

Children's Exposure to Violence

INDICATORS ON CHILDREN AND YOUTH



In 2014, more than two-thirds of children (ages 17 and younger) were exposed to violence within the past year, either directly (as victims) or indirectly (as witnesses).¹

Importance

Children are more likely to be exposed to violence and crime than adults are.² An experience of violence can lead to lasting physical, mental, and emotional harm, whether the child is a direct victim or a witness. Children who are exposed to violence are more likely to suffer from attachment problems, regressive behavior, anxiety, and depression, and to have aggression and conduct problems. Other health-related problems, as well as academic and cognitive problems, delinquency, and involvement in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems, are also associated with experiences of violence.^{3,4,5} Even community violence that children do not directly witness has been shown to affect negatively children's attentional abilities⁶ and cognitive performance.⁷

One mechanism through which early, chronic exposure to violence affects children is by disrupting the developing brain. Specific brain structures (amygdala, hippocampus, prefrontal cortex) are adversely affected by stress. Executive functions (such as planning, memory, focusing attention, impulse control, and using new information to make decisions) can become impaired. Moreover, children who have had chronic exposure to real or perceived threats may become conditioned to react with fear and anxiety to a broad range of circumstances. Their diminished capacity to differentiate between genuine threats and objectively safe or neutral situations can impair their ability to learn and interact with others, and may lead to serious anxiety disorders. Unfortunately, while fear-learning happens early in life, with emotional memories that are powerful and persistent, *unlearning* fears depends upon brain maturation that happens only later, and requires active work and evidence-based treatment.⁸

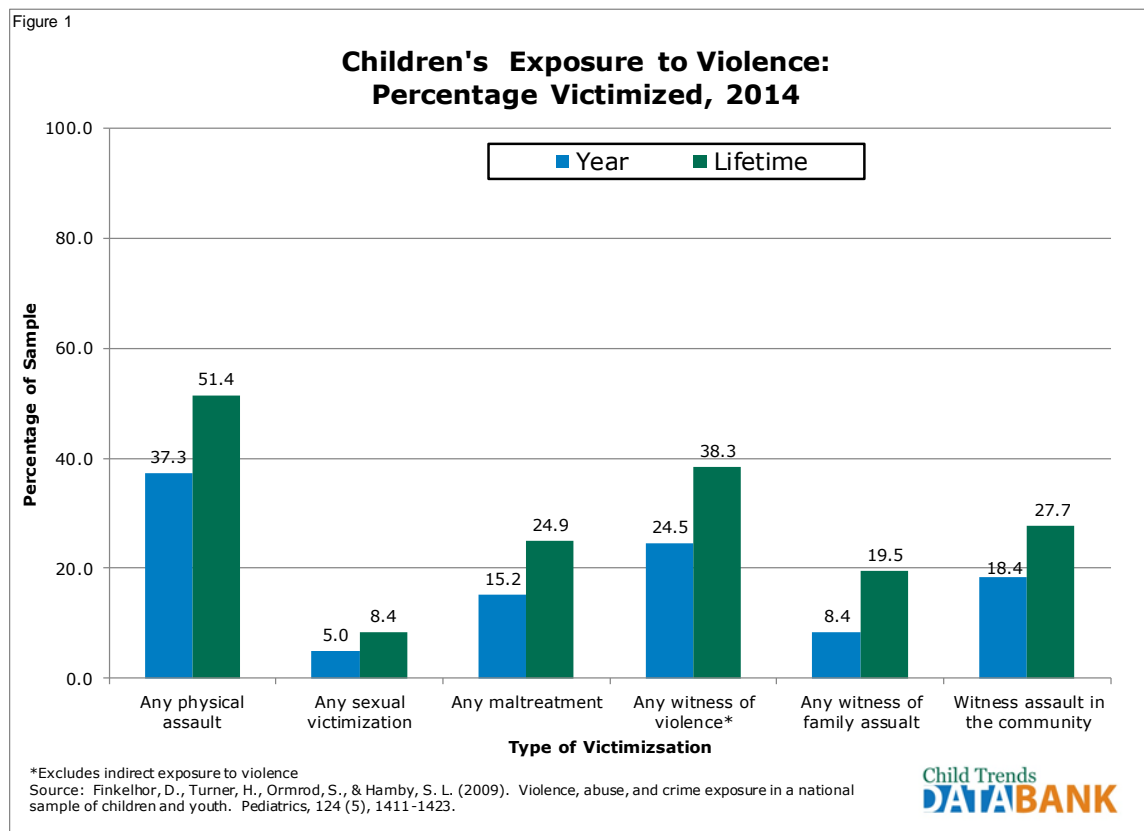
Children exposed to violence are more likely than those not experiencing violence to become victims or perpetrators of further violence.^{9,10} Victims of dating violence are considerably more likely to engage in sexual activity and other risky behaviors (binge drinking, suicide attempts, physical fights) than are non-victims.¹¹ However, even multiple types of direct victimization within a single year are not uncommon.¹²



