



## Incest

- Research indicates that 46% of children who are raped are victims of family members. (Langan, Patrick and Caroline Harlow. (1994). *Child Rape Victims*, 1992. Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice.)
- 11% of rape victims are raped by their fathers or step-fathers, and another 16% are raped by other relatives while they were children. (Langan, Patrick and Caroline Harlow. (1994). *Child Rape Victims*, 1992. Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice.)
- The study of a nationally representative sample of state prisoners serving time for violent crime in 1991 showed that of those prisoners convicted of rape or sexual assault, two-thirds victimized children and almost one-third of the victims were the children or step-children of the assailant. (Greenfield, Lawrence, (1996). *Child Victimizers: Violent Offenders and Their Victims: Executive Summary*. Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice.)
- Approximately, 28% of adult victims are raped by husbands or boyfriends, 35% by acquaintances, and 5% by other relatives. (Violence Against Women. Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice, 1994.)
- Incest has been cited as the most common form of child abuse. Studies conclude that 43% of child victims are abused by family members, 33% by someone they know, and the remaining 24% are sexually abused by strangers. (Hayes, Robert. (1990, Summer). "Child Sexual Abuse." *Crime Prevention Journal*.)
- There is evidence emerging that as many as one in three incidents of child sexual abuse are not remembered by adults who experienced them, and that the younger the child was at the time of the abuse, and the closer the relationship to the abuser, the more likely one is not to remember. (Jim Hopper, Ph.D., Child Abuse Statistics, Research and Resources. [www.jimhopper.com](http://www.jimhopper.com), 2004.)
- Less than 3 percent (2.5%) of parents committed sexual abuse; however, 28.9 percent of other relatives, 19.3 percent of daycare providers, 16.4 percent of residential facility staff, and 11.2 percent of unmarried partners of parents committed sexual abuse. More than one-third (36.9%) of perpetrators who were in "other" types of relationships to the child victims—including camp counselors, school employees, and hospital staff—committed sexual abuse. (Child Maltreatment Report 2002. National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect. (2004).)

Incest is an experience which affects survivors' lives in many ways. The following is only a partial list of possible effects survivors may experience for years into their adult lives:

- Low self-esteem
- Self-blame, guilt
- Vulnerability to revictimization
- Depression
- Difficulty sustaining relationships & building trust
- Alcohol or drug problems
- Anxiety, need to control relationships
- Post-traumatic stress disorder
- Eating disorders
- Dissociative reactions
- Sexual dysfunction
- Flashbacks and traumatic memories

Incest remains one of the most under-reported and least discussed crimes in our nation, making accurate statistics and information difficult to gather. Because of strong taboos, incest is often concealed by the victim because of guilt, shame, fear, coercion by the abuser, and/or social and familial pressure.

## **DEFINITION**

Incest is the sexual abuse of a child by a relative or other person in a position of trust and authority over the child. Additional characteristics include:

- Sexual contact or interaction between family members who are not marital partners;
- Oral genital contact, genital or anal penetration, genital touching of the victim by the perpetrator, any other touching of private body parts, sexual kissing and hugging;
- Sexually staring at the victim by the perpetrator, accidental or disguised touching of the victim's body by the perpetrator, verbal invitations to engage in sexual activity, verbal ridiculing of body parts, pornographic photography, reading of sexually explicit material to children, and exposure to inappropriate sexual activity (National Center for Victims of Crime).

Incest is experienced by those of every racial and ethnic descent, all religious traditions, and any socio-economic status. Victims of incest are boys and girls, infants and adolescents. Perpetrators of incest can be aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, nephews, parents, step-parents, step-children, grandparents, and grandchildren. In addition, incest offenders can be persons without a direct blood or legal relationship to the victim such as a parents' lover or live-in nanny, housekeeper, etc.

**MEMORY.** Many victims of incest may not have memories of it ever happening. Some will not have these memories because the abuse occurred while they were very young. Many abuse victims will report that the actual physical sexual abuse was not the worst aspect of the experience; rather, it was carrying such a powerful secret that must be protected. Others may have literally pushed the memories from their conscious mind in order to survive the abuse. In either case, the victim/survivor may feel as if something occurred and may eventually regain the memories of the abuse. Whether they remember the abuse or not, victims / survivors may still experience the effects previously listed.

**HEALING.** People who experience incest have experienced violation of trust and sexual exploitation, but they can and do survive. There is no one "right way" to heal. Many will heal with the help of a counselor/therapist and/or support group, and others will heal on their own. Once a survivor has made a commitment to address incest issues, it may take an average of 3-5 years of therapy to heal.

"The incest victim is usually the healthiest in the family: the one closest to the truth and the first to seek help."

Susan Forward, Ph.D., 1989.

Innocence and Betrayal Overcoming  
the Legacy of Sexual Abuse

*This information sheet was compiled in 2004 by the Wisconsin Coalition Against Sexual Assault, Inc. (WCASA). WCASA is a membership organization of sexual assault centers, other organizations, and individuals throughout Wisconsin working to end sexual violence. For information sheets on other topics or to become a member, contact WCASA 600 Williamson St., Suite N-2, Madison, WI 53703, (608)257-1516, [www.wcasa.org](http://www.wcasa.org). For more information about sexual assault or to receive support with a sexual assault experience, contact your local sexual assault program. This sheet may be reproduced in its original format only.*