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UNH Report Urges Multiple Initiatives to Reduce High U.S. Child Homicide Rate

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DURHAM, N.H. -- Children and youth are murdered in the United States three times more often than in any other developed country. Bringing that high rate down will require very diverse prevention efforts, according to a new report prepared by researchers at the University of New Hampshire's Crimes against Children Research Center and issued by the U.S. Department of Justice.

According to the report, "Homicides of Children and Youth," homicide is the only major cause of childhood death that has increased in incidence during the last 30 years. The report highlights the contrasting perils that children and youth of different ages face and that, the authors contend, require different prevention initiatives. Both older teens and very young children are at high risk, but for crimes of different sorts.

Among teens, victims are disproportionately males, killed by other young male offenders who use firearms, and often in conjunction with gang or drug activity. The young preschool victims, by contrast, are mostly killed by family members in beatings and suffocations.

According to David Finkelhor, director of UNH's Crimes against Children Research Center, "Programs that keep guns out of the hands of youth, or that train kids to foil an attempted abduction may do nothing to keep the young parent from shaking a child to death when the child refuses to stop crying." He says strategies to prevent child homicide need to be multi-pronged to be effective. "We will only reverse our sad reputation for killing kids when we address the risks on all these fronts."

The report, which Finkelhor authored along with CCRC colleague Richard Ormrod, also highlights substantial disparities in homicide risk among different groups of children and youth. For example, five urban counties were responsible for a fourth of all juvenile homicide victims in 1999, while 85% of all U.S. counties did not have even a single murder of a juvenile. African-American children face a homicide risk 5 times higher than that for whites.

The report also finds that middle childhood, the period from ages 6 to 11 years of age, is a time of unusually low homicide risk. Children of that age have outgrown some characteristics, like small stature and dependency, that make young children vulnerable to lethal force, but they are not yet involved in risky activities that help drive up the homicide rate for teenagers. By contrast, the report expresses concern that the homicides of preschool children may be seriously undercounted, because they are often difficult to distinguish from accidents and other causes.

"Long before the events of September 11, many children in America regularly felt in fear of their lives from violence," says Finkelhor. "We still have a long way to go before our children have the sense of safety that our level of prosperity, education and political sophistication should imply."

The full report, "Homicides of Children and Youth," will be available on-line at <http://ojjdp.ncjrs.org/pubs/new.html>

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