Children as Victims of Violence

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Violence against children and youths has always occurred, but it has recently been subject to increased public attention. This heightened attention is spawned by high-profile cases of stranger abductions, sexual assault, child abuse, and homicide, and by statistics suggesting an increase in the number of cases of child victimization. For example, newspapers recently reported that almost twice as many individuals under age 20 (5,500) died from gunshots in 1993 as in 1984.1 But deaths, while the most dramatic of victimizations, are only the tip of the iceberg. More frequently, children are abused and neglected by parents, assaulted by siblings, or intimidated by other children. When all of these types of victimization are considered as a whole, children suffer far more victimizations than do members of other age groups.

Children are more prone to victimization than adults not only because they are smaller and weaker than adults but also because they are dependent on adults for their day-to-day care and can seldom choose where and with whom they will live and spend time. Problems such as neglect, family abduction, and psychological maltreatment are strongly related to dependency, and these are much more common for children than for most adults. As children age, they become more independent, so the types of victimizations that they are most at risk for change, and the risks arise more from associations with other youths than from dependency on adults.2

The concept of children as victims brings together the disparate studies of child abuse, sexual abuse, kidnapping, and other forms of violence with studies of such victimizations as assaults by siblings and peer violence. This integration highlights the number of victimizations that children face and may make it easier to identify relationships among different kinds of victimization and to design appropriate interventions.2 Ultimately, however, defining and measuring child victimization as an integrative category of experiences is useful only if doing so leads to a better understanding of the
Defining Child Victimization

Although there is an emerging literature on child victimization, there is not a widely accepted definition of the concept. Yet, defining what is meant by child victimization is an essential step toward understanding and eventually ameliorating the problem. For the purposes of this article, children become victims when they experience involuntary physical, sexual, or emotional injuries, loss, or death at the hands of another human being, or when they are threatened by such actions against themselves.3 Children may be victimized by adults and other children, by family members (parents, siblings, other relatives), by friends and acquaintances, and by strangers. Activities producing victimization range widely in prevalence and severity. The most severe examples would typically be classified as crimes, but some behaviors are so commonplace as to be regarded as “normal.” Although the group of events potentially covered under the term victimization is broad, this article discusses only a limited number of types of victimizations because of space constraints.

Defining and measuring child victimization is partly a matter of social norms. For example, although nearly every culture might agree that an infant who is killed is a victim, the lines between justifiable disciplinary actions and abuse are not the same in all cultures. Categorizing victimizations may also require a judgment about the outcome or intent of an action, rather than knowledge of the specific components of the act itself; a determination of “intent” is needed to distinguish between an unintentional injury (an “accident”) and an episode of child victimization. The issue is also muddy in circumstances where children voluntarily engage in activities such as fighting which can lead to injury but where it may be difficult to distinguish between victim and perpetrator.4 It may be necessary to know about the circumstances preceding the event and the severity of the injuries sustained before a determination of victimization can be made.

Measuring Child Victimization

There is no single source of data about child victimization that is comprehensive and authoritative. Information can be obtained from administrative data and surveys of children, parents, or other adults. The three principal sources used in this Child...
Indicators article—the Uniform Crime Reports, the National Crime Victimization Survey, and the National Youth Victimization Survey—consider different kinds of victimizations of children and illustrate the strengths and weaknesses of different sources of information.

The Uniform Crime Reports (UCR), issued by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), is an administrative data set that provides information on serious crimes reported to law enforcement authorities each year.\(^5\) Data are compiled from monthly law enforcement reports or individual crime incident records and therefore provide counts of reported crimes for the nation as well as for smaller regions. An important limitation of the UCR is that, with the exception of homicide data, it collects no age information and thus can shed no light on other forms of child victimization.

