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# Exposure To Traumatic Experiences Among The Palestinian Students In The West Bank

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# Exposure to chronic traumatic experiences among the Palestinian Basic School children in the West Bank.

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For more than half a century, Palestinians have been suffered from various levels of traumatic experiences as a result of the occupation of their land. Since the beginning of the second Intifada that began in September 2000, the Palestinian population exposes to violence and helplessness. The population suffers from traumatic events imposed by armed and/or military violence together with continuous restriction of movement through checkpoints, closures, and curfews. Traumatic events such as shootings or bombings, destruction of houses or fields, physical violence and deaths of relatives, also occur on a daily basis (Abdeen, Qasrawi, Nabil & Shaheen, 2008; Qouta & El-Sarraj, 2004; Rytter, Kjaeldgaard, Bronnum-Hansen & Helweg-Larsen, 2006).



The Palestinians children suffered negative psychological, social, and educational effects such as: sleep disorders, fear of the dark, phobias, depression, bedwetting, social withdrawal, negative social-interaction, aggressive behavior, forgetfulness, and drop out from school (Altawil, 2008).

# Aims of the study

- The present study aims to examine the long-term effects of war and occupation on Palestinian children by examining the traumatic experiences of a large sample of children living in the West Bank. Some of my research questions were:
- What is the prevalence of exposure to traumatic experiences among Palestinian basic school students?
- What type of traumatic experiences were the students exposed to?



# Participants

- The participants were the basic school students in West Bank (2014/2015); that consisted of 537 students; 242 (45%) were males and 295 (55%) were females and the mean of age in the sample was ( $14.8 \pm 1.12$ ). There were 341 (64%) of the students from villages and there were 196 (36%) students from cities. In addition, there were 268 (50%) in the eighth grade and 269 (50%) were in the ninth grade.

# Pervious Studies

- Every child in Gaza Strip had been exposed to at least three traumatic.
- The study showed that 41% of Palestinian children suffered from symptoms PTSD (Altawil *et al.*, 2008).
- Another study over Palestinian students in Gaza strip found that the number of traumatic experiences was related to high levels of neuroticism, and lack of attention, concentration and memory (Qouta, Punamaki, & El Sarraj, 1995).



- Gaboulaud et al. (2010) presented data of 1773 children and adults who received treatment by psychotherapists between November 2000 and January 2006, in the Gaza Strip and in the West Bank. Nearly half of the patients were children between 4 and 14 years. The three main diagnoses were a) anxiety disorder other than post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or acute stress, b) mood disorder, and c) PTSD.
- A study by Abu Hein, Qouta, and El Sarraj (2004) found a high rate (25%) of conversion fits in Palestinian students that were living in Gaza strip and were exposed to traumatic experiences during the war.
- Most of the studies that were conducted in Gaza Strip and West Bank found that Palestinian children who live in war zones are at high risk of suffering from PTSD, somatic disorders, and psychosocial problems (Qouta & El-Sarraj, 2004; Kanninen, Punamaki, & Qouta, 2003; Thabet, Abed & Vostanis, 2004).



# Instrument

## Checklist of traumatic experiences:

This scale was adapted from the Gaza Traumatic Event Checklist (Abu Hein et al, 1993) and the Trauma Questionnaire Scale (Qouta & El-Sarraj, 2004), and includes 34 items covering the most traumatic events that a Palestinian child may have been directly exposed to during the war and the occupation period, The children are required to indicate whether or not they have been exposed to each event.

# The Findings

The major findings of the current study were:

