

## Research Article

# Sexual Abuse Among In-School and Out-of-School Adolescents in Ilorin Metropolis, Kwara State, Nigeria

Feyisara Arinola Ayodele<sup>1</sup>, Bilqis Wuraola Alatishe-Muhammad<sup>2</sup>, Waliyy Olakunle Sarumi<sup>3</sup>, Joshua Olusola Ogunniyi<sup>4</sup>, Sunday Adedeji Aderibigbe<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1,2,3</sup>Doctor, <sup>5</sup>Professor, <sup>4</sup>Department of Epidemiology and Community Health, University of Ilorin, Ilorin Kwara State, Nigeria  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24321/2582.3280.202607>

## I N F O

**Corresponding Author:**

Bilqis Wuraola Alatishe-Muhammad, Department of Epidemiology and Community Health, University of Ilorin, Ilorin Kwara State, Nigeria

**E-mail Id:**

[bilqis.alatishe-muhammad@unilorin.edu.ng](mailto:bilqis.alatishe-muhammad@unilorin.edu.ng)

**Orcid Id:**

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6895-1791>

**How to cite this article:**

Ayodele F A, Alatishe-Muhammed B W, Sarumi W O, Ogunniyi J O, Aderibigbe S A. Sexual Abuse Among In-School and Out-of-School Adolescents in Ilorin Metropolis, Kwara State, Nigeria. *Ind J Youth Adol Health*. 2026;13(2):3-11.

Date of Submission: 2026-04-23

Date of Acceptance: 2026-05-30

## A B S T R A C T

**Background:** Sexual abuse during adolescence is prevalent globally. Out-of-school adolescents in Nigeria face greater social and environmental hazards, yet comparisons with in-school peers remain scarce. This study evaluated knowledge, behaviours, and determinants of sexual abuse among adolescents in Ilorin Metropolis, Kwara State.

**Methods:** A comparative cross-sectional study of 650 adolescents (325 in-school, 325 out-of-school) aged 10–19 years, selected via multistage sampling. Data were collected using interviewer-administered questionnaires and 20 in-depth interviews, and analysed with IBM SPSS version 21.

**Results:** Out-of-school adolescents showed higher exposure to rape, fondling, and pornography. In-school adolescents had better overall abuse knowledge, while out-of-school adolescents had better rape-specific knowledge (73.2%). Key determinants among in-school adolescents included older age, male gender, living arrangements, smoking, pornography use, and transactional sex. Among out-of-school adolescents, determinants included alcohol use, guardian living arrangements, and early sexual initiation. Fear, stigma, and threats were the main barriers to disclosure.

**Conclusions:** Both groups experience elevated sexual abuse, with out-of-school adolescents more vulnerable. Preventive measures should include family involvement, community education, stronger law enforcement, and school-based guidance programmes.

**Keywords:** Sexual abuse, adolescents, In-school, Out-of-school, Nigeria, Ilorin, Kwara State

**Introduction**

The World Health Organization (WHO) characterises adolescence as the developmental window spanning ages 10 to 19 years — a period bridging childhood and full

adulthood<sup>1</sup>. This stage is marked by rapid and interrelated changes across physical, cognitive, and emotional domains. Globally, the WHO estimates that adolescent's number around 1.2 billion, representing roughly one in six of the world's population; in sub-Saharan Africa specifically, they

constitute approximately 23% of the regional population<sup>2,3</sup>. Within this global picture, Nigeria stands as the most populous nation in sub-Saharan Africa, with adolescents aged 10–19 constituting approximately 22% of its total population<sup>4</sup>.

A study conducted among adolescents in South-Eastern Nigeria documented a 40% prevalence of sexual abuse, with approximately one in nine (11.5%) reporting a single abusive incident; male perpetrators were predominantly implicated<sup>5</sup>. Exposure to pornographic materials was the most frequently reported form of abuse (18.4%), and nearly one in nine adolescents had first been abused while between the ages of 7 and 12 years. Notably, close relatives and family members accounted for a substantial proportion of perpetrators (11.4%)<sup>5</sup>.

