

## Violence against adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic in Bandung, Indonesia

Nita Arisanti<sup>1</sup>, Nia Kania<sup>2</sup>, Putri Sartika Dewi<sup>3</sup>, Meita Dhamayanti<sup>4</sup>

### Abstract

**Background** Violence against children includes all forms of violence against people under 18 years old, whether perpetrated by parents or other caregivers, peers, romantic partners, or strangers. During the COVID-19 pandemic, strained parent-child relationships due to family financial pressure, physical or mental health problems, and lockdown conditions that kept families at home and in close proximity for long periods of time might have exacerbated any underlying tensions.

**Objective** To describe violence against adolescents in Bandung during the COVID-19 pandemic, in the form of psychological violence, physical violence, neglect, and sexual abuse.

**Methods** This descriptive study was held from October to December 2020. Subjects were adolescents aged 12-18 years attending junior and senior high school in Bandung. Subjects filled the *International Society for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (ISPCAN) Child Abuse Screening Tool-for Children (ICAST-C)* questionnaire (Indonesian version).

**Results** The most common forms of violence experienced by adolescents in Bandung during the COVID-19 pandemic were being ignored (psychological violence), startled aggressively (physical violence), and being made to feel unimportant (neglect). Sexual abuse was reported by a minority of subjects.

**Conclusion** The predominant type of violence against adolescents in Bandung during the COVID-19 pandemic was psychological violence, followed by physical violence and neglect. [Paediatr Indones. 2023;63:195-201; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14238/pi63.3.2023.195-201> ].

**Keywords:** adolescents; COVID-19 pandemic; violence

Child abuse or child maltreatment is defined as “all forms of physical and emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect, and exploitation that results in actual or potential harm to the child’s health, development or dignity.” There are four main types of abuse: neglect, physical abuse, psychological abuse, and sexual abuse. Abuse is defined as an act of commission, while neglect is defined as an act of omission in care leading to potential or actual harm. It includes all types of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect, negligence and commercial or other exploitation, which results in actual or potential harm to the child’s health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power.<sup>1,2</sup>

The Indonesian law on child protection (No.23/2002) states that children and youth have the potential to contribute to national ideals and guarantee continuity of the future existence of the nation. Hence, threats to children’s lives and safety are threats to national existence.<sup>3</sup>

Department of Public Health<sup>1</sup>, Department of Basic Science<sup>2</sup>, Faculty of Medicine<sup>3</sup>, and Department of Child Health<sup>4</sup>, Faculty of Medicine Universitas Padjadjaran, Bandung, West Java, Indonesia.

**Corresponding author:** Meita Dhamayanti. Department of Child Health, Faculty of Medicine, Universitas Padjadjaran, Bandung, West Java, Indonesia. Email: [meita.dhamayanti@unpad.ac.id](mailto:meita.dhamayanti@unpad.ac.id).

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The COVID-19 pandemic led the government to apply a lockdown policy known as the “large-scale social restrictions” (LSSR), which may have increased the level of daily interaction between children and parents. In families with stable finances and health, more togetherness may strengthen relationships among family members, including parent-child and sibling relationships, through time spent engaging in fun and meaningful activities.<sup>4</sup> Increased family interactions can also help develop children’s ability to manage stress, due to greater opportunity for parents to listen to their children’s stories and help them handle their feelings.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, the LSSR negatively affected some families’ finances and caused parental anxiety, stress, and pressure, which led to excessive emotion.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, the parent-child relationship may deteriorate.<sup>6</sup> In such a situation, parents may take their frustrations out on their children, who are not always in a position to confront the parent.<sup>5,7</sup>

In 2020, the Indonesian Child Protection Commission (ICPC) conducted an online survey in which 25,146 children across 34 provinces in Indonesia participated. The survey revealed that physical violence was often inflicted on children during the COVID-19 pandemic, in the form of pinching (39.8%), ear-twisting (19.5%), beatings (10.6%) and pulling (7.7%).<sup>8</sup> The survey also revealed that psychological violence was inflicted on children during the COVID-19 pandemic, including scolding (56%), comparing with other children (34%), yelling (23%), and glaring (13%).<sup>8</sup> However, not much was known about violence against adolescents in Bandung during the pandemic. The aim of this study was to assess for physical and psychological violence, sexual abuse, and neglect against adolescents in the urban area of Bandung during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Methods

This cross-sectional study was conducted from October to December 2020. The inclusion criteria were adolescents aged 12-18 years who were students of junior and senior high schools throughout Bandung, and parents’/guardians’ agreement to participate in the study, by completion of the online consent form in a Google form. Exclusion criteria were students with

restrictions/disabilities (physical disabilities, inability to access the internet, or unavailability of devices to access the internet) such that they could not complete the online questionnaire.

