



WP3 FIELD SURVEY REPORT

BALKAN EPIDEMIOLOGICAL STUDY ON CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT
FP7 RESEARCH [HEALTH-F2-2009-223478]

BECAN Epidemiological Survey on Child Abuse and Neglect (CAN) in Drop Out of School Children in BULGARIA

**Stefka Chincheva,
Vaska Stancheva-Popkostadinova**

INTRODUCTION

The Project “Balkan Epidemiological Study on Child Abuse and Neglect” (B.E.C.A.N.) run from September 2009 until January 2013 in 9 Balkan countries and was co-funded by the EU’s 7th Framework Programme for Research and Innovation (FP7/2007-2013)¹ and the participating partner Organizations. The project’s coordinator was the Institute of Child Health, Department of Mental Health and Social Welfare, Centre for the Study and Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (ICH-MHSW), in Athens (Greece), while the national coordinators for each of the participating countries were the following Organizations:

- Children's Human Rights Centre of Albania (Albania)

¹ Grant Agreement No: HEALTH-F2-2009-223478.

- Department of Medical Social Sciences, South-West University "Neofit Rilski" (Bulgaria)
- Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Sarajevo (Bosnia & Herzegovina)
- Department of Social Work, Faculty of Law, University of Zagreb (Croatia)
- University Clinic of Psychiatry, University of Skopje (F.Y.R. of Macedonia)
- Social Work Department, Faculty of Sociology and Social Work, Babes-Bolyai University (Romania)
- Faculty for Special Education and Rehabilitation, University of Belgrade (Serbia)
- Association of Emergency Ambulance Physicians (Turkey)

The project's evaluation was conducted by Istituto degli Innocenti (Italy) and the project's external scientific supervision was undertaken by Prof. Kevin Browne, Head of the W.H.O. Collaborating Centre for Child Care and Protection (United Kingdom) and Chair of Forensic Psychology and Child Health, Institute of Work, Health & Organisations, University of Nottingham.

The BECAN project included the design and realization of an **Epidemiological field survey** and a **Case-Based Surveillance study** in 9 Balkan countries (Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, F.Y.R. of Macedonia, Greece, Romania, Serbia and Turkey).

The 9 Epidemiological Surveys that were conducted aimed at investigating the prevalence and incidence of child abuse and neglect (CAN) in representative randomized samples of the general population of pupils attending three grades (the grades attended mainly by children 11, 13 and 16 year-olds). In addition, supplementary surveys were conducted to convenience samples of children that have dropped-out of school in countries where the drop-out rates are high for producing estimates of respectful CAN indicators at national level. Data were collected by two sources, namely by matched pairs of children and their parents, by using two of the ICAST Questionnaires (the ICAST-CH and the ICAST-P) modified for the purposes of the BECAN project.

The Case-Based Surveillance Study (CBSS) aimed at identifying CAN incidence rates based on already existing data extracted from the archives of agencies involved in the handling of CAN cases (such as child protection, health, judicial and police-services and NGOs) in the same geographical areas and for the same time period as the epidemiological field survey. The collected data were related to the characteristics of individual cases such as child, incident, perpetrator(s), caregiver(s), and information concerning the family. At the same time, the CBSS targeted to map the existing surveillance mechanisms, where available, and to outline the characteristics of the surveillance practices in each participating country. Moreover, comparison at national level between inductance rates of CAN as found in field survey in one hand and in case based surveillance study on the other would produce evidence based estimates of the instantiation of the “iceberg” phenomenon regarding CAN, viz. that actual rates of the phenomenon are substantially higher than the number of cases actually known or provided for by services in the participant countries.

In addition, in the context of the BECAN Project were built National Networks of agencies (governmental and non-governmental) working in the fields of child protection from the areas of welfare, health, justice, education and public order. In total, 9 National Networks were developed in the participating countries, having more than 430 agencies-members. Last but not least, a wide range of dissemination activities were conducted which included the organization of National Conferences and one International Conference, scientific papers, announcements to scientific conferences and meetings, publications in press/media, publication of Reports, etc. (more information about the project’s activities can be found at the project’s website: www.becan.eu).

