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The Facts about Children and Violence

Over the next twelve months, around 3,500 children under the age of 15 will die as a result of physical assault and neglect in the world's richest nations. In Germany and the United Kingdom, two children die every week – three in France. More than 1 million children are trafficked across international borders every year. Over 300 million children in the world work – some of them in hazardous conditions, some of them forced. Street children fight for survival daily on the streets of Europe and Central Asia, exploited by criminals, dodging the police. One out of every ten schoolchildren faces violence at school – some of it so traumatic that suicide seems the only way out.

These figures from UNICEF, the World Health Organisation (WHO), the International Labour Organisation and the United Nations show that the children of Europe are as vulnerable to violence as any in the world. We can't assume that we are more developed or more civilized – the figures show we are not.

Behind every case that hits the headlines and shocks there are thousands of children who simply become statistics. Violence against children is hidden and corrosive. It destroys lives and potential and breeds societies that accept the unacceptable – that children can be punched, kicked, beaten, starved, taunted and tortured.

Violence has so many different faces, and can take place anywhere children spend their time – in the family, in the street, in schools, in State care and custody. Anyone who comes into direct contact with children is a potential perpetrator – parent, caregiver, relative, community member, an other child, school teacher, police officer.

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Some of the causes of violence:

Discrimination – Whether it is for reasons of gender, ethnic origin, religion, disability, disease or sexual orientation, discrimination legitimises violent behaviour. Discrimination in social, education or health services can result in ethnic groups, such as Roma, being socially excluded, increasing the vulnerability of children to violence.

Social acceptance – Countries across Europe have different thresholds of acceptance to violence. For instance, almost all countries accept corporal punishment as a means of disciplining children. These attitudes reflect the way that people react, both in their own behaviour and in the low incidence of reports of violence.

Poverty and social stress – Studies on child maltreatment deaths within the family in rich nations have found that poverty and stress, along with drug and alcohol abuse seem to be closely linked with child abuse and neglect. At its worst, poverty has proved an underlying factor in various world conflicts that have set communities against each other.

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Residential institutions

No one knows exactly how many children are in residential placements in Europe. The best estimates put the figure at around 1 million, but different standards and methods of compiling data make comparisons between countries very difficult.

And the classic picture of the child who has lost his or her parents and lives in a children's home is far from accurate. There are all sorts of reasons why children find themselves in a residential facility: their parents may be ill or temporarily unable to look after them, they may be the children of asylum-seekers, they might be held in police custody or prison, or they may have learning and physical disabilities.

Lack of data makes it difficult to assess the extent that children face violence in institutions, but increasing evidence of abuses and reports by child-care organisations are raising concerns that children – doubly vulnerable because they are alone in a strange environment – are clearly at risk.

The facts

- Cases of abuse in institutions have come to light all over the region. Ongoing investigations in Ireland and Portugal testify to sexual, physical and mental abuse over decades: in Ireland, the Government-established Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse received 3,000 complaints, 60 per cent of them from people over 50 who had been abused as children in residential care.
- In Belgium, the Czech Republic, France and Moldova there is no explicit ban on corporal punishment in institutions.
- Residential homes are often inadequate, unhygienic with poor heating and a lack of nutritious food.
- Much violence takes place amongst children themselves. A UK study on violence amongst children in residential care shows that half of the reported cases were between children including high-impact physical violence, such as knife attacks to kicks and punches, half were non-contact, such as vandalism and threats.
- Young people are often kept in custody with adults: according to the German National Coalition for the Implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, there is evidence of threat, blackmail and even rape. The Council of Europe's Anti-Torture Committee* noted that custodial staff have been seen to punch, kick or hit young people with batons in Croatia.
- There is evidence of police officers ill-treating children and young people in police custody in Albania, France, Georgia, Romania, Switzerland, and Ukraine.

* Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.

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- Children from ethnic minorities are over-represented in care and custody. According to the World Bank, as many as 40 per cent of institutionalized children in Romania are Roma, even though Roma account for just 10 per cent of the overall population.

