

# Sexualised Violence in the Experience of Adolescents

## Results of a Representative Survey

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### Abstract

#### Background

The Federal Centre for Health Education (BZgA) in Germany has generated data regarding the prevalence of sexualised violence in adolescence by performing representative surveys on youth sexuality since 1998. Since then, the methods have been refined and thus contribute to bridging existing gaps in prevalence research.

#### Objective

Based on the ninth iteration of the Youth Sexuality Survey, prevalence rates of direct (hands-on) and indirect (hands-off) sexualised violence in adolescence, data on offenders and the disclosure behaviour of young people after victimisation are described.

#### Methods

Computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI) was conducted in a population ( $n = 6032$ ) of adolescents (14–17 years of age) and young adults (18–25 years of age). During the recent phase of this representative survey, questions regarding the lifetime prevalence of indirect (hands-off) sexualised violence were included in the questionnaire. This article contains the first descriptive survey results.

#### Results

Adolescents and young adults experience sexualised violence predominantly within their own peer group. Peers also play a significant role in responding to the disclosure of sexualised violence.

#### Discussion

These findings confirm the results of other population surveys regarding the different experiences of sexualised violence in childhood and adolescence. The survey was intended to contribute to the continuous monitoring policy, providing regular datasets on sexualised violence in adolescence. The study aims to generate evidence-based, target-group-specific prevention measures.

#### Keywords

Prevalence, Young people, Sexual abuse, Peers, Disclosure

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## Background

The amount of available data on the prevalence of sexualised violence in the experience of adolescents has steadily and significantly improved during the past decade (Kindler & Derr, 2018).

In 2010, the abuse scandals in certain pedagogical and ecclesiastical contexts and the independent enquiry into cases of child sexual abuse cases triggered a real discourse in the research environment (Kappler et al., 2019). Since then, a broad database on the topic of sexualised violence has been compiled as part of numerous qualitative and quantitative research projects (Kindler & Derr, 2018; Häuser et al., 2011; Posch & Bienek, 2016; Maschke & Stecher, 2018; Hofherr, 2017).<sup>1</sup>

Despite this enormous gain in knowledge, it is still difficult to draw any conclusions about developments in the prevalence of sexualised violence in adolescence. In Germany, there is still a lack of regular follow-up studies that deal with the dark field of unreported cases, focused exclusively on adolescents' experiences with sexualised violence (Kindler & Derr, 2018). Against this background, the German Federal Centre for Health Education (Bundeszentrale für gesundheitliche Aufklärung, BZgA) has significantly expanded the questionnaire on sexualised violence in the latest iteration of the survey, which has been conducted regularly since 1980.

Since 1980, adolescents aged 14 to 17 - and since 2015 additionally young adults aged 18 to 25 - have been surveyed on sexuality education, sexual experiences, and contraception as part of the Youth Sexuality Survey. In 1998, core questions regarding adolescents' experiences with sexualised violence in their narrow hands-on definition in terms of lifetime prevalence (Hessling & Bode, 2006) were added to the questionnaire for the first time. The focus here is on the perspective of those who are affected. Over the years, the questionnaire in this repeat survey has been significantly adapted. This was done in line with developments in research and practice: There was a sharpening of terminology and a more differentiated depiction of the lifeworlds of young people was also included (Hessling & Bode, 2015).

This paper describes certain results of the 9th iteration of the Youth Sexuality Study in 2019. The prevalence of

physical and non-physical sexualised violence experienced by young people is presented, as are data on the offenders and the disclosure behaviour of those affected.

## Methods

The interviews on experiences of sexualised violence are embedded in a representative repeat survey on the sexual and contraceptive behaviour of young people. In the 2019 iteration, this section of the questionnaire was significantly extended. On the one hand, physical forms of sexualised violence were explored in greater depth and more detail than in previous iterations; this instrument, for instance, also includes questions on the type of physical forms of sexualised violence, the group of perpetrators, and the disclosure behaviour<sup>2</sup> after the assault. As a reference for assessment, respondents were asked to recall their first experience with sexualised violence.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, the range of sexualised violence was broadened by non-physical experiences with sexualised violence. In the survey, this is understood to include hands-off acts, verbal and written insults with sexual connotations, the spreading of rumours with a sexual content, and confrontations with sexual acts and victimisation on the internet. An established instrument was used for this purpose (Maschke & Stecher, 2017). Additionally, the survey also focused on awareness of relevant support services.

The data were obtained between May and October 2019 by the Kantar GmbH field institute, using the CAPI method (computer-assisted personal interviewing) as a combination of oral and written interviews. The survey took place in the adolescents' or young adults' home, mostly without any third parties being present. The questions on experiences with sexualised violence were answered by the respondents on a laptop (self-completion part) in the presence of the interviewers.

Both the legal guardians and the adolescents/young adults themselves were fully informed in advance about the objective and purpose of the study, as well as about the data processing policy. This was done verbally and in writing. Participation in the survey was possible only with the consent of the parents and the adolescents/young adults themselves.

Thorough training by specialists prior to the survey ensured that the interviewers were able to conduct the survey in an age-appropriate, culturally sensitive, and empathetic manner. The interviewers were able to refer to further counselling services where applicable – such as (anonymous) counselling in Advice Centres or telephone hotlines and websites. After responding to the survey, all adolescents received information about sexualised violence and relevant support services.

Since the samples of the Youth Sexuality Survey have already been described elsewhere (Scharmanski & Hessler, 2021), we will not specify them again in this context.

