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 inter-personal violence1 in a previous year.2 This in itself could be an underestimate given the culture of silence that surrounds the reporting of violence against children. 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.3

**Defining violence in childhood**

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) defines violence as “all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse.” Reflecting the CRC, the work of Know Violence in Childhood focuses on physical, sexual and emotional violence that can result in serious physical or psychological harm for children. It includes violence perpetrated against children by adults and caregivers, as well as violence perpetrated against children by their peers. It focuses particularly on the everyday inter-personal violence that children experience – or witness – within the home, school or community. For that reason, the Initiative uses the overall term “violence in childhood”.

Know Violence in Childhood has not addressed forms of violence (such as female genital mutilation) that are specific to some communities. Nor has it addressed issues related to slavery, exploitation and trafficking, which have been the subjects of recent global reports. It has also not addressed self-directed violence such as suicide and self-harm, or collective violence inflicted by larger entities such as states, political parties, terrorist organizations or other armed groups.

In 2015, roughly two-thirds of the world’s children – an estimated 1.7 billion – had experienced some form of inter-personal violence in a previous year. As the global report Ending Violence in Childhood illustrates, however, the actual scale of violence in childhood is probably even greater.

**Why violence goes unrecorded**

Violence against children often goes unrecorded for several key reasons.

- **Lack of capacity** – Very small children may simply not have the capacity to report an incident of violence or abuse.
- **Fear** – Many children believe that if they complain, they may be blamed or further punished. Parents often prefer to remain silent, particularly if the offender is a family member or an important official such as a police officer.
- **Dependence** – Children depend on adults for caregiving, even if these adults are also responsible for abuse.
- **Stigma** – Many families fear “loss of face” or humiliation if violence is reported.
- **Societal acceptance** – Many societies consider violence in childhood to be normal and inevitable. They may not regard harsh discipline, for example, as violence or abuse.

The problem of under-reporting is compounded by weak systems for gathering information on and reporting violence. Many schools, for instance, may not have mechanisms that enable a child to report incidents of abuse in confidence. Where such systems exist, they may not be strong enough to ensure the confidentiality of the information. Institutions such as orphanages or care homes may not be required to maintain records of violence. Child fatality statistics may be unreliable if the country does not ensure universal death registration, does not regularly carry out post-

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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.
3. See Evidence Highlights 2 in this series. Violence in Childhood: Key Facts.
mortems or fails to make sufficient efforts to attribute the true cause of a child’s death.

Despite gaps in the evidence, a number of important studies and surveys provide a critically important lens on the global crisis of violence in childhood.

Gaps in data

While compiling the Know Violence in Childhood flagship report, the research team uncovered significant gaps in the availability of nationally representative data on key indicators of violence against children and women. (TABLE 1) For example:

- The most widely reported data from 172 countries is on child homicide
- Some 77 countries collect information on corporal punishment at home.
- Statistics on peer violence, including bullying and physical fights, are available for 106 and 104 countries respectively.
- Prevalence data on physical violence and sexual violence against adolescent girls is only available for a handful of countries - 42 and 40 respectively.
- Prevalence data on violence against women is available for 91 countries.
- Data on physical violence against boys is only available for 6 countries, and on sexual violence for only 4 countries.
- No large-scale, internationally comparable surveys report on violent discipline practices and physical and sexual violence against adolescent girls in industrialized countries.
- Children from different backgrounds experiencing violence, such as those living with disabilities, those identifying across the gender and sexuality spectrum, those living with HIV/AIDS, and migrant and refugee children remain significantly under-represented.

Issues in data collection and analysis

It is important to address the challenges in building a global evidence base on childhood violence beginning with the lack of geographical representation. Around 98 per cent of all studies on promising interventions to end violence come from the Americas (mainly from the US and Canada) and Europe (mainly Western Europe). More than 95 per cent of all programme evaluations relate to just 12 per cent of the world’s population.4

The paucity of longitudinal studies makes it difficult to construct narratives that might offer insights into the intergenerational consequences and impacts of violence in childhood.

Significant inconsistencies in national data-collection efforts with respect to age make comparisons difficult. For example, the age range for survey data reporting on intimate partner violence varies from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) with national governments and other partners.4 The VACS are a rich data source for understanding the magnitude, nature and consequences of physical, emotional and sexual violence against boys and girls.

Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS): UNICEF assists countries in collecting and analyzing data on the well-being of women and children through this international household survey. Since its inception in the 1990s, the MICS programme has enabled more than 100 low-and middle-income countries to collect nationally representative and internationally comparable data on more than 100 key indicators covering nutrition, child health, mortality, education, water and sanitation, child protection, HIV/AIDS and child discipline.

Global School-based Student Health Surveys (GSHS): The GSHS, a collaborative surveillance project of WHO and CDC, help countries measure and assess behavioural risk and protective factors in 10 key areas among adolescents. The GSHS questionnaires are self-administered and address topics such as violence and unintentional injury, dating and sexual violence, perceptions of safety at school and physical violence by teachers. The GSHS are implemented upon request from countries.

Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS): Supported by the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the DHS collect nationally representative data on topics including population, health, HIV/AIDS, nutrition, women’s status and empowerment and the experience of specific forms of domestic and inter-personal violence. In particular, information is collected on any form of physical violence experienced by girls and women since age 15 and sexual violence at any age. The surveys are carried out in low- and middle-income countries at regular four-to-five year intervals.

Key studies and surveys

Violence Against Children Surveys (VACS): are nationally representative household surveys of children and young adults aged 13–24 years, carried out in a number of countries by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) with national governments and other partners.4 The VACS are a rich data source for understanding the magnitude, nature and consequences of physical, emotional and sexual violence against boys and girls.


violence faced by women varies from country to country, with some countries interviewing women above the age of 18 years; others above the age of 15; and some between the ages of 15 and 49.

Differences in the reporting period make comparison even more difficult. Prevalence of violence can be measured over a lifetime, over the past one year and for forms that are relatively common, such as violent discipline, even over the past one month.

Survey questions and interviewer training also affect responses and accuracy of reporting. Asking about multiple specific acts of violence, than questions that ask more generically about violence yield more accurate prevalence estimates. Similarly, more interviewer training results in higher levels of disclosure.

Finally, pinpointing the causes of violence and the most effective approaches to mitigating them can be challenging across cultures. For example, risk factors such as poor parental supervision, physical punishment and large family size were associated with crime in Pittsburgh and London, but were found to be unrelated to delinquency in Ghana.

**Improving knowledge and evidence**

Efforts to improve data collection and build capacity for effective evidence generation and regular monitoring of childhood violence are essential. Specifically, Know Violence in Childhood makes the following recommendations:

- Strengthen data collection efforts by standardizing definitions and developing practical protocols to measure childhood violence;
- Incorporate dimensions of childhood violence in surveys that reach out to children and their caregivers;
- Commission quality research and evaluation studies to promote accountability and learning; and
- Undertake operations research to understand implementation successes and challenges, and inform the design of integrated service-delivery platforms to prevent violence.

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 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