

Knowledge protects

## The Optimus Study Newsletter

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### Closing gaps and building bridges



There is ample scientific evidence of the serious consequences of sexual abuse. However, there is little data on the frequency of incidents. The few studies available fall short of meeting the quality criteria required.

The UN's Study of Violence against Children (2006) concluded that sampling was by and large unrepresentative, that the variance between estimates was very high, and that most studies were conducted in industrialized nations. Dr. Jürgen Barth came to similar conclusions in his analysis of 52 studies from 24 countries (see p. 4).

Yet without sound data, it is virtually impossible to develop or evaluate measures of prevention or intervention in an evidence-based manner. Indeed, both the WHO and the UN stress the need for high-quality studies on child abuse. International research projects are required in order to better understand the influence of cultural and socioeconomic factors on the risks and consequences of child abuse. In addition, studies are needed that aim to identify those particularly susceptible to abuse. Finally, it is important to take a closer look at the organizations and services available to those who have already been victimized.

With the Optimus Study, we are actively working to address these gaps, and we wish to do even more. We want to give science a face, to stimulate discussions, and to build bridges between theory and practice – this newsletter represents our first step in that direction.

I look forward to receiving your input and feedback.

Dr. Patricia Lannen  
Project Manager, Optimus Study

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## The Optimus Study: Protection through knowledge

This large-scale multinational research initiative is laying the foundations so urgently needed to provide children with effective protection against sexual abuse.

Violence and sexual abuse against children and adolescents are prevalent in all countries of the world, across all social classes. Besides the immediate and intense suffering of the victims, these acts bring with them medium- and long-term health, social and macroeconomic consequences, not only for the affected individuals, but also for their families and dependents, and ultimately for society as a whole.

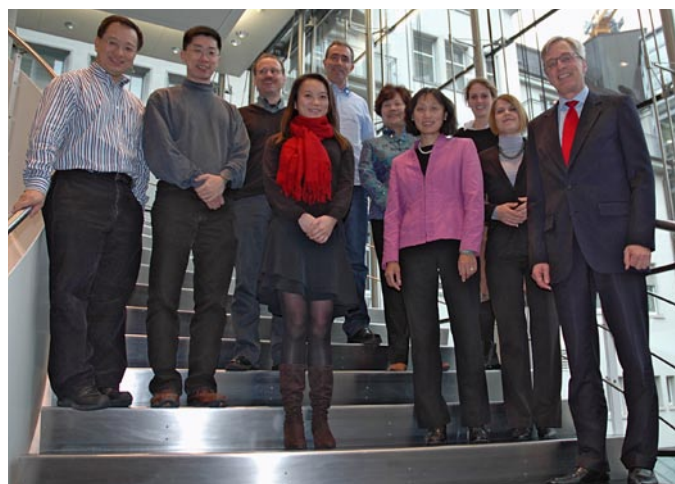
Most offenses are concealed. Societal taboos and the victim's feelings of personal shame compound the silence. Much remains hidden that should be shown the light of day. In order to develop effective, verifiable child protection and victim support measures, we must know more about the frequency, circumstances, risks and protective factors of such violence against children.

### Closing gaps

Indeed, scientific data are greatly lacking in this area. The dearth of information is lamented by several international organizations. UNICEF, for example, writes in its 2009 Progress for Children report: "Establishing reliable numbers for children and adolescents subjected to sexual abuse and sexual exploitation has proved to be a major challenge. It is probable, however, that the figures amount to millions, and that girls and boys of all ages and backgrounds and in every region of the world may be victims of sexual exploitation and abuse."

The UBS Optimus Foundation has set itself the goal of closing these gaps through the Optimus Study.

### The research teams from China and Switzerland



From left to right: **Dr. Edward K.L. Chan, Director of Research in China, Dr. Daniel Y.T. Fong, Dr. Markus Landolt, Dr. Elsie C.W. Yan, Dr. Thomas Maier, Dr. Agnes F.Y. Tiwari, Dr. Meichun Mohler-Kuo, Dr. Patricia Lannen, lic. phil. Ursula Meidert, Prof. Dr. Ulrich Schnyder, Director of Research in Switzerland**

This cross-national project should provide the scientific foundation for sustainable improvement in child protection. It focuses primarily on three goals:

**Establishing knowledge.** The frequency of incidents and the type of violence experienced by children and adolescents are being examined over a period of ten years in various countries and continents. In these studies, sexual abuse is not being considered in isolation, but in the context of other forms of violence. Specific cultural, risk and protection factors will be considered from which scientifically supported child protection and victim treatment measures can be deduced.

**Deepening knowledge.** The study will contribute to improving research by raising questions of methodology. The fact is that even today, the scientific community is still divided about many issues. These include: How is sexual abuse defined? How should surveys of children or adolescents be conducted? By including distinguished authorities on the Optimus Study advisory committee, conducting the individual national studies using pre-eminent institutes and through regular exchanges at international conferences, it will be possible to ensure that such questions are addressed, while at the same time advancing scientific research in this field.