Trends

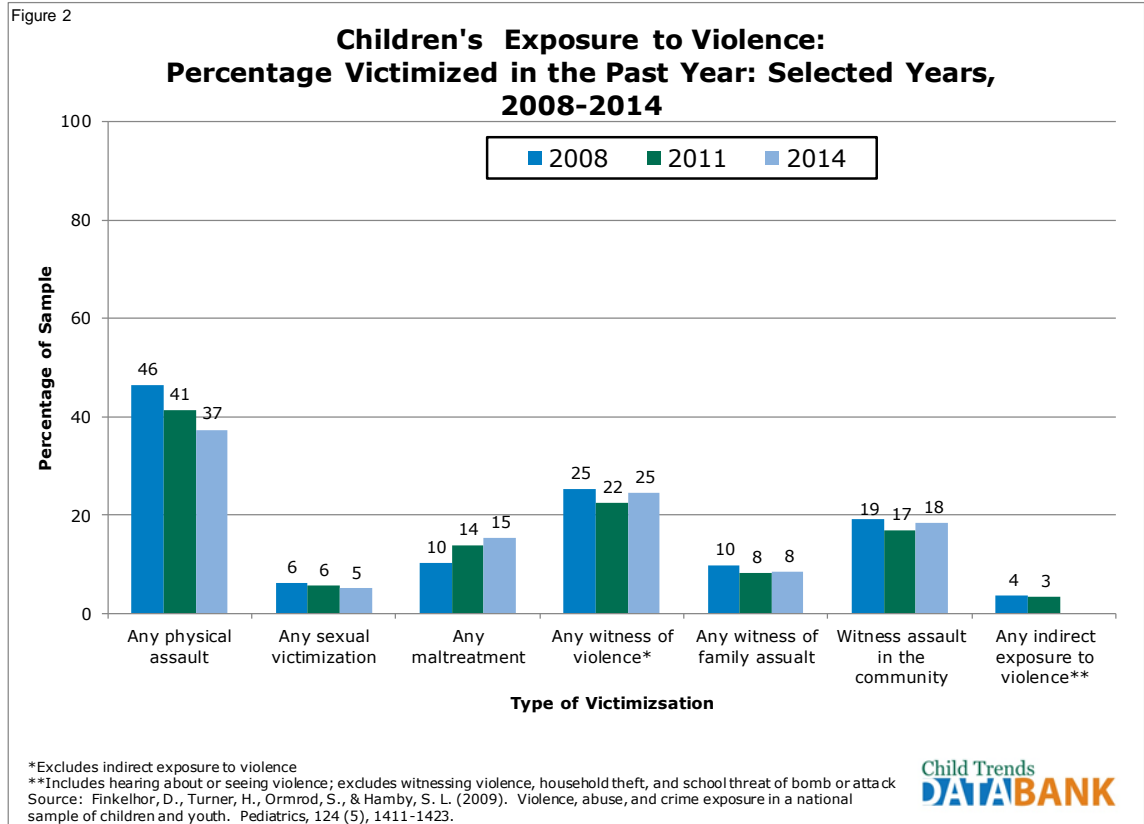
In 2014, more than one third of children were physically assaulted within the previous year (37 percent), and about half had been assaulted during their lifetime (51 percent). In the past year, 15 percent suffered some form of maltreatment (25 percent during their lifetime) and 5 percent reported being sexually victimized (8 percent over their lifetime). (Figure 1)

