



Child-on-Child Violence in the UK: A Retrospective Survey

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Contents

Executive Summary	3
Overview	4-5
Methodology	6-7
Key Findings	7-11
Recommendations	12

Executive Summary

The latest findings from Beatbullying suggest that more than a third (37%) of young people report having suffered a severe physical attack and/or inappropriate sexual behaviour during childhood by a fellow young person.

The severity of bullying is significant, 52 per cent having sustained physical injuries from the attack, 28 per cent threatened with a weapon and almost a tenth (7%) knocked unconscious, reported the 16-25-years-olds interviewed.

A further quarter of those respondents who had suffered child-on-child violence were subjected to a sexual attack by a peer.

“I got sexually abused by a best friend’s brother, and I got very depressed. I came home to a destructive family and was continually threatened...my past till affects me till this day with medical conditions...and emotions”

The research details the emotional and social implications of bullying, revealing that of those who suffered physical violence 15 per cent were also in trouble with the police, compared to just 4 per cent who were not under any physical attack.

A further 19 per cent of those who experienced violence went on to have an eating disorder, 17 per cent were prescribed anti-depressants and 7 per cent became involved in drink or drugs. Of children experiencing inappropriate sexual behaviour, 8 per cent ran away from home.

“I was assaulted aged 13 because of my clothing style. I was robbed of my bike and phone, and threatened with a knife.”

Experiencing physical violence also bears a distinct relationship to standards of living and health with 23 per cent of young people who were physically attacked by another child now classifying their standard of living themselves as ‘poor’ versus 13 per cent of those who did not endure child on child violence. Similarly, 13 per cent of those attacked cite themselves as being in ‘poor health’, compared to 4 per cent of people who faced no violence from their peers.

The report also finds a special focus should be paid to vulnerable children who are more likely to be victims of physical violence:

- Young carers are almost three times more likely to experience inappropriate sexual behaviour abuse at the hands of their peers (16% compared with 6%)
- Those who were reported as Statement of Special Educational Needs (SEN) were twice as likely to have experienced physical abuse (8% compared with 4%)

“I was taken to a park with a bunch of friends and beaten just because of who I am”

Overview

“Ten years on, I am still scared to walk around that area.”

“In the end I just didn’t leave the house other than to go to school.”

“I never got to be the person I wanted to be.”

It is commonly accepted to refer to violence and harassment between peers as ‘bullying’ and reserve the more serious and emotive term ‘abuse’ for harm committed against children by adults. However, it is increasingly being recognised that the physical, emotional and sexual violence experienced by many children and young people at the hands of their peers is, in its severity and its effects, equal to the adult-on-child violence that we term abuse.

When we refer to child-on-child violence we are talking about something overlapping with, but distinct from, the peer-to-peer harassment we call bullying. Child-on-child violence is an extreme form of bullying which crosses the line into serious crime, and which would be immediately identified as crime if it occurred among adults. Children and young people can and do suffer assault, robbery, molestation, abusive relationships and rape at the hands of their peers. This is not in any way to belittle the seriousness of adult-on-child abuse; rather it is to make the point, reinforced by emerging evidence, that the impact of violence is devastating no matter who perpetrates it.

This understanding has been made explicit in recent studies: Finkelhor’s 2006 US study of the nature and prevalence of child-on-child (including sibling) violence finds that the physical and emotional effects of such violence are comparable to that experienced by adult victims of violent crime. The authors cite research from Baum (2005) which finds that the rates of serious violent crime (aggravated assault, rape and robbery) in the USA during the period 1993 – 2003 were twice as high for young people aged 12 – 17 as they were for adults and the vast majority of violence against young people was committed by their peers. An Australian study by Dr. Jean B. Healey of the University of Sydney in 2005 identifies explicit parallels between adult-perpetrated child abuse and peer-to-peer bullying in terms of prevalence, severity and impact.

More recently and closer to home, the NSPCC report ‘Child Cruelty in the UK 2011’ presents findings on experiences of violence among 11 – 17 year-olds as well as retrospective data from young adults aged 18 – 24. The survey collected data on young people’s experience of violence, physical and emotional, at the hands of adults and on sexual abuse from both adults and peers. It found that 2 per cent of 11 – 17-year-olds had been sexually abused by an adult and 3 per cent had been raped or coerced into sex by another child or young person. The inclusion of a specific question on child-on-child sexual violence is significant in its acknowledgement that sexual abuse can be committed by peers as well as adults.