Finally, BECAN aimed to include all aforementioned outcomes in terms of evidence produced, experience gained and networking of resources into comprehensive consolidated reports at national and Balkan level that could facilitate evidence based social policy design and implementation for improving child protection services and overall provisos.

The current Report describes in detail the methodology and the main results of the survey conducted in Bulgaria to a convenience sample of children who have dropped-out of school and their parents.

A. GENERAL INFORMATION

The study was conducted in the periods May-July 2011, and March-December 2012.

The research team from South-West University “Neofit Rilski”, Blagoevgrad consisted by Stefka Chincheva (Coordinator of the Study with drop-out children and their parents), Viktoriya Sotirova (psychologist), Natasha Virmozelova (psychologist).

The data entry was conducted by students from the Department of Medical-Social Sciences of South-West University “Neofit Rilski”, Blagoevgrad.

B. ORGANIZATION OF THE STUDY

1. Permission(s) to access children dropped-out of school

The preliminary preparation for the interviewing of the school drop-outs required the written consent of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Science and the Child protection agency. There followed meetings with the heads of the Regional Inspectorate of Education and the Child Protection Department. They were our collaborators in informing the school directors in the region about the study. They also provided us with the lists of school dropouts and their addresses.

2. Field Researchers' Training

The researchers were trained during the training of the researchers for epidemiological study.

The training was held at University Center Bachinovo, 7-8 October 2010. Trainers were V.Stancheva-Popkostadinova, St. Chincheva, Ek.Mitova, who were trained in Tirana, 2010.

Content of the training included: presentation of the project BECAN and ICAST-questionnaires; methodology and procedure for the epidemiological study, self-administered ICAST-CH, ICAST-P, structured –interviews with ICAST-CH, ICAST-P, standardized answers of possible questions. The stress was given on ethical issues. Pre and post Evaluation. Follow-up tasks was given to the researchers.

All the participants were satisfied with the provided training.

At the last session the Coordinator for the study with drop-out children was appointed: Stefka Chincheva, SWU “Neofit Rilski”, Department of Medical-Social Sciences for Blagoevgrad region.

Organization of Survey

The study was conducted in two periods: May-July 2011, and March-December 2012 only in Blagoevgrad region. We were faced many difficulties in the organization of the study with drop-of children. Many of the children were difficult to be reached, and we decided to conduct the study only in Blagoevgrad region.

C. METHODOLOGY

1. Sampling Method – Sample

The small sample of drop-out of school children was assigned, due to the serious problems in their identification. The sample includes only children and parents from Blagoevgrad region. Total sample includes 21 pupils, drop out of school and 4 parents.

3. Research Tools

The ICAST-C and ICAST-P questionnaires have been developed by the International Society of the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (ISPCAN) in collaboration with the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF).

The ICAST questionnaires developed for and are being used in the UN Study on Violence against Children, namely the ICAST-P addressing parents and the ICAST-CH addressing children, can be used in epidemiological studies. South-West University “Neofit Rilski”, Blagoevgrad obtaining the rights to use the questionnaires from ISPCAN, as well as for their translation and cultural validation. Moreover, a Training Manual developed to be used during the training research teams in conducting epidemiological survey using the ICAST tools and to be distributed to the researchers. The Manual is based on the basic principles of the ICAST Manuals, but it also covers in every details all of the issues related to the methodology, the sampling, the administration of the questionnaires, ethical issues and coding of the data.

The ICAST-P and ICAST-CH questionnaires translated and validated in Bulgarian as

well as the Training Manual (in all languages of participated countries in BECAN project) are available at <http://www.becan.eu/node/25>.

After the translation ICAST-C and ICAST-P were slightly modified and culturally validated via focus groups with children (11, 13 and 16 years old children attending schools, and their parents.

Both instruments were pilot tested prior to the survey in a **focus group** with children that had dropped-out of school.

FOCUS GROUP WITH DROP-OUT CHILDREN – MARCH, 2010

The social workers and the psychologist from the Child protection Department played a significant role in the process of attracting participants to the group of students who dropped out of school, **mainly Roma children**. The social workers notified the parents whose children fall into the group of school dropouts. The social workers helped us receive the declarations of consent for the children to be interviewed as well as the parents' consent to send/bring them in order to take part in the study.