Out-of-school adolescents tend to have a higher prevalence of sexual abuse compared to in-school adolescents<sup>6</sup>. Children outside the school system are routinely engaged in street trading, hawking, and informal apprenticeships that expose them to predatory adult contact and heighten their risk. Among out-of-school female adolescents, one study recorded that 42.9% had initiated sexual activity, with 14% reporting rape as their first sexual experience<sup>7</sup>. By contrast, a survey of secondary school students found that the vast majority (90.8%) lacked clarity on what constitutes sexual and reproductive health; 14.1% disclosed that their sexual debut was non-consensual, and more than half (52.4%) took no protective measures whatsoever<sup>8</sup>.

The consequences of sexual abuse in adolescence cut across physical and psychological domains. Repeated victimisation, particularly when perpetrated by trusted relatives, has been associated with impaired social functioning, reduced life satisfaction, and heightened psychological distress. Where abuse begins in early adolescence — whether through rape, incest, or molestation — evidence points to compromised psychological wellbeing, greater engagement in high-risk behaviours, and diminished educational outcomes<sup>9</sup>. Over time, survivors may face enduring challenges such as sexual difficulties, psychiatric disorders, and suicidal behaviour; there is also evidence of intergenerational perpetuation of abusive patterns<sup>10</sup>.

Sexual abuse disrupts adolescent development across physical, psychological, and social dimensions. Longitudinal evidence suggests that women with a history of childhood sexual abuse face elevated risk of victimisation by intimate partners and are more likely to enter exploitative situations, including involvement in sex work, in later life<sup>11</sup>. Despite the burden it imposes, sexual abuse receives less research attention than other sexual health concerns; its stigmatised nature and strong tendency towards non-disclosure make it a substantially under-studied problem<sup>12,13</sup>. This study therefore aims to assess and compare the knowledge,

practices, and determinants of sexual abuse among in-school and out-of-school adolescents in Ilorin Metropolis, Kwara State.

## Methods

Ilorin is the capital of Kwara State, Nigeria, strategically located at the geographical and cultural confluence of the North and South of Nigeria. The indigenes are predominantly Muslim and the major ethnic groups are Yoruba and Hausa-Fulani. Kwara State has a literacy rate of 42.6% for adults and 80.1% for youth. Within the metropolis, there is one major tertiary health institution — the University of Ilorin Teaching Hospital (UITH).

The study was a comparative cross-sectional analytical study. The study population comprised in-school adolescents (10–19 years) in secondary schools and out-of-school adolescents, including unskilled workers (labourers, motor park touts, load carriers) and artisan apprentices (tailors, motor mechanics, bead makers, hairdressers/barbers) — aged 10–19 years and registered under the Kwara State Ministry of Commerce and Industry. Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Review Committee of UITH. Sample size was determined using Fisher's formula for two proportions, yielding 325 participants per arm and a total of 650 respondents.

A multistage sampling technique was employed. In the first stage, two of the three LGAs in Ilorin Metropolis, Ilorin West and Ilorin South were selected by simple random sampling. Three schools per LGA were then selected, totalling six schools. Students from all class arms (JSS1–SS3) were selected using proportionate allocation and systematic sampling, with class registers as the sampling frame. For out-of-school respondents, five convergence points and four major motor parks were selected; respondents were recruited by systematic and simple random sampling. Data collection was conducted between October and November 2019 using interviewer-administered questionnaires (quantitative) and in-depth interviews (qualitative). A total of 20 in-depth interviews were conducted (30 minutes each). The study instrument was pretested in Irepodun LGA with 10% of the sample size. Data were analysed using IBM SPSS version 21.

