



# SERBIA

Violence in Schools in Serbia: Analysis of the Situation from  
2006 to 2013



© UNICEF/NYHQ2011-1143/Hoit

**Dragan Popadić, Zoran Pavlović  
and Dijana Plut**

# VIOLENCE IN SERBIAN SCHOOLS

## Bullying and beyond

Many people experience violence more regularly in their early years at school than in the whole of the rest of their lives. Understanding the extent, nature and patterns of violence in schools is vital if teachers, educationalists and policymakers are to seek to minimize both its incidence and its impact on children. To this end, researchers from the University of Belgrade's Institute of Psychology have analysed a huge amount of data drawn from a fifth of Serbia's primary schools over the eight-year period from 2006 to 2013. The data were gathered via questionnaires completed by both students and staff members as part of the School without Violence programme, which has been jointly implemented by the Ministry of Education and UNICEF since 2005.

### **A COMPREHENSIVE SURVEY**

This represents one of the most comprehensive education research projects ever conducted in Serbia. It involved analysing the questionnaire responses of 109,151 students and 15,507 adults from 237 primary schools – around 20 per cent of the total number of schools in the primary sector. All students (from grades 3 to 8) and school staff were offered the opportunity to communicate their perspective in the context of an overarching programme aimed at motivating schools to work on the prevention of violence.

### **PANEL COMMENT**

The main value of this study lies in the conceptualization and the measurement of robust and context-relevant indicators of violence in Serbian schools, compared with the benchmarks used in global studies. The taxonomy of violence is comprehensive, including different types of violence (insults, rumours, physical, bullying), assessed and compared by gender, by victims and perpetrator, and by children and adults.

Seven different forms of questionnaire were used in the study, with separate versions for younger students (grades 3 and 4) and older students (grades 5 to 8) as well as ones tailored to different categories of employee. The student questionnaires contained a large number of mainly closed questions – ones that involved choosing from a set series of options – grouped by theme. The adult questionnaires contained more open questions that canvassed opinions not just on the prevalence of violence but on the causes of and responses to such behaviour in school.

An important feature of the research was that students were not only asked to give a global self-assessment of their own experience of violence but were also asked if they had encountered particular types of behaviour. This distinguished the study from some other prominent examples of research in the field that rely purely on student self-assessment and the two kinds of questioning produced markedly different results.

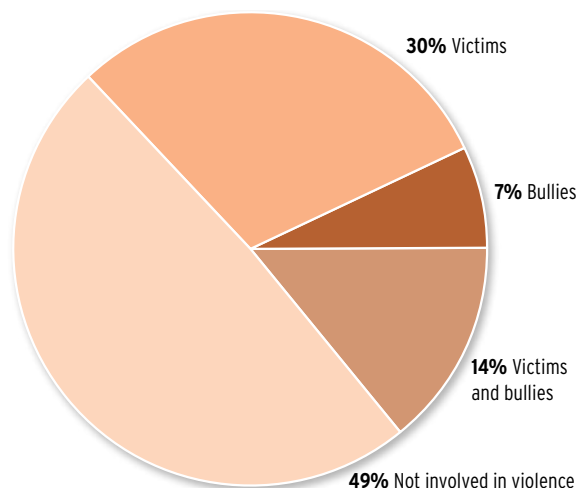
### THE PREVALENCE OF VIOLENCE

When students were asked for their global self-assessment, the results suggested that 9.5 per cent of children had been involved in violence more often than once or twice over the previous three months, with 6 per cent in the role of victims, 4 per cent in that of bullies and 1.2 per cent in both categories. On the other hand, when students were asked if they had been on the giving or receiving end of a number of specific forms of violence, 73 per cent had been involved in a violent interaction of some sort, with 32 per cent as victims, 8 per cent as bullies and 34 per cent as both.

