

Child victimization in China



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UBS Optimus Foundation

Executive summary



Millions of children do not have adequate protection from exploitation, abuse or violence, as noted by the United Nations' World Report on Violence against Children. Violence against children is a pervasive global challenge and a leading cause of death and disability worldwide, particularly among adolescent and pre-adolescent girls. It is not only a violation of human rights; it also poses an enormous barrier to global health and sustainable development goals.

However, violence against and the abuse of children, including the sexual abuse of children, have yet to be consistently defined and measured, which impedes effective action.

The Optimus Study was conceived to address this problem – commissioning research that strengthens the evidence base and supports better policy, practice, programs and outcomes for children. The results of its research initiative in China are summarized here.

About the Optimus Study

Shedding light to prevent violence and protect children

The Optimus Study is a 10-year, multi-country initiative dedicated to revealing the magnitude and consequences of child sexual abuse in order to prevent sexual violence against children and improve services for victims.

Applying the best social-science research methods available, the Optimus Study team developed a model that uses standardized, population-based survey methods to determine rates and contexts of child sexual abuse in the population, as well as risk and protective factors. Thus the surveys yield insights into the magnitude of child sexual victimization, lending child protection advocates a framework to inform and influence policymakers and other child protection decision-makers.

The Optimus Study in China

As in many countries, the lack of reliable estimates about the prevalence of child victimization and sexual abuse in China masks the extent of the problem and undermines prevention efforts. Though further research is merited, results from the Optimus Study China reveal essential insights into the state of children and child protection in China.

Data collection

A two-stage, stratified sampling procedure was pursued in five geographically diverse cities – Tianjin, Shenzhen, Shanghai, Xi'an and Wuhan – and Hong Kong. The study team recruited a total of 18,341 students in grades nine through 12 from 150 randomly sampled schools from November 2009 to July 2010. The probability of selection was proportional to school enrollment size.

For the second stage, the team randomly sampled one to two classes from each grade in selected schools. All students aged 15 to 17 years old in the sampled classes were invited to participate in the survey. This age group was selected based on the assumption that its members would be able to understand and complete the self-reported items about

child sexual abuse. Participation in this study was voluntary, and all participants provided written consent and were briefed by trained interviewers in a private and quiet place before taking the self-administered questionnaire.

Findings

The study found that the overall lifetime and preceding-year prevalence of child sexual abuse was eight percent for boys and 6.4 percent for girls. Girls were less likely to report child sexual abuse than boys.

Risk factors

Having experienced other forms of child victimization, including physical abuse, was revealed as a risk factor for child sexual abuse. Several other characteristics were associated with greater risk of child sexual abuse as well, including being a boy, being older, having a sibling, having divorced, separated or widowed parents, or having an unemployed father.

Conclusion

This study provides reliable estimates of child victimization in China and strongly suggests a need to allocate resources to detect and prevent further abuse in health care settings in China. Further, the

strong associations between child sexual abuse and other forms of child victimization warrant screening for additional forms of child victimization once any one form has been identified.

Introduction



Protecting children: a global agreement, responsibility and goal

While global recognition of the need to protect children from sexual abuse is growing, considerable efforts are still needed to build knowledge, capacity and support mechanisms to address this challenge.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is the most widely ratified of all the human rights treaties.

Adopted by the United Nations and opened for signature, ratification and accession by the General Assembly in November 1989, the Convention establishes a universal set of basic standards and obligations that are necessary to uphold the human rights of children. The 193 countries that are party to the treaty and its optional protocols have committed to protecting and ensuring children's rights and to holding themselves accountable for this commitment before the international community.

Protecting children from sexual abuse is among the essential requirements articulated by the Convention. Yet violence against children, including the sexual victimization of children and adolescents, is a prevalent problem, responsible for a range of serious, long-term consequences for children and communities, as well as significant social and economic costs. Indeed, contrary to the duties outlined by Article 19 of the Convention, many countries fail to take the "appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to pro-

tect the child from all forms" of maltreatment.

