

Interviewing Child Witnesses of Violent Crime

A Bibliography



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Scope

This bibliography contains citations and abstracts to publications about interviewing children who witness violence. This bibliography is not comprehensive. Publications are English language articles and reports.

Organization

Publications are listed in date-descending order.

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Interviewing Child Witnesses of Violent Crime

A Bibliography

Pastrana, F. A., Moreland, A. D., Milman, E. J., Williams, J. L., delMas, S., & Rheingold, A. A. (2022) Interventions for child and adolescent survivors of intrafamilial homicide: A review of the literature. *Death Studies*, *46*(5), 1206-1218. DOI:10.1080/07481187.2020.1805819

The nature of intrafamilial homicide is complex and traumatic. Child survivors are at significant risk for maladjustment, including negative psychological sequela, grief complications, and contextual challenges associated with the homicide. Thus, children may benefit from services addressing specific psychosocial challenges following intrafamilial homicide. In this paper, we review the literature to identify trauma- and grief-informed interventions implemented for youth following violent bereavement. Given limited research on this vulnerable population, we discuss interventions that show promise for child survivors, exploring specific needs, challenges, and potential implications of these interventions for treating children and families experiencing intrafamilial homicide bereavement.

Hu, X., Wu, J., DeValve, M. J., & Fisher, B. S. (2020). Exploring violent crime reporting among school-age victims: Findings from NCVS SCS 2005-2015. *Victims & Offenders*, *15*(2), 141–158. DOI:10.1080/15564886.2019.1705452

Most studies on the reporting of crimes to the police have focused on adult victims. Less is known, however, regarding crime reporting behavior among school-age victims. This paper presents findings from an exploratory study of violent crime reporting decision-making among school-age victims. It used six waves of data from NCVS SCS and thus seeks answers two research questions: 1) what are the major reasons for school-age victims not reporting crimes to the police? 2) What indicators are related to school-age victims' violent crime reporting decision-making? Incorporating variables employed in research on adult victims, the current study found that besides reporting crimes to the police, children frequently reported crimes to school officials, and they often decided to take care of incidents by themselves. Unfamiliarity with an offender was a significant predictor of dealing with crimes *formally* (i.e., reporting crimes to the police or school officials) by children. However, if they have decided to treat crimes formally, offender's age,

offender's sex, and whether they get injured became more important in predicting reporting crimes to the police. Theoretical implications, policy implications, and future research are also discussed.

Peterson, L., Rolls Reutz, J. A., Hazen, A. L., Habib, A., & Williams, R. (2020). Kids and teens in court (KTIC): A model for preparing child witnesses for court. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 65(1/2), 35–43. DOI:10.1002/ajcp.12390

Each year, numerous children testify in the United States in either criminal, civil, or juvenile court cases. Typically, children who testify are alleged victims of sexual or physical abuse or neglect, witnesses to violent crime, or subjects in custodial hearings in civil court. As more maltreatment cases are prosecuted and child custody is contested, an increasing number of children are being called as witnesses in court. Many of these children have already been traumatized by the experiences that led to their need to testify, and participation in the court process can have additional negative effects. This article describes the development and recent formative evaluation of a court preparation program that provides psychoeducation and utilizes components of evidence-based trauma treatment approaches, such as relaxation and in vivo exposure, to support child witnesses and reduce the risk of retraumatization. Children and adolescents participating in the program attend group sessions conducted by mental health clinicians and complete a court-related anxiety measure before and after each session. Results from 175 participants are reported. Findings indicated significant decreases in court-related anxiety with large program effects. Challenges encountered by the program and future directions are discussed.

Larson, R. P., & Cartwright, A. E. (2016). Introduction to this special issue - Research on child victims and witnesses: From attitudes and investigations to courtroom decisions. *Behavioral Sciences & the Law*, 34(1), 3–9. DOI:10.1002/bsl.2241

All too frequently, children are exposed to violence and maltreatment in their homes and communities (Baum, [3]; Finkelhor, Turner, Shattuck, & Hamby, [6]; White & Lauritsen, [33]). National surveys in the U.S. indicate that nearly one-quarter of children aged 2–17 years witnessed at least one violent crime during the previous 12 months, and a similar proportion of individuals will experience child maltreatment within their lifetimes (Finkelhor et al., [6]). Given the high rate of violence exposure during childhood, it is important to understand how children encode, store, and retrieve their memories of violence-related experiences (see Goodman & Melinder, [8], for a review), how violence against children is viewed and handled by community

members and professionals, and how children's testimony is obtained and evaluated in legal contexts.

