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One in three young South Africans sexually abused – new study

- **Previous sexual abuse assumptions challenged**
- **Boys and girls equally vulnerable to sexual abuse**
- **Links between sexual abuse and mental health established**
- **Causes identified and prevention action proposed**
- **More than 350,000 sexual abuse cases in 2015 alone**

Pretoria & Cape Town, 1 June, 2016: One in three young people in South Africa have experienced some form of sexual abuse during their lives, according to a new Optimus Study, the first-ever nationally representative study of child maltreatment in South Africa.

The “Optimus Study: Sexual victimisation of children in South Africa” was commissioned by the UBS Optimus Foundation and conducted by researchers from the University of Cape Town and the Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention. The findings indicate that both boys and girls are equally vulnerable to sexual abuse over their lifetime, although the form of abuse often differs.

Tip of the iceberg?

According to the study, **784,967 young people in South Africa are likely to have been the victims of sexual abuse by the age of 17**. This number would fill the Soccer City Stadium in Johannesburg eight times. 351,214 of these cases of sexual abuse would have occurred in 2015 alone.

The sexual abuse and maltreatment of children is preventable, but until now, a lack of data has hindered the development of systems needed to protect and support children.

While previous research has almost unfailingly underscored the particular vulnerability of young girls to sexual abuse, the study found that boys were at least as likely as girls to report some form of sexual abuse, but that girls are more likely to experience “contact sexual abuse” than boys, who reported higher levels of “no-contact” sexual abuse. Both forms of abuse, however, can be equally harmful and both should be taken equally seriously.

But when it comes to reporting incidents of sexual abuse to authorities, the study found that young people were unlikely to report these cases. Only 31% of girls and **no boys** reported sexual abuse to the police. Young males are especially disinclined to report, across all categories of abuse.

Good parenting reduces risk of victimisation

The study identifies a number of protective factors associated with a reduced risk of sexual victimisation. "Parents' knowledge of who young people spend their time with, and how they spend their time and where they go, were significantly associated with a lower likelihood of young people reporting that they had been victims of sexual abuse," the report says. "In addition to this, warm and supportive parent-child relationships were also found to be significantly associated with lower risk for sexual victimisation, specifically for girls."

Recommendations to stop sexual assault of young people in South Africa

The report offers recommendations to stop the sexual abuse of young people and highlights that more still needs to be done on a policy level. South Africa should move towards developing a standard and regulated framework for the reporting, referral and management of sexual offences for both state and non-governmental child protection service providers. This protocol should be supported and reinforced by existing laws and regulations, as well as the research evidence. The lack of such a protocol now means that too many children who experience abuse face delays in justice and do not get the care that they need.

To strengthen the role that schools play, school safety should be integrated into teacher training, as well as the integration into schools of evidence-based life skills curriculums that directly target issues relating to sex, gender and violence.

Substance abuse treatment programmes can play a significant role in preventing sexual abuse of young people. "Since parental substance misuse is associated with sexual abuse of children, one key preventive strategy is to make substance abuse treatment programmes far more widely available and accessible than they are at present."

Programmes that promote better parent-teen relationships should be made widely available to help foster good relations between parents and teens.

The study combined the expertise of leading researchers in the fields of crime and violence prevention, gender studies, psychology and statistical sciences – all working together to provide fresh perspectives and a wider scope of results on the subject of childhood sexual abuse in South Africa. This is the first-ever nationally representative study of child maltreatment in South Africa, giving accurate prevalence data for the first time. Information is presented, for instance, on boys' experiences of sexual abuse; the preventability of child abuse; and the hurdles faced by agencies dealing with the maltreatment of children.

The ["Optimus Study: Sexual victimisation of children in South Africa"](#), together with two previous [Optimus Studies](#) focused on Switzerland and China, will help inform the debate and shape the direction of child-protection efforts.

Background: Optimus Study: Sexual victimisation of children in South Africa

The study was conducted by Lillian Artz, Associate Professor and Director of the Gender, Health & Justice Research Unit in the Faculty of Health Sciences at UCT; Patrick Burton, Executive Director of the Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention; Catherine L. Ward, Associate Professor in the Department of Psychology at UCT; Lezanne Leoschut, Research Director at the Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention; Joanne Phyfer, researcher at the Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention; Sam Lloyd, a researcher at the Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention; and Reshma Kassanjee, a consultant in the Department of Statistical Sciences at UCT.

