



# THE VIOLENCE- PREVENTION

# DIVIDEND

**Why Preventing Violence Against Children Makes  
Economic Sense**



The Convention on the Rights of the Child enshrines the right of all children to live free from violence.<sup>1</sup> Whilst everyone can agree that violence against children is profoundly wrong, unacceptable and must end, few are aware that it also creates huge financial costs for its victims, families and economies.

Beyond its direct impact, violence can have long term economic and social costs. Violence against children undermines the efficiency and effectiveness of all government investments in services for children, including antenatal care, nutrition and parenting programmes, early childhood development, social protection and education. The pervasive effects of violence against children hamper both individual and social development and hold back future national economic growth.

Ending violence against children offers the potential to generate large social and economic dividends. It would remove a critical barrier to children achieving

their full developmental potential and could save costs to societies that have been estimated to be up to 5 per cent of national GDP (see figure 1).

Governments which direct resources towards ending violence against children are also upholding children's rights to survival, development and protection; they are also meeting their obligation to care and protect children to "the maximum extent of their available resources."<sup>2</sup> Such investments are also essential in adhering to their pledge to create a world "free from fear and violence" made in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

This paper gives an overview of the economic case for investing in the prevention of violence against children. It is intended to alert policymakers to the substantial economic and social costs of violence against children and the potential dividend that would accrue from investment in violence prevention. The paper outlines where governments can strengthen and improve engagement in violence prevention in light of post COVID-19 recovery planning and beyond.<sup>1</sup>

The investment case supports a Call to Action for governments and development partners to increase the resources currently allocated for the prevention of violence against children and to use resources even more effectively.

## THE ECONOMIC COSTS OF VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

In addition to lifelong pain and trauma, violence against children inflicts a huge financial toll on both victims and societies. Violence's economic burden on society is the sum of all the costs incurred by its child victims, their families, businesses and governments. **A seminal study suggests these costs could be as high as 8% of global GDP.<sup>3</sup> National studies** from a range of countries have estimated that violence against children has economic costs of up **to 5% of GDP**. While more research is needed, including on the additional impact of COVID-19, this equates to trillions of US dollars wasted each year (see figure 1).

The direct and indirect costs of violence against children can be both short-term and extend over the



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<sup>1</sup> This paper summarises the findings of a longer report commissioned by a consortium of child focused agencies (the Office of the Special Representative on Violence against Children, UNICEF, World Vision International, ChildFund Alliance, Plan International and Save the Children International) from Cornerstone Economic Research.



## KEY FACTS ABOUT VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

### **Key fact 1: Violence against children is a universal and global issue.**

Data from population-based surveys are improving our understanding of the prevalence and nature of violence against children.<sup>4</sup> An estimated one billion children – half of all the children in the world – are victims of violence every year.<sup>5</sup> More children are victims of violence than we know of because so much violence goes unreported. The evidence on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on violence against children reveals a grim picture: violence has increased while becoming less visible.<sup>6</sup>

### **Key fact 2: Violence against children is a continuum.**

Violence against children takes many forms, including harsh discipline, child labour, torture, trafficking, bullying, harmful practices such as child marriage and FGM, and deprivation of liberty. Evidence from surveys shows that one-third of respondents experienced multiple forms of violence.<sup>7</sup> Bullying and cyberbullying, which may torment a child at home, school, online and in the community, shows how violence affects children on a continuum of suffering.<sup>8</sup>

### **Key fact 3: Violence against children has multiple risk factors.**

Violence has a strong gender dimension and disproportionately affects marginalised children, such as those with disabilities, those from minorities, those experiencing poverty and those who are homeless.