This report presents initial descriptive results<sup>4</sup> regarding the prevalence of physical and non-physical forms of sexualised violence in a representative sample of adolescents and young adults. This is followed by more detailed analyses of the nature of sexualised violence that was experienced, as well as the perpetrator group, and the disclosure behaviour after the assault. Bipartite  $\chi^2$  tests were performed to test the respective significance of the frequency distributions. The statistical analyses were performed using an IBM SPSS 25.

## Results

### Prevalence of non-physical and physical forms of sexualised violence

All in all, 54 % of the interviewed adolescents and young adults reported having experienced at least one instance of *non-physical sexualised violence* of some sort. Male and female respondents are affected to a comparable degree (53 % vs. 56 %); although the nature of the assaults differs depending on the sex (Figure 1). Girls and young women are more likely to experience sexual comments (38 % of adolescents / 40 % of young adults), online victimisation (23 % of adolescents / 32 % of young adults), and exhibitionism (5 % of adolescents / 14 % of young adults); while boys and young men, on the other hand, experience more negative labels with sexual references (24 % of adolescents / 29 % of young adults).

Almost one in five female adolescents or young women have already experienced a form of *physical sexualised violence* once<sup>5</sup>. This is reported by 18 % of all girls and women aged 14 to 25. Another third of those who experienced some kind of violence said they had been exposed to physical violence on several occasions (6 %). According to their own reports, boys and young men, with 5 %, are less likely to be affected (repeatedly: 1 %). Detailed characteristics of the first experience with physical forms of sexualised violence are presented below. Since male respondents are less likely to be victimised, which means that there are generally not enough cases for differential analyses, this analysis focuses predominantly on the sample of girls and young women aged 14 to 25.

### Characteristics of the first experience with physical forms of sexualised violence

#### Age at first experience of physical forms of sexualised violence

According to the girls and young women, more than 66 % of the first sexualised violence experience occurred when they were under 18 years old; another 16 % of respondents reported being younger than 14 years at the time of this first experience (Table 1).

#### Type and group of perpetrators involved in the first experience of physical forms of sexualised violence

In the sample of 14- to 25-year-old girls and young women, 34 % of all respondents have experienced incidents of sexualised violence in the form of unwanted physical touching (such as kissing and/or petting). Another 23 % report forced sexual intercourse and 17 % mention other unwanted sexual acts. 37 % of the respondents reported being able to fend off the assault and there were no forced sexual acts<sup>6</sup>.

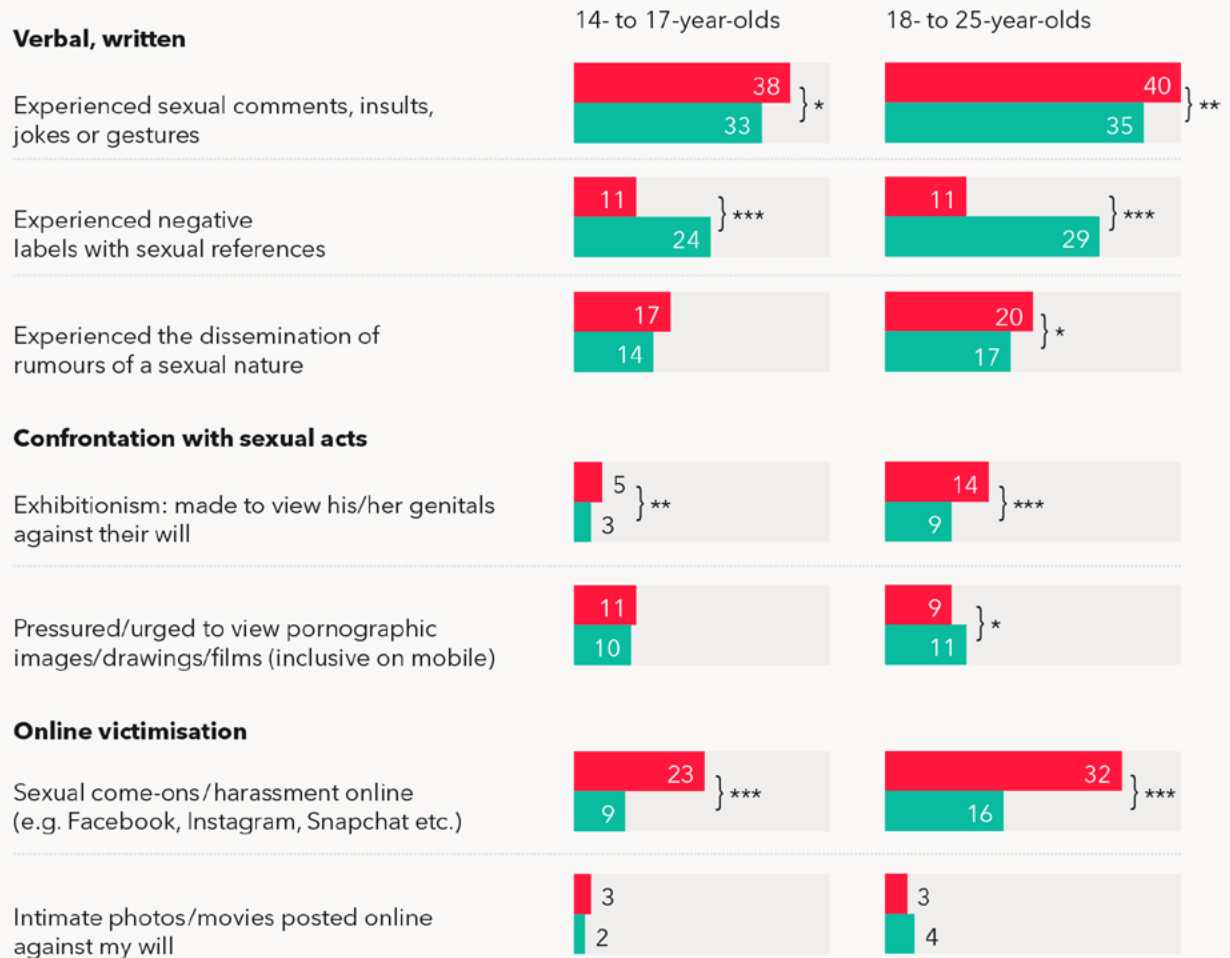
As shown in Figure 2, the nature of sexualised violence first experienced does not differ significantly in relation to the age at which the incident occurred. Only in the case of experiences of sexualised violence in childhood do the respondents mention other unwanted sexual acts significantly more often. There is also a tendency for unwanted physical touching to occur more frequently in childhood; although this is not a significant result.