## Results

### Socio-demographic Characteristics

The mean age of respondents was  $16.27 \pm 1.62$  years for in-school and  $15.82 \pm 2.77$  years for out-of-school respondents. In-school respondents were predominantly male (58.5%), while out-of-school respondents had a slight female majority (51.4%). Islam was the most practised religion in both groups. Yoruba was the predominant ethnic group. All in-school respondents were single; 4.3% of out-of-school respondents were married. Monogamous family

settings were reported by 70.8% and 59.4% of in-school and out-of-school respondents respectively. Cigarette smoking was reported by 9.8% of in-school and 4.3% of out-of-school respondents, while alcohol consumption

was reported by 18.8% of out-of-school and 9.8% of in-school respondents ( $p < 0.001$  and  $p = 0.006$  respectively). Sociodemographic characteristics are presented in Tables 1 and 2 and shown also in Figures 1 and 2.

**Table 1. Comparison of Sociodemographic Characteristics of Respondents**

Variables	Adolescent category		$\chi^2/t$	P-value
	In-school (%), N=325	Out-of-school (%), N=325		
<b>Age groups (Years)</b>			97.020*	0.001
≤ 13	16 (4.9)	83 (25.5)	-	-
14 – 16	166 (51.1)	62 (19.1)	-	-
> 17	143 (44.0)	180 (55.4)	-	-
Mean ± SD	16.27 ± 1.62	15.82 ± 2.77	2.559**	0.011
<b>Gender</b>			6.333*	0.012
Male	190 (58.5)	158 (48.6)	-	-
Female	135 (41.5)	167 (51.4)	-	-
<b>Religion</b>			73.880*	0.001
Islam	175 (53.8)	276 (84.9)	-	-
Christianity	150 (46.2)	49 (15.1)	-	-
<b>Marital Status</b>			12.337*	0.001y
Single	325 (100.0)	311 (95.7)	-	-
Married	0 (0.0)	14 (4.3)	-	-
<b>Ethnicity</b>			25.749*	0.001y
Hausa	32 (9.9)	38 (11.7)	-	-
Yoruba	277 (85.1)	272 (83.7)	-	-
Igbo	0 (0.0)	10 (3.1)	-	-
Fulani	0 (0.0)	5 (1.5)	-	-
Others	16 (4.9)	0 (0.0)	-	-
<b>Type of family</b>			61.417*	0.001
Monogamous	230 (70.8)	193 (59.4)	-	-
Polygamous	47 (14.4)	122 (37.5)	-	-
Single parent	48 (14.8)	10 (3.1)	-	-

\*=  $\chi^2$ , \*\*=t, y=Yates Corrected P-value

**Table 2. Comparison of Sociodemographic Characteristics of Respondents (Continued)**

Variables	In-school (%), n=325	Out-of-school (%), n=325	$\chi^2$	p-value
<b>With whom respondents is living with</b>			16.599	0.002
Father only	16 (4.9)	25 (7.7)	-	-
Mother only	39 (12.0)	38 (11.7)	-	-
Both parent	191 (58.8)	219 (67.4)	-	-
Guardian	63 (19.4)	29 (8.9)	-	-
Alone	16 (4.9)	14 (4.3)	-	-
<b>Employment status of father</b>			8.227	0.004y
Employed	325 (100.0)	315 (96.9)	-	-
Unemployed	0 (0.0)	10 (3.1)	-	-

Employment status of mother			32.690	0.001y
Employed	325 (100.0)	292 (89.8)	-	-
Unemployed	0 (0.0)	33 (10.2)	-	-
Level of education of father			88.546	0.001
Primary	64 (19.7)	39 (12.0)	-	-
Secondary	48 (14.8)	136 (41.8)	-	-
Tertiary	181 (55.7)	89 (27.4)	-	-
No formal education	32 (9.8)	61 (18.8)	-	-
Level of education of Mother			203.458	0.001y
Primary	64 (19.7)	73 (22.5)	-	-
Secondary	80 (24.6)	182 (56.0)	-	-
Tertiary	149 (45.9)	0 (0.0)	-	-
No formal education	32 (9.8)	70 (21.5)	-	-