### **Key fact 4: All violence against children can be prevented.**

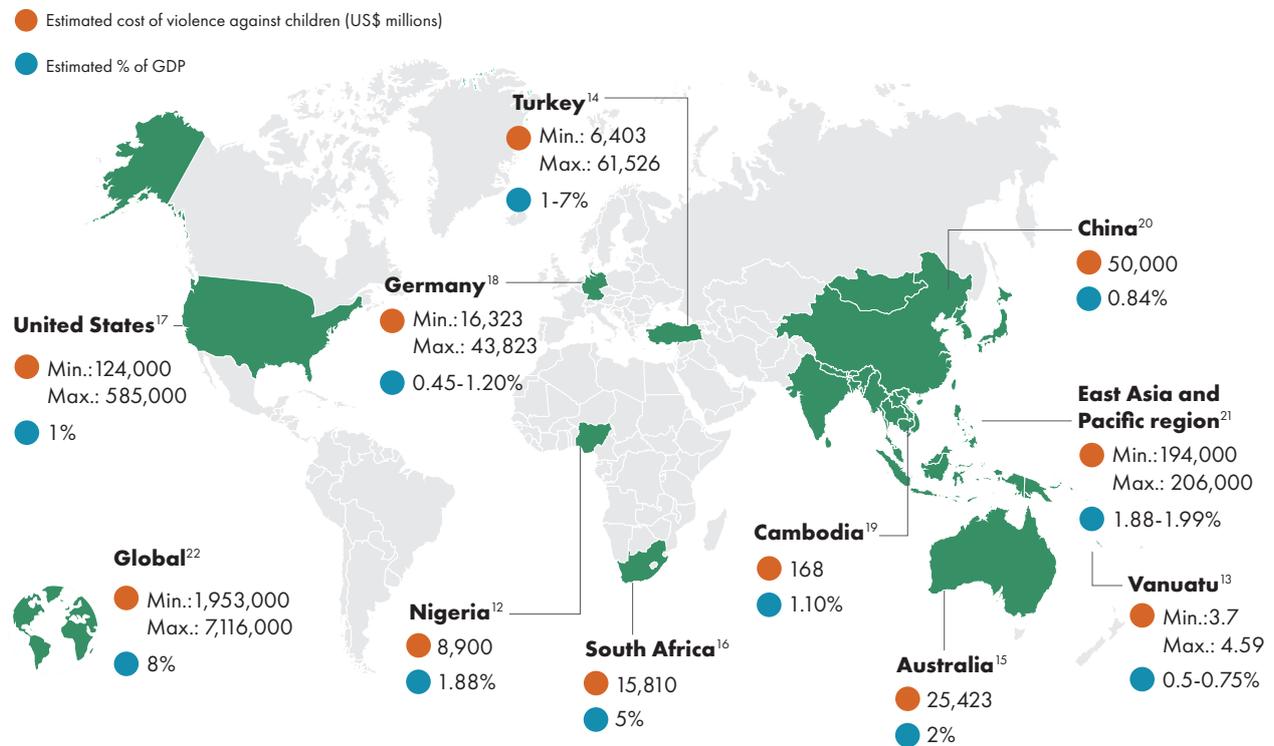
There is ample evidence that the prevalence of violence against children can be decreased by well-designed, evidence-based programmes, even in resource-poor settings, creating the foundations for its eventual elimination.<sup>9</sup>

### **Key fact 5: Sexual violence against children is widespread, and its scale and complexity has increased with digital technology.**

An estimated 120 million girls (or 1 in 10) under the age of 20 have suffered some form of forced sexual contact at some point in their lives.<sup>10</sup> In 2020, more than 153,000 websites were reported as containing images of child sexual abuse, an increase of 16% on the year before.<sup>xi</sup>

*The COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing humanitarian crises have exacerbated violence in all its awful dimensions: it is a global scourge that we must do all in our power to stop.*

**FIGURE 1. Estimates of the economic cost of violence against children**



Note: the year column refers to the year the data is from and not the year in which the study was published. All estimates not in USD were converted using the World Bank (2021 a) for the year in which the data is from.<sup>23</sup> When the % of GDP was not available in the study, it was calculated using World Bank (2021 b).<sup>24</sup>

lifetime of affected individuals. The range of costs of violence to individuals, families and governments is summarised in the figure 2.

Violence against children can impair all aspects of their physical, intellectual, language, emotional and social development – with long term consequences for children’s health, education and socialisation. These damaging individual outcomes also generate large economic costs for society. Child victims of violence may not reach their full education and health potential, limiting their future income and productivity. Children and their families often bear the direct costs of treating or responding to the impact of violence.

