



KNOWLEDGE AND AWARENESS OF THE POCSO ACT 2012 AMONG ADOLESCENTS IN ANANTHAPURAMU DISTRICT-A CROSS SECTIONAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Background: Child sexual abuse is a major public health concern with serious lifelong consequences. The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012 provides a comprehensive legal framework for protecting children in India. However, adolescents' awareness of the Act remains inadequate, limiting timely reporting and access to legal protection. This study assessed adolescents' knowledge of the POCSO Act and examined socio-demographic factors associated with knowledge levels.

Methods: A school-based cross-sectional descriptive study was conducted among 200 adolescents aged 15–19 years studying in two government and two private colleges in urban Ananthapuramu district, Andhra Pradesh, India, from January to June 2026. Participants were selected using simple random sampling. Data were collected using a pretested, self-structured questionnaire comprising 20 multiple-choice questions on the POCSO Act. Knowledge scores ranged from 0–20 and were categorized as good (14–20) or poor (0–13).

Results: Among the 200 participants, 120 (60.0%) were females and 104 (52.0%) attended government schools. Overall, 124 (62.0%) adolescents demonstrated good knowledge of the POCSO Act. Good knowledge was more common among females than males (66.7% vs. 55.0%; $p=0.096$) and among private school students than government school students (68.8% vs. 55.8%; $p=0.058$), although these differences were not statistically significant. Adolescents with literate parents had significantly higher knowledge than those with illiterate parents (68.4% vs. 41.7%; $p<0.001$). Awareness was highest for having heard of the POCSO Act (82.0%) and the age covered under the Act (76.0%), while knowledge of the Child Helpline (1098) was comparatively lower (58.0%).

Conclusions: Nearly two-thirds of adolescents had adequate knowledge regarding the POCSO Act; however, important gaps remain in awareness of specific legal provisions. Parental education significantly influenced knowledge. Strengthening school-based legal awareness programmes and involving parents and teachers may improve adolescents' understanding of child protection laws and facilitate timely reporting of child sexual abuse.

Keywords: Adolescents, Child Sexual Abuse, POCSO Act, Knowledge, Awareness, School Health, Cross-Sectional Study.

INTRODUCTION

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is a major public health and human rights concern affecting millions of children and adolescents worldwide. The World Health Organization estimates that approximately one in five women and one in thirteen men experience sexual abuse during childhood, resulting in long-term physical, psychological, social, and behavioral consequences.

Adolescents are particularly vulnerable because of limited awareness regarding their legal rights, inadequate reporting mechanisms, and fear of stigma associated with disclosure. Early awareness and education are therefore essential for the prevention and timely reporting of sexual offences against children.¹

In India, the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012 was enacted as a comprehensive legislation to protect children below 18 years of age from sexual assault, sexual harassment, and pornography. The Act is gender-neutral, child-friendly, and mandates reporting of sexual offences while ensuring confidentiality and speedy trial through Special Courts.² Despite the existence of this legislation, studies have shown that many adolescents possess inadequate knowledge



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regarding important provisions of the Act, including mandatory reporting, child helpline services, and legal protection available to victims.³⁻⁵ Limited awareness may delay reporting of abuse and reduce access to legal and psychological support.⁴⁻⁶

Educational institutions play an important role in disseminating information regarding child protection laws. Previous studies have reported that awareness regarding the POCSO Act varies according to socio-demographic characteristics such as gender, school type, parental education, and exposure to health education programmes.^{7,8} Understanding these factors is essential for planning targeted awareness interventions among adolescents.

Therefore, the present study was undertaken to assess the knowledge and awareness regarding the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act among adolescents studying in selected government and private schools in urban areas of Ananthapuramu district and to determine the association between socio-demographic variables and knowledge levels.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Study Design: A cross-sectional descriptive study was conducted to assess the knowledge regarding the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012 among adolescents studying in selected schools of Ananthapuramu district, Andhra Pradesh, India.

Study Setting and Duration: The study was conducted in two government and two private schools located in the urban areas of Ananthapuramu district, Andhra Pradesh. Data collection was carried out over a period of six months from January 2026 to June 2026.

Study Population: The study population comprised adolescents aged 15–19 years enrolled in the selected government and private colleges during the study period.

