Violence against children is ubiquitous. In 2015, at least three out of four of the world’s children – an estimated 1.7 billion – had experienced some form of interpersonal violence¹ in a previous year.² When the cumulative impact of violence is considered, almost no children – whether they live in rich countries or poor, in the global North or South – experience violence-free childhoods.

Ending violence in childhood needs no economic or financial justification. However, recognizing the immediate, medium-term and intergenerational impacts, and economic costs of childhood violence is key to prioritizing the issue and making the case for investing in prevention.³

Devastating impacts

Violence in childhood produces a range of devastating impacts. All forms of violence experienced or witnessed by children have harmful effects on them and their families, communities and societies in which they live.

Acts of violence have both constitutive and consequential effects. Constitutive effects refer to the pain and suffering that a child experiences and internalizes as the immediate result of an act of violence. Consequential or spillover effects refer to externalities, such as the effects of witnessing violence, or long-term societal consequences that persist beyond the immediate experience.

Violence in childhood can be deeply destructive. The damage goes far beyond immediate trauma and fear, extending through every aspect of a child’s life, affecting her or his health and education, and restricting future life opportunities.

Multiple studies demonstrate that exposure to violence – whether in homes, schools, other institutions or in communities – can lead to significant long-term physical and psychological illnesses. It can also shape a young person’s attitudes towards and acceptance of violence, and increase the chances that they will become the victim or perpetrator of violence in the future.

The phenomenon of poly-victimization, in which the same children are maltreated by their parents or caregivers, bullied at school, sexually or physically victimized by adults or peers and exposed to high levels of crime and violence in their communities, increases the cumulative impacts and costs of violence in childhood and provides a powerful argument for systemic approaches that break the chain of violence.

Finally, the staggering financial costs of violence in childhood account for significant portions of national GDP, often in countries that can least afford to lose those resources.

Violence disrupts schooling

Childhood presents a unique opportunity for learning, but numerous studies indicate that violence – from teachers and from peers – has a serious detrimental impact on school attendance and performance.

Corporal punishment in schools is common and frequently brutal. One study found that more than half of the children aged eight in Peru and Viet Nam, three-quarters in Ethiopia and over nine-tenths in India had witnessed a teacher administering corporal punishment in the previous week. The prevalence of corporal punishment was the most important reason for students not liking school.

¹ This estimate includes child homicide, violent discipline (or corporal punishment) at the hands of caregivers, peer violence (including bullying and physical fights), and sexual and physical violence experienced by adolescent girls.
² See Evidence Highlights 2 in this series. Violence in Childhood: Key Features.
A recent study in South Africa and Malawi found that children exposed to harsh discipline are less likely to enroll in school at all.

The impact of peer violence in schools is also significant. In 2015, some 261 million children worldwide were affected by physical fights and bullying in schools. Adolescents who are bullied miss more school, have poorer school achievement, report higher levels of loneliness and poor health and experience greater levels of anxiety, depression and suicidal thoughts than those who are not bullied. Bullying adversely affects the bully and the bullied – both of whom can have significantly lower academic achievement and poorer health. School is also the setting in which patterns of victimization can be established for life. People who bully at school, for example, are more likely to be violent as adults.

Numerous studies also indicate that children who are perceived to be different, due to factors such as race, religion, disability, sexual orientation or for other reasons, are subject to higher rates of violence in schools than ‘ordinary’ children and may be more likely to discontinue their education as a result.

Importantly, school is also a key setting for activities designed to break cycles of violence, and educational achievement is associated with reductions in violence. As the Violence in Childhood (VIC) Index indicates, young people are less likely to be victims of violence in countries where more girls complete secondary school.

Lifelong effects

Children and women risk not only the immediate impact of the assault, but also other, serious long-term physical and psychological consequences. A study by the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, for instance, has conclusively established a strong relationship between the number of adverse events in childhood and negative outcomes in adulthood, including partner violence and poor anger control. A wide range of chronic physical illnesses are also associated with the experience of childhood violence, including cardiovascular disease, asthma, obesity, diabetes and cancer.

The psychological impacts of childhood violence can include poor academic performance, depression, aggression, poor inter-personal relationships and behavioural problems, post-traumatic stress and anxiety. These, in turn, can make young people more vulnerable to illnesses such as substance abuse and poor reproductive and sexual health. In Swaziland, females aged 13–24 exposed to childhood sexual violence were three times more likely to contract HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, or to have an unwanted pregnancy than those who had not been exposed to such violence.

Intergenerational costs

Violence in childhood is frequently transmitted within families, from parent to child or from sibling to sibling. Witnessing or directly experiencing violence in childhood increases the chances that a child will be a victim or perpetrator of violence as an adult, thus perpetuating highly destructive cycles of violence. The experience of violence in childhood can create a costly and damaging legacy for families and communities.