FIGURE 1

## EXPERIENCE OF NON-PHYSICAL FORMS OF SEXUALISED VIOLENCE

Question: Sometimes you have unpleasant experiences or you could be put under pressure. Have you experienced this or something like this personally?

■ Female ■ Male



Basis: 14- to 25-year-olds (N = 6032, unweighted); group differences by sex: bipartite  $\chi^2$  test with 3 asterisks  $p < 0.001$ ; 2 asterisks  $p < 0.01$ ; asterisks  $p < 0.05$ . | figures in percent  
Question based on the SPEAK! study (Maschke & Stecher, 2017)

Source: BZgA, dataset Youth Sexuality, 2019 survey

TABLE 1

## AGE AT FIRST EXPERIENCE WITH PHYSICAL FORMS OF SEXUALISED VIOLENCE

Question: How old were you when this happened (for the first time)?

	Frequency	Percentage
Under 14 years	83	15.7
14- to 17-years-olds	265	50.5
18 years and older	158	30.1
Not remembered, no information	19	3.6
Total	525	100.0

Basis: 14- to 25-year-old girls/young women experienced sexualised violence (n = 538, unweighted)

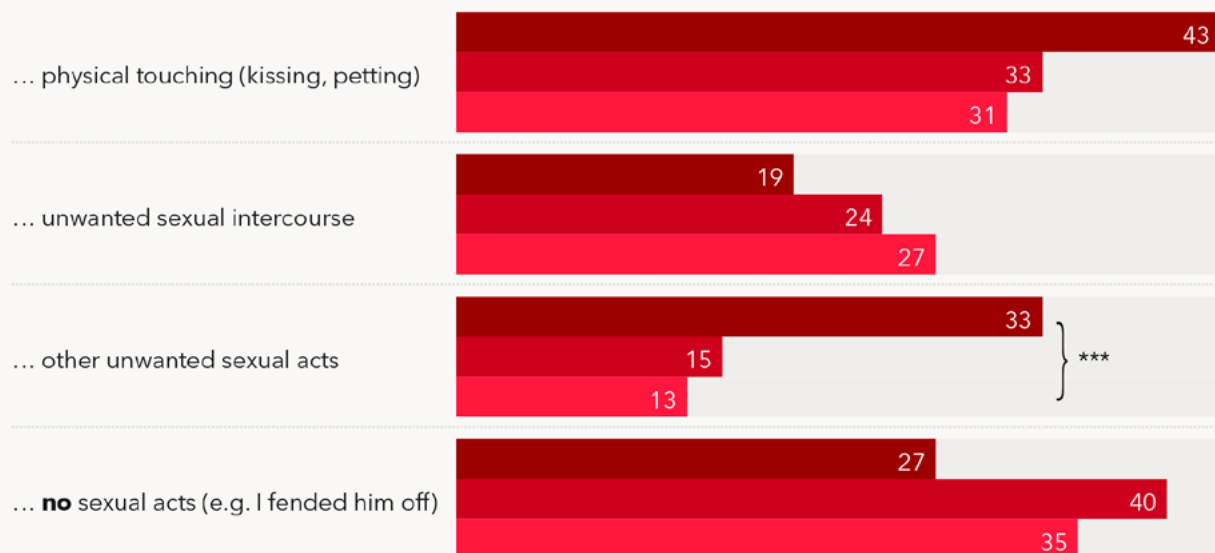
Source: BZgA, dataset Youth Sexuality, 2019 survey

FIGURE 2

## NATURE OF SEXUALISED VIOLENCE IN RELATION TO THE AGE AT FIRST EXPERIENCE WITH PHYSICAL FORMS OF SEXUALISED VIOLENCE

Question: How did the situation end? Did it result in ...

■ Under 14 years ■ 14- to 17-year-olds ■ 18 years and older



Basis: 14- to 25-year-old girls / young women with experience of sexualised violence; together with the exact age (n = 517, unweighted). Differences between the groups in relation to age at first incident: bipartite  $\chi^2$  test with 3 asterisks p < 0.001; 2 asterisks p < 0.01; asterisks p < 0.05. | multiple responses possible | figures in percent

Source: BZgA, dataset Youth Sexuality, 2019 survey

As for the group of perpetrators, the data from the Youth Sexuality Survey show that girls and young women almost exclusively experience physical forms of sexualised violence at the hands of male perpetrators (97%). This is in contrast to the statements of the boys and young men participating in the study; half of them had experienced sexualised violence at the hands of girls or women (51%), the other half at the hands of boys or men (49%).