In 2014, 24 percent of children in the NatSCEV study had witnessed violence in their homes, schools, and communities in the past year, and 38 percent during their lifetimes. One in 12 (8 percent) saw a family member assault another in the past year, while 1 in 5 (20 percent) had witnessed this scenario in their lifetime. (Figure 1)





Between 2008 and 2014, the percentage of children who had experienced a physical assault in the past year decreased from 46 to 37 percent, while those experiencing any form of maltreatment in the past year increased, from 10 to 15 percent. The prevalence of exposure to other types of violence remained fairly steady over that period. (Figure 2)



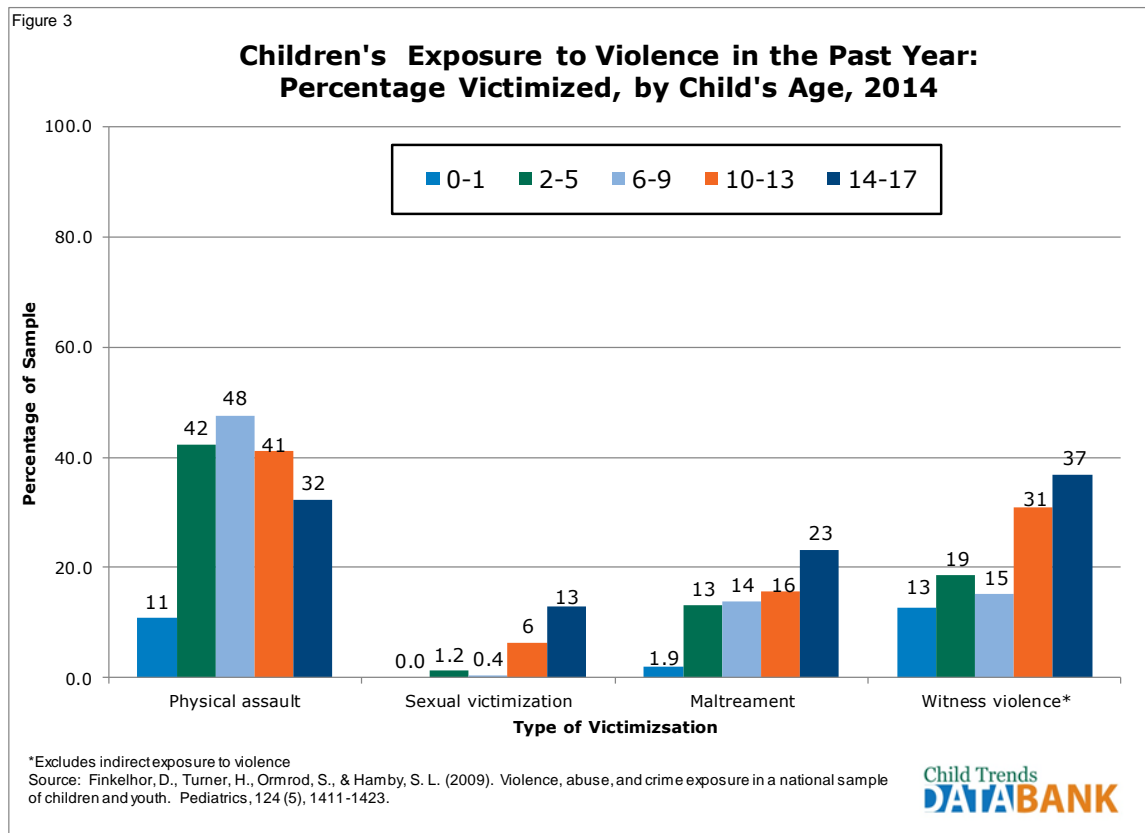
In 2014, 50 percent of children reported more than one form of victimization in the past year, 15 percent reported 6 or more, and 4 percent reported 10 or more forms of victimizations in the past year.¹³

In 2008, children who were exposed to one type of violence, both in the past year and over their lifetimes, had a far greater risk of experiencing other types of violence. Of the children who reported being exposed to violence during their lifetimes, 87 percent also reported being exposed to violence in the past year.¹⁴ More recent analysis along these lines is not available.



