



# ETHICAL RESEARCH INVOLVING CHILDREN

Centre for Children  
and Young People



*Childwatch*  
INTERNATIONAL  
RESEARCH NETWORK

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## HARMS AND BENEFITS

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### **Interviewing children on sensitive issues around violence: Do survey instruments and processes on violence against children provide adequate measures to protect children aged 13-17 years?**

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#### ***Background context:***

Numerous countries are engaged in the development and implementation of a nationwide household survey intended to determine the levels of emotional, physical and sexual violence against children. These surveys are being conducted under the direction and with full participation from the governments of the countries involved. The surveys are being conducted as part of a global private-public partnership called Together for Girls. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and UNICEF are taking lead roles in providing technical and logistic support for these surveys. The survey, planned or completed in 8 countries globally, provides important information on the circumstances surrounding abuse, as well as the long-term consequences. The results of the survey, where it has been completed, in 8 countries globally, provides important information on the circumstances surrounding abuse, as well as the long-term consequences. The results of the survey, where it has been completed, have advanced the field in terms of increasing understanding of this highly stigmatized and unfortunately common event, engaging governments and improving policies and programmes to address violence against children.

#### ***The ethical challenge:***

The 2006 UNSG World Report on Violence against Children qualified and quantified the extent of violence against children and subsequently urged countries to 'develop and implement systematic national data collection and research efforts.' In response, the Violence against Children Surveys (VACS) ask 13-24 year olds about their experiences of violence as children in nationally-represented household surveys. Concerns have been raised about the wisdom and value of including 13-17 year olds in the survey.

Proponents of the survey include 13-17 year olds because the survey addresses experiences of violence and there is substantial evidence of recall bias as events become more distant. Likewise, important and rapid social changes - all of which may likely impact children and experiences with violence across the age span - are significant and underway related to education, policy reform, communication technology, social media, etc. Moreover, they believe valid and effective strategies for protecting children from harm during the survey exist and that the benefits of the surveys for children far outweigh the potential harms.

Opponents have raised concerns about the wisdom and value of interviewing 13-17 year olds. They argue that possible unintended consequences of involving these children in the interviews might include potential retribution by parents or guardians and the development of post-traumatic stress, a concern in developing countries where there is a

lack of trained providers and associated systems to provide support and care to children who request it. It has also been argued that certain portions of the questionnaire were inappropriate for 13-17 year olds.

***Choices made:***

- Numerous steps were taken to protect children in the context of the survey:
  - Disclosure of the study's purpose was limited to village leaders or heads of Household to reduce possibility of retaliation by caretakers who may be abusing the respondent;
  - A non-judgmental environment was created for conduct of interviews;
  - Interviewers were matched with respondents by sex;
  - Female and male respondents were interviewed in separate enumeration areas to limit the possibility that a perpetrator in the same community as a respondent would learn of the nature of the survey;
  - Interviews were conducted in private to protect confidentiality of the information shared by the respondent;
  - Lists of services were provided to all respondents so that they were aware of places they could seek help if needed;
  - A response plan was established that linked service agencies and/ or counsellors with respondents who were upset or expressed a desire to get help;
  - A simple and easy to understand consent process was provided;
  - The respondent was allowed every opportunity to decline to answer questions or stop the interview process.
- Ethnographic research was implemented prior to the survey's implementation to ensure that the instrument was culturally appropriate and addressed issues in a sensitive manner for the entire age range.
- Cognitive testing of the survey instrument was carried out to investigate how well questions performed when asked of survey respondents, that is, if respondents understand the question correctly and if they can provide accurate answers. Cognitive testing ensured that a survey question successfully captures the scientific intent of the question and, at the same time, makes sense to respondents. Questions that are misunderstood by respondents or that are difficult to answer can be improved prior to fielding the survey, thereby increasing the overall quality of the survey data.

***Reflexive questions/considerations:***

- What steps should be taken to protect children from harm in the context of a survey addressing violence?

- What are the potential benefits to children of participating in a survey about violence?
- How do we determine if a survey is age-appropriate or not? Do we consider average age of sexual debut?
- Excluding young people means that results will rely on 18-24 year olds giving information on violence, services and circumstances that may be 5, 10 or even 15 years removed from the year of the survey. What is the value of such a survey?
- What is the risk of NOT doing research with young adolescents? What is the risk of inaction? Is it that more girls and boys might suffer mental and physical disorders because we refrain from asking children their own views on these issues or because we produce research that provides a less than accurate view of reality as it is now?
- Can a clear policy on children and ethics assist in debates around age appropriateness?

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