Data about other forms of child victimization, particularly abuse and neglect, are frequently obtained from surveys of administrative organizations. These surveys appear efficient because they collect data only from a limited number of agencies and organizations, but they miss the many cases of victimization which go unreported. In addition, there are often wide variations among administrative jurisdictions regarding the kinds of cases reported and investigated. Because of differences in definitions and practices, the compilation of abuse and neglect data is uneven across jurisdictions.\(^6\)

Unlike administrative data sets, surveys that collect data from children, parents, and other adults in households and schools can provide information about many acts of violence that are not reported to authorities. The National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), an annual survey of households in the United States, is designed to provide a detailed, nationally representative picture of crime incidents and victims over time. The survey includes children ages 12 and up, and since 1986 has asked all children in this group directly about their experiences with assault, theft, and rape. Limitations of the NCVS are that children are asked the same questions as adults in the survey; no special effort is made to ensure that the children understand the questions or interpret them in ways that are relevant to their personal experiences. In addition, the survey does not interview children in private.\(^7\) In contrast, the 1992 National Youth Victimization Survey (92NYVS) was a household survey designed specifically to measure the scope, variety, and consequences of victimization for children. Two thousand children ages 10 to 16 across the United States were interviewed about their experiences with victimizations ranging from nonfamily physical assaults to kidnapping and sexual assault.\(^8\)

No matter how the data are collected, there are hurdles to overcome to measure accurately children’s experiences of victimization. First and foremost, violence is a sensitive, complex subject. Questions about family violence may lead to answers that are misleading or even false if the respondent does not trust the confidentiality of the data collection effort, is reluctant to admit to unsanctioned behavior, or has a biased perspective about what actually transpired. Capturing the complexity of situations involving child victimization is also difficult because circumstances vary widely from case to case. Partly because of these complexities, different surveys sometimes find widely varying estimates for roughly similar events.

Second, it is unclear who should respond to questions about children and violence. Until children reach a certain age, parents and caregivers are the only option. Data that come from these adults (whether reported to authorities or to a survey taker) will frequently not contain the complete picture of a child’s experience because these adults may be unaware of all instances of victimization children suffer. Moreover, when young children experience violence, the perpetrators are frequently their caregivers, who may not report episodes of victimization to which they are parties.

At some age, children are able to answer questions about their experiences of victimization themselves, but asking children
directly may cause anxiety or lead children to exaggerate or deny their victimizations. Questions, too, must be designed specifically with children in mind. Many of the nationwide, comprehensive surveys (such as the NCVS) have been criticized for using survey methodologies that are not designed for children. Because of difficulties in determining how best to get answers about young children’s experience, many surveys leave them out completely. As a result, other than the data collected in administrative data sets, there are very few national data on victimization of children under age 12.

Despite all the caveats, the data about childhood victimizations are useful. Among other things, they show that the rate of victimization of children is high and provide insight into patterns of homicide and other more common types of victimization.

Child Homicide
Since the mid-1980s, increasing numbers of children have been homicide victims, with most of the increase concentrated in the 15 to 17 age group. This trend is in contrast to the decrease in deaths from unintentional injuries in recent years. Homicides of children by their family, acquaintances, or strangers are often reported widely in the media, and policy decisions regarding child protective and other services are sometimes made as a result of a single, very disturbing case. However, to make good decisions and policies to prevent the homicide of children, it is helpful to understand how the nature of homicide changes with age.

The distribution of homicides, shown in Figure 1 using data from the Uniform Crime Reports Homicide Supplement, is far from uniform across age groups. Most children who are homicide victims are under age 4 or are adolescents. For the younger children, homicides are almost always related to the child’s dependence on an adult, and most are carried out by family members or caretakers. In fact, infants are more likely to be killed by a family member than any other age group in the population.

After infancy and toddlerhood, the likelihood of death by homicide decreases dramatically with increasing age until a child reaches 11. Children in this age range have the lowest homicide rate of any group in the population, as shown in Figure 1. In 1994, of the estimated 2,660 homicide victims under age 18, fewer than 20% were between the ages of 5 and 14. Many of the homicide deaths in middle childhood result from gunshot wounds: 38% of homicide victims ages 5 to 9 and 65% of victims ages 10 to 14 were killed with a firearm. These gun-related deaths, while the most severe outcome of an incident involving firearms, represent only a fraction of the suffering, harm, and other social costs caused by gun-related injuries to children.

