



## Lifelong Negative Influence of School Violence on Children

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Violence in the school environment is a constant concern for educators and parents and is a serious and often lifelong burden for the young victims. School violence is not just a limited problem, variously affecting specific or isolated communities in economic advantaged or disadvantaged areas, but a global modern phenomenon involving, to various degrees, one of the core social institutions of our society.<sup>1-3</sup> The European Paediatric Association-Union of National European Paediatric Societies and Associations (EPA/UNEPSA), through the working group on social pediatrics, supported by its European national pediatric societies members, is currently developing dedicated projects to investigate the physical, psychological, and social impacts of school violence on European children and its possible lifelong risks.<sup>4</sup> The purpose of this commentary is to raise awareness on this issue among healthcare professionals involved in childcare and to emphasize the importance of their participation in programs that are developed to monitor and prevent the negative, personal, and social impacts caused by this disturbing phenomenon on children.

### School Violence

Violence against individuals during their developmental years (<18 years of age) is generally regarded as a circumstance including all forms of violence, whether perpetrated by parents or other caregivers, peers, partners, or strangers.<sup>5</sup> This broad definition of violence includes several types of interpersonal violence (Table; available at [www.jpeds.com](http://www.jpeds.com)). They may occur in different circumstances during childhood.

The term school violence is commonly used to describe acts of interpersonal violence that occur in a school-associated environment or specifically within a school community. However, the issue of school violence is complex, and it should not be restricted to a narrow frame focusing on the interpersonal violence occurring between students or by students against their teachers. In fact, it is a consensus that analysis of this disturbing phenomenon should take in to consideration the wider context and forms of violence in school, together with the important interactive and causal effects resulting from the confluence of these fac-

tors.<sup>6</sup> This constructive approach leads to an integrated, multilevel definition of the problem and to a consequential multilevel causal analysis of school violence. This should include the full range of constitutive elements, which may ultimately allow for comprehensive and effective policy responses.<sup>6</sup> A widely accepted general definition of school violence refers to it as any activity that can create a disturbance in an educational organization or system.<sup>6,7</sup> This may involve verbal and physical altercations, threats, weapon use, or gang activity, favoring a range of extreme consequences, such as school shootings. It also incorporates the concept of cyber-bullying, perpetrated through electronic means or social media. Thus, school violence includes physical or verbal confrontations on the way to school, on the way home from school, or at school-related events that can cause physical or psychological harm to other individuals.<sup>2,8</sup>

### The Worldwide Phenomenon of School Violence

Data from the 2018 United Nations Children's Fund report, which includes 122 countries (51% of the global population of children between 13 and 15 years of age), confirm that school violence is a global phenomenon.<sup>9</sup> Schools are entrusted with providing a safe environment for children to learn, cultivating their education, and nurturing their skills. However, laws prohibiting violence in educational settings looks at least inadequate. For instance, one-half of the global population, about 732 million school-age children (aged 6-17 years), live in countries where they are not legally protected from corporal punishment at school. Furthermore, among the most alarming data of the United Nations report are those reporting episodes of shooting in school environments. During a 25-year period (1991-2016), children attending schools in countries that are not affected by

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The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpeds.2019.09.075>

conflicts, suffered 59 documented school shootings, that resulted in at least one reported fatality occurred in 14 countries across the world.<sup>9</sup> Over 75% of them took place in Western countries (Europe, United States).

About one-half of 13- to 15-year-old students worldwide, nearly 150 million of them, reported to have experienced violence, such as physical fights or various forms of bullying, from their peers in and around school. Bullying is probably the most common form of school violence suffered by children. The percentages of children bullied at school are based on geographical belonging: 25% in Europe, 31.7% in North America, 22.8% in Central America, 30.2% in South America, 41.1% in the Middle East, 30.3% in Asia, 42.7% in North Africa, and 48.2% in sub-Saharan Africa. In Europe, a recent report from Italy revealed that more than 50% of boys between 11 and 17 years of age have suffered at least 1 offensive or violent episode from their peers. Derisive nicknames (12.1%), derision for physical appearance (6.3%), defamation (5.1%), exclusion (4.7%), and violent physical gestures (3.8%) are most frequently reported.<sup>10</sup> In the US, the National Center for Education statistics reports more than 800 000 nonfatal victimizations at school among students 12-18 years of age, and approximately 7% of teachers have been threatened with injury or physically attacked by a student from their school.<sup>11</sup> Finally, data from the United Nations study,<sup>9</sup> which are similar to data observed in a preliminary study by EPA/UNEP/SA, show that 3 in 10 young adolescents (17 million), from 39 countries in Europe and North America admit to bullying others at school (Figure; available at [www.jpeds.com](http://www.jpeds.com)).

