
Reporting on violence against children

A GUIDE FOR JOURNALISTS



World Health
Organization

Reporting on violence against children: a guide for journalists

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Violence against children: key issues

Every year, half of the world's children experience violence.

— Violence against children can be perpetrated by parents or caregivers, peers, romantic partners, or strangers.

— Most violence against children is carried out by individuals closely connected to the child.

— Children exposed to violence are at greater risk of mental and physical ill health that can last a lifetime.

— The impact of violence against children is severely underreported by the media.

— Stories featuring children are often sensationalist and tend to trivialize or stigmatize their suffering.

— Journalism on violence against children incorporates a wide range of subjects including public health, law, politics, and economics.

— Children's rights and welfare should always be prioritized, including while their story appears online or in print media.

— The “voice of the child” is a term used to describe children's wishes, feelings, and views about an event: journalists should always try to amplify the voice of the child.

— Solutions-based journalism (evidence-based reporting on the response to social issues) allows reporters to share existing evidence-based solutions to problems and can include a “call to action” to invite states and other bodies to act.



Introduction

There is a pressing need for journalists to understand the global health crisis that is violence against children, and the many forms of violence against children that exist. This will help this crisis to end.

This guide aims to support journalists in exposing violence against children through stories that inspire and bring about meaningful change. As an emerging discipline in journalism, finding people with an in-depth understanding of violence against children, and in its many contexts, is not always easy. This guide has been designed to help journalists find those people and amplify the voices of the many children who have been, and continue to be, abused.

The harm caused by violence against children does not disappear with time or the onset of adulthood. It is a deeply traumatic experience that can leave children with a legacy of pain and suffering into adulthood, affecting entire communities and countries, often for decades. Millions of children around the world continue paying the price for political instability and adult decision-making that rarely includes long-term thinking or the importance of integrating child-focused policies into all state sectors.

In a world where children are still largely seen as unimportant, reporting on these forms of violence can change that narrative. It can give children the visibility and legitimacy they deserve and can help to make violence against children a thing of the past.

The following pages set out how this can be done.

Chapter 1: Reporting on violence against children

Half of the world's children experience violence every year (1) yet it is an issue largely overlooked by the media. While governments continue to ignore child maltreatment, media outlets focus their reporting on violence against children in the contexts of war, conflict and slavery, allowing child maltreatment to remain underexposed and unchecked. While reporting violence against children as part of war, conflict and slavery is essential, child welfare journalism must also investigate less-visible forms of violence found in low-, middle- and high-income countries worldwide.

The good news is that there is a growing demand for empathetic, solutions-based journalism, rooted in evidence and able to build constructive responses to some of society's most urgent problems: violence against children is one of them. There is also increasing public sensitivity to the way children are treated and portrayed by the media.

The purpose of this guide

This guide aims to help editors and journalists understand the forms and complexities of violence against children, and their scale. It is designed to help journalists craft more in-depth stories on the subject and to identify opportunities to expand and sustain coverage of what is a critical public health issue.

It aims to guide journalists in exposing the harms caused by violence against children, and in exploring what can be done to prevent it. It also hopes to help enrich reporting on the subject through meaningful context and thought-provoking insight.

How the guide was developed

This guide is based on a review of existing guidance for journalists on how to report on violence against children, as well as interviews with journalists that have done so in the past. It served as the basis for a series of World Health Organization (WHO) trainings with over 50

In the following sections you will find:

- key statistics that show the scale of global violence against children;
- frameworks that can help tell the full story of violence against children;
- definitions of violence against children, and testimonies from survivors of such violence;
- helpful further resources for solutions-based journalism on the subject.

journalists from more than 20 countries in 2021. Training participants reviewed the first draft, and their inputs were subsequently included in the final guide.

The power of the media to expose violence against children

High-quality media coverage of stories on violence against children (and which gives audiences the wider context) can help protect children from experiencing such violence. By presenting credible information on children's exposure to violence, including by amplifying the voices of children and adolescents, and those that represent them, the media can help society adopt appropriate standards for treating and protecting them. This in turn can push governments to improve legal protection (through laws and their enforcement) and can help everyone – from parents, teachers, neighbours and children – to adopt norms and systems of protection that permeate daily life (2).

Why violence against children must be headline news

Wide-ranging, nuanced, and with consequences that can last a lifetime, violence against children includes all forms of violence against people under 18 years of age. It can be perpetrated by anyone from parents and other caregivers, to peers, romantic partners, or strangers. Most forms of violence against children are perpetrated by individuals who have a close connection to the child.



The magnitude of the problem

Corporal punishment of children in the home remains legal throughout most of the world, even though laws prohibiting the assault of adults in all settings are well established. Girls are particularly vulnerable to sexual violence. For example, the lifetime prevalence of childhood sexual abuse is 18% for girls, compared to 8% for boys (3). Additionally, almost one-third of young teenagers globally have been bullied (4). Finally, a quarter of children under the age of 5 years live with a mother who is a victim of intimate partner violence (IPV) – and it is known that children who witness IPV are more likely to be involved in it when they grow up (5).

The impact

Children exposed to these forms of violence are at greater risk of physical and mental ill-health that lasts into adulthood and causes irreversible, long-term damage. Children may suffer serious injuries, experience impaired development, engage in risky behaviours, or even die. Each year an estimated 40 150 children are murdered (of which 70% are boys), and at least 49 000 young people die by suicide (6). These deaths and other widespread adverse effects have far-reaching consequences for children, communities, and countries worldwide. The economic cost of this violence has been estimated to be between 2–8% of countries' GDP (7). Further, it erodes the ever-shrinking child welfare investments made by governments.