Homicide rates increase rapidly with increasing age during adolescence, peak at 19, and then decline slowly with age. Most adolescent homicides occur at the hands of acquaintances, as shown in Figure 1, and many fewer are at the hands of family members, as is also true for adults. For adolescents, the growing availability of weapons, particularly firearms, appears to be a factor in the alarming homicide rate. Gun carrying has become such a problem in schools that, in January 1994, of 44 school districts represented by the Council of the Great City Schools, 60% used some sort of metal detectors or security systems designed to detect firearms in some way. In 1994, almost 80% of homicide victims ages 15 to 17 were killed with a firearm.

The Uniform Crime Reports include data only about child deaths that are reported to law enforcement authorities as homicides and therefore exclude deaths officially attributed to other causes which may actually be homicides. One recent study, using data from death certificates, estimated that as many as 85% of child deaths due to homicide were not recorded as such in vital statistics. A high proportion of these deaths were recorded as deaths due to injury or sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS). Because deaths from SIDS and injuries are highly concentrated among very young children, the UCR data may understate the homicide
Most children who are homicide victims are either less than one year old or adolescents. A large number of homicides of infants occur on the first day after birth. The homicide rate peaks at age 19 and declines with increasing age.

The distribution of homicides by age shows the changing nature of dependency as a child ages. More family homicides occur to young children than for any other population group, while acquaintances are responsible for a substantial number of homicides among adolescents and adults. Rates of homicide by strangers are low until the late teens.

There is reason to believe that the homicide rate for the youngest children is actually much higher than that shown here, because homicide deaths easily can be misclassified as sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) or unintentional injury. This is true especially for homicides at the hands of parents and caregivers.

rate among infants and very young children by as much as a factor of three. After adjustment for this undercounting, homicide rates among infants and very young children may be of the same order of magnitude as the rates for 17- to 19-year-olds, who have the highest rate of any age group.

**Personal Crimes of Violence**

While homicide rates are greater for adults than for most children (with the exception of older adolescents), Figure 2 shows that rates of victimization from personal crimes of violence—including rape, assault, and robbery where there is contact between the victim and the offender—are two to three times higher for 12- to 19-year-olds than for the adult population as a whole. Prior to 1986, the reported rate of victimization among 12- to 19-year-olds had been fairly steady, but since then there has been an increase in the number of victimizations reported for adolescents. One possible explanation is a 1986 change in data collection technique: 12- and 13-year-olds began to be asked directly about their experiences instead of having someone else answer for them. This change in data collection methods may account for an important fraction of the increase in the rate of victimization for 12- to 19-year-olds between 1985 and 1987 but is unlikely to be a factor in the increase in victimization in subsequent years. Other data showing a substantial increase in homicides in this age group since the mid-1980s suggest that the growth in the rate of victimizations of children shown in Figure 2 is real and not solely the result of more sensitive data collection efforts.

The high rate of victimization among children shown in Figure 2 is consistent with other data on the incidence of crime and other undesirable behavior. Studies of crime rates have found that, as the proportion of young people increases in a population, so does the rate of criminal activity. Age peers are the group that adolescents spend the most time with, so it is not surprising that rates of victimization are high too in this age group. In fact, adolescents who are involved in delinquent activities are at a greatly increased risk for victimization themselves. The reason for this relationship is not clear. Children who are involved in delinquent activities may be more likely to be placed in situations where they might also become a victim. Alternatively, children who have been victimized may become delinquent in retaliation. Of course, many children who are victimized are not delinquent.

As noted above, the NCVS does not consider the experiences of children under age 12, and it is not likely to capture a great deal of family or peer violence. Knowledge about these common child victimizations would be better if data were collected on young children and if surveys were better at counting family and peer violence toward children.