Action and accountability

In 2000 at the United Nations' (UN) Millennium Summit, the world's governments gathered to adopt the Millennium Declaration, which reaffirmed the duty of nations "to all the world's people, especially the most vulnerable and, in particular, the children of the world, to whom the future belongs."

This shared responsibility to the world's people was articulated through the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Established by the UN in September 2000, the MDGs aligned governments, donors and development organizations in pursuit of a set of obligations, all of them relevant to the long-term health and wellbeing of children and each one focused on a meaningful objective, from establishing universal primary education to eliminating hunger and improving child survival.

Twelve years later, the UN Secretary-General announced that MDG targets on reducing poverty and expanding access to safe sources of drinking water had been achieved. In addition, many coun-

tries are much closer to enrolling all children in primary school. Progress towards polio eradication continues, and, from 1999 to 2005, child deaths from measles fell by 60 percent worldwide and by 75 percent in Africa. While far too many children, especially the hardest-to-reach and poorest children, are still denied the benefits of clean water, basic vaccines and a quality education, these gains have contributed to dramatic reductions in child mortality and serve as an encouraging reminder of what can be achieved.

An unfinished agenda

Because the MDGs will expire in 2015, governments and UN leaders are currently negotiating the next round of development priorities. As experts consider the accomplishments made beneath the MDG banner, a glaring and unresolved gap remains and demands their attention.

Millions of children do not have adequate protection from exploitation, abuse and violence, and even the limited available evidence supports this assumption. Though comprehensive and reliable data does not exist, 2010 World Health Organization (WHO) statistics indicate that approximately 20 percent of women and five to 10 percent of men report be-



ing sexually abused as children. Furthermore, physical abuse is reported by 25 to 50 percent of all children.

But unlike school enrollment and basic vaccination coverage rates, which are carefully monitored even in remote settings, there is no proper accounting for violence against children, and especially sexual victimization.

Indeed, the World Report on Violence against Children, published in 2006, was the first of its kind and was notable in part because it made clear how little the global health and development community knows about the causes and extent of violence against children. Many low-income countries cannot provide credible data about how violence affects its youngest citizens, and current data often depends on conclusions drawn from studies in high-income countries and anecdotal evidence.


The lack of knowledge that the global community and national governments have about child sexual abuse creates a considerable barrier to prevention efforts and a major obstacle to establishing global targets or assessing progress for the safety and welfare of children.

Defining child sexual abuse

Child sexual abuse is the involvement of a child in sexual activity that he or she does not fully comprehend, is unable to give informed consent to, or for which the child is not developmentally prepared and cannot give consent, or that violates the laws or social taboos of society. Child sexual abuse is evidenced by this activity between a child and an adult or another child who by age or development is in a relationship of responsibility, trust or power, the activity being intended to gratify or satisfy the needs of the other person. Examples include the inducement or coercion of a child to engage in any unlawful sexual activity as well as the exploitative use of a child in prostitution, other unlawful sexual activities or pornographic performances and materials.

(Based on 1999 WHO Consultation on Child Abuse Prevention)

Millions of children do not have adequate protection from exploitation, abuse and violence.



A lack of data is not just a difficulty: it is dangerous.

Basic elements of a mature child protection system

In a report comparing national child protection systems, researchers Leah Bromfield and Daryl Higgins put forth four critical elements of a mature child protection system.

1. A responsible statutory agency

Though many agencies, including the police and education and health institutions and NGOs, engage in child protection, ideally one organization holds primary authority.

2. A reporting system

Clear reporting obligations and systems are essential. In some domains, for example, all citizens are mandated to report suspected child abuse, while in others professionals who work with children are legally bound to report issues of concern.

3. A case processing procedure

A specified and reliable process of investigation, assessment, substantiation and intervention should follow a report of abuse.

4. A system for out-of-home care and legal provision

For children who remain at risk at home, the state needs provisions for removing children from the care of their parents and for alternative out-of-home care.