Insofar as the relationship between the person who experienced sexualised violence and the perpetrator is to be examined in more detail, the analysis is based once more exclusively on the sample of female respondents. As shown in [Figure 3](#), this relationship depends on the age at which the respondents first experienced sexualised violence. With regard to abuse occurring between the ages of 14 to 25, the perpetrator is significantly more often an (ex-)boyfriend or (ex-)girlfriend, a friend/classmate or a girlfriend/classmate, but may also be a new acquaintance. As far as sexualised violence in childhood is concerned, on the other hand, perpetrators are more likely to be members of the intimate social environment; for instance the family circle, the neighbourhood, or a dependent relationship at school or in the recreational context.

Strikingly, the type of sexualised violence experienced differs depending on the relationship with the perpetrator ([Figure 4](#)). If respondents report that sexualised violence occurred in the context of a (former) relationship, this resulted in forced sexual intercourse significantly more often than with other groups of perpetrators. However, if the perpetrator was unknown to them, persons who experienced sexualised violence were significantly more likely to report that they had not experienced any forced sexual acts, for instance because they were able to fend off the perpetrator.

### **Disclosure after the first experience with physical forms of sexualised violence**

In addition, the Youth Sexuality Survey also focused on the tendency of persons who experienced sexualised violence to report the incident after their first experience with physical forms of sexualised violence.<sup>7</sup> A quarter of the respondents had apparently not yet told anyone about this experience (25%); it took years for another 17% to talk about their experience. 12% of all persons who experienced sexualised violence reported the experience after a few weeks or months. Just under half of the respondents reported the incident a few days later (17%) or immediately afterwards (29%).

As the data from the Youth Sexuality Survey show, the tendency to report the first experience of physical forms of sexualised violence also depends on the relationship with the perpetrator ([Figure 5](#)).

If the perpetrator is a member of the intimate social environment and the person who experienced sexualised violence is dependent on and/or has a social relationship with this person, respondents state significantly more often not to have told anyone about the violence. However, if the perpetrator is unknown to the respondent, those who experienced sexualised violence are more likely to talk about the experience in the immediate aftermath of the abuse.

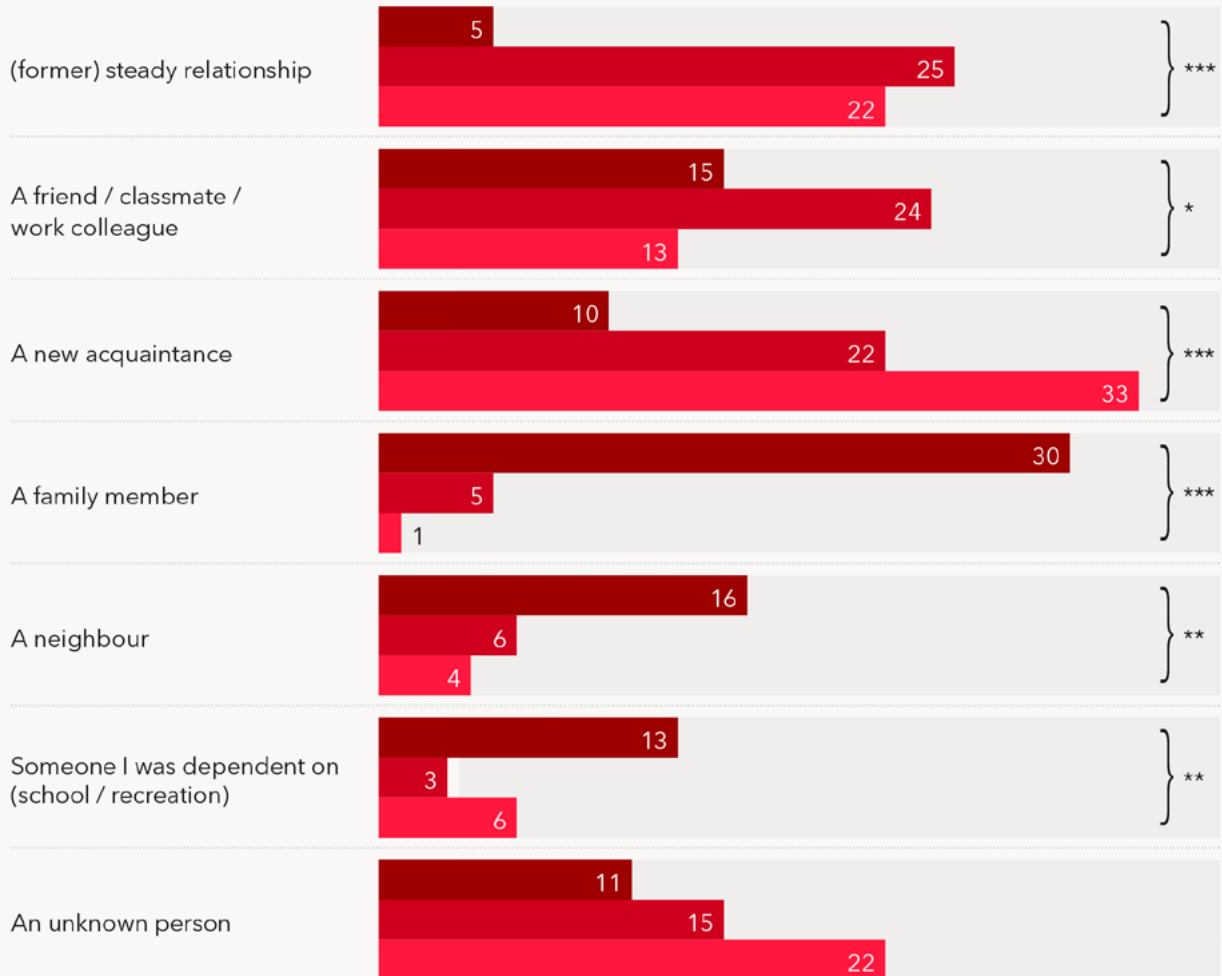
And to whom the respondents disclose their first experience of sexualised violence also depends on their age at the time of the abuse. Persons experiencing violence between the ages of 14 and 25 have a clear preference: The majority of them talk primarily to their peers ([Figure 6](#)). Parents, teachers, and other adults play a minor role in the disclosure of sexualised violence in adolescence and young adulthood. Even if the abuse occurs in childhood, persons who experienced sexualised violence will most often turn to peers; although they will do so less frequently than in other age cohorts. In addition to their peers, victimised children are significantly more likely to turn to adults, such as parents or therapists and professionals.

