Preventing Children's Exposure to Violence: The Defending Childhood Initiative

by Sarah B. Berson, Jolene Hernon and Beth Pearsall

An NIJ-funded evaluation takes a close look at communities developing strategies to address childhood exposure to violence.

Sixty percent of American children are exposed to violence, crime or abuse in their homes, schools and communities.[1] Children exposed to violence — whether as victims or as witnesses — are more likely to exhibit aggressive behavior, such as bullying and fighting in school, and they are at higher risk of engaging in criminal behavior later in life by repeating the violence they experienced as children.[2]

Yet there is hope. Research has found that early identification and intervention, along with continued follow-up, can help prevent or reduce the impact of exposure to violence.[3]

To help address the problem of children's exposure to violence, U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder launched the Defending Childhood Initiative in 2010. The Initiative's goals are to:

- Prevent children's exposure to violence.

- Mitigate the negative impact of children's exposure to violence when it does occur.

- Develop knowledge and spread awareness about children's exposure to violence.

To pursue these goals, the Department of Justice awarded $1.25 million to develop and evaluate innovative programs. Eight project demonstration sites were selected to develop, implement and test plans designed to reduce children's exposure to violence in

their communities.[4] NIJ-funded researchers at the Center for Court Innovation are rigorously evaluating the sites' activities to determine which efforts are effective. The evaluations will help researchers and practitioners to better understand what does and does not work in reducing and mitigating children's exposure to violence, so evidence-based policies and programs can be developed and put into place.

The demonstration program, which is managed by the Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, is divided into two phases: Phase I — Assessment and Strategic Planning, and Phase II — Implementation and Evaluation.

Phase I: Assessment and Strategic Planning

During Phase I, which ended in April 2011, the demonstration sites conducted assessments to identify community needs. They developed strategic plans and proposed methods for preventing children's exposure to violence, treating the psychological effects of such exposure, and increasing awareness of youth violence and resources. Specific strategies included:

- Bringing a wide range of stakeholders (politicians, law enforcement agencies, social service organizations, researchers and school representatives) together to address children's exposure to violence. Some sites formed new coalitions, and others folded programs into existing coalitions, such as public safety or early childhood collaboratives.

- Establishing new or enhancing existing data collection and analysis systems to better track and analyze incidents reported to law

enforcement and child protective services, arrest rates, and related data from schools and other agencies.[5]

- Implementing evidence-based curricula in schools on dating violence prevention and healthy relationships.

- Using a trauma-informed practice checklist to monitor agency compliance with evidence-based practices.

- Educating school, mental health and medical professionals, as well as parents and advocates, on identifying and understanding the impact of children's exposure to violence.

- Training teachers, school staff and school leaders on evidence-based, trauma-focused mental health interventions.

- Training tribe elders/Peacemakers to work directly with youth to address violence and proper behavior within the tribal region.

Formative Evaluation of Phase I

The Center for Court Innovation conducted a formative evaluation of Phase I activities.[6] Formative evaluations are conducted while programs or initiatives are still in development. Unlike evaluations of programs after they are implemented, which assess programs in terms of their processes, impacts, and costs and benefits, formative evaluations describe the planning process; assess goals and objectives met during development; and identify potential strengths, weaknesses and opportunities, as well as barriers to implementation and adaptation. They also document lessons learned and strategies used

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Findings from the Comprehensive National Survey on Children's Exposure to Violence

- Sixty percent of American children were exposed to violence, crime or abuse in their homes, schools and communities.

- Almost 40 percent of American children were direct victims of two or more violent acts, and 1 in 10 were victims of violence five or more times.

- Children were more likely to be exposed to violence and crime than adults.

- Almost 1 in 10 American children saw one family member assault another family member, and more than 25 percent had been exposed to family violence during their lifetime.

- Exposure to one type of violence increased the likelihood that a child would be exposed to other types of violence and exposed multiple times.

Note: Finkelhor, David, Heather Turner, Richard Ormrod, Sherry Hamby, and Kristen Kracke, "Children's Exposure to Violence: A Comprehensive National Survey," *Juvenile Justice Bulletin* (October 2009), Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, available at http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojjdp/227744.pdf.

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over the course of the development process. Collecting and disseminating this kind of information can help jurisdictions interested in replicating the programs in the future.

The Center for Court Innovation's goals for the formative evaluation of Phase I were to:

- Implement a participatory research process with all sites.
- Describe key strategies, outcomes and available data.
- Produce evaluability assessments for each site and an evaluation design for Phase II (implementation).

All of the sites proposed some mix of prevention, intervention and public awareness strategies. Sites varied, however, in a number of ways — including geography, demography, level of violence, research expertise, existing infrastructure and history of collaborating with key stakeholders from other sectors. In their strategic proposals, the sites developed approaches that fit the particular needs and resources of their communities. For example, two sites that identified domestic violence as the most common form of violence to which children were exposed in their communities created a proposal to implement evidence-based curricula on dating violence prevention and forming healthy relationships. One of these sites is including this dating violence curriculum as part of a universal prevention strategy. After forging relationships with local school districts, the site proposed using schools, daycare and other existing programs to reach children 17 and younger with a wide variety of primary prevention programming. Examples of other strategies developed by the sites are listed above and in the Phase I Evaluation report.

The evaluators also identified some common themes among the proposed strategies. For example, most sites included intensive direct training of service providers and plans for better data systems to improve data collection and more efficiently and systematically track services. Collecting, accessing and sharing data was a challenge for most of the sites.

