



# HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT

**A statistical analysis of violence  
against children**

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Cover photo: A 7-year-old girl who was sexually abused by an 18-year-old boy at the Mena police station in Makeni, Bombali district, Sierra Leone. The boy, who is a close neighbour, forced her to have sex with him.

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ISBN: 978-92-806-4767-9

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Suggested citation: United Nations Children's Fund, *Hidden in Plain Sight: A statistical analysis of violence against children*, UNICEF, New York, 2014.





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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This is a report of UNICEF's Division of Data, Research and Policy. It was produced under the direction of Tessa Wardlaw, Chief, Data and Analytics Section.

The preparation of the report was initiated and coordinated by Claudia Cappa, who was also responsible for data analysis, interpretation of the results and report writing. Nicole Petrowski facilitated the preparation of the statistical figures, contributed to the writing of the report and participated in the document review. Laura Cordisco Tsai (independent consultant) was involved in data compilation and fact-checking, and prepared summaries of relevant literature. Yadigar Coskun provided support for data processing and tabulations. Colleen Murray assisted in the calculation of global estimates and preparation of statistical tables. Janet Njelesani (independent consultant) participated in the document review. The report was edited by Lois Jensen, copy-edited by Tina Johnson, fact-checked by Baishalee Nayak and designed by Era Porth (independent consultants).

Valuable feedback and inputs were provided by Tatiana Aderikhina (UNICEF Kazakhstan), Nadi Albino (UNICEF South Africa), Line Baago Rasmussen (UNICEF Zimbabwe), Caroline Bakker (UNICEF Sri Lanka), Ramiz Behbudov (UNICEF Azerbaijan), Casimira Benge (UNICEF Brazil), Patrizia Benvenuti (UNICEF South Africa), Stephen Blight (UNICEF Regional Office for East Asia and the Pacific), Andrew Brooks (UNICEF Regional Office for West and Central Africa), Clarice Da Silva e Paula (Child Protection Section, UNICEF headquarters), Karin Heissler (Child Protection Section, UNICEF headquarters), Keshani Hiranthika (UNICEF Sri Lanka), Noriko Izumi (UNICEF Zimbabwe), Severine Jacomy Vite (UNICEF Turkey), Hemamal Jayawardena (UNICEF Sri Lanka), Shane M. Khan (independent consultant), Theresa Kilbane (Child Protection Section, UNICEF headquarters), Nela Kmic Brkovic (UNICEF Montenegro), Joost Kooijmans (Child Protection Section, UNICEF headquarters), Jean-Claude Legrand (UNICEF Regional Office for Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States), Seamus Mac Roibin (UNICEF South Africa), Paolo Marchi (UNICEF Bosnia and Herzegovina), Tiina Markkinen (UNICEF China), Mendy Marsh (Child Protection Section, UNICEF headquarters), Amalee McCoy (independent consultant), Nadine Perrault (UNICEF Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean), Fiorella Polo (Water and Sanitation Section, UNICEF headquarters), Rashad H. Abdel Rahman (independent consultant), Clara Sommarin (Child Protection Section, UNICEF headquarters), Violet Speek-Warnery (UNICEF Eastern Caribbean Area), Gary Stahl (UNICEF Brazil), Heather Stewart (UNICEF Eastern Caribbean Area), Rosana Vega (UNICEF Bolivia) and Danzhen You (Data and Analytics Section, UNICEF headquarters).

Gratitude also goes to those who facilitated access to relevant datasets: Donneth Ann Marie Edmondson (UNICEF Jamaica), Alma Jenkins Acosta (UNICEF Panama), Elena Laur (UNICEF Moldova), Oladimeji Olowu (UNICEF Eastern Caribbean Area), Manar Soliman (UNICEF Egypt), Vicente Teran (UNICEF Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean), Frederic Unterreiner (UNICEF Eastern Caribbean Area) and Sabastian Waisgrais (UNICEF Argentina).

UNICEF gratefully acknowledges the inputs provided by the Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children (Elinor Milne and Peter Newell), the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children Study team (Lise Augustson and Oddrun Samdal), the Statistics and Surveys Section of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (Jenna Dawson-Faber and Felix Reiterer) and the Health Systems and Innovation Cluster of the World Health Organization (Colin Douglas Mathers and Wahyu Retno Mahanani).

This report was made possible through core funding to UNICEF. It is based on research funded in part by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The findings and conclusions contained within are those of UNICEF and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

## FOREWORD

Violence against children occurs every day, everywhere: the slaps of an upset parent to control an 'unruly' child, the sexual victimization of a teenager by a peer or a neighbour, the bullying of one child by another in the schoolyard, the emotional degradation of a child bride by her spouse. Too many children worldwide are affected by such violence, yet it is rarely acknowledged, in part because it is so commonplace. The repercussions are not inconsequential, with ripple effects throughout society as well as future generations.