Despite the fact that the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is the most ratified international human rights treaty in history (signed by 196 out of 197 countries), children are still subject to violence.

Helping journalists tell the story

Journalists can shape how the world sees and understands violence against children. As well as exposing the problem, journalists can offer examples of evidence-based solutions and initiatives that have helped reverse the damage that violence can cause – and even reduce its prevalence (sometimes called “solutions-based” journalism).

However, at present, much media coverage fails to describe the impact of this violence, especially through the eyes that matter most: those of the child. It often ignores the deeper aspects of abuse, prioritizing sensationalism over substance (and often factual accuracy) to attract readers' attention – even though reporting on violence against children does not need to be sensationalist to make an impact.

WHO's groundbreaking [*INSPIRE: Seven strategies for ending violence against children*](#) (8) gives journalists a unique springboard for raising awareness about solutions to stop violence against children and enable positive change.

Solutions-based journalism

Solutions-based journalism works well when covering stories about violence against children because:

- solutions offer **unique story angles** (see story angles that follow);
- **effective interventions** to prevent violence against children are often pioneering and fresh;
- it provides a **child-focused** way to report on violence against children;
- it offers **in-depth insight** into the root causes of these forms of violence.

A helpful structure for solutions-based journalism is the **Centers for Disease Control's Public Health Approach** to tackling violence against children, which involves:

- defining the **type** of violence (see panel);
- **explaining why** the violence is affecting the child, community, or society as a whole;
- setting out solutions that **prevent the violence**; and
- showing **how** this solution has helped the child and wider society.

If you need country-specific data, WHO's [online country profiles](#) chart countries' progress towards ending violence against children. They collate inputs from over 1000 decision-makers in 155 countries who assessed their violence-prevention status against the evidence-based approaches set out in *INSPIRE: Seven strategies for ending violence against children* (8).



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Defining violence against children

There are many different forms of violence against children, and myriad ways in which children and their environments are affected.

Child maltreatment (including violent disciplining)

Child maltreatment (which includes violent disciplining) can come in the form of physical, sexual and psychological, or emotional violence by parents, caregivers, or other authority figures. It also includes the neglect of infants, children and adolescents by parents, caregivers, or people with a custodial relationship to the child. Maltreatment takes place most often in the home but can also occur in schools and other state-run settings. It is estimated that 300 million children aged 2–4 years regularly suffer physical punishment and/or psychological violence at the hands of parents and caregivers (9).

Children who are maltreated are at greater risk of being a victim of violence or perpetuating it, and of depression, smoking, obesity, high-risk sexual behaviours, unintended pregnancy, and substance misuse⁶. Additionally, parents who are struggling financially may experience increased levels of stress, which can trigger maltreatment.

WHAT ADULTS SAY ABOUT THE IMPACT OF MALTREATMENT IN CHILDHOOD:

in this poignant video series produced by WHO, survivors of childhood violence talk about how the abuse affected them, and which interventions they found helpful.

Sexual violence

Sexual violence against children includes completed or attempted non-consensual sexual contact; non-consensual acts of a sexual nature that do not involve contact (such as voyeurism or sexual harassment); sexual trafficking of someone unable to consent or refuse; and online exploitation. Girls are disproportionately affected by this form of violence and are more likely to experience IPV (sexual and/or physical); rape by acquaintances or strangers; child or early/forced marriage; trafficking for the purposes of sexual exploitation and child labour; and genital mutilation/cutting.

Sexual violence against children is not always reported to authorities. Furthermore, less than 10% of children who experienced sexual violence said they had received help from services, according to surveys in Cambodia, Haiti, Kenya, Malawi, Swaziland, United Republic of Tanzania, and Zimbabwe (10).

WHAT ADULTS SAY ABOUT THE IMPACT OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN CHILDHOOD:

adult survivors of child sexual abuse have shared their experiences of sexual violence with the [UK's Truth Project](#).

Emotional or psychological violence, and witnessing violence

Emotional violence against children can be described as restricting a child's movements, shaming a child, threats, intimidation, discrimination, rejection, and other non-physical forms of hostile treatment. Witnessing violence can involve forcing a child to observe an act of violence or the incidental witnessing of violence between two or more other people. It is estimated that globally 176 million children, or one in four children under the age of 5 years, live with a mother who is a victim of IPV (5). Children can be acutely affected by witnessing a parent, friend, or relative being abused. They can also suffer harm when forced to have contact with a violent parent or caregiver who only seeks custody to further control their partner or former partner.

These forms of violence can affect children's health and development and place them at greater risk of mental health issues and engaging in substance misuse.

WHAT CHILDREN SAY:

research from the UK in 2019 offered children's views on how witnessing IPV had impacted their lives and exposed the myth that these children are passive onlookers.

Bullying (including cyber-bullying)

Bullying is repeated and intentional emotional or physically aggressive behaviour by another person or group, usually where the relationship involves an imbalance of power. Children experience bullying by peers or teachers in a school setting, but increasingly it also takes place online, often as a continuation of face-to-face bullying. Journalists should be mindful that bullies may themselves be victims of abuse. Children who bully may have been bullied previously or may be suffering from mental ill-health or behavioural difficulties. Cyber-bullying is the use of computers, mobile phones, and other digital devices or platforms to post defamatory messages and online threats or hate speech including racist, homophobic and sexist content.

