

# Media reporting of violence against children in the Eastern Mediterranean Region during the early days of COVID-19 pandemic

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## Abstract

**Background:** Violence against children constitutes a significant public health problem globally.

**Aim:** To document and compare media reports of violence against children before and during COVID-19, and measures taken by countries to address such violence.

**Methods:** This comparative review covered news reports of violence against children from 1 January to 30 June of 2019 and 2020 in the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region countries. A total of 823 articles published in Arabic and English, covering incidents, initiatives, opinions and views on all types of violence among children under 18 years of age were sourced using search engines and platforms and reviewed. News on incidents was analysed quantitatively while news on initiatives and opinions was analysed qualitatively.

**Results:** Some 40.3% of the news reports was on incidents, followed by interviews or opinions (31.5%) and initiatives (28.2%). There were 1129 reports of violence against children from 1 January to 30 June of 2019 and 1880 for the same period in 2020. Reports of physical violence increased from 34% in 2019 to 40% in 2020, while reports of sexual violence decreased from 45% in 2019 to 37% in 2020. Views and opinion reports showed 0.4–1.1% alignment with the 7 INSPIRE strategies.

**Conclusion:** The COVID-19 pandemic affected the incidence and reporting of violence against children across the region. It is essential to provide accurate and sensitive media coverage for incidences of violence against children so that survivors and at-risk children can receive adequate support and ensure that communities can tackle it appropriately.

Keywords: violence against children, sexual violence, physical violence, COVID-19, media report, social media, Eastern Mediterranean

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## Introduction

Violence against children (VAC) constitutes a significant global public health problem that affects not only victims but also the community and society at large (1). It is estimated that worldwide one in every 2 children aged 2–17 years experiences some form of violence each year (2). In 2017, the global child (0–17 years) homicide rate was 1.7 per 100 000 children, and was more than twice as high among boys (2.4 per 100 000) as among girls (1.1 per 100 000). An estimated 10% of global child homicides occur in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, which has the third-highest estimated child homicide rate in the world (1.52.4 per 100 000) (2). Children exposed to violence are at an increased risk of mental health disorders such as anxiety and depression; high health-risk behaviours such as smoking, drug abuse and unprotected sex; chronic diseases, including diabetes, cancer and heart disease; and infections such as HIV (2). The economic impact of VAC is also significant. For instance, in the United States of America (USA), the aggregate lifetime cost of VAC alone is estimated at US\$ 121.6 billion (3).

Evidence-based guidance to prevent and respond to VAC is presented in the INSPIRE initiative of the World

Health Organization (WHO) (4), which includes the following strategies: implementation and enforcement of laws; norms and values; safe environments; parent and caregiver support; income and economic strengthening; response and support services; and education and life skills. These strategies have been proven to effect a 20–50% decrease in prevalence through well-designed programmes (5) together with 2 cross-sectional activities: multisectoral action and coordination, monitoring and evaluation. A rapid reduction in violence is possible with strong political leadership, evidence-based policies, interventions and adequate financing. Governments have committed to ending VAC through their adoption of target 16.2 of the Sustainable Development Goals: “end abuse, exploitation, trafficking, and all forms of violence against and torture of children”. Governments are also committed to achieving the related target of reducing the number of children subjected to violence according to the WHO’s Thirteenth General Programme of Work (6) and the WHO’s Strategy for the Eastern Mediterranean Region, 2020–2023: turning vision 2023 into action (7).

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has affected the daily lives of children and families worldwide.

Responses to the disease have led to economic crises; school closures; and reduced access to health, social and legal services, all of which may affect the risk of VAC (8). More than 1.5 billion children worldwide live with the increasing risk of violence at home. Loss of income can increase caregivers' stress levels and thus the likelihood of VAC (9). This is further complicated by the disruption to child healthcare and anti-violence services resulting from the diversion of the healthcare system towards addressing COVID-19 (2).

The 2020 global status report on preventing violence against children noted the increased likelihood of VAC during the pandemic as family members spent more time in close contact and household stress intensified, with potential economic or livelihood losses (2). The lockdown prevented frontline providers in the community (including teachers, social workers, nurses, and physicians, who would be able to detect abuse in normal circumstances) from reporting suspected abuse.