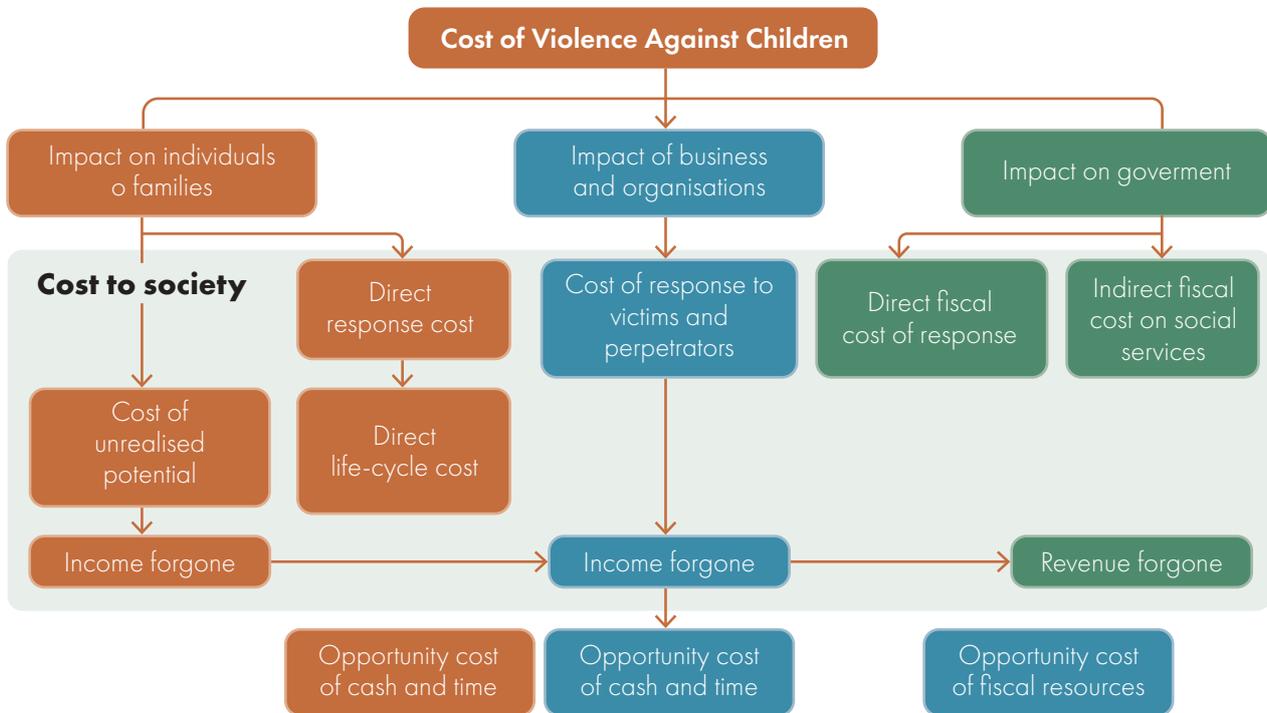
Violence impacts businesses and organisations both directly and indirectly, through loss of opportunity. For example, violence in childhood can constrain the potential productivity of a workforce; employees who were victims of violence in childhood may have enduring physical and mental health issues that affect the economic contribution they can make as adults;

absence from the workforce increase when adults must provide care to child victims.

Governments incur direct costs in responding to the impact of violence on the short- and long-term health of its victims, as well as the costs associated with the child protection and justice systems’ responses in providing rehabilitation to victims and enforcing the law against perpetrators. Violence against children also has indirect, long-term costs, as it undermines investments in children’s health, education and the other social sectors. Through combination of these impacts, violence can also affect the potential earnings of individuals and businesses, resulting in lower tax revenue for governments.

The pain, suffering and trauma of victims, their diminished physical and mental health, and the impact on their social interactions and relationships is difficult to quantify in economic terms and is seldom included in research studies. Therefore, current estimates of the economic cost of the impacts of violence against children provide only a partial picture and are expected to understate the true scale.

**FIGURE 2.** The different pathways that violence against children costs individuals and families, businesses and organisations, and government



## INVESTMENT FOR A VIOLENCE-PREVENTION DIVIDEND

Investment in proven, evidence-based violence prevention programmes can avert the economic costs of violence as well as remove a critical barrier to children achieving their health, educational and economic development potential. Economic benefits accrue through multiple mechanisms, among them:

- All children will reach their full potential, expanding the supply of productive labour market participants to the economy, boosting per capita incomes and increasing domestic demand.
- As children’s development will not be hindered by the impact of violence, existing health, education and social protection spending will be more effective. The exposure to toxic stress inhibits optimal brain development and leads to poorer child outcomes, including school performance;

**eliminating violence against children will raise the overall stock of human capital.**

- The costs associated with the consequences of violence against children on the health, education, child protection and criminal justice systems will be eliminated, allowing governments to use these funds more productively elsewhere.
- The vicious cycle of violence and its links to poverty will be broken, allowing children and their communities to have significantly improved economic trajectories.

