

# DEFENDING CHILDHOOD

## PROTECT HEAL THRIVE

### THE THREE GOALS OF THE INITIATIVE:

1. Prevent children's exposure to violence
2. Mitigate the negative impacts of exposure when it does occur
3. Develop knowledge and spread awareness about the issue

*"Our children are counting on us. Our communities are counting on us. And we cannot—and will not—let them down."*  
—Attorney General Eric Holder

## Children's Exposure to Violence (CEV)\*

To better understand the nature and extent of children's exposure to violence, the Office of Justice Programs (OJP) within the Department of Justice partnered with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to sponsor the National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence. The survey is the most comprehensive effort to date to measure children's exposure to violence, abuse, and crime. The survey found:

- Sixty percent of American children were exposed to violence, crime, or abuse in their homes, schools, and communities.
- Almost 40 percent of American children were direct victims of 2 or more violent acts, and 1 in 10 were victims of violence 5 or more times.
- A child's exposure to one type of violence increases the likelihood that the child will be exposed to other types of violence and exposed multiple times.

### CrimeSolutions.gov

The Office of Justice Programs' CrimeSolutions.gov uses rigorous research to determine what works in criminal justice, juvenile justice, and crime victim services. The database of evidence-based programs identifies 20 programs as "effective" in addressing children's exposure to violence, and another 20 programs are identified as "promising," based on program evaluation evidence.

[www.crimesolutions.gov/Topic-Details.aspx?ID=60](http://www.crimesolutions.gov/Topic-Details.aspx?ID=60)

The Department of Justice launched the Defending Childhood Initiative on September 23, 2010, to address children's exposure to violence, as both victims and witnesses. Research shows that children who have been exposed to violence are more likely to abuse drugs and alcohol; suffer from depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic disorders; fail or have difficulty in school; become delinquent or engage in criminal behavior; and experience repeated victimization. Children's exposure to violence is often associated with long-term physical, psychological, and emotional problems.

Building on lessons learned from previous research, Defending Childhood leverages existing resources across the Department to focus on preventing, addressing, reducing, and more fully understanding childhood exposure to violence.

Defending Childhood has several component projects that include the following:

- **Demonstration program.** In 2010, the Department awarded grants to eight cities and tribal communities to develop strategic plans for comprehensive community-based efforts to address children's exposure to violence in the home and the community.
- **National Task Force on Children Exposed to Violence.** The task force will review research and conduct public hearings across the nation to collect input from experts, advocates, and impacted families on policy options for improving the prevention, identification, assessment, and response to children's exposure to violence.
- **Partnerships.** A number of federal, private, and non-profit agencies and organizations are part of the Defending Childhood Initiative. Federal partners include the Department of Health and Human Services, the Executive Office of United States Attorneys, the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, the Office on Violence Against Women, and the Office of Justice Programs.
- **National Survey on Children Exposed to Violence.** This survey is the first comprehensive attempt to measure children's exposure to violence in the home, school, and community across all age groups from birth to age 17, and the first attempt to measure the cumulative exposure to violence over the child's lifetime.

In addition to these efforts, the Initiative supports research, evaluation, public awareness campaigns, and training for professionals and affiliates of national organizations.

The Initiative operates on three key principles:

### PROTECT

- Recognize the range of negative effects on children who are direct victims or witnesses to violence.
- Understand that violence takes many forms, may come from many sources, and may occur in various settings.
- Work with community members and partners in multiple disciplines to raise awareness, educate, and build the capacity of those who interact with children.
- Reduce the occurrence of violent incidents and reverse belief systems that accept childhood exposure to violence as normal or inevitable.

### HEAL

- Recognize that proper interventions, support, and services can mitigate the negative effects of violence and the natural resilience of children can be enhanced.
- Develop comprehensive and coordinated responses to ensure seamless delivery of services and resources.
- Identify and assess children immediately or soon after exposure to violence to provide support and services tailored to the child's or family's needs.
- Engage first responders, service providers, medical professionals, teachers, and other community members to help identify children exposed to violence and contribute to healing.

### THRIVE

- Encourage and support healthy families.
- Provide opportunities for enrichment and growth for all children.
- Build positive bonds among family members.
- Provide safe communities in which families and children may prosper.
- Support a culture of non-violence in households and communities.

