UNH Report: Recession Did Not Lead to More Violence Against Children

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May 13, 2013
UNH Report: Recession Did Not Lead to More Violence Against Children

DURHAM, N.H. -- A new study from the University of New Hampshire Crimes against Children Research Center shows that there has not been a recession-related increase in violence exposure among children and youth. The research tracking more than 50 forms of violence, crime, bullying, and child maltreatment from 2008 to 2011 found levels for most forms of violence either declining or near the same levels.

“Many observers expected that increased unemployment and housing foreclosures would translate into more youth problems through family stress and pessimism about future jobs and educational opportunities,” said study author David Finkelhor, director of the UNH Crimes against Children Research Center and professor of sociology.

However, rates of exposure were nonetheless high. More than one in 10 girls age 14 to 17 was sexually assaulted in 2011. One in 10 of all children age 0 to 17 was injured in a physical assault. One in eight of any age was maltreated by a caretaker.

“We usually hear about violence against children in single topic studies, like about bullying or sexual abuse or dating violence. But that ‘siloed’ approach obscures how massively children are exposed to violence and maltreatment,” Finkelhor said.

“Almost three out of five children of all ages had a recent exposure to one of the victimizations included in the study. Fifteen percent were exposed to six or more different kinds of victimizations in a single year,” Finkelhor said.

The study, the National Survey of Children’s Exposure to Violence, is a joint effort funded by the U.S. Department of Justice and the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, and carried out by the UNH Crimes against Children Research Center. The results are presented in the May 13 online edition of JAMA-Pediatrics in the article “Violence, Crime and Abuse Exposure in a National Sample of Children and Youth.”

The study was carried out by interviewing parents and youth themselves by telephone in 4,503 households around the United States. It was conducted by Finkelhor; Heather Turner, professor of sociology and research associate at the UNH Crimes against Children Research Center; Anne Shattuck, researcher at the UNH Crimes against Children Research Center; and Sherry Hamby, UNH Crimes against Children Research Center research associate and research associate professor at Sewanee, the University of the South.
The study pointed out that even exposure to less serious kinds of victimization, such as peer assault, can increase the risk of more serious victimizations, such as sexual assault.

“It’s not wise to cavalierly dismiss victimizations because they can escalate and accumulate quickly,” Finkelhor said. Findings such as this argue for more intensive efforts to comprehensively assess and monitor children’s exposure by physicians, educators, and child protection workers, the researchers said. They also say that prevention efforts are often too narrow and do not address all the perils that children face.

The UNH Crimes against Children Research Center (CCRC) works to combat crimes against children by providing high-quality research and statistics to the public, policy makers, law enforcement personnel, and other child welfare practitioners. CCRC is concerned with research about the nature of crimes including child abduction, homicide, rape, assault, and physical and sexual abuse as well as their impact. Visit the center online at http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/index.html.

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The full journal article can be obtained by calling 312-464-5252 or mediarelations@jamanetwork.org.

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