Pioneering research from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) published in 2019 shows that almost one-third of young teenagers worldwide have

been bullied. The data revealed that bullying affected children across all regions, and countries of all income levels. However, children from low socioeconomic backgrounds and child immigrants in wealthy nations were more affected than children from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. Bullying harms a child's mental health, quality of life, and academic achievement. Children are more likely to feel alienated from

WHAT CHILDREN SAY:

one study by academics at the Department of School Development and Leadership, Malmö University in Malmö, Sweden collected the views of 29 Swedish children aged 11–13 years to understand their thoughts on bullying and why they felt adult definitions and perceptions of bullying were inadequate.

their school environment, take days off school and leave formal education early. Cyber-bullying can result in short and long-term physical, sexual or emotional suffering.

Youth violence

[Youth violence](#) is defined by WHO as violence that occurs among individuals aged 10–29 years who are unrelated and who may or may not know each other. This form of violence includes bullying and physical fighting, as well as more severe sexual and physical assault, and homicide. An estimated 200 000 homicides occur among young people in this age group every year – constituting 42% of global homicides annually – and homicide is the fourth leading cause of death for people in this age group. Boys are most at risk of youth violence, making up 80% of the victims and the perpetrators of this form of violence (11).

WHAT CHILDREN SAY:

a [study by the University of Nebraska Medical Center](#) involving children who had engaged in youth violence and who had also experienced the justice system in the United States of America (USA) found that what the children wanted most was to feel protected. The study also found that while parents with violent histories often wanted a different life for their children, ongoing exposure to violent settings made it difficult for young people to choose an alternative way of life.

Youth violence can lead to premature death, injury and disability. It can also have a severe and often lifelong impact on a person's psychological and social functions. Youth violence increases the costs of health, welfare, and criminal justice services and reduces productivity.

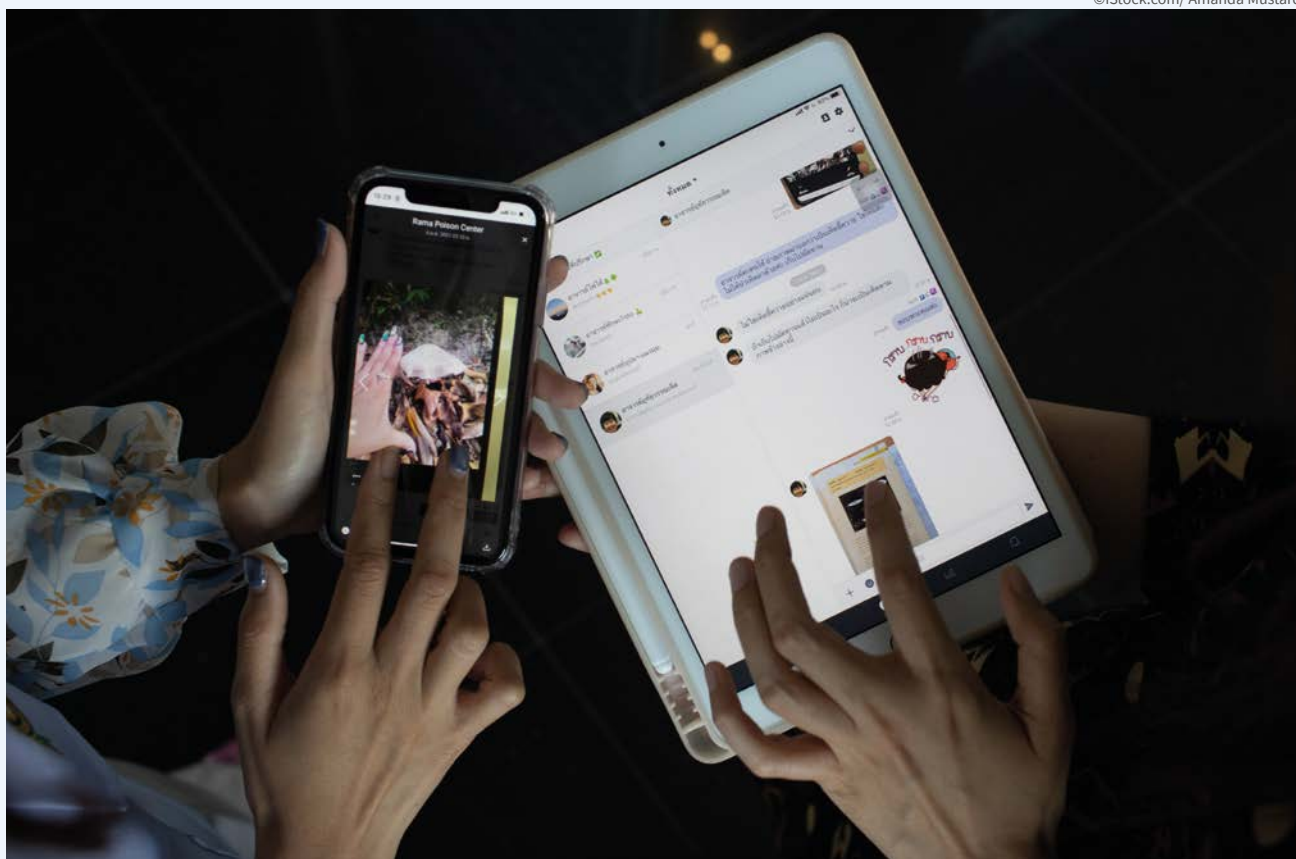
Intimate partner violence or domestic violence

IPV involves violence by an intimate partner or ex-partner. Although males can also be victims, IPV disproportionately affects females and commonly occurs against girls within child and early/forced marriages. It is sometimes called “dating violence” among romantically involved but unmarried adolescents.

