

# Outlining the Profile of Child Sexual Abuse in Greece: Data from Official Police Records

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**How to cite this paper:** Mavridakis, G., & Brouskeli, V. (2024). Outlining the Profile of Child Sexual Abuse in Greece: Data from Official Police Records. *Psychology*, 15, 514-529.  
<https://doi.org/10.4236/psych.2024.154032>

**Received:** March 2, 2024

**Accepted:** April 23, 2024

**Published:** April 26, 2024

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## Abstract

The study of child sexual abuse (CSA) is a crucial, though difficult, scientific field characterized by a significant lack of data since social and personal factors hamper disclosure. This study presents data retrieved from the official records of actual CSA cases in the archives of the Hellenic Police in Crete. All data available for the decade 2012-2022 were systematically collected and collated in a form specifically designed for the needs of this study. The issues explored in the study include detailed information concerning the abusive act and, specifically, the type of abuse, i.e., physical contact with and without penetration or no-contact sexual abuse. It also includes information about the recurrence of the abusive act, the context in which it was committed, the existence of violence during the abuse, and the person who disclosed the fact. Finally, data on whether the abuse was impulsive or premeditated, as well as on the perpetrators' prior relationship with the child and/or their caregivers, as well as the child's developmental background, are analyzed. Results show that cruel abuse of a child, such as rape, comes more often from a person in the child's intimate environment, while when the perpetrator has no prior relationship with the victim, the most frequent type of abuse is no-contact sexual abuse. Furthermore, results reveal that when the abuse is premeditated, such as with bribery or threats, it is more likely to be repeated. Results are discussed and interpreted, taking into account the broader theoretical framework and previous studies.

## Keywords

Child Sexual Abuse, Perpetrator, Victim, Police Records, Greece

## 1. Introduction

Traumatic experiences during childhood have a wide range of negative effects on

development. Such a traumatic experience is child abuse and, in particular, sexual abuse, a major public health problem (Hailes et al., 2019) that has pervasive psychological effects on an individual's life. Sexual abuse has many dimensions and occurs in a variety of forms of abusive acts towards children (Gerke et al., 2023). Sadly, it is a widespread phenomenon that has not been adequately studied in terms of its extent, mostly due to cultural, social, and individual causes (Kumaravel et al., 2023).

According to the definition adopted by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2023), child sexual abuse (CSA) is “the involvement of a child in sexual activity that he or she does not fully comprehend, is unable to give informed consent to, or for which the child is not developmentally prepared, or else that violates the laws or social taboos of society. Children can be sexually abused by both adults and other children who are—by virtue of their age or stage of development—in a position of responsibility, trust or power over the victim”.

CSA has been described and categorized differently by different researchers. Initially, it is categorized into two forms, depending on whether it involves physical contact or not. Abusive experiences that include physical contact comprise 1) penetration and 2) intentional touching (caressing, touching, kissing) and other forms of non-penetrative physical contact (Fortier et al., 2020). In several studies (Gilbert et al., 2009; Selengia et al., 2020), the categorization of CSA is subdivided into three categories: 1) physical contact with penetration (hereafter “penetration”), 2) physical contact without penetration (“physical contact”), meaning kissing, caressing, or touching and 3) no-contact sexual abuse (“no-contact”), meaning exposure to sexual activity, filming, or prostitution.

Studies document differences in the qualitative elements of the phenomenon, the demographic characteristics of victim and perpetrator, the age of abuse onset, the way the victim is approached, the degree and type of abusive contact, and the use or non-use of force during the act (Stiernströmer et al., 2022).

A review of the existing literature shows that the majority of victims are girls, usually between 70% and 80% of the victims (Kumaravel et al., 2023; McGuire & London, 2020; Anwar et al., 2020), although a few studies recorded boys as the most frequent victims (Almuneef, 2019). In addition, the average age of victims has varied from study to study, with high concentrations of ages between 10 and 15 years (Girgira et al., 2014; Kumaravel et al., 2023; Quiroz et al., 2020). The most common form of abuse also seems to vary across studies, although sexual intercourse and touching appear to be the most frequent ones (Bourke et al., 2014; Karkoskova & Ropovik, 2018; Kumaravel et al., 2023). Finally, another parameter examined in studies is the existence of an intimate relationship between the perpetrator and the victim. The vast majority of studies show high rates of acquaintance between them (COE, 2018; Hackett et al., 2013; Kumaravel et al., 2023).

