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Commentary

Violence against children in the time of COVID-19: What we have learned, what remains unknown and the opportunities that lie ahead

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The emergence of COVID-19 as a global pandemic has disrupted the daily lives of children and families around the world, with impacts both immediate and likely long-lasting. Even before the COVID-19 outbreak, the international community recognized violence against children to be both universal and widespread, affecting children in every country, regardless of wealth or social status (UNICEF, 2014). We also know that girls and boys experience violence across all stages of childhood, often at the hands of trusted individuals with whom they interact on a daily basis (UNICEF, 2017). Sadly, most child victims never disclose their experiences of violence to anyone or seek help (Pereira et al., 2020).

Now, several months into the pandemic, researchers across the globe are attempting to find out how the health and socioeconomic crisis brought about by the coronavirus is affecting children's exposure to violence.

1. What we have learned

More data are needed to strengthen the evidence base on this issue. However, findings are beginning to emerge, pointing to increased risks for victimization as well as changes in the demand for and delivery of services. For instance, a recent study of a community sample of parents in the United States found that job loss during the pandemic was associated with child abuse, particularly psychological maltreatment (Lawson, Piel, & Simon, 2020). Closing schools also carries risks. Teachers are generally alert to signs of abuse and neglect among children, and studies have indeed found that drops in reporting to child protection authorities by school personnel have tended to coincide with school closures (Baron, Goldstein, & Wallace, 2020). And despite the Internet's extraordinary capability to facilitate remote learning and connections with the outside world, it can also make children vulnerable to a myriad of dangers. Studies have shown increased exposure to abusive online content during periods of lockdown (Babvey et al., in press). This is tied with growing concerns about elevated risks of sexual exploitation of children amid increased sharing of online pornographic materials (International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL), 2020). On the other hand, the Internet is being used as a medium for talking about violence and disclosing personal experiences (Babvey et al., in press).

Widespread interruptions in the reporting and referral mechanisms of child protection services have also been observed. In fact, UNICEF estimates that 1.8 billion children live in countries where violence prevention and response services have been disrupted due to COVID-19 (UNICEF, 2020b). Services typically delivered in person, such as case management and home visits for those at risk of abuse, have been most affected, whereas child helplines have experienced the least disruption. An analysis of data from 48 child helplines around the world revealed that, since the beginning of the pandemic, there has been a dramatic increase in the total number of contacts, with most users requesting information on COVID and the accessibility of various services (Petrowski, Cappa, Pereira, Mason, & Aznar Daban, in press). The evidence on contacts related to violence is mixed: some child helplines recorded an increase; others showed a decline in reporting of violence. Such fluctuations are likely to represent victims' ability and willingness to access services during periods of lockdown – circumstances that are important to document.

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2. What remains unknown

While much has been learned, far more remains unknown, partly for the lack of baseline data. Despite global advances in increasing the availability of data on violence against children (Cappa & Petrowski, 2020), only about one in five countries have sufficient data to assess progress toward related Sustainable Development Goal targets (UNICEF, 2020a). This is due, in large part, to limited investments in routine surveys necessary to obtain prevalence estimates on children's experiences of violence (Cappa & Petrowski, 2020). Persistent weaknesses also exist in many countries in terms of administrative data systems, which provide information on the number of incidents identified and reported to authorities and service providers (UNICEF, 2020c). In the absence of comparable data, it may not be possible to understand what changes have occurred and how they may be linked to COVID-19 related prevention measures. Even in countries where baseline data on prevalence and service utilization exist, some overarching knowledge gaps remain. For instance, it is not clear whether the pandemic's impact primarily represents an increase in the severity and frequency of violence against children with a history of abuse, or whether it points to an increase in the overall magnitude and scale and, thus, the number of children who are victimized. Future research will also be needed to understand how the COVID-19 crisis has affected children's exposure to forms of violence outside the home, such as peer and community violence.

3. New opportunities

Since the start of the COVID-19 crisis, governments have struggled to meet unprecedented demands and, in many cases, have responded creatively and adapted services to address critical child protection needs.

Maintaining workforce safety has been a key concern and, increasingly, remote case management is being used to overcome challenges posed by social distancing requirements. In Malaysia, for example, social work practice is being adapted through greater use of phone and virtual contact to identify and assess children and families at risk, provide psychosocial support and assist families to manage stress and mental health (Maestral International & UNICEF, N.D.). Where the immediate safety of children is concerned, however, direct contact with children in their usual living environment remains imperative. Many governments have designated social workers as "essential" for child protection service delivery and provided them with the personal protective equipment necessary to continue their work with children and families in Bangladesh, Bolivia, China, Ethiopia and other countries.

In the Dominican Republic, national authorities strengthened their response to online child sexual exploitation, including e-hearings of cases, public messaging on ways to report these violations of children's rights, and support for national response coordination through virtual means. Officials in Australia have noted rises in cyberbullying complaints. In turn, the country has strengthened the portal for online child protection to respond to specific COVID-19 related risks (Government of Australia eSafety Commissioner, N.D.). Among other resources, the portal includes tools for schools to support the development of effective online safety policies and procedures, as well as guidelines for responding to online safety incidents.

In Georgia, a new child helpline has been overwhelmed by COVID-19 related calls. In response, a mechanism has been set up to screen and prioritize calls where children are at high risk. In addition, the network of psychologists, social workers and probation officers providing services to children and families has been reinforced (UNICEF Georgia, 2020).

In the Philippines, as in many countries, students were forced to stay home when classes began this year. As a precautionary measure, the Department of Education has boosted its child protection policy for online learning (Manila Bulletin, 2020b) and adjusted its reporting mechanism to respond to possible cases of child abuse at home (Manila Bulletin, 2020a).

To mitigate the risk that containment measures could lead to increased violence in the home, governments are developing innovative ways of delivering positive parenting resources. In Jordan and Montenegro, for example, face-to-face parenting groups quickly pivoted to online platforms, text messaging and telephone calls. Parenting resources developed through the Parenting for Lifelong Health Initiative have reached more than 80 million people through a variety of media, and are being adopted by 29 governments (Lachman and Cluver, 2020). In fact, the pandemic has opened up new possibilities for rapidly scaling up parenting programs through remote delivery, although the effectiveness of this approach in improving caregiver and child outcomes requires further research.

4. Working toward a world free of violence

Clearly, the COVID-19 pandemic has presented the world with complex questions and challenges. A growing body of research is helping answer such questions, by exposing new risks but also providing insights into possible entry points for intervention. When it comes to violence prevention and response, governments have responded by rethinking service delivery and by seeking opportunities to explore out-of-the-box solutions and strategies. Additional studies will be needed to evaluate the impact and effectiveness of such interventions. However, it is also likely that, as a result, services to victims of violence will become more agile and resilient in future crises.

We need to harness this knowledge and momentum to reimagine a world free of violence for every child.

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