A dangerous dearth of data

WHO asserts that child maltreatment is complex and difficult to study, noting that current estimates vary widely depending on the country and due to the following:

- definitions of child maltreatment used
- type of child maltreatment studied (e.g. sexual or physical abuse)
- coverage and quality of official statistics
- coverage and quality of surveys that request self-reports from victims, parents or caregivers

The ability of child safety and development advocates to fully understand and prevent child sexual abuse or care for its victims is severely hindered by this weak evidence base. A lack of data is thus not just a difficulty: it is dangerous.

Why is data difficult to collect? In many ways, this is a topic that remains shrouded in silence. Victims often do not disclose the abuse because of coercion or shame. Families hide violence to avoid legal and social consequences. Concerned community members forego reporting because of uncertainty or fear of reprisal.

These dynamics partially explain the lack of robust, usable data sources. Existing

scientific studies are often too small to represent the broader population. Definitions of sexual violence differ from study to study and country to country. Data collection methods are diverse and include written surveys, telephone surveys and personal interviews, each with its own limitations and benefits. Even when the same definition of sexual abuse is applied, these studies cannot be used to compare the situation in different contexts.

Unknown extent, but known and considerable costs

Though the full extent of child sexual abuse is unknown, it is nonetheless a proven and recognized threat to optimal child health and development, exerting lifelong physical and mental limitations on its victims.

Reports indicate that survivors of child sexual abuse suffer from a wide variety of health problems, including depression and anxiety, gastrointestinal pain and sexually transmitted infections, such as HIV. Abuse can cause stress that disrupts early brain, nervous and immune system development. Victimization is associated with smoking, obesity, high-risk sexual behavior, unintended pregnancy, substance abuse, educational problems, dis-

placement and death. Criminal behavior and unemployment have also been linked to abuse. Importantly, children who are sexually abused are more likely to experience other types of violence or perpetrate it. Violence thwarts a child's ability to successfully transition to adulthood, and its adverse consequences linger into adulthood.

Beyond its devastating impact on a child's health and wellbeing, violence against children burdens society with enormous economic costs, including hospitalization, mental health treatment, child welfare costs, longer term health costs and loss of economic productivity. Over the course of a lifetime, such costs represent a significant economic burden, and research suggests that, just in the year 2008, new cases of child maltreatment in the US resulted in a lifetime cost of 124 billion dollars.

The need for and failure of child protection systems

Violence against children is often unrecognized and underreported. Only a fraction of cases are reported and investigated, and few perpetrators are held accountable. Weak child protection systems exacerbate these problems.

Child protection refers generally to the social and legal measures that a country uses to address child abuse, including laws, police procedures, legal protocols and social protection services, such as benefits provided to vulnerable or disadvantaged children and their families.

Though child protection systems vary by jurisdiction, effective child protection structures typically define protocols for reporting, investigating and substantiating abuse and establish access to services to help children recover from abuse and avoid additional abuse.

Protecting children: child sexual abuse in China

It has been difficult to assess the extent of the child sexual abuse problem in China, but rapid social and economic changes are offering new challenges and opportunities for addressing this problem.

Like many countries, China lacks comprehensive, reliable data about the prevalence of child sexual abuse. However, a growing body of academic research verifies that the sexual abuse of children is a problem in China, and children there often experience more than one form of victimization. Indeed, several studies show a high prevalence of beating and other forms of family violence.

Because of the considerable size of China's population, past studies include only populations from specific cities or provinces and are not broadly representative. Still, previous research indicates child sexual abuse rates of two to 14 percent.

Child protection in China

China does not have a reliable, modern child protection system. Public perception may influence this status quo. Researchers Ilan Katz, Xiaoyuan Shang and Yahua Zhang of the Social Policy Research Centre at the University of New South Wales suggest that there is little public recognition of child abuse in China. They have found that the majority of

Known maltreatment of children is generally denied and people are deeply reluctant to identify or report child abuse and neglect.

survey participants believe that child abuse rarely occurs, and it is not generally viewed as an important social problem. The historical and widespread acceptance of physical chastisement is a likely factor. There is also a shared belief that all Chinese parents cherish their children (a notion likely influenced by the one-child policy), which probably contributes to and sustains the perception that child abuse is uncommon.