Violence against children has not received sufficient attention amid the COVID-19 crisis, it is under-reported and there is no relevant data, and the media, including electronic media, play a significant role in increasing public awareness of VAC. Unrestricted availability of information on the types of violence and their prevention can help lower the risk of abuse among potential victims (10). Many researchers have focused on the role of the media as a tool for both surveillance and dissemination of prevention messages (11). Researchers have applied tools to automatically detect reports of violence on social media (12).

This study aimed to develop baseline information on regional media reporting of incidents of VAC during the COVID-19 pandemic and of national and sectorial initiatives to address the phenomenon. It was also to assess the time trends for VAC before and after the pandemic based on media reports and recommend measures to protect children during a crisis.

## Methods

News reports on VAC in the Eastern Mediterranean Region (EMR) countries were collected and reviewed for the period 1 January to 30 June in both 2019 and 2020. These included items published on webpages of print media and social media platforms. EMR comprises 22 countries and territories: 5 low-income countries (Afghanistan, Somalia, Sudan, Syrian Arab Republic, Yemen), 7 lower-middle-income countries (Djibouti, Egypt, Islamic Republic of Iran, Morocco, Pakistan, Palestine, Tunisia), 4 upper-middle-income countries (Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya), and 6 high-income countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates).

An internet search was conducted using available search engines and platforms such as Google News, Yahoo News, BBC News, Bizjournals, Bloomberg, DailyMotion, HeadlineSpot, InternetNews.com, NewsLibrary, SkyNews, Today's Front Pages, and WorldNetDaily News as well as individual local newspaper webpages

(see: <https://www.newspaperindex.com/>). The following keywords were used: child abuse and neglect, child maltreatment, child protection, childhood trauma, physical, sexual, emotional, psychological, neglect, rape, corporal punishment, firearm, gun, victimization, violence, domestic violence, child, children, youth, and age < 18 years. The searches were conducted in Arabic and English.

News on VAC in print media was found in 25 international and 157 local newspapers. The social platforms Facebook and Twitter were selected because the research team perceived them as being the most widely used. The search resulted in a total of 823 articles: 471 from print media (182 newspapers), 182 from Facebook and 170 from Twitter. The flow diagram for collected media reports is provided in Figure 1.

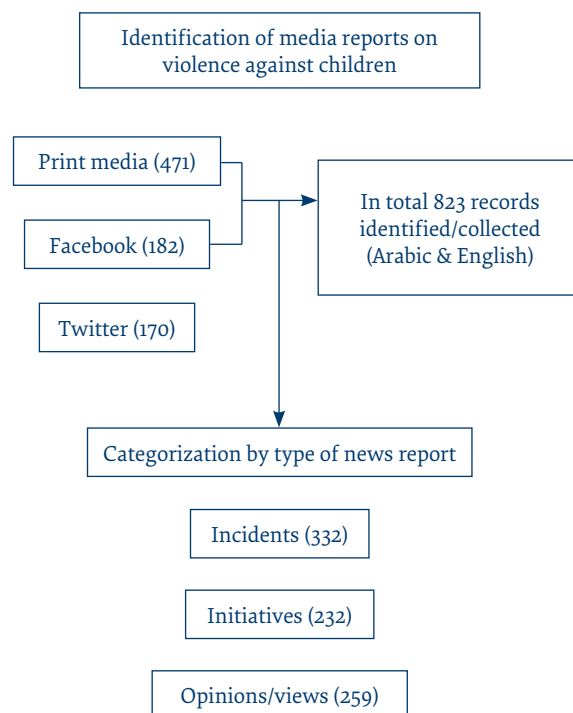
Data were entered into a regional database and converted into systematic categories for analysis. Data validation was performed to ensure that the data were accurate, consistent, uniformly entered, complete, and arranged to facilitate classification and tabulation. A mixed analysis approach was used that included both quantitative and qualitative analyses (Figure 2). The quantitative analysis summarized the various sets of data. Qualitative analysis of the media content was conducted independently for each news article based on 7 criteria to assess content quality (tone, inclusion of messages, photographs, appearance in headlines, large headlines, reported during the pandemic, in an emergency setting) (13). The conceptual framework of the analysis is provided in Figure 2. Articles published in 2020 that met at least 5 of these 7 criteria were used as demonstrative examples for our analysis. News on incidents was analysed quantitatively while news on initiatives and opinions was analysed qualitatively.

