

SUBSTANTIATED REPORTS OF CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT

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INTRODUCTION

Research on child abuse has yielded inconsistent and contradictory results. A major factor in these inconsistencies has been the varied sampling techniques of the researchers. Many studies have used nonrandom samples of cases that were chosen for reasons of convenience or accessibility to make causal inferences (Defrancis 1963; Kempe et al 1962; Nagi 1977; Steele, Pollock 1974). Studies which tried to get a national random sample to measure child abuse, also suffer from methodological problems in data gathering (Gelles, Strauss 1979; Gil 1970).

While these various researchers have been searching for a valid data base many state agencies, strengthened through the passage and enforcement of new reporting laws, have expanded efforts to improve the measurement of child abuse, which proliferated data sets on reported cases of child abuse. These data sets have largely been untapped as a source of academic study. The major reason for this seems to be the assumption by many researchers that the data sets are incomplete and grossly biased (Gelles 1973; Taylor 1971). However these purported biases have never been empirically validated (Jayaratne 1977; Justice 1976).

In those instances where survey techniques have been used to measure the demographic characteristics involved in child abuse, the findings have been very similar to those given by an analysis of reported cases. The only major exception to this is in the measurement of the true incidence of the problem. Reported cases of child abuse are only a portion of the actual number of cases in the general population. Different studies argue over the proportion but all show a greater incidence of child abuse than accounted for in reported cases.

VALIDITY CHECK

Using the assumption that reported cases of abuse do not represent all incidents of abuse, as discussed earlier, but only a portion of it, the increased amount of reporting can then serve as a validity check on the data. This can be

done by using simple sampling logic: the larger the number of cases the more representative the sample. Thus, if the large increase in reported cases of abuse and neglect does not cause any significant changes in the proportions of the various categories this would indicate that the data has some validity.

In addition to examining the validity of the data a second objective of this study will be to glean information concerning distribution of abuse among various social groups. Foremost among the causal models of child abuse are those that stress environmental factors associated with low socio-economic status. Numerous studies have indicated that abuse and neglect are more prevalent among the lower classes in the United States (Newburger 1979). According to this school of thought, poverty, degradation, occupational dissatisfaction, and other problems of day to day living cause stress and frustration in lower class families. Proponents hypothesize that this stress and frustration is displaced to the children in the form of physical abuse. The stress and frustration can also manifest itself as neglect by making the children a secondary concern to the survival of the parents.

The relationship between socio-economic status and child abuse has been called into question (Wasserman 1976; Bybee 1979). These studies and other articles point out the methodological problems involved in crediting higher rates of abuse to the lower classes. They attempt to show that this relationship is actually due to the greater chance of lower class parents being caught and thus labeled an abuser. Lower class parents must take their abused and neglected children to state or municipal health clinics and emergency rooms at hospitals for treatment while middle or upper class families are more likely to take their children to private physicians. Despite mandatory reporting laws, private physicians are still far less likely to report abuse cases to the authorities than hospital or clinic personnel. However, more recent studies have shown that the relationship between socio-economic class and abuse, though possibly exaggerated by

methodological problems, may actually be true (Polansky et al 1972). The relationship is not clear in the existing literature.

DATA

The data used in this investigation consist of demographic summary data of reported cases of child abuse and neglect in the United States. The demographic summary data are an aggregate of data on several variables involved in the incidence of child abuse. In this case "reported" is defined as becoming known to a state department of public welfare or other state agency with a responsibility for child welfare.

National demographic data on child abuse and neglect was obtained from the American Humane Association through the 1976, 1977, and 1978 issue of their annual publication *National Analysis of Official Child Neglect and Abuse Reporting*. This limitation is necessary for two major reasons. The first year in which all 50 states as well as two territories, Washington, D.C. and Guam participated in the analysis was 1976, and was the first year that neglect, as well as abuse cases, was included in national reports. At the time of this report, 1979 data was not yet available.

METHOD OF ANALYSIS

A number of tables have been constructed in order to facilitate comparison of variables. Because this study is exploratory and descriptive in nature, crosstabulation of proportions is the procedure used for the analysis of data. This is because statistical description of child abuse, not theoretical explanation, is the primary focus of this project.