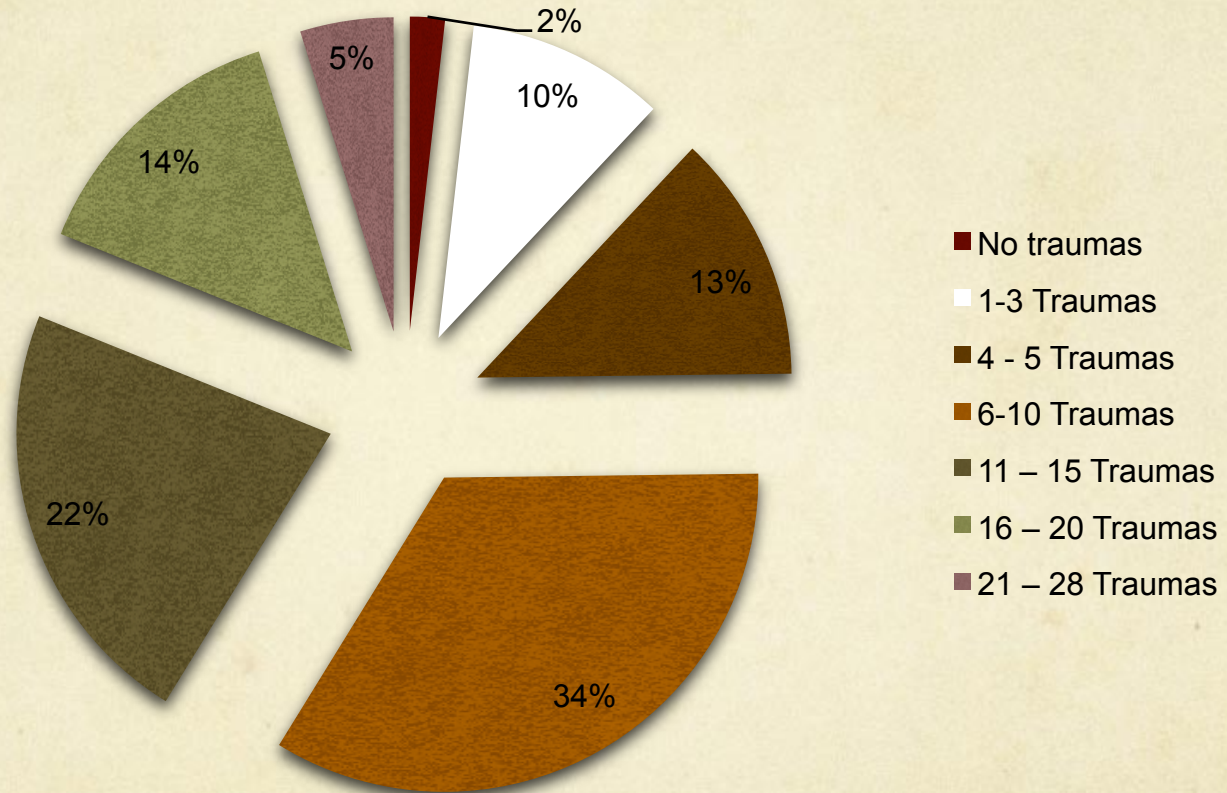
- Palestinian students reported a variety of traumatic experiences as a result of the occupation in West Bank.
- The number of traumatic events ranged from no traumatic event to **28** traumatic events with a mean of **9.3** events (SD = **5.35**).



1. Exposure to traumatic events: almost every Palestinian child of the sample had been exposed traumatic events (chronic trauma).

<b>Traumatic experiences</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
<b>No traumas</b>	10	.02
<b>1-3 Traumas</b>	55	.10
<b>4 - 5 Traumas</b>	69	.13
<b>6-10 Traumas</b>	183	.34
<b>11 – 15 Traumas</b>	120	.22
<b>16 – 20 Traumas</b>	76	.14
<b>21 – 28 Traumas</b>	24	.05
<b>Total</b>	<b>537</b>	<b>%100</b>

Figure 1: The percentages of children who exposed to the number of traumatic events





## 2. Type of traumatic experiences

The most common traumatic experiences reported by children were:

- Hearing of the explosion sounds or the sounds of bombs.
- Exposing to inhaling tear gas.
- Witnessing a martyr's funeral.
- Witnessing anyone being arrested by the occupying forces.
- Occupied forces using your house, block, camp, or zone as a cordon.