Today, after years of social fermentation and the development of awareness of the gravity of the issue and the harm caused to the victims, CSA seems to be of

particular concern to the global community. This fact is further highlighted through the intensive monitoring of the issue by media when cases of CSA are revealed (Russell et al., 2020). However, there is a limited number of studies about child abuse in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, and limited evidence on the subcategories of child sexual abuse in the same region (Enyedy et al., 2018). The present study focuses on the characteristics of the phenomenon in Greece and, in particular, in the region of Crete. It presents data from a critical and relatively unexplored field of child sexual abuse in Greece and highlights patterns and characteristics that are crucial for understanding the phenomenon not only locally but also globally. In addition, in several similar studies, analysis of the characteristics of abuse through police records can yield useful information about incidents of child sexual abuse (van Duin et al., 2018). In this study, the direct use of a decade of police records provides a valid basis for uncovering the trends and findings described, enriching the empirical evidence in this area. It seems that, despite the current awareness in Greek society, more research efforts are needed to describe the phenomenon accurately, to develop prevention policies, to establish best practices for victim protection, perpetrator monitoring and restriction of action, and to institutionalize support practices for victims and their families after the abuse.

The aim of this study is to study the characteristics of CSA in Greece and then compare them with the results of relevant international research. In particular, victim and perpetrator characteristics, as well as the way of approaching the victim in relation to the type of sexual abuse, are investigated. In addition, the type of abuse and its association with the existence or absence of a prior relationship between perpetrator and victim is investigated. Finally, the existence of premeditated vs. impulsive abusive behavior in approaching the victim is studied in relation to the recurrence of the abusive behavior.

The research fills an important gap in the literature on child sexual abuse in Greece, offering information based on data that was rare in this geographical context and particularly in the narrow geographical context of the geographical area of Crete. Through the use of official records and ensuring the ethics of data protection, reliability and validity of the research, knowledge is provided that could be adopted in the formulation of prevention policies both in Greece and in similar socio-cultural contexts.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Procedure

This study was conducted in three out of four Prefectures of Crete. Data were collected from the official records of actual cases of CSA, kept in the archives of the Hellenic Police. We included all cases that were available in the police records for the decade 2012-2022. This study yields data through direct, primary print sources; data extraction from official records, especially from police agencies, is an accepted methodology for data extraction on CSA (Bell, 2001; Walsh

et al., 2004). Although data related to violence against children can be found through multiple sources, all of which have strengths and weaknesses (United Nations Children's Fund, 2014), we deliberately avoided any method that required direct contact with the victims to avoid retrieving traumatic experiences and further upsetting victims.

Sexual abuse of minors is an offence under Greek and international law. The search of information from the centralised systemic records of police and judicial authorities allows the collection of more detailed information about the crime, the perpetrators and the victims. Police agencies are becoming increasingly involved in cases of abuse through incident reports (Finkelhor & Ormrod, 2001).

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and all necessary permissions were obtained from the relevant departments and authorities, which ensured the ethical integrity of the research. Specifically, the research was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Democritus University of Thrace (protocol number ΔΠΘ/EHΔΕ/49473/071) authorized by the Hellenic Data Protection Authority (protocol number ΓΝ/ΕΕ/570/28-02-2018), as well as by the Hellenic Police (protocol number 8741/18/8222527/26-04-04-2018), which granted permission to access the archives of the services for research purposes.

## 2.2. Data Collection

The information was systematically collected and collated by filling out a form specifically adapted to be useful in the retrieval of the requested information from the archives. For the design of the form, we took into account the methodology followed by the Hellenic Police for reporting relevant cases (the categories and information included in the files), as well as other relevant tools developed in previous studies for the investigation of CSA (Halpérin et al., 1996).

The dimensions explored included detailed information concerning the abusive act and, specifically, the type of abuse, i.e. "penetration" or "physical contact" or "no-contact". These three categories correspond to the classification followed by the Greek criminal justice system, which assesses the criminal gravity of each act. The issues explored also included information about the recurrence of the abuse (one or more times), the context in which it was committed (within or outside the family), the existence of violence during the abuse, the person who disclosed the fact (report of parents, friends or experts, e.g. a doctor) and the existence of manipulative tactics before the abusive act, i.e., by promising, threatening or bribing, instead of spontaneous abuse without one of the above. In addition, the child's developmental background (whether the child had faced developmental difficulties of some kind) and whether the perpetrator(s) had a prior relationship with the child and/or their caregivers were investigated. Finally, collected data included information about the victims' and the perpetra-

tors' demographics (i.e., age and sex).

Information was extracted from 120 case reports. Two cases were excluded due to incomplete information, so 118 cases were finally analyzed. The information was collected, entered in the form, and then analyzed using the SPSS statistical package.