Differences by Age

Except for physical assault, all types of exposure to violence were more common among older children and adolescents. For example, past-year rates for maltreatment were greater for older children: in 2014, 13 percent of children ages 2 to 5, 14 percent of children 6 to 9, and 16 percent of children ages 10 to 13 reported maltreatment in the past year, compared with 23 percent of children ages 14 to 17. Physical assault was most common among children ages 6 to 9, with 48 percent of parents reporting it occurred in the past year, compared with 42 and 41 percent, respectively among children ages 2 to 5 and 10 to 13, 32 percent among those ages 14 to 17, and 11 percent among children under 2. (Figure 3)

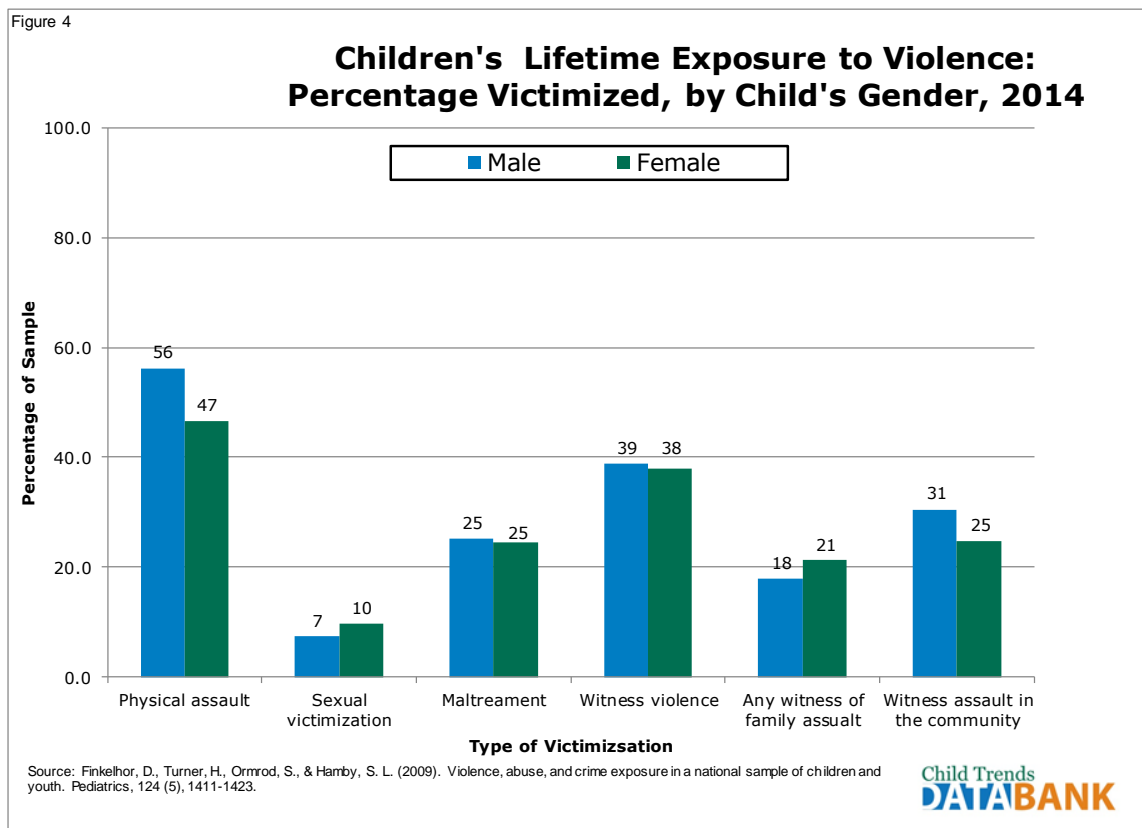


In general, the type of violence children are exposed to increases in severity with age. For children ages six to nine, the most common exposure was assault without a weapon or injury, and the most common perpetrator of assaults was a sibling. Exposure to these kinds of violence was less common in older children. More serious types of assaults, including those involving a weapon or injury, were most common among 10- to 13-year-olds. All other forms of violence, including dating violence, attempted rape or sexual