y=Yates corrected p-value

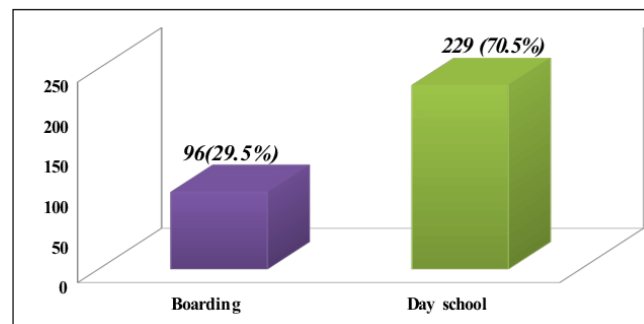


Figure 1. Schooling Type Among In-School Respondents

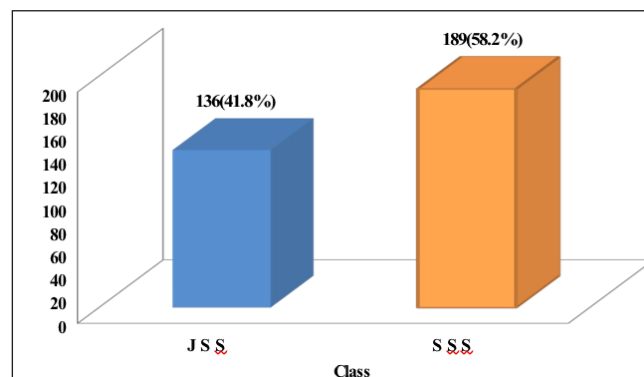


Figure 2. Classes Among In-School Respondents

### Knowledge of Sexual Abuse

Out-of-school respondents had better knowledge of rape (73.2%), sexual harassment (38.8%), and incest (30.2%) compared to in-school respondents. In-school respondents recorded better knowledge of molestation (19.4%) and unsolicited touching (4.9%), while no out-of-school respondent identified unsolicited touching as a form of sexual abuse. Notably, some out-of-school respondents identified 'accusing someone' as a form of sexual abuse. These findings are presented in Table 3.

### Disclosure of Sexual Abuse and Sources of Information

Among in-school respondents, 64.0% reported discussing sexual abuse with their parents, compared to 38.8% of out-of-school respondents ( $p < 0.001$ ). Home was the primary source of information on sexual abuse for in-school respondents (53.8%), whereas gatherings (38.9%) and friends (21.5%) were the most common sources for out-of-school respondents ( $p < 0.001$ ). These are summarised in Table 4.

### Practices Related to Sexual Abuse

The most commonly reported sexual abuse practices among out-of-school respondents were looking at pornographic pictures (59.7%), watching pornographic movies (56.9%), watching someone masturbate (47.4%), fondling someone (47.4%), undressing and showing genitals (44.0%), and being fondled (43.1%). Among in-school respondents, the most common practices were being fondled (45.8%), watching someone masturbate (43.4%), submitting to fingering (36.0%), submitting to full sex (36.0%), fondling someone (36.3%), and looking at pornographic pictures (33.5%). These differences are shown in Table 5.

### Determinants of Sexual Abuse-Related Behaviours

Among in-school respondents, those aged ≥17 years had significantly higher risk of sexual abuse practices than younger age groups (32.9% vs 18.1%;  $p=0.002$ ). Males (28.4%) had higher risk than females (17.0%), which was statistically significant ( $p=0.017$ ). All respondents who lived alone had the highest risk of sexual abuse-related

practices ( $p<0.001$ ). Smoking, SSS class level (see Figure 2), knowledge of puberty age, and pornography viewing were also significantly associated ( $p<0.001$ ). At multivariate level, Table 6 shows that age, living with father only or alone, male gender, knowledge of puberty age, smoking, and pornography watching remained significant predictors. Pornography viewing conferred almost 5.5 times the odds of sexual abuse (OR=5.478; CI 2.926–10.255;  $p<0.001$ ).

