

## **How did the pandemic hit Norwegian youth? Rates of child abuse towards adolescents before and during the pandemic in Norway**

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**Introduction:** Considerable concern is raised as to whether the pandemic has led to an increase in violence and sexual abuse against children. Some even termed the pandemic a perfect storm for child abuse, and predicted an elevated risk for child abuse. Despite the concern expressed, few studies exist that can scrutinize this question based on adolescent self-report data. To address this gap in research, the present study compares rates of self-reported child abuse in the Norwegian youth population one year before the pandemic, with rates during the first year of the pandemic.

**Methods:** Two samples of Norwegian 12–16-year-olds were approached. A representative pre-pandemic sample of 9240 adolescents (M age (SD) = 14.11(0.88)), and a sample recruited one year into the pandemic resulting in 3540 responses (M age (SD) = 14.5 (0.96)). An online survey was administered during school hours including established measures of violence and sexual abuse exposure. Sociodemographic characteristics were assessed.

**Results:** There was 1.4 percentage point increase in sexual abuse by an adult, and a 3.9 percentage point decrease in psychological violence by a parent during the pandemic compared to the year before the pandemic. Otherwise, violence and sexual abuse rates remained stable across these two time periods. Risk factors for violence and sexual abuse were amplified during the pandemic. In particular gender differences were exacerbated, in that if an increase in violence was detected, it was in girls' disfavour.

**Conclusions:** Norway, a high-income welfare state, imposed measures to counteract the burden of the pandemic mitigation actions for adolescents. This might partly explain why we did not detect a significant increase in rates of violence except for those reported regarding sexual abuse. The disproportionate risk for violence and sexual abuse for some groups of adolescents is however concerning, and should be followed up over time. As underscored by the pandemic, monitoring child abuse rates is paramount in order to develop targeted interventions to prevent and stop child abuse.