The retrieved articles were reviewed by the National Family Safety Program in Saudi Arabia with respect to information extraction and coding. All news items were assigned a unique identifier (ID, date, time, country, journal, and media platform) that was perceived essential for enabling and facilitating the detection and extraction of specific records.

The data were categorized into 3 groups: incidents, opinions/views, and initiatives. A regional tool was developed to break down news items using the following data elements where possible:

- **Incidents:** including demographic information on victims and perpetrators (age, sex, and education), type of violence according to the typology of violence from the "World report on violence and health" (physical, emotional, sexual, neglect, peer, intimate partner, and commercial exploitation) (14), site of the incident (home, school, workplace, institution, etc.), nature of the incident (actual or virtual), and health outcomes (death, disability, hospitalization, physical injury, and psychological trauma);

**Figure 1** Flow diagram of the collected media reports on violence against children during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, 2019–2020



- **Initiatives:** including interventions that were classified based on a set of 7 evidence-based strategies (INSPIRE) (4);
- **Opinions/views:** analysed using the same analytical framework for incidents (if the topic of the article was an incident) or initiative (if the topic was an intervention).

This study was exempted from ethical clearance as it did not involve human subjects or personal data. We sought, recorded and analysed information freely available in the public domain.

## Results

During the study period, 823 news articles on VAC were published. Between January and June of each year, the media-reported data on VAC increased from 304 news items in 2019 to 519 in 2020 (Figure 3). This increase began with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic (March 2020) and nearly doubled during May and June 2020.

Across 2019–2020, 40.3% of reported news items were on incidents, followed by interviews/opinions (31.5%) and initiatives (28.2%). Interviews/opinions increased from 29.6% of all VAC reports in the media in 2019 to 31.5% in 2020. Over half (57.2%) of the reports were published in newspapers, followed by Facebook and Twitter.