To insure the validity of comparisons with different data bases, comparisons were only made with those variables which use the same variable categorization. Where the variable categories differed between data bases no comparison was made.

There is considerable debate over the influence of several demographic variables on the incidence of child abuse. Consequently, one of our specific research objectives has been to analyze the distribution of child abuse among different social groups. This objective was accomplished by defining and analyzing each variable and the distribution of abuse associated with the variable. The perpetrator is

examined by looking at such factors as education, sex, ethnicity/race and relationship to child. Socio-economic factors are analyzed by looking at income. Similarly, special characteristics of the abused child are examined as well as seriousness of injury. Changes in quantity or trends in the reporting the phenomenon of child abuse over recent years indicate not only the possible influences of the increased attention society and social agencies have paid to the problem of child abuse in recent years but also the validity of the reported cases.

REPORT SUMMARY

Neglect appears to be found almost twice as often as physical abuse, as shown in Table 1. The majority of reports brought to the attention of social agencies are discovered to be unsubstantiated. The category of Unsubstantiated Reports includes cases that are never investigated but this group is very small. In many states all cases are investigated. Thus the figure of 60 percent reported as the percentage of unsubstantiated cases can be considered accurate within one or two percentage points.

Comparing the type of reports over the three study years shows a dramatic increase in the number of cases in all categories of reports. Proportionately, however, there is only an increase in one category of report, that of unsubstantiated cases. Individuals and/or agencies seem more willing to report suspected cases of abuse and neglect. The proportional relationship between abuse and neglect is stable through the three years.

REPORT SOURCES

The most common source of the initial report is the category of Nonprofessionals (Table 2). This category is composed of citizens acting on their own initiative and includes relatives, friends, neighbors and self-reports. This finding of 38% definitely indicates the importance of community concern with child abuse and its' reduction.

Medical personnel account for approximately 12% of reported cases. This category includes hospitals, nurses, private physicians, and clinics. This small proportion seems to challenge the contention that lower class children are overrepresented in reported cases of abuse because they must be brought to public health facilities more than middle and upper

TABLE 1: SUMMARY, NATIONWIDE CASE STUDIES OF CHILD ABUSE (Percentage)

<i>Substantiated Reports:</i>	1976	1977	1978
Abuse	14.7	18.8	13.4
Neglect	28.3	32.5	24.2
Abuse & Neglect	4.2	4.0	2.4
Unsubstantiated	52.6	44.6	60.0
(N, 1000's)	(100)	(110)	(192)

TABLE 2: SOURCE OF INITIAL REPORT, NATIONWIDE (Percentage)

<i>Initial Source:</i>	1976	1977	1978
Medical personnel	11.0	11.7	11.9
School personnel	11.3	12.4	11.6
Social service pers	9.1	10.0	10.2
Law enforcement pers	11.8	11.6	11.5
Nonprofessionals	39.4	40.1	38.4
Child care provider	1.2	1.7	1.6
Anonymous	4.0	5.9	5.7
Other	12.2	6.6	9.1

TABLE 3: PERPETRATOR-VICTIM RELATION (Validated reports, percentage)

<i>Relationship</i>	1976	1977	1978
Natural parent	86.9	86.3	81.7
Step parent	7.1	7.8	7.7
Grandparent	.8	.9	1.1
Sibling	.6	.6	.5
Adoptive parent	.6	.7	.9
Foster parent	.3	.3	.3
Parent outside of home	.1	.1	.3
Preschool care	.3	.4	.6
Teacher	.3	.3	.1
Other	1.3	1.2	5.3

TABLE 4: ABUSE TYPE BY EDUCATION 1978 (Percent)

<i>Educational Level:</i>	Neglect	Abuse	Both
Grade 0-3	5.3	2.5	6.0
Grade 4-8	16.0	9.7	16.2
Some high school	47.2	37.4	42.3
High school graduate	24.0	37.2	26.7
Some college	5.8	9.7	6.4
College graduate	1.7	3.5	2.4

class children who are taken to private physicians. The small portion of cases reported by medical person personnel should not greatly bias the data, at least not to any huge extent. The four areas of public service, medical, educational, social service, and law enforcement