¹Finkelhor D., Turner H., Ormrod R., 2006: Kid’s Stuff: the nature and impact of peer and sibling violence on younger and older children, in the Journal of Child Abuse and Neglect 30, 1401 - 1421 <http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/pdf/CV133.pdf>

²Baum (2005), cited in Finkelhor (2006), *ibid.*

³Healey J., 2005, Peer Abuse as Child Abuse and Indications for Interventions in Schools <http://www.aare.edu.au/o5pap/hea05418.pdf>

⁴NSPCC research team (2011), Child Cruelty in the UK 2011: An NSPCC study into childhood abuse and neglect over the past 30 years http://www.nspcc.org.uk/news-and-views/our-news/nspcc-news/11-02-15-report-launch/overview-report_wdf80875.pdf

For the purpose of this research, we defined child-on-child violence as meeting one or all of the following criteria:

- Being beaten, choked, thrown or knocked down, threatened with a knife or gun, or threatened with death by another child
- An incident resulting in sustained physical injuries
- An incident requiring medical attention

We defined inappropriate sexual behaviour as meeting one or all of the following criteria:

- Being touched or grabbed in a sexual way, exposed to unwanted sexual content making the victim feel uncomfortable, removal of clothing, rape or attempted rape
- An incident requiring medical attention

Methodology

Beatbullying

Beatbullying commissioned YouGov to administer a retrospective survey exploring the prevalence of child-on-child violence in the UK. Surveying young people at the start of adulthood gives an accurate retrospective view of the prevalence of peer violence in adolescents.

The survey questions themselves were drawn up in consultation with young people and Beatbullying practitioners (including development officers, researchers and counsellors), who have extensive experience in visiting schools and talking to children about bullying.

The comprehensive survey posed a mixture of both open and closed questions: closed questions were used to aggregate answers for statistical purposes, allowing generalised findings to emerge to the wider population, while open questions were posed to allow the respondent to express themselves, further gleaning essential depth of information with respect to the feelings and experiences reported by the respondents.

The survey covered the views of 1,001 young adults aged 16-25, ensuring a representative sample was captured. The respondents were based in the following regions of the UK: North East (4%), North West (12%), Yorkshire and Humber (9%), East Midlands (7%), West Midlands (9%), East of England (9%), London (12%), South East (14%), South West (9%), Wales (5%), Scotland (8%) and Northern Ireland (2%). Over half (51%) were male (remaining 49% were female). Just under a third (32%) were aged between 16-and-18-years-old, 33 per cent were aged 19-21 and the remaining 35 per cent were aged 22-25.

A number of questions were asked about whether the respondent had experienced any inappropriate sexual behaviour. These questions were framed in such a way to avoid any unnecessary gratuitous and graphic descriptions of the experience. To further reduce any potential harm from engaging in this type of research, respondents were assured that all answers would be treated with the strictest confidentiality. Respondents were not obligated to complete the questionnaire and withheld the right to skip any questions, indicate the 'prefer not to say option' or withdraw from the research.

One of the key criticisms of retrospective studies is that a correlation does not necessarily imply causation. For example, those who describe themselves as having a low standard of living were not able to state that this was directly related to the violence or abuse they experienced. However, people who indicated that they had had such experiences were more likely to describe themselves in such a way compared to people who had not, allowing us to shed some light on the long-term implications of extreme forms of violence. Added to this, we asked the questions at the beginning of the survey to further avoid any bias with results. Lending added validity to these findings, we asked the respondents to answer a question on the consequences of such violence, allowing insight into a more explicit relationship of causation.

YouGov

This survey has been conducted using an online interview administered by members of the YouGov Plc GB panel of 280,000+ individuals who have agreed to take part in surveys. An email was sent to panel lists selected at random from the base sample according to the sample definition, inviting them to take part in the survey and providing a link to the survey. (The sample definition could be “GB adult population” or a subset such as “GB adult females”).

YouGov Plc normally achieves a response rate of between 35 per cent and 50 per cent to surveys; however this does vary dependent upon the subject matter, complexity and length of the questionnaire. The responding sample is weighted to the profile of the sample definition to provide a representative reporting sample. The profile is normally derived from census data or, if not available from the census, from industry accepted data.

Total sample size was 1001 adults aged 16-25 years old. Fieldwork was undertaken between 29th March and 4th April 2011. The survey was carried out online.

Key Findings

The latest findings from Beatbullying reveal that nearly one-in-three (30%) 16-25 year olds have experienced some form of severe physical violence, and one-in-ten (15%) have experienced some form of inappropriate and unwanted sexual contact at the hands of their peers.