IPV (or dating violence) among teenagers can negatively impact the healthy development of sexuality, feelings of intimacy, and sexual identity. It can also increase the risks of poor academic performance, substance abuse, unhealthy body image, physical injury, and engaging in violence in future relationships.

WHAT CHILDREN SAY:

Data about dating violence collected from children aged 9–12 years in the USA by [CDC's 2019 Youth Risk Behavior Survey \(YRBS\)](#) found that 8.2% of children reported experiencing physical dating violence, and 8.2% had experienced sexual dating violence.



Online violence (or technology-assisted violence)

Violence against children online, also called “technology-assisted” violence, is the use of computers, mobile phones, or other digital devices and platforms to access, threaten, and harm children. This form of violence includes live-streaming children being sexually abused, unsolicited sexual texts (“sexting”) and sexual blackmail, cyber-bullying, online grooming, sharing or creating explicit imagery, and child sex trafficking. There were 367 million new internet users globally in the 12 months to January 2019, of which INTERPOL estimates that 1.8 million men with a sexual interest in children are newly online (noting that not all will become sexual offenders) (12).

Harmful images and posts can be distributed widely and can circulate on the Internet for a long time and may resurface at any time. Research on how online violence affects children is limited, but it can cause severe and ongoing harm, including mental ill-health, risky and anti-social behaviours, and physical health difficulties (13).

WHAT CHILDREN SAY:

a [report by the United Nations Children's Fund \(UNICEF\)](#) includes the views of 490 children about the Internet, the benefits of the Internet for young people, and what can be done to make the digital world a safer place.

Using INSPIRE for solutions-based journalism

Using INSPIRE's seven strategies as a guide (see Box 1), journalists can explore in-depth the key causes of and potential solutions for eradicating violence against children. Potential solutions-based story angles could look like the following:

Box 1: Seven INSPIRE strategies

1. Implementation and enforcement of laws to prevent violent behaviours, reduce excessive alcohol use, and limit youth access to firearms and other weapons.
2. Norms and values that support non-violent, respectful, nurturing, positive and gender equitable relationships for all children and adolescents.
3. Safe environments where children and youth gather and spend time.
4. Parent and caregiver support to reduce harsh parenting practices and create positive parent-child relationships.
5. Income and economic strengthening to improve families' economic security and stability, reduce child maltreatment and intimate partner violence.
6. Response and support services such as good-quality health, social welfare and criminal justice support services for all children who need them – including for reporting violence – to reduce the long-term impact of violence.
7. Education and life skills to increase children's access to more effective, gender-equitable education and social-emotional learning and life-skills training and ensure that school environments are safe and enabling.

Angle 1: Child-focused laws to end corporal punishment

Laws prohibiting violent behaviours like sexual abuse or violent punishment of children signal that society considers these behaviours unacceptable. Such laws provide a way to hold perpetrators to account for their actions.

A story highlighting how policies allowing corporal punishment in schools are unjust is a powerful way to explain why this form of violence should be stopped. It also engages

QUESTIONS TO ASK INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING:

- *What laws exist to address corporal punishment?*
- *Are existing laws functional and operating at all levels?*
- *If not, what are the obstacles to effective implementation and enforcement?*
- *Are the majority of people aware of the law surrounding corporal punishment and violence against children in general?*

people who can introduce legislation to stop this practice – lawmakers at the highest levels of government.

+++ Example story: [*Representative McEachin: School corporal punishment is bad policy, and immoral too*](#) (Reuters)

Angle 2: Societal norms are linked to violence against children

Social and cultural norms can create a climate in which violence is encouraged or normalized, so strengthening norms and values that support non-violent, respectful, nurturing, positive and gender-equitable relationships for all children and adolescents is central to preventing violence against them.

Achieving this requires modifying deeply ingrained social and cultural norms and behaviours – in particular, the idea that some forms of violence are not only normal, but sometimes justifiable. It involves approaches like community mobilization programmes, bystander interventions, and small-group programmes that challenge boys’ often harmful gender and social norms.

Programmes that alter norms around violence can also lead to laws being passed to protect these changes. Examples of these norms include male peers coercing younger boys into gang violence as a “rite of passage”; girls and boys not reporting violence because of stigma and shame; and accepting child marriage as a regular and inevitable part of daily life.

+++ Example story: [*She was forced to wed at 13. Now she’s helped make child marriage illegal in NY*](#), NBC

QUESTIONS TO ASK INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING:

- Which societal or cultural norms enable the form of violence against children in your story?
- Why do parents and society at large engage in these norms?
- What are the barriers to tackling such harmful norms?
- What laws exist to address those harmful norms and are they effective?

Angle 3: Safe spaces protect against gun violence

Physical and emotional safety in public spaces allows people to move freely, access community resources, and fully participate in learning, working, and playing. Changes to the environment such as lighting, better walkways, and more welcoming buildings can help people feel safe, influence individual and community behaviour, and reduce the risks of violence against and by children and adolescents. Problem-oriented policing directed towards “hotspots” for violence and interrupting violent conflicts by stopping retaliatory violence can also improve safety.



Incorporating information into stories about effective anti-violence programmes such as [Cure Violence](#) can raise awareness of existing knowledge on how to stop violence against children. The model uses the analogy that violence is contagious and can be prevented and reduced using the same methods associated with disease control.

