Advancing the measurement of violence against children in schools: Evidence from Malawi

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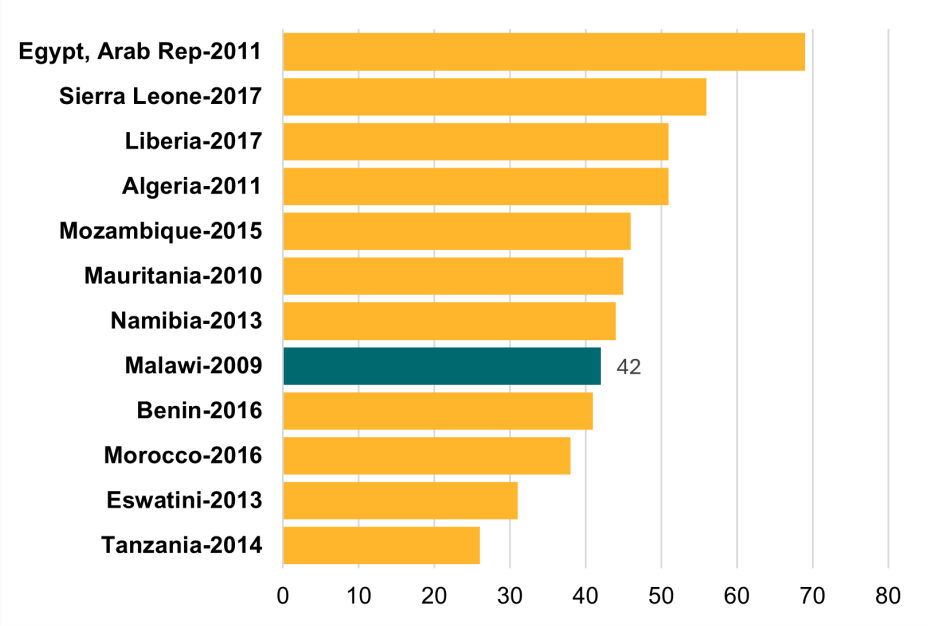
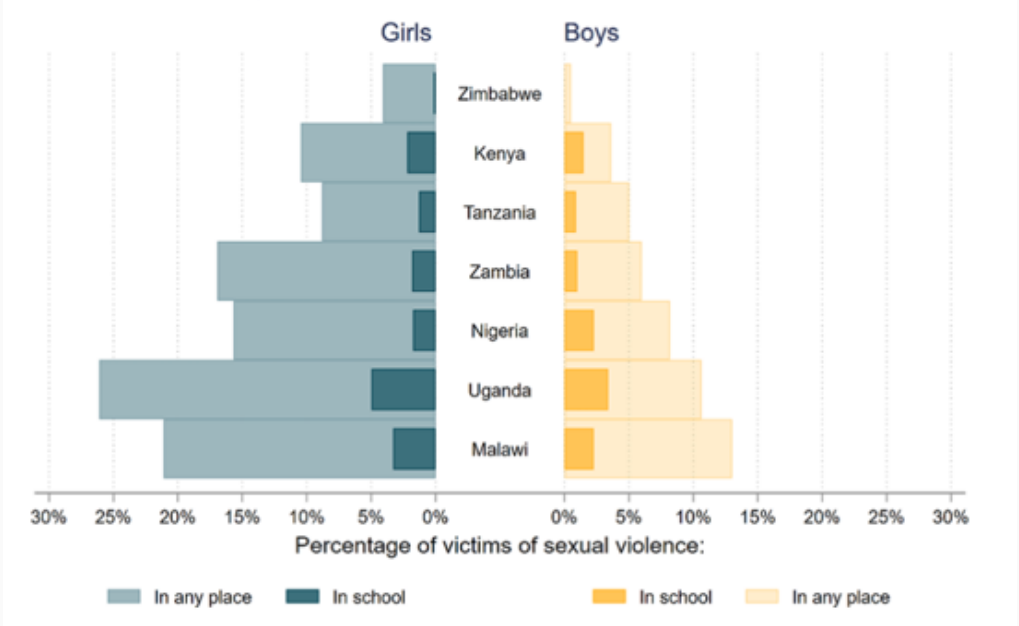
High levels of school-related violence among adolescents, but no data about the prevalence of violence among young children

