

Optimus *Impact*



Children training to become "Peacemakers" in a school in Münchenstein, Switzerland

An empirical basis for informed action: *Translating the findings of the Optimus Study to prevent violence against children*

Published in March 2012, the Optimus Study represents the most detailed and comprehensive assessment of both the frequency and the forms of sexual abuse affecting minors today in Switzerland. The findings have filled a substantial gap in understanding of this critical issue, including the findings that perpetrators and their victims are often in the same age group, and that the vast majority of victimizations go unreported. Drawing on the findings of the Optimus Study, a group of leading experts generated a series of detailed recommendations tailored to address the identified challenges. The findings and recommendations have been broadly and effectively disseminated, resulting in use by a range of key organizations and practitioners as they adapt their activities to address these challenges.

The Optimus Study: A Two-Part Process

The knowledge base generated by the Optimus Study Switzerland is derived from a survey of more than **6,700 ninth grade students** (aged 15–17) about their victimization experiences, and an agency survey of **324 institutions** active in the areas of child protection and violence prevention. The school survey was carried out in the **2009/2010 academic year**, and encompassed a total of **168 schools** from across Switzerland with a relatively even gender balance of **48% girls** and **52% boys**. Recognizing the potential limitations associated with this voluntary sample of schoolchildren responses, the agency survey represented an important supplementary source of information on the frequency and forms of abuse being reported across the country. Of the institutions that completed the online questionnaire for the study, **47% are custody authorities, 28% are associated with voluntary child protection, and 25% with child protection** in relation to criminal law.

Key findings

A significant finding of the Optimus Study is that although young children are most commonly victims of abuse by known adults, perpetrators of sexual violence among adolescents are often within the same age group as their victims. These perpetrators are primarily engaged in relationships or are dating their victims. Clear gender differences can also be distinguished in the victimization patterns, with 8 percent of boys indicating that they had been victims of sexual abuse with physical contact, while 22 percent of girls gave the same response.

The Optimus Study also sheds light on emerging risks of sexual abuse through the electronic media, with new forms of abuse developing in step with new technological advances. These cases of non-physical abuse include indecent exposure, dissemination of pornographic materials and verbal advances in chat rooms, etc. Nearly

one-third of girls indicated that they had experienced some form of non-physical abuse, while the same was indicated by around 10 percent of boys. However, the consequences of victimization through the electronic media remain unclear and the subject of continued study and discussion.

A considerable challenge that practitioners face when designing effective interventions aimed at preventing sexual abuse and violence is the sensitive nature of the subject. While it is known that cases have gone unreported and it is feared that this may comprise a sizable proportion of all cases, a clear picture of the true extent of the problem has been elusive. By comparing rates of victimizations derived from the survey of ninth grade students with the number of cases reported to agencies per year, it is estimated that only 3–5% of victimization involving physical contact are actually reported. This leaves 95% of cases unreported, which means that agencies working in this area are only seeing the tip of the iceberg. However, when the ninth grade respondents were asked whether they had talked with anyone about these experiences, they most often reported that they had confided in peers (55%) or family members (23%).

Highlights:

Perpetrators of sexual violence among adolescents often come from same age group as victims

Clear gender differences in victimization patterns for physical abuse (8% of boys, 22% of girls) and non-physical abuse (10% of boys, 33% of girls)

Approximately 95% of cases of physical abuse do not get reported to officials

When talking about their experiences, victims of abuse most frequently confide in peers (55%) or family members (23%)



Preventing violence

Findings such as those described above have provided a strong impetus and knowledge base for developing and financing programs aimed at violence prevention. Understanding the extent of violence among peers helped provide a stronger focus when developing and implementing effective programming, and underscored the importance of using approaches specifically tailored to these groups. Two programs that follow the recommendations from the study and which are also supported by the UBS Optimus Foundation are Peacemaker (www.ncbi.ch/peacemaker) and Roots of Empathy (www.rootsofempathy.org). Both are evidence-based programs that have generated proven outcomes in reducing violence among peers.

The fact that so many cases go unreported highlights the importance of focusing on prevention and providing targeted training on the identification and correct reporting of suspected cases of abuse, and making such training available to all professionals working with children and adolescents.

The Optimus Study approach of collecting responses from adolescents themselves provides a crucial supplement to statistics about officially reported cases.

Considerable emphasis has been placed by the UBS Optimus Foundation not only on careful data collection to form a solid knowledge base, but also on distilling these findings into specific recommendations for interventions

aimed at addressing the identified problems. This also contributes to addressing a recognized challenge, namely bridging the gap between research activities and the world of practitioners and policymakers. Many key findings generated by the research community struggle to find their way into the sphere of policymaking, while at the same time researchers sometimes fail to consider policy and practice relevance when designing their research activities. In the case of research and policymaking related to peer violence, this challenge is further compounded by this important issue often falling just outside the scope of existing communities working on related issues. It was therefore a considerable achievement that within the context of the Optimus Study, a group of seven leading experts working with domestic violence joined together to discuss the outcomes of the study, leading not just to the development of a comprehensive set of recommendations (see Table 1) that cover eight major themes, but also to ensuring the important issue of sexual violence between peers is addressed by the broader “domestic violence” community. Along with the study findings, these recommendations have been broadly disseminated and welcomed within the practitioner community, forming the basis for coordinated and targeted action.

