



Violence in the lives of children – what have we learnt from the Birth to 20+ Study

By Prof Shanaaz Mathews, Children's Institute (UCT)

Media Summary

Birth to Twenty Plus is a unique birth cohort study which started enrolling pregnant women from Soweto, Johannesburg, in 1990 and has followed them and their children for more than 27 years. This study reveals the extent to which children are exposed to violence in their homes, at school, in their communities and in their intimate relationships with peers and the long-term effects of violence in their lives.

Children hear gunshots outside their homes, see learners being beaten up by bullies at school, witness physical violence between members of their family, and hear about the rape and sexual assault of their friends. Only a handful (1%) of the nearly 2,000 children studied across their childhoods had not been exposed to severe forms of violence at some point in their lives.

Very large numbers of children are also the victims of violence. Two thirds of parents report that they regularly beat their 4 – 5-year-olds with sticks, belts, straps and shoes. More than 80% of children in their primary school years, and more than 90% during their secondary school years report being a victim of violence at home, school, in their community, or in their intimate relationships.

A third of children reported experiencing all forms of violence studied: exposure to violence in their community, in their school and at home; peer violence; being a victim of non-sexual violence, and sexual violence, with a greater proportion of boys (44%) experiencing this kind of pervasive violence. Violence is concentrated in the lives of mainly poor Black children, where criminal, community and school violence spills into their homes and leaks into their close relationships.

Children growing up in Soweto during the last two decades were likely to be exposed to chronic violence in all aspects of their lives with few safe spaces to provide respite. They are therefore at risk of becoming desensitised to violence, uncaring towards others and potentially violent themselves. In fact, the study points to already high levels of violent behaviour, with more than two thirds of school-aged children in the study reporting that they themselves have behaved violently towards others.

The study highlights that most children have been poly-victimized, and they experience increasing stress and helplessness. This can lead to poor mental health, impaired social relationships and substance abuse, with implications for their educational progression, work productivity and social stability.

Reducing both children's experience of and exposure to violence is essential to prevent the long-term negative consequences for children growing up in South Africa's townships.

Reference:

Richter L, Mathews S, Kagura J & Nonterah E (2018) A longitudinal perspective on violence in the lives of South African children from the Birth to Twenty Plus cohort study in Johannesburg-Soweto. South African Medical Journal, 108(3), pp.181-186.

Definitions:

Poly-victimized - When a child experiences multiple forms of violence across their life course