**Many proven violence prevention interventions have a relatively low cost, making the case for investment even stronger.**

Multiple research studies have shown that violence prevention programmes have positive returns on investment and offer benefits that exceed their costs (see figure 1).

**FIGURE 3.** Returns on investment of programmes to prevent violence against children

Study	Country	Type	Programme	Outcome
Lakhotia, 2019 <sup>25</sup>	New Zealand	Parenting programme	Incredible Years Parenting Programme	\$3.75 ROI
Lee et al, 2012 <sup>26</sup>	USA	Parenting programme	SafeCare	\$14.65 ROI
Nystrand et al, 2020 <sup>27</sup>	Sweden	Parenting programme	Comet	BCR 6.84-7.17
Nystrand et al, 2020	Sweden	Parenting programme	Connect	BCR 10.29-10.93
Nystrand et al, 2020	Sweden	Parenting programme	Incredible Years Parenting Programme	BCR 5.81-6.11
Nystrand et al, 2020	Sweden	Parenting programme	COPE	BCR 5.46-16.13
Kaytaz, 2005 <sup>28</sup>	Turkey	Parenting programme	Mother Child Education Program	BCR 5.91-8.14
Lopez Garcia, 2021 <sup>29</sup>	Kenya	Parenting programme	Msingi Bora Parenting Intervention	BCR 10.6 -15.5
Rasmussen et al, 2021 <sup>30</sup>	India	Preventing child marriage	Life Skills Education and Youth Information Centres programmes	BCR 21
Hawkins et al, 2011 <sup>31</sup>	USA	Preventing adolescent problem behaviour	Communities that Care	\$5.30 ROI
Huitsing et al, 2020 <sup>32</sup>	Netherlands	Prevent bullying at school	KiVa	€4.04-€6.72 ROI
Le et al, 2021 <sup>33</sup>	Australia	Prevent bullying at school	Friendly School Programme	AUS\$1.56- AUS\$2.22 ROI
Bonin et al, 2011 <sup>34</sup>	UK	Prevent bullying at school	School-based anti-bullying intervention	£14.35 ROI
Ministry of Social Affairs, 2020 <sup>35</sup>	Iceland	Integrated child welfare	New legislation to integrate child welfare	9.6% ROI
Ariss et al, 2017 <sup>36</sup>	UK	Preventing domestic violence	Domestic Violence Perpetrator Programme	£2.05 ROI

BCR – Benefit Cost Ratio; ROI – Return on Investment

Evidence shows that investment in violence prevention and child protection by most governments is currently low and insufficient. A WHO survey of 155 countries found that while 80% had at least one national action plan to prevent violence against children, fewer than one in four (<25%) had fully funded their plans.<sup>37</sup> This tells us more work is needed to adequately resource plans and strategies in government budgets. Given the high return on investment of many such initiatives, this is a great opportunity being missed.

Realising the violence prevention dividend requires a whole-of-government effort that goes well-beyond social sector ministries. Ministries responsible for planning, economic development and finance also need to be fully engaged; **all government sectors should understand violence**

**prevention as a mechanism for reducing poverty, fostering economic growth and enhancing social development.**

The focus should be on embedding the prevention of violence into all child-facing services and making sure existing social spending is deployed efficiently and effectively in ways that prevent violence. The systems that respond to and prevent violence against children must be strengthened; even modest increases in government spending on these services can make a substantial difference. This could be as simple as enhancing programmes that contribute to reducing violence against children while also having multiple other concurrent benefits, such as those focused on social protection (e.g. child grants, income support and employment creation) and early childhood development.<sup>38</sup>



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## THE DIRECT IMPACT OF VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

Every act of violence is a tragedy for the child. Violence inflicts pain: it causes injury, brain damage and death. Violence leaves a child victim struggling with upsetting emotions, memories and anxiety that won't go away. It impairs their physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development with damaging long-term consequences. Sexual violence often exposes children to sexually transmitted infections, and girls to unwanted pregnancies. The rape of small children leads to injuries that can result in death.