Subjects were included by multistage random sampling. In the first stage, we randomly selected one junior high school and one senior high school from each of the four working areas of Bandung. From each of the selected schools, we then randomly selected 50 students across all grade levels. Selected students were asked to complete the *International Society for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect* (ISPCAN) *Child Abuse Screening Tool-for Children* (ICAST-C) questionnaire.

The ICAST-C questionnaire had been translated, modified, and validated into an Indonesian version.<sup>10</sup> The questionnaire consists of five domains: explanation on violence, psychological violence, physical violence, sexual violence, and neglect.<sup>9</sup> In our study, only four question domains were used: 17 questions on psychological violence, 19 questions on physical violence, four questions on sexual violence, and six questions on neglect. Each question has five answer options based on the frequency of maltreatment: “almost always” meaning once a week or more often, “often” meaning several times a month, “sometimes” meaning about once a month, “almost never” meaning once or twice a year, and “never”.

*Microsoft Excel 2016* (Microsoft Inc.) and *SPSS version 22* (IBM, Armonk, New York) were used to process the collected information. Steps in data processing consisted of editing (checking for data validity), coding (converting the data from letters or sentences into figures or numbers), data entry (inputting coded data), and cleaning (evaluating the possibility of errors in data entry or coding and identifying incompletions which needed correction). The study protocol was approved by the Health Research Ethics Committee, Universitas Padjadjaran.

## Results

From October to December 2020, 418 subjects were included from eight schools, consisting of four junior and four senior high schools. Subjects were predominantly female (64.4%) and in senior high school (51.7%); 69.6% of subjects had parents whose

highest educational level was college/university (Table 1).

Table 2 shows the ICAST-C results for psychological violence. The item “feeling ignored” was answered as “almost always” by 5.5% of subjects and “often” by 16% of subjects. The item “forbidden to go out” was answered as “sometimes” by 40.9% of subjects. The item “shouted, yelled, or screamed at very loudly” was answered as “almost never” by 24.6% of subjects (Table 2).

**Table 1.** Sociodemographic characteristics of subjects

Characteristics	(N=418)
Sex, n (%)	
Male	149 (35.6)
Female	269 (64.4)
Subject's educational level	
Junior high	202 (48.3)
Senior high	216 (51.7)
Parents' highest level of education	
Low (elementary to junior high)	28 (6.7)
Medium (senior high)	99 (23.7)
High (college/university)	291 (69.6)

**Table 2.** Frequency and proportion of psychological violence

ICAST psychological violence	Almost always	Often	Sometimes	Almost never	Never
Shouted, yelled, or screamed at you very loudly	13 (3.1)	34 (8.1)	131 (31.3)	103 (24.6)	137 (32.8)
Insulted you by calling you dumb, lazy or other such names	14 (3.3)	56 (13.4)	145 (34.7)	80 (19.1)	123 (29.4)
Cursed you	7 (1.7)	21 (5.0)	76 (18.2)	95 (22.7)	219 (52.4)
Ignored you	23 (5.5)	67 (16.0)	154 (36.8)	65 (15.6)	109 (26.1)
Blamed you for his/her misfortune	8 (1.9)	10 (2.4)	36 (8.6)	61 (14.6)	303 (72.5)
Forbade you from going out	18 (4.3)	58 (13.9)	171 (40.9)	64 (15.3)	107 (25.6)
Embarrassed you publicly	7 (1.7)	25 (6.0)	118 (28.2)	88 (21.1)	180 (43.1)
Said they wished you were dead or never been born	6 (1.4)	3 (0.7)	16 (3.8)	34 (8.1)	359 (85.9)
Threatened to leave or abandon you	8 (1.9)	17 (4.1)	52 (12.4)	56 (13.4)	285 (68.2)
Locked you out of the home	2 (0.5)	4 (1.0)	15 (3.6)	56 (13.4)	341 (81.6)
Threatened to invoke harmful people, ghosts or evil spirits against you	2 (0.5)	1 (0.2)	10 (2.4)	43 (10.3)	362 (86.6)
Threatened to hurt or kill you	0 (0.0)	3 (0.7)	8 (1.9)	30 (7.2)	377 (90.2)
Referred to your skin color/gender/ religion or culture in a hurtful way	3 (0.7)	13 (3.1)	51 (12.2)	53 (12.7)	298 (71.3)
Tried to embarrass you because you were an orphan or without a parent	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	6 (1.4)	8 (1.9)	404 (96.7)
Stopped you from being with other children to make you feel bad or lonely	6 (1.4)	24 (5.7)	39 (9.3)	57 (13.6)	292 (69.9)
Stole or broke or ruined your belongings	4 (1.0)	8 (1.9)	71 (17.0)	93 (22.2)	242 (57.9)
Threatened you with bad marks that you did not deserve	5 (1.2)	22 (5.3)	62 (14.8)	68 (16.3)	261 (62.4)

Table 3 shows the ICAST-C results for physical violence. The item “shocked aggressively” was reported as “almost always” by 1.2% of subjects. “Pinching” was reported as “often” by 8.6% of subjects and “sometimes” by 31.1% of subjects. “Twisting the ear” was answered as “almost never” by 26.3% of subjects.