Among out-of-school respondents, those aged ≥17 years (31.5%) had the highest risk of sexual abuse practices ( $p=0.001$ ). Respondents living with their guardians had significantly higher risk (48.1%;  $p=0.007$ ). Transactional sex was associated with 100% high risk of sexual abuse ( $p=0.001$ ). At multivariate level (Table 7), age, living with a guardian or alone, and alcohol consumption were significant predictors. Guardian-living conferred nearly 3 times the odds (OR=2.717;  $p=0.013$ ), and alcohol consumption approximately doubled the odds (OR=2.014;  $p=0.001$ ). Knowledge of puberty age tripled the odds of engaging in sexual abuse-related practices (OR=3.414;  $p=0.001$ ).

**Table 3. Knowledge of Sexual Abuse Among Respondents**

Variables	In school (%)	Out of school (%)	$\chi^2$	p-value
Incest	79 (24.3)	98 (30.2)	2.803	0.094
Molestation	63 (19.4)	56 (17.2)	0.504	0.478
Sexual harassment	96 (29.5)	126 (38.8)	6.157	0.013
Rape	213 (65.5)	238 (73.2)	4.527	0.033
Unsolicited touching	16 (4.9)	0 (0.0)	16.404	0.001
Accusing someone	0 (0.0)	14 (4.3)	14.308	0.001

**Table 4. Communication About Sexual Abuse and Sources of Knowledge**

Variables	In school (%)	Out of school (%)	$\chi^2$	p-value
<b>Talked about sexual abuse with parent</b>			41.410	0.001
Yes	208 (64.0)	126 (38.8)	-	-
No	117 (36.0)	199 (61.2)	-	-
<b>Sources of knowledge on sexual abuse</b>			167.591	0.001y
Home	175 (53.8)	84 (25.8)	-	-
School	102 (31.4)	31 (9.5)	-	-
Gathering	32 (9.9)	126 (38.9)	-	-
Friends	16 (4.9)	70 (21.5)	-	-
Others	0 (0.0)	14 (4.3)	-	-

y= Yates corrected p-value

**Table 5. Comparison of Practices Related to Sexual Abuse Among Respondents**

Variables	In school (%), n=325	Out of school (%), n=325	$\chi^2$	P-value
Watch porn movies	95 (29.2)	185 (56.9)	50.820	0.001
Demanding/forcing you to look at genitals	94 (28.9)	70 (21.5)	4.697	0.030
Undress and showing of genitals	86 (26.5)	143 (44.0)	21.905	0.001

Watch him/her masturbate	141 (43.4)	154 (47.4)	1.049	0.306
Undress and fondle each other	80 (24.6)	42 (12.9)	14.571	0.001
Be fondled with	149 (45.8)	140 (43.1)	0.505	0.477
Fondle him or her	118 (36.3)	154 (47.4)	8.193	0.004
Look at porn pictures	109 (33.5)	194 (59.7)	44.666	0.001
Been naked and exposed genitals for filming	85 (26.2)	70 (21.5)	1.906	0.167
Submit to full sex	117 (36.0)	84 (25.8)	7.843	0.005
Submit to fingering	117 (36.0)	70 (21.5)	16.584	0.001

**Table 6. Predictors of Sexual Abuse Among In-School Adolescents**

Variables	Odd ratio	95% CI	P value
<b>Age</b>			
Gender: Male	1.633	1.357 – 1.965	0.001
Female (RC)	1.934	1.117 – 3.346	0.018
<b>With whom respondent is living with</b>			
Father only	2.570	1.788 – 3.694	0.001
Mother only	0.853	0.350 – 2.077	0.725
Guardian	1.218	0.618 – 2.400	0.569
Alone	4.748	2.103 – 8.437	0.981
<b>Both parent (RC)</b>			
Smoking: Yes	3.803	1.800 – 8.037	0.010
<b>No (RC)</b>			
Alcohol consumption: Yes	0.619	0.123 – 1.420	0.293
<b>No (RC)</b>			
Age at puberty	0.174	0.106 – 0.286	0.001
<b>Knowledge of sexual abuse: Poor (RC)</b>			
Good	1.008	0.528 – 1.923	0.981
Transactional sex: Yes	1.767	0.988 – 3.487	0.907
<b>No (RC)</b>			
Watch pornography: Yes	5.478	2.926 – 10.255	0.001