Recommendations for action based on the findings of the Optimus Study Switzerland

Universal prevention: sexual violence must be understood as a cross-cutting issue and requires a holistic approach that unifies strong commitments by families, educators, politicians and other stakeholders to address this problem.

Prevention of sexual violence by peers: services for at-risk groups must be better tailored to match their needs while taking into account specific requirements based on age, gender and context.

Prevention of cyber-victimization: effective measures to prevent cyber-victimization must be continuously developed and evaluated to ensure their quality.

Parent and family-focused prevention: timely and targeted support and counselling must be provided to children and adolescents in at-risk families to avoid victimization at a later stage.

Interventions within leisure time: recognizing both the potential vulnerability of adolescents in leisure settings as well as the possibility of using such settings for raising awareness through activities like peer-based group work, and media-based prevention campaigns.

Educational measures: not only must efforts foster discussion among adolescents regarding norms, values and gender stereotypes, but teachers, social workers and other adults should also develop deeper understanding of issues surrounding sexual violence.

Intervention and therapy for perpetrators: in order to break through victim-perpetrator spirals, timely support must be provided to victims in an individualized manner

Further research: additional efforts are needed by the federal government to help coordinate research activities, and further studies as well as an assessment of existing violence prevention services across the country should be conducted.

Detailed recommendations available on UBS Optimus Foundation website in English, French, German and Italian at: <http://www.optimusstudy.org/>



School children training to become “Peacemakers”

Integrating new knowledge into activities

Practitioners and officials have recognized the important gaps that the Optimus Study has helped to bridge, and there has been substantial interest in using these data. In addition, these materials have been distributed at symposia such as one on violence in relationships among teenagers convened in March 2014 at the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts. Medical and psychiatric institutions have also used the informational materials in staff training activities, and local schools have used them as educational materials for teachers and other staff members.

Law firms have used the brochures and recommendations derived from the Optimus Study as evidence when focusing on couple violence and the counseling of children. The documents have even been integrated into self-defense courses as informational materials. Finally, the pervasiveness of abuse among teenagers as well as the urgent need for

evidence-based action can be recognized in the fact that interest in the Optimus Study findings spans international boundaries. Today the data of the Optimus Study is being used in Germany, for example at theater workshops used for therapeutic purposes. The findings have also been presented at governmental offices in Germany (Federal Ministry of Education and Research) and the state coordination office of domestic violence. Globally, the methodology and the findings have attracted considerable attention. They were presented at the Violence Prevention Milestones meeting in 2011 in Cape Town and the Conference of the International Society for Child Abuse and Neglect in Honolulu, Hawaii, 2010. Currently, a global effort, led by the researcher involved in the Optimus Study Agency Survey in Switzerland, is underway to systematize and promote the methodology for agency surveys.

Affecting policy change

An encouraging result of this study and the focus on sound data collection is that it has become a credible source for influencing policymaking. In fact, the study has been used to develop a series of national policy recommendations for the Swiss Government on necessary measures in the area of child and youth protection in 2012 (Postulat Fehr 07.3725).

The findings and recommendations were also used by the Swiss Federal Office for Gender Equality to develop a set of its own recommendations for action to be taken by the cantons. The data has also fed into estimates of cost generated by gender-based violence in Switzerland, and has been utilized to inform political votes on issues related to violence and abuse against children. Recognition of the gap this data has filled is also evident in how the study findings are being included in a range of relevant conferences and other meetings, including the 2012 and 2013 National Conference on Youth and Violence organized by the Swiss Federal Office for Social Insurance.

Lifetime prevalence of sexual victimization
of each 1000 respondents

Type of victimization	Male	Female	Total
Victimization with physical contact	81	217	146
Attempted or completed penetration	11	65	37
Attempted penetration	7	46	25
Completed penetration	5	26	15
Victimization without physical contact	199	397	294
Indecent exposure	45	89	66
Verbal/written harassment	83	213	145
Forced to witness sexual acts	30	34	32
Intimate pictures/content passed on to others	18	44	30
Cyber-bullying (sexual)	95	277	182

Source: Averdijk, M., K. Müller-Johnson, M. Eisner (2012). Sexual Victimization of Children and Adolescents in Switzerland, Table 3.1