The research team considered the safest estimate of the prevalence of violence to be based on when children had experienced specific incidents more often than once or twice. On this basis, 49 per cent of children had not been involved in violence at all, 30 per cent had been victims, 7 per cent bullies and 14 per cent in both roles (see Figure 1).

Direct verbal insults were the most common form of violence, with 45.8 per cent of students having experienced this, and all ages and both genders were equally susceptible to this. Around a third of students had been exposed to physical violence, including hitting, theft, threats and coercion, with younger children and boys more at risk. Social violence – spreading nasty rumours – had also affected around a third of students, with girls more vulnerable on this front. Sexual harassment was reported by 1 student

**FIGURE 1: CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCE OF SCHOOL VIOLENCE**



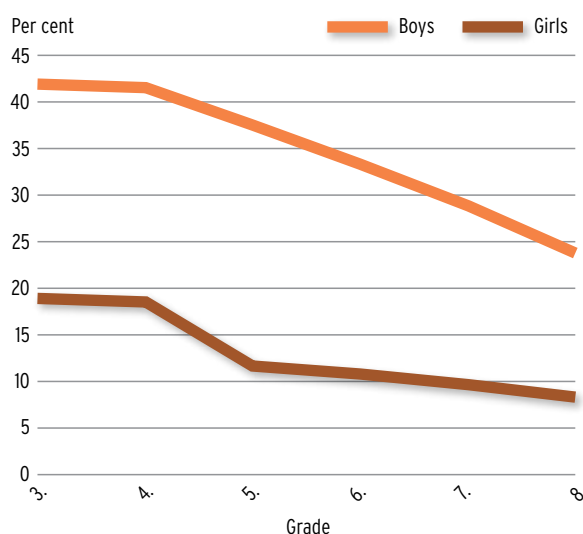
Source: Popadić et al.

in 10, with older girls the most likely group to have experienced this.

The research indicates that one child in four (24 per cent) had been involved in a school fight over the previous three months, though only 5 per cent had been involved more than once. Fights were much more common among the younger children, with 41 per cent of boys and 19 per cent of girls in grades 3 and 4 involved (see Figure 2).

Students often had a different perspective on such fights from staff, seeing some kinds of fight as a form of

**FIGURE 2: FREQUENCY OF FIGHTS AMONG BOYS AND GIRLS ACROSS THE GRADES (IN %)**



Source: Popadić et al.

game played by 'fair play' rules and by mutual consent, while the adults still classified this as violent interaction, not least because of the risks of physical injury and escalation. In fights it is generally impossible to determine who is the aggressor and who the victim and these were therefore excluded from any consideration of bullying.

### INTERNATIONAL COMPARISONS

Although the researchers considered global self-assessment to be a less reliable indicator of the prevalence of violence than when children were asked about particular forms of violence, the former has been the basis of most international studies. Comparing the results of this survey with international research suggests that school violence in Serbia is much less pronounced than in most other countries.

In particular, periodic surveys conducted by the World Health Organization (WHO) provide useful comparison points. A study carried out in 2005/6 in 40 countries showed an average of 26.9 per cent of students to be involved in violence: 10.7 per cent as perpetrators, 12.6 per cent as victims and 3.6 per cent as both. This incidence is almost three times higher than that shown in the Serbian research.