Furthermore, known maltreatment of children is generally denied, and people are deeply reluctant to identify or report child abuse and neglect. In fact, no mechanisms to report abuse exist should a professional decide to do so. These re-

searchers report that interviews with teachers, doctors and police officers confirmed that "none of these professionals would report cases of child abuse under the current system, and, even if there was a mandatory reporting system in place, they would also be extremely reluctant to report any, except the most serious cases." They also found that, when confronted with a serious child abuse case, people usually call the emergency telephone line to report it to the Public Security Department. However, the research team found that this very seldom occurred, with only one case reported in recent years and no criminal prosecution pursued as a result.

No agency in China is tasked with child protection, though a number of agencies have responsibilities that could potentially include the protection of vulnerable children. For example, the national Ministry of Civil Affairs' Department of Social Welfare and Social Affairs is charged with protecting the welfare of older people, people with disabilities and children. However, its primary responsibility is for children who have no legal guardians, including abandoned and homeless children and orphans. Chinese justice departments are mainly concerned with

youth criminality, as are the public security departments.

Meanwhile, Chinese culture is experiencing rapid social and economic change. The community authorities in urban and rural areas that once responded to family problems no longer provide support. Mass migration to cities, altered family structures, an increasing incidence of HIV and trafficking of children, among other trends, have only made children more vulnerable. Katz, Shang and Zhang conclude that the combination of increasing need, limited resources and cultural reluctance to admit and intervene has created "a particularly challenging situation for vulnerable children in China."

Child protection challenges

- > No public recognition to limited recognition of child abuse in China
- > Acceptance of physical chastisement of disobedient children
- > Belief that all Chinese children are treasured
- > Deep reluctance to report abuse and neglect
- > No official mechanism to report abuse
- > Child protection not the responsibility of any one agency
- > Dramatic changes in Chinese society exacerbate risks for children



The Optimus Study China



Initial findings from five cities

Mindful of this context, the Optimus Study was launched in China to provide a comprehensive profile of the prevalence of child sexual abuse, as well as other forms of child victimization, and to examine the associations between child sexual abuse, demographic factors and other forms of child victimization.

Cities in China chosen for the Optimus Study



China's vast geography and enormous population make it impossible to identify a truly representative sample of China's children. However, the Optimus Study team sampled people in cities from different geographic regions to achieve a sufficiently large and diverse sample.

Five cities were chosen, including Tianjin in the north, Shenzhen in the south, Shanghai in the east, Xi'an in the west, and Wuhan in the central area. These cities represent a range of social, economic, political and cultural development, and can be differentiated from the sixth city sampled, Hong Kong.

A two-stage, stratified sampling procedure was employed. First, the team recruited a total of 18,341 students in grades nine through 12 from 150 randomly sampled schools between November 2009 and July 2010 in the six cities. The probability of selection was proportional to school enrollment size.

For the second stage, the team randomly sampled one to two classes from each of the grades in the selected schools. All students aged 15 to 17 years old in the sampled classes were invited to participate. This age group was selected based on the

assumption that its members would be able to understand and complete the self-reported items on child sexual abuse.

Participation in this study was voluntary. All participants provided written consent and were briefed by trained interviewers in a private place before taking the self-administered questionnaire. Participants were reassured that they could decline to answer any question or stop the interview at any time. To protect the identities of the participants, each questionnaire was assigned a record identifier. No information about the student's name, address or school was recorded.

Finally, institutional review boards for each research site approved all procedures. All interviewers were trained in the relevant ethical issues related to working with participants who are reporting violence. Where appropriate, participants were given information about violence prevention social services.