The focus group was held with 6 children who dropped out of school – 5 boys and 1 girl. All school dropouts were Roma children. Four of them had the ability to read and write and filled in the questionnaires by themselves without asking for further clarifications. They answered all of the questions. However, they answered with both “yes” and “no” one of the questions. They answered most of them with either “yes” or “no” but they didn't add any further information.

It is important to note that we had to read the questions one by one to two of the children (11 and 13 years old) and clarify most of them. They showed signs of being tired too early. Only 2-3 children were speaking during the discussion.

4. Data Collection & Fieldwork process

In order to conduct this survey in Bulgaria it was necessary to **obtain the permission** by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Science to access schools in order to obtain the contact details of children that have been dropped-out of school.

After obtainment of official permission, an **information letter** was sent by the National Coordinator to the Directors of Regional inspectorates of education and/or to the School Principals (which are selected to be included in the sample) in order to be informed about the survey that will be conducted at their school.

The local coordinator communicated with the Directors of Regional Inspectorates and Schools (by phone and personal meetings) in order to obtain information about the number of classrooms of the selected grade in each selected school, and to make a schedule for the survey.

Data collection - step by step:

1. A letter to the Regional Inspectorate of Education - Blagoevgrad was sent asking for permission and assistance
2. A letter to the Child Protection Department - Blagoevgrad was sent asking for permission and assistance
3. After the consent for collaborative work was given, a meeting with the psychologist and CPD social workers was held to organize the conducting of the study.
4. Having the list given by the Regional Inspectorate of Education in advance, the social workers personally informed the families of children dropped out of school for the upcoming event.
5. The focus group study was conducted in a room, provided by the Municipality of Blagoevgrad.
6. With the main study's group the interviews took place in the homes of the children dropped out of school with two field researchers who are part of the project team together with a social worker from CPD.
7. Before the interview, the parents were required to sign the informed consent form. All parents allowed interviews with their children.

8. In the main study a structured interview was used, due to the fact that both the children and their parents experienced difficulties with the reading of the questionnaire texts.

5. Ethical considerations related to the fieldwork process

The parents and their children, participated in the survey were informed for their right to decline to participate and to withdraw to participate in the study in the information letter (for parents), and in the presentation of the research to the children, before the beginning of the study.

In the information letter was provided addresses and telephones of national and regional coordinators, as well as the contact details for Child Protection Department in the respected municipality.

The research team and the members conducting field studies are familiar with the interagency approach to working introduced, the requirement for working in a multidisciplinary team at every case of violence, as well as with the algorithm for each specific case, which should be followed.

It has been prepared a Declaration form for all who have access to data and information concerning the study. They are obliged to comply with the legislation, ethical and professional standards for working with personal data and official information. By signing the form they declare that they bear criminal liability if they disseminate or take advantage of the data and information they have access to.

Safety of the participants (but also of the research team) is of major importance in studies investigating sensitive issues, like abuse.

The safety plan was develop and introduced to each pair of the researchers. to be able to appropriately respond to any danger that they will face during the survey; at the same time, though, we were extremely careful in order not to frighten our researchers by leading them to believe that they will for sure be exposed in (great) danger.

D. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Drop-out of school child refers to a student quitting school before s/he became 16 years old, without continuing his/her education at another school.

The recent statistical sources sometimes differ significantly. According to some of them, drop-out of the education system affects 2% of the students. Others claim that about 3% of the students are affected, which is equal to about 20,000 - 30,000 cases of dropping out of school each year.

The problem of drop-outs is most serious among Roma children. This problem exists with the other ethnic groups (the Bulgarian and the Turkish one), as well, but its scale is not that large as it is the case with the Roma children.

According to a sociological study of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Science and UNICEF (2009), the largest proportion of students dropped out of school due to social problems or problems connected with their families. A large number of students dropped out of school because of their unwillingness to study or had absences from class.

The field survey with drop out of school children was conducted only in the region of Blagoevgrad. Criteria for including in the study were: children aged 11-16 years old, who are drop-out of school.

