



CHILD PROTECTION WEEK 2003: FACT SHEET NR 4: CRIMES AGAINST CHILDREN

*Prepared by the Children's Institute, University of Cape Town
For more information, please contact Carol Bower at Resources Against Child Abuse and Neglect (RAPCAN) on 083 4784079*

Crimes Against Children

The large number of crimes committed against children in South Africa reflects the urgent need for the pledge to protect children from harm to become a reality. According to data from the South African Police Services provided by RAPCAN (1), reported crimes against children increased from almost 67 000 in 1996 to over 72 000 reported crimes in 2000. These crimes include murder and attempted murder, assault, rape and kidnapping:

- The most common crime committed against children is physical assault. This category includes murder, common assault and assault with the intention to do grievous bodily harm. The number of reported cases of all these crimes put together amounted to 37,669 in 2000 (2).
- The second most common crimes committed against children are sexual assault. This category includes rape, sodomy, indecent assault and other sexual offences. In 2000, reported sexual crimes against children numbered 25,578 (3).

Physical Assault

Children in South Africa have been – and continue to be – exposed to high and traumatic levels of violence in many forms. There are no accurate statistics on children exposed to violence. However, studies have found that:

- Some 25% of non-natural deaths of children younger than 18 years between January and June 1999 were homicides (4).
- Nearly half of the homicides were the result of a firearm and a further third was perpetrated with a sharp object. Homicide victims were predominantly male, black and on average 15 years old.
- Gun Free South Africa reports that South Africa has the highest firearm homicide rates in the world (5).

Violence in schools is also a growing problem and in urban areas, gangsterism is rife (6):

- Many children are caught in the crossfire between gangs or drive-by shootings. A study found that an average of 1 in 4 children had witnessed incidents such as gang fights or robbery (7).
- Studies in Soweto, Durban and Cape Town identify gang-based violence as the major crime and violence problem affecting many schools (8).
- The possibility is great that children faced with unemployment, boredom, violence and poverty in their environments can turn to crime and violence as alternatives. These children include those involved in gangs and children on the street. Factors that increase the likelihood of children turning to crime are child poverty, limited opportunities for youth, alienation from school and substance abuse (9).

Sexual Assault

- Figures on sexual crimes against children for 2000 were the highest in the KwaZulu-Natal province, at just less than 5 500 (10).
- In the first three months of 2001, just over 5 400 cases of child rape were reported nationally (11).
- While girl children have traditionally been at risk of being abused, and are abused more often, many boy children are also sexually abused (12).

These figures are not a true reflection of the situation for children. It is well known that recorded sexual crimes greatly under-estimate prevalence, due to under-reporting. Also, crimes that result in less injury to children than rape are far less likely to be reported (13).

Sexual Assault in the School Environment

School is an environment of violence for many children in South Africa. For girls in particular, violence and abuse are an inevitable part of the school environment (14):

- A study in 1998 found that 1 in 3 Johannesburg schoolgirls had experienced sexual violence at school (15).
- Similarly, an investigation into abuse at Gauteng schools found that learners with special needs were particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment and violence (16).
- A study of three provinces by Human Rights Watch in 2001 (17) "...found that girls from all levels of society and among all ethnic groups are affected by sexual violence at school..." The impact of abuse results in children's learning ability and girl's equal access to education being severely impeded.
- The study also found that South African girls face multiple forms of sexual violence at school, including rape, sexual abuse, sexualised touching and sexualised verbal degradation. Fellow students largely commit these forms of gender violence.
- Furthermore, the findings identified that "...teachers engaging in serious sexual misconduct with underage female students is widespread".