Table 4 shows the ICAST-C results for neglect. The item “made to feel unimportant” was answered as “almost always” by 1.7% of subjects and “often” by 5% of subjects. The item “being hurt or injured

due to absence of adult supervision” was answered as “sometimes” by 15.8% of subjects and “almost never” by 19.1% of subjects. The item “had to wear clothes that were dirty, torn or inappropriate (even though there was other clothing available) was answered as “never” by 91.9% of subjects.

Table 5 shows the ICAST-C results for sexual violence. None of our subjects answered “almost always” or “often” for any of the items. However, “being made to look at their private parts or wanted to look at yours was answered as “almost never” by 5.3% of subjects.

**Table 3.** Frequency and proportion of physical violence

ICAST physical violence	Almost always	Often	Sometimes	Almost never	Never
Kicked you	0 (0.0)	10 (2.4)	50 (12.0)	85 (20.3)	273 (65.3)
Shocked you aggressively	5 (1.2)	25 (6.0)	85 (20.3)	83 (19.9)	220 (52.6)
Slapped you on the face or on back of head	0 (0.0)	7 (1.7)	54 (12.9)	73 (17.5)	284 (67.9)
Hit you on the head with knuckles	1 (0.2)	8 (1.9)	37 (8.9)	66 (15.8)	306 (73.2)
Spanked you on the bottom with bare hand	2 (0.5)	8 (1.9)	68 (16.3)	71 (17.0)	269 (64.4)
Hit you elsewhere (not buttocks) with an object (such as a stick, broom, cane, or belt)	1 (0.2)	1 (0.2)	25 (6.0)	51 (12.2)	340 (81.3)
Hit you over and over again with object or fist ("beat-up")	1 (0.2)	5 (1.2)	31 (7.4)	41 (9.8)	340 (81.3)
Choked you to make it difficult to breathe	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	5 (1.2)	24 (5.7)	389 (93.1)
Burned or scalded or branded you	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	5 (1.2)	13 (3.1)	400 (95.7)
Put hot pepper, soap or spicy food in your mouth to cause pain	1 (0.2)	2 (0.5)	7 (1.7)	18 (4.3)	390 (93.3)
Locked you up or tied you to restrict movement	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	2 (0.5)	18 (4.3)	398 (95.2)
Twisted your ear	4 (1.0)	12 (2.9)	67 (16.0)	110 (26.3)	225 (53.8)
Pulled your hair	1 (0.2)	10 (2.4)	52 (12.4)	87 (20.8)	268 (64.1)
Pinched you to cause pain	2 (0.5)	36 (8.6)	130 (31.1)	88 (21.1)	162 (38.8)
Forced you to stand, sit or kneel in a position that caused pain	0 (0.0)	2 (0.5)	16 (3.8)	29 (6.9)	371 (88.8)
Put you in time-out	1 (0.2)	1 (0.2)	23 (5.5)	54 (12.9)	339 (81.1)
Withheld a meal as a punishment	0 (0.0)	2 (0.5)	8 (1.9)	17 (4.1)	391 (93.5)
Made you take drugs or alcohol	0 (0.0)	1 (0.2)	2 (0.5)	8 (1.9)	407 (97.4)

**Table 4.** Frequency and proportion of neglect

ICAST neglect	Almost always	Often	Sometimes	Almost never	Never
You did not get enough to eat (went hungry) and/or drink (were thirsty)	1 (0.2)	3 (0.7)	19 (4.5)	22 (5.3)	373 (89.2)
You had to wear clothes that were dirty, torn, or inappropriate for the season	1 (0.2)	1 (0.2)	7 (1.7)	25 (6.0)	384 (91.9)
You were not taken care of when you were sick or injured	1 (0.2)	5 (1.2)	24 (5.7)	35 (8.4)	353 (84.4)
You were hurt or injured because no adult was supervising	5 (1.2)	17 (4.1)	66 (15.8)	80 (19.1)	250 (59.8)
You did not feel cared for	2 (0.5)	10 (2.4)	34 (8.1)	54 (12.9)	318 (76.1)
You were made to feel unimportant	7 (1.7)	21 (5.0)	61 (14.6)	69 (16.5)	260 (62.2)