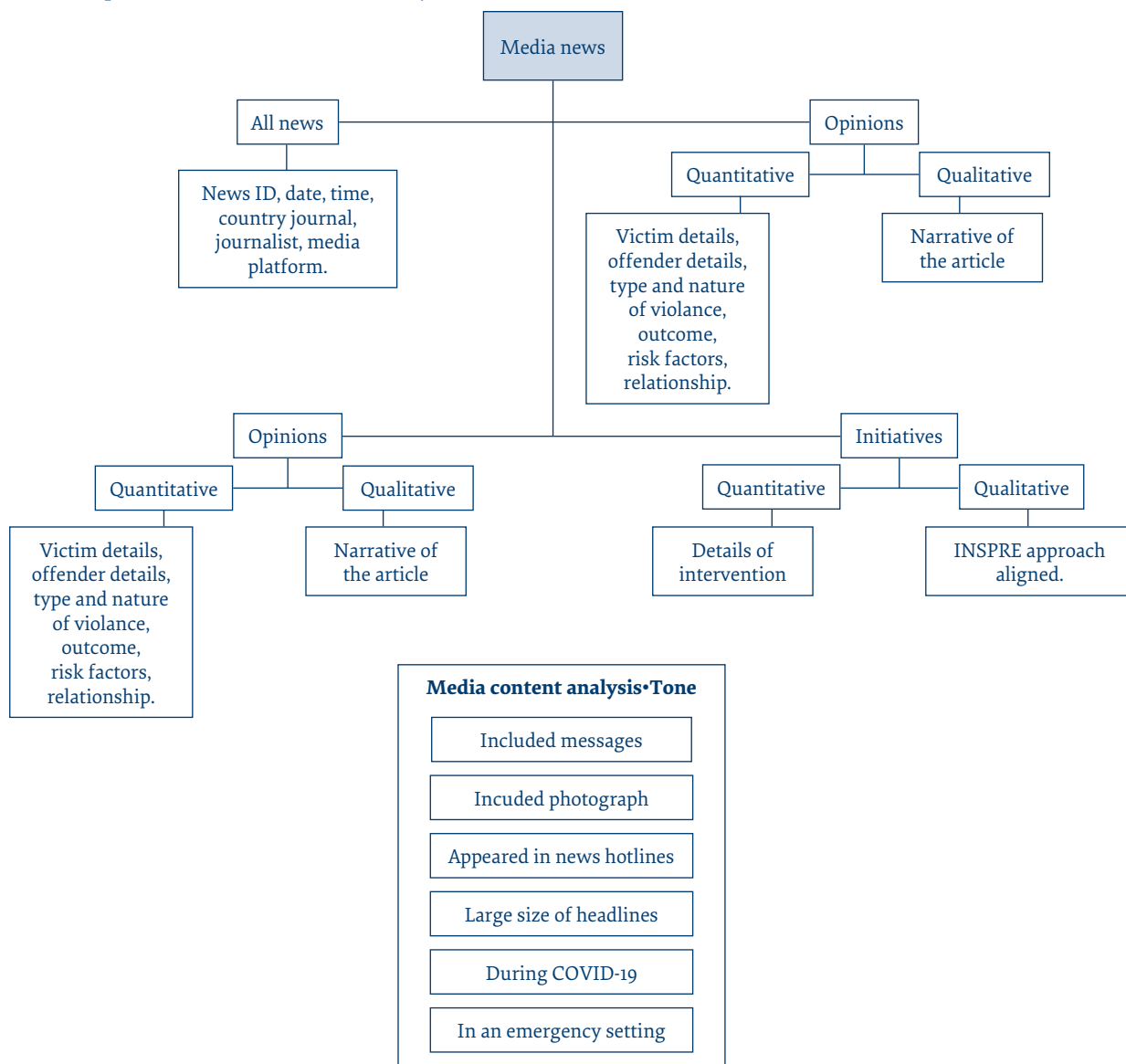
In the low- and middle-income countries of the region there was an increase in all forms of media reporting on VAC between 2019 and 2020. Increases in initiatives to address VAC and interviews/opinions were observed in the high-income countries (Table 1).

Articles on physical VAC increased from around 34% of all reported news in 2019 to just under 40% in 2020 (Table 2). A sharp increase in reports of physical maltreatment was witnessed among children aged 11–17 years, from 14% in 2019 to 32% in 2020. Reported incidents among children aged 5–10 years decreased from 28% in 2019 to 23% in 2020. Overall, 72% of physical maltreatment occurred among male children, and there was a significant increase in incidents among female children, from 9% in 2019 to 33% in 2020.

Generally, male offenders accounted for 63% of all offenders in reported physical VAC incidents, while the number of female offenders increased from 14% in 2019 to 32% in 2020. Physical violence committed by family members accounted for 32% of all reported physical VAC, and increased from 24% in 2019 to 34% in 2020. Reports of violence by fathers increased from 2% in 2019 to 19% in 2020 of all physical VAC incidents. Reported physical violence by a mother also increased, from 4% in 2019 to 9% in 2020. In other reported incidents of physical VAC, the perpetrators included friends, strangers, teachers, employers and drivers. Poverty as a risk factor for physical VAC increased from zero in 2019 to 7% in 2020.

There was clear under-reporting of the age of the perpetrators of physical VAC: it was mentioned in only 16% of incidents. Children and young offenders (18–21 years) were the perpetrators in 29% of physical VAC incidents. Hospitalization as a consequence of physical VAC increased from 12% in 2019 to 20% in 2020 although reports of deaths decreased, from 86% to 61%. Overall, media reports on sexual VAC decreased, but still accounted for over 30% of the reported cases; this was the

Figure 2 Conceptual framework for the data analysis



second most commonly reported type of VAC incident in 2019–2020.

Reported rates of VAC in the media were lowest for psychological violence, in comparison with other forms. Only 4 news items were observed during the study period on bullying, children witnessing adult domestic violence, and emotional exploitation of children.

We identified several examples of reporting of views and opinions on VAC during the COVID-19 pandemic, amounting to over one-third of the media stories covered in this study.

