

Growing Up in Harm's Way

Child victimization develops into a scientific challenge

By BRUCE BOWER

Two young children drown after their mother straps them into a car, releases the emergency brake, and lets the vehicle roll into a lake. A teenage boy suffers a fatal bullet wound after refusing to hand over his new jacket to a gun-toting assailant of about the same age. A 12-year-old girl runs away from abusive parents, only to get abducted and raped by a man who befriends her.

Youthful victims of abuse and crime such as these appear in the media with numbing regularity. Politicians and public interest groups decry the violence and fear that infect too many young lives. National concern focuses especially on sexually abused children and contested memories of childhood sexual violations.

But outside the glare of the political and media spotlight lurks an even more disturbing reality, contends David Finkelhor, a sociologist at the University of New Hampshire in Durham. Scientists and mental health workers, in Finkelhor's view, know remarkably little about the extent, nature, and ramifications of child victimization.

Overall, national survey data indicate that, compared to the general population, youths from 12 to 17 years of age suffer more than twice as much violent crime, including physical assaults and robbery. More than half of all sexual assault victims reported to police are under 18 years old.

Moreover, 16- and 17-year-olds in the United States get murdered at a rate of 15.2 per 100,000, around 50 percent higher than the overall rate. The official homicide rate for children under age 5 approaches that for the general population, but it significantly understates the true rate of such murders, Finkelhor argues. Many infant homicides, in particular, are probably recorded as cases of sudden infant death syndrome or accidents, he maintains.

Moreover, the roughly 1 million official cases of child neglect recorded by law en-

forcement and social service agencies each year fall short of the actual number.

The lack of comprehensive statistics on the scope of abuse and crime experienced by youngsters seriously hampers research, according to Finkelhor. Moreover, investigators have intensively explored only a few issues, such as sexual abuse and child abduction, without examining how they relate to each other and to other forms of victimization, he holds.

"The need for new theory and research is vast and urgent and ranges from how children view victimization at different ages and how it affects them to what can be done to minimize their risk of being victimized," the New Hampshire researcher argues. "Many symptoms seen in sexually abused children, for instance, may not be specific to sexual abuse but represent general responses to different types of victimization and trauma."

This call to arms comes from a well-known investigator who since 1977 has studied sexual and physical abuse of children, including homicide. Finkelhor hopes his blunt assessment will help launch a new research field, which he calls "developmental victimology." Disciplines such as criminology, sociology, pediatrics, and psychology would join arms in this endeavor.

Developmental victimology, as envisioned by Finkelhor, contains two major research branches. One addresses the developmental changes that make children more or less likely to encounter certain types of victimization. For instance, cases of physical abuse resulting in death occur largely in youngsters under the age of 2, the risk of sexual abuse jumps sharply between ages 6 and 10, and handgun homicides rise sharply for ages 15 to 17.

The second branch concerns the impact of victimization at various points in development. The same brand of

abuse or neglect may inflict harsher psychological damage on toddlers and preschoolers than on older kids, Finkelhor suggests, but few studies have explicitly tested this possibility.

The behavioral fallout of victimization probably reflects a child's stage of development also, he adds. Consider sexual abuse, which tends to trigger overtly sexual behaviors in 2- to 6-year-old girls, inhibition and social withdrawal in older girls, and depression, running away from home, and drug abuse in teenagers of both sexes.

It's too early to tell whether developmental victimology will blossom across disciplinary boundaries. Finkelhor faces an uphill battle, especially since researchers lack a comprehensive theory with which to knit together diverse findings on causes and consequences of child abuse, asserts John E. Richters, a psychologist at the National Institute of Mental Health in Rockville, Md.

"I'm sympathetic to Finkelhor's position," Richters states. "The concentrated and sophisticated scientific activity that he envisions may be exactly what the field needs to bootstrap itself to a more solid footing on these pressing issues."

In particular, Finkelhor wants to move beyond the assumption of some criminologists that assaults, rapes, and other serious crimes mainly befall youngsters who court danger through delinquent and risky behaviors.

Many young children and teenagers fall prey to abuse, robberies, and assaults without ever having flouted laws or acted irresponsibly, he holds. For others, personal attributes render them vulnerable both to law breaking and to victimization, the New Hampshire researcher adds.

Some emotionally troubled girls, for instance, may seek approval within a peer group by committing delinquent acts. As a result, they cross paths with sexually predatory males who can cajole them into situations that provide a cover for rape.

To get a better handle on risk factors for child victimization, Finkelhor and New Hampshire colleague Nancy L. Asdigian analyzed data from a national survey of 1,457 youths between ages 10 and 16. Each participant completed an initial telephone interview and a follow-up phone interview from 8 to 24 months later.

Victims of assaults outside the family, which were often perpetrated by peers, reported academic problems and psychological distress, including sleep difficulties, feelings of guilt and hopelessness, irritability, and an inability to control one's temper. Boys cited many more nonfamily assaults than girls did.

A large portion of nonfamily assaults may, in fact, involve attempts by certain boys to enhance their reputations by beating up other boys seen as vulnerable to attack, Finkelhor proposes. Research-

ers estimate that approximately 9 percent of students in grades 1 through 9, or about 3 million U.S. students, encounter regular bullying by peers.

Consider international data on bullying. Among Norwegian and Swedish students in grades 1 through 9, typical victims of bullying are anxious, insecure boys who generally think poorly of themselves and are physically weak compared to their male peers, according to studies directed by Dan Olweus of the University of Bergen, Norway.

A similar pattern emerges for boys who routinely get picked on by bullies in the United States, finds Kenneth A. Dodge of Vanderbilt University in Nashville and his coworkers.

