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REVIEW ARTICLE

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A COMPARISON OF ABUSE/VIOLENCE CASES AGAINST CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS BEFORE AND DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: AN INTEGRATIVE REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has generated stress in the economic, emotional and psychological spheres of social structures, especially in families. Combined with measures taken to reduce the spread of SARS-CoV-2, these factors favor an increase in the incidence of cases of abuse/violence against children and adolescents. Through an integrative review, verify if after the establishment of lockdown periods, there was an increase in abuse/violence against children and adolescents compared to the pre-pandemic period. The bibliographic survey was carried out by online research in the Virtual Health Library, with the descriptors: COVID-19, SARS-CoV-2, Child Abuse, Child and Adolescent. The search also used the Boolean operator AND. The Rayyan tool was used to filter and select the articles. From 556 initial articles, ten articles were selected for the construction of the integrative review. Most articles showed a reduction in abuse/violence cases, reflecting underreporting, underdetection, silencing of denouncers and evasion of health systems. However, an increase within specific groups was observed in some articles, as well as the severity of mistreatment was greater during the pandemic.

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INTRODUCTION

The new coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) is the causative agent of 2019 coronavirus disease or COVID-19 (SCHMIDT *et al.*, 2020). This disease was first observed in December 2019, after a mysterious outbreak of pneumonia in individuals who went to the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market in Wuhan, China, such situation was considered an epidemic (SIFUENTES-RODRÍGUEZ; PALACIOS-REYES, 2020). However, due to the fast worldwide dispersion and explosion of infected people, on March 11, 2020 COVID-19 was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization - WHO (HENSEL *et al.*, 2020). In Brazil, the first case occurred in São Paulo, being registered on February 26th, 2020 (SOUZA *et al.*, 2020). As a method to minimize the spread of SARS-CoV-2, therefore the cases of COVID-19, social distancing and lockdown were adopted worldwide as emergency measures (STEWART *et al.*, 2021). Despite the need and benefit of such measures to slow the transmission of the new coronavirus, they can have secondary consequences for people's

health (LEWNARD; LO, 2020). It has been seen that people in quarantine might exhibit high rates of stress, emotional disturbances and post-traumatic stress symptoms, which can last for months after the quarantine is over (SETHURAMAN *et al.*, 2021). Factors such as financial insecurity, social isolation and family stress, combined with the latter ones described above, are commonly associated with the growth of cases of abuse/violence against children and adolescents (SALT *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, researchers have precociously considered the COVID-19 pandemic as a potential risk factor for the increase of abuse/violence cases aforementioned (DE BOER *et al.*, 2022). After the application of the SARS-CoV-2 control recommendations, a significant decrease in reports of cases of abuse/violence against children and adolescents has been observed (SALT *et al.*, 2021). Undoubtedly, the pandemic has had a negative effect on the agents who cooperate with the detection and reporting of suspected and tangible cases of abuse/violence, which represents a critical threat to the well-being of children and adolescents (STEWART *et al.*, 2021).

Thus, little is known about the effects of the pandemic on the incidence of abuse/violence cases (KOVLER *et al.*, 2021; SALT *et al.*, 2021). Considering the above, more studies are needed to assess and portray the impact of the pandemic on the epidemiology of abuse/violence against children and adolescents, as their findings can raise awareness among health professionals, policymakers and families for this issue, especially in environments that favor its occurrence. Thus, this study aimed, through an integrative review, to verify if after the establishment of emergency measures to control SARS-CoV-2, there was an increase in the incidence of cases of abuse/violence against children and adolescents compared to the pre-pandemic period.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study is as integrative literature review with qualitative approach. In order to systematize the methodology of the integrative review, important steps were defined in order to guarantee the quality of the study, namely: 1) definition of the guiding question of the work; 2) definition of inclusion and exclusion criteria; 3) definition of keywords and databases; 4) Rayyan tool; 5) representation of findings through flow diagrams and charts.

Definition of the study guiding question: The guiding question of the work was formulated through the PICO strategy (SANTOS; PIMENTA; NOBRE, 2007), aiming to guarantee the quality in the studies selection. The guiding question was: Has the incidence of violence against children and adolescents increased or not with the COVID-19 pandemic?

Definition of inclusion and exclusion criteria: The inclusion of studies for detailed analysis was based on the following criteria: descriptive, observational and cross-sectional studies that are scientific articles, patient data reviews and medical records, which are in Portuguese and English, with a year filter between 2020 and 2021. The exclusion criteria were: works that do not consider the guiding question, literature reviews and duplicate articles.

