



# Asian Journal of Scientific Research

ISSN 1992-1454

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## Authorities Often Aware of Previous Incidents of Victimization Among Children and Adolescents, Report Finds

*Almost half of U.S. youth who experience violence, abuse or crime have had at least one of their victimizations known to school, police or medical authorities, according to a report in the January issue of Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine, one of the JAMA/Archives journals.*

"Childhood/adolescent abuse is frequently described as a hidden problem, and victimization studies regularly have shown that much abuse goes undisclosed," the authors write as background information in the article. "The hidden nature of childhood victimization has multiple sources. Clearly, children and adolescents are easily intimidated by offenders and fear retaliation. However, families, children and adolescents often wish to deal with crime and victimization informally. They sometimes fear the consequences of disclosure to authorities in the form of interviews and police and court involvement. In other cases, they do not perceive that victimizations as something that would be of interest to authorities."

To obtain national estimates of the degree to which authorities are aware of childhood victimization, David Finkelhor, Ph.D., of the University of New Hampshire, Durham, and colleagues conducted a national telephone survey involving 4,549 children. Between January and May 2008, interviews were conducted with children and teens age 10 to 17 and the parents of children age 0 to 9 years. Participants answered questions about five types of victimization: conventional crime, maltreatment, abuse by peers and siblings, sexual abuse and indirect exposure to violence (such as witnessing abuse).

A total of 58.3 percent of the children and teens reported at least one direct victimization in the past year, including bullying. Of these, 45.7 percent had at least one

victimization that was known to authorities. The incidents about which authorities were aware tended to be more serious -- for instance, officials knew about 69 percent of the cases of sexual abuse by a known adult, 73.5 percent of kidnappings and 70.1 percent of gang or group assaults. "However, even emotional bullying (51.5 percent), neglect (47.8 percent) and theft (46.8 percent) were often known to authorities," the authors write. The episodes most infrequently reported to authorities included peer and sibling assault, dating violence, sexual exposure/flashing and statutory rape.

School authorities were more likely to be aware of victimization events, with 42.3 percent being aware compared with 12.7 percent among police and 1.8 percent among medical authorities. This result "is understandable given how much time children and adolescents spend in school and interact with school professionals," the authors write. "Although police and medical authorities may conclude from these results that they are seriously underinformed about victimization, it is not clear how much victimization of children and adolescents merits the specialized involvement of these professionals."

The findings represent an improvement from a comparable survey conducted in 1992, in which 25 percent of cases of victimization among children age 10 to 16 years were known to authorities (compared with 50.6 percent among this age group in the current study). "However, the study

also shows that a considerable portion of childhood/adolescent exposure to victimization is still unknown to authorities," the authors write. "The study suggests that outreach needs to be particularly enhanced toward boys, Hispanics and higher-income groups. It also suggests that disclosure promotion should be directed toward episodes that involve family members and peer perpetrators."

Editorial: Society Must Face Problem of Child and Teen Victimization.

"In the current issue of the Archives, Finkelhor et al offer welcome news about increasing awareness by authorities of the cases of childhood/adolescent victimization over time," write Andrea Gottsegen Asnes, M.D., M.S.W., and John M. Leventhal, M.D., of Yale University School of Medicine, New Haven, Conn., in an accompanying editorial.

"Encouraging children and adolescents who have experienced victimizations to disclose these events, thereby connecting those individuals with authorities, is a laudable goal, but it is only one of multiple opportunities

for connection that are not optimized for children and adolescents in our society who experience trauma."

"That 58.3 percent of the children and adolescents in the study sample reported at least one direct victimization incident within the past year speaks to the enormity of the problem of victimization experienced by children and adolescents in our society. That the problem makes so many people uncomfortable is perhaps the first and most important hurdle to overcome," they conclude.

"We must recognize the scope of the problem of childhood/adolescent trauma and begin to look at it head on without blinking. Society then can and must accept the crucial connection between childhood/adolescent trauma and downstream social ills and act to maximize multidisciplinary collaboration and mental health resources to help children and adolescents before they become troubled, unhealthy adults."

Source:  
(Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine, 2011; 165 (1): 87 DOI: 10.1001/archpediatrics.2010.241).