Children are the most criminally victimized segment of our population. They suffer from higher rates of crime than do adults and they suffer from all the kinds of crimes adults do, and a whole lot that are specific to their condition of childhood as well. One dramatic illustration of this comes from the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), which is probably our nation’s most large-scale and long-term assessment of crime exposure, composed of surveys of over a 100,000 families that are done every year by the Department of Justice. They show that youth between the ages of 12 and 17 have rates of being victims of serious crime and aggravated assault, rape and robbery that are twice as high as that of persons over the age of 18 and they have rates of simple assault that are three times as high. It is not the case that these violent victimizations are less serious than the kinds adults suffer and, in fact, when you look at whether a weapon was used in commission of a crime or whether an injury was incurred as a result of the crime victimization here, again, children are two to three times more likely than adults to have had these serious kinds of crime victimization.

The NCVS also shows something very interesting for us adults about this crime exposure, and that is the rates for children in rural areas are as high or higher in their victimization as adults in urban areas—that is to say, for them growing up in New Hampshire would be like for me living in Boston or New York. Children are not as protected by geography and social class as are adults.
It’s sobering that this issue hasn’t been raised very substantially in our discussions of crime and in the way we teach about crime, and it is also very sobering when you come to recognize how much of the victimization of children actually is not even assessed in a way so that we could judge how much crime young people experience. So, for example, the newspapers are filled with stories about children who are molested or sexually abused by adults. It’s absolutely incredible to me that we do not have national statistics that tell us how many children in total in the United States are molested by adults. That is not a number that you can get from any source; there are statistics, like the number of children who experience sexual abuse, that are substantiated by child protection agencies, but that doesn’t cover a lot of the sexual abuse of children that doesn’t go through child protection agencies and that is reported to law enforcement. There are other serious kinds of crimes against children for which we have no regular national estimates; for example, child abduction, something that is feared by many parents and children. I get calls from reporters around the country all the time when there’s a case in their locality—How many abductions occur? Are we seeing an epidemic? We don’t know. We don’t keep those statistics. Abuse by teachers in schools, clergy in religious organizations, and by employees of organizations serving children and youth—we have no idea how many children are abused in those situations or of children exposed to domestic violence. How many kids are bullied every year? The list goes on and on.

By contrast, I’d like to put up this slide that shows 60 conditions that are monitored by the Centers for Disease Control, where public health officials around the country provide reports to a national agency and where they can be tracked and graphed to show the vulnerability of different segments of the population. Conditions you’ve never heard of are on this list, but some of the basic and most fundamental components of children’s exposure to violence and victimization, we simply do not keep track of in this country. It’s really quite a sad commentary.

Now one of the things that has kept a more complete assessment and awareness from happening about the degree of exposure that children face is the fact that a lot of these things that happen to kids are really dealt with, studied, and responded to by disparate groups of people. So, we have a whole mobilization about bullying; we have
mobilization about physical abuse. These are separate groups of people who have not really come together fully to make the point that, taken as a whole, children are extensively and unusually vulnerable to violent victimization and abuse. It was to counteract this balkanization, that I’ve developed a concept called “Developmental Victimology,” which tries to bring together all of these different disparate fields to look at exposure of children to different kinds of victimization and how that changes over the course of a life span.

Now one of the tools that we’ve developed to implement this vision is something called the Juvenile Victimization Questionnaire, which is an instrument that tries to assess the full range, a comprehensive spectrum of victimization that kids experience. This is the 34 different kinds of victimization experiences that we assess in one version of the questionnaire [indicating a slide] that includes some things that are quite common and things that are quite rare. With money from the U.S. Department of Justice under its Defending Childhood Initiative, we have been able now to go and survey children and their caregivers across the United States, using this instrument to find out more about their exposure to different kinds of violence and victimization. And we have data most recently from a survey that involved the experiences of 4,500 children where we interviewed young people themselves, ages from 10 to 17 years old. We interviewed the caregivers about the experiences of children, ages 0 to 9. And we’ve been able to provide a kind of comprehensive perspective on this. “The National Survey of Children Exposed to Violence” found that if you look at any of these exposures, 61 percent of the kids have been exposed during the last year. But, if you look at some of the specific kinds of victimizations, 6 percent had experienced a sexual victimization, 10 percent a maltreatment episode at the hands of a caregiver, and a quarter had witnessed some kind of violence in their home or in the community in the course of the previous year.

My own interest is in trying to understand more about the intersection of these kinds of experiences. One of the things that’s very interesting, of course, is that if you have any one of these kinds of victimizations, you’re considerably more likely to have others and there is a tendency for these kinds of victimization exposures to congregate among certain individuals. There are some that become more common as kids become teenagers, like witnessing violence. But there are some, like physical assault, which are
quite common across the whole spectrum. It clearly shows that studies, like the National Crime Victimization Survey, which just surveyed 12 to 17-year-olds, really don’t do a good job of presenting the picture of children younger than that.

But on the issue of intersection of these victimizations, one of the things we found that is most interesting is that about 10 percent of the sample had experienced seven or more victimizations over the course of just a single year. We call these kids poly-victims, and they have levels of stress symptoms that are exceedingly high, and they account for a large part of the association between individual kinds of exposures, like sexual abuse or bullying, because the kids who are manifesting the most stress are the ones experiencing sexual abuse and bullying and exposure to domestic violence in the household and witnessing violence in the community and so forth. These are kids that we need to pay particular attention to.

I want to talk about something else that we really have to be paying more attention to and that is the fact that we have been making substantial progress. It’s easy to hear about the epidemic of violence and the impact that it has on children and get kind of discouraged. But, since the early 1990s, violence has been decreasing in the lives of children according to many indicators; this is a slide that shows a summary from 26 surveys that cover this time period and 10 official data indicators that use crime report data and national childhood abuse data. They show that crime exposure and victimization exposure is down for children and violence in general by almost 50 percent in this time period. This includes a 61 percent decline through 2009 in sexual abuse substantiations. It includes a 55 percent decline of physical abuse substantiations. The criminologists and the sociologists who talk about this are not in agreement about what exactly is going on. We need a lot more information.

Here are, I think, seven possible factors that combine to play a role, including some of the economic improvements that we saw in the 1990s that may be in part responsible: The large increase in law enforcement and child protective staff who are mobilized around these issues, development of more effective evidence-based interventions, the dissemination of more effective mental health treatments, including psychopharmacology; better and more effective policing and prosecution, a lot of education that’s happened in this area that’s creating more awareness and the fact that we
now have technology that protects children. I’d like to point out that when the judge in Texas was caught on video beating his child, it was kind of a Rodney King moment for the children of the United States, in that we saw a parent finally getting caught in their abuse of a child. I think it’s going to have, and has had, a dramatic impact on people’s awareness about just what is it that children have suffered. This is an example of how our digital age actually does, in some ways, helps to protect children.

So, I think that has given us fair amount to think about.