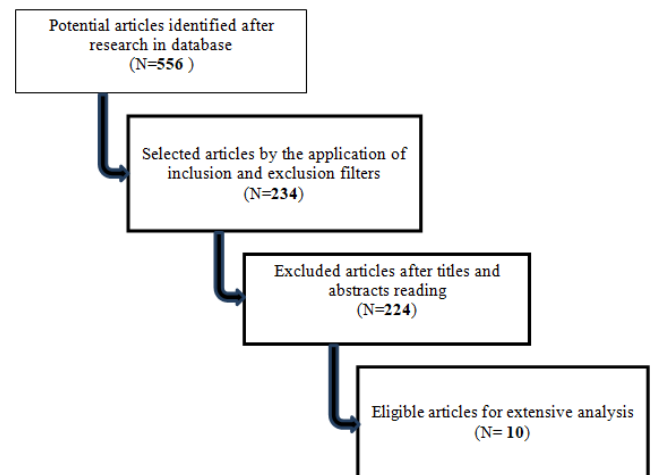
Definition of keywords and database: The keywords adopted were: COVID-19, SARS-CoV-2, Child Abuse, Child and Adolescent. Through these keywords, the pairing between them was performed using the Boolean operator AND, respecting the setting of the descriptors. The crosses were: Child AND Child Abuse AND COVID-19, Child and Child Abuse AND SARS-CoV-2, Adolescent AND Child abuse AND COVID-19, Adolescent AND Child Abuse AND SARS-CoV-2. The database chosen by the authors were: Scielo, Lilacs and Medline, which were accessed through the Virtual Health Library (VHL) (Table 1). The search in the mentioned database took place from March 08th to March 10th, 2022.

Rayyan Tool: In order to ensure the quality of the study, the Rayyan tool for systematic reviews was used to select the contents found and ensure the reliability of the study through confidentiality between researchers and blind selection. For the articles selection, titles and abstracts were read, after which it was decided whether or not to include the article (Figure 1). After completing the selection of articles, the Mendeley tool was used to create and register quotations and references.

Presentation of findings: Finally, the presentation of the findings took place through the use of tables created by the Excel software and flowchart to better highlight the results obtained.

RESULTS

With the search methods used in the current work, 556 articles were identified in the publications database. Afterwards, applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria, 234 articles were selected. In the following stage, the titles and abstracts reading was made and 224 articles were removed.



Picture 1. Flowchart describing the process used for the articles selection

Finally, a full analysis of the remaining articles was carried out, which resulted in 10 articles, which constitute the final sample of this study (Table 2). The articles that compose this review were published in 5 foreign journals and were published in English, namely: The American Surgeon, BMC Pediatrics, Child Abuse and Neglect, InternationalJournal of Environmental Research of Public Health and Journal of Pediatric Surgery. Obeying the previous quotation order, the first journal contributed with one article (10%), as well as the second and fourth; the third with five (50%), and the last with two (20%), for our final sample. 80% and 20% of the selected articles were published in 2021 and 2022, respectively (Table 2). Furthermore, in terms of location, the articles brought studies carried out in four different countries: the United States (70%), Canada (10%), France (10%) and Norway (10%). From the 10 articles, four (40%) delimited, in terms of age, the sample up to 18, two (20%) up to 15, one (10%) up to 21, one (10%) from 12 to 18, one (10%) from 13 to 16 and one (10%) up to 5 years. As for the research design, most (80%) of these articles were observational, retrospective and cross-sectional, and only two (20%) were longitudinal analyses, the one developed in Canada (STEWART *et al.*, 2021) and the one carried out in Norway (AUGUSTI *et al.*, 2021), which was part of a longitudinal study that combined the cross-sectional panel with repeated measures in a subsample. In addition, only this last study made use of quali-quantitative approaches, the others only analyzed from a quantitative perspective. Table 2 provides information on the sample size studied, as well as the period used to compare cases of abuse/violence against children and adolescents before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

DISCUSSION

Based on the analysis of the ten selected articles, it was possible to answer the guiding question of this research. The articles provided literary support to understand how cases of abuse/violence against children and adolescents behave in scenarios such as the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Most articles showed, from a general perspective, a reduction in the number of notifications, registration or detection of cases of abuse/violence in the period of social isolation and lockdown, when compared to the pre-pandemic period. However, an increase within specific groups was observed among some articles (analysis by color, place of abuse and gender, for example), as well as that the severity of abuse was greater in the pandemic (more severe cases). It is known that economic, social and psychological stressors are associated with an increased risk of abusive injuries in children and adolescents, and such stressors are accentuated in situations of major recessions, such as the current pandemic (RUSSEL *et al.*, 2022). Thus, a statistically significant increase in reports of abuse/violence cases against children and adolescents was to be expected.