harassment, and physical or emotional abuse, were most common among the oldest youth, ages 14 to 17. Witnessing violence in the home or community was also most common for this age group. Adolescents (ages 14 to 17) were far more likely than younger children to be sexually victimized (including flashing or exposure by a peer, sexual harassment, and sexual assault): 13 percent in the previous year, including 16 percent among females.¹⁵

Differences by Gender

Male children are more likely than females to be victims of assault. In 2014, 56 percent of male children were assaulted in their lifetimes, compared with 47 percent of females. Males are also more likely than females to witness violence in the community: 31 and 25 percent, respectively. (Figure 4)



Females ages 14-17 were more likely to have been sexually victimized in the past year than were males of the same age (16 and 9 percent, respectively, in 2014). In that age group, 20 percent of females had ever experienced sexual harassment, 14 percent had experienced sexual assault, 13 percent had experienced



attempted or completed rape, and 5 percent had been raped. Among males, the proportions were three, six, five, and 0.2 percent, respectively.¹⁶

Males and females were equally likely to experience maltreatment or to witness violence in their lifetimes. (Figure 4) Similar patterns of child maltreatment were reported by both sexes, though males were more likely to experience physical abuse, and girls were more likely to experience emotional abuse.¹⁷

State and Local Estimates

State-by-state comparisons on risky youth behavior, including some violence indicators, are available from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey; results available at

http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/data/yrbs/index.htm?s_cid=hy-homepage-002.

State-by-state and county data on juvenile arrests for violent crime are available at

http://ojdp.gov/ojstatbb/ezaucr/asp/ucr_display.asp.

International Estimates

The Health Behavior in School-aged Children survey was conducted in thirty-five industrialized countries, including the U.S., in 2009-10. Results related to bullying and fighting among adolescents are available at: www.euro.who.int/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/163857/Social-determinants-of-health-and-well-being-among-young-people.pdf.

Also see Hillis, S., Mercy, J., Amobi, A., & Kress, H. (2016). Global prevalence of past-year violence against children: A systematic review and minimum estimates. *Pediatrics*, 137(3), e20154079.

<http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/pediatrics/137/3/e20154079.full.pdf>

National Goals

Through the national *Healthy People 2020* initiative, the federal government has set a goal to reduce children's exposure to violence, from 60.6 percent in 2008 to 54.5 percent in 2020. There are also several goals related to this indicator, including reductions in physical assaults, bullying, child maltreatment, and sexual violence.

More information is available at:

www.healthypeople.gov/2020/topicsobjectives2020/objectiveslist.aspx?topicid=24

What Works to Make Progress on This Indicator

- Home visiting for first-time mothers, and comprehensive early education and family support have been shown to be effective in reducing the incidence of child abuse and neglect. See What Works . . . under the DataBank indicator, Child Maltreatment. (www.childtrends.org/?indicators=child-maltreatment)
- Also see U.S. Department of Justice. (2012). Evidence-based practices for children exposed to violence: A selection from federal databases. http://www.nccadv.org/images/pdfs/CEDVFEDERALEvidence-Based-Practices-Matrix_2011.pdf
- A number of universal school-based programs have been shown to be effective in preventing or reducing violence among school-aged youth. See the report from the Task Force on Community Preventative Services: www.cdc.gov/mmwr/PDF/rr/rr5607.pdf
- Recommended public health approaches to the treatment of children exposed to violence include specific training for professionals working with families experiencing trauma; developmentally appropriate interventions for children in programs addressing domestic violence; and programs that address the emotional needs of children living under circumstances where they are likely to experience violence (e.g., poverty, domestic violence, substance abuse, neighborhood violence). See the report of the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child: <http://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/persistent-fear-and-anxiety-can-affect-young-childrens-learning-and-development/>
- Cognitive-behavioral therapy has demonstrated effectiveness in reducing anxiety and fear. See the report of the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child: <http://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/persistent-fear-and-anxiety-can-affect-young-childrens-learning-and-development/>