- In a survey in Jordan, 51% of Jordanians confirmed they had been negatively affected by the curfew: 38% believed the family atmosphere was tense and 25% had experienced quarrels, disagreements and violence within the family (15).
- A Facebook post by Tunisian Television in April 2020 indicated a 7-fold increase in violence against women, children and older people during the COVID-19 com-

plete lockdown period (see post at: [www.Facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=903930380077652&id=100013820952482](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=903930380077652&id=100013820952482)).

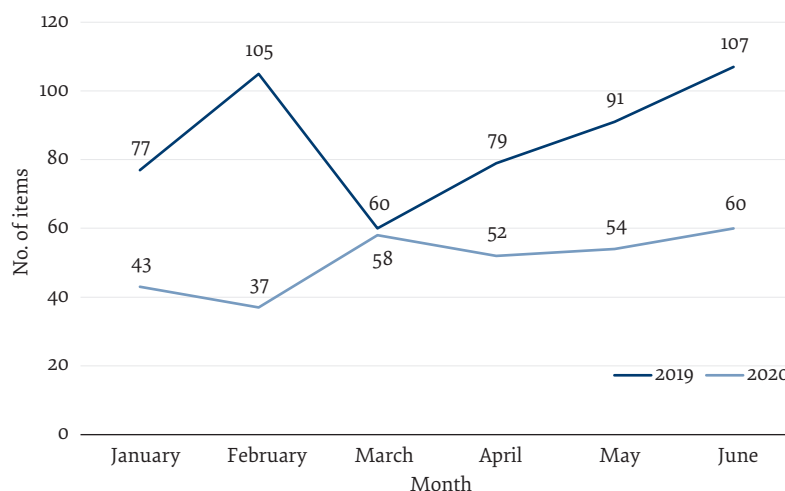
- In Pakistan, a story on the response to the murder of 7-year-old Zainab called for the authorities to take measures against child maltreatment after the incident, and this led to what was named “the Zainab Alert Bill” (16).

In the United Arab Emirates, the media reported on demands for preventing VAC by providing an adequate number of specialists in the field of child protection (Alkhaleej, April 2020, <https://reader.magzter.com/preview/kvt2qif2zq9d1r47rvn61r4398830/439883>).

The analysis of views and opinion pieces extracted from the media based on the 7 INSPIRE strategies showed a 0.4–1.1% alignment with each of these strategies (Table 3).

Media reports on country-level initiatives in response to VAC increased by 60% for all reports between 2019 and

**Figure 3** Reported media news on violence against children during January–June 2019 and 2020 in the Eastern Mediterranean Region



2020 (87 vs 144). The initiatives were examined according to the 7 INSPIRE strategies: 55% involved life skills training, followed by law availability and enforcement (19%) (Table 4, Figure 4).

The following examples of country initiatives during the COVID-19 pandemic published during the study period are examples of the INSPIRE approach:

- In Tunisia, a media story was published about the green line (hotline) launched by the Ministry of Women, Family, Childhood and the Elderly aimed at alleviating the psychological pressure experienced by families and to receive reports (complaints) of domestic violence during the lockdown (17).
- The Akon Foundation in Yemen organized an online meeting to discuss violence against women during the COVID-10 pandemic, and referred to VAC. The meeting called for training of at least one provider in psychological support (Yemenakbar, June 2020, <https://ar-ar.facebook.com/yemennews/posts/1664387833707666/>).

- In the United Arab Emirates, 930 students from 93 public and private schools joined the “Aman Ambassadors” programme, which aims to spread a culture of child rights among school students while empowering them to become safety ambassadors and to educate their peers about negative phenomena threatening their childhood (18).
- In Saudi Arabia, the launch of the “Rifk” (رفق) counsellor programme aimed to inform students, school workers and parents about violence, its causes, manifestations and consequences to prevent and control violence in schools (19).