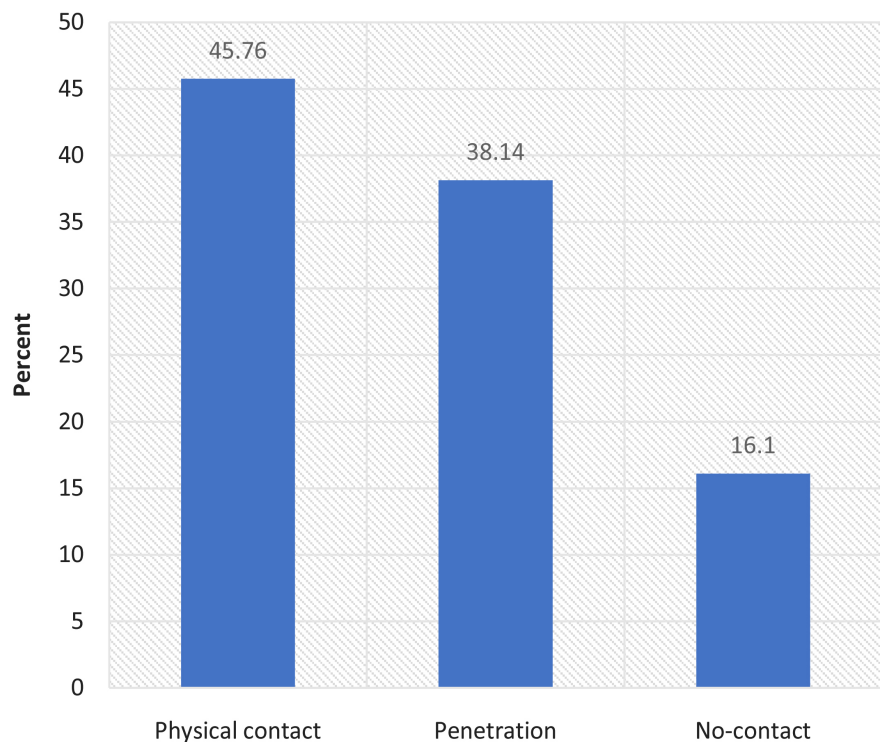
### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Characteristics of the Victims

The victims' ages ranged from 3 to 17 years ( $M_{age} = 12.51$ ,  $S.D._{age} = 3.44$ ). Results showed that among the victims, 79.63 % were girls and 20.34 % were boys. Regarding their age, 6.8 % of the children were up to 6 years old (up to pre-school age), with one child aged 3 years and three children aged 4 years. In addition, 47.5% were between 6 - 12 years old (primary education) and 52.5 % were between 12 - 18 years old (secondary education). Moreover, as for their developmental background, 94.9% of the victims had a typically expected development; only 4 children had a prior diagnosis for mental deficits, and 2 children were diagnosed with learning difficulties.

#### 3.2. Type of Sexual Abuse

Regarding the type of abuse, physical contact (without penetration) appeared to be the most frequent type. The distribution of the different types of abuse according to frequency is presented in **Figure 1**.



**Figure 1.** Type of abuse (frequency).

Subsequently, we researched the type of sexual abuse according to the gender of the victims. Among the boys, the most frequent type of abuse was “penetration”, which was reported in 50% of the cases. Among the girls, the most frequent type of abuse was “physical contact”, reported in 46.81% of the cases. The distribution of the different types of abuse per gender is illustrated in **Figure 2**.

### 3.3. Context of Sexual Abuse

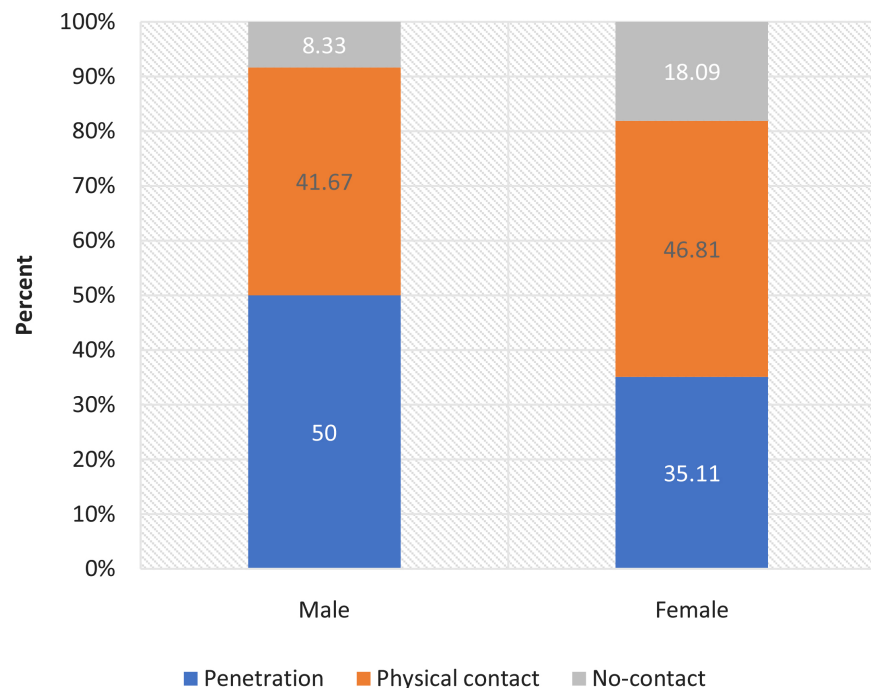
Regarding the context in which the abusive act took place, the majority of cases occurred outside the family context (persons outside the immediate family), and only in a small percentage of cases did the abuse take place through technology and the Internet, i.e., exposure to sexual behaviors. Data on the context in which the abuse took place are presented in **Figure 3**.