## Prevention

Primary prevention should be the goal of any strategy tackling school violence, which should typically include the promotion of protective factors at various degrees of influence, with the general aim of building a culture of peace. An effective preventive strategy in the area of school violence is multidimensional, including 4 key levels: individual, relationship, community, and social.<sup>12</sup>

Strategies to prevent school violence at the individual level have 2 main objectives: (1) encouraging nonviolent behavior and conduct in children and young people, to prevent violence before it occurs, and (2) aiming at changing attitudes in students who have already manifested violent behaviors, or are at risk of harming themselves. Strategies to prevent school violence at the relationship level should primarily aim at influencing the type of relationships that both offenders and victims of school violence have with the individuals they regularly interact with, such as family members, teachers, mentors, and bystanders.

At the community level, strategies to prevent school violence should focus on raising public awareness and debate about typical school violence issues and discussing openly social and material causes of school violence in the various local environments. Furthermore, providing care and support for victims and encouraging community action by focusing

particularly on developing supervising initiatives and promoting cultural and environmental activities should be a priority.

Finally, preventing school violence at the societal level should focus on key values, including the normative cultural, social, and economic determinants that shape societies, thus inspiring, and, where it is needed and when it is possible, influencing the educational systems and institutional policies that emerge from them.

## Conclusions

Violence involving children in school-related environments often remains hidden, owing to the reluctance of many victims to disclose their abuse. This prevents them from seeking help to cope with their negative experiences or take action to protect themselves from further victimization. School violence can occur in both passive and physical forms, causing both bodily and psychological harm. An increasing awareness of this issue has been seen in public institutions over the past few years. However, interventions are still scarce and insufficient.<sup>13</sup> Several studies emphasize that besides the negative results of violent behaviors between children and adolescents, relationships based on violence from significant figures for the adolescent, such as peers and teachers, contribute to the emergence of aggressive behavior and depressive symptoms, which can have a lifelong negative impact on victims.<sup>14</sup> Teachers are the significant adult figures that should act as positive and stable socioemotional supports inside schools, and assist in preventing peer conflict during adolescence. They should be trained to deal with violence situations and to establish effective strategies to improve classroom climate and, in turn, enhance students' academic performance. Furthermore, pediatricians can play a key role in the supervision of cases of abuse such as school violence, as they can intercept the signs of discomfort and promote the adoption of the most appropriate measures to protect the physical or emotional health of children before any other subject. However, pediatricians may fail to intercept abused children, possibly owing to the lack of social culture and/or sufficient training in this area. It is important to promote dedicated educational programs during medical courses, involving all healthcare professionals.<sup>15</sup> Finally, the EPA/UNEP/SA working group emphasizes that a key measure to counteract school violence is to further raise social awareness through developing efficient programs in communities, supported by appropriate statistical analysis of the results attained.<sup>16,17</sup> This would facilitate the interactions between families and community members with healthcare professionals, and help them to suspect and recognize abuse. ■