What is being done?

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child puts governments firmly in charge of protecting children in care and bans the arbitrary imprisonment of children. It also stipulates that children should be treated sensitively and separated from adults in custody.

The Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers has adopted a recommendation setting out children's rights in residential institutions, including the right to a non-violent upbringing.

The European Union has passed a directive that child asylum-seekers be placed with adult relatives, a foster family or specially-designed centres in order to ensure their protection.

The Council of Europe's Anti-Torture Committee* has a mandate to inspect places where young people are detained.

An increasing number of States are recognizing the problems and are undertaking or allowing investigations into conditions and concerns about violence in residential facilities of all kinds.

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The Community

The world is a dangerous place for an unprotected child. Studies show that not one single country is exempt from violence in the community – although measuring the extent is difficult.

Poverty, crime and exploitation are everyday facts for many of the region's children. In Eastern Europe there are special risks: poverty creates a fertile ground for crime and pushes children and young people out onto the street or into cruel or illegal work, and many are attracted to violent and criminal gangs. Killings and wounding are rising steeply. Other children make their homes on the street and live from begging or prostitution, suffering violence from customers or the police. Poverty leads to exploitation, with organised crime profiting from misery by trafficking children for sexual exploitation or to work alongside criminals.

Even in the most structured areas of community life there can be hidden dangers. Children face violence in leisure time, in clubs and even in religious settings, such as churches. They can be made to train too hard or diet too much for sports performance, or face corporal punishment or sexual abuse by trainers or carers.

The facts

Statistics on violence in the community are difficult to find. More data is needed to help governments to act. The extent of trafficking and child sexual exploitation is still being investigated, and crime statistics only reveal the cases that come to light. The following figures aim to give a general picture of the situation.

- Gang violence has risen steeply in Eastern Europe. In the Russian Federation, homicide rates for young people aged 10-24 rose by over 150 per cent after the collapse of communism. Shootings more than doubled in Azerbaijan, Latvia and the Russian Federation.
- In the Netherlands, in 1995, young people aged 15-17 were four times more likely than adults to be victims of assault.
- In Bremen (Germany), gang violence accounts for almost half of reported violent offences.
- Of the estimated 10,000-16,000 on the streets of St. Petersburg, half are under 13 years. Around 10 to 30 per cent of them are particularly exposed to violence because they are involved in criminal activities, such as trafficking drugs or stolen goods; about 20 per cent of those under 18 earn a living from prostitution.
- Police routinely round up street children, and detain and charge them with minor offences.
- The London police identified 14 children who had been trafficked for domestic slavery in 2003.
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- Some Albanian and Romanian children are brought to Western Europe to work with criminal gangs for burglaries and other crimes.
- Since 1995, over 5,000 cases of child abuse by Catholic clergy have been reported worldwide. Thirty priests have been convicted of sexual abuse in France in recent years, 21 cases were recorded in the United Kingdom between 1995 and 1999, and 13 cases between 1994 and 2001 in Germany.
- Expert reports estimate that about 20 per cent of young people involved in sport are at risk from abuse, and about 10 per cent are actual victims.

What is being done?

International treaties, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the European Convention on Human Rights, set out ways to protect children – including their right to life and to family life.

Conventions by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) aim to stamp out cruel forms of child labour such as sale and trafficking, prostitution, and working in the army, in dangerous industries or forced labour.

The Council of Europe's most recent convention aims to stop trafficking. Its Cybercrime Convention gives police means to work cross-border to stop child pornography sites.

The United Kingdom has opened the first unit to protect children in sport, and the Football Association has set up an Ethics Strategy Group to tackle the problem.

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Schools

Most children in Europe get the chance to go to school every day. It is their chance to learn, to play, to get to know themselves and the world, and to build their future.