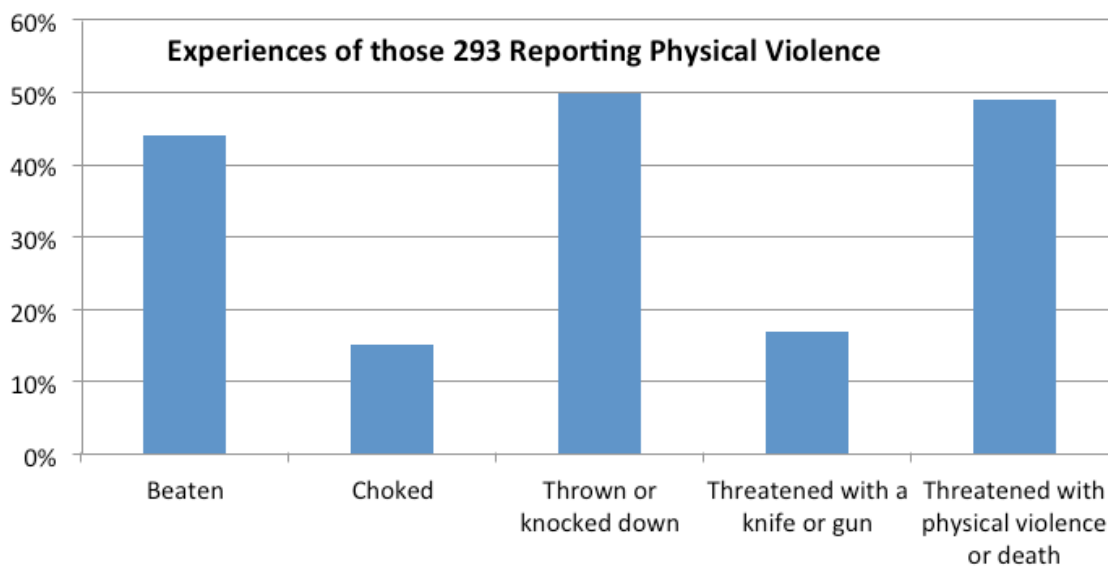
Physical violence

“The violent experience was from an ex-boyfriend when I was 13, I have still never told anyone.”

“Well, I was beat up by some people older than me but still under the age of 18 on my estate, they always shouted abuse at me and bullied me because of the way I dressed. In the end I just didn’t leave the house other than to go to school and avoided them at all costs.”

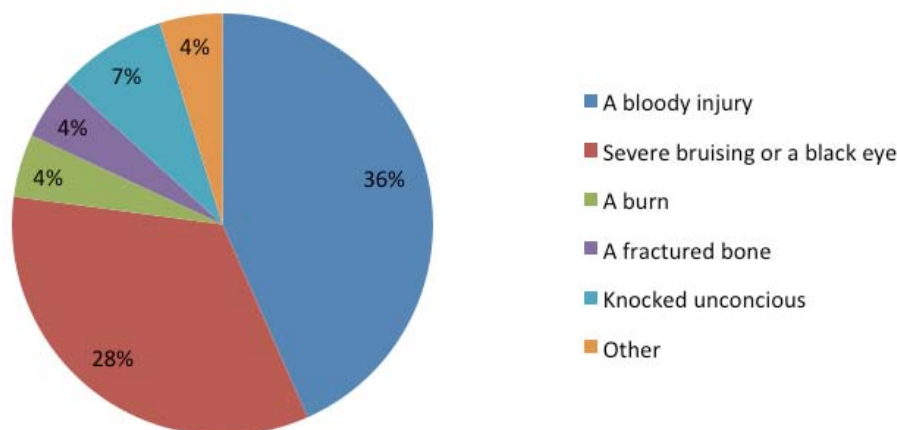
“I was taken to a park with a bunch of friends and beaten just because of who I am.”

Out of the 30 per cent who reported undergoing physical violence at the hands of their peers (40% males; 19% females) over half suffered this abuse as a single isolated incident. At the other end of the spectrum a concerning minority of 11 per cent said that it occurred more than 10 times. The most common location for physical abuse was at school (55%), followed by other locations such as in the community or on public transport (45%) and 14 per cent at home (respondents could select more than one option.)



Over half (52%) sustained physical injuries as a result of the attack (7% reported being ‘knocked out’ or knocked unconscious), while more than a quarter (28%) involved the use of a weapon (12% said a knife was used).

Injuries Sustained (Physical Violence)



Interestingly, a quarter (25%) of those who said that they suffered physical abuse also said that they suffered inappropriate sexual behaviour at the hands of their peers.

