

Violence Against Children in the Asia Pacific Region: The Situation Is Becoming Clearer

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Up to the year 2000, there was very little scientific evidence in this region about the scale of child maltreatment, its effects on children, families, and society, and the resultant economic burden. Since then, many agencies large and small, government and nongovernment, and university-based researchers have worked independently with diverse groups of people to measure violence, neglect and other childhood adversities and to understand the harmful consequences.

While the accumulated evidence is mostly patchy and the methodological quality is variable, there is now enough data to compose an overall regional picture. Guided by the UNICEF East Asia and Pacific office in Bangkok, researchers completed several systematic reviews between 2012 to 2015¹⁻³ and that work has been complemented by reviews focused on China and Australia.⁴⁻⁶

The *Asia Pacific Journal of Public Health* is making an increasingly important contribution to the evidence base on violence and other maltreatment in childhood, through publication of recent studies from China,⁷ Japan,⁸ Taiwan,^{7,9} Vietnam,^{7,10} and other countries.

There are 3 clear conclusions from reviews of published data from throughout this region.

1. *Violence against children is common.* No population group has negligible levels of child maltreatment. While definitions of violence and neglect vary, there are clear indications that emotional, physical and sexual abuse, neglect by parents or guardians, and exposure to domestic violence in childhood are experienced by many young people.
2. *Violence against children is shaped by local factors.* There is no “true” prevalence statistic that can be generalized to children across the region. Prevalence of different forms of violence varies considerably across countries, provinces, cultural groups, and social

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conditions. Likewise, there is wide cross-cultural variation in the profile of possible determinants and protective factors. This diversity in risk for boys and girls in Asia and the Pacific is at least as wide as has been found across the globe.^{11,12} Therefore, action within countries must be based on local evidence of the main threats faced by their children.

3. *Violence against children harms them and the society.* Evidence showing the impact on health and well-being from research in the Asia Pacific region is entirely consistent with international studies. The personal harms can be severe and lifelong. The mechanisms linking exposure to impaired health and then poorer educational, social, and economic outcomes are becoming better understood.¹³ Using a burden of disease approach, the best estimate for this region is that the economic loss from child maltreatment is substantial, averaging between 1% and 3% of national GDP per annum. Fang et al² estimated a total annual economic loss in the Asia Pacific of at least US\$194 billion due to the burden from consequential mental disorders and common health risk behaviors.

The recent systematic reviews are indicative rather than definitive. They are useful at the present time and have already been applied in advocacy work. However, they do not yet meet the need for sufficient scientifically rigorous evidence on which national governments can take action. In many countries, limited human resources are dedicated to monitoring violence. There are substantial gaps in evidence from Pacific Island nations, and across the whole region there is a paucity of information about how rates of child abuse, neglect, and exposure to other adversities are changing over time. Furthermore, there is a particular shortage of evidence regarding the effectiveness of primary and secondary prevention initiatives within family, educational, health, and other social services.

Among the many regional child rights agencies, the International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (ISPCAN) in particular has a pivotal role in child protection research, policy advocacy and professionalisation of child health and social welfare services. Multilateral agencies such as the World Health Organization, UNICEF, and Save the Children have significantly raised the profile of violence prevention. There needs to be deeper and broader coordination across the academic public health and child development sectors so that research transforms into comprehensive action.¹⁴

As we move to the Sustainable Development Goals framework from 2016, prevention of violence against children must become a higher priority for governments. This shift requires informed policy advisors and substantial investment in prevention and care program specialists supported by system-wide capability to establish and maintain violence reporting and response services. We need more reliable local data from epidemiological research to inform the design of effective interventions. There is much work to do.

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