Factors Contributing to Crimes Against Children

Though crimes against children occur in all communities, it is clear from research conducted abroad, and from the limited South African data, that children in poor communities are more at risk. Structural features of poverty environments that raise the risk of abuse include (18):

- Overcrowded housing in which there is little possibility of separation between sexualised adults or teenagers and children.
- Inclusion of non-family members (e.g. lodgers) in already overcrowded households as a way of improving family income.
- Social isolation of families in communities with high rates of mobility, which leads to women and children having limited sources of support from neighbours.
- Poor recreational and related resources for youths.
- Unsafe neighbourhoods with low levels of policing and high levels of gang activity restrict movement and render children vulnerable to attack.

At the same time there are also personal features of poverty environments that raise the risk of abuse:

- Individual parents struggle to cope with the strains of poverty, which leads to low emotional resources, depression and intra-familial and community violence.
- High levels of alcohol abuse.

- Parental difficulties with child monitoring and supervision (particularly where childcare facilities are very limited).
- Large numbers of unemployed men and youths.

Structural inequalities built into the fabric of our society by colonial and apartheid policies have contributed to the high levels of poverty and inequity in South Africa as well as undermined the position of women, and ultimately have played a major contributing role to our high rate of crimes against children.

The growth in reports of sexual crimes against children in South Africa indicates that this type of crime is either on the increase or is being more widely reported and spoken about. However, inconsistent definitions of "child sexual abuse" and inadequate recording also prevent the accurate collection of administrative and statistical data on sexual crimes against children (19).

TOMORROW: FACT SHEET NR. 5: CHILDREN'S ACCESS TO THE CHILD SUPPORT GRANT

SOURCES:

- (1) Data from South African Police Services. Bower, C. 2003. RAPCAN. Personal Communication.
- (2) As Above
- (3) As Above
- (4) Peden, M. 1999. Input to the President's State of the Nation's Children's Report 1999. In: Office on the Rights of the Child, The Presidency. 2001. *Children in 2001. A Report on the State of the Nation's Children*. Pretoria.
- (5) Office on the Rights of the Child, The Presidency. 2001. As Above.
- (6) Office on the Rights of the Child, The Presidency. 2001. As Above.
- (7) Duncan, N. and Rock, B. 1997. Inquiry into the effects of Public Violence on Children. In: Office on the Rights of the Child, The Presidency. 2001. As Above.
- (8) Phillip, B. 1999. Violence in South African Township Schools: An Exploration. In: Office on the Rights of the Child, The Presidency. 2001. As Above.
- (9) National Crime Prevention Strategy. 1996. In: Office on the Rights of the Child, The Presidency. 2001. As Above
- (10) As Above
- (11) Data from South African Police Services. Bower, C. 2003. RAPCAN. Personal Communication.
- (12) Office on the Rights of the Child, The Presidency. 2001. *Children in 2001. A Report on the State of the Nation's Children*. Pretoria.
- (13) Dawes, A. 2002. *Sexual Offences against Children in South Africa. Considerations for Primary Prevention*. Submission. Children's Institute, UCT.
- (14) Savage, K. 2002. *Evaluation of Policy Formulation and Legislation Projects on Children's Rights supported by Save the Children Sweden 1998-2001*.
- (15) CIETAfrica – SMLC. 2000. Beyond victims and villains: The culture of sexual violence in South Johannesburg. In: Community Agency of Social Enquiry. 2002. *A Sector Review of Child Abuse and Exploitation in South Africa*. Draft Report Researched for Save the Children (Sweden). Braamfontein.
- (16) Gauteng Legislature. 2002. Sexual violence and harassment of a girl child in Gauteng schools. In: Community Agency of Social Enquiry. 2002. *A Sector Review of Child Abuse and Exploitation in South Africa*. Draft Report Researched for Save the Children (Sweden). Braamfontein.
- (17) Human Rights Watch. 2001. Scared at School: Sexual Violence Against Girls in South African Schools. Washington.
- (18) Dawes, A. 2002. *Sexual Offences against Children in South Africa. Submission*. Children's Institute, UCT
- (19) Dawes, A. and Parker, Z. 2003. Child Sexual Abuse in Atlantis. A research report (draft). Children's Institute, UCT