**Passing on knowledge.** Through targeted cooperation with stakeholders, decision-makers and field workers, the Optimus Study is taking into account the concerns and voices of the various groups, thereby ensuring that the data collected are made accessible and are put to good use. The aim is to bridge the gap between science and practice in order to implement the scientific findings in practical measures, thus improving the long-term situation of the children.

The first major surveys are being conducted in Switzerland and China between 2009 and 2010. The findings will be available in 2011.

The study is being conducted in Switzerland by the University of Zurich, and in China by the University of Hong Kong.



General information about the study and detailed information about the national research work is available at [www.optimusstudy.org](http://www.optimusstudy.org)

“I wanted to be involved in such an ambitious and important project.”

Interview with Dr. David Finkelhor, Chairman of the Advisory Board of the Optimus Study

■ **Why have you decided to become a member of the Advisory Board of the Optimus Study?** Optimus is undertaking a very important project here. It will provide information about the distribution of sexual abuse in various countries around the world, and allow us to compare how different social environments generate and cope with this problem. This will advance science substantially, and I wanted to be involved in such an ambitious and important project.

■ **What is currently known about the prevalence of CSA worldwide?** There have been some international meta-analyses, such as one completed by the World Health Organization. They suggest widespread of CSA in virtually all regions where studies have been conducted. But there is very little data on comparisons between countries or regions.

■ **How do you define child sexual abuse (CSA)? Is there a consensus in the scientific community?** I define CSA as sexual activities involving a child that are coerced, unwanted or that are inappropriate because of the age difference or caretaking relationship with the child. There are some variations in how countries and researchers define CSA. For example, not all researchers count date rape upon adolescents as CSA, as I do. Countries also differ in their age of consent.

■ **What is known about risk and protection factors?** Risk factors include divorce and other family problems like substance abuse, mental illness, homelessness and domestic violence. Being a girl is often a risk factor in itself. Awareness of the problem and education are among the protective factors. This has been demonstrated in various studies, including ones conducted by me.

■ **Are there any methodological problems or open questions which need to be discussed by the scientific community?** We need to understand what kinds of interviewing techniques maximize the likelihood of getting candid and valid disclosures from young people. For example, in China the Optimus Study is examining the option of interviewing young people at home compared to interviewing them in schools.

■ **Does research in the field of CSA influence policy?** Very much so. Increasingly, policy makers are of the opinion that prevention and intervention strategies need to be evaluated before being introduced.

■ **Do you see any discrepancy between theory and practice? If yes, what can be done to remedy this?** These topics are very emotionally charged and tend to evoke rash responses before they have been properly understood or analyzed. Many countries have increased the penalties for CSA without assessing whether such changes actually help to protect children. Where they have a close relationship with the perpetrator, such legislative changes can even lead to children not confiding in anyone. Research is one way to try to moderate impulsive and potentially ineffective or counterproductive measures.

■ **What should be done to improve the situation of the children?** Evidence-based education and awareness for children, their families and their communities could help reduce the extent of this problem. Thus, informing children and families about CSA while they are still at elementary school makes it more likely that these children will actually report subsequent abuse. If organizations like the Scouts raise awareness among their staff, it is easier to prevent abuse occurring during such activities.



David Finkelhor is an internationally renowned researcher in the field of child victimization. He is Co-director of the Family Research Laboratory and Professor of Sociology at the University of New Hampshire. He has been studying the problems of child victimization, child maltreatment and family violence since 1977. He is well known for his conceptual and empirical work on the problem of child sexual abuse, reflected in publications such as ‘Sourcebook on Child Sexual Abuse’ (Sage, 1986) , ‘Nursery Crimes’ (Sage, 1988) and Childhood Victimization: Violence, Crime, and Abuse in the Lives of Young People (Oxford University Press, 2008). He is Chairman of the Advisory Board of the Optimus Study.

The Optimus Study is guided by an external team of experts. Its tasks include advising the Foundation on strategic questions as well as evaluating research applications and reports.

**The Advisory Board of the Optimus Study**

From left to right:

**Prof. Nico Trocmé, Canada**, Professor of Social Work at McGill University, holder of the Philip Fisher Chair in Social Work, Director of the Centre for Research on Children and Families. He is the principle investigator for the Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (1998, 2003 & 2008).

**Prof. Pasqualina Perrig-Chiello, Switzerland**, Institute of Psychology at the University of Bern, member of the Research Panel of the Swiss National Fund and of the Standing Committee for the Social Sciences, European Science Foundation, Strasbourg, editor of the Child and Youth Report Switzerland.

**Prof. David Finkelhor, US**, see previous page.

**Prof. Andrew Dawes, South Africa**, is an Emeritus Professor in the Psychology Department at the University of Cape Town and an Associate Fellow in the Department of Social Policy and Social Work at the University of Oxford. His current research seeks to strengthen evidence-based social policy, particularly in relation to child protection and early development.

**Prof. Mathias Albert, Germany**, Professor of Political Science at the Faculty for Sociology of the University of Bielefeld and Honorary Professor of the University of Aarhus/Denmark. Co-director of the Shell Youth Studies 2002, 2006 and 2010.