Inclusion Criteria

- Adolescents aged 15–19 years studying in the selected schools.
- Students present on the day of data collection.
- Students who provided written assent to participate.
- Students whose parents or legal guardians provided written informed consent.

Exclusion Criteria

- Adolescents who were absent during the data collection period.
- Students who declined participation.
- Students whose parents or guardians did not provide written informed consent.
- Questionnaires with incomplete responses.

Sample Size

The sample size was estimated using the single population proportion formula:

$$n = \frac{Z^2 pq}{d^2}$$

where $Z = 1.96$ at the 95% confidence level, $p = 60\%$ (0.60) based on the estimated prevalence of adequate knowledge from previous literature, $q = 1 - p = 0.40$, and $d = 7\%$ (0.07) as the absolute precision.

The calculated minimum sample size was approximately 188 participants. The final sample size was rounded to 200 adolescents.

Sampling Technique: A simple random sampling technique was used to select study participants. Initially, two government and two private colleges were selected after obtaining permission from the District Education Department and the respective school authorities. Student attendance registers served as the sampling frame, and eligible adolescents were selected using a simple random method until the required sample size was achieved.

Study Instrument

Data were collected using a self-structured, pretested questionnaire developed after reviewing relevant literature and the provisions of the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012. The questionnaire consisted of two sections.

The first section collected socio-demographic information including age, gender, type of school, and parents' educational status.

The second section consisted of 20 multiple-choice questions assessing knowledge regarding the objectives of the POCSO Act, age covered under the Act, gender neutrality, child rights, mandatory reporting, Child Helpline (1098), legal provisions, offences covered under the Act, punishment for offenders, and preventive measures.

The questionnaire was reviewed by experts from the Department of Community Medicine for content validity and pretested among adolescents from a school not included in the final study. Necessary modifications were made before the final administration.

Data Collection Procedure

Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the concerned educational authorities and school principals. The objectives and procedures of the study were explained to the participants before data collection. Written informed consent was obtained from parents or legal guardians, and written assent was obtained from all participating adolescents. The questionnaire was administered in the classroom under the supervision of the investigators. Participants completed the questionnaire independently without discussion. Completed questionnaires were checked immediately for completeness and consistency.

Operational Definitions

Knowledge regarding the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act was assessed

using a 20-item structured questionnaire. Each correct response was awarded one mark, while incorrect responses and "Don't Know" responses were awarded zero marks. The total score ranged from 0 to 20.

Knowledge was categorized as follows:

- Good (Adequate) Knowledge: 14–20 marks ($\geq 70\%$)
- Poor (Inadequate) Knowledge: 0–13 marks ($< 70\%$)

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Ethics Committee, Government Medical College, Ananthapuramu, Andhra Pradesh (Protocol Approval No. IEC/GMCATP/2026/010; approved on 21 April 2026). Administrative permission was obtained from the District Education Authorities and the principals of the selected schools before commencement of the study. Written informed consent was obtained from parents or legal guardians, and written assent was obtained from all

participating adolescents prior to enrollment. Participation was voluntary, confidentiality and anonymity of the collected information were maintained throughout the study, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any consequences.

Statistical Analysis

The collected data were entered into Microsoft Excel, cleaned, and analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, Version 26.0 (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA). Descriptive statistics were summarized as frequencies and percentages. The association between socio-demographic variables and knowledge regarding the POCSO Act was assessed using the Chi-square test. A p-value < 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

RESULTS

A total of 200 adolescents participated in the study. The study included participants aged 15–19 years from government and private schools located in urban areas of Ananthapuramu district.

Table 1. Socio-Demographic Characteristics of the Study Participants (N = 200)

Variable	Category	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Age (Years)	15–16	74	37.0
	17–18	88	44.0
	19	38	19.0
Gender	Male	80	40.0
	Female	120	60.0
School Type	Government	104	52.0
	Private	96	48.0
Parents' Education	Illiterate	48	24.0
	Literate	152	76.0

Table 1 presents the socio-demographic characteristics of the study participants. Among the 200 adolescents, the largest proportion (44.0%) belonged to the 17–18 years age group, followed by 37.0% aged 15–16 years and 19.0% aged 19 years. Females constituted 60.0% of the participants, while

males accounted for 40.0%. Slightly more than half of the adolescents (52.0%) were studying in government schools, whereas 48.0% attended private schools. Regarding parental education, 76.0% of participants had literate parents, while 24.0% had illiterate parents.