We were provided with the information about the dropouts by the Regional Inspectorate of Education for the region of Blagoevgrad. For the period of the study – 35 students dropped out of school. They are from Blagoevgrad, Petrich and Parvomay . Four of the children in the Blagoevgrad list of school dropouts are under the age of 10. We couldn't find the rest of the other children (10) at the stated place of living – probably they changed it or went abroad.

Twenty one children from Petrich and Blagoevgrad were interviewed. Four of them are Bulgarians, the rest are Roma children. The study was conducted in the towns of Balgovevgrad and Petrich in the period May-July 2011 and March-December 2012.

The social workers from the Departments of Child Protection supported communication with the parents and their drop-out of school children.

With all participants were conducted structured interviews. A quiet place for conducting the interview was provided at the home of each family.

Socio-demographic characteristic of the sample

The number of boys and girls participating in the research is approximately equal. Separation by sex and age is presented in Table No. 2. Seven children are from the town of Petrich and the rest from Blagoevgrad. The number of boys and girls participating in the research is approximately equal. They live in urban areas, have Bulgarian nationality, belong to the Roma ethnic group and their religion is Orthodox Christianity. The majority of children live with their parents (fathers and mothers).

Table.1. Sociodemographic characteristics of drop-out of school children, participated in the study (N=21)

		11 year old	13-14 year old	15 year old	Total
Child's Gender	Boys	1	9	1	11
	Girls	2	8	-	10
City	Petrich	-	7	1	8
	Blagoevgrad	3	10	-	13
	Parents	1	3	-	4

The parents of eleven children have a legal marriage, six live without marriage, four are divorced, and in one of the family the father is dead. In 15 of the families, at home live not only the parents and the children, but also their grandmothers and grandfathers.

The parents have low educational status. In only two cases the mother and the father have completed secondary education. Seven parents (five mothers and two fathers) have no education. The majority part of the parents (14 mothers and 10 fathers) have only primary education.

Experience of violence

According to the children dropped out of school in the research the most frequent form of violence is psychological violence. Results, presented in the table No.2 shows the most common behaviors within the psychological violence, which the child survives.

The children did not want to mention the specific perpetrator, they limited their answers only to define him/her by gender and age. They most often mentioned old man and old woman, probably in the closest circle of children.

In the majority of children the behaviors related to psychological violence were repeated often.

Table 2. Division of most frequent positive answers of the items in Psychological Violence

	Item	N (%)
18A.	Shouted, yelled, or screamed at you very loud and aggressively?	17 (81 %)
20A.	Ashamed or embarrassed you intentionally in front of other people in a way that made you feel very bad or humiliated?	6 (28.6%)
19A.	Insulted you by calling you dumb, lazy or other names like that?	5 (23.8%)
24A.	Threatened to invoke ghosts or evil spirits, or harmful people against you?	5 (23.8%)
21A.	Said that they wished you were dead or had never been born?	4 (19%)

In terms of physical abuse, related behaviors mostly involve kicking, pushing, pinching, grabbing, hitting, hair pulling (Table No. 3). Some behaviors were much exercised many times. Unfortunately in Bulgaria is still believed that hitting a child is not violence - it is difficult to convince the parents that their methods of education are incorrect and lead to violations of children's rights.

Some behaviors were practiced repeatedly (32.1, 33A, 33C). One of the children said that his uncle tied him with a chain when he failed to fulfill his orders, and his grandfather pulled his ears. The child does not want to talk about it more.

Table 3. Division of most frequent positive answers of the items in Physical Violence

	Item	N (%)
32A.	Pushed or kicked you?	10 (47,6%)
38C.	Pinched you roughly?	10 (47,6%)
32.1.	Grabbed you by your clothes or some part of your body and shook you?	8 (38,1%)
33A.	Slapped you?	7 (33,3%)
33C.	Spanked you on the bottom with bare hand?	7 (33,3%)
33B.	Hit you on head with knuckle or back of the hand?	5 (23,8%)
38B.	Pulled your hair?	5 (23,8%)
34A.	Intentionally burned or scalded you?	4 (19%)

With regard to sexual abuse, three children (two boys and a girl) said that they were upset and felt bad when men (an old and young one) talked them about sex (Table No. 5).

In addition to the facts, the children did not want to talk more on this topic.

Information on whom to turn if they need help was given to them.