+++ Example story: [Cure violence in Honduras](#)

QUESTIONS TO ASK INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING:

- *Has the country or area in your story seen an increase in violence, and if so, why?*
- *How can you create an environment that is safe for children?*
- *What are examples of safe environments, and what enabled this?*

Angle 4: Parent and caregiver support stems child abuse and neglect

Helping parents and caregivers use positive, non-violent methods of discipline as their children grow up provides many benefits, including fostering healthy bonds between the parent/carer and child (14). Parent and caregiver support can be provided through parent training programmes delivered during home visits or in groups. In these approaches, parents are educated on child development and effective parent-child communication on sensitive topics.

Supporting families, parents and caregivers to

QUESTIONS TO ASK INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING:

- *Are the parents in your story struggling with pressures stemming from poverty, addiction or mental health concerns?*
- *Do government policies exist describing home visit or group-based parenting support?*
- *Are evidence-based, free-of-charge parenting interventions being offered to parents?*

practice positive parenting helps prevent child separation, the risk of child maltreatment at home, and witnessing IPV.

+++ Example story: [Parenting for Lifelong Health Video](#)

Angle 5: Cash transfers can lift families out of poverty

Improving families' economic security and stability can reduce IPV and child maltreatment (15). It involves schemes such as cash transfers to families in combination with parent training (and/or on condition that they ensure their children attend school). It can also come in the form of microfinance in combination with education for men and women on gender norms, domestic violence and sexuality.

In the past two decades, governments in low- and middle-income countries have invested more and more in cash transfers – direct and regular cash payments that increase incomes for vulnerable households. When cash transfers are provided for women in conjunction with another intervention, such as parent training, they have been shown to improve parental monitoring, reduce child maltreatment and increase prosocial behaviour that is positive, helpful, and intended to promote social acceptance and friendship among adolescent boys.

+++ Example story: [Cash transfers and child violence](#), The Star, Kenya

QUESTIONS TO ASK INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING:

- Does the area or country in your story offer cash transfers for families?
- What are the most effective forms of cash transfer?
- What are the obstacles to implementing cash transfers and how can they be overcome?
- How have cash transfers benefitted children in the short and long term?

Angle 6: Support services for children who experience sexual violence

Access to good, social welfare and criminal justice support services for all children who need them – including for reporting violence – reduce the long-term impact of violence. Accessing care and the right services at the right time can help children and adolescents who experience violence go on to thrive – though these services are less likely to be readily available in low- and middle-income countries. Additionally, many support services for children who have been

QUESTIONS TO ASK INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING:

- How many support services tailored specifically to children exist in the area or country in your story?
- Does the initiative use a joined-up service model to enable an effective multi-disciplinary approach to supporting children?
- Is the service cost-effective?

sexually abused still incorporate models designed for adults rather than children.

Iceland's pioneering Barnahus model — which brings together a range of services in a child-friendly setting to support children who have been sexually abused — recognizes the importance of multi-agency cooperation and the need to deliver support in a way that is comfortable for the child. Finding cutting-edge, evidence-based models that work for children is an excellent way to frame problems such as a lack of government funding and social inequality.

+++ Example story: [What is a Barnahus, and why is it needed in Scotland?](#) (Holyrood)

Angle 7: Education can protect children against violence

Access to education protects children against several forms of violence, including childhood sexual violence, youth violence, IPV, and childhood marriage. Access includes increasing enrolment in pre-school, primary and secondary schools; establishing safe and enabling school environments; and improving children's knowledge about sexual abuse and how to protect themselves against it.

QUESTIONS TO ASK INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING:

- *How has a lack of access to schooling enabled violence against the children in your story?*
- *Are there violence-prevention programmes in place in schools?*
- *What initiatives exist to ensure education is delivered and what impact has this had on the children who received support?*

Schools can also offer children safe spaces to learn about positive social behaviours that can prevent violence within educational settings and their communities.

India's [Schools of Equality programme](#) gives children the educational tools they need to change often ingrained attitudes about gender-based violence and forms of social injustice. Stories that focus on educational programmes making a difference in children's lives and protecting them from violence can create a “viral” effect, allowing other countries worldwide to be inspired by the programmes and consider implementing similar strategies of their own.

+++ Example story: [Teaching gender equality in India](#) (Positive News)

Journalists can use hooks alongside — or to complement — story angles. Inspiration for hooks can be found in upcoming political events, pioneering research announcements, or child-focused national and international days. [The United Nations International Days and Weeks calendar](#) offers an excellent summary of these events. Journalists can also use the interactive website from [Awareness Days](#) to search for upcoming awareness days and months worldwide.

Exposing violence against children: Jason Farrell, Home Editor, Sky News, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

Jason Farrell is the Home Editor for Sky News in the United Kingdom, reporting on social affairs, crime and politics. His investigations have exposed county lines operations (drug dealing across county borders) in the UK and child sexual abuse in Telford, UK. Jason also wrote the first book examining the county lines illegal drugs trade and how children are forced into child trafficking. Jason has previously worked for the BBC, Five News and ITV News.

Exposing child trafficking in the county lines drug trade, by Jason Farrell, Sky News editor

I decided to investigate county lines and report on the children caught up in it. As a TV journalist, it's quite hard sometimes to express the abuse in words rather than pictures, but sometimes you have to do that. And if there's anything the child has said that they don't want you to use, or there's a question that I've asked that makes them feel uncomfortable, I make sure that information isn't used.