Katz, C. (2014). The dead end of domestic violence: Spotlight on children's narratives during forensic investigations following domestic homicide. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 38(12), 1976-1984. DOI:10.1016/j.chiabu.2014.05.016

The current study provides an in-depth exploration of the narratives of children who witnessed their father killing their mother. This exploration was conducted using a thematic analysis of the children's forensic interviews based on seven investigative interviews that were conducted with children following the domestic homicide. Investigative interviews were selected for study only for substantiated cases and only if the children disclosed the domestic homicide. All of the investigative interviews were conducted within 24 h of the domestic homicide. Thematic analysis revealed the following four key categories: the domestic homicide as the dead end of domestic violence, what I did when daddy killed mommy, that one time that daddy killed mommy, and mommy will feel better and will go back home. The discussion examines the multiple layers of this phenomenon as revealed in the children's narratives and its consequences for professionals within the legal and clinical contexts.

McWilliams, K., Narr, R., Goodman, G. S., Ruiz, S., & Mendoza, M. (2013). Children's memory for their mother's murder: Accuracy, suggestibility, and resistance to suggestion. *Memory*, 21(5), 591-598. DOI:10.1080/09658211.2013.763983

From its inception, child eyewitness memory research has been guided by dramatic legal cases that turn on the testimony of children. Decades of scientific research reveal that, under many conditions, children can provide veracious accounts of traumatic experiences. Scientific studies also document factors that lead children to make false statements. In this paper we describe a legal case in which children testified about their mother's murder. We discuss factors that may have influenced the accuracy of the children's eyewitness memory. Children's suggestibility and resistance to suggestion are illustrated. Expert testimony, based on scientific research, can aid the trier of fact when children provide crucial evidence in criminal investigations and courtroom trials about tragic events.

Compo, N. S., Gregory, A. H., & Fisher, R. (2012) Interviewing behaviors in police investigators: a field study of a current US sample. *Psychology, Crime & Law*, 18(4), 359-375. DOI:10.1080/1068316X.2010.494604

Considerable research shows that scientifically based interviewing techniques (e.g. the Cognitive Interview) increase the quality and quantity of witness recall compared to typical police interviewing guidelines. In an effort to improve witness evidence, the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) recommended guidelines for conducting witness interviews that follow empirical research (Technical Working Group: Eyewitness Evidence, 1999). These guidelines were distributed to all police departments in the USA in 1999, along with a trainer's manual. The present study is the first to examine whether US police investigators adhere to these nationally published guidelines when interviewing witnesses and victims of crime. A sample of audiotaped real-world witness interviews from 26 South Florida investigators was analyzed. Results indicated that investigators rarely engage in recommended 'positive' interviewing techniques (e.g. rapport building or context reinstatement) while using many 'negative' techniques (e.g. interrupting the witness or using complex questions). Based on the data provided, it appears that national US recommendations on witness interviewing have not been translated into real world interviewing practice by the investigators surveyed. Implications for interviewing policies are discussed.

Eriksson, M., & Näsman, E. (2012). Interviews with children exposed to violence. *Children & Society*, 26(1), 63-73. DOI:10.1111/j.1099-0860.2010.00322.x

The aim of this article is to show how research practices may simultaneously follow principles of children's citizenship rights to participation and principles of protection and support when children exposed to violence are informants. The article focuses upon organisation of interview processes and interactions between adult researchers and child informants in interview encounters. We point to a number of ways in which one may negotiate the tensions between, on the one hand, victimised children's vulnerability and dependence upon adults for protection and support, and on the other these children's agency and rights to participation.

Georgsson, A., & Almqvist, K. (2011). Naming the unmentionable: How children exposed to intimate partner violence articulate their experiences. *Journal of Family Violence, 26*(2), 117-129. DOI:10.1007/s10896-010-9349-x

Witnessing intimate partner violence (IPV) is a frightening experience that affects children's development and well-being. This study examines experiences of IPV from the perspective of children. Interviews with 14 children between 8 and 12 years of age were analyzed using a thematic method. Three main themes were identified: how children talked about abuse of their mother, described their own actions, and related to or handled memories of violence. Most children confirmed that their mother had been the victim of abuse, but had difficulties describing these experiences. Narratives were often incoherent and difficult to fully understand. In contrast, most of the children seemed to find it easier to describe their own actions during violence and conflicts. Not thinking about IPV was a strategy that aimed at reducing unwanted memories; it is also a strategy that may obstruct creating a narrative.

Powell, M. B., Wright, R., & Clark, S. (2010). Improving the competency of police officers in conducting investigative interviews with children. *Police Practice and Research, 11*(3), 211-226. DOI:10.1080/15614260902830070

Despite the provision of 'best-practice' guidelines regarding conducting interviews with children, research indicates that most investigative interviews do not adhere to these guidelines. To date, there has been little discussion in the literature of the conditions that are needed to promote and sustain expertise in forensic interviewing. The current paper addresses this limitation by describing the main factors preventing the adoption of 'best practice' interview guidelines. A description of these barriers (and the literature that supports them) forms the basis for the review component of this paper as well as the subsequent recommendations for change.

