

Summary

# HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT

**A statistical analysis of violence  
against children**

unite for  
children

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A new report from UNICEF presents the latest statistics on violence against children, drawing on data from 190 countries. By examining global patterns of violence as well as attitudes and social norms, it sheds light on an issue that has remained largely undocumented. Its objective is to use data to make violence against children and its many ramifications more visible, bringing about a fuller understanding of its magnitude and nature and offering clues to its prevention. While intensified efforts are needed to strengthen the availability of reliable and comprehensive data on the issue, the findings presented here are a clear call for action.

## OVERVIEW

The protection of children from all forms of violence is a fundamental right guaranteed by the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other international human rights treaties and standards. Yet violence remains an all-too-real part of life for children around the globe – regardless of their economic and social circumstances, culture, religion or ethnicity – with both immediate and long-term consequences. Children who have been severely abused or neglected are often hampered in their development, experience learning difficulties and perform poorly at school. They may have low self-esteem and suffer from depression, which can lead, at worst, to risk behaviour and self-harm. Witnessing violence can cause similar distress. Children who grow up in a violent household or community tend to internalize that behaviour as a way of resolving disputes, repeating the pattern of violence and abuse against their own spouses and children. Beyond the tragic effects on individuals and families, violence against children carries serious economic and social costs in both lost potential and reduced productivity.

Over the last decade, recognition of the pervasive nature and impact of violence against children has grown. Still, the phenomenon remains largely undocumented and underreported. This can be attributed to a variety of reasons, including the fact that some forms of violence against children are socially accepted, tacitly condoned or not perceived as being abusive. Many victims are too young or too vulnerable to disclose their experience or to protect themselves. And all too often when victims do denounce an abuse, the legal system

fails to respond and child protection services are unavailable. The lack of adequate data on the issue is likely compounding the problem by fuelling the misconception that violence remains a marginal phenomenon, affecting only certain categories of children and perpetrated solely by offenders with biological predispositions to violent behaviour.

Despite countless gaps in the current knowledge base, this report is testimony to the improvements in data collection that have been made in recent years. The report makes use of available evidence to describe what is currently known about global patterns of violence against children, using data compiled from a selection of sources. The analyses focus primarily on forms of interpersonal violence, defined as violent acts inflicted on children by another individual or a small group. The types of interpersonal violence covered include those mainly committed by caregivers and other family members, authority figures, peers and strangers, both within and outside the home.

Given the general lack of uniformity in the way data on violence against children are collected, this report relies mainly on information gathered through internationally comparable sources, including the UNICEF-supported Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS), the US Agency for International Development (USAID)-supported Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), the Global School-based Student Health Surveys (GSHS) and the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children Study (HBSC). These international survey programmes have been mostly implemented in low- and middle-income countries (with the exception of the HBSC). So while the focus of this report is largely on these countries, this should in no way be interpreted to suggest that violence against children is not found in high-income nations. To that end, the report also uses country-specific facts or evidence derived from small-scale studies and national surveys to shed light on certain aspects or circumstances from a variety of countries for which representative or comparable data are unavailable. Using these combined sources, the report draws on data from 190 countries and represents the largest compilation of statistics to date on violence against children.

## KEY FINDINGS

This report provides evidence that violence is ever-present in the lives of children from all walks of life around the world. Interpersonal violence takes many forms –physical, sexual and emotional – and occurs in many settings, including the home, school, community and over the Internet. Similarly, a wide range of perpetrators commit violence against children, such as family members, intimate partners, teachers, neighbours, strangers and other children. Such violence not only inflicts harm, pain and humiliation on children; it also kills.

### Homicide

In 2012 alone, almost 95,000 children and adolescents under age 20 were victims of homicide, making it a leading cause of preventable injury and death among children. The vast majority of victims (85,000) lived in low- and middle-income countries. From 0 to 9 years of age, 85 per cent of deaths are the result of communicable and non-communicable diseases, with little differentiation by sex. As children enter the second decade of their lives, however, the share of deaths due to intentional injuries, including homicide, becomes greater, particularly among boys.

Globally, Latin America and the Caribbean has the largest share of homicide victims under age 20 (25,400). West and Central Africa has the second largest share (23,400), followed by Eastern and Southern Africa (15,000). The lowest number of homicides in this age group is found in Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CEE/CIS), followed by the Middle East and North Africa. The three countries with the highest homicide rates in the world among children and adolescents under age 20 are El Salvador, Guatemala and the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. In each of these countries, homicide is the leading cause of death among adolescent boys. Nigeria has the largest number of young homicide victims, with almost 13,000 deaths in 2012, followed by Brazil with approximately 11,000.

