

Violence Towards Children in the EU

In this European Parliamentary report, which exposes the prevalence and multifaceted nature of violence towards children across Europe, the common assumption that violence is more of a problem for developing nations is squashed. In fact, the European Parliament concludes from cross-regional consultations between Europe and Central Asia that “children in Europe are as vulnerable to violence as in any other region” (p.7). Dispelling the myth that violence can only happen in impoverished communities is part of this report’s agenda. Recognising the omnipresence of violence towards children is an essential step towards its final eradication.

At the same time, this report does acknowledge the very real connections between poverty and violence towards children. Statistics shared by the European Child Helpline show a sharp increase in the number of calls received since the onset of the 2008 economic crisis. Multiple NGOs report that austerity measures introduced following the financial crisis have also influenced violence towards children. The coincidence of cuts to essential services with increased financial pressures at the family level has led to higher levels of violence towards children in Europe.

Across Europe there are at least two strands to the child protection system: one formal, the other informal. Internationally ratified conventions recognising children’s rights constitute the formal element of the system whilst the attitudes, values and norms of the society shape the informal element. What becomes clear from this report is that the synthesis of these two strands is a pre-requisite for ending violence towards children in the EU. The political objective of ending violence against children is underpinned by both socio-economic and moral imperatives. Extrapolating from global statistics, this report estimates that *each year* as many as 18 million children in Europe suffer from sexual abuse. This translates into approximately 1 in 5 European children experiencing sexual abuse, where, in 70-85% of cases, the victim knows the perpetrator. Up to 44 million children suffer from physical abuse and 55 million suffer from psychological abuse. Approximately 850 children die as a consequence of violence each year in Europe.

At the human level, the consequences of violence are perhaps incalculable. However, evidence indicates that the stresses associated with violence in childhood can be so acute as to result in brain damage, cognitive impairments, developmental, behavioural and social difficulties. In the long-term, experiencing violence in childhood can mean reduced economic productivity. This can lock victims into poverty and, thus, violence in childhood often leaves people disadvantaged throughout life. Witnessing domestic violence can be equally damaging to children as being subject to it themselves. Growing up in environments where violence is perceived as ‘normal’ has a range of negative physical, social and psychological effects. The poorer grasp of language abused children typically exhibit is perhaps a double blow given that these children are likely to be the more in need of self expression.

Research shows that child victims of violence are also more likely to resort to violence than their non-abused peers. This means that so called ‘trans-generational transmission’ of violence (or ‘cycles’ of violence) can establish themselves more easily in communities where certain forms of violence are socially accepted. Precisely for this reason the European Parliament is insistent that while punishing individual perpetrators is absolutely critical, alone it will not be enough to prevent violence against children. European governments must ensure adequate law enforcement so that child abusers are not treated with impunity. However, more efforts must be made to address the underlying economic, social and cultural conditions that allow violence towards children to occur in the first place.

Certain groups of children (e.g. minority groups, disabled and economically disadvantaged) are more vulnerable to violence. Equally there are certain settings (e.g. residential institutions and detention centres) in which the risks of maltreatment are higher. Thus, governments must ensure that more vulnerable children receive the degree of protection required. Transparency and accountability are essential to eradicating violence towards children in Europe. European legal frameworks are already in place: what is required is renewed political will and the distribution of sufficient resources to respond.