**Table 7. Predictors of Sexual Abuse Among Out-of-School Adolescents**

Variables	Odd ratio	95% CI	P value
<b>Age</b>			
Gender: Male	1.172	1.059 – 1.292	0.002
Female (RC)	0.781	0.474 – 1.286	0.331
<b>With whom respondent is living with</b>			
Father only	1.443	0.984 – 2.330	0.134
Mother only	0.903	0.403 – 2.025	0.805
Guardian	2.717	1.234 – 5.980	0.013
Alone	1.617	0.520 – 5.029	0.004
<b>Both parent (RC)</b>			
Smoking: Yes	5.664	1.841 – 17.423	0.241

No (RC)			
Alcohol consumption: Yes	2.014	1.115 – 3.640	0.001
No (RC)			
Age at puberty	3.414	2.195 – 5.312	0.001
Knowledge of sexual abuse: Poor (RC)			
Good	1.221	0.717 – 2.079	0.461
Transactional sex: Yes	0.081	0.004 – 1.253	0.997

## Qualitative Findings

### Knowledge and Ways of Being Sexually Abused

Several in-school participants felt that sexual abuse encompassed any form of unsolicited touch, rape, sexual attraction to children by an adult, and pornography viewing.

*“She said sexual abuse involved touching of the breast, buttocks and vagina” (Female, 17 years)*

*“He said sexual abuse is when a person is sexually attracted to a child” (Male, 19 years)*

Among out-of-school adolescents, the prevailing understanding was that sexual abuse involved any form of non-consensual sex (rape), with several also identifying incestuous acts.

*“She said sexual abuse involved having sex with a close relative. For example, father having sex with daughter” (Female, 15 years)*

### Practice Related to Sexual Abuse

Most in-school participants acknowledged having experienced at least one form of sexual abuse, with unsolicited touching and pornography viewing being the most common.

*“She said I have experienced being touched on my buttock and breast one night when I was coming back from a friend’s place” (Female, 16 years)*

*“He said I watched pornographic videos most of the times and I saw it as a normal thing” (Male, 18 years)*

Among out-of-school adolescents, rape was the most commonly experienced form of sexual abuse.

*“My boyfriend forcefully had sexual intercourse with me when I went to visit him” (Female, 15 years)*

### Measures Taken After Their Experience

Most participants — both in-school and out-of-school — reported not disclosing their experiences to anyone, citing fear, stigmatisation, and threats from perpetrators.

*“I couldn’t tell someone because I felt no one would believe me” (Female, 13 years)*

*“He said I couldn’t tell anyone; I was so terrified and frightened as she was my aunt” (Male, 14 years)*

*“I told my close friend but he didn’t believe me as he felt I was making up stories. So, I decided not to tell anyone again” (Male, 16 years)*

### Preventive Measures

Respondents identified several preventive strategies: enlightenment and educational programmes on sexual abuse; enactment and enforcement of laws against sexual abusers; parental sex education from an early age; and appropriate punishment for offenders as a deterrent.

*“...there should be law enactment against sexual abuse.... Severe penalty should also be put in place to deal with sexual abusers or perpetrators... Government and parents should also educate and enlighten their children on sexual abuse, dangers involved and how to prevent it. Guidance and counselling program should be reactivated in school.” (Female, 17 years)*

### Discussion

Sexual and reproductive health concerns among adolescents have emerged as a pressing public health priority. The current study found that awareness of sexual abuse varied between groups: in-school adolescents demonstrated broader recognition across abuse categories — incest, molestation, harassment, rape, and uninvited touching — while 73.2% of out-of-school adolescents specifically identified rape as abuse. A notable gap was the failure of out-of-school respondents to recognise unsolicited touching as a form of sexual abuse, and the erroneous inclusion of ‘accusing someone’ as an abuse type. In a comparable Nigerian study, exposure to pornographic material was the most widely recognised form of abuse<sup>5</sup>.