With children it's good to let them know what it is you're doing and that you're not threatening them in any way. You can say to children that the reason you are talking to them is because you are not from their world, and you're here to learn from them.

The county lines story is such an important subject because it doesn't just affect these individuals as children — it's going to impact them and completely change the direction of their lives for the rest of their lives.

The investigation into county lines, which was the first time that we heard the voices of the people involved, and the publication of my book, led to the UK Home Secretary calling me in for a meeting to see how the problem could be addressed. She told me that the investigation had made her think

about ways to solve the problem.

One of the things that you can do as a journalist is to raise awareness among the general public and get people to think about the issues. After the county lines investigation, discussions about child trafficking were put back on the government's agenda, which looked at ways to invest more money in police and support services.

The difficulty with any investigation is that journalists move on, and our editors want us to move on because they don't want several days devoted to the same issue. So sometimes you have to say "this is what we need to keep coming back to and covering". It's also important to find ways of telling the story differently, to keep engaging your readers.

When it comes to what stories are covered in the newsroom, it can be very frustrating if you've spent five months working on an investigation and the lead story of the day is someone's banal tweet. As journalists, we can keep pushing for those priorities to change, particularly because it is young people who don't have a voice, and they can often offer the most important stories — as we discovered with county lines.

[Behind County Lines](#)

Using data to tell the story

Data journalism is the use of numbers and other types of digital information to help tell a story (see Box 2 for resources). Digital information can be used in several different ways for violence against children stories. These include showing the scale and size of a form of violence against children, demonstrating how violence against children starts, spreads, and grows; and highlighting the types of responses to violence against children and how effective those actions have been in tackling the violence. Journalists should not assume that the data they are working with are accurate.

All data should be analysed, checked, and verified. The Data Journalism project run by Google News Initiative and the European Journalism Centre offers a [checklist](#) for analysing datasets:

- Check that all relevant records have been sourced.
- Make sure every appropriate geographical location is included.
- Look for inconsistencies within the data.
- Ensure the numerical data are within valid ranges and timeframes for the story.
- Double check totals found in summaries shared by the agency that produced the data.
- Understand every field in the dataset and how it is used by the agency or organization.
- Discuss the dataset with those who produced it and ask them about the checks they run on the data.

Box 2: Data-driven journalism resources for violence against children

- UNICEF data hub
- Violence Against Children Survey Country Reports
- Mendeley Data Datasets for Child Abuse and Neglect
- WHO Violence Information System
- The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development Family Database
- International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) Data Journalism Tips and Resources
- The Data Journalism Handbook: includes several data-driven violence against children stories
- Open Knowledge Foundation's open data handbook
- Data Camp: offers free tutorials and courses about data journalism
- Royal Statistical Society Statistics Course for Journalists (30-minute online video)

Critical story elements

A strong pitch for a story about violence against children should include:

- A fresh angle.
- A brief summary of which form/s of violence against children is/are featured.
- The analysis of the “common forms of violence (e.g., child maltreatment)” alongside other form.
- Details of which children are involved or affected.
- What is at stake for the children, their communities, and society at large.
- Solutions that have been scientifically proven to work.
- Key findings from the project or research outlining the solution.
- The overall effectiveness of the solution – both short-term and long-term.
- Details about who produced the research.

The most powerful violence against children stories include interviews with:

- at least one child affected by the violence;
- a child welfare expert;
- a key stakeholder;
- a government spokesperson who has knowledge on violence against children.

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Exposing violence against children: Marisa Kwiatkowski, USA Today

Marisa Kwiatkowski is a multi-award-winning investigative reporter for USA TODAY covering social services and children. She previously worked at the IndyStar where she helped to uncover the child sexual abuse scandal at USA Gymnastics. Her investigation into child sexual abuse at USA Gymnastics has been featured in the Netflix documentary, Athlete A, which aired on June 24, 2020.

Uncovering child sexual abuse in sport: Dr. Larry Nassar and USA Gymnastics

This investigation, which was carried out by Mark Alesia, Tim Evans and myself, was important because USA Gymnastics' policy for how they handled child sexual abuse allegations had a very real impact on children in the sport. There were people who had been accused of misconduct, and the allegations weren't reported, and they continued to move from gym to gym, sometimes for years despite warning signs about their conduct. That meant more children in the sport were hurt.

The biggest challenges within this investigation revolved around getting USA Gymnastics to speak with us, hearing their perspective and having them respond to questions about how they handled child sex abuse allegations.

In relation to speaking with survivors, it really came down to us being very intentional about communicating throughout the process and then afterward as well. We were asking people to share with us, in some cases, the most difficult experiences of their lives. So we not only communicated what we were working on and how their story and their experiences fitted into it, we were also giving them an opportunity to ask us questions or raise any concerns that they had before we asked a single interview question. That communications aspect of it was integral to our reporting.

The immediate impact of our first article, published 4 August 2016 on the eve of the Olympic Games, was that we were inundated with phone calls, emails and communication from people who for the first time felt like they had a chance to be heard. That was the same day that we got the first tip about Larry Nassar, who became a huge piece of our broader investigation.

The reporting also prompted a change in federal law in which national governing bodies like USA Gymnastics would have to immediately report child sexual abuse allegations to authorities. There were also many lawsuits that a number of people faced, such as Larry Nassar and Steve Penny. People at Michigan State University faced charges as well.

Educating people on grooming and use of language was as important, and helping people understand the complicated dynamics linked to the abuse of authority.