### Violent discipline

Though staggering in themselves, the above



statistics represent an extreme violence that is relatively uncommon in the lives of children. The data show that far more children experience violence in the form of discipline – usually in their own homes and from a very young age. On average, about 6 in 10 children worldwide (almost 1 billion) between the ages of 2 and 14 are subjected to physical (corporal) punishment by their caregivers on a regular basis. For the most part, children are exposed to a combination of physical punishment and psychological aggression. The most severe forms of corporal punishment – hitting a child on the head, ears or face or hitting a child hard and repeatedly – are less common overall: On average, about 17 per cent of children in 58 countries experience these harsh practices. In 23 countries, severe physical punishment is widespread, with more than one in five children affected.

### Attitudes towards corporal punishment of children

The large share of children who are exposed to violent discipline appears to contradict the findings on attitudes towards it: Only about 3 in 10 adults worldwide believe that physical punishment is necessary to properly raise or educate a child. In fact, in all countries but one – Swaziland – the percentage of adult respondents who think physical punishment is necessary is consistently lower than the percentage of children aged 2 to 14 who are subjected to violent discipline. In most countries, adults with no or little education are more likely to find physical punishment a necessity in raising children than their more educated peers. In Yemen,

for instance, 51 per cent of mothers or primary caregivers with no formal education feel it is necessary to use physical punishment to educate a child, compared to 21 per cent of mothers or primary caregivers with a secondary or higher education. Adults with low economic status are also found to be more supportive of corporal punishment than their wealthier counterparts in about three quarters of countries with available data.

### Violence among peers and by intimate partners

As children grow up, they become more vulnerable to other forms of aggression, including violence inflicted by their peers and intimate partners. Physical attacks among students are common, especially among boys. In 25 countries with comparable data, the prevalence of physical attacks against students aged 13 to 15 ranges from around 20 per cent in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Uruguay to over 50 per cent in Botswana, Djibouti, Egypt, Ghana, the United Republic of Tanzania (Dar es Salaam) and Yemen. Worldwide, more than one in three students between the ages of 13 and 15 experience bullying on a regular basis. Among 106 countries with comparable data on adolescents who were recently bullied, rates range from 7 per cent in Tajikistan to 74 per cent in Samoa. On the flip side, nearly a third (31 per cent) of teens in Europe and North America admitted to bullying others, with prevalence ranging from around one in seven (14 per cent) in the Czech Republic and Sweden to nearly 6 in 10 (59 per cent) in Latvia and Romania.

The experience of violence continues into late

adolescence. Among girls aged 15 to 19 worldwide, almost one quarter (around 70 million) said they were the victims of some form of physical violence since age 15. In Eastern and Southern Africa, at least 12 per cent of girls in this age group reported incidents of physical violence in the last year in all nine countries for which data are available except Comoros. In West and Central Africa, the proportion is at least 1 in 14 girls in each of the 11 countries with available data; the share reaches as high as 26 per cent in Cameroon and 42 per cent in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Never-married girls are most likely to report physical violence at the hands of family members, friends or acquaintances and teachers. However, among ever-married girls, current and/or former intimate partners are the most commonly reported perpetrators of physical violence in all the countries with available data. In India, Mozambique, Nepal, Pakistan, the United Republic of Tanzania and Zambia, for instance, over 70 per cent of girls named their current or former husbands or partners as the perpetrators of physical violence against them. Indeed, intimate partner violence is the most common form of gender-based violence against girls. Globally, nearly one in three adolescent girls aged 15 to 19 (84 million) in formal unions have been the victims of emotional, physical and/or sexual violence perpetrated by their husbands or partners. Rates of partner violence are particularly high in sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean.

Data regarding adolescent boys' exposure to physical violence, including by intimate partners, are much more limited. However, at least one in four adolescent boys aged 15 to 19 said they experienced physical violence since age 15 in each of five low- and middle-income countries with comparable data; prevalence exceeds 40 per cent in all but two of these countries (Ghana and Mozambique). The most commonly reported perpetrators vary across the five countries and include family members, friends or acquaintances, and teachers.

### Sexual violence

Around 120 million girls worldwide (slightly more

than 1 in 10) have experienced forced intercourse or other forced sexual acts at some point in their lives. However, girls living in certain parts of the world seem to be at greater risk than others. Prevalence rates of 10 per cent or more for forced sex are found in 13 of the 18 countries in sub-Saharan Africa with available data. In contrast, in all countries of CEE/CIS with comparable data (except the Republic of Moldova), less than 1 per cent of adolescent girls reported instances of sexual violence.

The age at which sexual violence first occurs has also been measured. In all but 3 of 21 countries with comparable data, most adolescent girls said they were sexually victimized for the first time between the ages of 15 and 19. However, a substantial share experienced sexual violence for the first time at younger ages. In all 21 countries except India, Liberia, the Republic of Moldova, Sao Tome and Principe, and Zimbabwe, at least one in five girls who reported at least one incident of sexual violence said it occurred for the first time between the ages of 10 and 14.