FIGURE 3

**GROUP OF PERPETRATORS DURING THE FIRST EXPERIENCE OF SEXUALISED VIOLENCE IN RELATION TO THE AGE RESPONDENTS EXPERIENCED FIRST PHYSICAL FORMS OF SEXUALISED VIOLENCE**

Question: How did you know this person? Was it ...?

■ Under 14 years ■ 14- to 17-year-olds ■ 18 years and older



Basis: 14- to 25-year-old girls / young women who have experienced sexualised violence; together with the exact age (n = 517, unweighted). Differences between the groups in relation to age at first incident: bipartite  $\chi^2$  test with 3 asterisks  $p < 0.001$ ; 2 asterisk  $p < 0.01$ ; asterisks  $p < 0.05$ . | figures in percent

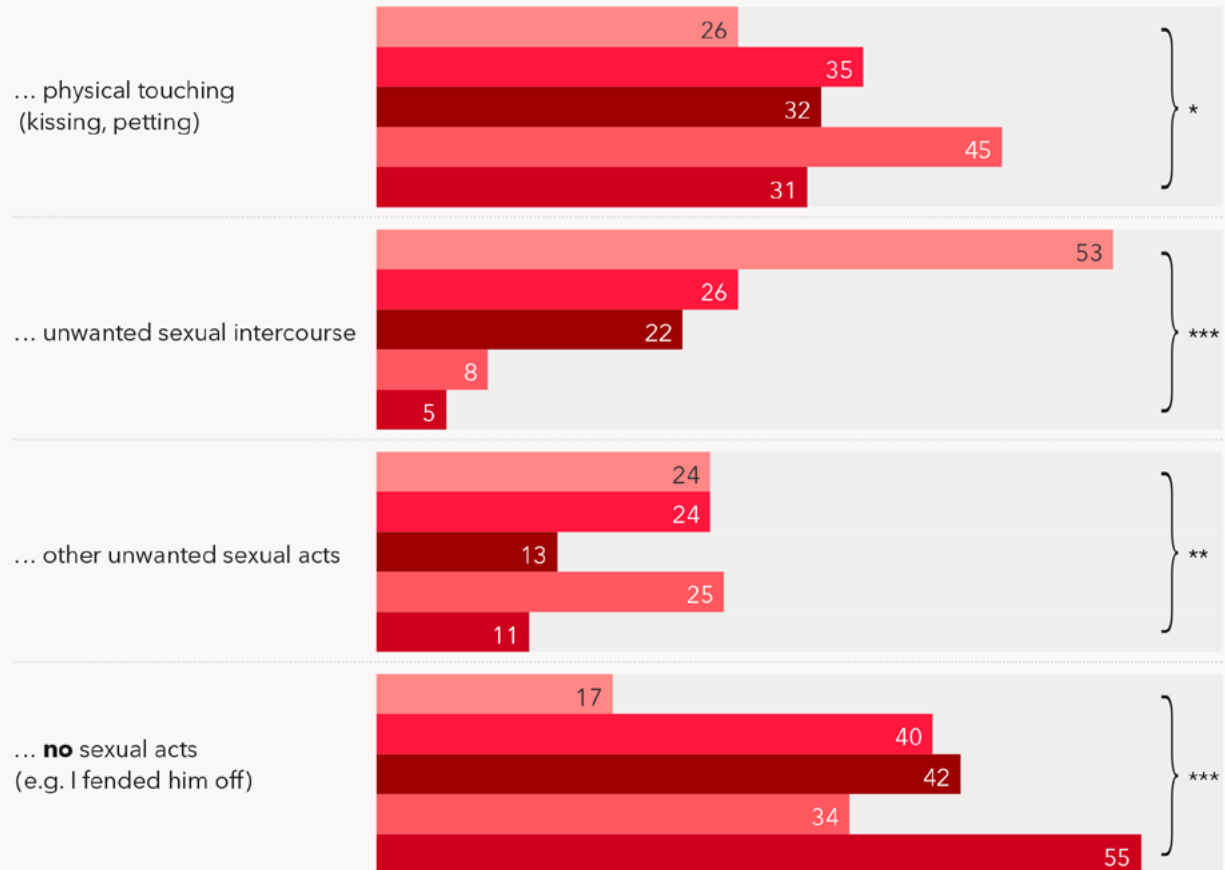
Source: BZgA, dataset Youth Sexuality, 2019 survey

FIGURE 4

## NATURE OF SEXUALISED VIOLENCE EXPERIENCED DEPENDING ON THE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE PERPETRATOR

Question: How did the situation end? Did it result in ...