Related Indicators

- Adolescents Who Have Ever Been Raped: www.childtrends.org/?indicators=adolescents-who-have-ever-been-raped
- Attitudes Toward Spanking: www.childtrends.org/?indicators=attitudes-toward-spanking
- Bullying: www.childtrends.org/?indicators=bullying
- Child Maltreatment: www.childtrends.org/?indicators=child-maltreatment

- Dating Violence: www.childtrends.org/?indicators=dating-violence
- High School Students Carrying Weapons: www.childtrends.org/?indicators=high-school-students-carrying-weapons
- Neighborhood Safety: www.childtrends.org/?indicators=neighborhood-safety
- Physical Fighting by Youth: www.childtrends.org/?indicators=physical-fighting-by-youth
- Teen Homicide, Suicide, and Firearm Deaths: www.childtrends.org/?indicators=teen-homicide-suicide-and-firearm-deaths
- Unsafe at School: www.childtrends.org/?indicators=unsafe-at-school
- Violent Crime Victimization: www.childtrends.org/?indicators=violent-crime-victimization
- Adverse Experiences: www.childtrends.org/?indicators=adverse-experiences

Definition

Data on this issue come primarily from the 2008, 2011, and 2014 National Surveys of Children's Exposure to Violence (NatSCEV), the first nationally representative survey on these topics. Youth ages ten and older were interviewed directly; for children younger than 10, interviews were conducted with their adult caregivers. The survey's sponsors believe the data likely understate children's actual exposure to violence, because they rely on family members to report incidents, some of which may be undisclosed, minimized, or not recalled.¹⁸

The survey measured the following categories of violence: assaults (including from peers and when there is no weapon or injury), sexual victimization, child maltreatment by an adult, and witnessed victimization. Witnessing violence includes any witness of family assault and assault in the community, exposure to shooting, and exposure to war.

Data Sources

- Data for 2014: Finkelhor, D., Turner, H. A., Shattuck, A., & Hamby, S. L. (2015). Prevalence of childhood exposure to violence, crime, and abuse: Results from the national survey of children's exposure to violence. *JAMA Pediatrics*, 169(8), 746-754.
- Data for 2011: Finkelhor, D., Turner, H. A., Shattuck, A., & Hamby, S. L. (2013). Violence, crime, and abuse exposure in a national sample of children and youth: An update. *JAMA Pediatrics*, 167(7), 614-621



- Data for 2008: Finkelhor, D., Turner, H., Ormrod, S., & Hamby, S. L. (2009). Violence, abuse, and crime exposure in a national sample of children and youth. *Pediatrics*, 124(5), 1411-1423.

Raw Data Source

National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence

www.unh.edu/ccrc/projects/natscev.html



Appendix 1 - Percentage of Children Exposed to Violence in the Past Year, by Selected Victimization Categories: 2008, 2011, and 2014

	2008	2011	2014
Any Physical Assault	46.3	41.2	37.3
Gender			
Males	50.2	45.2	41.6
Females	42.1	37.1	33.0
Age			
0 to 1 year	17.9	12.7	10.8
2 to 5 years	46.0	43.9	42.3
6 to 9 years	55.6	49.2	47.6
10 to 13 years	49.8	46.5	41.1
14 to 17 years	46.9	39.5	32.3
Any Sexual Victimization	6.1	5.6	5.0
Gender			
Males	4.8	3.8	4.1
Females	7.4	7.5	5.9
Age			
0 to 1 year	-	0.7	0.0
2 to 5 years	0.9	1.1	1.2
6 to 9 years	2.0	2.1	0.4
10 to 13 years	7.7	4.4	6.4
14 to 17 years	16.3	16.4	12.9
Any Maltreatment	10.2	13.8	15.2
Gender			
Males	9.7	13.4	15.2
Females	10.6	14.2	15.2
Age			
0 to 1 year	2.2	6.2	1.9
2 to 5 years	8.1	9.5	13.1
6 to 9 years	7.8	11.5	13.8
10 to 13 years	12.0	16.8	15.7
14 to 17 years	16.6	20.6	23.2