# Type of traumatic experiences

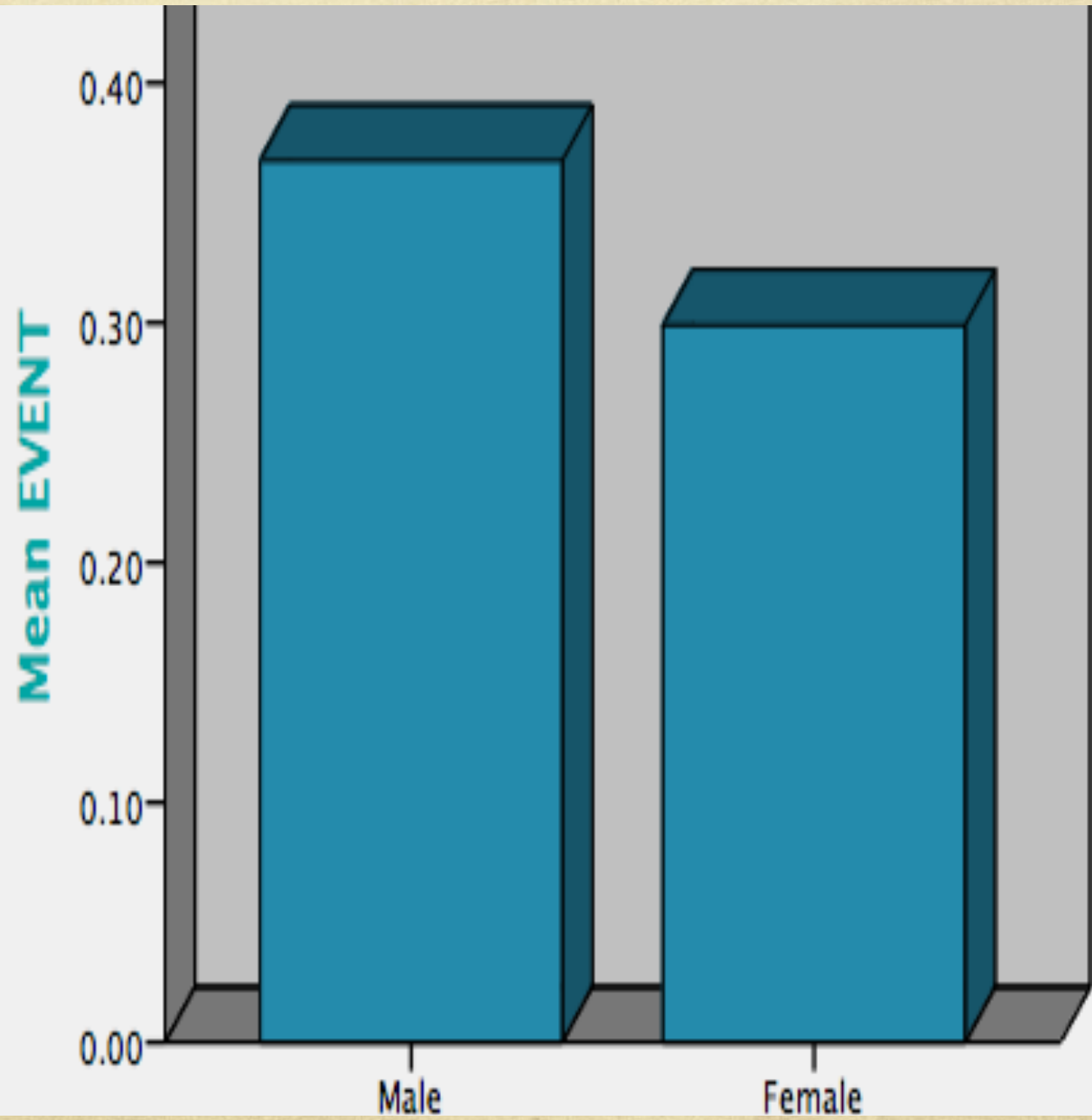
The statements of traumatic experiences	Item no	Frequency	(%)
Has any of your friends, neighbors, or relatives been injured by the occupying forces?	17	242	.4488
Have you witnessed the occupying forces opening fire against people?	27	250	.4655
Have you witnessed injuring by the occupying forces?	31	258	.4804
Has any of your friends, neighbors, or relatives been killed by occupying forces?	15	277	.5158
Have you witnessed the occupying forces beating anyone?	30	278	.5177
Have the occupied forces used your house, block, camp, or zone as a cordon?	11	287	.5364
Have you witnessed anyone being arrested by the occupying forces?	32	311	.5791
Have you witnessed a martyr's funeral?	29	344	.6406
Have you been exposed to inhaling tear gas?	3	384	.7151
Have you been exposed to the hearing of the explosion sounds or the sound bombs?	24	429	.7989



# Boys are more exposed to traumatic experiences than girls.

- The present study found that male Palestinian children have a greater degree of exposure to traumatic experiences than females.

Construct s/ Gender	Males n = 242		Females n = 295	
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.
CTE	<u>0.37</u>	<u>0.19</u>	<u>0.29</u>	<u>0.19</u>