Table 4. Division of most frequent positive answers of the items in Sexual Violence

	Item	N (%)
41.	Made you upset by speaking to you in a sexual way or writing sexual things about you?	3 (14,3%)
43.	Made you look at their private parts or wanted to look at yours?	1 (4,8%)

Some of the children (6, 28.6%) reported that the care taking of them was not well. Regarding the methods of discipline and punishment used by the parents, children reported as most frequently used: awards, bans and orders (Table No. 5)

Table 5. Division of most frequent positive answers of the items in Positive & Non violent Parenting

	Item	N (%)
19.5.	Gave you an award for behaving well?	21 (100%)
19.3.	Told you to start or stop doing something (e.g. start doing your homework or stop watching TV)?	20 (95,2%)
19.9.	Forbade you to go out?	15 (71,43%)
19.8.	Forbade you something that you liked?	14 (66,7%)

All interviewed children said they feel safe in their family and that they like to live in it.

However, three of the children (85.7%) reported that they were threatened in their home by adults who have used alcohol, and five of the children (76.2%) were witnessed serious quarrels at home which seriously scared and worried them.

Due to the small number of children dropped out of school in the research it is not correct to draw conclusions based on their answers about experienced violence.

F. FACILITATORS AND BARRIERS

The excellent communication and support from Regional Inspectorates for Education, school masters, school teachers and school psychologists, pedagogical advisers, as well as Departments for Child Protection were main factors that facilitated the implementation of the survey at national and regional levels.

The other supportive factor was the expertise and qualification of the researchers. All of them were from helping professions and had experience in research with children.

The difficulties we encountered during the study with drop –out of school children were follow:

1. Absence of children and parents at the address specified (change of residence, abroad).
2. Difficult communication with some of the children and their parents.
3. Refusal of parents to give their consent for the interviews (2 parents)

4. Refusal on the part of the children (3 of them) to answer all the questions asked.
5. The questionnaires were too detailed and long, and a few of the children and their parents didn't understand part of the questions.
6. The low educational level and suspicion of part of the parents.

G. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

According to "Eurostat" in 2009 in Bulgaria, the percentage of early school leavers aged 18-24 was 14.7% in average for the EU27 -14.4%, and in 2010 was 13.9% for Bulgaria in average EU27 - 14.1%.

It is reported that although the percentage of children dropouts in the country is below the EU average it is still remains a serious problem with the high share of non-enrollment and dropout from basic education to children of Roma origin.

The school is considered not to support the model of socialization in the children - Roma dropped out of school, most probably due to preservation of traditional lifestyles and values of Roma ethnic.

Ethnic and cultural specificity of the Roma community as a reason for dropping out of school is associated with early marriage for girls (in the case of the two girls in Petrich), traditionally stopped attending school at about 12-13 years old. Another ethno cultural reason for dropout out of the educational system of the Roma children is their believe that school success and education are not attractive because they are not related to immediate practical use. One part of the parents of Roma origin think that their children do not need education, they do not benefit from education, or that the educational process in school is very difficult.

Monitoring and collection of information about the problem of school dropouts is not sufficiently coordinated. A large amount of data and information has been collected by the Ministry of Education, National Statistical Institute and State Agency for Child Protection, but is not efficiently used because differences in criteria systems (definitions of dropout, definitions of reasons and others). There is no system for evaluating the effectiveness of various measures, for lack of a system for exchanging data between the three institutions, which may be the subject of a new research.

The research of the abuse of child and the experience of parents in education and

childcare is crucial to provide information on the preparation of programs for prevention and intervention in children, based on scientific evidence.

For new surveys for dropouts we recommend using shorter questionnaires and clearly defined questions. For greater efficiency social mediators from the Roma ethnic group are better to be trained and used as interviewers. We propose this kind of research to be regularly conducted, but with a shortened version of the questionnaires.

H. REFERENCES

1. Reasons for children dropping out of school. Vitosha Research. S., 2006
2. Progress towards the Lisbon objectives in education and training. Commission of the European Communities. Brussels, 2006
3. Reasons for children dropping out of school. Analysis of the survey results, Ministry of Education, Youth and Science, UNICEF, Vitosha Research, (2009)