

8-30-1991

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Recommended Citation

Tyroler, Deborah. "Costa Rica: Report On Child Abuse." (1991). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/6008>

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Costa Rica: Report On Child Abuse

by Deborah Tyroler

Category/Department: General

Published: Friday, August 30, 1991

According to sources cited by the Agence France-Presse, child abuse occurs in 20% of Costa Rican homes. Ten percent of all children are sexually abused. Parents are the abusers in 32.5% of sexual abuse cases. Children's Hospital director Edgar Mohs said, "The home is not a safe place for children." He added that the hospital treats an average of 10 cases of abuse daily, half of which are sexual. Mohs pointed to societal factors which lead to abuse, including the fact that 38% of pregnancies are unwanted. Women's Delegation Director Ines Gonzalez noted that 20% of children are born to minors, and 90% of pregnancies among women aged 14 and under are the result of rape or incest. Next, 18% of attempted abortions are carried out by minors. According to psychiatrist Gioconda Batres, 94% of incest victims are girls and 80% of the rapes occur in the victims' homes. A spokesperson for the Paniamor Foundation, an organization dedicated to eliminating child abuse, said that hundreds of cases are reported to police every month. Despite the high level of child abuse, perpetrators are rarely sanctioned. Few cases are reported due to cultural taboos against incest and violence against children. The number of cases taken to trial is very small, and the number of convictions fewer still. In addition, convicted persons serve short prison terms. The Paniamor Foundation and the "Woman, You are not Alone" campaign promote penal code reforms. The two organizations assert that the judicial process "repeats the aggression and rape of the boy or girl who must testify publicly in front of his or her attacker." According to Mario Viquez, former child defender for the Justice Ministry, legal procedures produce "greater trauma for the child than the attack itself." Viquez resigned his post in July charging that the court system failed to take actions which would have prevented the death of a five-year-old girl. The child's father used sharp objects to penetrate her vagina, beat her, and burned her with cigarettes and candles. [Other child abuse cases reported by the local media over the summer include a five-year-old child who was slashed with a machete by his father; on July 11, an 11-year-old girl told authorities that she had witnessed her stepfather strangle her four-year-old brother and then bury him in the backyard; and, an 11-year-old girl was raped and stabbed to death, and her 15 year-old brother knifed to death by a family friend who had been living in the household for several months.] (Basic data from AFP, 08/24/91)

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