■ (former) steady relationship   
 ■ A friend, classmate or work colleague   
 ■ A new acquaintance  
■ A family member, neighbour, someone I was dependent on   
 ■ An unknown person



Basis: 14- to 25-year-old girls / young women who have experienced sexualised violence (n = 538, unweighted). Differences between the groups in relation to the group of perpetrators during the first incident: bipartite  $\chi^2$  test with 3 asterisks  $p < 0.001$ ; 2 asterisks  $p < 0.01$ ; asterisk  $p < 0.05$ . | figures in percent

Source: BZgA, dataset Youth Sexuality, 2019 survey

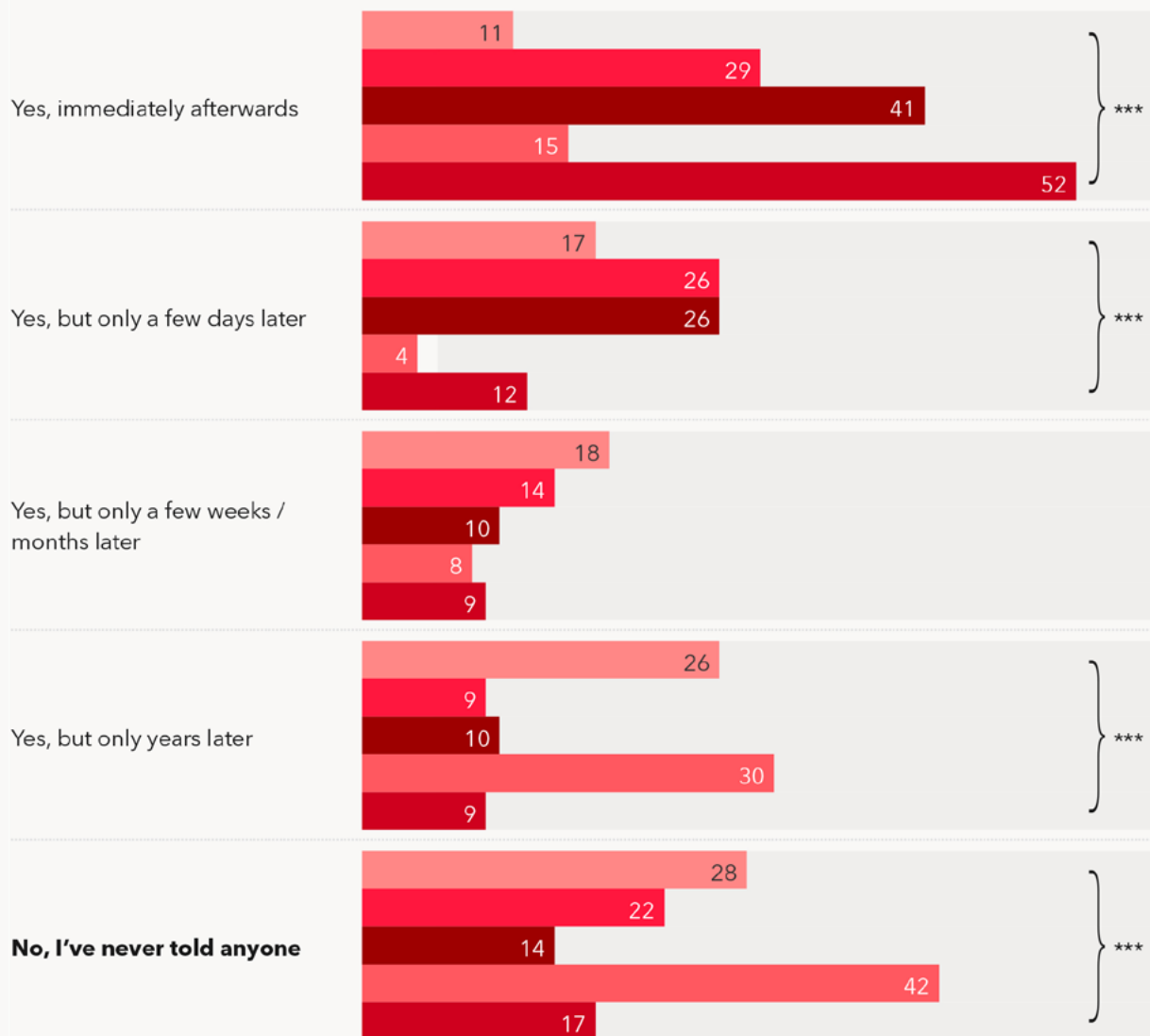


**FIGURE 5**

**DISCLOSING EXPERIENCES OF FIRST EXPERIENCE WITH SEXUALISED VIOLENCE DEPENDING ON THE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE PERPETRATOR**

Question: Have you told anyone about this experience?

■ Current / former steady relationship  
 ■ A friend, classmate, work colleague  
 ■ New acquaintance  
■ A family member, neighbour, someone I was dependent on  
 ■ An unknown person



Basis: 14- to 25-year-old girls / young women who have experienced sexualised violence (n = 538, unweighted). Differences between the groups in relation to the group of perpetrators during the first incident: bipartite  $\chi^2$  test with 3 asterisks  $p < 0.001$ ; 2 asterisks  $p < 0.01$ ; asterisk  $p < 0.05$ . | figures in percent

