

# Facts on Children and Youth Exposed to Violence

Children and youth's exposure to violence is a complex issue that has wide-reaching effects.<sup>1, 2, 3</sup> Common exposures include violence within families, schools, and communities- including on-line communities. Current national data on rates of children and youth's violence exposure is limited. A U.S. national survey in 2008, 2011, and 2014 revealed that rates of children's exposure to violence are common and relatively stable across time.<sup>4, 5</sup> Recent studies suggest that times of crisis, such as natural disasters, can increase violence exposure rates.<sup>3, 4, 6</sup>

Solutions to support children and youth exposed to violence include promoting positive experiences and conditions for children where they live, learn and play and also involve interventions that heal children and their families when they experience harm.

## Scope of the Problem

### *Family violence*

- Approximately 2,000 children ages 0-17 died from abuse and neglect nationally – that's about five children every day.<sup>7</sup>
- 66.9% of all children who died were younger than 3 years old.<sup>7</sup>
- Approximately 15.5 million children are exposed to intimate violence each year.<sup>8</sup>
- 38.1% of children experienced any form of maltreatment.<sup>4</sup>
- 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 20 boys experienced sexual abuse.<sup>9, 10, 11</sup>

### *School violence*

- In 2024, there were a total of 331 shootings on K-12 school campuses in the U.S, with 267 people injured or killed.<sup>12</sup>
- 16% of high school students were cyberbullied.<sup>13</sup>
- 19% were bullied on school grounds.<sup>13</sup>
- 11% experienced sexual violence by anyone.<sup>13</sup>

## *Community violence*

- Firearm related injury was the leading cause of death for children and adolescents in the U.S. from 2020-2022.<sup>14, 15</sup>
- In a 2014 national sample 1 in 8 children aged 14 to 17 reported having witnessed a shooting in their communities within the year.<sup>4</sup>
- 27.5% of reported U.S. human trafficking cases in 2023 were children.<sup>16</sup>

## *Multiple forms of violence*

The cumulative effect of exposure to negative life events is well documented in research, especially regarding Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs).<sup>17, 19</sup> However, relying on ACE scores can lead to a simplistic and limited view of an individual's experience.<sup>19</sup> Family, school, and community violence are highly correlated with each other. The more kinds of exposure to violence that children and youth have, the more trauma they may experience. This significantly influences mental and physical health outcomes.<sup>17, 18, 3</sup>

- Experiencing one form of violence can place individuals at a higher risk of experiencing other forms of violence.<sup>17, 3</sup>
- Encounters with violence in childhood elevate the risk of experiencing violence across the lifespan into adulthood.<sup>18</sup>
- When youth experienced multiple types of violence across multiple environments (family, school, community) they experienced a more diverse range of negative outcomes in adulthood, including depression and attention problems.<sup>3</sup>

## **Impacts of Violence Exposure**

Exposure to violence has wide-ranging effects on children and youth. Below are common shared impacts children and youth may experience after violence exposure.

### *Impacts on health and well-being:*

- Increased rates of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder in adulthood and increased rates of substance use in adolescence.<sup>3</sup>
- Increased risk for developing chronic medical conditions such as asthma, type 2 diabetes, hypertension, and hyperlipidemia.<sup>20, 21</sup>

### *Changes to behavior:*

- Difficulty with self-regulation, and increased hyperarousal.<sup>3, 22</sup>
- Decreased school performance.<sup>3</sup>
- Increased aggression and violent behavior.<sup>3</sup>
  - Not all children and youth will engage in violent behavior after being exposed to violence. For those who do engage in aggressive behavior, it is important to remember that this is often a protective response to real or perceived danger.<sup>3, 22</sup>

## **Moving Forward**

To address and prevent children and youth's exposure to violence, we must focus on healing children and their families AND changing the experiences and social conditions that put them at risk of exposure to violence in the first place. Promoting protective factors can mitigate the harm caused by exposure to violence, and it can also prevent further violence from occurring.

Protective factors are characteristics at the individual, family, community, and societal levels that promote positive well-being, mitigate adversity and predict positive outcomes.<sup>23</sup> Programs and policies can increase protective factors and resilience by:<sup>24, 25</sup>

- Creating safe and stable environments at home, at school, and in their neighborhoods;
- Bolstering social supports, including family, peer, school, and community support;
- Promoting self-regulation and other social-emotional abilities;
- Supporting positive and nurturing caregiver-child relationships; and
- Promoting a growth mindset for children and their families.

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