Bullies in the U.S. and Scandinavian studies act aggressively and impulsively toward everyone, including parents and teachers. They show little empathy for their victims and strive to dominate other people, Olweus argues.

This brand of violence exerts lasting effects. At age 23, former victims of regular bullying at school report depression and low self-esteem that derive partly from those experiences, he contends.

While boys are more often the victims of bullying, girls are more commonly the targets of sexual abuse. Finkelhor and Asdigian's analysis of the national data, as yet unpublished, portrays a rapid rise in sexual assaults on girls after age 8. As girls reach late childhood, they undoubtedly become more tempting targets for sexual abusers, the scientists state.

This notion coincides with evidence, gathered as part of the 1992 national survey, that 29 percent of all rapes involve girls age 11 years or younger.

Certain risk factors also raise the likelihood of violence within families. Physical assaults by parents, according to Finkelhor and Asdigian, increase if a child has a physical limitation or disability, engages in risky or reckless behaviors that parents presumably fail to control, or lives with a step-parent.

Some risk-taking behavior may represent a reaction to parental violence rather than a cause of it, Finkelhor notes. An unknown portion of physical problems, as well, may stem from early parental abuse or neglect.

Crimes against children often get erroneously tagged as less violent, less injurious, and less criminal than those endured by adults, Finkelhor contends. "The younger the children involved, the harder it is to consider the violence an assault or the taking of property a robbery, even if the behaviors and motives are almost identical to those of adults," he states.

Even child sexual abuse did not attract concerted public and scientific attention until the early 1980s.

A common image of violence among

young people focuses on mutual fights or scuffles that flare up without creating a readily apparent victim. Mutual fighting also occurs prior to many adult homicides and in some instances of spousal violence, but a victim and an aggressor usually stand out clearly. Finkelhor says that the research on bullying indicates that aggressive, domineering children pick fights continually with certain of their classmates, so there is often an aggressor and a victim.

The psychological impact of violence and crime on children must be taken seriously, Finkelhor says. Although in robberies children tend to lose relatively inexpensive objects, such as sneakers or even bicycles, the event may still pack a psychological wallop. Finkelhor adds, "For adults to tell a child that the stolen sneakers are not that important and can be replaced may be equivalent to the police dismissing the theft of a VCR with the comment that insurance will take care of it," he remarks.

Another widespread assumption holds that children, blessed with youth and resilience, quickly overcome a bully's punches or the theft of a valued possession. But a study conducted by Finkelhor and Sue Boney-McCoy of Eastern Connecticut State University in Willimantic indicates that children exposed outside the family to a "simple" physical assault—which involves neither a weapon nor physical injury—suffer increased trauma symptoms up to 2 years later, especially if they have a poor relationship with their parents.

The national longitudinal telephone survey of 10- to 16-year-olds revealed that trauma symptoms and depression frequently emerge after sexual abuse, parental assault, or kidnapping experiences. Trauma reactions include emotional numbing, intrusive thoughts and memories of an event, and avoidance of any potential reminders of it.

Genital assaults, in which an assailant hurts or tries to hurt a child's genitals by kicking or through some other means, may also cause more emotional distress than adults often assume. Nearly 10 percent of boys and about 2 percent of girls in the national survey reported experiencing a genital assault in the previous year, Finkelhor and his New Hampshire colleague Janis Wolak reported in the Dec. 6, 1995 *JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION*.

Boys cited the most depression and trauma symptoms after genital assaults. They usually declined to notify parents or adult authorities of these incidents.

Corporal punishment, notably spanking, stands as perhaps the most glossed-over form of violence against children, he adds. Physical pun-

ishment by parents often reaches the moderate level of violence observed in fights or assaults among youths, according to Finkelhor. Such violence, despite parents' good intentions, may prove harmful to a child.

Of course, this contention elicits a storm of controversy. During the course of a year, more than 90 percent of parents of toddlers resort to spanking or some other corporal punishment. This proportion remains high throughout childhood.

However, evidence now exists that preschoolers and older children subjected to regular corporal punishment engage in substantially more aggressive and hostile behavior over time, says New Hampshire sociologist Murray A. Straus.

Straus and his coworkers obtained corporal punishment data from a national sample of 3,780 mothers who were interviewed by another research team in 1986 and 1988. At the first interview, children ranged in age from 3 to 10.

A majority of mothers, particularly those with younger children, regularly used spanking or other physical punishment. They also reported significant increases in their children's antisocial behavior at the second interview, compared to other mothers.

This effect remained after statistically controlling for each antisocial behavior at the start of the study, family income, the child's sex, and the amount of emotional support and mental stimulation available at home.

"If all spanking stopped tomorrow, we wouldn't see a massive change in kids' antisocial behavior," Straus contends. "But these findings suggest that there would be a change for the better."

But the greatest problem may be severe, injury-causing assaults inflicted on children by their discipline-minded parents, contends Dodge. In a study of 585 children, tracked from ages 5 to 14, he and his associates find that those regularly exposed to severe assaults—which usually occurred in the context of punishment for misdeeds—develop much higher rates of antisocial behavior than other children, including those spanked without lasting physical harm from time to time.

What's more, approximately 12 percent of the children encountered severe physical abuse by their parents or caretakers, he says. Such incidents necessitated emergency room treatment or produced bruises or scars that lasted for more than 24 hours.

Further research, especially if it is conducted from a developmental perspective, will help to clarify how children respond to various levels of family violence, Finkelhor holds.

"We're getting to the point where the science outweighs ideology on issues of child victimization," he remarks. "I feel very good about that." □