**An Introduction to the Defending Childhood Task Force**

The problem of childhood exposure to violence has reached epic proportions in the United States. The strong impact of these exposures has implications for every aspect of our civic, social, and justice systems. In the United States, a child between the age of 12 and 19 is more than twice as likely as an adult to be a victim of a violent crime.[[1]](#endnote-2) As troubling as this is, the stakes grow exponentially higher when we consider that children’s exposure to violence—both direct and as witnesses—carries short- and long-term consequences for brain development, emotional attachment and healthy relationships, physical health, educational success, and risk of future delinquency among many others. Victimized and traumatized children become parents, partners, and members of communities, and must face long-lasting consequences, including greater risk of crime and arrest, alcohol and drug addiction, depression, severe obesity, and chronic diseases.[[2]](#endnote-3),[[3]](#endnote-4) Thus, exposure to violence not only harms the children who experience it, but society as a whole.

In 2009, the National Survey of Children’s Exposure to Violence found that more than 60% of children surveyed were exposed to violence in the past year, either directly or indirectly.[[4]](#endnote-5) Children can experience many types of violence, including physical, sexual, and emotional abuse and victimization; conventional crime; domestic violence; school violence; community violence, including witnessing violent crime; online violence and victimization; and relationship violence. Many children experience multiple types and incidences of violence, which compounds and complicates the negative effects.

In 1999, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) along with then–Deputy Attorney General Eric Holder, created the Safe Start Initiative to broaden knowledge of and promote evidence-based strategies and comprehensive service delivery in communities to reduce the impact of children’s exposure to violence.[[5]](#endnote-6) Safe Start highlights what numerous studies have found: all adults in children’s lives are jointly responsible for increasing child safety, reducing childhood exposure to violence, and recognizing, assessing, and treating trauma when it does occur to minimize the impact of violence. Families, teachers, other school personnel, direct service providers, police, judges, doctors, and community members must also collaborate and communicate to assist the field in gaining knowledge. Uniting forces across multiple disciplines can broaden knowledge about how many children are exposed to violence, effects of violence on children from birth through the teenage years, cumulative effects of repeated exposure to violence, and the intersection of multiple types of violence in children’s lives.

The Attorney General’s National Task Force on Children Exposed to Violence (also known as the “Defending Childhood Task Force”), commissioned in 2011 as part of the Attorney General’s Defending Childhood initiative, represents a historic opportunity to gather experts in the field, victims and families, service providers, and the public. The establishment of the Task Force not only creates a unique opportunity for substantive progress through the convening of diverse expertise, it also facilitates an opportunity to strengthen the awareness and engagement of the many constituencies that must be involved for a real leap forward in stopping this epidemic. Past task forces have made lasting, national impacts on justice and social policy. President Reagan’s Task Force on Victims of Crime established the Office for Victims of Crime, while President Johnson’s Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice created the departments known today as the Office of Justice Programs and the National Institute of Justice. The Defending Childhood Task Force’s recommendations to Attorney General Holder will likewise have profound, lasting influence on policy and legislation as well as direct practice in multiple fields around children’s exposure to violence.

Task Force Hearings

The task force held four public hearings. The hearings served as the project’s central vehicle for engaging task force members in a conversation about the local and national impact of childhood exposure to violence (CEV). Hearings provided opportunities for these leaders to discuss the scope of CEV, the multitude of its effects, and the creative ways that individuals and communities are addressing it. Hearings also focused on challenges or barriers due to current legislative, funding, and/or service structures.

The first hearing was held in Baltimore, Maryland, on November 29 and 30, 2011; the second was held in Albuquerque, New Mexico, on January 31 and February 1, 2012; and the third hearing was held in Miami, Florida, on March 20 and 21, 2012. The final hearing was held in Detroit, Michigan, on April 24 and 25, 2012. The first hearing focused on defining the problem of children’s exposure to violence; the second, on children’s exposure to violence in rural and tribal communities; and the third focused on children’s exposure to violence in the community. The final hearing focused on current innovative efforts and collaborations to protect children from violence and help them heal and thrive.

Listening Sessions

Hearings were an opportunity for a limited number of community members to present oral testimony and provide specific examples of the devastation caused by CEV, but outreach to community members personally impacted by CEV went beyond the hearings. Listening sessions provided an opportunity for individuals to offer their stories of CEV as a survivor, as a parent, or as a community member, and provide perspective on how government and non-governmental agencies may provide prevention and response services. Listening sessions have taken place in Oakland, California; at Joint Base Lewis-McChord in Washington; and in Anchorage, Alaska.

Final Report

The task force’s final report will be the vehicle by which the work and recommendations of this task force become concrete policy changes necessary to successfully address the problem of childhood exposure to violence. The task force’s final report and recommendations will be delivered to the Attorney General in December 2012.

1. Baum, 2005. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. Kracke, 2001. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. CDC, 2006. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. Finkelhor et al., 2009. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. Wilson, 2000. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)