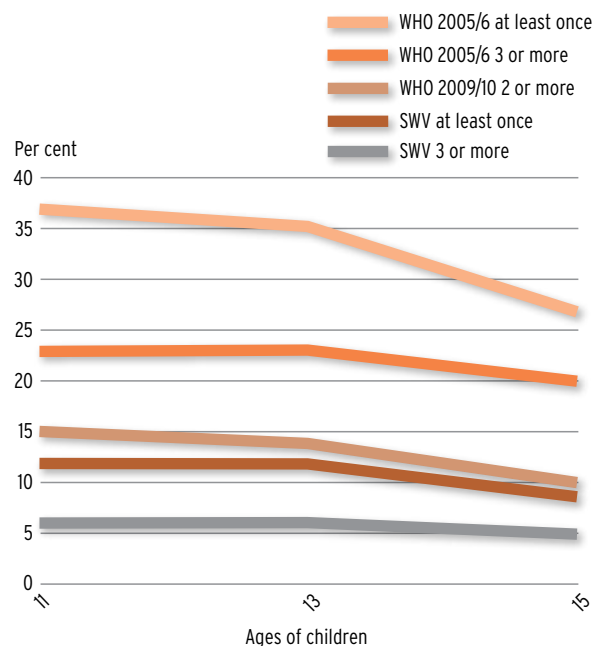
The most recent WHO survey was conducted in 2009/10, reporting on the experience of children aged 11, 13 and 15 in 38 countries. The overall result showed that 11 per cent of students (13 per cent of boys and 10 per cent of girls) had been subjected to repeated violence, whereas 6 per cent of students in the recent Serbian research (7 per cent of boys and 5 per cent of girls) had suffered by this measure.

Results from these last two WHO surveys and from the current Serbian research are compared in Figure 3.

### CHARACTERISTICS ASSOCIATED WITH VIOLENT BEHAVIOUR

In general, the study found, characteristics associated with violent behaviour in children are easier to identify than those associated with children suffering from violence. Gender is one clear factor in this respect: boys were almost twice as often violent as girls (27 per cent compared with 14 per cent). Both boys and girls report that boys have more often been violent towards them. Boys were also more liable than girls to engage in insults, hitting, threats and sexual harassment. The researchers see an element of socialization in this, given that aggression is more tolerated, and sometimes even encouraged, in boys than it is in girls.

**FIGURE 3: EXPOSURE TO VIOLENCE OF CHILDREN AGED 11, 13 AND 15 WHO AVERAGES AND CURRENT SERBIAN RESULTS**

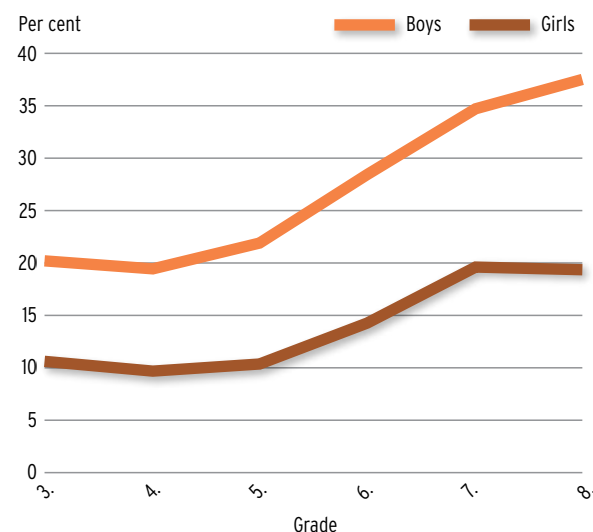


Source: Popadić et al.

Violent behaviour increases with age, so that in Grade 8 there were almost twice as many bullies as in Grade 3. Figure 4 shows both the gender gap in aggressive behaviour as well as the greater prevalence among older children of both sexes.

One interesting finding of the study, which correlates with the work of other researchers, is that there is a