## Defending Childhood Task Force

The task force is composed of 13 leading experts, including practitioners, child and family advocates, academic experts, and licensed clinicians. Joe Torre, founder of the Joe Torre Safe at Home® Foundation, and a witness to domestic violence as a child himself, and Robert Listenbee, Jr., Chief of the Juvenile Unit of the Defender Association of Philadelphia, serve as the co-chairs of the task force.

Using the testimony from public hearings in Baltimore, Albuquerque, Miami, and Detroit; comprehensive research; and extensive input from experts, advocates, and impacted families and communities nationwide, the task force issued a final report of 56 recommendations to the Attorney General at the December 12, 2012 Coordinating Council on Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention meeting. The report will serve as a blueprint for preventing children's exposure to violence and reducing the negative effects experienced by children exposed to violence across the United States.

The report emphasizes prevention and intervention and underscores the importance of trauma-informed care and victim-tailored services. The report calls on the federal government, states, tribes, and communities to ensure children exposed to violence are identified, screened, and assessed; to create multidisciplinary councils to facilitate systemwide collaboration; to involve men and boys as critical partners in preventing violence; and to help, not punish, child victims of sex trafficking.

The report is organized into six chapters. The first chapter sets forth 10 foundational recommendations and provides an overview of the problem. The next two chapters offer recommendations that would ensure reliable identification, screening, and assessment of children exposed to violence and the support, treatment, and services needed to address their needs. Chapters four and five focus on prevention and the importance of effective integration of prevention, intervention, and resilience across systems. The final chapter calls for a new approach to juvenile justice which acknowledges that the vast majority of children in the system have been exposed to violence and necessitates the prioritization of services which would promote their healing.

## Law Enforcement

The work of law enforcement is inextricably bound to the initiative's goals. The Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office) is the office of the U.S. Department of Justice that advances the practice of community policing in America's state, local and tribal law enforcement agencies. As part of the Defending Childhood Initiative, the COPS Office provided funding support to OJJDP for the FY 2012 Enhancing Law Enforcement Response to Children Exposed to Violence solicitation. Through a competitive process, the International Association for Chiefs of Police (IACP) was selected as the training and technical assistance provider and will be developing tools and resources specifically on law enforcement's identification, response and referral of children who have been exposed to violence in their homes, schools and communities. These resources will include self-assessment tools for identification and response to children exposed to violence, pocket guides, a library of resources and model policies for law enforcement response. These products will be developed in collabora-



*Attorney General's Task Force on Children's Exposure to Violence, hearing one Baltimore Maryland*

tion with the federal working group and communities supported through the initiative by convening of focus groups and an advisory group of law enforcement experts and community partners.

"The critical role that local law enforcement officers play in the defense of children cannot be overstated. As first responders, they deal with both victims and suspects in the epidemic of youth violence that threatens our nation's children. In effect, law enforcement are the gatekeepers between the child and the societal support required to ensure the child's safety and long-term well-being."

-Bernard Melekian, Director of the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS)

## Communities

As part of the initiative, the Department of Justice is supporting 35 communities addressing children's exposure to a broad range of violence. The Office on Violence Against Women (OVW) funds 17 sites and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention funds 10 Safe Start Initiative sites. In 2010, the Department awarded additional grants to eight cities and tribal communities to develop strategic plans for comprehensive community-based responses to children's exposure to violence. Each of these sites received additional support in 2011 to launch, sustain, and expand programs, and organizations focused on the development of community-based solutions to address the problem.

Of the eight sites, the Department awarded \$2 million grants to Boston, MA; Cuyahoga County, OH; Grand Forks, ND; and Shelby County, TN, to implement their strategic plans. One million dollars was awarded to two tribal communities—Rosebud Sioux, SD, and Chippewa Cree, Rocky Boy, MT—for 2 years to continue comprehensive planning and to implement their plans and \$500,000 was awarded for 2 years to Portland, ME, and Multnomah County, OR, for partial implementation of their strategic plans.

## Resources

The Defending Childhood Initiative has launched a Web page "Take Action To Protect Children," with Voices from the Field to support professionals who address children's exposure to violence. The Web page provides online resources, tips, hotline numbers, and a personal call to action tailored for professionals in different fields who work with children who experience or witness violence.

To view the Take Action Web page, go to [www.justice.gov/defendingchildhood/action.html](http://www.justice.gov/defendingchildhood/action.html).

For more information about the Defending Childhood Initiative, go to [www.justice.gov/defendingchildhood](http://www.justice.gov/defendingchildhood).