



532 crime incidents against children took place in 2010

Madhavi Rajadhyaksha | TNN

A seven-year-old girl recuperating in Sion Hospital reveals the most horrific face of crime in the city. The child, whose body bears burn marks, has allegedly endured the torture of her stepmother.

Just a few months ago, a similarly chilling incident had surfaced at Manav Mandir School, where a six-year-old student had allegedly been sodomized by a physical education teacher.

These incidents are not aberrations. There were 532 incidents of crimes against children reported in 2010 alone, reveals the latest data of the NCRB, according to which murder, rape and kidnapping dominate. The number of children being tortured and abused behind closed doors in places meant to be safe havens—homes and schools—or silently suffering in the mean streets of Mumbai increased by 44% in 2010 over the year before.

The numbers may be much higher, believe child welfare experts, who say crimes against children often go unreported. "Often abuse happens within

homes or schools and family honour takes precedence over reporting the crime to the police," says a social worker.

Psychiatrist Nilima Mehta, who previously headed the state government's child wel-

CRIME AGAINST CHILDREN		
Year	Incidence in Mumbai	% of all-India crime
2010	532	8.6
2009	369	6.6
2008	364	7.9
2007	278	6
2006	380	8

Conviction in Maharashtra | 8.2%
Conviction in India | 35%
(Source: National Crime Records Bureau)

fare committee, says her worries are beyond the numbers. "Crimes are becoming more brutal and violent with each passing day."

Experts see this trend as a worrying reflection of growing intolerance in society. "Stress is increasing and the acceptance of dissent is decreasing in society. Children, who are most vulnerable, become the easiest targets for the frustration of people who are insecure, can't cope or who have personality disorders," says

psychiatrist Kersi Chavda of Hinduja Hospital.

He believes it is necessary to veer society as a whole towards values that recognize that a child is not the property of parents and violence will not be tolerated.

"Rising crime could indicate that reportage has gone up. Till a few years ago, sexual abuse, for instance, was always swept under the carpet. There was little understanding about abuse. Even today, when we go to schools for talks with parents and teachers, many can't believe that kids are being abused. Yet, in every session students say they have faced such situations," says Pooja Taparia, founder and CEO of the NGO Arpan.

Children's activists say physical crimes are often better reported than crimes like sexual abuse.

Many schools and institutions are now training children on distinguishing between "good" and "bad" touch and working with them to probe their fears, gently encouraging them to speak up.

Taparia, who has been conducting such workshops at shelters and schools, says they teach children that they are unique and special and only they are the bosses of their bodies. "We teach them about their private parts so that they can correctly articulate to their parents or teachers if they are abused," she says.

Experts also say laws need to be more effective if crime against children is to be curbed.