### 3.4. Disclosure of the Sexual Abuse

Regarding the manner the abuse was disclosed and specifically of the person who made the disclosure, the studied records showed that in the vast majority of cases (75.42%), it was the parents/caregivers of the victims who disclosed the abuse to the relevant services (**Figure 4**). Disclosure by the victims themselves or a professional was relatively rare in both genders. Finally, disclosure by friends was witnessed in only 2.54% of the cases (in only 2 children, all of whom were girls).

### 3.5. Characteristics and Modus Operandi of the Perpetrator

All perpetrators were male (100%), ranging from 12 to 87 years of age ( $M_{age} = 39.86$ ,  $S.D._{age} = 19.82$ ).



**Figure 2.** Type of abuse according to victim's gender.



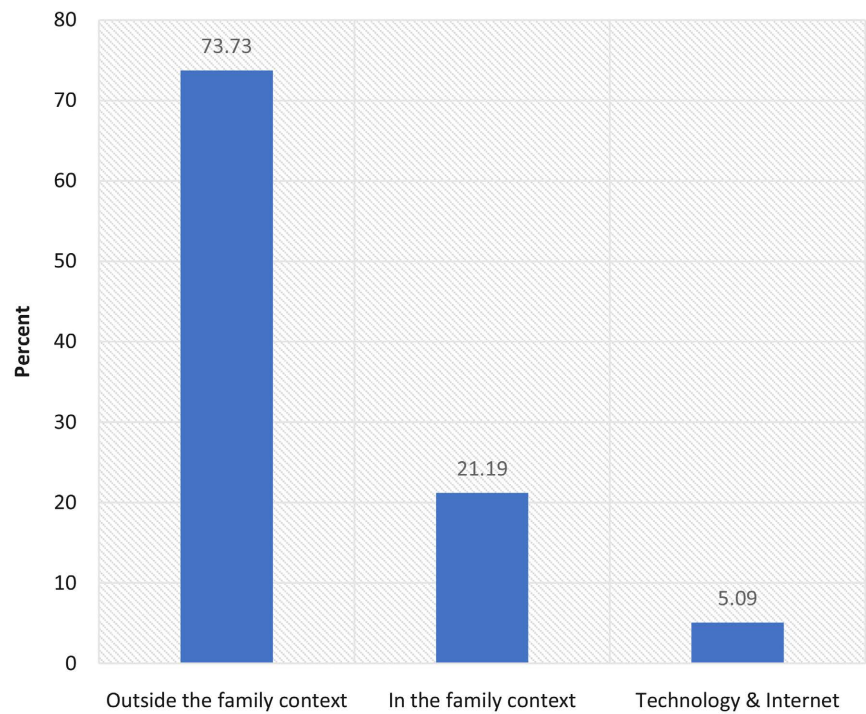


Figure 3. Abuse context (frequency).