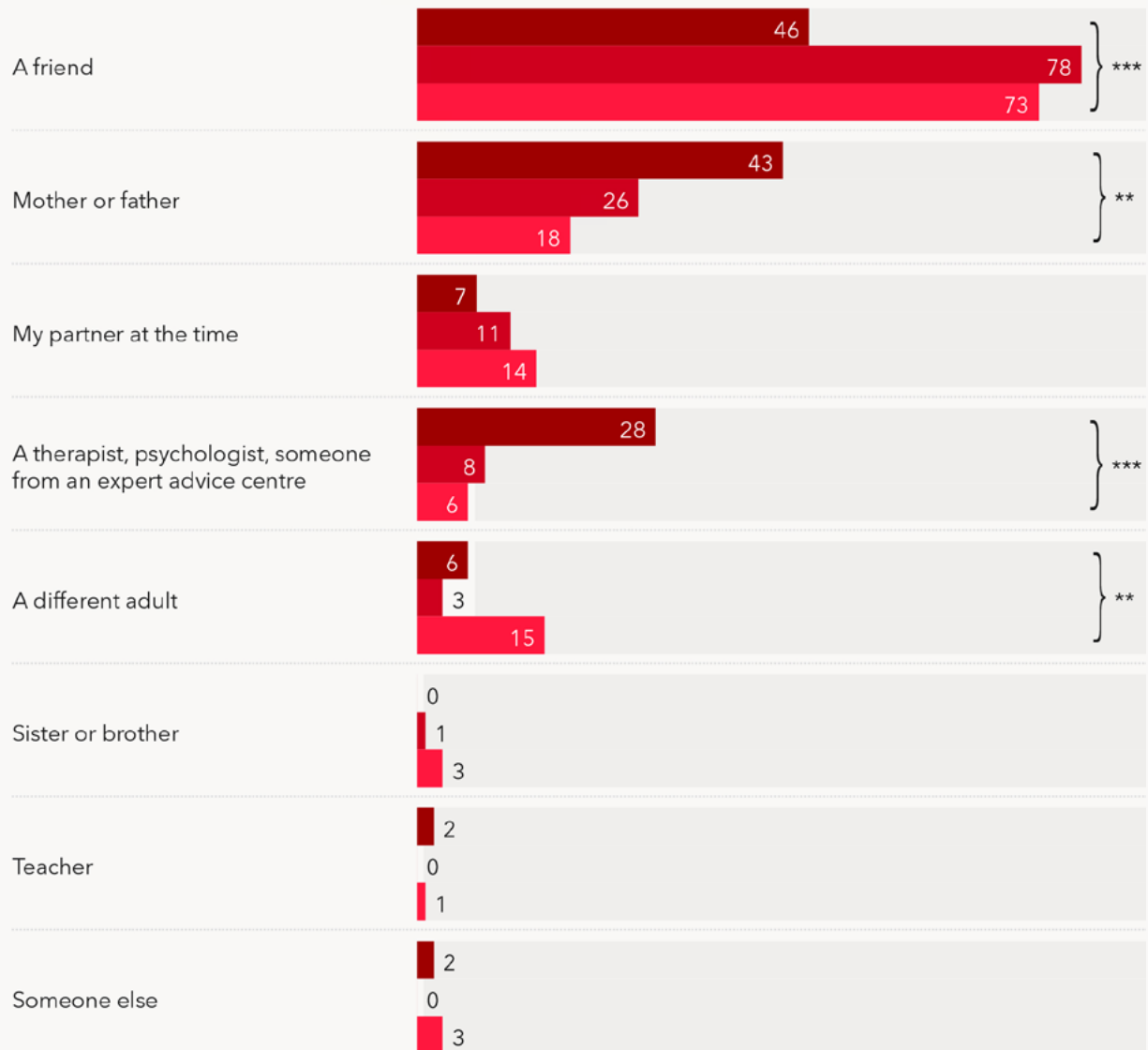
Source: BZgA, dataset Youth Sexuality, 2019 survey

FIGURE 6

### CONFIDANTS AFTER EXPERIENCING SEXUALISED VIOLENCE IN RELATION TO THE AGE RESPONDENTS EXPERIENCED FIRST SEXUALISED VIOLENCE

Question: Who did you tell about this experience?

■ Under 14 years ■ 14- to 17-year-olds ■ 18 years and older



Basis: 14- to 25-year-old girls / young women who spoke about their experience of sexualised violence; together with the exact age (n = 384, unweighted). Differences between the groups in relation to the age during the first incident: bipartite  $\chi^2$  test with 3 asterisks  $p < 0.001$ ; 2 asterisks  $p < 0.01$ ; asterisk  $p < 0.05$ . | multiple responses possible | figures in percent

Source: BZgA, dataset Youth Sexuality, 2019 survey

## Discussion

The 9th iteration of the Youth Sexuality survey provides up-to-date data regarding sexualised violence experienced by adolescents and young adults. Initial results of the study regarding the prevalence of experienced forms of physical and non-physical sexualised violence are presented here on a descriptive level. More in-depth multivariate analyses are required to investigate the nature and strength of possible correlations between several parameters.

### Limitations

It should be mentioned, however, that despite the overall size of the sample, only very few respondents were younger than 14 years of age when they first experienced sexualised violence. Experiences with sexualised violence in childhood differ markedly from those in adolescence with regard to the disclosure behaviour and the group of perpetrators.

While children are predominantly affected by sexualised violence within their own family and their intimate social environment, adolescents and young adults are more likely to experience sexualised violence at the hands of their peers. Adolescents are also significantly more likely to turn to their peers to discuss incidents of sexualised violence. Since these differences are relevant in terms of prevention and intervention, the data on sexualised violence experienced by under 14-year-olds are nevertheless presented here.