By far the most common perpetrators of sexual violence against girls are current or former husbands, partners or boyfriends. A significant share of girls in the Plurinational State of Bolivia, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Kenya, the Republic of Moldova, the United Republic of Tanzania and Uganda also reported being victimized by a friend or acquaintance.

Boys experience sexual violence too, but to a far lesser extent than girls, according to data from four countries. In Uganda, adolescent boys are nearly two times less likely than their female counterparts to report incidents of forced intercourse or other forced sexual acts. Similarly, in Mozambique, a much smaller proportion of adolescent boys than girls said they were the victims of sexual violence (3 per cent versus 9 per cent, respectively). As with girls, incidents of sexual violence among boys most often occur for the first time between the ages of 15 and 19 and the most commonly named perpetrators are current or former intimate partners.

Adolescents living in high-income countries are also at risk of sexual violence. In Switzerland, for

instance, a 2009 national survey of girls and boys aged 15 to 17 found that 22 per cent and 8 per cent, respectively, experienced at least one incident of sexual violence involving physical contact in their lifetimes. The most common form of sexual violence for both sexes in that country is cyber-victimization. In the United States, the second National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence (NatSCEV II), carried out in 2011, recorded lifetime rates of sexual victimization among girls and boys aged 14 to 17 at 35 per cent and 20 per cent, respectively.

### Reporting incidents of violence

Regardless of the type of violence experienced or the circumstances surrounding it, most victims keep their abuse secret and never seek help. The data presented in this report confirm that nearly half of all adolescent girls aged 15 to 19 who reported ever having experienced physical and/or sexual violence said they never told anyone about it. In Jordan, Kyrgyzstan, Nepal, Nigeria, Pakistan, Tajikistan and Uganda, the percentage rises to more than half. Female victims of sexual violence only are least likely to disclose the abuse, as opposed to those who experienced either physical violence only or both physical and sexual violence. A comparison of data from countries with information on both sexes indicates that boys are about as likely as girls to keep their victimization secret.

Among adolescent girls aged 15 to 19 who have ever been victims of physical and/or sexual violence, about 7 in 10 said they never sought help to end it. While the reasons vary, many girls said they did not realize that what they experienced was a form of violence or did not see the abuse as a problem. Limited data show that, in some countries, boys are even less likely than girls to seek help. And, like girls, most boys remain silent about their experience of violence, regardless of the type, because they do not view it as a problem. When female victims do seek help, most look to their own families for assistance. They are much more likely to turn to individuals they know personally for support rather than to institutions such as the police department, medical centres, legal aid establishments, religious groups and/or social services, even when they know that help can be found there.

### Attitudes towards wife-beating

Exploring attitudes and social norms related to violence can provide insights into why it occurs, persists and goes unreported. The evidence in this report suggests that close to half of all girls aged 15 to 19 worldwide (about 126 million) think a husband or partner is sometimes justified in hitting or beating his wife (or partner). In sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East and North Africa, this proportion rises to more than half. In CEE/CIS, it drops to 28 per cent.

Supportive attitudes towards wife-beating are also widespread among adolescent boys. In both Eastern and Southern Africa and South Asia, close to 50 per cent of boys aged 15 to 19 think a husband is justified in hitting his wife under certain circumstances; in West and Central Africa, the share is slightly more than one third. Perhaps surprisingly, however, in 28 of 60 countries with data on both sexes, a larger proportion of girls than boys believe wife-beating is sometimes justified; in 14 of these countries, the gender gap exceeds 10 percentage points. This pattern is found more often in South Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and East Asia and the Pacific than in other regions.

While males and females may differ with respect to the extent of their support for wife-beating, opinions seem to converge on the main circumstances under which this form of violence can be justified: Neglecting the children is the most commonly cited reason among both female and male respondents.

### Attitudes towards child sexual abuse

Attitudes concerning the sexual abuse of children have also been explored. While no large-scale, internationally comparable data on this issue currently exist, research conducted in a few regions and countries illustrates the variations and complexity in commonly held beliefs about this particular form of violence against children. For example, a study carried out in six countries in the Eastern Caribbean in 2008-2009 analysed the perceptions of women and men aged 18 and older about child sexual abuse. In attempting to understand some of the factors that may contribute to this form of violence, the study asked respondents whether they felt that men's negative attitude towards women was one of

the causes. Most respondents either disagreed (60 per cent) or were unsure (27 per cent). However, 77 per cent of respondents said that the way a girl dresses draws sexual attention from men.