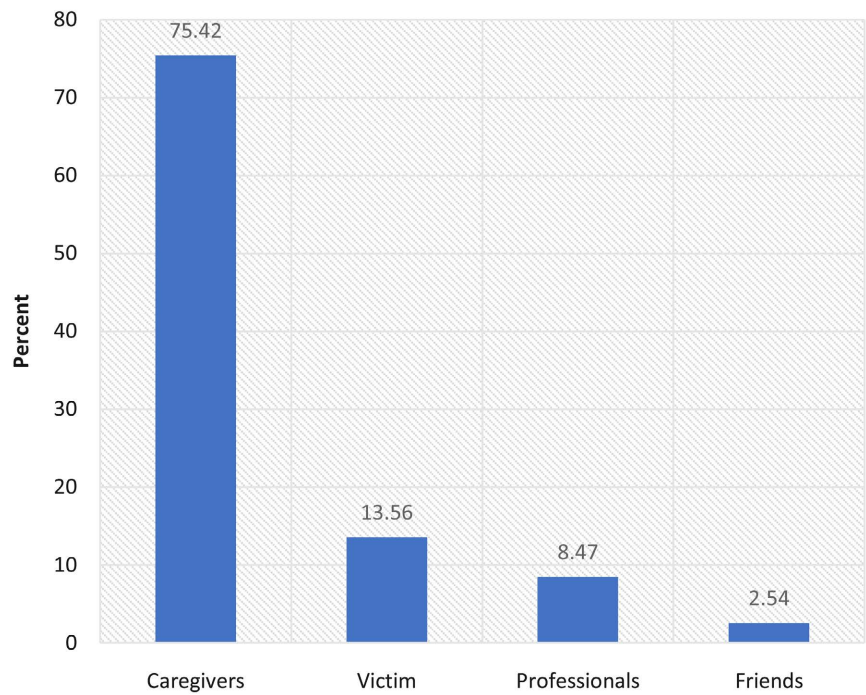
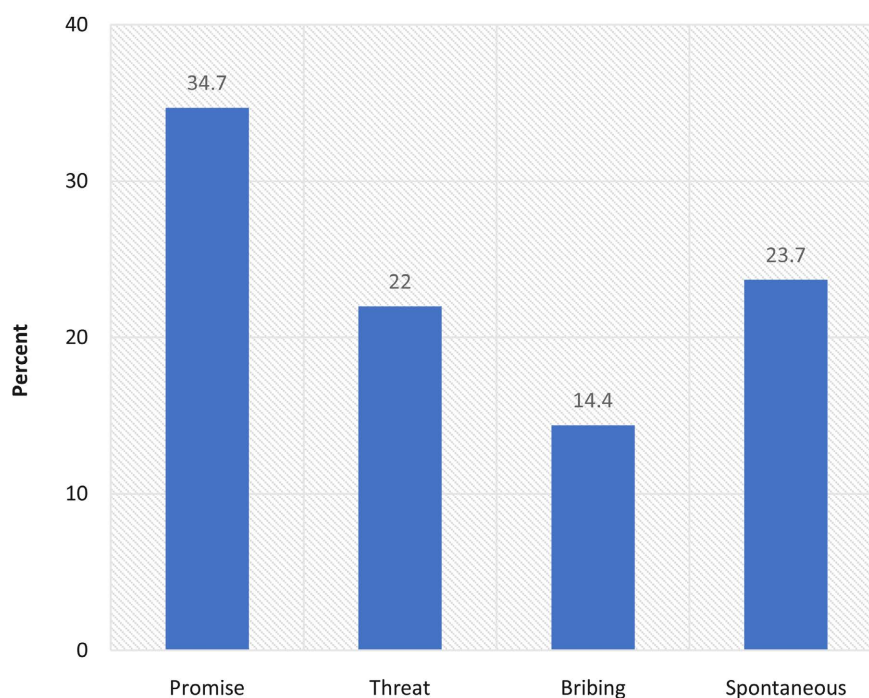


Figure 4. Persons who disclosed the abuse (frequency).

Concerning the methodologies adopted by the perpetrators to approach the victims (see Figure 5), making promises to the child was the most frequent tactic, followed by spontaneous abuse, threat, and bribery. So, it appears that in 71.1% of the cases, some kinds of manipulative tactics were used.



**Figure 5.** Methodology adopted for approach (frequency over total sample).

As for the perpetrator's connection to the victim, only in 5% of the cases were they completely unknown to the child or the family. Conversely, in 95% of the cases, the victim knew the perpetrator and, in 50% of the cases, the perpetrator maintained friendly relations with the victim's family.