### Discussion

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, over 50% of children worldwide were exposed daily to various types of violence. This was compounded by the impact of the pandemic (20). The media can be a valuable, even if imprecise, source in enabling the identification of VAC and providing information on national efforts to address it. Previous research has indicated that reporting of VAC in the news media not only makes the public more aware of these cases but also makes them realize the

**Table 1** Distribution of types of news reports according to income group in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, 2019–2020

Year	Low- and middle-income countries, %	High-income countries, %
<b>Incidents</b>		
2019	34	54
2020	66	46
<b>Interviews/opinions</b>		
2019	30	42
2020	70	58
<b>Initiatives</b>		
2019	42	33
2020	58	67

**Table 2** Types of incidents reported in the media on violence against children in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, 2019 and 2020

Type of maltreatment <sup>a</sup>	Incidence (% of reports)	
	2019	2020
PJ2Z Unspecified	10.16	12.68
PJ2Y Other specified	10.16	10.24
PJ22 Psychological	1.56	0.98
PJ21 Sexual	44.53	36.59
PJ20 Physical	33.59	39.51

<sup>a</sup>Codes in this column refer to type of maltreatment (see ICD11: <https://icd.who.int/browse/2024-01/mms/en>).

**Table 3 Distribution of media reports on violence against children classified as views/opinions (corresponding to the INSPIRE strategies) in the Eastern Mediterranean Region collected during 1 January–30 June 2019 and 2020**

INSPIRE strategy	%
Implementation and enforcement of laws	0.8
Norms and values	1.1
Safe environments	0.8
Income and economic strengthening	–
Parent and caregiver support	0.4
Response and support services	0.4
Education and life skills	0.4

need to report such occurrences to the proper authorities (21). Developing a media monitor for VAC during the pandemic could provide baseline information on this problem. Given the limitations associated with the data, social media can be used to gather insights into children’s welfare and their exposure to violence (10).

To our knowledge, this report on VAC in the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region is the first published report showing the incidence of VAC during the COVID-19 pandemic, changes in VAC trends before and after the pandemic, and initiatives to respond to VAC during the pandemic. The results revealed 3 major findings: first, reports of physical VAC increased from 34% in 2019 to 40% in 2020; second, reports of sexual VAC decreased from 45% to 37%, and third, 55% of the reported initiatives focused on life skills training to address VAC during the pandemic.

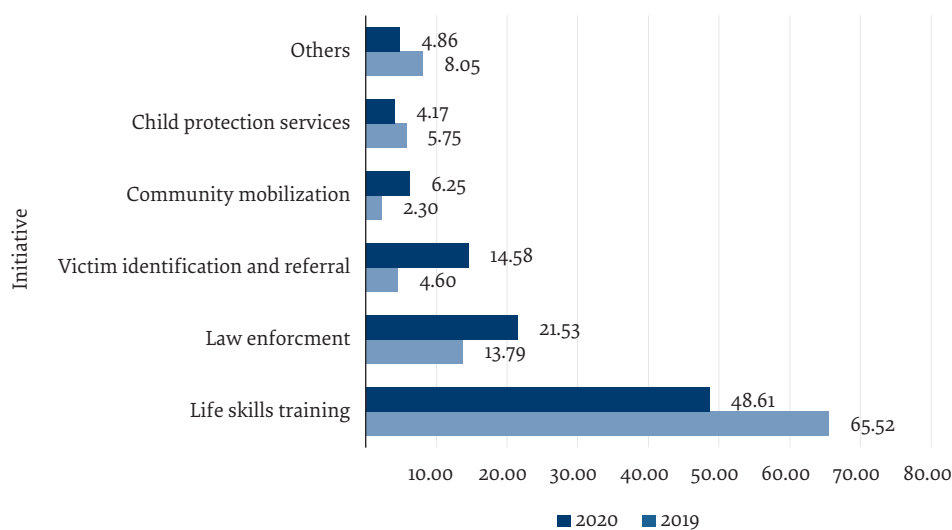
A very small proportion of VAC has received media attention. When the media do report on VAC, they specifically cover events that are rare, unusual or unpleasant (22,23). Physical and sexual VAC typically fall under these categories. Our findings are consistent with those of the BBC, which reported 285 notifications on serious incidents from April to September 2020 in England, reflecting an increase of 27% from 225 during the same period in 2019 (24). According to Sky News in the United Kingdom, reports of physical VAC to the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children increased by 53% during the COVID-19 lockdown compared with the pre-pandemic period (25). In the USA, according to the National Broadcasting Company news analysis, the incidence of VAC plummeted during the pandemic, however, experts anticipated that there may have been an unseen surge (26).

