

“YOU FEEL LIKE YOU’RE NOTHING”

SUMMARY

Ending violence against children in England



A contribution to the UN Violence Study from the
Children's Rights Alliance for England and the NSPCC

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

In 2002 the United Nations Secretary-General appointed Paulo Sergio Pinheiro as independent expert to provide a global picture of violence against children and to propose recommendations for its prevention. The study offers a set of overarching recommendations and a set of specific ones, which apply to home and family, schools and other educational settings, institutions for care or detention, the workplace, and the community.

“There should be a way to get into that circle and break it up. I don’t know how, but there must be a way – otherwise it will keep going on.”



Our study on ending violence against children in England has been prepared in parallel with the UN study and, like it, looks at the different settings in which violence to children occurs, including the home, alternative forms of care, schools, public spaces and the criminal justice and immigration systems. The final section focuses on forms of violence that are not yet universally rejected – “traditional practices prejudicial to the health of children”, as the Convention on the Rights of the Child puts it.

The study of violence in England considers three elements: *What children experience*, *What children say* and *What needs to be done*. *What children experience* provides a literature review-based overview of the different forms of violence that children suffer in particular settings. *What children say* draws from existing publications, which give children’s views and voices, and also includes original material gathered for the specific purposes of this report. *What needs to be done* sets out some of the recommendations of the NSPCC (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children) and CRAE (Children’s Rights Alliance for England) on how to prevent or stop the different forms of violence that English children experience. This summary contains a selection of the 60-plus recommendations that are in the full report. Many of our recommendations reflect those in the global UN report; none contradict it.

Guiding principles

This report’s definition of violence is taken from Article 19 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child: “all forms of physical or mental violence, injury and abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse”. Like the UN Study, it also draws upon the World Health Organisation’s definition: “the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against a child, by an individual or group, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in actual or potential harm to the child’s health, survival, development or dignity”.

We define a child as a person under the age of 18 (Article 1, Convention on the Rights of the Child).

In formulating recommendations for law, policy and practice, we have taken full account of the UK’s human rights obligations – principally the Convention on the Rights of the Child, but also other human rights instruments.

Much of our report focuses on children’s views and experiences. We believe that the testimonies and recommendations of children affected by violence should be driving our efforts to end violence.

“No violence against children is justifiable; all violence against children is preventable.”
– United Nations Study on Violence Against Children

AREAS OF CONCERN

“I know that parents think hitting their children is a good way of making children do the right thing. But it makes children think of their parents as a scary person.” (Boy, 10)



Child deaths

What children experience

According to Home Office records, the annual number of child homicides in England and Wales has remained constant for almost 30 years, averaging one to two child deaths per week. Babies under the age of one have the highest homicide rate in England, Wales and Scotland – more than young males between 16 and 29, the next largest victim group – and the homicide rate for babies under one has actually increased over the most recent five-year period. The vast majority of child homicide victims were killed by their parents, particularly those in the younger age groups.

What children say

“I get nightmares before I get to sleep and am scared someone’s going to murder me.”
(Boy, 10)

The report’s recommendations include:

The primary purpose of Child Death Overview Panels and Serious Case Reviews should be to identify whether a death or serious injury could have been prevented and how best to prevent another similar death or injury occurring. The government should aggregate local findings and produce a national strategy for preventing child deaths from maltreatment. Where there is any element of state responsibility for child death, there should be an independent and public inquiry.

Violence in the home

What children experience

Physical violence: Research carried out for the Department of Health showed that 48% of four-year-olds, 35% of seven-year-olds and 11% of 11-year-olds were hit by their parents at least once a week. Over half of one-year-olds were smacked at least once a week by their parents. According to a prevalence study

conducted for the NSPCC in 2000, seven per cent of young adults experienced serious physical violence by their parents/carers as children, with a further 14% suffering intermediate levels of physical abuse.

Sexual violence: In 2005/06, more than 9,000 children called ChildLine about sexual abuse, with nearly two-thirds speaking to the helpline about rape. NSPCC research has found that 16% of young adults report experiencing some form of sexual abuse as a child.

Emotional violence: Six per cent of children experience frequent and severe emotional maltreatment during childhood, according to the NSPCC’s prevalence study. Eighteen per cent of children experienced humiliation and/or attacks on their self-esteem.