Next steps – the path forward

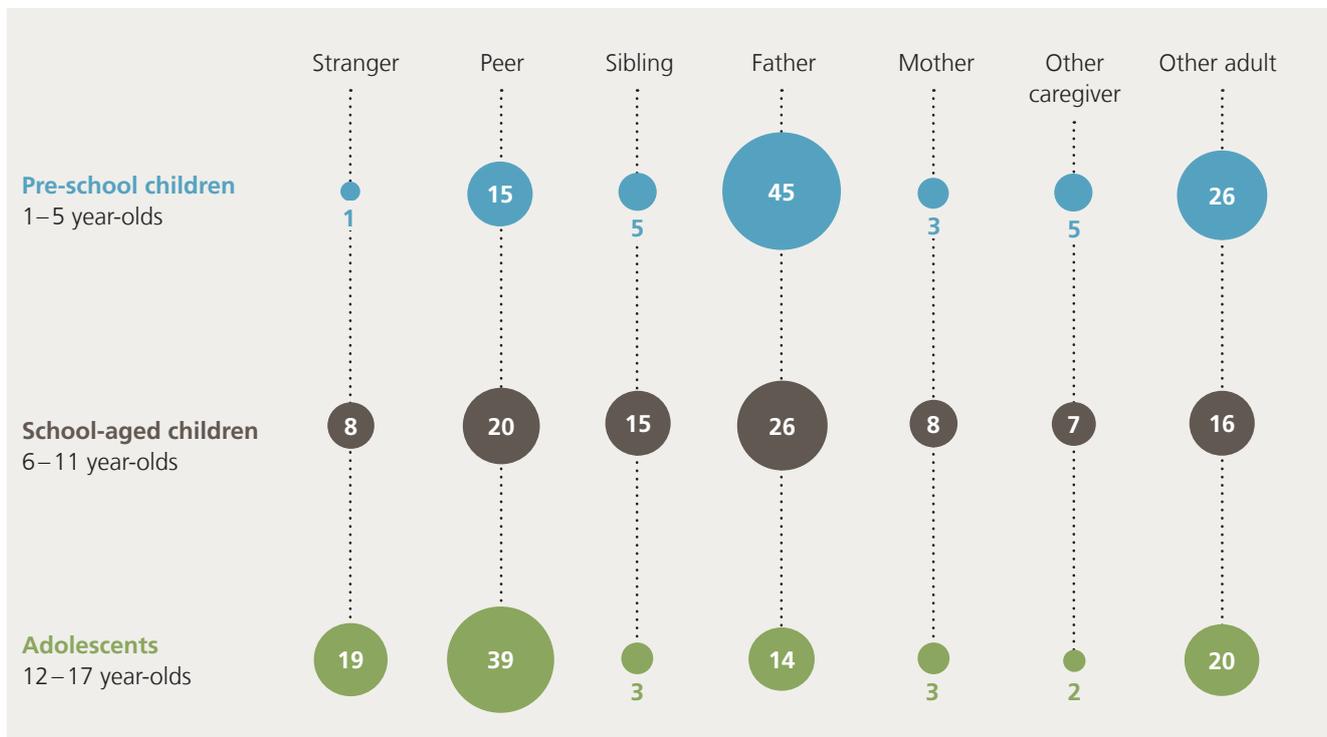
While initial efforts to build a strong evidence base for targeted action against sexual abuse and to effectively communicate this information have been encouraging, further work is needed to continue to build on this basis. The UBS Optimus Foundation is already taking the next steps. In Switzerland, for example, efforts are currently underway to carry out an economic assessment of the costs and economic burden associated with child maltreatment. Some hurdles remain to be tackled, however, due to complications related to the country's federalist system as well as access to private data from health care companies.

Likewise, The UBS Optimus Foundation Strategic Plan 2014 to 2019 includes the launch of a new grant making strategy built of four portfolios – the Safe Kids portfolio will help to develop effective solutions to preventing violence against children. It encompasses the development of an evidence base of best practices and investments in building capacity. Support is also being provided to the Global Violence Prevention Conference to be organized in September 2014 by Cambridge University and the World Health Organization. The conference theme of reducing violence by 50% over the next 30 years is unifying the leading figures in the field, who will come together to share their knowledge and expertise. Among other things, there is hope that the conference can be used as a platform for introducing a violence reduction goal into the Millennium Development Goals and post-2015 development agenda.

Communication and dissemination are not one-off activities, but rather require continuous and coordinated engagement. The UBS Optimus Foundation will continue to build and strengthen its network of collaborators, among other things towards the goal of creating a database on child protection in Switzerland. In addition, the Optimus Study will expand the knowledge base on sexual abuse among other things by conducting another agency survey in 2016. The newsletter as well as further information and past publications can be found on the Optimus Study website (<http://www.optimusstudy.org>).

Perpetrator's relationship to victims in various age groups according to the agency survey

in %



Source: Averdijk, M., K. Müller-Johnson, M. Eisner (2012). *Sexual Victimization of Children and Adolescents in Switzerland*, Table 6.10

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