Today's schoolchildren are no longer likely to face cruel punishments from teachers – almost all of Europe now outlaws corporal punishment in school. But violence waits in the shadows – most often in the form of bullying. Children who are a little bit different – cleverer, bigger or smaller, or with a different-coloured skin or a different accent – can find themselves the target of taunts and attacks. Teachers too can become bullies or victims.

The high profile cases – the shooting of pupils by pupils or the suicides of children who could take no more – are proof that violence can have tragic consequences if it is not tackled in time. Safe schools are schools without violence, and schools without violence need to be developed and fostered by governments, teachers, pupils, parents and the community.

The facts

An European Observatory on Violence in Schools has been set up to collect data. Based at the University of Bordeaux in France, it covers Belgium, Germany, Italy, Spain, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.

But facts and figures about violence are always difficult to find. Many children are afraid to speak out, and the statistics can be influenced by the questions researchers ask or the size or nature of the group they choose. The following examples aim to give a general picture from different countries in the region:

- In 2000, a study in Georgia on child abuse and physical violence against children found that, of 4,382 children aged six to seven, 31.8 per cent reported experiencing physical punishment in schools, in 96 per cent of cases by school teachers.
- A 2002 survey in Armenia conducted by UNICEF among parents and children aged 7-18, found that beating and slapping are common in schools as well as in the home.
- According to a government report of the Russian Federation, 16 per cent of pupils suffer physical abuse and 22 per cent mental abuse from teachers.

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- Studies by the University of Bordeaux in France show that of 35,000 pupils questioned, 10 per cent had been bullied. Slovenian studies report 45 per cent of pupils being bullied. In 2004, the United Kingdom children's charity ChildLine announced a 42 per cent rise in the total number of children counselled about bullying over their telephone helpline – the biggest annual increase in the charity's 18-year history. Around 500 children call each year because they are suicidal.
- Girls are more often bullied than boys. Boys carry out 85 per cent of the attacks. There are very few studies on girls as bullies. Eighty per cent of violence is carried out by the 12-16 age group.

What is being done?

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child says children must be provided with a safe environment at school.

According to a table compiled by the campaign group Global Initiative, corporal punishment in school is in principle banned throughout Europe apart from the British Channel Island of Jersey, although there is no knowledge about whether practice is in line with the law.

Campaigns against bullying have been launched in many of the region's countries. Stars, such as David Beckham, Princess Caroline of Hanover and Crown Princess Victoria of Sweden, have given their support to bullied children.

The Council of Europe launched a Charter for Democratic Schools without Violence in 2004. It was put together by children from 40 schools in 19 European countries and adopted by more than 17,000 pupils Europe-wide. It sets out ways in which schools can react to violence and bullying in a positive way that involves teachers, pupils, auxiliary staff and the local community.

Programmes that involve the whole community and favour openness in the school environment are proving successful – especially when they are introduced before the climate of violence becomes too entrenched. Some countries – such as Sweden – are looking at new laws which put a legal obligation on school authorities to stop bullying and violence, and make it easier for students to lodge complaints.

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Family

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child calls the family “the natural environment for growth and well-being”, but studies throughout Europe paint a darker picture. Quite simply, for many children home is not a haven but a hell – the place where they face the most violence, yet the place where it is the least visible.

Society still hesitates to act against violence within families. Children are often considered the ‘property’ of parents, rather than people with their own rights to protection. Violent and humiliating punishment by parents and close carers remains lawful and very common in the majority of European countries. Harmful traditional practices such as female genital circumcision and honour killings are left unchallenged because of ignorance or a fear of offending.

Every day, many children across Europe are hit, kicked, threatened, ridiculed or isolated. If an adult were subject to any of these actions it would be a criminal assault in any European country.

The facts

These examples aim to give a general picture for Europe. Facts and figures about violence against children are always difficult to find. Many children are afraid to speak out, and statistics can be influenced by the questions researchers ask or the size or nature of the group they choose. Some issues – such as sexual abuse and some harmful traditional practices – are only just being documented: the vast majority of cases do not come to official notice.