Table 2. Overall Knowledge Regarding the POCSO Act (N=200)

Knowledge Level	Frequency	Percentage
Good Knowledge	124	62.0
Poor Knowledge	76	38.0

Table 2 shows the overall level of knowledge regarding the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act among the study participants. Based on the predefined scoring criteria, 124 (62.0%) adolescents demonstrated good

knowledge, while 76 (38.0%) had poor knowledge. The findings indicate that the majority of adolescents possessed an adequate level of knowledge regarding the POCSO Act.

Table 3. Knowledge According to Gender

Gender	Good Knowledge N (%)	Poor Knowledge N (%)	Total	P Value
Male	44 (55)	36 (45)	80	0.096
Female	80 (66.6)	40 (34.4)	120	

Table 3 compares the knowledge levels regarding the POCSO Act between male and female adolescents. Good knowledge was observed among 80 (66.7%) female participants and 44 (55.0%) male participants. Although female adolescents

demonstrated relatively better knowledge than males, the association between gender and knowledge level was not statistically significant ($p = 0.096$).

Table 4. Knowledge According to School Type

School	Good Knowledge N (%)	Poor Knowledge N (%)	Total	P Value
Government	58 (55.8)	46 (44.2)	104	0.058
Private	66 (68.8)	30 (31.2)	96	

Table 4 depicts the association between school type and knowledge regarding the POCSO Act. Good knowledge was observed among 66 (68.8%) students studying in private schools compared with

58 (55.8%) students from government schools. Although private school students showed comparatively better awareness, the difference was not statistically significant ($p = 0.058$).

Table 5. Knowledge Regarding the POCSO Act According to Parents' Education

Parents' Education	Good Knowledge N (%)	Poor Knowledge N (%)	Total	P Value
Illiterate	20 (41.7)	28 (58.3)	48	<0.001
Literate	104 (68.4)	48 (31.6)	152	

Table 5 illustrates the relationship between parental education and adolescents' knowledge regarding the POCSO Act. Among participants with literate parents, 104 (68.4%) demonstrated good knowledge compared with only 20 (41.7%) adolescents whose parents were illiterate. Conversely, poor knowledge was more common among adolescents with illiterate

parents (58.3%) than those with literate parents (31.6%). The association between parental education and knowledge level was statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), indicating that parental literacy positively influenced adolescents' awareness of the POCSO Act.

Table 6. Awareness of Important Provisions of the POCSO Act

Question	Correct N (%)
Heard About POCSO Act	164 (82.0)
Correct Age Under POCSO (<18 Years)	152 (76.0)
Gender-Neutral Act	128 (64.0)
Mandatory Reporting	140 (70.0)
Child Helpline (1098)	116 (58.0)
Knew Punishment For Offenders	122 (61.0)

Table 6 summarizes adolescents' awareness regarding key provisions of the POCSO Act. A majority of participants (82.0%) had heard about the POCSO Act, while 76.0% correctly identified that the Act applies to individuals below 18 years of age. Seventy percent were aware of the mandatory reporting provision, and 64.0% knew that the Act is gender-neutral. Awareness regarding the Child Helpline number (1098) was comparatively lower (58.0%), and only 61.0% correctly identified the punishments prescribed for offenders. These findings indicate that although general awareness of the POCSO Act was satisfactory, important gaps remain in knowledge of specific legal provisions.

The present study assessed knowledge regarding the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act among adolescents in urban schools of Ananthapuramu district. Overall, 62.0% of participants demonstrated good knowledge regarding the Act, indicating that the majority of adolescents possessed a satisfactory level of awareness. However, more than one-third (38.0%) still had inadequate knowledge, highlighting the continued need for structured educational interventions. Similar findings have been reported in previous Indian studies, which observed moderate awareness of the POCSO Act among school-going adolescents but identified deficiencies in knowledge of important legal provisions.^{7,8}

Female adolescents demonstrated better knowledge than males (66.7% vs. 55.0%), although the

DISCUSSION

association was not statistically significant. This finding is comparable with previous studies suggesting that girls often receive greater exposure to discussions related to personal safety and sexual abuse prevention through school and community awareness programmes.⁸ Nevertheless, awareness programmes should equally target male adolescents because the POCSO Act provides gender-neutral protection for all children.