Child sexual abuse was measured using the Chinese version of the sexual victimization module of the Juvenile Victimization Questionnaire, which has been shown to be an effective and reliable survey instrument.

Findings

The team assessed the students' demographic background and their experience of child sexual abuse and other forms of victimization. The independent effect on child sexual abuse of each demographic factor and form of child victimization was examined after controlling for other variables.

A total of 18,341 students participated. Girls comprised 46.7 percent of participants. The mean age of participants was 15.86 years.

A high response rate of 95.8 percent was achieved because the participating schools were very supportive of the study and school officials encouraged students to participate.

During the analysis, the characteristics of the students who participated in the study were compared with those of students who refused to participate. No significant differences in sex, age and demographics were found.



The study found that overall lifetime and preceding-year prevalence of child sexual abuse was eight percent for boys and 6.4 percent for girls. Girls were less likely to report child sexual abuse than boys.

When child sexual abuse was split into 12 specific behaviors, a significant difference in prevalence rates by gender persisted. Again, fewer girls than boys reported having had an experience of victimization across all of the child sexual

abuse behaviors. The most prevalent form of lifetime child sexual abuse was sexual assault by a known adult, followed by nonspecific sexual assault, and forced exposure to pornography.

Risk factors

Several other characteristics were associated with greater risk of child sexual abuse, including being a boy, being older, having a sibling, having divorced, separated or widowed parents, or having an

unemployed father. These factors were all significantly associated with increased odds of child sexual abuse. There was no significant association with family income and the education levels of parents.

Lifetime experiences of all types of child victimization, such as physical or mental abuse, were significantly associated with increased odds of lifetime and preceding-year child sexual abuse.

Conclusion

The Optimus Study China provides a credible estimate of child victimization in China.

The study cohort included a sufficiently large and diverse sample from across China and found that almost one in 10 boys and nearly one in 15 girls in this study had experienced child sexual abuse by an adult during their lifetime.

Contrary to findings often yielded by Western studies, which usually find that girls are more likely to experience sexual abuse, this study reveals a lower prevalence of all forms of child sexual abuse among girls – a relationship that persists after controlling for other risk factors in the multivariate analysis. However, the



underreport sexual abuse, which may be considered as too sensitive in the context of Chinese culture.

The lower prevalence of child sexual abuse against girls in this study may reflect a true difference in the prevalence of child sexual abuse between China and the West. Parental supervision of children, especially girls, is generally strict and potentially influenced by the one-child policy. Chinese girls are more often expected to stay at home and be supervised by parents. A follow-up analysis published in Child Abuse and Neglect revealed, however, that evidence suggests that inhibited disclosure might also be responsible for the lower reporting rates in girls.

prevalence rate for boys in this study is consistent with the Western range of four to 16 percent. For participating girls, the prevalence is lower than the Western average range of 20 to 30 percent.

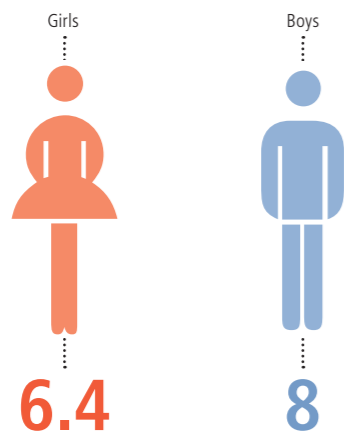
Experts have hypothesized that higher prevalence rates among girls generally may be due to the failure of identification and underreporting of child sexual abuse among boys. In this study, however, underreporting among boys relative to girls does not appear to be a concern. In addition, the male predominance in child sexual abuse prevalence reflects the higher rates of victimization of boys through other forms of violence, such as physical assault.

It is also important to note that school-aged girls in China may be more likely to

This study reveals a lower prevalence of all forms of child sexual abuse among girls.

Data source for this chapter: UBS Optimus Foundation (ed.) (2013): Sexual victimization of children and adolescents in China. Final report of the UBS Optimus Foundation, Zurich.