Cognitive, emotional, interpersonal, and social skills are considered life skills that enable people to cope with challenges in their daily lives. In our study, 55% of the reported initiatives included life skills training to address VAC, which is consistent with previous research reporting that preschool enrichment and social development programmes targeting children during early life can prevent violence, improve social skills and magnify educational achievement (27).

**Table 4 Distribution of media reported initiatives for prevention of violence against children under each of the INSPIRE approaches**

INSPIRE approach	%
<b>Education and life skills</b>	
School enrolment	0.4
Life skills training	55.4
Violence by school staff	0.0
Training to recognize abusive situations	0.0
Anti-bullying	0.0
Dating violence prevention	0.0
<b>Income and economic strengthening</b>	
Law enforcement	18.6
Cash transfers	2.2
Group savings and loans	0.0
Microfinance with gender norm training	0.0
<b>Norms and values</b>	
Bystander intervention	0.4
Gender and social norms	0.9
Community mobilization	4.3
<b>Parental and caregiver support</b>	
Centre-based parenting	0.0
Home visiting	0.0
<b>Response and support services</b>	
Perpetrator mental health services	0.0
Perpetrator identification and referral	0.0
Victim mental health services	1.7
Victim identification and referral	10.8
Clinical services for sexual violence victims	0.0
Child protection services	4.8
<b>Safe environment</b>	
Spatial modification	0.0
Interrupting the spread of violence	0.0
Hotspot interventions	0.4

Most studies on the effects of life-skills programmes on the prevention of VAC have been conducted in developed countries. Improving knowledge vis-à-vis the effectiveness of these programmes in high-income countries and translating it to low- and middle-income countries should be a research priority. Further evidence is required regarding the effects of preschool enrichment and social development programmes in low- and middle-income countries. Interventions that support children in acquiring life skills can have positive effects on their opportunities by improving prosocial abilities, educational attainment and employment prospects, and can help prevent violence (28). Collaborative efforts by funders, researchers and policymakers can play an important role in establishing the evidence architecture to prevent VAC by ensuring high-quality systematic reviews and impact evaluations of education and life skills. High-quality research requires adhering to standard scientific

**Figure 4 Distribution of reported initiatives in the Eastern Mediterranean Region according to the INSPIRE approach, 2019 and 2020**

study designs, ensuring precise ethical protocols and engaging with experienced VAC researchers (29).

## Conclusion

The lockdown in response to the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced the incidence and reporting of VAC across the Eastern Mediterranean Region. Media reporting can help address information gaps, provide a better understanding of the existing situation, raise awareness

of VAC, and help society engage positively with children's rights. The media has an obvious effect on the general population and can be used by child protection agencies to keep the population better informed. It is essential that VAC receives accurate and sensitive media coverage to help survivors, at-risk children and communities find resources for prevention or for help if it happens.

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**Competing interests:** None declared.

## Couverture médiatique de la violence à l'encontre des enfants dans la Région de la Méditerranée orientale au cours des premiers jours de la pandémie de COVID-19

### Résumé

**Contexte :** La violence contre les enfants constitue un problème de santé publique important à l'échelle mondiale.

**Objectifs :** Documenter et comparer les informations diffusées par les médias sur la violence à l'égard des enfants avant et pendant la pandémie de COVID-19, ainsi que les mesures prises par les pays pour lutter contre ce phénomène.

**Méthodes :** Le présent examen comparatif a porté sur les actualités diffusées sur la violence à l'encontre des enfants entre le 1<sup>er</sup> janvier et le 30 juin pour les années 2019 et 2020 dans les pays de la Région de la Méditerranée orientale de l'OMS. Un total de 823 articles publiés en arabe et en anglais, couvrant des incidents, des initiatives, des opinions et des avis sur toutes les formes de violence contre les enfants de moins de 18 ans, ont été recensés à l'aide de moteurs de recherche et de plateformes, puis ont été examinés. Les actualités portant sur des incidents ont fait l'objet d'une analyse quantitative, tandis que celles concernant des initiatives et des opinions ont été analysées sur le plan qualitatif.