Lillian Artz is Associate Professor and Director of the Gender, Health & Justice Research Unit in the Faculty of Health Sciences at UCT. She obtained her PhD in Criminology and Criminal Justice from Queen's University Belfast in Northern Ireland. She has published widely on domestic violence, sexual offences, feminist jurisprudence and women's rights to freedom and security in Africa. Her current project work includes research on female offenders in prisons and psychiatric settings, the epidemiology of child sexual abuse, the prevention of torture as well as the medico-legal management of sexual and domestic violence in conflict-affected and post-conflict African states. She is co-editor of "Should we Consent? Rape Law Reform in South Africa" and co-author of "Hard Time(s): Women's Pathways to Crime and Incarceration".

Patrick Burton is the Executive Director of the Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention (CJCP), an NGO working in the field of violence prevention nationally and regionally, with a particular focus on children and youth. Patrick is a post-graduate developmental researcher, having graduated from the University of the Witwatersrand with a Higher Diploma in Development Planning, and from the University of KwaZulu-Natal (Durban) with a Master of Science degree in Development Studies, with a gender focus. He has worked extensively in the field of security, HIV/AIDS, health, violence against children, online safety, and school violence prevention. His current research focus is on evidence-led approaches to school violence prevention; and on online child protection in the Global South, within a broader framework of child safety and empowerment.

Catherine L. Ward is an Associate Professor in the Department of Psychology at UCT, South Africa. She holds a PhD in Clinical-Community Psychology from the University of South Carolina, USA. Her research interests are in violence prevention from the perspective of children's development, and particularly in public health approaches to this – in developing evidence-based approaches to violence prevention that have a wide reach and are effective in improving children's development and reducing their likelihood of becoming aggressive. Much of her current work is focused on preventing child maltreatment, and on understanding the epidemiology of risk factors faced by South African children.

Lezanne Leoschut is the Research Director at the Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention. She holds an MA in Research Psychology from the University of the Western Cape (UWC), where she worked for three years as a researcher. Much of this time was spent at the Child and Youth Research and Training Programme where child and adolescent well-being were among the core focus areas. Leoschut has been at the CJCP since 2005. Recent projects include community and school safety auditing and planning, youth victimisation and maltreatment, child and youth risk and resilience to crime and violence, understanding the nature and extent of

school violence, and overcoming violence as a barrier to education. Country experience includes Namibia, Mozambique, South Sudan, Kenya, and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Joanne Phyfer is a researcher at the Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention. Joanne has managed and worked on a number of studies during her time at CJCP, most recently the baseline study for the Umhlali Project in Walmer Township, Port Elizabeth. This project seeks to promote the resilience of children in the community to crime and violence and improve their life outcomes through various interventions over the next five years. Joanne has also done work to promote safety in schools, having been involved in the implementation of the National School Safety Framework and having worked on a study investigating the role of police in schools. Joanne has previously written on issues of online safety. She has a Masters in Research Psychology from the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

Sam Lloyd is a researcher at the Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention, working on projects related to child protection in South Africa, Namibia, and Uganda. Sam has a Master of Science degree in Wellbeing and Human Development from the University of Bath, UK, and is currently completing his Masters in Public Health (Epidemiology and Biostatistics) at UCT, where he also works as a researcher on projects evaluating the impact of urban upgrading programmes on violence and safety, and alcohol policy in Africa. Other current research interests include organizational evaluation, and the determinants and outcomes of social capital and social cohesion.

Reshma Kassarjee is a consultant in the Department of Statistical Sciences at UCT. She has considerable experience in epidemiology, particularly with regards to HIV/AIDS and other risks that face South Africans.

About the UBS Optimus Foundation

We're an expert grant-making foundation for UBS clients looking to use their wealth to drive positive and sustainable social change for children. We help clients achieve their philanthropic goals by connecting them with inspiring entrepreneurs, new technologies, and proven models that bridge a gap preventing children from thriving. Our focus areas are child health, education and protection.

We don't work with the usual suspects. We seek out and offer clients the game changers. We identify programs where we can add value, ones that can grow and make a fundamental and sustainable difference to the maximum number of children's lives.

Our business-minded, entrepreneurial approach to philanthropy means we never assume a program will work just because it seems like the obvious solution. We challenge program assumptions rigorously, and only very few meet our tough standards. In short, we take measured risks based on hard facts.

And UBS is so confident about the programs we select that it co-funds them, maximizing the reach and impact significantly. Best of all, we guarantee that 100% of all donations go to programs that benefit children because UBS covers all our costs.

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