Dando, C., Wilcock, R., Milne, R., & Henry, L. (2009). A modified cognitive interview procedure for frontline police investigators. *Applied Cognitive Psychology, 23*(5), 698-716. DOI:10.1002/acp.1501

The current investigative interviewing model for police officers in England and Wales recommends the use of the cognitive interview (CI). However, there is much to suggest that police officers do not regularly fully apply the procedure and that when they do, it is often poorly applied. Research has indicated that this is particularly the case with non-specialist police investigators who believe the CI is too cumbersome, complex and time consuming for the types of witness interviews

they conduct. With this in mind the present study investigated a CI procedure that had been substantially modified in an attempt to enhance its forensic practicability while retaining the demonstrated superiority of the CI. Employing the mock witness paradigm, the modified procedure was compared to both the current CI model and a structured interview (SI). Results revealed that the modified CI was more effective than the SI, while being as effective as the current CI, despite being significantly shorter in duration and, we argue, less demanding for the interviewer. Hence, the proposed modified CI may well be an effective practical alternative for frontline investigators.

State of Washington, 61st legislature. (2009). House Bill 2304. AN ACT Relating to child victims and witnesses; and amending RCW 7.69A.030.
<http://www.leg.wa.gov/pub/BillInfo/200910/Pdf/Bills/House%20Bills/2304.pdf>

Dando, C., Wilcock, R., & Milne, R. (2008). The cognitive interview: Inexperienced police officers' perceptions of their witness/victim interviewing practices. *Legal and Criminological Psychology, 13*(1), 59-70. DOI:10.1348/135532506X162498

The primary objectives of the study reported here were twofold. First, to investigate less experienced frontline police officers' perceptions of their witness interviewing practices with specific reference to their use of the ten cognitive interview components taught during initial PEACE (a mnemonic for the stages of the interview; Planning and preparation, Engage and explain, Account, Closure and Evaluation) interview training. Second, to investigate this group of officers' practical experiences of interviewing witnesses. Method. A sample of 221 young, in-service, non-specialist police officers from five UK police forces completed a self-report questionnaire concerning their perceived witness interviewing practices. Respondents were surveyed about their use of the PEACE cognitive interview components, their practical experiences of interviewing witnesses and victims, and their views on investigative interviewing training. Results. There was a consensus among these officers that they perceived using some of the PEACE cognitive interview components more frequently and perceived some of them to be more effective than others. Conclusion. This study provides a unique insight into the perceived interviewing practices of some of the least experienced and the least trained investigative interviewers who conduct the majority of frontline witness interviews. These officers report feeling

inadequately trained, under pressure and generally ill equipped to conduct a PEACE cognitive interview.

Goodman, G. S., & Melinder, A. (2007). Child witness research and forensic interviews of young children: A review. *Legal & Criminological Psychology*, 21(1), 1-19.
DOI:10.1348/135532506X156620

In this article, we provide an introduction to child eyewitness memory issues that are frequently discussed and debated, both within the research and practice communities. We review several of the central areas of research on child eyewitness memory and some of the most promising protocols aimed at standardizing and improving child forensic interviews. We focus primarily on memory in young children, because they pose particular challenges. Research on the use of props and external cues to prompt young children's memory is discussed. We also review research on professionals' knowledge and attitudes about children as witnesses. It is concluded that we must guard against overly negative or overly optimistic views of children's abilities.

Wright, R., Powell, M. B., & Ridge, D. (2007). What criteria do police officers use to measure the success of an interview with a child? *Psychology, Crime & Law*, 13(4), 395-404.
DOI:10.1080/10683160601060754

This study used a mixed-methods approach to explore the perceptions of a heterogeneous sample of 75 police interviewers regarding their performance in a mock interview with a 5-7-year-old child. Each officer recruited for this study was authorized to conduct investigative interviews with children. Specifically, we explored how the officers' perception of what makes a good interview differs depending on their background experience and their (perceived and actual) ability to adhere to best-practice interview guidelines. Overall, the officers' perceptions of what constitutes an effective interview were not entirely consistent with those held by experts in forensic interviewing. The majority of the interviewers perceived that the locus of control in the interview rested primarily with the child and/or the environmental setting. In contrast, experts tend to place the central onus of responsibility for the outcome of an interview on the skill of the interviewer in using open-ended questions. Several possible explanations for, and the implications of, these findings are discussed.

Faller, K. C. (2003). Research and practice in child interviewing: Implications for children exposed to domestic violence. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 18*(4), 377-389.
DOI:10.1177/0886260502250839

Recent research documents the comorbidity of child maltreatment and domestic violence as well as the detrimental impact of exposure to domestic violence on children. Domestic violence and child interviewing also share the distinction of being contested social issues. This article argues that methods employed in interviewing children about child maltreatment can be applied to interviewing children about exposure to domestic violence. The article describes how cognitive interviewing, narrative elaboration, and event segmentation can be employed when talking to children about domestic violence. In addition, the article discusses how focused questions related to child maltreatment and child endangerment can be used to elicit information from children about domestic violence.