### 3.6. Relationship between Victim-Perpetrator and Type of Abuse

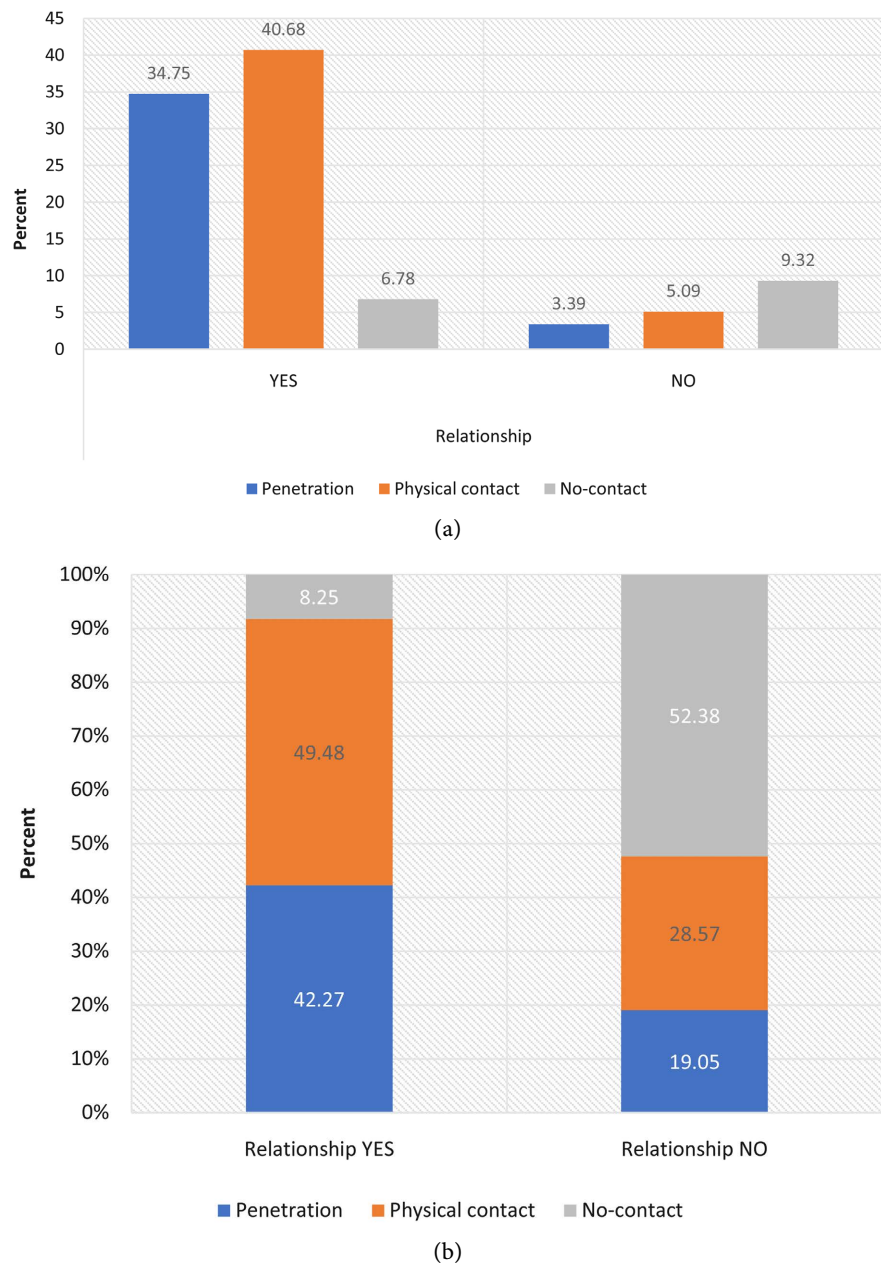
Concerning the association between the prior social relationship victim-perpetrator and the type of abuse the victim suffered (**Figure 6(a)**, **Figure 6(b)**), results revealed that when the perpetrator and the victim knew each other, the most frequent type of abuse was physical contact without penetration in 40.68% of the total cases, penetration in 34.75%, no-contact sexual abuse in 6.78% of the cases (**Figure 6(a)**). When the perpetrator has no previous relationship with the victim, the most frequent type of abuse was no-contact sexual abuse at a rate of 9.32% over the total number of cases, followed by physical contact without penetration at a rate of 5.08% and lastly penetration at a rate of 3.39%.

Moreover, the type of abuse suffered by the victim appeared to differ significantly according to the existence (or not) of a prior relationship between the perpetrator and the victim ( $\chi^2 = 24.97$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

### 3.7. Recurrence of Abusive Acts and Modus Operandi

An important finding is that in 66.9% of the cases, sexual abuse was recurrent (happened more than once). As to whether the modus operandi of the perpetrator (method of approaching the victim) was related to the recurrence of the abusive behavior (**Figure 7**), results revealed that when the abuse was recurrent,