Gender Breakdown of Physical Violence

Of the 513 males, 21 per cent reported having been thrown or knocked down, 19 per cent reported having been threatened with physical violence or death and 19 per cent reported having been beaten. Of the 488 females, 8 per cent reported being thrown or knocked down, 10 per cent reported having been threatened with physical violence or death and 7 per cent reported having been beaten. There is therefore a significant gender difference in regard to the extent of physical violence experienced.

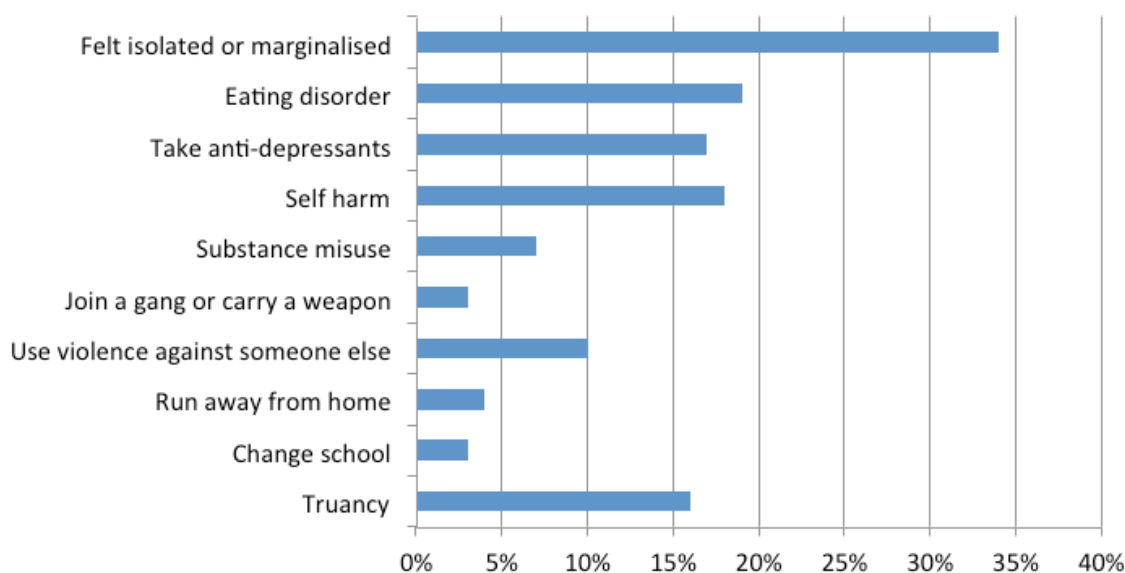
The findings further reveal that child-on-child violence is of increased concern for particular 'high risk' groups of children.

- Those who had a Statement of Special Educational Needs (SEN) were twice as likely to experience physical abuse at the hands of their peers (compare 8% of those who reported a physical attack with 4% of those who did not)
- People who said they received Free School Meals (FSM) – a proxy measure of deprivation employed within the Deprivation Index – were 8 per cent more likely to experience physical abuse at the hands of their peers (17% of those who experienced physical violence with 9% of those who did not)
- People who reported being excluded from school were 7 per cent more likely to experience physical abuse at the hands of their peers (11% compared to 4%)
- Young people who identified themselves as a young carer (e.g., looking after a family member with a disability or long-term illness), were nearly three times more likely to experience this type of physical abuse (14% compared to 5%)
- Those who were physically abused in childhood were nearly three times more likely to be in trouble or get in trouble with the police (15% of those who had experienced physical violence said they were in trouble with the police, compared to 4% who did not report physical violence)
- Finally CYP in care or care leavers (e.g., Looked After by the Local Authority, foster or residential care) were more likely to experience physical violence at the hands of their peers (3% compared to 0%)

Experiencing child-on-child violence also bears a distinct relationship to standards of living and health in adulthood with 23 per cent of young people who were physically attacked by another child now classifying their standard of living as ‘poor’ versus 13 per cent of those who did not endure child-on-child violence. Similarly, 13 per cent of those attacked cite themselves as being in ‘poor health’, compared to 4 per cent of people who faced no violence from their peers.

To highlight a more explicit correlation, over a third (34%) reported feeling isolated and marginalised at the time of the incident; 17 per cent said they took medication in the form of anti-depressants, 19 per cent reported a eating disorder and 18 per cent turned to self-harm, highlighting the self-destructive behaviour that readily follows peer to peer violence.