Lifetime and preceding-year prevalence of child sexual abuse (in %)



Participants
 Total: 18,341
 Girls: 46.7 %
 Boys: 53.3 %
 Mean age: 15.86
 Response rate: 95.8 %

Outlook



Implications

The Optimus Study China was one of the largest youth-based survey studies to investigate the severity of child sexual abuse and its association with demographics and other forms of child victimization in China. It provided the most comprehensive data set on victimization ever produced in China.

The study results have been published in several esteemed journals, including “The Journal of Pediatrics and Preventative Medicine,” and will be featured in forthcoming publications.

The findings suggest a need to strengthen child protection policy and practice. First, these results argue for a more generous allocation of resources in health care settings in China to detect, treat and prevent further abuse among affected children. Further, the strong associations between child sexual abuse and other forms of child victimization warrant screening for additional forms of child victimization once any one has been identified.

These findings also provide compelling evidence that child sexual abuse is a significant problem in China. In the interest

of child safety and welfare, China should strengthen existing child protection, including improving child victimization surveillance and family support, parenting skills and child welfare.

Finally, the study results affirm that child sexual abuse is a universal problem, no matter what the context. Global leaders are considering the post-2015 development agenda. This study, as well as others, argues for meaningful child protection goals for all countries.



Strengthening child protection in China

Resources

More resources are needed to detect, treat and prevent abuse.

Screening

Screening for other forms of child victimization is warranted when any one is identified.

Policy

Better policies are needed to improve reporting, surveillance, family support and outcomes.

Next steps

Building on the findings of the Optimus Study, further steps will now be initiated to advance child protection in China.

The UBS Optimus Foundation prioritizes child protection and, specifically, enhancing the evidence base for what works to prevent violence against children, and advances child protection through the following activities:

- investing in programs that significantly and measurably reduce violence against children
- developing locally relevant and cost-effective prevention programs that can be adopted and scaled
- contributing to the global understanding of the scope and magnitude of the problem in different geographic areas to influence practitioners, decision-makers and the public
- supporting the global community in practice that embraces an evidence-based approach to effectively combat violence against children

Based on the findings of the study, the UBS Optimus Foundation will begin funding pilot child protection projects in China in 2013. One such project, for example, will seek the establishment of an effective, national child protection system through key stakeholder re-

search with children and young people, their family and community members, government agencies, NGOs and a resulting advocacy platform.



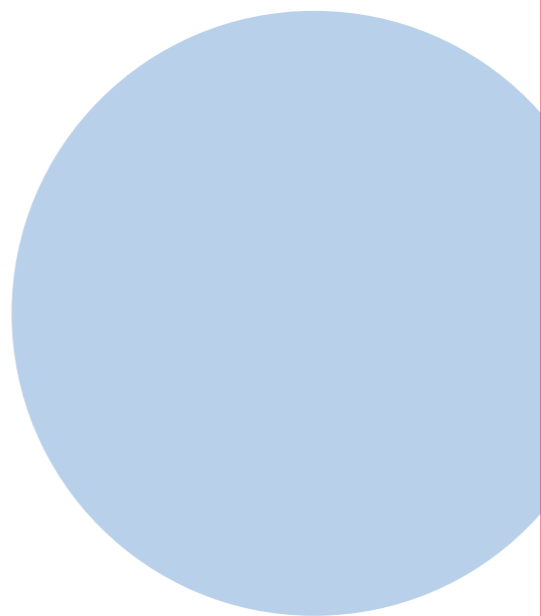
About the UBS Optimus Foundation

The UBS Optimus Foundation is an expert grant-making foundation established by UBS in 1999. The Foundation works to break down barriers that prevent children from reaching their potential by funding leading organizations to improve the health, education and protection of children.

The UBS Optimus Foundation supports projects in places where children face adversity. UBS covers all the Foundation's administrative costs so that 100 percent of all donations go directly to the projects.

UBS Optimus Foundation – a better future for children

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