Phase II: Implementation and Evaluation

Phase II began in October 2011, when the sites started to put their proposed plans into action. It will run until September 2013.

The Center for Court Innovation, with funds from NIJ, will evaluate implementation at the demonstration sites. Evaluating implementation at the demonstration sites will allow future sites to learn from their broad range of techniques and approaches for reducing the number of children exposed to violence and mitigating the impact on those already exposed. Researchers will conduct a process evaluation and an impact evaluation.

Process evaluation: The process evaluation will provide a rich account of strategies undertaken at six sites.[7] The evaluation will clarify:

- Why the strategies were chosen
- The scope of each strategy in terms of target population (e.g., geographic, demographic)
- Which agencies were involved
- How implementation unfolded over time
- What barriers to implementation arose and how they were overcome
- The successes, challenges and lessons learned
- How other jurisdictions could replicate the strategy

Impact evaluation: The impact evaluation will show change over time in a number of indicators related to children's exposure to violence. Using a large pre-post community survey (that is, a survey conducted before implementation and again after implementation) at each site, researchers will be able to track changes in adults' attitudes toward violence, perceptions of violence as a community problem, awareness of local resources and knowledge about the effects exposure to violence has on children.[8] Additionally, the researchers will work with sites to access local law enforcement, child welfare services and school incident data, as well as service utilization data, both historically and over the course of the initiative. They will use these data to investigate the associations between the implementation schedule, strategy scope and changes over time. In addition, the researchers will conduct a pre-post survey of professionals participating in training events for each site to assess changes in knowledge, awareness and practices related to children exposed to violence.

Table 1 depicts the desired outcomes and indicators the demonstration sites and evaluators are likely to use to assess the strategies' effectiveness in their communities.

The Defending Childhood Initiative is designed to help communities develop, test and evaluate strategies in the field to determine what works for reducing the number of children exposed to violence. A final report from the research team is expected in 2014.

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Table 1. Desired Impacts/Outcomes and Indicators of Success

	Impacts/Outcomes	Indicators
Prevention	Reduced exposure to school violence	• Incidence of bullying • Incidence of physical fights/threats at school • Incidence of disciplinary suspensions
	Reduced exposure to violence at home	• Incidence of child abuse, neglect, etc. • Incidence of domestic violence (with child present) • Incidence of relative/sibling violence
	Reduced exposure to community violence	• Incidence of violent crime (adult/juvenile) • Child/juvenile victims of violence
	Increased healthy relationship knowledge, attitudes, behavior and resilience factors	• Increased knowledge of healthy relationships • Improved healthy relationship attitudes • Improved healthy relationship behaviors
Intervention	Increased/improved screening for children exposed to violence	• Incidence of screening for children exposed to violence • Use of standardized screening tools
	Improved systems responses for children exposed to violence	• Changes in systems, policies and procedures • Increased collaboration among agencies • Increased information/data sharing
	Improved treatment outcomes and resilience factors for children exposed to violence	• Reduced negative symptoms • Increased resilience factors
Awareness	Increased awareness of effects of children's exposure to violence	• Increased knowledge of effects of children's exposure to violence • Increased negative attitudes toward children's exposure to violence
	Increased awareness of community resources/services available for children exposed to violence	• Increased knowledge of resources • Increased likelihood to use/recommend resources
	Increased awareness of what constitutes violence	• Increased knowledge of what constitutes violence • Increased negative attitudes toward all types of violence/acceptance of violence

For more information:

- Read the Formative Evaluation of the Phase I Demonstration Program at http://www.courtinnovation.org/sites/default/files/documents/Defending_Childhood_Initiative.pdf.

- Visit the Defending Childhood Initiative's website, http://www.justice.gov/defendingchildhood.

Notes

1. Finkelhor, David, Heather Turner, Richard Ormrod, Sherry Hamby, and Kristen Kracke, "Children's Exposure to Violence: A Comprehensive National Survey," *Juvenile Justice Bulletin* (October 2009), Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention,

available at http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojjdp/227744.pdf. Additional information on the survey and related publications are available at http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/projects/natscev.html.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. The Phase I demonstration sites were: Boston, Mass.; Cuyahoga County Board of Commissioners, Ohio; Grand Forks, N.D.; Multnomah County Department of Human Services, Ore.; Portland, Maine; Shelby County, Tenn.; the Chippewa Cree Tribe (Mont.); and the Rosebud Sioux Tribe (S.D.).

5. The comprehensiveness of existing data varies greatly by type of violence, which makes it difficult to accurately and effectively address violence issues. Filling the gaps in existing data would improve accuracy and effectiveness. Moreover, interagency agreements and mechanisms to build data capacity can improve collection of existing data.

6. Swaner, Rachel, and Julia Kohn, "The U.S. Attorney General's Defending Childhood Initiative: Formative Evaluation of the Phase 1 Demonstration Program," Final report to the National Institute of Justice, grant number 2010-IJ-CX-0015, November 2011, NCJ 236563, available at https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/236563.pdf.

7. Multnomah County Department of Human Services (Ore.) and Portland, Maine, were not selected to receive full implementation funding and will not undergo Phase II evaluation.

8. Because of the Shelby County, Tenn., site's unique methodology (a place-based approach focused on several apartment complexes), researchers will not implement a community survey at this site. Instead, they will develop an alternative strategy to assess similar variables at this site.