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## JUVENILE JUSTICE FACT SHEET



# NATIONAL SURVEY OF Children's Exposure to Violence



Jeff Slowikowski, Acting Administrator

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Office of Justice Programs

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# Questions and Answers About the National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence

**DEFENDING  
CHILDHOOD**  
PROTECT HEAL THRIVE

**David Finkelhor, Heather Turner, and Sherry Hamby**

In June 1999, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) created the Safe Start Initiative to prevent and reduce the impact of children's exposure to violence. As part of this initiative and with the support of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), OJJDP launched the National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence (NatSCEV) to document the full extent of children's exposure to violence. The Crimes Against Children Research Center of the University of New Hampshire designed and conducted the survey between January and May 2008. NatSCEV is the first nationwide study to examine comprehensively the extent and nature of children's exposure to violence across all ages and settings. The following questions and answers introduce the study and its findings. For a more detailed overview of NatSCEV, see the OJJDP bulletin, *Children's Exposure to Violence: A Comprehensive National Survey*, available online at [www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojjdp/227744.pdf](http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojjdp/227744.pdf).

### **What is the objective of NatSCEV?**

The survey provides comprehensive estimates of children's exposure to a wide variety of violence, crime, and abuse, including child maltreatment, bullying, community violence, domestic violence, and sexual victimization.

### **What are the key features of NatSCEV?**

NatSCEV bases its estimates on a large, nationally representative sample of more than 4,500 children ages 17 and younger, including interviews of caregivers of children ages 9 and

younger and children age 10 and older about 45 different kinds of violence, abuse, and victimization in the past year and over the course of their lifetime.

### **What new information does NatSCEV provide about children's exposure to violence?**

For the first time, NatSCEV provides information on the overall scope of children's exposure to violence nationwide, both past-year and lifetime, across all ages from birth through age 17. Aggregating all of the direct and indirect exposures to different types of violence assessed in the study, it found that more than three in five children (61 percent) had at least some exposure to violence, crime, or abuse, direct or witnessed, during the previous year. As discussed below, however, this number includes many forms of exposure to violence, including indirect exposure (e.g., seeing an assault in the home or a shooting in the neighborhood) and psychological or emotional violence (e.g., neglect or bullying), that are not counted in more traditional measures of violence.

In addition, NatSCEV provides estimates of various kinds of childhood exposure to violence that were not available before. Researchers learned that nearly 1 in 10 children witnessed an assault in their family over the course of a year and that 1 in 10 had a violence-related injury in the past year. In addition, 6 percent of children and youth were victimized sexually in the past year, and 10 percent were maltreated by a caregiver in the past year.



Access OJJDP publications online at [ojjdp.gov](http://ojjdp.gov).

Learn more about the Attorney General's Defending Childhood Initiative at [justice.gov/ag/defendingchildhood](http://justice.gov/ag/defendingchildhood).

Find out more about OJJDP's Safe Start Initiative at [safestartcenter.org](http://safestartcenter.org).

### What does the survey say about changes in exposure to violence as children grow up?

NatSCEV provides estimates of exposure to violence across the whole span of childhood. As figure 1 shows, children are exposed to high levels of physical assault and, to a somewhat lesser extent, property victimization even before their teens. By contrast, sexual assault victimization is relatively less common for younger children and increases as they grow up. Witnessing and indirect exposure to violence also rise sharply as children grow older. Nearly one-half of youth ages 14–17 witnessed violence in the previous year, and one-quarter of those youth were indirect victims of violence in the previous year (Finkelhor, Turner, Ormrod, and Hamby, 2009).

### What happens when children are exposed to more violence and more kinds of violence?

The study reveals how many children are exposed to multiple kinds of victimization even in a short timespan. Eleven percent of children had five or more different kinds of victimization exposure in a single year. These are the children (called “poly-victims”) whose victimization is most associated with other adversities and mental health problems. Another bulletin in the NatSCEV series that discusses multiple exposures to violence describes the plight of these children more extensively.

The survey findings make it clear that when children are exposed to one form of violence, they are at increased risk for other kinds of violent victimization. For example, a child who was physically assaulted in the past year would be five times as likely to also be sexually assaulted in the same year.

In addition, though all exposures increase the risk of problems, children who are exposed to multiple types of violence, crime, and abuse have been found to suffer from particularly elevated levels of anxiety and depression, and aggression and conduct problems. They are prone to dating violence, delinquency,

further victimization, and involvement with the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. Moreover, being repeatedly exposed to violence may impair a child’s capacity for partnering and parenting later in life, continuing the cycle into the next generation (Finkelhor, Turner, Ormrod, Hamby, and Kracke, 2009).

### Are all these exposures that NatSCEV measured really “violence”?

Most social scientists define violence as acts of physical aggression, like a punch or a sexual assault. Some child advocates and professionals who work with children think of violence as including nonphysical acts that have the potential to harm children, including psychological abuse and neglect. NatSCEV assesses exposure to a broad range of victimizations that concern child advocates, including bullying (both physical and emotional), neglect, property crime, and Internet victimization. For clarity, the researchers recommend referring to all of these together not just as “violence,” but rather “exposure to violence, crime, and abuse.” Thus, 61 percent of children in this sample were exposed to violence, crime, or abuse in the past year. Because this statistic includes such a variety of exposures of differing kinds and degrees, it is apt to be misunderstood. Therefore, the researchers recommend that citations from the study always mention not only the global 61 percent for all exposures, but also other statistics that reflect more familiar categories of violence, such as children who were physically assaulted or were physically abused by a caregiver.