Table 1. Crossing the descriptors selected through the Boolean operator AND, after applying the filters: publication date, language and type of publication in the database. Recife, 2022

| | SCIELO | LILACS | MEDLINE | TOTAL |
|--|--------|--------|---------|-------|
| Child AND Child mistreatment AND COVID-19 | 4 | 7 | 227 | 67 |
| Child AND Child mistreatment AND SARS-CoV-2 | 1 | 4 | 158 | 5 |
| Adolescent AND Child mistreatment AND COVID-19 | 1 | 4 | 78 | 2 |
| Adolescent AND Child mistreatment AND SARS-CoV-2 | 1 | 3 | 68 | 20 |
| Total | 7 | 18 | 531 | 556 |

Table 2. Description of the selected articles with titles, authors and year of publication

| Articles Titles | Authors | Year of publication | Sample number | Period (sample collection) |
|---|---|---------------------|---------------|--|
| Abuse, mental state, and health factors pre and during the COVID-19 pandemic: A comparison among clinically referred adolescents in Ontario, Canada | Stewart, Toohey, Celebre e Poss | 2021 | 6.909 | Pre= 17/03/2019-16/03/2020 Post = 17/03/2020-16/03/2021 |
| A comparison of child abuse and neglect encounters before and after school closings due to SARS-CoV-2 | Salt, Wiggins, Cooper <i>et al</i> | 2021 | 469 | Pre = 19/09/2019-20/03/2020 Post= 21/03/2020-20/09/2020 |
| Child physical abuse and COVID-19: Trends from nine pediatric trauma centers | Russell, Acker, Ignacio <i>et al</i> | 2022 | 319 | Post = 01/04-30/06/2019 Post = 01/04-30/06/2020 |
| COVID-19: Differences in sentinel injury and child abuse reporting during a pandemic | Sharma, Wong, Schomberg <i>et al</i> | 2021 | 776 | Pre = 15/03-31/07/2017-19 Post = 15/03-31/07/2020 |
| Effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on presentation and severity of traumatic injury due to physical child abuse across US children's hospitals | De Boer, Ghomrawi, Bouchard <i>et al</i> | 2022 | 20.346 | Pre = 01/03-30/06/2016-19 Post = 01/03-30/06/2020 |
| Increased proportion of physical child abuse injuries at a level I pediatric trauma center during the Covid-19 pandemic | Kovler, Ziegfeld, Ryan <i>et al</i> | 2021 | 257 | Pre = 28/03-27/04/2018-19 Post = 28/03-27/04/2020 |
| Pediatric emergency department visits due to child abuse and neglect following COVID-19 public health emergency declaration in the Southeastern United States | Bullinger, Boy, Messner <i>et al</i> | 2021 | 322.928 | Pre = Jan-Jun/2018-2019 Post =Jan-Jun/2020 |
| Physical abuse of young children during the COVID-19 pandemic: Alarming increase in the relative frequency of hospitalizations during the lockdown period | Loiseau, Cottenet, Bechraoui-Quantin <i>et al</i> | 2021 | 844.227 | Pre = Mar-Apr/2017-19 Post = Mar-Apr/2020 |
| Trauma Visits to a Pediatric Emergency Department During the COVID-19 Quarantine and "Stay at Home" Period | Sethuraman, Kannikeswaran, Singer <i>et al</i> | 2021 | 3.130 | Pre = 16/03-3/06/2019 Post = 16/03-3/06/2020 |
| Violence and abuse experiences and associated risk factors during the COVID-19 outbreak in a population-based sample of Norwegian adolescents | Augusti, Sætren, Hafstad <i>et al</i> | 2021 | 3.545 | Pre = Jan/2019 Post = Jun/2020 |

This was an example of the hypothesis by Russell *et al.* (2022), however his results showed the opposite of this hypothesis. The same result was obtained by De Boer *et al.* (2022), and for them it was unlikely that such findings represent a true decrease in physical child abuse. In fact, the reduction is possibly the result of fewer cases of abuse/violence detected by the health system during the pandemic, as well as the cancellation of routine healthcare appointments and procedures, in which abuse/violence indications are discovered by professionals (DE BOER *et al.*, 2022). It is worth mentioning that not only healthcare professionals act as reporters in cases of abuse/violence denunciations against children and adolescents. Other agents commonly involved in the communication of these cases include, in addition to healthcare professionals, teachers, social workers and police officers (BULLINGER *et al.*, 2021; RUSSEL *et al.*, 2022).

With the lockdown and social isolation, such denouncers were excluded, promoting a drastic reduction in the registration of cases when compared to the pre-pandemic period (BULLINGER *et al.*, 2021; RUSSEL *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, the non-increase in the incidence of abuse/violence cases actually reflects the deficit in monitoring and tracking such cases (BULLINGER *et al.*, 2021). Low notification generates less opportunity to early intervene in suspected or concrete cases, preventing the rupture of the abuse/violence cycle that can lead to increased morbidity and mortality in children and adolescents (DE BOER *et al.*, 2022). Some mechanisms, such as the consumption of cannabis and alcohol, are often used to escape the pressure generated by situations of crisis, such as the current COVID-19 pandemic, and are related to the increased incidence of abuse/violence cases against children and adolescents (AUGUSTI; SAETREN; HAFSTAD, 2021; KOVLER *et al.*, 2021; LOISEAU *et al.*, 2021; STEWART *et al.*, 2021).