Everyday violence may be pervasive, but it is not inevitable. The first step in curbing all forms of violence against children is bringing the issue to light – in all its complexity. Despite the difficulties in measuring violence against children, and considerable gaps, an unprecedented volume of data on the subject has become available over the last two decades that is providing the evidence countries need to develop effective policies, legislation and programmes to address violence. Solid data and research are essential in bringing the issue out of the shadows. They are also important in revealing hidden attitudes and social norms that may perpetuate violence against children and factors that may place certain children at higher risk.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child guarantees that children everywhere should live free from all forms of violence. For this to happen, the true nature and extent of the problem must be documented. It is to that end that this report is dedicated.



Jeffrey O'Malley  
Director, Division of Data, Research and Policy, UNICEF

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# DEFINING VIOLENCE

**PHYSICAL VIOLENCE** against children includes all corporal punishment and all other forms of torture, cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment as well as physical bullying and hazing by adults or by other children. 'Corporal' (or 'physical') punishment is defined as any punishment in which physical force is used and intended to cause some degree of pain or discomfort, however light. Most involves hitting ('smacking', 'slapping', 'spanking') children with the hand or with an implement – a whip, stick, belt, shoe, wooden spoon, etc. But it can also involve, for example, kicking, shaking or throwing children, scratching, pinching, biting, pulling hair or boxing ears, caning, forcing children to stay in uncomfortable positions, burning, scalding or forced ingestion.

**SEXUAL VIOLENCE** comprises any sexual activities imposed by an adult on a child against which the child is entitled to protection by criminal law. This includes: (a) The inducement or coercion of a child to engage in any unlawful or psychologically harmful sexual activity; (b) The use of children in commercial sexual exploitation; (c) The use of children in audio or visual images of child sexual abuse; and (d) Child prostitution, sexual slavery, sexual exploitation in travel and tourism, trafficking for purposes of sexual exploitation (within and between countries), sale of children for sexual purposes and forced marriage. Sexual activities are also considered as abuse when committed against a child by another child if the offender is significantly older than the victim or uses power, threat or other means of pressure. Consensual sexual activities between children are not considered as sexual abuse if the children are older than the age limit defined by the State Party.

**MENTAL VIOLENCE** is often described as psychological maltreatment, mental abuse, verbal abuse and emotional abuse or neglect. This can include: (a) All forms of persistent harmful interactions with a child; (b) Scaring, terrorizing and threatening; exploiting and corrupting; spurning and rejecting; isolating, ignoring and favouritism; (c) Denying emotional responsiveness; neglecting mental health, medical and educational needs; (d) Insults, name-calling, humiliation, belittling, ridiculing and hurting a child's feelings; (e) Exposure to domestic violence; (f) Placement in solitary confinement, isolation or humiliating or degrading conditions of detention; and (g) Psychological bullying and hazing by adults or other children, including via information and communication technologies (ICTs) such as mobile phones and the Internet (known as 'cyber-bullying').

**NEGLECT OR NEGLIGENT TREATMENT** means the failure to meet children's physical and psychological needs, protect them from danger or obtain medical, birth registration or other services when those responsible for their care have the means, knowledge and access to services to do so. It includes: (a) Physical neglect: failure to protect a child from harm, including through lack of supervision, or to provide a child with basic necessities including adequate food, shelter, clothing and basic medical care; (b) Psychological or emotional neglect, including lack of any emotional support and love, chronic inattention, caregivers being 'psychologically unavailable' by overlooking young children's cues and signals, and exposure to intimate partner violence or drug or alcohol abuse; (c) Neglect of a child's physical or mental health: withholding essential medical care; (d) Educational neglect: failure to comply with laws requiring caregivers to secure their children's education through attendance at school or otherwise; and (e) Abandonment.

These definitions have been adapted from: United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, *General Comment No. 13 (2011): The right of the child to freedom from all forms of violence*, UN document CRC/C/GC/13, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Geneva, 18 April 2011. In addition to the main definitions listed here, the comment also defines 'torture and inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment', 'violence among children', 'self-harm', 'harmful practices', 'violence in the mass media', 'violence through information and communication technologies', and 'institutional and system violations of child rights'. The comment also specifies types of physical violence to which children with disabilities may be subjected.



# AGAINST CHILDREN

*“All forms of violence against children, however light, are unacceptable. [...] Frequency, severity of harm and intent to harm are not prerequisites for the definitions of violence. States parties may refer to such factors in intervention strategies in order to allow proportional responses in the best interests of the child, but definitions must in no way erode the child’s absolute right to human dignity and physical and psychological integrity by describing some forms of violence as legally and/or socially acceptable.”*

**United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 13 on the Convention on the Rights of the Child**



## Chapter 1

# 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 risky behaviours 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 (*see Box 1.1*).