A possible bias (social desirability bias, recall bias, or self-report bias) due to parental presence of the adolescents and young adults surveyed in the home cannot be fully excluded. It should be noted that a bias in the response behaviour would be expected primarily among children who experience sexualised violence most commonly in the family setting. Additionally, given the significant role that peers<sup>8</sup> play in the context of sexualised violence in adolescence, it is likely that alternative survey settings, for instance in a school or recreational setting, may also introduce a bias. Also, cluster effects as well as relevant effects of non-participation ("school-based non-response") should be assumed in any surveys performed among adolescents in a school setting; and these ought to be methodically controlled (Smit et al, 2002).

Good comparability of the data obtained in different survey settings – despite possible bias – is confirmed by the close proximity of the results of the present study to experiences of non-physical violence in the "Speak!" study (Maschke & Stecher, 2018).

## Implications

Despite the above-mentioned limitations, the available data provide valuable insights for further development of methodological approaches to obtain the prevalences in the dark field on the one hand, and the design of preventive measures in the social environment of adolescents and their peers.

### Continuous monitoring of the experiences of adolescents with sexualised violence

Thus, the representative repeat survey of the Youth Sexuality Study gives option to record the prevalence of experiences with physical and non-physical sexualised violence in the respective current generation of adolescents and young adults and to compare the age groups surveyed (14 to 17 and 18 to 25) with each other – in the sense of continuous monitoring. In addition, comparability with other regional, national, and international studies (Hofherr, 2017; Maschke & Stecher, 2017; Jud et al., 2018) is ensured.

Further development of the scope and content of the measuring instruments might support the long-term monitoring of these issues. This study, for instance, highlights the need to pay more attention to the role of adolescents as perpetrators of sexualised violence (aggressors), which is shown by the high percentage of transgressions and assaults experienced by peers. Moreover, additional questions focusing on multiple victimisations by different perpetrators might provide valuable information regarding the context of the exposure of children and adolescents to violence.

### Evidence-based prevention concepts and policies for specific target groups

Based on the available data, developments and hazard constellations of specific target groups can be continually identified. These should then be specifically utilised for prevention and protection concepts. Thus, additional measures for the prevention of sexualised violence against children, which predominantly takes place in the family context and the intimate social environment, are required (Kappler et al., 2019). 24 % of the participating adolescents aged 14 to 17, however, reported experiences with sexualised violence at the hands of someone in their circle of friends, at their own school, or by colleagues at work. Another 25 % of all subjects in this age group have experienced sexualised violence by their (ex-)partner. Adolescents - in contrast to children - tend to experience sexualised violence primarily within their own peer group. In addition, the differences in the experiences with regard to the sex of the perpetrators reported by the female and male respondents should also be taken into account.

While preventive actions aim at protecting children from victimisation by adults and enabling them to seek help from trusted adults (Kindler & Derr, 2018), policies for the prevention of sexualised violence through peers must explicitly be geared towards adolescents' environments, milieus and mindsets and must be designed so as to be more participatory, informative, reflective, and empowering rather than protective.

The sensitive developmental stages between childhood and adolescence warrant special attention; and the age-specific needs for protection and support must be (individually) balanced.

In terms of the disclosure behaviour, this study also confirms the results of other surveys regarding the special role of peer contact for victimised adolescents (Hofherr, 2017; Maschke & Stecher, 2018). Apart from primary prevention policies targeting peer groups, it is therefore important to prepare young people - who are potential recipients of such a disclosure - for conversations with peers about sexualised violence they have experienced and to enable them to accompany victimised peers on their way into the support system (Gulowski & Krüger, 2020).

At this point in time we need more prevention concepts targeting sexualised violence in adolescence, as well as so-called bystander programmes<sup>9</sup> that promote interventional behaviour among young people. This requires an in-depth scientific examination of the age-specific and target group-specific conditions for the success of participatory prevention and for strengthening of the competencies of adolescents and young adults in distinction to child protection. Up until now, young people have scarcely been involved in the development of protection concepts and preventive as well as educational policies (Wolff et al., 2019; Henningsen & Winter, 2020). This should be understood and supported as an essential contribution to the prevention of sexualised violence and thus to the enhancement of the sexual and reproductive health of young people.

## Endnotes

- 1 For an overview please see the series of books on „Sexuelle Gewalt und Pädagogik“ [Sexualised violence and pedagogy] by Martin Wazlawik and Arne Dekker (editors).
- 2 Disclosure describes ‘processes of remembering, classifying, and disclosing sexualised violence’ (Rieske, Scambor & Wittenzeller, 2018, p. 700).
- 3 Instruction: “When answering the following questions, please think of the first time someone tried to get you to physically touch them or engage in sexual acts against your will.”
- 4 All results published in this article are reported with design weights (combined regional, sex, and educational weighting; for the group of respondents with an immigrant background, weighting by nationality group).
- 5 Question: “Has anyone ever tried to force you against your will to engage in physical contact or sexual acts by pressuring you?”; basis: 14- to 25-year-olds (n = 6032).
- 6 Question: “How did the situation end? Did it result in ...” (multiple responses possible); basis: 14- to 25-year-old girls/young women with experience of sexualised violence (n = 538, unweighted).
- 7 Question: “Have you told anyone about this experience?”; basis: 14- to 25-year-old girls/young women who have experienced sexualised violence (n = 538).
- 8 A peer is someone equal in age, education, or social class, who has a similar mindset. Peer groups include persons who have similar ages, backgrounds, and a similar social status (Köhler, Krüger & Pfaff, 2016).
- 9 Bystander Programmes describe measures geared towards the prevention of (sexualised) violence in the presence of potential bystanders and third-person witnesses by increasing the intervention skills of these third persons (Banyard, 2011).

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