Figure 1: Bullying by Peers



Survey: Global School Health Survey
Survey mode: Self-administered Survey
Location: School
Ages: 11-16

Figure 2: Sexual Violence



Survey: Violence Against Children Survey
Survey mode: Face to Face Survey
Location: Home
Age: 13-17

Several international surveys collect data on violence against children using different survey methods and in different locations

Surveys	Administration mode	Location	Age	Bullying	Corporal Punishment	Sexual Violence
DHS	Face to Face	Home	15 to 49 (female only)		✓	✓
MICS	Face to Face	Home	15 to 49 (caretakers)		✓	
VACS	Face to Face	Home	13 to 24		✓	✓
GSHS	Self-administered	School	11 to 16	✓		
PISA / ERCE / TIMSS / PIRLS	Self-administered	School	15 / 9-12 / 10-14 / 10	✓		

The measurement challenge

- Self-reported data suffers from misreporting. Driven by:
  - Fears of breaches to privacy, retaliation, stigma and embarrassment (*Cortes and Kochenderfer-Ladd 2014; Barr et al, 2017; Peterman et al, 2023*).
  - Misunderstanding questions and/or lack of attention (*Barr et al, 2017*).

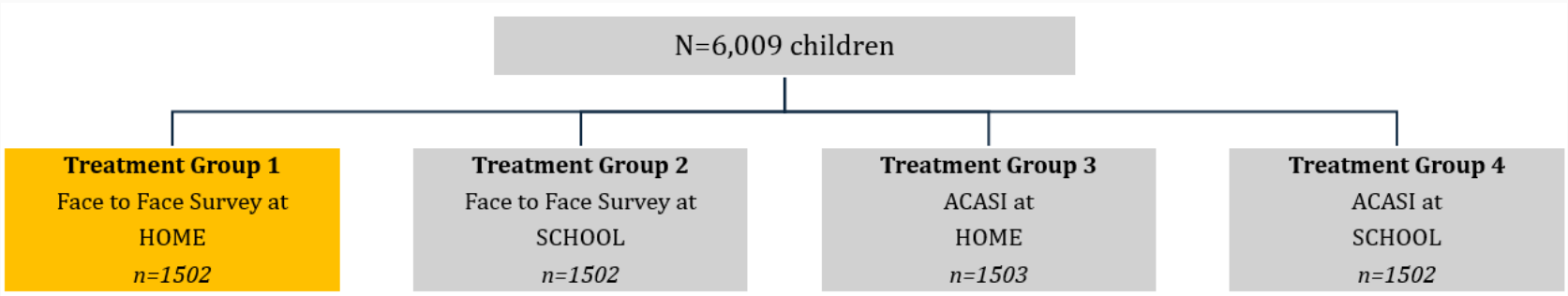
- Improving measurement is crucial:
  - Misreporting can lead to inaccurate conclusions about the size of the problem and the effectiveness of interventions aimed at preventing violence *(Blattman et al, 2016; Frisancho and Aguero, 2022; Cullen, 2023; von Russdorf et al, 2024)*.

This paper

Aim: Identify which survey methods yield more reliable measures of bullying, corporal punishment and sexual violence, among children aged 8 to 12 years old.