TABLE 5: CHILD ABUSER TYPE BY SEX 1978 (Validated, nationwide, percent)

<i>Sex of Child Abuser:</i>	Neglect	Abuse	Both
Male	30.4	56.7	44.1
Female	69.6	43.3	55.9

TABLE 6: ETHNICITY BY ABUSE TYPE (Validated, nationwide, percent)

<i>Abuser Ethnic Group:</i>	1976	1977	1978
Asian	.5	.5	.6
Black	19.3	17.2	19.2
Caucasian	58.4	65.6	69.1
Spanish surname	11.5	8.7	8.2
Native American	1.7	1.6	1.6
Other	8.5	6.3	1.3

TABLE 7: ABUSER FAMILY INCOME 1978 (Percent)

<i>Abuser Income Group:</i>	Neglect	Abuse	Both
Less than 5000	45.7	23.2	37.1
\$ 5000 - 8999	32.0	28.2	32.8
\$ 9000 - 12999	13.6	23.1	16.7
\$13000 - 15999	4.4	10.6	6.2
\$16000 - 19999	2.4	7.5	3.8
\$20000 - 24999	1.2	4.1	2.0
\$25000 +	.7	3.3	1.4

TABLE 8: CHARACTERISTICS OF ABUSED AND NEGLECTED CHILDREN (National, percent)

<i>Characteristics:</i>	1976	1977	1978
Premature birth	1.8	1.7	1.6
Mentally retarded	2.5	2.6	2.3
Congenital handicap	1.4	1.3	1.0
Physical handicap	1.2	1.0	.9
Chronic illness	2.1	2.2	1.8
Emotionally disturbed	7.5	7.5	6.8
No special condition	85.4	85.7	87.9

TABLE 9: MEDICAL TREATMENT REQUIRE FOR ABUSED CHILDREN (National, percent)

<i>Treatment required</i>	1976	1977	1978
No treatment	71.9	75.3	75.8
Moderate	21.4	20.9	19.2
Serious, hospitalized	6.0	5.1	4.5
Permanent disability	.2	.2	.2
Fatal	.5	.4	.3

all seemed to be equally involved with the problem of child abuse.

In the longitudinal analysis of national data the reporting proportions seem to be quite consistent, with no real substantive changes. This is noteworthy for two major reasons. First, it would tend to validate a basic assumption of this study; that the any report biases are present during each year. All areas of society are becoming equally involved in abuse and neglect reporting, evidenced by the increase in the number of cases reported and the proportional consistency of abuse reporting.

PERPETRATOR — CHILD RELATION

The person most likely to abuse or neglect a child in our society is the child's natural parent (Table 3). The second most likely group to harm/neglect a child is that of a parent substitute. Combining the categories of step-parent, adoptive parent and foster parent the figure of 8.9% is derived. Add that figure to the natural parent figure of 81.7% and it can be seen that the child's legal guardian is responsible for over 90% of the cases of abuse and neglect. Examination of the other categories in Table 3 shows that abuse outside of the family including all relatives represents a small part of the abuse against children.

There have been few changes in the proportions of each of the categories over the three years under study. Some slight increases can be noted for preschool care. However, this increase may be a result of the increased responsibility for the child's welfare placed on the personnel in these categories. Another factor that may account for this increase is the rise in the number of working mothers. With mothers becoming more involved in the job market they must confer a greater role on outside agencies in the upbringing of their children. This increase in the number of children and the amount of contact with them may be responsible for the increase in abuse within these categories.

EDUCATION OF PARENT

Table 4 shows that the education level of the majority of parents and parent substitutes who commit all types of abuse is far below the national proportions. The low education of perpetrators is most pronounced in those categories involving neglect. These findings

would seem to agree with the purported belief that neglect may be largely a case of ignorance on the part of the parents.

