The high Chi² (173.16, df = 23) with a high significance level (p < 0.00001) illustrates the stochastic independence of the two groups. The analysis resulted in a moderate total effect of 0.61 (95 % CI = [0.45, 0.77], see figure 1). The result shows that – after the participation in the prevention program – the intervention group has a significantly higher knowledge of sexual abuse than the control group. The effect of knowledge transfer is not connected to the age of the participating children and juveniles.

Figure 1: Effects of the prevention programs on knowledge transfer (k=25)

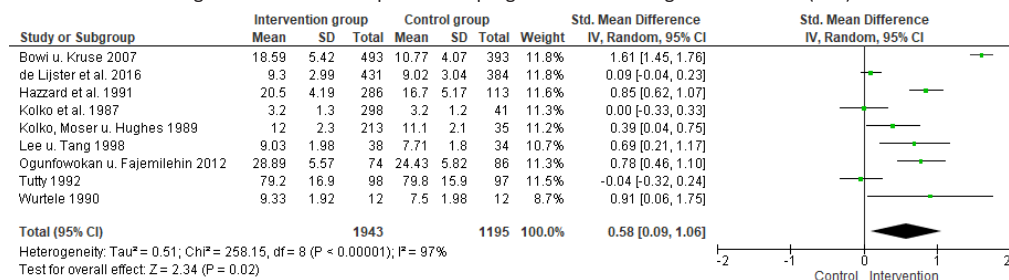


Knowledge Maintenance

The question concerning a long-term effect of the prevention program was measured by means of the state of knowledge. While the post-interview records the state of knowledge immediately after the participation in the program (Outcome 1), the follow-up measures the state of knowledge after a certain time subsequent to the post-interview. The period between the post-interview and the follow-up varied within the studies from six weeks to six months after the post-interview.

Nine studies carried out a measurement of the knowledge in a follow-up survey in the intervention group and the control group (Outcome 2). The analysis is based on data of 3.138 persons, 1.943 participated in the program and 1.195 belonged to the control group. There is a moderate total effect of 0.58 (95 % CI = [0.09, 1.06], see figure 2). The results therefore indicate a long-term effect of the programs, but the effect is lower in comparison to the effect of the knowledge level at the end of the program.

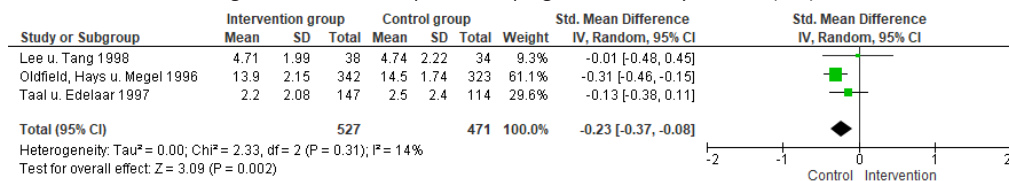
Figure 2: Effects of the prevention programs on knowledge maintenance (k=9)



Anxiety and Fear

Four studies dealt with the relation between the participation in a school-based prevention program and anxiety or fear of a sexual assault. Due to missing data concerning the sample size in one study, only three studies could be included in the meta-analysis. The total effect reported in the following is based on data of 998 persons (intervention group 527, control group 471). The standardized mean difference shows greater anxiety and fear with the children of the control group. The total effect is -0.23 (95 % CI = [-0.37, -0.08], see figure 3) with a low heterogeneity within the study findings (I² = 14 %; Tau² = 0.00).

Figure 3: Effects of the prevention programs on anxiety and fear (k=3)



4. DISCUSSION

39 evaluation studies on prevention programs to avoid sexual abuse of children and juveniles in institutions were identified and could be included into the meta-analysis. There is an increasing number of published evaluations since 2012, but the number is still low compared to the numerous prevention programs for the prevention of sexual abuse of children which are established.

The meta-analytical results show effects of the prevention measures. In particular, there were effects in the knowledge transfer whereas the maintenance of knowledge is slightly decreasing over time. In the intervention groups, anxiety and fear to become a victim of sexual abuse were lower than in the control groups. The high heterogeneity in the study findings illustrates differences in the study designs and in the study results. The findings are consistent with the results of a meta-analysis of school-based education programs for the prevention of child sexual abuse (Walsh et al. 2015).

LITERATURE

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