As the pandemic increased the unemployment rate, psychological pressure, stress and conflicts within homes, there was a greater pursuit for the use of these substances (STEWART *et al.*, 2021). It is evident that the set formed by the union between these escape methods and the problems generated by the pandemic, explains why the place with the highest number of aggressions is the home, as seen by Augusti *et al.* (2021), for example. When analyzed in relation to physical abuse, which is the most common, the selected articles were not unanimous. For example, in the study developed by Loiseau *et al.* (2021), researchers observed an increase in physical abuse in children aged ≤ 5 years old.

In contrast, Sharma *et al.* (2021) showed a decrease in cases of this type of abuse in a sample that contained children and adolescents aged ≤ 18 years old. However, in these same articles, when physical abuse was analyzed in terms of sex, a higher frequency of cases was observed for males. For females, there was a higher incidence of sexual abuse (AUGUSTI; SAETREN; HAFSTAD, 2021; SHARMA *et al.*, 2021), but the visualization of a general increase in this category of abuse was not unanimous, as Salt *et al.* (2021) observed an increase, while Bullinger *et al.* (2021) and Sharma *et al.* (2021) a decline in sexual abuse. The literature already documents the relationship between gender and the type of abuse, that is, men are more victims of the physical and women of the sexual (DAVIES *et al.*, 2015; SALEM *et al.*, 2020). A possible explanation could be that children are seen differently by the aggressor depending on their sex (REY-SALMON *et al.*, 2018). This is related to a popular belief that a boy must learn to be "tough", which can lead to more violent parents (FONTAINE, 1991). In turn, girls, because they seem more fragile, lead to less physically violent behavior. Possibly, the decrease in the detection of cases of physical and sexual abuse observed may be related to the underreporting and limitations of the studies (sample size and analyzed period, for example).

Furthermore, changes in the profile of the types of abuse/violence during the pandemic may also explain this decrease, as suggested by Bullinger *et al.* (2021) and could be seen in the work by Sharma *et al.* (2021), in which while physical and sexual abuse declined, emotional and psychological abuse increased. In terms of race/color criteria, white people had the highest number of cases of abuse/violence. However, in the studies developed by Kovler *et al.* (2021) and De Boer *et al.* (2022), the authors observed a higher incidence with black people. Furthermore, in the work by Salt *et al.* (2021) blacks ranked second, as the most abused/violated color. Obviously, the fact that most of the ten selected articles were carried out in places where the white population is more expressive, becomes a bias that tends to show the white color as the first place. Therefore, we assume that it is not possible to establish a direct relationship between color and level of abuse/violence, aiming to generalize such relationship, due to the limitations of the selected studies, such as: sample size and quantitative distribution of people colors within it, socioeconomic profile of the sampled location and local culture treatment for each color in the country, region or city. Finally, for this study we also decided to verify the consistency of a hypothesis that emerged during its elaboration: the younger the age, the greater the incidence of abuse/violence. The hypothesis was plausible, as Stewart *et al.* (2021) in their work divided their sample into three age groups: 12-13, 14-15 and 16-18, and found an increase in cases of abuse/violence only in the first group, while in the last two there was a decrease. Still providing further support for the hypothesis, Salt *et al.* (2021) and De Boer *et al.* (2022) found a higher incidence for ages ≤ 1 and ≤ 5 years, respectively. Furthermore, a significant association between younger age and higher abuse/violence rate was seen by Sharma *et al.* (2021), where their results showed greater significance for 1.01 years, when their sample ranged from 0 to 18 years. We suggest that, possibly, children tend to be more abused because they report less to denouncers and/or do not understand abuse/violence as abnormal. As they develop and reach adolescence, their level of discernment increases, enhancing their ability to denounce the abuse/violence they experienced.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, our findings show that, although an increase was expected, there are studies that showed a reduction in abuse/violence cases during the implementation of social isolation guidelines, reflecting underreporting, underdetection, silencing of denouncers and evasion of health systems. Boys are the main target of physical abuse and girls suffer with sexual abuse, however, the opposite is also found. The main place of violence is the domestic one. The incidence of abuse/violence is inversely proportional to age, the younger, the higher its value. The white color registered to be the one most attacked, however there are works that identified the black color. More research is needed to understand these events, which can help identify children and adolescents at risk of abuse/violence, as well as provide more information to create public policies on social isolation and reduce morbidity and mortality generated in childhood and adolescence due to mistreatment in time of crisis.

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