More than half of out-of-school respondents reported that adults had involved them in sexual abuse, including watching pornographic movies and looking at pornographic pictures. In contrast, a survey in Geneva reported that only 33.8% of girls and 10.9% of boys had experienced at least one sexual abusive event<sup>16</sup>. Among in-school respondents, over a third reported submitting to full sex (36.0%), fingering (36.0%),

and fondling (36.3%). Another study in South-Eastern Nigeria found that 40% of adolescents had been abused, indicating a persistently high burden of sexual abuse<sup>5</sup>.

Both contact and non-contact forms of abuse were captured in this study. Among out-of-school adolescents, non-contact abuse was most prevalent — pornographic film viewing (56.9%) and exposure to pornographic images (59.7%) — alongside substantial contact abuse (being fondled: 43.1%; fondling others: 47.4%). This pattern diverges from earlier work in Enugu and Ebonyi States, where non-contact forms were also predominant but at markedly lower rates (pornographic pictures: 18.4%; genital exposure: 16.8%)<sup>5</sup>.

Comparing risk determinants across groups, older adolescents ( $\geq 17$  years) showed elevated abuse risk in both cohorts ( $p=0.001$ ). Among in-school adolescents, males carried greater risk than females ( $p=0.017$ ) — a finding consistent with certain Nigerian studies but at variance with Enugu and Ebonyi data where female adolescents were disproportionately abused<sup>5</sup>. Residing with both biological parents did not confer complete protection against abuse in either group, underscoring that physical parental presence is insufficient without meaningful engagement and communication. In both groups, cigarette smoking was associated with substantially elevated abuse risk ( $p=0.001$ ), plausibly reflecting shared peer environments where both substance use and sexual exploitation are more common.

Alcohol use was a significant independent predictor of abuse among out-of-school respondents ( $p=0.019$ ;  $p=0.001$ ). This aligns with established evidence that alcohol and substance use lower inhibitions, impair judgement, and heighten vulnerability to exploitation<sup>9</sup>. Among in-school adolescents, transactional sex emerged as a significant determinant ( $p=0.001$ ), likely mediated through unequal power dynamics with older partners who may offer academic advantages, gifts, or cash. Pornography exposure was the strongest single predictor in this group (OR=5.478; 95% CI: 2.926–10.255;  $p<0.001$ ), suggesting that access to explicit material substantially escalates abuse risk. The trend of higher risk among senior secondary students, though not reaching significance, is broadly consistent with the pattern of increasing sexual experimentation across late adolescence.

## Conclusion

The findings demonstrate meaningful heterogeneity in sexual abuse risk profiles between in-school and out-of-school adolescents in Ilorin Metropolis, with the out-of-school cohort showing greater overall exposure and involvement. Contributing factors among out-of-school youth included limited parental oversight, lower educational engagement, substance use, and pornography access. Across both cohorts, disclosure remained extremely rare — constrained by stigma, fear of retaliation, and limited

understanding of what constitutes abuse. These findings underscore the urgent need for structured, age-appropriate sexuality education, active parental engagement, community-level sensitisation, and rigorous enforcement of existing child protection legislation.

Policymakers should prioritise the enactment and enforcement of statutory protections for adolescents, with clear legal consequences for perpetrators. Adolescent sexual and reproductive health content should be embedded within national health policy frameworks and delivered consistently at all levels of the health and education systems. School-based guidance and counselling services should be expanded and adequately resourced, while parallel community-based programmes are needed to reach young people who remain outside the formal education system.

## Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful to the management and staff of the secondary schools in Ilorin West and Ilorin South Local Government Areas, and to the Kwara State Ministry of Commerce and Industry, for granting access to study participants. We sincerely thank all the adolescents who volunteered their time and experiences to participate in this study. We also acknowledge the Ethics Review Committee of the University of Ilorin Teaching Hospital (UITH) for ethical oversight of the study. The contributions of the research assistants who administered the questionnaires and conducted the in-depth interviews are deeply appreciated.

**Conflict of Interest:** None

**Source of Funding:** None

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