**Common Victimizations of Children**

Public attention to child victimization is most easily focused on the most severe but rarest types of cases, such as homicide, and blatantly illegal cases, such as theft or assault. Victimizations that happen to the majority of children, such as sibling and peer assault and verbal abuse, have often been dismissed as being part of growing up and do not receive comparable popular attention. While the consequences of these victimizations are certainly not as severe as those of homicide, kidnapping, or physical abuse, they represent the bulk of children’s experiences with emotional and physical harm from others. Unfortunately, they are difficult to learn about because they most often occur to children before adolescence, when it is most challenging to collect good information on victimizations.

Data from the 1992 National Youth Victimization Survey (NYVS) show that children experience more nonfamily and sibling violence than any other types of victimization except for corporal punishment. The great majority (94%) of the nonfamily
Data from the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) show the differences between the violent crime experiences of the different age groups. The survey collects data on people ages 12 and up. Personal crimes of violence include rape, assault, and personal robbery where there is contact between the victim and the offender. The category includes both attempted and completed crimes.

- Rates of victimization from personal crimes of violence are two to three times higher for 12- to 19-year-olds than for the adult population as a whole.

- Even though the elderly may be perceived as the population group most vulnerable to crime, adolescents experience far higher victimization rates.

- A change in the way the NCVS was conducted in 1986 may account for some of the upturn in the rate of victimization of 12- to 19-year-olds around that time. However, there is reason to believe that the substantial increase in the rate of reported victimizations for this age group in the most recent reporting period is real.

assault reported in the survey was from other children. As compared with an annual homicide rate of 0.012% among 10- to 16-year-olds, 22% of 10- to 16-year-olds in the NYVS had experienced a completed assault from someone outside their family in the past year, a rate almost 2,000 times the annual rate of homicide. Other surveys have shown rates of assault for children ranging from 6% to 32%.

Child-to-child violence is most likely to occur in places where children are in constant contact with one another. For example, victimizations that occur in school are common. The 1987 National Adolescent Student Health Survey, which surveyed 11,400 eighth and tenth graders, found that almost half of boys and a fourth of girls reported having been in at least one fight in the past year, and more than a third of students reported that someone threatened to hurt them during the past year. These experiences make the school day a frightening time for some proportion of students. The 1989 NCVS survey supplement on school crime found that 22% of students ages 12 to 19 feared being attacked at school, and 6% actually avoided certain places in their school for fear of being assaulted.

Observation suggests that the milder forms of sibling violence (pushing/shoving/pulling, kicking, hitting, throwing an object) are quite commonplace, and in fact, several studies of sibling violence report rates of victimization at the hands of siblings of 65% to 95%, with the higher rates found among younger children who appear more likely to use physical violence to settle disputes. For more severe forms of sibling violence such as beating up, choking, or being bodily thrown, rates from these other surveys (4% to 5% in the past year) are of the same order of magnitude as those reported for sibling assault in the NYVS.

Although data about verbal abuse are not collected in any of the major surveys of victimization, limited data collection efforts suggest that verbal abuse in some form or other is among the most frequently experienced forms of child victimization. A 1990 study of high school juniors and seniors found that 50% to 60% reported experiencing name-calling and teasing by a sibling within the past year. In contrast, about 44% reported being pushed, shoved, or pulled by a sibling, and only 5% reported being “beaten up” by a sibling. Similar rates of child victimization were reported in surveys of parents conducted by the National Committee for the Prevention of Child Abuse (NCPCA). In the 1992 NCPCA survey, 45% of parents reported insulting or swearing at their children in the past year, 53% reported spanking or hitting their children, and 4% reported more severe violence such as kicking, pushing, or biting their children.