**Résultats :** Près de 40,3 % des actualités portaient sur des incidents, suivis par des entretiens ou des opinions (31,5 %) et des initiatives (28,2 %). Entre le 1<sup>er</sup> janvier et le 30 juin 2019, 1129 cas de violence à l'encontre des enfants ont été notifiés et 1880 pour la même période en 2020. Les signalements de violences physiques ont augmenté, passant de 34 % en 2019 à 40 % en 2020, tandis que pour les violences sexuelles, ils ont diminué entre le 1<sup>er</sup> janvier et le 30 juin, passant de 45 % en 2019 à 37 % en 2020. Les opinions et les avis présentés ont révélé une concordance de 0,4 à 1,1 % avec les sept stratégies INSPIRE pour mettre fin à la violence à l'égard des enfants.

**Conclusion :** La pandémie de COVID-19 a eu un impact sur l'incidence et le signalement de la violence à l'encontre des enfants dans toute la Région. Il est essentiel d'assurer une couverture médiatique précise et sensible de ces cas, afin que les survivant(e)s et les enfants à risque puissent bénéficier d'un soutien adéquat et que les communautés puissent s'attaquer au problème de manière appropriée.

## الإبلاغ الإعلامي عن العنف بحق الأطفال في إقليم شرق المتوسط خلال الأيام الأولى لجائحة كوفيد-19

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### الخلاصة

الخلفية: يعد العنف ضد الأطفال مشكلة صحية عامة كبرى على الصعيد العالمي.

الهدف: هدفت هذه الدراسة الى توثيق ومقارنة التقارير الإعلامية عن العنف ضد الأطفال قبل جائحة كوفيد-19 وفي أثنائها، وكذلك التدابير التي اتخذتها البلدان للتصدي لهذا العنف.

طرق البحث: تناول هذا الاستعراض المقارن التقارير الإخبارية عن العنف ضد الأطفال في الفترة من 1 كانون الثاني/يناير إلى 30 حزيران/يونيو 2019 و2020 في بلدان إقليم منظمة الصحة العالمية لشرق المتوسط. باستخدام محركات البحث والمنصات، جرى جمع واستعراض ما مجموعه 823 مقالا، باللغتين العربية والإنجليزية، وهذه المقالات تتناول الحوادث والمبادرات والآراء والاستعراضات بشأن جميع أنواع العنف بين الأطفال دون سن 18 عامًا. وحُللت الأخبار المتصلة بالحوادث تحليلًا كميًا، في حين حُللت الأخبار المتصلة بالمبادرات والآراء تحليلًا نوعيًا.

النتائج: ركزت قرابة 40.3% من التقارير الإخبارية على الحوادث، وتليها المقابلات أو الآراء (31.5%) والمبادرات (28.2%). وكان يوجد 1129 بلاغًا عن العنف ضد الأطفال في الفترة من 1 يناير / كانون الثاني إلى 30 يونيو / حزيران 2019، و1880 بلاغًا عن الفترة نفسها من عام 2020. وارتفعت نسبة الإبلاغ عن العنف البدني من 34% في عام 2019 إلى 40% في عام 2020، في حين انخفضت نسبة الإبلاغ عن العنف الجنسي في الفترة من 1 يناير / كانون الثاني إلى 30 يونيو / حزيران من 45% في عام 2019 إلى 37% في عام 2020. وأظهرت تقارير الآراء والرأي مواءمة بنسبة 1.1-0.4% مع 7 استراتيجيات INSPIRE.

الاستنتاجات: أثرت جائحة كوفيد-19 على معدل حدوث العنف ضد الأطفال والإبلاغ عنه في جميع أنحاء الإقليم. ومن الضروري توفير تغطية إعلامية دقيقة وحساسة لحالات العنف ضد الأطفال، لكي يتمكن الناجون والأطفال المعرضون للخطر من الحصول على الدعم الكافي، ومن ثم تتمكن المجتمعات المحلية من التصدي للعنف ضد الأطفال على النحو المناسب.

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