Intergenerational transmission of the impacts of violence can start even before birth. The most immediate risk for the unborn child is domestic

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Estimating the economic costs of violence in childhood

Efforts to estimate the cost of violence in childhood generally employ one of three methodologies:

- **Burden of violence** – These studies use a human capital approach to estimate primarily the health burden of violence in childhood. This involves reviewing the prevalence and outcomes of different forms of violence and mapping these onto the WHO Global Burden of Disease estimates to calculate the number of ‘disability adjusted life years’ lost.

- **Direct and indirect costs** – This method involves adding together the direct household out-of-pocket expenses, the costs incurred by the community of providing services to the victims of violence, and indirect costs (usually estimated as loss of productivity).

- **Cost of inaction** – This approach estimates the negative consequences of not taking an appropriate action. In addition to the challenges of modeling the direct and indirect benefits of an action, net of its implementation cost, this method also requires extensive consultations with policy stakeholders about which actions they believe would be most beneficial in preventing violence, adjusted for different country contexts.

Each of these approaches has limitations, frequently based on the lack of reliable data, particularly from low-income countries, and the need to rely on self-reported data. Calculating the global cost of violence also requires comparisons and generalizations between countries at very different levels of development. Some costs, such as the potential loss of wages as a result of violence, or the cost of the long-term health impacts of violence, cannot be directly measured and must be modelled.
violence against the mother by a partner, spouse or other member of the family. Studies indicate that pregnant women or girls who are victims of abuse are more likely to develop complications during pregnancy and have pre-term births, and their children are at increased risk for low birth-weight and physical and mental disability.

Whether they are suffering or witnessing abuse, children who grow up with violence in the home learn early and powerful lessons about the use of violence to dominate others. Witnessing violence against the mother increases boys’ risks of committing intimate partner violence as adults.

**The financial impacts**

Beyond the direct impact of violence on children and women, the financial cost to society of violence in childhood is staggering. According to some estimates, the total cost of physical, sexual and psychological violence against children (measured indirectly as losses in future productivity) ranges between 2 per cent and 5 per cent of global GDP, and in the highest scenario may reach up to 8 per cent of global GDP – about US$ 7 trillion. The health costs of violence in childhood are also significant. Using the WHO’s Disability Adjusted Life Years (DALY) measure, studies have found that physical abuse against children costs China an estimated 0.84 per cent of its GDP, while the total lifetime economic burden resulting from new cases of child maltreatment in the United States in 2008 was approximately US$ 124 billion, or as high as US$ 585 billion using sensitivity analysis.

In all, the total cost to households and society of violence against children and women (including the burden on the health system, the justice system and other services, along with lost wages and productivity and the impact on the next generation) is estimated to be higher than the combined costs of homicide, assault, terrorism and war.

Investing in childhood violence-prevention can not only reduce the impact of violence on individual lives, but can also produce significant economic benefits for society at large. These benefits can be quantified as cost savings – which measures the costs of preventing childhood violence versus the cost of treating its impact – or as return on investment, which calculates the overall gain for society from an investment in childhood violence-prevention. By both metrics, investing in effective programmes to reduce children’s vulnerability to violence pays big dividends.

In 2012, the cost of delivering a youth literacy programme in Jamaica ($3000) was significantly lower than the cost of caring for a gunshot wound in a hospital ($500,000), incarcerating a young male ($800,000) or keeping a child in a foster home ($1,000,000). Similar dramatic rates of return are reported in Europe, where it is estimated that every additional Euro spent on prevention of violence against women would save €87 in violence response costs.

Estimates of the financial burden of violence may be particularly useful for policymakers working to justify the costs of efforts to reduce violence. Those estimates make a compelling case for the comparatively small expenditure that can reduce the enormous financial toll of violence on our societies.

In conclusion, whether approached from the perspective of an individual or the cost to society, the devastating emotional and psychological impacts of violence in childhood can never be captured, measured or monetized fully. Regardless of the economic benefits, all forms of violence against children are wrong, and they can and must be prevented.

Every day millions of boys and girls around the world experience fear and violence – physical, emotional or sexual. This need not happen. Violence in childhood is preventable – through concerted and collective public action that addresses the root causes of violence and lays firm foundations for both sustainable development and more peaceful societies.

To fulfill the commitments to ending all forms of violence that are enshrined in both the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda, states and societies must analyze the causes of childhood violence, and invest in preventing violence against women and children.
Know Violence in Childhood is a learning initiative dedicated to informing and supporting a global movement to end violence in childhood. Established in 2014 for a three-year period, the Initiative analyzed existing data, commissioned new research and synthesized knowledge on the causes and consequences of childhood violence worldwide. Its work highlights the impact of childhood violence on individuals, families, communities and societies, expands the research base on this global crisis and promotes evidence-based strategies to prevent violence.

The full report and related outputs are available at: www.knowviolenceinchildhood.org