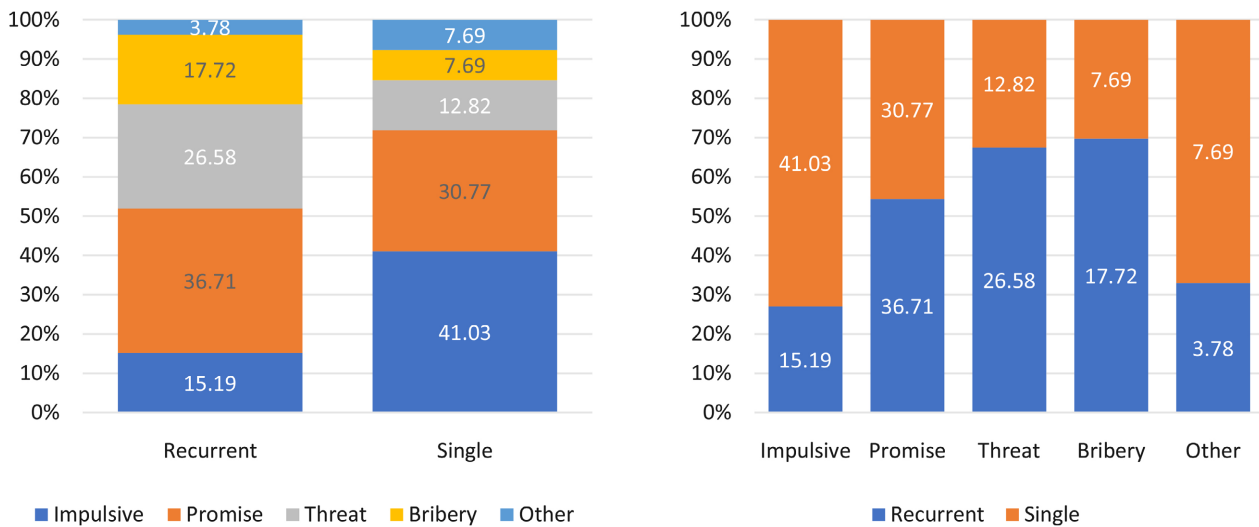




**Figure 6.** (a) Abuse type according to relationship (frequency over total cases); (b) Abuse type according to relationship (distribution per “relationship”).

the most frequently approaching methods were making promises (36.71%), threatening (26.58%), and bribing (17.72%). Conversely, when the abuse took place only once, the most frequent ways of approaching the victim were spontaneous/impulsive abuse without pre-planning (41.03%), making promises (30.77%), threatening (12.82%), and bribing (7.62%).

Statistical analyses revealed that the existence of a methodological plan regarding the perpetrator’s approach is more likely to be related to the repetition of the abuse ( $\chi^2 = 12.45$ ,  $df = 4$ ,  $p < 0.5$ ). In other words, it seems that if there is a pre-planned behavior before the abusive behavior, such as making promises,



**Figure 7.** Recurrent vs. single abusive event according to approach method.

bribery, or threats, then it is more likely that the abusive behavior will be repeated.

#### 4. Discussion

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is an extremely abusive behavior with immediate and long-term effects on children's lives. Consequences include, but are not limited to, phobias, behavioral problems, substance use, anxiety disorders, depression, and even suicide (Srivastava et al., 2017). Unfortunately, CSA seems to be strongly present in Greece. Data analyses of this study show that the perpetrator has the following main characteristics: he is male, with an average age of 40 years, and the most frequent age of 55. He predominantly uses some form of promising or lying as a technique of approaching and seducing the victim and psychological violence, such as threatening. Two out of three times, the abuse appears to be repeated, and in the vast majority of cases the abuser is a known and trusted person to the victim. Indeed, the [United Nations Children's Fund \(2020\)](#) review confirms that the majority of perpetrators, in around 90% of the cases reported in most studies, are male. Furthermore, [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(2023\)](#) reports that about one in four girls and one in twenty boys in the United States experience CSA, with the perpetrator being someone known and trusted by the child and/or the child's family in 91% of the cases.

Regarding the child's profile, in our study, the victim is four out of five times a girl, with an average age of 12.5 years, while the disclosure of the abuse is predominantly made by the child's caregivers, and less often by the victim, professionals or friends. Worldwide, it is estimated that around 120 million girls under the age of 20 (slightly more than 1 in 10) have experienced forced sexual intercourse or other forced sexual acts ([United Nations Children's Fund, 2014](#)). According to [United Nations Children's Fund \(2020\)](#) report, girls typically report rates of sexual abuse and exploitation 2 - 3 times higher than boys, although

rates for boys have been found to be higher than for girls in some countries and in certain organizational settings. Radford and her colleagues (2015) suggested that CSA is a gendered crime, and some studies in countries such as Sweden and Estonia have found particularly high rates of contact sexual abuse reported by girls. However, in some regions—such as China and Poland—rates reported by boys are close to or higher than those reported by girls, underlying that social desirability factors, such as giving acceptable answers may influence what females and males report. Although in our study data have been retrieved from archives, factors related to social desirability and acceptance might contribute to greater reluctance to report cases of boys' sexual abuse. Furthermore, United Nations Children's Fund (2014) reports that boys experience sexual violence too, but to a far lesser extent than girls. Finally, according to the same report, the age at which sexual violence first occurs, according to adolescent girls who were sexually victimized for the first time, is between 15 and 19 years old. In 16 of 21 countries at least one in five girls reported that at least one incident of sexual violence occurred for the first time between the ages of 10 and 14.