**Table 5.** Frequency and proportion of sexual violence

ICAST sexual violence	Almost always	Often	Sometimes	Almost never	Never
Made you look at their private parts or wanted to look at yours	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	3 (0.7)	22 (5.3)	393 (94.0)
Touched your private parts in a sexual way, or made you touch theirs	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	1 (0.2)	7 (1.7)	410 (98.1)
Made a sex video or took photographs of you alone, or with other people, doing sexual things	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	1 (0.2)	2 (0.5)	415 (99.3)
Forced you to have sex or tried to have sex with you when you did not want them to	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	3 (0.7)	415 (99.3)

## Discussion

The city of Bandung is an urban area in West Java Province, close to Jakarta, the capital city of Indonesia. In our study, there is no predominant form of violence experienced by adolescents in Bandung during the COVID-19 pandemic. Psychological violence and physical violence seem more frequent than neglect and sexual violence. Our findings are in contrast to a previous study on prevalence of violence towards adolescents in West Java in 2017 that reported a high frequency of sexual abuse.<sup>11</sup> In June 2020, the ICPC conducted an online survey of 25,146 children in 34 Indonesian provinces on psychological and physical violence experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>12</sup> The ICPC survey results were similar to ours: the frequency of psychological violence was higher compared to the frequency of physical violence.<sup>8</sup> This current survey also showed that the most common forms of psychological violence were being addressed in anger, being compared to other children, being shouted at, and being glared at. In contrast, the three most common types of psychological violence as depicted by the “almost always” answers were being neglected, being forbidden to go out, and being called insulting names such as “stupid,” “dumb,” or “lazy.” The ICPC survey noted that the form of physical violence most frequently inflicted on children during the COVID-19 pandemic were pinching, ear twisting, beating, and pulling.<sup>8</sup> Our results differed somewhat. The four types of physical violence with the highest frequency (“almost always”) in our subjects were shocking aggressively, twisting the ear, pinching, and beating the buttocks by hand. Moreover, the percentages of each form of violence in our study, be it psychological or physical, tended to be higher compared to those in the ICPC survey. The differences may have been due to differences in the study setting; the ICPC study comprised all parts of Indonesia, urban as well as rural, while our study was done in Bandung, an urban area. Klein et al. showed that the incidence of violence and neglect in children was strongly related to urban areas, in which population density as well as physical and social inequality are often found.<sup>12</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic had many effects on societies and families in the majority of world’s population. Many people experienced changes

never before imagined. One impact of the pandemic was increased risk for children and adolescents to become victims of violence.<sup>13</sup> During the COVID-19 pandemic, many countries, including Indonesia, implemented policies of social restrictions as a way to prevent disease transmission. These restrictions may have increased the risk of violence against children and adolescents due to several factors, such as increased stress and fear of contagion, family financial pressure, exacerbated physical and mental health problems in parents, children, or both, and challenges in attending school from home or online.<sup>13</sup>

Lovell et al. found that since the beginning of the pandemic, more than one of four parents reported worsening of their children’s mental health, one of seven parents reported worsening of behavioral health, and almost one out of ten reported worsening of mental and behaviour.<sup>14</sup> In general, parents who are stressed tend to respond to their children’s anxiety or behavioral demands in an aggressive or harsh way. Patwardhan et al. also reported that a home environment with high stress levels is often the main predictor of physical violence and neglect in children.<sup>15</sup>

Sexual violence in childhood often takes place with other forms of violence or neglect, especially within a family circle where there is lack of family support and/or severe stress, such as high poverty, limited parental education, single parent or none at all, parental drug abuse, family/marriage problems, abuse, or lack of warmth from the caregiver. Children who act impulsively, have special needs (emotionally, physically, or mentally), or use illicit substances may have higher risk for experiencing sexual violence. The risk of child sexual violence also seems to increase in adolescence.<sup>16</sup> Low parental education is a risk factor for abuse.<sup>17</sup>

It is challenging for healthcare providers and policymakers to limit the maltreatment of children. Therefore, many parties must act in concert to ward off the incidence of violence against children or adolescents, including parents, teachers, psychologists, and policymakers. Providing education for parents, communities, school teachers, and students could make a difference in society.<sup>18</sup>

The limitation of this study was that the ICAST-C questionnaire answers were based only on the respondents’ perceptions of the five options:

“almost always”, “often”, “sometimes”, “almost never”, and “never.” There were no clear definitions to differentiate among answer options. Nor were there objective confirmations of these self-reports. In addition, we did not ask subjects to identify the perpetrators of violence. Suggestions for further research include a larger sample size and converting the questionnaire results to a score or Likert scale.

In conclusion, the predominant type of violence experienced by Bandung adolescents during the pandemic was, specifically feeling ignored. The most common physical violence experienced was being shocked aggressively. In the neglect category, some adolescents reported being made to feel unimportant. Sexual violence was the least reported.

## Conflict of interest

None declared.

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