Important advice to engaged editors in regularly covering stories exposing violence against children is to a) try to cover different aspects of the issue, whether it is about bullying, IPV, or poverty and neglect; and b) frame the story in terms of accountability – this can help editors become invested in an issue.

[*A blind eye to sex abuse: How USA Gymnastics failed to report cases*](#) (IndyStar)

Chapter 2: Ethics and reporting tips

All journalists are required to follow a code of conduct when producing stories. Journalists covering the issue of violence against children also need to observe additional ethical principles that protect children and their rights, including making sure that their reporting is free from politically motivated narratives, agendas and interests. Several articles in the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child \(UNCRC\)](#) are relevant to the production of stories on violence against children:

- **Article 3** – The best interests of a child must be paramount in all decisions affecting them.
- **Article 12** – A child has the right to express his or her wishes, feelings and views, and for their views to be given weight at all times.
- **Article 13** – A child must be free to express their opinion and to have access to information they are legally allowed to obtain.
- **Article 16** – Every child has the right to be protected from unlawful interference with his or her privacy, family, home, and from attacks on his or her honour and reputation.
- **Article 17** – Every child has the right to access information from the media and it should be produced in a way that a child can understand.
- **Article 19** – Children have the right to be protected from all forms of violence.
- **Article 36** – Children must not be exploited by the media for political other purposes.

The [International Federation of Journalists' \(IFJ\) Guidelines and Principles for reporting on issues involving children](#) was launched in 1998 in



Brazil during the world's first international conference on journalism and child rights. The guidelines were designed to combat sensationalist child welfare stories by offering reporting principles that make children visible and respect them as individuals.

Given these existing conventions and guidelines, covering violence against children can be daunting. Below is a checklist, based on the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's [*Suggested Practices for Journalists Reporting on Child Abuse and Neglect*](#) (and see Box 3 for digital sources of information on the subject):

- 1. Ensure your reporting does not cause additional harm to child victims and families.** Stories about violence against children are ultimately about human suffering and the terrible burdens that children who have experienced violence may carry with them for a lifetime. Journalists should report on violence against children with compassion and understanding.
- 2. Look for the laws and policies.** Children's legal rights are set out in most countries' laws, and they should provide the foundation for stories about violence against children. Identify the region or regions included in the story and find the related legislation. In some instances, laws protecting children from a form of violence will not exist. Incomplete or missing laws are powerful angles for these stories.
- 3. Investigate the risk factors that contribute to violence against children and explain the impact on children, families, and communities.** Violence against children is linked with societal problems and governments' responses to those problems. Speaking with independent child welfare experts, bodies and watchdogs can create a "big reveal" effect for a story and help to uncover the origins of violence against children, which are not always immediately visible.
- 4. Use statistics.** The effects of violence against children are so widespread that the UN has [*included the need to address it*](#) as part of its strategy to achieve all 17 Sustainable Development Goals. Data and statistics that highlight the scale of this violence should be included in stories on violence against children.
- 5. Examine the long-term consequences of failing to prevent violence against children.** Violence against children is connected to the wider world and the adults who live in it. Connecting a child's experience of violence with adult action — or inaction — that allows the violence to develop and thrive offers important background to the story. This background can then be used to show the visible — and invisible — ways in which violence affects children.
- 6. Focus on prevention strategies that work.** Highlight the best available evidence for

prevention approaches. Many communities have a range of programmes to support parents and caregivers. However, by focusing on strategies that have been rigorously tested in research trials, journalists can increase the chance that their stories will lead parents to programmes that can actually make a difference in their lives.

7. **Use respectful and sensitive language when reporting on violence against children.** Break down jargon and complicated terms. Terms used to talk about violence against children can be confusing and should be explained using simple, respectful, and accessible language.
8. **Don't share graphic detail.** If a child does not want to share graphic details of the violence they have suffered, that wish must be respected. However, victims of violence against children may want to release those details into the public domain, which may include photographic evidence, in order to raise awareness or as part of their healing process. Communicating regularly and clearly with the child and their caregivers is crucial. Any descriptions of graphic violence must also be written sensitively and without judgement.

To portray violence accurately, it is important for journalists to use accurate terms for describing the acts, rather than using euphemisms. Below are some examples of inappropriate violence against children terminology, and terms and phrases that can be used instead. Additional language considerations around sexual violence can be found at [SV-Media Guide \(cdc.gov\)](https://www.cdc.gov/violenceagainstchildren/media/):

- **Violence against children**, not child violence
- **Intimate partner violence (IPV)** not domestic violence
- **Non-recent child sexual abuse or child sexual abuse**, not historic child sexual abuse
- **Paedophile or offending paedophile** not “monster” or “pervert”
- **Children** not kids
- **Victim or survivor? Always ask the individual which term they prefer**

Lastly, it is important to note that every experienced journalist will, at some point, be personally impacted by a story. The details that are revealed in testimony or court documents show the ugliest side of humanity. Vicarious trauma is real and can lead to long-term issues including post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and substance abuse. The Dart Center provides these tips for dealing with trauma on the job:

- Talk to someone you trust.
- Monitor for delayed reactions.
- Maintain normal activities and routines,
- but slow down.
- Seek professional help if distress continues 3–4 weeks after assignment.

If an assignment leaves a journalist feeling too vulnerable, management should support the journalist's decision to request an unrelated assignment.