In terms of the perceived consequences of child sexual abuse, a majority of respondents in the Eastern Caribbean (85 per cent) considered it to be emotionally damaging to children in the long term. Research in other parts of the world, however, reveals a range of opinions. In Norway, for instance, a study among the general population found that respondents expressed uncertainty about whether sexual contact was damaging to a child or not. In Nigeria, 61 per cent of parents surveyed believed that abuse could only have a serious health impact when it involves intercourse.

## IN OUR HANDS

Violence against children is widespread but not inevitable. Bringing it to an end is a shared responsibility.

While often regarded as an individual problem, violence against children is, in fact, a societal problem, driven by economic and social inequities and poor education standards. It is fuelled by social norms that condone violence as an acceptable way to resolve conflicts, sanction adult domination over children and encourage discrimination. It is enabled by systems that lack adequate policies and legislation, effective governance and a strong rule of law to prevent violence, investigate and prosecute perpetrators, and provide follow-up services and treatment for victims. And it is allowed to persist when it is undocumented and unmeasured as a result of inadequate investments in data collection and poor dissemination of findings.

The evidence provided in this report clearly shows that too many children do not receive adequate protection from violence. Most violence against children occurs at the hands of the people charged with their care or with whom they interact daily – caregivers, peers and intimate partners. Children are also frequently deprived of the protection they need and deserve from the State. Only 39 countries

worldwide protect children legally from all forms of corporal punishment, including at home. Moreover, large discrepancies exist between the protections afforded to adult and child victims of violence. For example, if an adult is hit by a relative or peer, this is generally regarded as unacceptable behaviour and legal provisions are usually in place to protect the victim's rights. However, if children are violently punished by their parents or other caregivers, such acts are generally seen as inconsequential, and the same type and level of legal protection is usually not available. This lack of protection – combined with attitudes and social norms that justify certain acts of violence against children – creates an environment in which many forms of violence are considered normal and treated with impunity.

One of the limitations inherent in any attempt to document violence against children is what it leaves out: the presumably large numbers of children unable or unwilling to report their experiences. While this report also suffers from that constraint, the story it does tell is motivation enough to spur action. For if even one child is harmed through an act of violence, it is one child too many.

The process of understanding and addressing violence against children will continue to be fraught with difficulties. Nevertheless, as additional strategies to end violence are formulated and carried out, it is also clear that systematic investments in data generation are vital. The evidence that results is essential to monitoring commitments, informing the development of new programmes, policies and laws and assessing their effectiveness. Future research should focus on not only documenting the prevalence of violence but also understanding the underlying factors that fuel it and evaluating interventions aimed at preventing and responding to it. Broad dissemination of data in accessible formats will continue to be needed to raise awareness and to foster the political will required to develop and implement effective strategies and action – at all levels of society.

Ending violence against children is in our hands. With reliable data, we will know when this human rights imperative is finally achieved.

# TEN FACTS ABOUT VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

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- 1 In 2012 alone, homicide took the lives of about **95,000 CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS** under the age of 20 – almost 1 in 5 of all homicide victims that year.
- 2 Around **6 IN 10 CHILDREN** between the ages of 2 and 14 worldwide (almost a billion) are subjected to physical punishment by their caregivers on a regular basis.
- 3 Close to **1 IN 3 STUDENTS** between the ages of 13 and 15 worldwide report involvement in one or more physical fights in the past year.
- 4 Slightly more than **1 IN 3 STUDENTS** between the ages of 13 and 15 worldwide experience bullying on a regular basis.
- 5 About **1 IN 3 ADOLESCENTS** aged 11 to 15 in Europe and North America admit to having bullied others at school at least once in the past couple of months.
- 6 Almost **ONE QUARTER OF GIRLS** aged 15 to 19 worldwide (almost 70 million) report being victims of some form of physical violence since age 15.
- 7 Around **120 MILLION GIRLS** under the age of 20 (about 1 in 10) have been subjected to forced sexual intercourse or other forced sexual acts at some point in their lives. Boys are also at risk, although a global estimate is unavailable due to the lack of comparable data in most countries.
- 8 **1 IN 3 ADOLESCENT GIRLS** aged 15 to 19 worldwide (84 million) have been the victims of any emotional, physical or sexual violence committed by their husbands or partners at some point in their lives.
- 9 About **3 IN 10 ADULTS** worldwide believe that physical punishment is necessary to properly raise or educate children.
- 10 Close to **HALF OF ALL GIRLS** aged 15 to 19 worldwide (around 126 million) think a husband is sometimes justified in hitting or beating his wife.

**Note:** Estimates are based on a subset of countries with available data covering 50 per cent or more of the global population of children or adults within the respective age ranges.

**Sources:** UNICEF global databases, 2014, based on Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), Global School-based Student Health Surveys (GSHS), Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) study, Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS), other national surveys, and relevant studies. Population data are from: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *World Population Prospects: The 2012 revision*, CD-ROM edition, United Nations, New York, 2013.