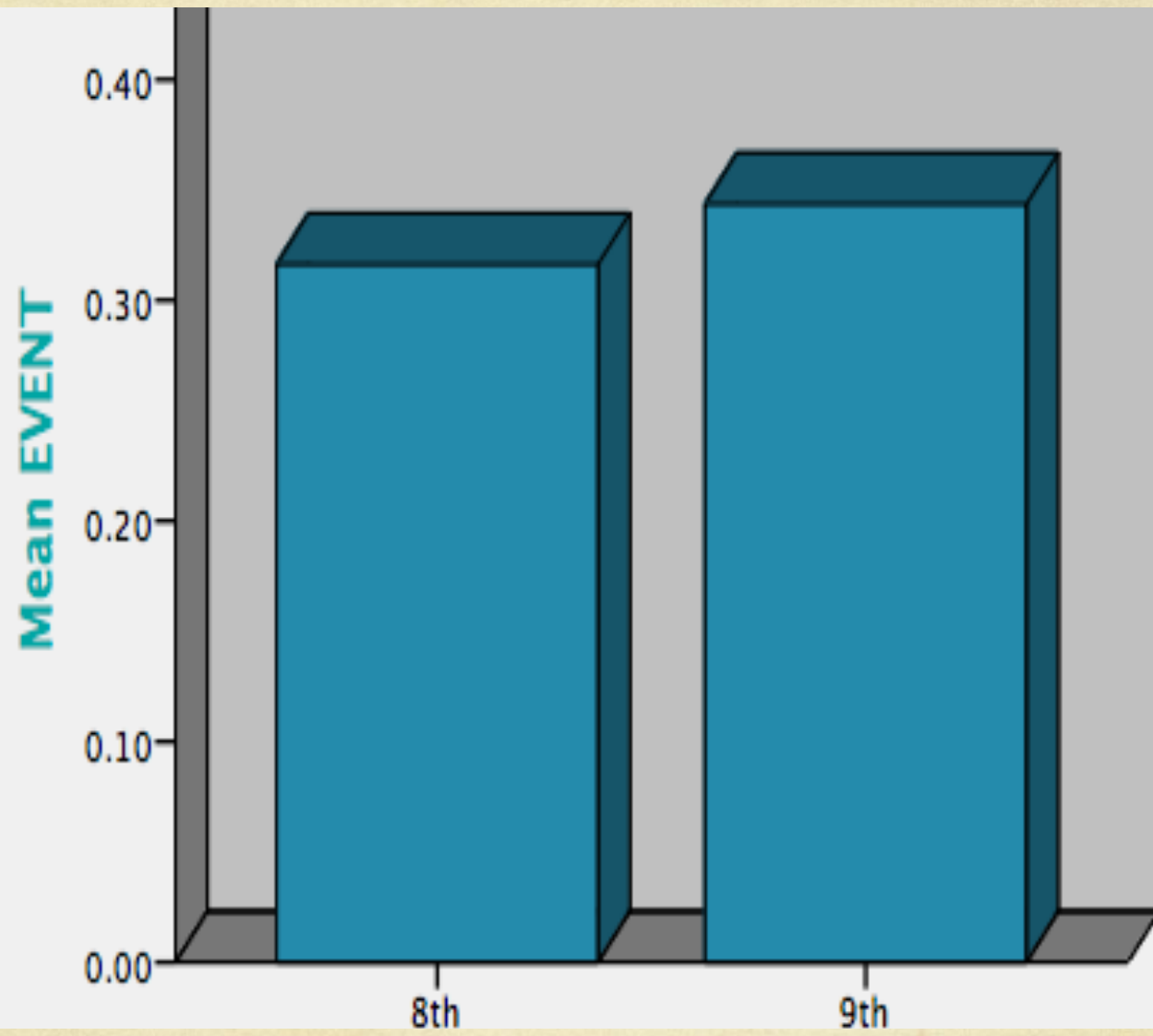
This difference between boys and girls in the number of experienced traumatic experiences could be a result of the socio-cultural factors. For example, girls in villages normally stay and play at home more than boys, who spend a portion of their time outside their home. Other reasons could be political; soldiers that are responsible for these experiences may focus their aggression towards boys more than girls. In fact, Children at this specific stage (13 - 14 years old) are entering the adolescence, and boys may be more likely than girls to participate in risky behavior, putting them at a higher risk of experiencing traumatic events.

# Exposure to traumatic events by grade

- There were significant differences between grades (8th and 9th) in benefit to respondents in the ninth grades.