**FIGURE 4: AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOUR OF BOYS AND GIRLS FROM GRADE 3 TO GRADE 8 (IN %)**



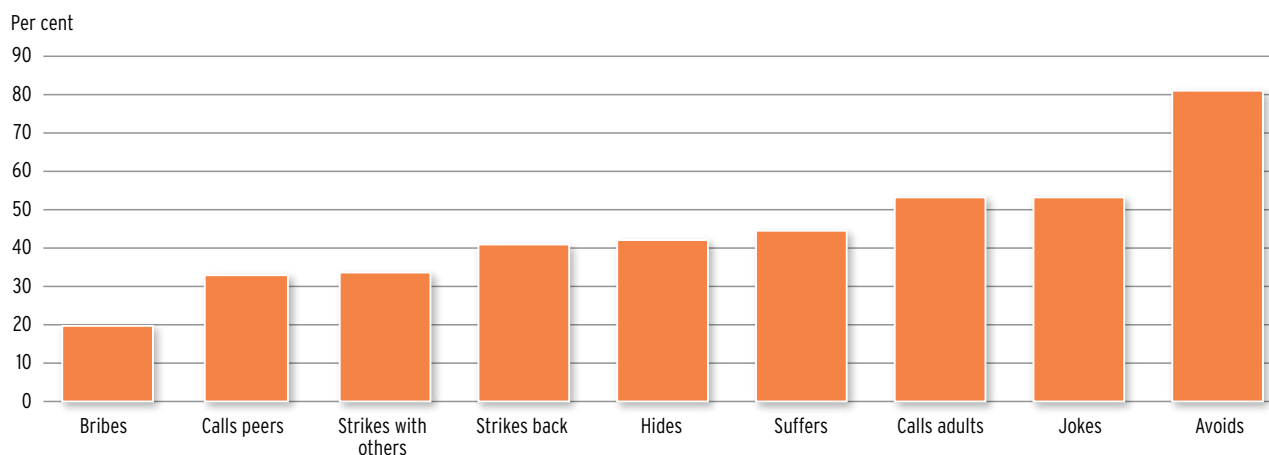
Source: Popadić et al.





© UNICEF/NYHQ2013-1049/Pirozzi

**FIGURE 5: FREQUENCY OF RESPONSES TO PEER VIOLENCE OF CHILDREN MOST LIKELY TO BE BULLIED**



Source: Popadić et al.

positive correlation between bullying and victimization. Put simply, bullies are twice as likely to be victims compared with those who do not bully, while victims of violence are three times more likely to be bullies than children who are not victims.

### **ADULT VIOLENCE IN SCHOOLS**

A third of older students (33.6 per cent) complain about violence perpetrated upon them by adults. Indeed, 15 per cent of older students complain only about adult violence and not about that by their peers. Almost half the Grade 8 boys surveyed complained about adult violence. In addition to this being traumatizing, it offers children a violent behaviour model as well as the lesson that power legitimizes violence. This did not only comprise verbal attacks: 14 per cent of students reported having been hit by a teacher in the previous three months, with boys three times more likely to experience adult physical violence than girls.

Student violence against teachers is also not uncommon. Around 1 in 10 senior students had witnessed a student physically assaulting a teacher.

### **CHILDREN'S RESPONSES TO VIOLENCE**

Students surveyed were able to give multiple responses when asked how they typically react in a violent situation. The most common response was to avoid conflict by giving the bully a wide berth. In general, those children most likely to be bullied ticked the greatest number of possible responses, indicating that such students test every available response from calling adults for help right through to suffering in silence.

### **WHAT SCHOOLS CAN DO**

- Schools need to make it a priority to establish the safety of their own environment. The first step towards this is to accept that school violence exists.
- Schools have to make it clear what is allowed in school and what is not. The standards set by the school must be stricter than those that apply outside school – and students need to be able to count on protection when threatened by their violation.
- Staff should not ignore low-intensity aggression and focus only on more serious forms of violence – if it is not combated, it can encourage the more serious forms and lead to a general climate of insecurity.
- Responding to a violent situation is not simple – it takes both understanding and appropriate social skills. Greater numbers of school staff need to be trained in these skills.
- The school ethos and climate are all-important and should not be based upon conflict between students and staff.
- The safer the environment that teachers and students work in, the more enabling it will be – and vice versa.

### **Link to the full report**

[www.unicef.org/serbia/Nasilje\\_u\\_skolama\\_Srbije\\_web\\_24.3.2015.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/serbia/Nasilje_u_skolama_Srbije_web_24.3.2015.pdf)