Finally, it is frustrating that in our sample, there were very young children who were abused, e.g., one child at the age of three years and three children aged four years. McKillop et al. (2015) and colleagues examined the routine activities approach of one-hundred adult male child sexual abusers and according to their results 11% of their victims were under 5 years of age. According to the routine activity approach (Cohen & Felson, 1979), three elements must converge for any crime to occur, consequently for children's sexual abuse as well: a suitable target (the victim), a likely offender, and an absence of capable guardians. The lack of any one of these three elements is sufficient to prevent the successful completion of a crime, thus, prevention interventions should start raising awareness of the fact that even very young children are among the targets of perpetrators and, therefore, people who take care of them should systematically assess and exclude the possibility that the person next to them is a potential abuser.

The frequency of approaching the victims via the Internet found in this study is similar to that recorded in Jeglic & Winters' (2023) study. According to the results of our study, perpetrators who do not have a close acquaintance with the victim usually attract the child through exposure (to pornographic material, etc.). Using technology as a means of CSA has emerged in recent decades through technological advances and children's greater access to electronic media (Christensen & Vickery, 2023). Technology fosters new modes of child abuse to emerge, such as the live streaming of sexual assaults of children and sexual extortion of children, or even aiming to coerce a child to take part in the production of CSA material, usually under threat (United Nations Children's Fund, 2020). Informing children since their early years about the potential risks of sexual abuse in their daily lives and on the Internet, as well as using developmentally appropriate methodology, could drastically contribute to reducing the incidents. Scientific research suggests that it is beneficial to focus on 1) knowledge about body

privacy, potential risks, and trustworthy people, 2) risk perception, and 3) self-protection and the cultivation of skills—behaviors in case of an attempted abuse (Rahimi Khalifeh Kandi et al., 2023).

On the other hand, it seems that cruel abuse of a child, such as rape, comes more often from a person in the child's intimate environment. This finding is consistent with worldwide research findings suggesting that children are most likely to be sexually abused by a person known to them (United Nations Children's Fund, 2020). It seems that family context plays a particular and always crucial role in child abuse: family members are meant to protect children and usually reveal the offense but are also, in some cases, they are responsible for the crimes. It is, therefore, absolutely essential, firstly, that children are trained to understand that awkward touching could come by anyone and they can confess it to someone they trust, such as a pediatrician or a teacher; secondly, that schools have an active role in children's education so that the discussion of the pupils' possible concerns becomes perfectly acceptable and not something like a "betrayal of the secret".

Finally, our research indicated that if there is a planned behavior before the abusive act, such as bribery or threats, then the act is more likely to be repeated. Therefore, if children are aware of the concepts of bribery, threats, and generally the methods of malicious people's approaching, then once again, the third of the important elements in the routine activity approach (Cohen & Felson, 1979), the "suitable target" will not "cooperate" with the offender.

The central trends in the findings of this study seem to be in line with the findings of other international studies, in terms of the assumption that a large proportion of cases are not recorded, that girls are more often victimised and that abusers are more often male, known and trusted by child victims. The findings converge on the need to take measures to prevent and protect vulnerable children (Lee et al., 2021; Murray, Ngyen & Cohen, 2014; Tyagi & Karande, 2021). In addition, in many local surveys describing the phenomenon of sexual abuse, there is partial agreement on the central qualitative characteristics (e.g. more frequent form of abuse, average age of abuse, gender of victim/victim) and divergence on others (e.g. lower rate of recurrence of abuse). This reveals the influence of cultural influences on the occurrence of the phenomenon (David et al., 2018).

## Limitations

As with any study on sexual abuse, limitations related to the rate of reported incidents emerge, mainly because of social stereotypes and fear of disclosure (Walsh et al., 2004). Studying official records from police agencies is a methodologically sound approach to this highly sensitive issue. However, as not all cases are reported, this approach is likely to lead to conclusions that underestimate the extent of the phenomenon. Moreover, we have to bear in mind that data are based uniquely on police reports. Although these are confidential, one cannot exclude

potential biases that could be due to fear of social stigma for the victims and/or their families.

It is necessary to further study the phenomenon through quantitative and qualitative research and use the resulting data for planning targeted interventions to prevent as well as to protect children after disclosure. For example, knowing the characteristics of the perpetrators, the victims, and the context in relation to the age of the victims could provide specific tools for the prevention and deterrence of abusive behavior.

## 5. Conclusion

Child sexual abuse is an understudied phenomenon, especially in Greece, mainly because of its nature; this is due to the particularly sensitive personal data for a tender aged population, but also because of the social barriers in disclosing this kind of crime. Having regard to data about specific characteristics and methods of the perpetrators, the characteristics of the victims, and the situations that facilitate or hinder the abusive behavior, we are better equipped to design more effective proposals for prevention and treatment.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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