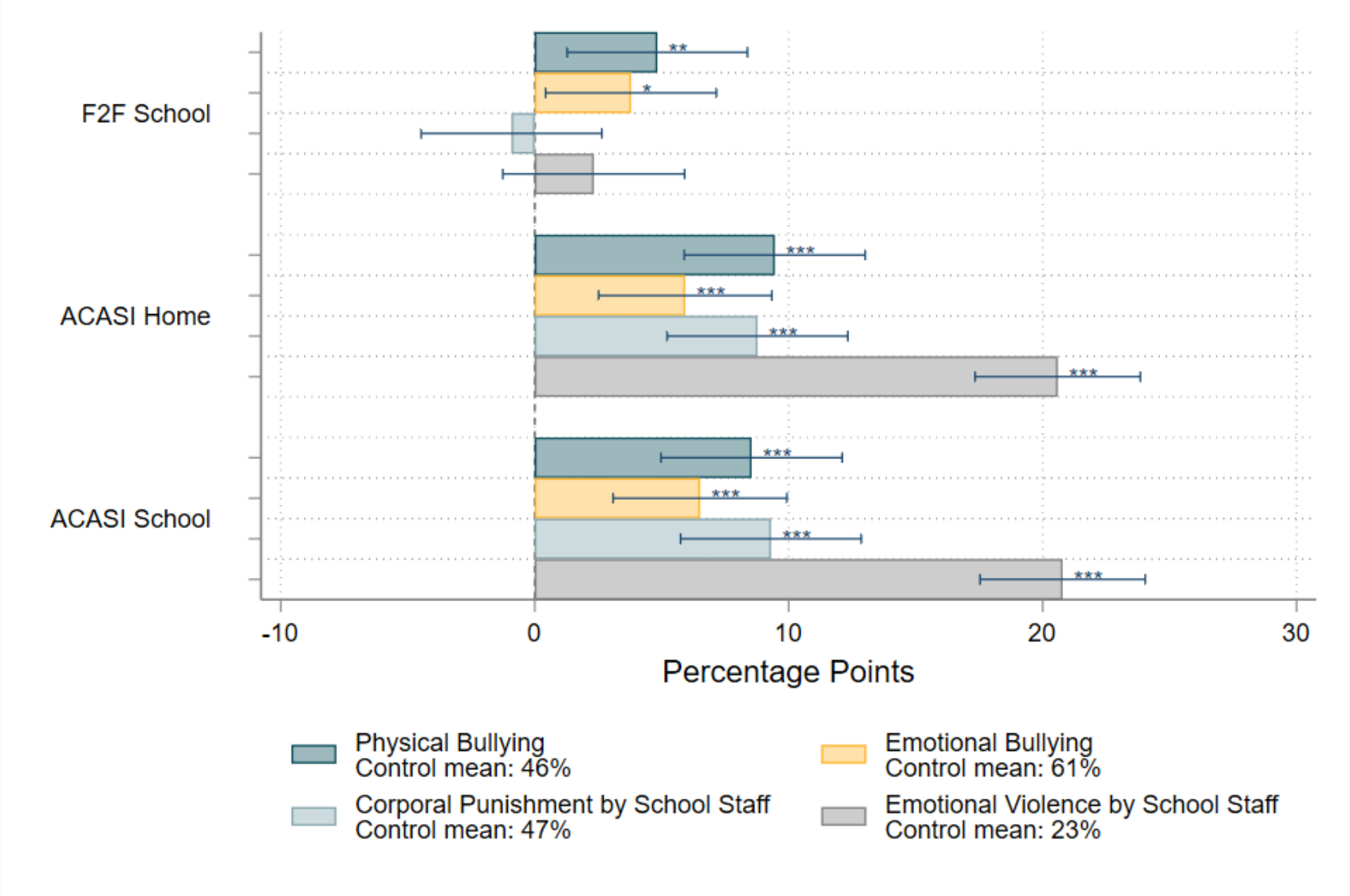
How? Individual level survey experiment with 4 treatment arms, where we vary:

- Data collection method: face-to-face (F2F) and audio computer-assisted self-interviewing (ACASI).
- Location of the survey: home and school.



