

MEDIA RELEASE

Launch of the Innocenti Report Card 5:
A League Table of Child Maltreatment Deaths in Rich Nations
EMBARGO 10.00 GMT, 18 September 2003

Child Abuse Leads to 3,500 Deaths Each Year in Developed Countries, New Research Finds

First Comparative Analysis of Child Maltreatment in Rich Nations

BERLIN, 18 September 2003 – New research on child maltreatment, published today by the UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, finds that almost 3,500 children under the age of 15 die every year from child abuse in developed nations.

The report represents the first ever attempt to draw a comparative picture of the physical abuse of children in the 27 richest nations of the world.

The UNICEF research estimates that almost 3,500 children under the age of 15 die from physical abuse and neglect every year in the industrialized world. The greatest risk is among younger children. A small group of countries – Spain, Greece, Italy, Ireland and Norway – appear to have an exceptionally low incidence of child maltreatment deaths; Belgium, the Czech Republic, New Zealand, Hungary and France have levels that are four to six times higher. The United States, Mexico and Portugal have rates that are between 10 and 15 times higher than those at the top of the league table.

The good news is that child deaths from maltreatment appear to be declining in the great majority of industrialized countries.

The UNICEF *Innocenti Report Card*, launched by Marta Santos Pais, Director of UNICEF's Innocenti Research Centre in Florence and by Paolo Pinheiro, a leading expert on violence against children, brings together data on the abuse of children from 27 developed countries.

Uneven Statistics

Inconsistencies in the classification of child deaths and a lack of common definitions of "abuse" mean that little internationally comparable data on child maltreatment exist. The study describes a "growing certainty that child deaths from maltreatment are under-represented by the available statistics." The report argues that all statistics on child abuse should be treated with great caution and calls for the adoption of consistent research methodologies and improved data collection across countries in order to inform and guide child protection policies.

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In an attempt to address variances in the classification of child deaths, the UNICEF researchers have constructed a league table that combines national totals of child deaths from known abuse and neglect with those child deaths that are recorded as being of "undetermined cause." The assumption made is that when no other cause can be established, the death is likely the result of maltreatment that cannot be proven in a court of law. The revised calculations yield child death rates that are more than double in the case of some countries.

The thousands of children who die each year from violence in their homes, schools or communities are clear proof that the world has systematically failed to protect them. These children deserve to live in a protective environment - one that safeguards them from abuse and exploitation. The report makes an explicit connection between the problem of child maltreatment and the broader spectrum of violence against children. The authors argue that any serious attempt to tackle child abuse must engage in promoting a culture of non-violence towards children.

Violence in Society

The research also establishes that a clear relationship seems to exist between levels of child death from maltreatment and the levels of violence in society as a whole. The countries with the lowest rates of child deaths from maltreatment also have very low rates of adult deaths from assault. Similarly, the three nations with exceptionally high levels of child deaths from maltreatment also have exceptionally high adult death rates.

The UNICEF report draws on a wide range of surveys from different countries to investigate the various factors most commonly associated with physical abuse. Poverty and stress are factors closely associated with physical abuse and neglect of children although the relationship is far from fixed. Contrary to common perceptions, 80 per cent of child abusers are the biological parents.

Of all the family problems recorded by investigators into the circumstances of child maltreatment, one of the most common and most serious is drug and alcohol abuse. Strong evidence also exists to link the physical abuse of children with domestic violence between the adults they live with. But the report also cites research from Germany which shows that more than 50 per cent of children who often witnessed violence between adults at home never, or only rarely, experienced physical abuse themselves.

The *Report Card* also presents new research summarizing the present legal status of physical punishment in all OECD member countries. Overall it shows that only seven of those countries – Austria, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Norway and Sweden – currently have laws explicitly banning physical punishment of children. All OECD nations have banned the use of physical punishment within the justice system and the majority have made it illegal in schools. Several more countries are now close to introducing broader legal standards.

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Recalling the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and a mounting weight of political, legal and moral pressure, the report argues that legalized violence towards children is a breach of human rights including when it takes place within the home.

Note to Editors

The report card series is produced by the UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre in Florence. This publication is the fifth in the series designed to monitor the performance of the industrialized countries in promoting the realization of the human rights of their children. Each *Report Card* presents and analyzes league tables ranking the performance of rich nations against critical indicators of child well-being.

Embargoed media materials in English, French, Spanish and Italian and downloadable copies of the report in English are available from the IRC Newsroom: <http://www.unicef-irc.org/presscentre/indexNewsroom.html>

Protection of children from violence, abuse, and exploitation is a major UNICEF priority, along with immunization, education for all, preventing the spread of HIV/AIDS among young people, and early childhood care to give every child the best start in life.

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