Constructs/ Grade	Eighth n =268		Ninth n = 269	
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.
CTE	0.31	0.19	0.34	0.21



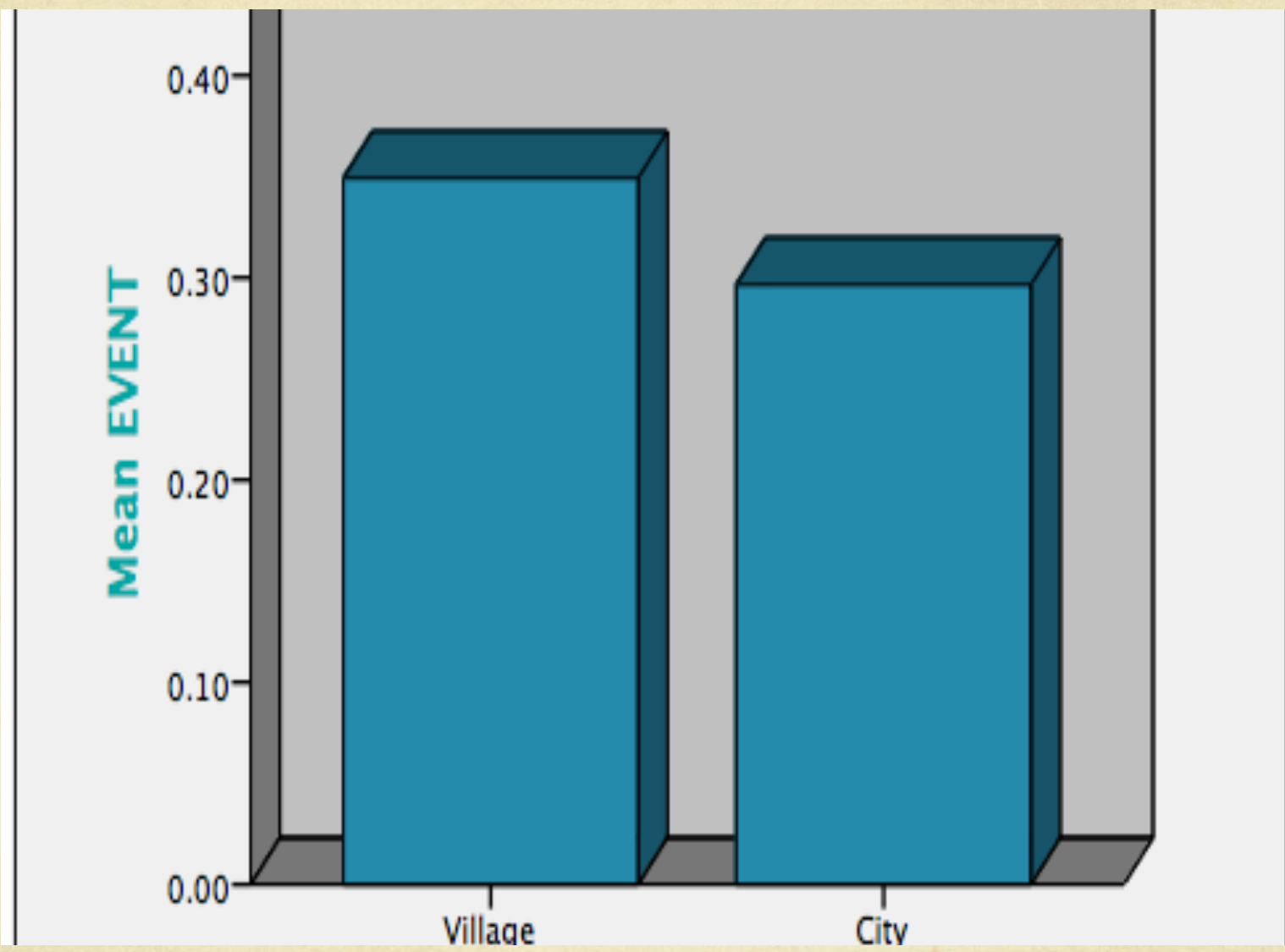


# Exposure to traumatic events by residence

- There were significant differences between residence (City and Village) in benefit to respondents from villages.

Constructs / residence	Cities n = 196		Villages n = 341	
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.
CTE	<u>0.29</u>	<u>0.19</u>	<u>0.34</u>	<u>0.20</u>





- This difference between villages and cities students, in the number of experienced traumatic experiences could be a result of:
- The villages are more close to the Segregation Wall, and also close to the Israeli settlements.
- Frequent direct violence by the settlers against the Palestinian families and their farmlands were recorded,

# Conclusion

The war and the long term occupation of Palestinian territory expose children to recurrent traumatic events which violate their human rights: the right to live, to learn, to be healthy, to live with his/her family and community, to develop his/her personality, to be nurtured and protected, and the right to enjoy childhood. The potential for having a normal childhood in Palestine is unlikely in the current circumstances and the future psychological well-being of Palestinian children is at risk of being compromised by on-going traumatic experiences.



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