Witnessing violence: NSPCC research found that 26% of young adults had witnessed physical violence between their carers at some time during their childhood; for five per cent it had been constant or frequent. There were 17 recorded domestic violence attacks every hour in England and Wales, according to the Economic and Social Research Council Violence Research Programme. In 2004/05, nearly 20,000 women and more than 24,000 children in England were provided with refuge services because of domestic violence. This represented an increase of 16% for women and 13% for children over the last three years, according to Women’s Aid.

What children say

“Children need to be protected – they need to feel safe. We want to feel comfortable and safe and not worried or scared.”

“I think the worst type of violence towards children is verbal abuse because I think it lowers the child and makes them feel less of a person.”

The report’s recommendations include:

Government should remove completely the defence of reasonable punishment. This should be accompanied by a high-profile, long-term public education campaign on positive, non-violent parenting.

Children should have well-publicised access to local advocates who can offer them a high level of confidentiality (breaching only to prevent death or serious harm) and informed advice and assistance about their problems, including physical or sexual violence.

Violence and children living away from home

What children experience

Around 60,000 children are currently being looked after by local authorities. In addition, there are around 6,000 children in state-funded residential special schools, and others in boarding and further education institutions. According to a report by the Department of Health, children in residential accommodation are extremely vulnerable to violence of all kinds, including violence from other children. Disabled children are especially vulnerable. No one knows how many children are in private foster care, but estimates are put at 10,000.

What children say

“[Being restrained by children’s home staff] makes you feel like you’re nothing. People holding you down brings bad memories. It’s horrible.”

The report’s recommendations include:

All looked after children should have a legal right to a named and easily accessed social worker. All private foster placements should have to be approved and registered by the local authority.

Violence on the streets and in other public places

What children experience

The Offending, Crime and Justice Survey (2004) found that more than a fifth of 10–17-year-olds said they had been assaulted

within the past year. (Children were not encouraged by the survey to define parental blows as assault.) Sixty-two per cent of the 10–15-year-old victims reported that they had been the victim of more than one assault in the previous year. Among pupils in mainstream schools, only about one in eight victims of crime reported incidents to the police, according to the Youth Justice Board’s annual Youth Survey.

Up to 5,000 children in the UK are estimated to be involved in prostitution at any one time, according to The Children’s Society, with a female to male ratio of 4:1.

What children say

“They feel out of the community, so they do something against the community. If they felt part of the community and involved, then they wouldn’t take it out on the community.”

“After a while of being abused, you stop caring and you stop caring about your body. Sometimes you just don’t care if you’re safe or not.”

The report’s recommendations include:

Local strategies for crime and disorder reduction and youth provision should pay specific attention to violence between children and young people, consulting with both young victims and perpetrators. Greater resources should be given to youth leisure pursuits and to providing places for young people to meet outside their own homes.

All children should be exempt from prostitution offences, and effective supports, including exit strategies, should be offered to young people involved in prostitution.

Violence in schools

What children experience

The British Crime Survey reports that among children and young people, 56% of reported assaults with injuries and 62% of assaults without injury occurred at school. According to Youth Justice Board research, 23% of children have been bullied and 13% have been victims of an assault. Bullying is the most common reason for calling ChildLine, and more than 36,000 children called the helpline about the issue in 2005/06.



“The children were sick in detention. My daughter Sylvie said she was going to kill herself in there.”

What children say

“At school it’s like a war.” (Girl, 13)

“I’m getting bullied by so many people – I don’t think I can go on any more. I’m so unhappy.” (Boy, 15)

The report’s recommendations include:

Government must recognise that children who bully need positive and thoughtful interventions to help change their behaviour. Schools should be prepared to put in whatever effort is needed to achieve this.

Violence in the justice system

What children experience

Between 1994 and 2004, the number of children sentenced to penal custody in England and Wales increased by 90%; during the same period, the number of children and young people remanded in custody grew by 142%. In 2005, in England and Wales, there were 11,936 receptions of children into prison. As of August 2006, there were 2,892 children in custody in England and Wales – 83% were held in young offender institutions run by the Prison Service. The high numbers of children in custody have been criticised by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, the UN Committee against Torture, the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights and the Council of Europe’s Human Rights Commissioner.

Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) are used disproportionately against children: 39% were issued to children in England during 2005, yet 10–17-year-olds (the age at which children are held criminally responsible and can be issued with ASBOs) comprise just 10% of the population.

What children say

“Prison officers act as if they’ve got more power [than the police]. I’ve been twisted up and punched and stuff like that in here but I’ve never been punched by a police officer.”