**An analysis of international studies proves that there is great need for improving research into the sexual abuse of children**

How many children are affected by sexual abuse worldwide? What and how many studies are available to provide information about this? Dr. Jürgen Barth and his team at the Institute of Social and Preventive Medicine at the University of Bern have looked into these questions.

At the request of the UBS Optimus Foundation, the team based around Jürgen Barth performed a meta-analysis of the international prevalence of child sexual abuse. The goal of the analysis was to gather findings from existing studies on the subject, to check their quality and to compare and compile selected results.

All studies published between 2002 and 2009 that dealt with the sexual abuse of children and where the child reported the incident or where it was determined by medical examination were included in the study.

Following a thorough review based on defined criteria, data from 52 surveys in 24 different countries contributed to the final analysis.

**Higher risk for girls**

The following figures for the number of children affected by sexual abuse were produced by the sum total of the studies considered:

	Girls	Boys
Abuse involving non-consensual sexual intercourse	7%	3%
Abuse involving physical contact	13%	6%
Mixed types	12%	9%
Data for abuse without physical contact can be derived from the original study.		

It is clear that the figures for girls are considerably higher than those for boys. "Being born a girl entails an increased risk of becoming a victim of sexual abuse," stresses the Director of Research.

These figures more or less tally with the results of other meta-analyses and studies in which adults were questioned about their experiences of sexual abuse during their youth. Despite this correlation, the results must be viewed with caution. "The studies differ widely with regard to the definition of sexual abuse," says Barth.

The differences in the determined frequency of abuse in the various countries were accordingly great, although no clear regional trends could be discovered. Besides the divergence in definition, no factor was identified to explain these differences in frequency. In this area, says Barth, more research remains to be undertaken.

### A great need to improve epidemiological and psychosocial research

One of the team's most important conclusions was that there is great potential for improvement in this field of research in terms of standardizing research methodologies.

In particular, the large differences in the definition of sexual abuse make it difficult to compare data. "Ideally, there should be guidelines in place on collecting prevalence data on sexual abuse as is usual in other fields of research," advises Barth. It would also serve matters if there were a central collection of studies to provide simple access to all researchers active in this field.

The lack or the comparatively low quality of studies from countries in the southern hemisphere and missing follow-up surveys was also conspicuous.

"The meta-analysis shows that there is still much to be done and that many questions need clarification. One thing, however, is certain and clearly evident: The extent of sexual abuse is so widespread that no one can afford to turn a blind eye to it," Barth concludes.

The Optimus Study seeks to improve research on child abuse and support the establishment of new standards.

### Conclusions

- Frequencies vary from one country to the next.
- Various studies define sexual abuse in a number of ways.
- Besides the various definitions, there are no verifiable factors that could explain the country-specific differences.
- There is a lack of high-quality studies for countries in the southern hemisphere.
- In principle, the data collected on prevalence tally with other studies.

### Recommendations

- Standardized research methodology.
- Standardized definition of sexual abuse.
- Creation of guidelines for collecting prevalence data.
- Establishment of a central collecting point for studies on this subject.



Dr. Jürgen Barth (on the left) studied psychology and initially practiced psychological psychotherapy. In 2006, after receiving his doctorate and PhD in Freiburg, Germany, he joined ISPM in Bern, Switzerland. As head assistant he deals with subjects connected with health-related and clinical psychology. His focus is on chronic illnesses, traumas and health-related resources. Jürgen Barth will be happy to answer any questions about the study: [mail@juergen-barth.de](mailto:mail@juergen-barth.de)

From left to right: Dr. Jürgen Barth, Director of Research, Lilian Bermetz M.A., psychologist, Dr. Sven Trelle (statistics), Tonia Thomy M.A., psychologist (scientific employee, not pictured)

UBS Optimus Foundation:

## A decade of international work in child protection

Established ten years ago by UBS, the UBS Optimus Foundation is a non-profit charitable organization whose philanthropic work is made possible by the donations of clients. The Foundation has been active worldwide in the protection of children for many years. It pursues innovative projects along its value chain to achieve maximum leverage. It trains its focus on subjects that attract little or no financing from other quarters, developing them further or replicating them in other locations. These include a prevention project in Scotland that seeks to change the attitudes of young men to violence against women and to encourage young women who have been the victims of violence to talk about their experiences. Another is the interactive prevention project "My body belongs to me", which is now being launched in Mozambique with attention to cultural differences after a successful pilot in Germany and Switzerland.

It is hoped that the Foundation's Optimus Study will also close a widely lamented gap. Because only when scientifically collected data on the occurrence of sexual violence against children are available can the impact of prevention and intervention projects be appraised in the future.

[www.ubs.com/optimus](http://www.ubs.com/optimus)



UBS Optimus Foundation

### Looking ahead to the next issue:

- The state of research in China and Switzerland
- Results of the pilot study in China
- Interviews with the head researchers
- Best practice: Prevalence study in Swaziland

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