Students from private schools exhibited comparatively higher knowledge than those from government schools, although the difference was not statistically significant. Better access to educational resources, awareness campaigns, and extracurricular health education activities in private schools may explain this observation. Similar trends have been reported in earlier studies conducted among school-going adolescents in India.^{8,9}

Parental education showed a significant association with adolescents' knowledge regarding the POCSO Act. Adolescents whose parents were literate demonstrated substantially better knowledge than those with illiterate parents ($p < 0.001$). Educated parents are more likely to discuss personal safety, legal rights, and child protection issues with their children, thereby improving awareness. Similar associations between parental literacy and adolescent health knowledge have been documented in previous studies.^{9,10,11}

With respect to specific provisions of the Act, most participants had heard about the POCSO Act and correctly identified the age covered under the Act. Awareness regarding mandatory reporting was reasonably high; however, knowledge regarding the Child Helpline number (1098) and punishment for offenders remained comparatively low. These findings indicate that while general awareness has improved, important gaps persist in practical aspects that are essential for reporting abuse and seeking timely assistance. Strengthening school-based awareness programmes, incorporating legal education into adolescent health curricula, and conducting regular awareness campaigns involving parents and teachers may further enhance knowledge and encourage early reporting of child sexual abuse.

Strengths and Limitations

The present study has several strengths. First, it is among the few studies conducted in Andhra Pradesh that specifically assessed adolescents' knowledge regarding the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act. Second, the study included participants from both government and private schools, enabling comparison across different educational settings. Third, a pretested structured questionnaire covering multiple domains of the POCSO Act was used, providing a comprehensive assessment of adolescents' knowledge regarding legal provisions, mandatory reporting, child helpline

services, and preventive measures. The findings offer baseline evidence that may assist policymakers, school administrators, and public health professionals in planning school-based legal awareness and child protection programmes.

However, the study has certain limitations. The cross-sectional study design precludes establishing causal relationships between socio-demographic factors and knowledge regarding the POCSO Act. The study was conducted among adolescents from selected urban schools in a single district of Andhra Pradesh, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to rural areas or other regions of India. Knowledge was assessed using a self-administered questionnaire, making the responses susceptible to recall and social desirability bias. Additionally, the study evaluated knowledge alone and did not assess attitudes, perceptions, reporting practices, previous exposure to awareness programmes, or actual experiences related to child protection, which may also influence awareness and preventive behaviours. Future multicentric studies involving larger and more diverse populations from both urban and rural settings are needed to provide nationally representative evidence regarding adolescents' awareness of the POCSO Act. Longitudinal and interventional studies should be undertaken to evaluate the effectiveness of school-based educational programmes, digital learning modules, peer-led awareness initiatives, and teacher training in improving knowledge retention and reporting behaviour. Future research should also examine adolescents' attitudes, perceptions, help-seeking behaviour, barriers to reporting child sexual abuse, and the influence of parents, teachers, social media, and healthcare professionals on legal awareness. Qualitative studies involving adolescents, parents, teachers, and child protection stakeholders may further explore contextual factors influencing awareness and implementation of the POCSO Act. Such evidence would support the development of comprehensive, evidence-based strategies for strengthening child protection and preventing child sexual abuse in India.

CONCLUSION

The present study demonstrated that nearly two-thirds of adolescents possessed adequate knowledge regarding the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, while a considerable proportion continued to have inadequate awareness. Female students and private school students showed relatively better knowledge, although these associations were not statistically significant. Parental education emerged as a significant determinant of adolescents' knowledge, emphasizing the influence of family literacy on legal awareness. Although general awareness regarding the POCSO Act was satisfactory, deficiencies were

identified in knowledge of important provisions such as the Child Helpline number and punishment for offenders. Regular school-based educational programmes, teacher-led awareness sessions, parental involvement, and inclusion of child protection laws in the school curriculum are recommended to improve adolescents' understanding of the POCSO Act and promote timely reporting of child sexual abuse.

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