Box 3: Useful digital media outlets on violence against children

- @CRINwire – The Child Rights International Network is a think tank that works to protect children from child rights violations.
- @DitchtheLabel – Ditch The Label is a global charity supporting children affected by bullying, mental health, identity and relationship issues.
- @IWFHotline – The Internet Watch Foundation is a leading tech charity focused on eliminating child sexual abuse images and videos from the Internet.
- @Glendcorpun – Hosted by the Global Partnership to End Violence, the End Corporal Punishment campaign works towards a global ban on all forms of corporal punishment.
- @GPtoEndViolence – The Global Partnership to End Violence is a platform dedicated to ending all forms of violence against children.
- @Together4Girls – Together for Girls is a global partnership working to end violence against children, stop child abuse, and create a safer world.
- @unicefchief – Official Twitter account of UNICEF's Executive Director.
- @UNICEFInnocenti – UNICEF's research centre.
- @WarChildUK – War Child is an international charity supporting children affected by conflict.
- @WHOviolencenews – WHO's Twitter updates on child violence prevention.
- @ZamaHRW – Zama Neff is the Director for Human Rights Watch's Child Rights Division

Chapter 3: Interviewing children

Interviews with children are sensitive and require patience. Journalists should be mindful of the child's feelings and state of mind, and the ways in which violence suffered by the child has harmed or impacted the child's family and community.

- 1. Prioritize the child's best interests.** Journalists should never force a child to disclose their story. Like adults, children have their own set of legal rights that protect them, including the right to be heard. The UNCRC defines a child's best interests as respect for a child's well-being. In journalism, this can include respecting their needs and sense of identity, collecting their views, ensuring they are interviewed in a safe environment, and speaking respectfully with their families and networks.
- 2. Get consent.** Interviews with children should take place after consent to speak with the child has been given. This consent should come from the child and their parents or other caregivers. If a child is under a certain age or unable to give their consent, consent from a parent or caregiver is needed for interviews and photographs. It is best to get this consent in writing and to ensure that the child and their caregivers understand which news outlet is contacting them and exactly what the interview is about.
- 3. Avoid harming or retraumatizing children.** Interviewing a child about intimate and frightening experiences can be emotionally and psychologically draining for a child. Journalism that sensationalizes or trivializes the violence they have experienced can also harm or retraumatize a child. Reporting that blames or shames the child for the violence – including teenage children – is never acceptable. Speaking with children involves building trust and ensuring the child feels safe during the interview process. Reporters should start with easy, less emotionally complex questions to ease the child into the interview. Monitoring a child's responses through their body language and state of mind throughout the interview is essential. This allows journalists to make sure the child is comfortable, and the answers are not forced. Allow the child to take breaks during the interview if needed. If a child appears agitated, scared or uncomfortable during the interview, stop the interview immediately.
- 4. Check documents connected to the story.** Some documents may be sensitive or restricted for third party use, such as court documents and medical files. Depending on which country the

child is in and in which state the documents were produced, journalists may need to submit a request for files through the state's court system.

5. Verify photo and video content. Using photographs and video footage may also need informed consent from the child or their caregivers. Limiting the number of photographs and video footage taken, as well as keeping interview periods as short as possible when engaging a child for a story, is also recommended. Journalists may be required to blur or remove the child's face or body in imagery and video content if the child asks for privacy and where laws require this kind of censorship for legitimate child welfare reasons.

6. Use dignified and sensitive language. News stories about child sexual abuse which happened more than 10 years ago continue to refer to the abuse as “historical”, but it is far from historical for victims and survivors. Survivors prefer the term “non-recent” abuse while some have questioned the need to distinguish between recent and non-recent sexual abuse altogether. Journalists do not report on “non-recent rape” or “non-recent murder” when covering crimes that happened more than a decade ago. Child neglect that occurs within child protection cases should also be divided into two categories: intentional and unintentional

neglect, or voluntary and involuntary neglect.

Many children experience this form of violence

not because their parents intend to harm them

but because the family has been deeply affected by poverty through no fault of their own. Lastly,

it is important to assess whether the language

is correct, legal terminology for the crime. For

example, avoid using “sex or intercourse”

when it is rape, sexual assault, unwanted

sexual penetration; avoid using “fondle”

and use grope, unwanted sexual contact,

unwanted touching; avoid using “accuser”

and use victim, victim, or survivor (if the

perpetrator is convicted).

7. Engage with communities and organizations campaigning to end violence against children.

These groups and organizations are often happy to share with journalists their deep knowledge of the effects of violence against children.

Networks such as these offer unique

insights into these forms of violence.



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- 8. Uncover knowledge gaps.** A growing body of research on violence against children exists, but it is a vast field with many areas. Journalists should identify gaps in research and knowledge about violence against children to raise awareness of these complex forms of violence.
- 9. Fact check.** Statistics on violence against children can be misleading and child welfare organizations may not always report this data correctly. Using fact-checking platforms such as [Full Fact](#) or [Reuters Fact Check](#) is recommended.
- 10. Add links to helplines and support groups.** Stories about violence against children are often read by victims and survivors of these forms of violence. Adding the number for a helpline or links to support groups or organizations at the end of a story should be a standard sign-off for stories. Journalists should also consider adding a “trigger warning” at the start of their stories.

Examples of stories using the guide’s reporting principles:

[Child sexual abuse and cover-up claims alleged by Gucci heiress](#) (The Times)

[“This is a missing human right”: the children, women and men fighting to revoke their adoptions](#) (The Independent).

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For more information, contact:

World Health Organization

Department of Social Determinants of Health

20, avenue Appia, 1211 Geneva 27, Switzerland

violenceprevention@who.int

who.int/teams/social-determinants-of-health/violence-prevention