**Conclusion**

The concept of child victimization, defined to include a broad spectrum of acts against children, is relatively recent, and whether it ultimately is proven to be a useful concept remains to be seen. The wide range of victimizations included in the concept may make it difficult to generalize about the experiences of children as victims. Moreover, in some circumstances it is difficult to divorce children as victims from children as perpetrators. Similar problems arise, however, with adult victimization: much of what is reported as adult victimization is actually two adult males fighting, and an important component of domestic violence is couples trading blows. Adult assault is more frequently sorted into victim-perpetrator categories because the criminal justice system investigates to determine who the victim is. For children, on the other hand, there is a tendency to minimize victimization by dismissing experiences of child-to-child violence as part of growing up, and of parent-to-child violence as discipline.

Ultimately, attention to and measurement of child victimization will prove useful if such activities lead to a better understanding of the interrelationships of different types of victimization and to more effective policies to reduce the frequency of child victimization. For example, public attention has focused on the substantial increase in the number of children killed by guns in recent years. Policies formulated to respond to this troubling statistic might give highest priority to gun control to contain gun-associated violence or to more severe punishments for youths who use guns. Policies developed from a victimization perspective, however, would acknowledge that gun-related homi-
cides are only the most severe and visible instances of a spectrum of victimization activities. Research and policies which focused on this spectrum of experiences might give higher priority to intervening at earlier points along that spectrum, such as when conflicts first begin. This might interrupt the chain of events that can lead to gun homicide and, in the process, reduce other forms of victimization as well.

The concept of child victimization assists in raising public awareness about the extent to which children experience victimizations in their daily lives. Acknowledgment that children are victims of violence from many sources, including from their siblings and peers, establishes the need to keep children safe and allows comparisons of different types of victimizations. It underlines the need for parents, teachers, and policymakers to be sensitive to children’s circumstances and to work against the trend of increasing victimization of children in the United States.

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3. This definition includes theft and other property crimes but does not include children who are victims of nonhuman agents such as natural disasters.
4. Making this distinction is also a problem for adult victimization.
6. For example, even though states are required to collect information about child abuse and neglect, and many voluntarily report to national data collection agencies, classifications of maltreatment vary among states. Evidentiary levels also vary among states, as do classifications of dispositions of investigations. Thus, comparing data from state to state is difficult. Ying-Ying Yuan, Walter McDonald Associates. Personal communication, May 1996.
7. The NCVS was redesigned in 1993 to improve the questions used to uncover crime, update the methods, and broaden the scope of crimes measured. The redesigned survey collects detailed information on the frequency and nature of the crimes of rape, sexual assault, personal robbery, aggravated and simple assault, household burglary, theft, and motor vehicle theft. It does not measure homicide. U.S. Department of Justice. The nation’s two crime measures. NCJ-122795. Washington, DC: DOJ, Bureau of Justice Statistics, November 1995.
12. See note 9, Greenfield, p. 17, Figure 17.
13. See note 9, Greenfield, p. 19, Figure 21.
14. The National School Safety Center. School systems represented by the Council of the Great City Schools: Use of metal detectors. Westlake Village, CA: NSSC, January 1994. In 1987, the National Adolescent Student Health Survey found that 3% of male students carried a gun to school at some time during the school year, and 1% reported carrying a gun to school


16. The category includes both attempted and completed crimes.

17. Underestimation is likely because of the survey's limitations for children, such as asking children the same questions as adults and not interviewing children in private.

18. See note 9, Greenfield, p. 19, Figure 23.


21. The data presented in this Child Indicators article are, with the exception of the homicide data, only for children age 10 and over, which limits their usefulness for considering the experiences of the younger children. The best data available on victimizations other than homicides for younger children come from the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect, which finds that between 1% and 1.5% of young children are the subject of reports of child abuse and neglect. This rate is likely to be lower than the actual rate, especially for the youngest children, who are not able to communicate verbally. National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect. *Child maltreatment 1994: Reports from the states to the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1996.

22. See note no. 8, Finkelhor and Dziuba-Leatherman, p. 416, Table 3.

23. A completed assault was an episode that included actual punching, kicking, hitting with an object, or threatening with a weapon.


