

Violence in the lives of South African children

A longitudinal perspective from the Birth to Twenty Plus cohort study

Background

Violence against children is a significant cause of personal suffering and long-term ill health, poor psychological adjustment, and a range of social difficulties, including adverse effects intergenerationally.

Objectives

The overall objective of this project was to gain longitudinal perspectives on violence in the lives of children in South Africa. Specifically, the project aimed to analyse exposure to risk factors for violence among South African children over the timespan of childhood between pregnancy and 18 years of age through an analysis of data from the Birth to Twenty Plus (Bt20+) study.

Methodology

The study identified 280 data points relating to exposure to and perpetration of violence in 14 of the 21 waves of data collection from birth to 22 years of age. Data were classified into four developmental stages (preschool, primary school years, adolescence and young adulthood) and seven categories (exposure to violence in the community, home and school; exposure to peer violence; being a victim of violence, excluding sexual violence; sexual violence; and perpetration of violence). Both descriptive and inferential statistics were employed to analyse the data.

Results

Over the past two decades, only 1% of the sample had not been exposed to or experienced violence in their home, school and/or community. Two-thirds of children of school-going age were reported as having been exposed to community violence, and more than half of all children to violence in their home. Reports of sexual violence increased from 10% among primary school-aged children to about 30% among adolescents and young adults. Over the course of their lives, around 40% of children were reported as having been exposed to or being victims of five or six of the categories of violence coded in this analysis. High levels of violence perpetration were reported across childhood. Age and gender differences in exposure to and experience and perpetration of violence were evident, and all categories of violence were more prevalent among poorer and more disadvantaged groups.



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Conclusion

Very high levels of violence were reported in all the settings of urban South African children's lives: home, community, school, among peers, and in their intimate relationships. Children and youth were also reported to perpetrate high levels of violence. The personal and social costs of violence are very high, resulting in major public health problems due to its avoidable effects on short- and long-term mental and physical health and social adjustment, and intergenerationally.



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