Violence in childhood often leads to poor self-image, substance abuse, suicidal thoughts, self-harm and suicide. Prolonged exposure to violence or violent situations can lead to "toxic stress", which has detrimental effects on learning, behaviour and health throughout a person's lifetime.

Gender-based violence has wide ranging impact on the sexual and reproduction health, mental health, empowerment and education of its victims. It may result in obstetric fistula and early and unwanted pregnancies that put the young mother and her child at further risk of violence and discrimination.

Violence recreates itself through a vicious cycle. Violence experienced as a child may carry over into the adult lives of men who think it's the way to solve problems, or parents who abuse their own children.

The intersections between violence against children and violence against women in terms of common causes, consequences and solutions is well-documented. Ending violence against children will also help in addressing gender-based violence and breaking intergenerational cycles of violence.<sup>39</sup>

## CALL TO ACTION

There is a compelling economic case for increasing and improving investment in the prevention and response to violence against children.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the expediting of vaccine developments have shown the cost-effectiveness of prevention over response when dealing with a public health crisis. This knowledge should also be applied towards ending violence against children: essentially a “vaccine” to prevent it. Fortunately, cost-effective preventative and response interventions already exist.

Preventing and responding to violence against children should be an integral part of every government’s economic growth and development strategy and a cornerstone of their plan to implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Action is needed now more than ever.



### Governments should:

- Recognise the high returns from investment in child protection and violence prevention services and the long-term cost savings.
- Incorporate preventing violence against children and other vulnerable groups into national economic growth and development strategies, as an integral part of investing in human capital. They should also prioritise and protect such investments within post-COVID-19 national recovery plans and beyond
- Increase investment in integrated, evidence-based approaches for the prevention of violence across all services for children and leverage opportunities for concurrent benefits<sup>40</sup>

- Track spending on child protection and violence prevention in the national budget and accounting system across all relevant ministries to improve accountability, monitoring and reporting
- Strengthen mechanisms for inter-ministerial, national and sub-national government coordination of all agencies with a role in child protection and violence prevention
- Develop indicators and data collection systems to assess the effectiveness of investments in child protection and violence prevention.



### Development partners should:

- Invest in generating and promoting evidence on the economic returns from investments in violence prevention and child protection to inform government policy, planning and budgeting
- Support global research, analysis and dissemination of evidence on the economic returns of investments in preventing violence against children, including the development of standardised approaches to estimating its costs and returns on investment
- Finance capacity building on making the economic case for investing in violence prevention and child protection for government financial decision-makers, including parliamentarians and all relevant line-ministries
- Develop and promote the use of existing standardized indicators, including the OECD policy-markers on the SDGs, to monitor and report on development partners’ allocations to child protection and violence prevention<sup>41</sup>.



- <sup>1</sup> See article 19 Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989, and General comment No. 13, on the right of the child to freedom from all forms of violence
- <sup>2</sup> See articles 3 and 4, Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989, and General comment No. 19 on public budgeting for the realisation of children's rights
- <sup>3</sup> The Costs and economic impact of violence against children, ChildFund Alliance and ODI, 2014
- <sup>4</sup> See, for example, <https://www.togetherforgirls.org/violence-children-surveys/>, and <https://data.unicef.org/resources/a-familiar-face/>
- <sup>5</sup> Hillis, S., Mercy, J.A., Amobi, A. & Kress, H. 2016. Global prevalence of past-year violence against children: A systematic review and minimum estimates. *Pediatrics*. 137(3): e20154079.
- <sup>6</sup> Annual report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children, United Nations, 2021
- <sup>7</sup> Ending violence in childhood, Global Report, Know Violence in Childhood, 2017
- <sup>8</sup> Ending the torment: tackling bullying from schoolyard to cyberspace, Office of SRSG on Violence against Children, 2016
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- <sup>24</sup> World Bank. 2021b. GDP (current US\$). Available at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD>
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- <sup>38</sup> See for example the INSPIRE framework: <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/inspire-seven-strategies-for-ending-violence-against-children>
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