Violence in the family

- According to UNICEF, two children die every week in the United Kingdom and Germany from maltreatment and three die every week in France.
- The risk of homicide is about three times greater for children under the age of one than for those aged 1-4. That age group, in turn, faces double the risk of those aged 5-14.
- A 2003 study of students in Croatia showed that 93 per cent had experienced violence.
- Most parents in most countries still believe it is acceptable to smack or slap a child.
- About 10 to 30 per cent of children in many States are beaten severely with belts, sticks or other objects: in some cases the abuse of children amounts to torture.
- Over half the Moldovan children interviewed for one study reported being harmed or injured.
- Three quarters of a sample of British mothers in the mid-1990s admitted to ‘smacking’ their baby before the age of one.

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Sexual abuse

- The most likely victims are girls, pre-teens or early teens and children with disabilities;
- Studies carried out in 14 European countries put the rate of sexual abuse both within and outside the family at 9 per cent: 33 per cent for girls and 3 to 15 per cent for boys;
- In 2000, a Romanian study showed that 9.1 per cent of children questioned said they had been abused and 1.1 per cent had been raped;

Harmful traditional practices

- Honour killings, where family members murder relatives they believe have acted immorally, have existed for centuries in Turkey and Albania;
- Young women have been killed by their families in Germany, the United Kingdom, and Sweden for refusing to follow traditional ways;
- Child marriage is still common amongst the Roma and has led to girls being forcibly married in Slovakia and Albania;
- In the United Kingdom, about 200 cases of forced marriage are reported to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office every year.

What is being done?

Reports show that Europe is ahead of other regions in taking measures to stop violence against children. All countries in Europe are quickly changing from a past in which violent and humiliating punishment of children was common and accepted. Sweden started the process of law reform half a century ago and became the first State in the world to explicitly ban corporal punishment in 1979. It is now also illegal in Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Latvia, Norway, Portugal, Romania and Ukraine. Other countries, which have said they intend to bring in a law against corporal punishment, include the Netherlands, Slovakia and Slovenia.

Law reform is accelerating. The European Court of Human Rights has issued a number of judgements that require laws against child violence to be toughened up in Europe and stressed that Governments have an obligation to criminalize non-consensual sex.

Programmes to promote good parenting are a growing trend in Europe. For example, in Moldova, parent education is being mainstreamed through the health-care system. In Serbia and Montenegro, mobile outreach teams and multidisciplinary groups for child protection have been set up in towns and cities using different professional skills and mobilizing the communities.

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Media

The media shape the way we see the world – and are in a frontline position to change attitudes to violence against children. Journalists, photographers, editors and programme makers act as the eyes, ears and voices of the public, and have a primary responsibility to draw attention to abuses of power and human rights. Through their work, they can encourage governments, the public and civil society to effect changes. They are uniquely placed to help people understand how to stop violence against children.

Reporting has to be ethical. Studies on the way the media report show that too often the focus is on horrific, one-off cases; that journalists too easily sensationalise; and that the tendency to exploit stories, rather than explain them, lets society ignore its responsibility in the case.

UNICEF's handbook on *The Media and Children's Rights* was produced to help media professionals working on stories about children to do so responsibly, protecting the child and pointing the finger at the relevant adults who failed in their obligations towards the child.

Organisations such as the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), recognise journalists' responsibility not only to report fairly and accurately, but also to reflect children's own opinions. Respect for child rights is part of the IFJ's professional code of ethics. It has also drawn up international guidelines on the subject to help media professionals (Putting Children in the Right).

What can journalists do?

- Generate debate on the issue of violence against children in our region by appropriate coverage of the issue.
- Respect children's privacy and protect their identity in such cases.
- Give children access to media to express their own opinions.
- Solicit the views of children with due respect for identity protection.
- Ensure effective investigative reporting is not compromised by protecting sources.
- Challenge governments on the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- Combat child abuse by 'de-sexualizing' the language used, and pointing out those being exploited are children.
- Work together with NGOs or people that the kids trust when gathering material.
- Encourage projects that involve kids – such as Children's Express news agency in the United Kingdom – and use material prepared by them.

