

SCHUBERT CENTER CHILD STUDIES

04

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VIOLENCE IN CHILDHOOD: Understanding Prevalence, Risk and Prevention Strategies

Witnessing violence, or being “indirectly victimized,” includes exposure to violence in the family and in the community context and can have profound ramifications on a child’s healthy development. Being a witness to violence includes seeing someone attacked with or without an object, having something stolen,

witnessing a murder, witnessing a shooting or riot, knowing a family member or close friend who was robbed, or knowing a family member or close friend who was threatened with a weapon.¹ The National Survey of Children’s Exposure to Violence (NatSCEV) revealed that in 2008, 25.3% of children had witnessed violence at school, in their home, or in their communities in the past year, and 37.8% had witnessed violence against another person during their lifetime.¹

Children can also be direct victims of violence. Childhood victimization includes child abuse and neglect, conventional crimes perpetrated against a youth and peer and sibling violence perpetrated against a youth.² According to the National

Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), adolescents ages 12-17 are two times more likely than adults to be victims of violent crimes.³ Research also shows that the majority of juvenile violence victims will experience more than one type of victimization in a given year.²

The Developmental Victimization Survey reported that two thirds of children who reported being victimized in the previous year had been victimized two or more times.

violence in childhood continued

the ages of 10 and 24.⁵ Youth violence includes a variety of behaviors including slapping, hitting, assault, homicide, family/ domestic violence, robbery, and acts of interpersonal violence such as bullying and dating violence. In 2011, the results of a nationwide survey showed that 33% of high school students reported being in a physical fight and 20% reported being bullied on school property in the last year.⁶ Overall rates of youth violence have declined in recent years. Trend data show a 74% decline in violent victimization at school between 1992 and 2010.⁷ (See the 2013 Schubert Center issue brief *Childhood Violence: A National Survey, Policy, and Practice*, for further information on violent victimization in schools at [http://www.schubertcenter.org](#).)

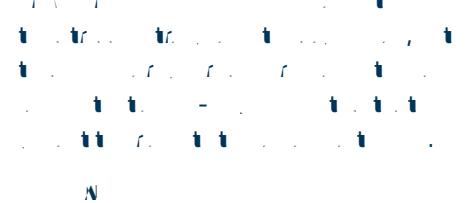
Juvenile crime data also show a decrease in arrests for violent offenses. Juvenile arrest rates for violent crimes sharply increased from the late 1980s to the mid 1990s and subsequently decreased to their lowest levels since 1980 (Figure 1). After a sharp decline, the rate of arrests for all juvenile crimes in Ohio reflect national trends and have remained fairly stable at this low level since 2005 (Figure 2).

Youth violence is not only a national public health concern, but a local one as well. In 2011, 31.2% of Ohio high school students reported being in a physical fight one or more times in the past year.⁸ In 2013, 26.5% of Cuyahoga County high school students reported engaging in physical fighting in the previous 12 months.⁹ Encouragingly, state and local trends reflect national trends. Between 2003 and 2011 the percentage of Ohio high school students who reported being in a physical fight on school property fell from 11.3% to 8.8%.⁸ The prevalence of reported physical fights among Cuyahoga County middle schoolers similarly decreased from 47.8% in 2008 to 34.8% in 2012.¹⁰

Youth perpetration and experience of violence as a victim or a witness are major public health issues. Youth perpetration of violence is currently the second leading cause of death among 15 to 24 year olds.⁶ Witnessing violence, or exposure to violence, can also have consequences for public health outcomes. Chronic childhood exposure to violence has been linked to an increased risk of mental health problems and increased aggression in adolescence and adulthood.¹¹ Also, results from the NatSCEV show that there is a growing group of “delinquent-victims” who are children who have both experienced violent victimization and have committed delinquent acts including substance use, violence or truancy.¹² Research has also shown that children who witness parental intimate partner violence are more likely to experience delayed developmental milestones.¹³ Exposure to violence at school can also interfere with educational goals and stall normal development.⁷ In a nationwide survey of high school students, about 6% reported not attending school one or more days in the thirty days before the survey because they felt unsafe.¹⁴

Research suggests that trauma, including exposure to violence, can have lasting effects on a child’s affect regulation, cognition and behavioral control.^{15, 16}

For some youth, their reactions to trauma can affect their daily lives and interfere with healthy development. Young children can become easily alarmed after experiencing trauma and are less willing to explore new situations and environments, which can inhibit learning.¹⁵ School-age children are more likely to swing between withdrawn and aggressive behaviors.¹⁵ They can also easily experience sleep disturbances, which can lead to poor school outcomes. Adolescents who experience violence and traumatic events have been shown to have better judgment of and address danger on their own and with the help of peers. However, this can also have negative consequences on their health. Adolescents who are dealing with the stress of trauma are more likely to swing between reckless behaviors and extreme avoidance behaviors.¹⁵ Adolescents may also turn to substance use to hide the emotions associated with trauma.¹⁵



Research on youth violence has led to a greater understanding of the factors that can make children more susceptible to becoming victims or perpetrators

NATIONAL TREND DATA: JUVENILE ARREST RATES FOR VIOLENT CRIME INDEX OFFENSES

Source: Puzanich, C. (2009). Juvenile Arrests 2008, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice, Washington, DC. <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojjdp/228479.pdf>.

Public Initiatives

Several public initiatives aimed at addressing childhood violence exist both nationally and locally in Ohio. Presented here is a selection of promising efforts.

1. Defending Childhood Initiative: This national initiative was created to address the growing concerns associated with children's exposure to violence as victims and witnesses of violence. Cuyahoga County is one of eight sites that has received Department of Justice funding through U.S. Attorney General Holder's Defending Childhood Initiative. The goals of the initiative are to prevent exposure to violence, mitigate the negative effects of exposure to violence and spread awareness about the issue of childhood exposure to violence. As part of the Defending Childhood Initiative the Cuyahoga County Children Exposed to Violence Initiative aims to develop and implement a strategic plan to improve prevention, intervention and response systems for children exposed to and at risk of exposure to violence. More information on the Defending Childhood Initiative

can be found at <http://www.justice.gov/defending-childhood>. More information on the Cuyahoga County Children Exposed to Violence Initiative can be found at <http://www.cuyahogacountyohio.gov/childhoodviolence>.

health care for youth who are at risk of harming themselves or others due to mental illness or other developmental disabilities. More information on the Strong Families, Safe Communities project can be found at <http://www.samhsa.gov/4>.

5. National Child Traumatic Stress

NCTSN (NCTSN): Established by Congress in 2000 and funded by the Center for Mental Health Services, SAMHSA, the NCTSN brings together researchers, providers, and families to improve the standard of care and increase access to services for youth who are dealing with childhood traumatic stress. Several medical centers in Ohio have received grant money from the NCTSN. The Children's Hospital Medical Center of Akron, for instance, currently has a grant to teach medical providers in nine counties in Northeast Ohio how to treat traumatized children. More information can be found at <http://www.nctsn.org>.

Numerous programs have been created to prevent youth violence and promote healthy youth development. These databases provide a menu of various evidence-based programs.

1.Blueprints for Healthy Youth Development

Blueprints: Blueprints is a national initiative designed to identify violence prevention programs that meet a set of strict scientific criteria and promote healthy youth development. To date over 1100 programs have been reviewed, but only about 50 have been determined to meet Blueprint's criteria for effectiveness. A database of programs can be found at <http://www.nrc.ohio.gov/blueprints>.

2. SAMHSA's National Resource