Consequences of Physical Violence



Inappropriate sexual behaviour

“I was over a desk when a guy came behind me and began thrusting in a forceful manner. It made me feel uncomfortable and belittled.”

“I did not talk about or report the incidents for a long time and so the police could not gather enough evidence.”

“It was my boyfriend at the time (I was 14, he was 16 and already left school) and after suffering bullying I’d become very shy so had trouble fully expressing my feelings about not wanting to get involved with sexual acts, although I had said no to him often. I’ve since returned to my previous confident self and have talked through the issues with people I can trust.”

More than one-in-ten (15%) 16-25-year-olds reported experiencing some form of inappropriate sexual behaviour at the hands of another child or young person (10% males and 19% females).

The majority of incidents (48%) were isolated incidents (occurring once), while 21 per cent were persistent incidents (occurring more than 6 times).

Whilst physical abuse was more likely to occur in school, inappropriate sexual behaviour was more likely to occur elsewhere in the community (e.g., on public transport).

An overwhelming 52 per cent did not tell anyone about the experiences. Those who did report the incident were more likely to tell a friend or peer, highlighting the notion that peer support is an effective support strategy for children and young people encountering this type of problem.

Moreover, a quarter (26%) of those experiencing inappropriate sexual behaviour felt isolated and marginalised, 16 per cent developed an eating disorder, 15 per cent took anti-depressants and 14 per cent said that they self-harmed, highlighting the self-destructive behaviour that readily follows sexual abuse.

The findings further reveal that children and young people identified as vulnerable are more likely to experience inappropriate sexual behaviour:

- Those who reported a Statement of Special Educational Needs (SEN) were two times more likely to experience inappropriate sexual behaviour at the hands of their peers (compare 8% with 4%)
- Those who received Free School Meals (FSM), were more likely to experience sexual abuse at the hands of their peers (compare 15% with 11%)
- People who were excluded at school (e.g., permanent or fixed period) were twice as likely to experience inappropriate sexual behaviour at the hands of their peers (compare 10% with 5%)
- Young carers (e.g., looking after a family member with a disability or long-term illness) were nearly three times more likely to experience sexual abuse at the hands of their peers (compare 16% with 6%)
- Children who reported an experience of inappropriate sexual behaviour were more likely to be in trouble or get in trouble with the police (compare 11% of those who experienced inappropriate sexual behaviour with 7% of those who did not)
- CYP in care (e.g., Looked After by the Local Authority, in foster or residential care) were more likely to report inappropriate sexual behaviour (compare 6% with 0%)

Gender Breakdown of Sexual Abuse

Of the 511 males, 4 per cent reported being touched in a sexual way, 4 per cent said were exposed to sexually explicit content, and 2 per cent were made to do something sexual that they didn't want to do. Of the 490 females, 12 per cent were touched in a sexual way, 7 per cent were exposed to sexually explicit content, and 8 per cent were made to do something sexual that they didn't want to do. These figures are significant and conclusive, thus females are more likely to experience inappropriate sexual contact at the hands of their peers in comparison to their male counterparts.

Recommendations

- 1. Shared and integrated approach.** Society needs to take action and tackle this epidemic head on as a community and no longer perceive severe bullying to be an issue confined only within the school gates. An integrated approach is needed from children and families, teachers, police, local authorities and Government.
- 2. Adequate resourcing of anti-bullying bullying programmes.** We need robust peer focused anti-bullying and anti-violence strategies rolled out across every school nationwide. Only by educating children in an engaging manner and in their peer groups can they properly recognise their role in bullying and its negative impact. Early and decisive interventions are needed to redirect the social power held by children towards more constructive ends.
- 3. Targeted work aimed at groups of vulnerable young people.** This research highlights evidence to suggest that vulnerable children are more likely to experience violence at the hands of their peers in comparison to their counterparts. More research is needed in this area, followed by targeted intervention work with the identified groups to support those affected and redirect behaviours.
- 4. Government-commissioned academic research to explore the issue in more depth.** Beatbullying commissioned YouGov to deliver an online poll to a statistically significant sample, allowing us to generalise the findings to the wider population. To explore the phenomenon in more depth, we need to commission academic research to question young people about their experiences and understand the issue.
- 5. Recognition and acknowledgement that peer-to-peer violence is of equal importance to adult-to-peer abuse in policy and intervention terms.** It is commonly accepted to refer to violence and harassment between peers as 'bullying' and reserve the more serious term 'abuse' for harm committed against children by adults. The impact of peer violence is no less severe than adult to peer violence with respect to the consequences.