The report’s recommendations include:

Only children who are a serious danger to others should be locked up, and only then for the period that they remain a danger. No children should be placed in penal custody – they should be in secure accommodation and remain the full responsibility of the local authority.

ASBOs should be abandoned in their current form, to be replaced by extension of the special educational system of assessment and statement of provision for the child.

Violence against immigrant and asylum-seeking children

What children experience

A 2005 study by Save the Children UK estimated that around 2,000 children were detained with their families every year in the UK for the purposes of immigration control; the length of detention varied from seven days to more than eight months. HM Chief Inspector of Prisons has consistently said that the welfare needs of children cannot be met in detention centres and has called on the Government to ensure that the detention of children should only occur in exceptional circumstances and only for a matter of days, in line with international law.

What children say

“The children were sick in detention. My daughter Sylvie said she was going to kill herself in there. She was crying all the time... she would be sucking her fingers and saying, ‘I’m going to kill myself.’”

The report’s recommendations include:

The UK Government must end immediately the harmful practice of placing children in detention, and ensure that alternative measures comply fully with its human rights obligations. Failed asylum-seeking/immigrant children should only be returned to their country of origin when the authorities are satisfied that their welfare and safety will be secured, and this has been subject to independent verification.

Children in the armed forces

What children experience

The UK shares the lowest minimum age of recruitment in Europe and enlists the highest number of under-18s of any European State. In October 2002, the Committee on the Rights of the Child expressed deep concern that about one-third of the annual intake of recruits into the armed forces are below the age of 18 years and that the armed services target children for recruitment.

The report’s recommendations include:

No person under the age of 18 should be deployed in armed conflict and the UK should withdraw its declaration to the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict. If young people are able to enlist in the British armed forces at 16, their training should be limited to the non-violent, non-combatative aspects of military life, separate from adult recruits.

Violence in the media and games and toys industries

What children experience

A 2006 survey by the teenage magazine *Sugar* found that 32% of respondents aged between 13 and 18 had opened a text message to find an X-rated video, picture or message. One in ten of the respondents had been asked intimate questions in internet chatrooms.

What children say

“I think that as violence does become more acceptable in media and films, it’s seen as an everyday occurrence... [young people] see it as okay in a sense.” (Girl, 16)

“People think that video games etcetera promote violence. This is rubbish. Children are smarter than it appears. Just because Kao Lung in Mortal Kombat punches his opponent in the face and his head comes clean off, doesn’t mean that an ‘impressionable’ child will do the same.” (Boy, 15)

CONCLUSION

This report contains over sixty recommendations for changes to current laws and practice. Most of our proposals are directed at the Government, but some have implications for local government or professional bodies as well. Some reforms will be more difficult to enact than others. All the proposals have the same end – to prevent or reduce violence against children – and as such we believe they all demand priority attention.

The report’s recommendations include:

Consistent measures should be taken to protect children from having unsupervised access to damaging images and messages, and more resources should be devoted to outreach work with parents, so they can engage with and support their children’s use of the internet at home.



Harmful traditional practices

What children experience

Female genital mutilation (FGM) is generally inflicted on girls between the ages of four and eight. The Female Genital Mutilation Act 2003 confirms the criminality of the practice and makes it illegal for parents to take girls abroad in order to inflict FGM upon them. However, there are concerns that information about the new law has not reached all the FGM-practising communities.

The Forced Marriage Unit at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office is notified of around 300 cases of forced marriage a year, but it is estimated that there actually could be as many as 2,000 per year.

What children say

“I was genitally mutilated with a blunt penknife. Afterwards, I haemorrhaged and became anaemic. This was attributed to witchcraft.”

“My father kept me prisoner in the house... and then started planning my wedding – to a man I had never met! He said I had to follow our customs, and there would be no discussion.”

The report’s recommendations include:

Government should campaign against FGM within communities in the UK, and should reform the law so that the threat of FGM constitutes fear of persecution under the Refugee Conventions. Arranging a forced marriage should be made an offence.



About CRAE and the NSPCC

The Children's Rights Alliance for England (CRAE) is a coalition of more than 380 voluntary and statutory organisations committed to the full implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. CRAE is one of the biggest children's rights coalitions in the world.

The NSPCC (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children) is the UK's leading charity specialising in child protection and the prevention of cruelty to children. In 1999 the NSPCC launched the FULL STOP Campaign, which aims to end cruelty to children.

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Ordering information

A free PDF version of the full report is available from www.nspcc.org.uk/inform, as are additional copies of this summary.

The full version of this report is available in hard copy for £20.00 from:

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