

Panel: child abuse costs countries up to \$150 billion per year

WATERLOO, Ont. (Friday, February 5, 2016) – Beyond physical and emotional damage, child abuse has a steep economic price tag that costs economies billions of dollars each year, an international panel of experts will tell the 2016 General Meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science on Friday, February 12.

In high-income countries, the median child abuse costs are equivalent to a loss of 1.2 per cent of per capita income, translating to \$150 billion each year in the United States of America. The estimated loss is \$50 billion in China, a middle income country.

“Violence against children is prevalent across countries at all income levels, in all forms,” said Sue Horton, a professor of at the University of Waterloo and Chair in Global Health Economics at the Centre for International Governance and Innovation. “In addition to a rights-based case, there is now a stronger than ever economic case for protecting children against violence.”

The panel, organized by Professor Horton and Susan Bissell, director of the Global Partnership to End Violence against Children housed at UNICEF, presents Friday at 1 p.m. in the Harding room at Marriott Wardman Park, Washington, DC.

Featuring leading academics and practitioners from the United States, United Kingdom, China and Pakistan, the panel will present the latest research on the economic impact of violence against children in key regions around the globe. One study, from the University of Edinburgh, will reveal that the cost of emotional abuse alone, in countries in East Asia and the Pacific, tops more than \$48 billion per year.

Panelists

- James Mercy, U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
- Deborah Fry, University of Edinburgh
- Xiangming Fang, China Agricultural University
- Zulfiqar Bhutta, Centre for Global Child Health, Hospital for Sick Children, Toronto and Center of Excellence in Women and Child Health, The Aga Khan University

Significant financial costs stemming from child abuse include treatment costs for physical injuries suffered, future loss of productivity due to injuries, lower schooling attainment and labour market earnings, and intergenerational effects. Violence experienced in childhood is associated with higher health spending in adulthood.

Lower-income countries have higher rates of child abuse. In West and Central Africa, 90 per cent of children are either physically or psychologically disciplined at home. In East Asia and the Pacific that number stands at 74 per cent.

“While child abuse rates are tied to a country’s economic status, that is no excuse for the continued prevalence,” said Susan Bissell. “There are known interventions which are effective in preventing violence and supporting children who have experienced violence. Many of these are cost-effective and provide good value for public money.”

Laws can have a significant effect on changing attitudes and practices to physical violence against children. Legislation to protect children from violent punishment reduced the proportion of children being hit by 80 per cent over a 35-year period in Sweden. Parent-education, home visitation and sexual abuse prevention programs also have proven track records for curbing violence against children.

In 1990, UNICEF created the Convention on the Rights of the Child to clarify the rights of children and change the way they are viewed and treated. To date 196 member countries have signed or are in the process of signing the Convention. The United States is the sole remaining holdout.

“Child abuse is a global issue with far-reaching and very negative consequences,” said Professor Horton. “Even if we just looked at economic burden studies—they demonstrate the magnitude of this problem and the urgent need for action.”

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