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- Make an effort to tackle issues from the point of view of the child – for instance interviewing street kids about how they see their world.

What should journalists avoid?

- Sexual, violent or victim-focused journalism potentially damaging to children.
- Stereotyping and sensationalising material.
- Reinforcing prejudices and preconceived ideas that contribute to tolerance of violence against children.
- Fostering an image of adolescents or younger children as sexually mature.
- Portraying children as ‘villains’ (in reports about street crime, for example).

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Cyberspace

In years gone by, parents would worry about their children as they played outside, warning them against the traffic or the ill-intentioned stranger. Today the Internet has made the whole world a place of play and exploration for children – but it is a place that holds many potential dangers.

Children all over the world are using the Internet on a daily basis – and it should be a safe place for them to discover the world. But unscrupulous adults are all too quick to use new technology to exploit the young. Paedophiles and abusers are using cyberspace to “groom” young people: invading children’s and young people’s chatrooms to try and lure children into their power or to get a kick turning a normal conversation into something sexual. Many abusers try to meet the child or young person in real life – where they risk becoming real life victims.

Rapidly evolving technology is providing new pastures for criminals to exploit children. What used to be confined to computers can now be achieved through the new G3 generation of mobile phones and through game consoles. It has also given pornographers the power to disguise their actions – they can easily take photos of children in a non-pornographic situation (for example at the beach or swimming baths) and then use them in a sexual context.

And mobile phones can present other, more immediate dangers to children. Of course, they are a way for a child to feel safe and in contact with parents and friends. But they are also proving a new weapon for bullies – who can send insulting text messages, create online sites to harass someone, or get together to carry out a “flaming” attack when a group gangs up together and bombards another person with email or texts messages to their mobile phone. Cyber bullying is the new face of an old problem – and equally destructive.

The facts

The dangers of cyberspace are relatively new, and few statistics are available. Most information is anecdotal, but some studies have been carried out:

- In a study carried out by the EU in five countries (Denmark, Iceland, Ireland, Norway and Sweden) 11,000 children and parents were interviewed about their online use, and between 24% (Iceland) and 36% (Denmark) of the children said they had received unwanted sexual comments on the internet. Nine percent (Denmark) to 35% of the children had met a person online claiming to be their own age who subsequently turned out to be an adult.
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- The NGO Nobody's Children Foundation in Poland found out during a study in 2002 and 2003 that 56% of children interviewed had been induced into unwanted sexual conversations on the Internet.
- During the first years of the 21st century, at least 27 children in the UK had been raped or severely sexually assaulted after meeting a groomer in real life.
- According to statistics in the UK, 5.5 million children under the age of 16 own a mobile phone.
- In a survey conducted in the UK in 2005, twenty per cent of the respondent children had experienced some kind of digital bullying. 14% had been bullied through mobile phones, 5% in Internet chat rooms and 4% via email. Ten per cent of children had had a photo taken of them that made them feel uncomfortable, embarrassed or threatened.

What is being done?

New technology brings new challenges, and some of the phenomenon – such as bullying by mobile phone – are hard to combat by legal means. Awareness raising against the problem is the most common approach, but some steps are being made to stop harassment in cyberspace.

- the Council of Europe Convention on Cybercrime sets up legal provisions against child pornographers. It also covers internet or mobile phone use.
- It is now a criminal offence in the UK to arrange a meeting with a child, for oneself or someone else, with the purpose of sexual abuse. In the USA, it is an offence to transmit information about a person below the age of 16 for the purpose of committing a sexual offence, and in Australia the use of electronic communication for procuring a person under the age of 16 is banned.
- The private sector is getting more and more involved. Internet service providers are now blocking child porn and mobile phone operators are setting age limitations for certain services and blocking access to certain websites.

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