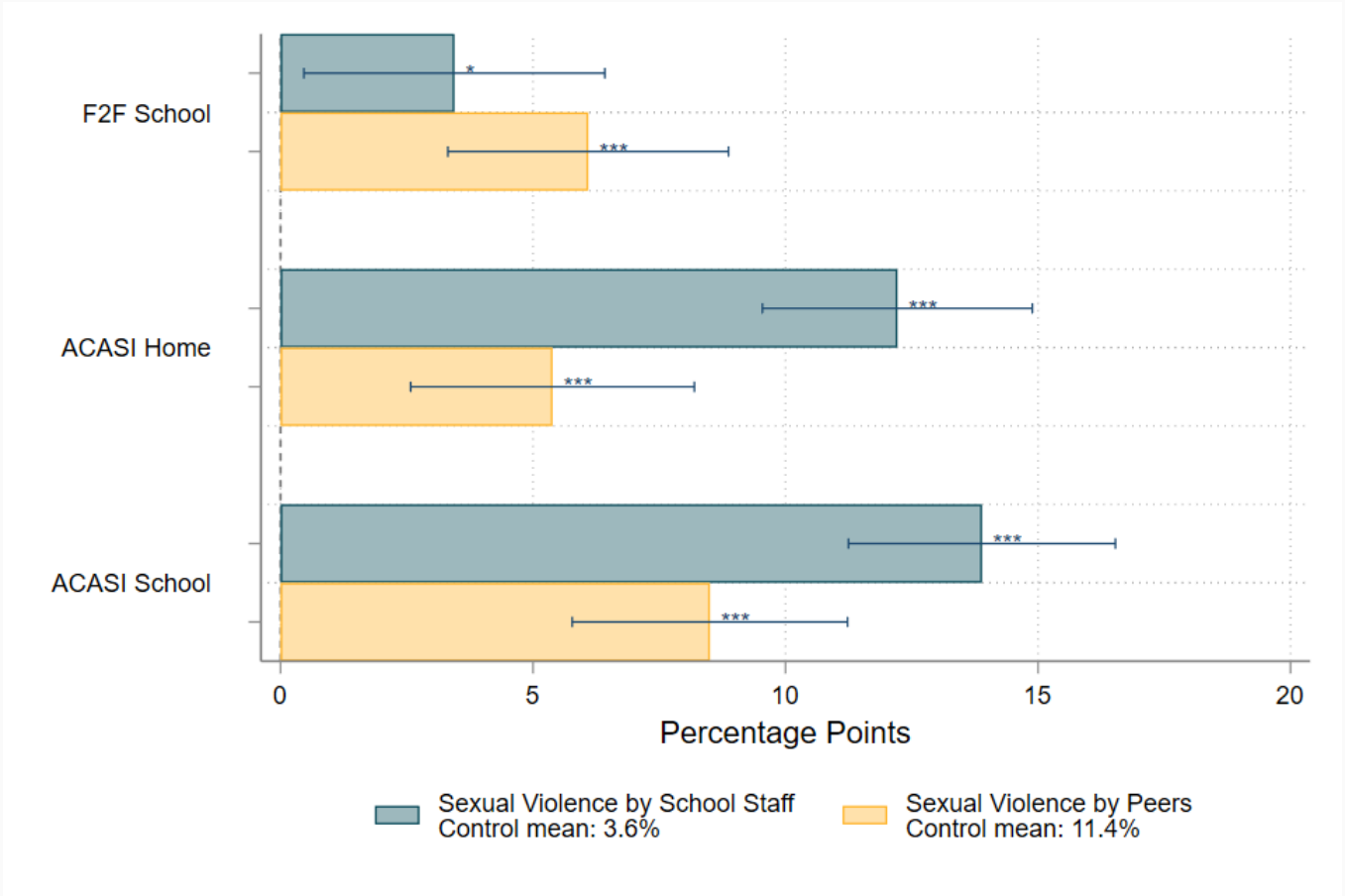
Additional details: Children sampled from enrollment registers / Nationally representative survey / No differential attrition across treatment arms / Measures for child protection were in place.

Physical and Emotional Violence



Sexual Violence

ACASI (whether conducted at home or at school) elicits more than a 100% increase in the reporting of sexual violence perpetrated by the school staff.



Cost-effectiveness

- Cost-effectiveness ratio: Using the estimated average treatment effects on sexual violence and the cost data, we find that increasing the probability of reporting violence by 1 percentage point costs:
  - 4.44 USD when collecting data using ACASI School
  - 6.40 USD when collecting data using ACASI Home
  - 8.44 USD when collecting data using F2F School

Discussion

Robustness checks: We find lower social desirability bias with ACASI. However, more children misunderstood questions or failed the attention checks under ACASI. Yet, even after adjusting for this, our results hold.

How does this inform other surveys? In over 15 countries with VACS data (which uses F2F method at home), 1 in 500 children (0.02%) self-reported experiencing forced sex. If we assume the same level of under-reporting found in our study, this would suggest that 1 in 50 may have actually experienced forced sex.

Conclusion

(1) Administering surveys in spaces that ensure a higher level of privacy is important;
(2) ACASI is more effective at eliciting disclosures and is more cost-effective.

- This should not be interpreted as ACASI being the gold standard, but rather as a method that, relative to F2F, yields lower systematic misreporting (mainly under-reporting).

Thank you!

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Safeguarding Practices

- Safeguarding during data collection is of vital importance to minimize risks of harms.
  - Design clear safeguarding and referral protocols.
  - Extensive training and support to enumerators and counselors.
  - An engaging comic story.
  - Counseling & referral services: 25% of children asked/received counseling. Of this, 30% received further support/follow up from NGO (including referrals to police).