There is a lack of evidence on interventions addressing institutional child maltreatment

Child maltreatment affects millions of children, adults and communities globally. Research on institutional maltreatment is spread across multiple sources and can be difficult for stakeholders to locate.

This evidence and gap map (EGM) provides a ‘go to’ resource that presents existing evidence evaluating the effectiveness of interventions targeting the prevention, disclosure, response to, and treatment of institutional child maltreatment. The map indicates that evidence supporting interventions addressing institutional child maltreatment is limited.

What is this evidence and gap map about?

Child maltreatment, including sexual, physical or emotional abuse and neglect, negatively impacts the physical, mental, spiritual and interpersonal wellbeing of those experiencing and surviving it, in both the short term and the long term.

Child maltreatment occurring in institutional settings has recently gained substantial public and policy recognition through government inquiries. Institutional settings can include places of education, foster care, residential care or juvenile justice or health care settings.

The relevant research can be difficult for stakeholders, such as policy makers, researchers, practitioners and others, to access and use because it is spread out across multiple sources.

The map highlights a substantial need for more high-quality studies that evaluate interventions across a broader range of institutional contexts and maltreatment types.

What studies are included?

Eligible studies were systematic reviews and primary studies that reported on the effectiveness of interventions addressing child maltreatment within institutional settings.

Seventy-three eligible studies met the selection criteria, including: 11 systematic reviews; 59 primary studies; and three protocols. The studies were conducted across 18 countries, with over half within the USA.

What is the aim of this evidence and gap map (EGM)?

This EGM provides a ‘go to’ resource presenting the existing evidence on the effectiveness of interventions addressing child maltreatment within institutional settings.
Most studies evaluated curriculum-based interventions delivered in educational settings, aimed at preventing sexual abuse. Fewer studies examined other organisational settings, such as out-of-home care settings (including, foster care, residential care and orphanages). No studies explicitly assessed sports clubs, religious organisations, juvenile justice, or health care settings.

Most interventions targeted children, rather than adults. Few studies included populations known to be at risk, or those already exposed to maltreatment. Prevention interventions were most studied, with few studies evaluating disclosure, institutional responses, or treatment interventions. The majority of studies assessed interventions addressing sexual abuse, and far fewer addressed physical and emotional abuse, or neglect.

The reported outcomes reflected the bias towards child-targeted interventions, and primarily captured child wellbeing and protective skills/knowledge outcomes. Measures of maltreatment disclosure or maltreatment occurrence/reoccurrence were less common, and all other outcome categories included in the EGM were minimally represented.

Only a third of studies reported measures of implementation. These included measures representing the feasibility, adoption, fidelity, acceptability and penetration of the interventions being evaluated.

What are the main findings of this map?

This EGM indicates that evidence supporting interventions addressing institutional child maltreatment is limited. The map highlights a substantial need for more high-quality studies that evaluate interventions across a broader range of institutional contexts and maltreatment types.

The evidence does not currently cover countries with large populations and those with the greatest incidence of child maltreatment. Few studies focussed on perpetrators or the organisational environment. There are evidence gaps for disclosure, organisational responses and treatment interventions, and few studies assessed interventions targeting perpetrators’ behaviours, recidivism or desistence.

What do the findings of the map mean?

More research is needed to address the gaps described above. Furthermore, future studies should include measures of programme implementation.

How up-to-date is this EGM?

The authors searched for studies published up to July 2019.

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About this summary


Financial support from the American Institutes for Research for the production of this summary is gratefully acknowledged.

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EN-EGM14