The urgent need to fund Violence Against Children and Youth Surveys

The Problem

1 billion children experience sexual, physical or emotional violence each year.

- Violence against children is a critical public health, social and human rights issue with short- and long-term consequences, including increased risk of HIV, sexually transmitted infections, early pregnancy, and mental health issues, as well as poor educational outcomes and reduced lifetime earnings, repeated exposure and/or perpetration of violence.
- Fortunately, violence against children is preventable and survivors can heal when there is data and evidence to drive action.

The Violence Against Children and Youth Surveys

Violence Against Children and Youth Surveys (VACS) are the world’s most comprehensive source of quality data on violence against children, including sexual, emotional and physical violence and its health, social and educational consequences. The data are proven to be a powerful tool and have been used to mobilize change at the local, national and global levels.

Yet, the future of this resource is in jeopardy.

- VACS are led by national governments and implemented through local multisector partnerships with support from a wide range of partners, including UNICEF and local universities. HHS/CDC/Division of Violence Prevention provides technical assistance and builds in-country capacity for violence research, prevention, and response.
- VACS funding varies year over year. The surveys are primarily funded using U.S. government resources, including funding from PEPFAR and USAID (Carsi and APCCA) budgets; past costs have ranged from $2-3 million per survey.
- The surveys are undertaken with adherence to strict ethical standards that ensure child safeguarding, including the provision of a list of services for all participants and service referrals for those who need it.
- To date, VACS have provided evidence of high levels of violence in 23 countries representing 30% of the world’s children in lower income countries.
- Despite high country demand for data that are the global gold standard for understanding violence against children and youth, funding is unstable, and the survey’s future is at risk.
VACS AND THE DATA TO ACTION MODEL ARE A CATALYST FOR THE MOVEMENT TO END VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

VACS provide the foundation for collaborative efforts to end violence against children.

- The Together for Girls partnership was initially established through U.S. government resources to build on the early VACS and expand data and action. The partnership is now a global leader driving action to end violence against children.
- The Brave Movement, an initiative of Together for Girls, is a growing global network of adult survivors of childhood sexual violence across 40 countries that use VACS data as the foundation for advocacy.
- Recent innovations include piloting VACS in humanitarian settings and the first VACS in a U.S. city.
- 100% of countries report using the VACS data to make positive policy and programmatic changes, including 14 countries that have developed specific multisector national action plans aligned with the evidence-based INSPIRE Framework: Seven Strategies to End Violence Against Children.
- VACS and the associated Data to Action process are fully endorsed by Ministers of Health in East, Central and Southern Africa.
- The first-ever 2024 Global Ministerial on Ending Violence Against Children is the result of momentum catalyzed by VACS data and subsequent advocacy and action.

There is evidence of the effectiveness of the VACS data-to-action model.

- All countries with repeat VACS have shown declines in violence as a result of actions put in place following the first VACS. The prevalence of sexual violence against girls in Eswatini declined from 38% to 6%, and in Kenya declined from 32% to 16%.
- A USAID-commissioned landscape analysis found that 21 countries integrated VACS results into broader child-related policies (e.g., 13 introduced new child safety laws, 10 prohibited physical punishment in schools, and 5 included VACS indicators in national statistics).

THE RISK AND THE OPPORTUNITY

- Because of unstable funding for VACS implementation and technical assistance after 2024, the world risks losing its only reliable source of population-level data on violence against children and a U.S. government investment of over 15 years.
- Advocates are leading efforts to ensure long-term funding for VACS, but short-term funding solutions are essential to maintaining technical assistance from the CDC, ensuring countries have data to guide action, and evolving data collection toward more cost-efficient, locally driven models.

Learn more about the VACS by visiting togetherforgirls.org.