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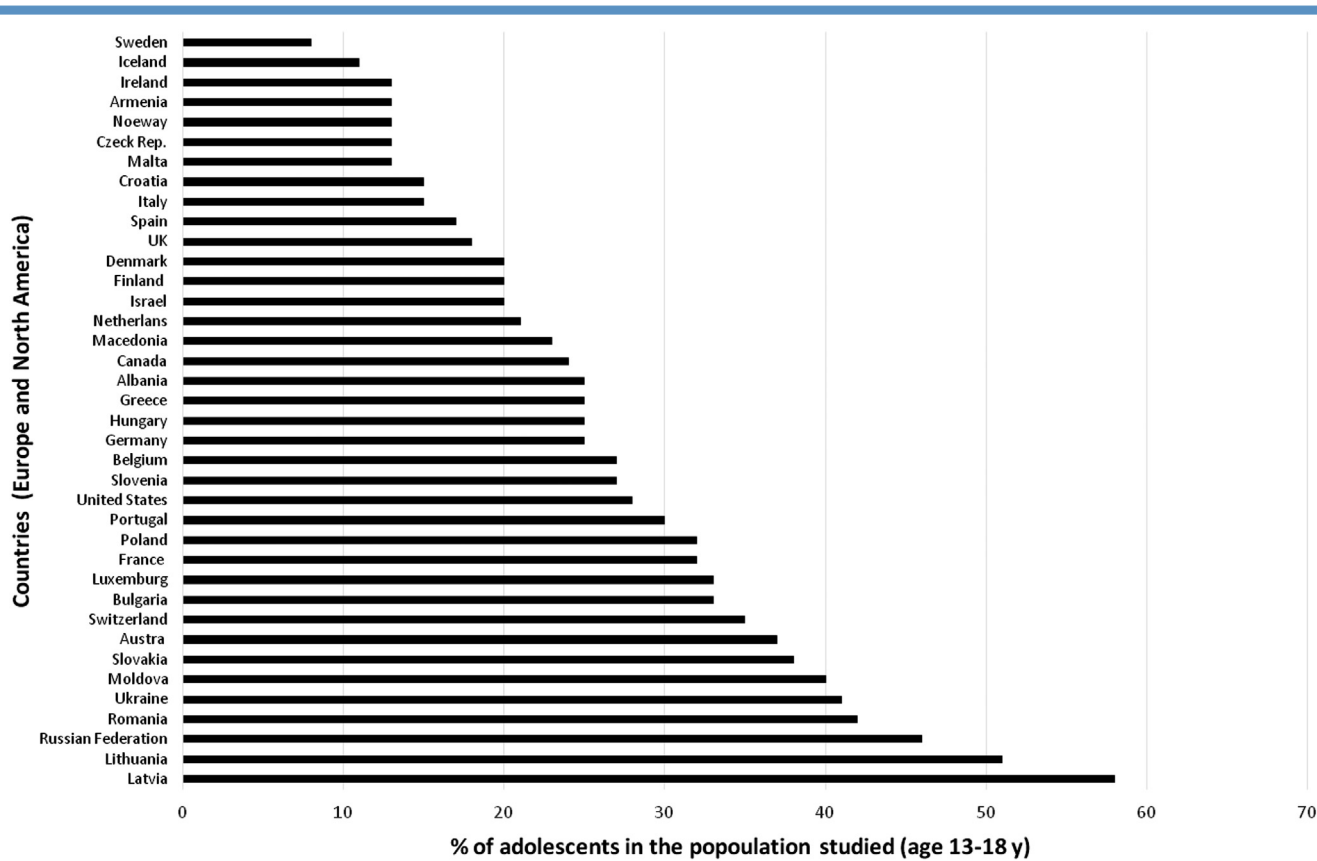


Figure. Adolescents admitting to bullying others at school in European and North American countries.

**Table. Type of interpersonal violence**

Maltreatment, including physical, sexual, psychological violence  
Unethical educational measures (ie, violent punishment)  
Unwanted, aggressive behavior involving a real or perceived power imbalance.  
Including mobbing (physical and emotional abuse in the workplace) and bullying (making threats, spreading rumors, attacking someone physically, verbally or by cyber means and excluding someone from a group on purpose)  
Youth violence (frequent in community settings between associates and newcomers/strangers)  
Domestic violence, including physical, sexual and emotional violence (frequently by an intimate or former partner)  
Sexual violence, completed or attempted sexual nonconsensual acts (not necessarily involving contact)  
Psychological and emotional pressure: nonphysical forms of hostile treatment (including child's movements restriction, denigration, derision, threats, intimidation, discrimination, and rejection)