A longitudinal analysis of the data indicates a dichotomy within each type of abuse group, resulting in an increasing bimodal distribution. While a higher proportion of abusive parents have a college education there are also increases in the proportion of parents with little or no education. This split is most pronounced in physical abuse cases. In the case of all perpetrators, fewer have graduated from high school, but of those who have, more have graduated from college.

SEX OF PERPETRATOR

Table 5 indicates that females are 50% more likely to be the perpetrator in all cases of abuse and neglect. However a closer examination, after breaking the categories down into type of report, indicates a distinct difference in sex of perpetrator for physical abuse and neglect. In those cases involving abuse, males were 40% more likely to be the perpetrator, while in those cases involving neglect the perpetrator was more likely to be female by a two to one margin. The disproportion of female perpetrators in neglect cases may be an indication of our societal expectations of women as the guardian of children. No substantive changes were found in the longitudinal analysis.

ETHNICITY OF PERPETRATOR

As indicated in Table 6, the most common ethnicity of the perpetrator is Caucasian or white. This should not be interpreted as meaning that whites are more likely than other ethnic groups to abuse children. To correctly interpret these figures they must be compared with the proportion of each group in the general population to that proportion of child abuse cases found. Whites make up 87 percent of the population of this country, yet account for only 69 percent of abuse and neglect cases. Blacks are 11 percent of the general population and account for 19 percent of the cases of child abuse. These figures indicate that there may be a greater propensity for abuse and neglect to take place within minority groups than in the general white population.

The comparisons of proportions over the years indicated that only major substantive

change has occurred in an increase in the white category. This increase may be a factor of, or at least influenced by, the decrease in the category of "Other." Groups that were at one time classified as "Other" may now be classified as white or Caucasian.

FAMILY INCOME

As shown in Table 7, according to reported cases, abuse and neglect are differentiated by family income. This distinction is most prominent in cases involving neglect but is still evident in physical abuse cases. In more than 50 percent of the cases in all categories of type of report the family income is below \$9,000. The 1978 poverty level income was \$6,200 (3). This indicates that the majority of families involved in abuse and neglect cases were below or not far above the poverty line. In 45.7 percent of the neglect cases the family was at least \$1,200 below the poverty level.

Over the years the proportions of the higher income families involved in child abuse and neglect have increased significantly. However there are no controls in this study for the effect of inflation on family income. Thus, the increase in incidence of abuse and neglect among higher income groups may be a result of higher incomes for the lower income groups.

ABUSED CHILD CHARACTERISTICS

The vast majority of abused children have no special characteristics at all (Table 8). Examining the data for any trends over three years of analysis indicates that there has been a general decrease in the proportion of abused children with all of the listed category of no special conditions. This change may be a result of people changing their attitudes toward child abuse.

SEVERITY OF INJURY

Table 9 indicates that in the great majority of abuse and neglect cases, the injury is slight enough not to require any treatment. This would seem to contradict some professionals' contention that an abuse or neglect case only gets reported to the authorities when it is severe (Helfer, Kempe 1974). These figures also indicate that in few cases is the physical injury incurred by the child severe enough to disable or kill the child. This seems to be far from the impressions given by reporting agencies with

their sensationalist approach to the problem.

A longitudinal comparison of the figures indicates a reduction in the more severe types of abuse. This reduction in proportion may be a result of an increased amount of reporting of lesser forms of abuse. This can be deduced from the increase in the proportion of cases in which no treatment is needed.

The near doubling of reported cases of abuse and neglect over the three years of this study with minimal changes in the proportions of variable categories gives clear evidence as to the validity of the data. It should not be assumed that the data is totally accurate, but, this study would seem to indicate that data sets of reported cases of abuse may be more valid than some professionals credit.

The final note to be made concerning the validity of representativeness of the reported data is that even if it is biased in estimating the true incidence of phenomena it still deals with a large number of validated cases of child abuse and neglect. The lives and health of over 75,000 children were known to be in jeopardy in 1978, according to these reported statistics. Even if these 75,000 cases represent only a fraction of the true cases of child abuse, as much as possible should be done to increase the understanding of the phenomena in these cases.

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