	2008	2011	2014
Any witness of violence¹	25.3	22.4	24.5
Gender			
Males	26.1	24.2	24.9
Females	24.6	20.5	24.2
Age			
0 to 1 year	10.5	7.5	12.6
2 to 5 years	13.8	14.4	18.5
6 to 9 years	13.7	11.8	15.1
10 to 13 years	33.0	26.4	30.9
14 to 17 years	47.6	42.6	36.9
Any witness of family assault	9.8	8.2	8.4
Gender			
Males	9.0	8.5	6.7
Females	10.7	7.8	10.2
Age			
0 to 1 year	7.6	5.7	9.0
2 to 5 years	9.6	6.8	11.6
6 to 9 years	6.4	6.3	5.8
10 to 13 years	11	10.5	6.0
14 to 17 years	10.1	10.2	9.4
Witness assault in the community	19.2	16.9	18.4
Gender			
Males	20.4	18.5	20.2
Females	17.9	15.2	16.6
Age			
0 to 1 year	-	1.8	3.6
2 to 5 years	5.8	9.3	17.7
6 to 9 years	8.5	6.4	10.7
10 to 13 years	27.0	21.1	26.8
14 to 17 years	42.2	36.4	33.3

¹ Witness of violence includes witness of family or community assault, exposure to war, and exposure to shooting.

Sources: Data for 2008: Finkelhor, D., Turner, H., Ormrod, S., & Hamby, S. L. (2009). Violence, abuse, and crime exposure in a national sample of children and youth. *Pediatrics*, 124 (5), 1411-1423. Data for 2011: Finkelhor, D., Turner, H. A., Shattuck, A., & Hamby, S. L. (2013). Violence, crime, and abuse exposure in a national sample of children and youth: An update. *JAMA Pediatrics*, 167(7), 614-621. Data for 2014: Finkelhor, D., Turner, H. A., Shattuck, A., & Hamby, S. L. (2015). Prevalence of childhood exposure to violence, crime, and abuse: Results from the national survey of children's exposure to violence. *JAMA Pediatric*, 169(8), 746-754.



Appendix 2 - Percentage of Children Exposed to Violence in Their Lifetimes, by Selected Victimization Categories: 2008, 2011, and 2014

	2008	2011	2014
Any Physical Assault	56.7	54.5	51.4
Gender			
Males	60.3	58.5	56.1
Females	52.9	50.3	46.5
Age			
2 to 5 years	48.7	-	-
6 to 9 years	63.8	-	-
10 to 13 years	61.1	-	-
14 to 17 years	71.1	69.7	63.5
Any Sexual Victimization	9.8	9.5	8.4
Gender			
Males	7.5	7.8	7.4
Females	12.2	11.4	9.6
Age			
2 to 5 years	1.5	-	-
6 to 9 years	5.0	-	-
10 to 13 years	9.4	-	-
14 to 17 years	27.8	27.4	21.7
Any Maltreatment	18.6	25.6	24.9
Gender			
Males	18.6	25.2	25.2
Females	18.7	26.1	24.6
Age			
2 to 5 years	12.1	-	-
6 to 9 years	16.8	-	-
10 to 13 years	21.0	-	-
14 to 17 years	32.1	41.2	38.1