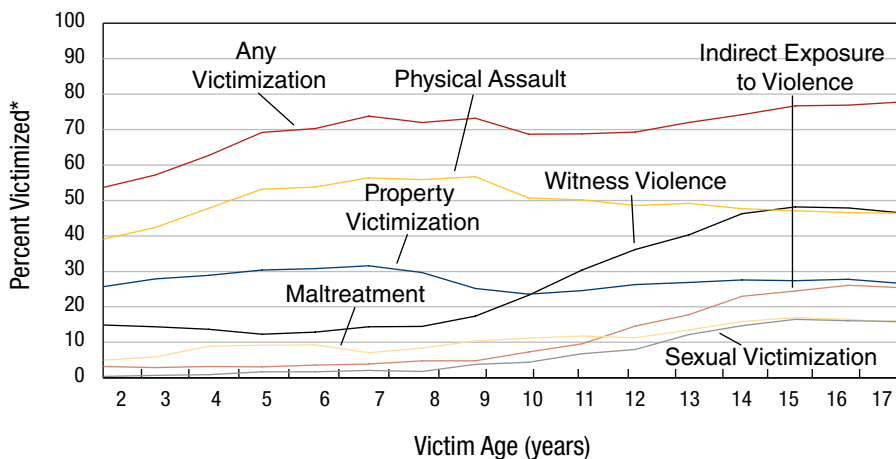
### What is “indirect” exposure and why was it counted?

Mental health and trauma experts agree that children experience harm when they witness violence against others close at hand and in their neighborhood (Suglia et al., 2010). The study counted how many children saw or heard intimate partner violence in their households in the past year (6 percent) or violence among peers and in the community (19 percent). It also counted children whose school had been threatened with a bomb or attack in the past year (5 percent) or children exposed to wars and civil disturbances (0.7 percent), which would include recent refugees from war-ravaged areas of the world. The study did not, however, examine or count exposure to media violence.

### The study counts it as an assault when siblings and young children hit one another. Is this really assault?

Some people wonder whether children hitting other children should be considered exposure to violence and abuse, in part because it is so common. In many cases, hitting among young children and siblings evokes considerable pain, fear, and humiliation. In terms of harm to the victims, research suggests that peer assaults by 4-year-olds differ little from peer assaults

Figure 1: Past-Year Victimization by Type and Victim Age



\*Shown as 3-year age-group running average.

by 16-year-olds or 33-year-olds (Finkelhor, Turner, and Ormrod, 2006). Experts agree that peer and sibling violence can cause serious developmental problems. However, police and other authorities do not generally consider it a criminal assault when siblings and young children hit one another because they appreciate that family or schools can deal better with young aggressors than the criminal justice system. Although these acts are not criminal assaults, they are important to inventory as part of an assessment of children's exposure to violence and abuse.

#### **Why would a parent tell the interviewers about child maltreatment?**

First, the study promised respondents complete confidentiality. Second, many studies have shown that parents under conditions of confidentiality tell survey researchers about a great deal of their hitting, punching, and yelling at their children, in some cases because they do not see it as unusual or wrong (Grych, 1998; Kruttschnitt and Dornfeld, 1992). Third, the interviewees were often disclosing maltreatment that other parents or caregivers committed. Nonetheless, some maltreatment almost certainly was not reported because of embarrassment, fear of consequences, or lack of awareness on the part of the parent or caregiver. But a considerable amount was honestly disclosed.

#### **Can NatSCEV estimates be compared to "official" estimates?**

In general, NatSCEV estimates for crime victimization and abuse are tremendously higher than estimates from official sources such as police reports or child protection agencies. This is in part because most of the episodes that parents and children disclosed to NatSCEV are not reported to police or other authorities. For example, only 10 percent of physical assaults and 19 percent of sexual assaults disclosed in the survey were reported to police. It should also be noted that official agencies can use somewhat different criteria for classifying exposures. Therefore, many child protection agencies require evidence of harm before classifying something as abuse or maltreatment. It is inaccurate to describe all the unreported NatSCEV episodes as cases that official counts missed.

#### **Are NatSCEV estimates available for individual states or localities?**

The sample size used in NatSCEV is not large enough to afford reliable estimates for individual states or localities. States and localities, however, are free to use the NatSCEV questionnaire or portions of it to complete studies to estimate local rates. A toolkit for using the questionnaire and methodology are available at [www.unh.edu/ccrc/jvq/index\\_new.html](http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/jvq/index_new.html).

#### **What plans are there to publish additional findings from NatSCEV? Are there plans for followup surveys to NatSCEV?**

This fact sheet is part of a series that OJJDP and CDC are publishing jointly on the NatSCEV findings, including bulletins

on children's exposure to family and intimate partner violence, school victimization, and multiple exposures to violence (polyvictimization). In addition, the researchers have published articles on the NatSCEV study under the auspices of the Crimes Against Children Research Center. Plans are also underway for additional surveys to track longitudinal data as well as trends in children's exposure to violence, crime, and abuse.

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