Aldridge, J., & Cameron, S. (1999). Interviewing child witnesses: Questioning techniques and the role of training. *Applied Developmental Science, 3*(2), 136-147.
DOI:10.1207/s1532480xads0302_7

This study evaluated the effect of a 1-week intensive training course on police and social worker forensic interviewing with children and investigated the actual types of questions employed by interviewers. Analysis of videotaped interviews was used to compare trained and untrained interviewers on a series of rating scales designed to assess interviewer performance. The number of requests for free reports and the number of open, specific, leading, and nonleading questions used were obtained. The study found no differences in performance between trained and untrained interviewers on any rated behaviors with both groups rating poorly.

Breaking the Cycle of Violence: Recommendations to Improve the Criminal Justice Response to Child Victims and Witnesses, OVC, June 1999, NCJ 176983. Retrieved from <http://www.ovc.gov/publications/factsheets/pdf/monograph.pdf>

Goodman, G. S., Quas, J. A., Bulkley, J., & Shapiro, C. (1999). Innovations for child witnesses: A national survey. *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law, 5*(2), 255-281.
DOI:10.1037/1076-8971.5.2.255

Numerous innovative procedural reforms have been proposed concerning child victims involved in legal cases. In this study, 153 district attorney offices nationwide were surveyed about their use

of innovations, their perceptions of the innovations' effectiveness, reasons why they opt not to utilize innovations, and defense strategies used with child witnesses. Prosecutors were also asked about the type of cases they encountered in which children testified. Prosecutors reported mainly using inexpensive, easy-to-implement innovations, which were also typically rated as helpful in reducing children's trauma and enhancing guilty outcomes. Prosecutors reported rarely using expert witnesses and innovations that altered how children were interviewed or how they testified. The most common types of cases in which children testified involved sexual abuse. Frequent defense strategies to challenge child credibility concerned suggestibility, inaccurate memory, coaching, and delays in reporting abuse. Results are discussed in relation to the need for increased social science research on procedural reforms for child witnesses.

Fisher, R. P. (1995). Interviewing victims and witnesses of crime. *Psychology, Public Policy and Law*, 1(4), 732-764. DOI:10.1037/1076-8971.1.4.732

Despite the importance of eyewitness information in criminal investigation, police receive inadequate training to interview cooperative witnesses. They make avoidable mistakes that minimize the amount of eyewitness information elicited and contribute to inaccurate recollections. Interviewing techniques derived from laboratory research are provided to facilitate eyewitness recall. The effectiveness of these techniques is examined in laboratory and field research on a novel interviewing procedure (Cognitive Interview). Recommendations are made to improve the quality of interview training, to assign police personnel to the role of investigative interviewer, and to make psychological research more relevant for the legal system.

Richters, J. E., & Martinez, P. (1993). The NIMH community violence project: Children as victims and witnesses to violence. *Psychiatry*. 56(2), 7-22.
DOI:10.1080/00332747.1993.11024617

THE 1980s WITNESSED an extraordinary increase in community violence in most major cities across the United States. In 1990 the homicide rate in Boston increased by 45% over the previous year; in Denver, by 29%; in Chicago, Dallas, and New Orleans, by more than 20%; in Los Angeles, by 16%; in New York, by 11 %. In Washington, DC, which has the highest per capita homicide rate in the country, the 1990 murder rate set an all time record in the District's history (Escobar 1991). Across the country, 1 out of 5 teenage and young adult deaths was gun related in 1988 -the first year in which firearm death rates for both Black and White teenagers exceeded the total for

all natural causes of death combined. Also in 1988, the firearm homicide rate for young Black males increased by 35%, and Black male teens were 11 times more likely than their White counterparts to be killed by guns (Christofel 1990).

Pynoos, R. S., & Spencer, E. (1986). Witness to violence: The child interview. *Journal of the American Academy of Child Psychiatry*, 25(3), 306-319.
DOI:10.1016/S00027138(09)60252-1

In this paper, we present a widely applicable technique of interviewing the traumatized child who has recently witnessed an extreme act of violence. This technique has been used with over 200 children in a variety of clinical settings including homicide, suicide, rape, aggravated assault, accidental death, kidnapping, school and community violence. The easily learned, three-stage approach allows for proper exploration, support and closure within a 90-minute initial interview. The format proceeds from a projective drawing and storytelling, to discussion of the actual traumatic situation and the perceptual impact, to issues centered on the aftermath and its consequences for the child. Our interview format is conceptualized as an acute consultation service available to assist the child, the child's family, and the larger social network in functioning more effectively following the child's psychic trauma.