(Lifetime)	2008	2011	2014
Any witness of violence¹	37.8	39.2	38.3
Gender			
Males	40.1	40.9	38.8
Females	35.4	37.4	37.9
Age			
2 to 5 years	21.2	-	-
6 to 9 years	24.7	-	-
10 to 13 years	47.5	-	-
14 to 17 years	70.2	71.5	68.1
Any witness of family assault	20.3	20.8	19.5
Gender			
Males	19.6	20.9	17.9
Females	21.1	20.7	21.2
Age			
2 to 5 years	15.8	-	-
6 to 9 years	15.6	-	-
10 to 13 years	21.2	-	-
14 to 17 years	34.6	34.5	32.0
Witness assault in the community	28.7	27.5	27.7
Gender			
Males	31.0	30.0	30.5
Females	26.2	24.9	24.7
Age			
2 to 5 years	9.0	-	-
6 to 9 years	13.8	-	-
10 to 13 years	39.0	-	-
14 to 17 years	64.2	58.9	57.9

¹ Witness of violence includes witness of family or community assault, exposure to war, and exposure to shooting.

Sources: Data for 2008: Finkelhor, D., Turner, H., Ormrod, S., & Hamby, S. L. (2009). Violence, abuse, and crime exposure in a national sample of children and youth. *Pediatrics*, 124 (5), 1411-1423. Data for 2011: Finkelhor, D., Turner, H. A., Shattuck, A., & Hamby, S. L. (2013). Violence, crime, and abuse exposure in a national sample of children and youth: An update. *JAMA Pediatrics*, 167(7). 614-621 Data for 2014: Finkelhor, D., Turner, H. A., Shattuck, A., & Hamby, S. L. (2015). Prevalence of childhood exposure to violence, crime, and abuse: Results from the national survey of children's exposure to violence. *JAMA Pediatric*, 169(8), 746-754.

Endnotes

¹ Finkelhor, D., Turner, H. A., Shattuck, A., & Hamby, S. L. (2015). Prevalence of childhood exposure to violence, crime, and abuse: Results from the national survey of children's exposure to violence. *JAMA Pediatrics*, 169(8), 746-754. As used here, violence includes assaults, sexual victimization, child maltreatment by an adult, and witnessed and indirect victimization.

² Finkelhor, D., Turner, H. A., Ormrod, R., Hamby, S., & Kracke, K. (2009). Children's exposure to violence: A comprehensive national survey. U.S. Department of Justice. Retrieved from <http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojdp/227744.pdf>.

³ Margolin, G., & Elana B. G., (2004). Children's exposure to violence in the family and community. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 13, (4), 152-155. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdfplus/20182938.pdf>.

⁴ Finkelhor, et al. (2009). Op. cit.

⁵ Duke, N. N., Pettingell, S. L., McMorris, B. J., and Borowsky, I. W. (2010). Adolescent violence perpetration: Associations with multiple types of adverse childhood experiences. *Pediatrics*, 124(4), e778-e786.

⁶ Sharkey, P. T., Tirado-Shaver, N., Papachristos, A. V., & Raver, C. C. (2012). *American Journal of Public Health*, 102(12), 2287-2293.

⁷ Sharkey, P. (2010). The acute effect of local homicides on children's cognitive performance. *PNAS*, 107(26), 11733-11738.

⁸ National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2010). Persistent fear and anxiety can affect young children's learning and development: *Working paper No. 9*. Retrieved from www.developingchild.net.

⁹ Margolin and Elana. (2004). Op. cit.

¹⁰ Finkelhor, et al. (2009). Op. cit.

¹¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2006). Physical dating violence among high school students—United States, 2003. *MMWR*, 55 (19), 532-535. Retrieved from www.cdc.gov/mmwr/PDF/wk/mm5519.pdf

¹² Finkelhor, et al. (2009). Op. cit.

¹³ Finkelhor, et al. (2015). Op. cit.

¹⁴ Finkelhor, et al. (2009). Op. cit.

¹⁵ Finkelhor, et al. (2015). Op. cit.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.



¹⁸ Finkelhor, D., Turner, H. A., Shattuck, A., & Hamby, S. L. (2013). Violence, crime, and abuse exposure in a national sample of children and youth: An update. *JAMA Pediatrics*, 167(7), 614-621.