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.

## MEASURING VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

Measuring the breadth and depth of violence against children is complicated by the fact that violence can take many forms (physical, sexual and emotional), occur in any setting (including the home, school, workplace and over the Internet) and be perpetrated by individuals (parents and other caregivers, peers, intimate partners, authority figures and strangers) or groups. A thorough assessment of its nature and prevalence requires reliable statistics on all types of violence to which children are exposed as well as the range of circumstances surrounding its occurrence. These data needs, however, remain largely unmet. Certain forms of violence are better documented than others, depending on a country's capacity and investment in data collection. Yet even when data are available, the quality and scope of the information are often limited. For instance, mortality data, including counts of homicides, are available for many countries, but errors and incomplete information in birth and death registries, challenges related to correctly determining causes of death, and weaknesses in countries' mechanisms for recording vital events can affect their accuracy. In addition, detailed information on the victims themselves and the circumstances surrounding these fatalities are rarely recorded. Representative data on particular forms of interpersonal violence, including violent discipline and bullying, have increased over the last two decades, mainly through large-scale population-based surveys. However, data on other forms of abuse, including systematic statistics on sexual violence against boys, remain woefully lacking.

## THE SCOPE AND STRUCTURE OF THIS REPORT

While acknowledging these limitations, this 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.<sup>1</sup> 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. The report does not cover certain forms of violence that take place within the context of shared community, cultural or social norms and values, like female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C), as this harmful traditional practice occurs under specific circumstances and has been addressed in other publications.<sup>2</sup> Two additional categories of violence are also outside the scope of this report: self-directed violence and collective violence. The former has been defined as violence a person inflicts upon himself or herself (for example, suicide or other forms of self-abuse), while the latter is inflicted by larger entities such as States, organized political parties, terrorist organizations and other armed groups.<sup>3</sup>

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).<sup>4</sup> These international survey programmes have been almost exclusively 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.

The presentation of the data has been organized into two main sections. The first section covers three main types of violence experienced by children and committed by anyone in all possible settings: physical acts of violence (both fatal and non-fatal), emotional violence and sexual violence. The second

half of the report explores in more detail specific manifestations of these forms of violence: violent discipline in the home, peer violence (including involvement in physical fights and bullying) and intimate partner violence among adolescents. The report also explores attitudes towards some forms of violence to provide insights into deeply rooted cultural beliefs that may help to explain their persistence.

Each chapter follows a similar structure, beginning with a brief overview of the definitions for the specific type of violence covered and current knowledge about potential risk factors and consequences. Regional and/or country-level data, depending on availability, are then presented. When possible, disaggregated data are also included to reveal certain characteristics of children who experience violence, including information on their families as well as some contextual factors surrounding their experiences of violence such as the identity of the most common perpetrators. Boxes within each chapter highlight specific issues relevant to the type of violence covered that deserve special consideration.

### A WORD OF CAUTION

While specific forms of violence have a distinctive nature and can occur in isolation, any attempt to ‘categorize’ violence is a somewhat artificial undertaking. For one thing, the boundaries between acts of violence tend to become blurred. Sexual violence is often inflicted through the use of physical force and/or psychological intimidation. Moreover, experiences of violence often overlap. While some children may experience rare and isolated incidents of aggression, others may find themselves repeatedly exposed to multiple forms of abuse.

In addition to the possible overlap of various types of violence, children can be victims, perpetrators and witnesses to violence – all at the same time. Children who grow up in societies characterized by the systemic use of violence by terrorist organizations or other armed groups are at heightened risk of interpersonal victimization and often end up becoming violent themselves.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, those



who suffer violence are sometimes driven to hurt themselves in response to their own victimization. Certain research, for example, has demonstrated a direct association between experiences of physical or sexual abuse and suicidal thoughts and behaviours among adolescents.<sup>6</sup> Rather than turning aggression on oneself, another possible manifestation of being victimized or witnessing abuse is to become angry or hostile towards others. To take one example, observing violence between parents or being the target of child abuse is closely associated with the perpetration of dating violence.<sup>7</sup> All of these points are important to keep in mind when reading this report, since the reality of violence against children is far more confounding and multidimensional than any attempts to categorize and quantify it.

“1. States Parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child.

2. Such protective measures should, as appropriate, include effective procedures for the establishment of social programmes to provide necessary support for the child and for those who have the care of the child, as well as for other forms of prevention and for identification, reporting, referral, investigation, treatment and follow-up of instances of child maltreatment described heretofore, and, as appropriate, for judicial involvement.”

**Article 19 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child**