



Community characteristics, social service allocation, and child maltreatment reporting



Asher Ben-Arieh

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jerusalem, 91905 Israel

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ABSTRACT

This study expands research on the relationship between community (defined here as a locality) characteristics and child maltreatment. Research in this field is not new, but it is scarce. Our study is unique by examining changes between two periods rather than focusing on one point in time. Furthermore, our study examines structural conditions in small and medium size localities in Israel, a non-Western and non-Christian society. We compare our results with those from studies on inner-city and suburban neighborhoods in Western countries and earlier studies in Israel. We collected data on 169 Israeli localities, ranging from small ones (with as few as 1,500 residents) to medium size localities (i.e., towns) (with as many as 50,000 residents) in which approximately 34% of the Israeli child population resides. Our study tested four hypotheses: (1) Socioeconomic characteristics of the locality will be negatively correlated with the availability of social services; (2) Reported child maltreatment rates will be negatively correlated with the socioeconomic characteristics of the locality; (3) The availability of social services will be positively correlated with reported child maltreatment rates; and (4) Overall reported child maltreatment rates will be negatively correlated with the overall status of the localities. We have supported our second and third hypothesis in full, and partially supported our first and fourth hypothesis. In particular we have demonstrated that while demographics play a different role in Israel than in other countries in regard to child maltreatment, social, economic and cultural context are crucial for understating reported rates of child maltreatment.

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Introduction

More than 20 years ago, the [American National Research Council \(1993\)](#) proposed an ecological-developmental approach to understand child maltreatment using a framework in which risk and protective factors interact across ecological levels of the individual, family, community, and sociocultural context ([Cicchetti & Lynch, 1993](#)). Others have more recently expanded this framework to include the effects of relationships within social networks, community connectedness, neighborhood, and child maltreatment ([Attar-Schwartz, Ben-Arieh, & Khoury-Kassabri, 2011](#); [Coulton, Crampton, Irwin, Spilsbury, & Korbin, 2007](#)).

However, several issues complicate research on communities and/or the effects of neighborhoods on child maltreatment. First, defining neighborhoods or communities is complicated, and relying on census blocks (i.e., administrative demographic units) is problematic. Recent efforts tried to overcome the census block issue by examining small towns ([Ben-Arieh, 2010a](#)) or by defining communities more accurately with alternative methods or mapping than the administrative census blocks ([Spilsbury, Korbin, & Coulton, 2012](#)). Second, early research focused on communities in Western and Christian societies, and studies have only recently begun looking beyond those societies ([Ben-Arieh, 2010c](#)). Third, most studies have focused on a specific moment in time, neglecting possible changes in child maltreatment that may occur as time progresses. Our

study attempts to bridge these shortcomings by focusing on the relation between community characteristics and child maltreatment at two points in time. Furthermore, we examine these changes in small to medium-sized localities in Israel, a non-Christian society outside traditional definitions of the West.

Although contextual factors (i.e., community characteristics) and their relation to child maltreatment have been established in research, less extensive knowledge exists on the relationship among these contextual factors, and the availability of social services (Ben-Arieh, 2010c). In many countries, national or state governments determine social service expenditures and the number of social worker positions in a locality, regardless of the actual local characteristics or need, even though the local authorities are responsible for providing and administering the services. Thus, children and families receive services on the basis of where they live but not necessarily their needs. Unequal distribution of social services is a major issue (Saunders, 1994), yet our knowledge of these inequalities, particularly in different localities within a country, is lacking. In Israel, inequalities between localities are evident in varying levels of human and financial resources available to local social services and in the range, level, and quality of these services. Inequality is pronounced in Arab localities compared with Jewish localities, but inequality also exists within each sector (Kop, 2007). Furthermore, like studies examining child maltreatment rates, studies on unequal distribution of social services have not considered changes that occur between two periods.

Finally, few studies adequately examine the relation between the availability of social services, particularly child protective services, and rates of reported child maltreatment (Ben-Arieh, 2010c). However, some research has suggested that the availability and quality of child protective services might be directly correlated with rates of child maltreatment reporting (Ben-Arieh, 2010b; Ben-Arieh & Haj-Yahia, 2006).

Our study explores the relation between three variables during two periods. The independent variables include a 10-item set of locality characteristics and two measures of social service availability. The dependent variable is the rate of reported cases of child maltreatment. Using locality as the unit of analysis, we examine if and how socioeconomic characteristics of the locality relate to the availability of social services and child protective services, and how these two independent variables are related to a dependent measure of reported child maltreatment.

The Theoretical Framework

Community social organization theory and the ecological perspective support the notion that the characteristics of communities or localities are connected to rates of child maltreatment (Coulton et al., 2007; Swanson, 2001). Community social organization theory addresses patterns and functions of formal and informal networks, institutions, or organizations in a community (Kasarda & Janowitz, 1974). It includes the protection and provision of resources for families (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Warren, 1971). The concept of social organization is useful for explaining the relation between child maltreatment and locality characteristics, such as poverty, economic decline, and residential mobility (Hirschi, 1969; Sampson, 1992; Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997).

In the ecological perspective, a growing number of studies have found child maltreatment rates in neighborhoods to be highly correlated with socioeconomic measures (Zuravin, 1989). In addition, researchers have found that lack of community organization and social coherence were most apparent in areas where child maltreatment was more prevalent (Freisthler, 2004; Garbarino & Crouter, 1978; Garbarino & Kostelny, 1992; Garbarino & Sherman, 1980) and, specifically, that low-income communities had fewer social services.

Additional studies have embraced both theoretical frameworks and have shown that communities and neighborhoods are etiologically significant to child maltreatment (Coulton et al., 2007; Korbin & Coulton, 1997; Stanley, Tomison, & Pocock, 2003; Swanson, 2001; Tomison & Wise, 1999). Literature is consistent in suggesting that maltreatment is associated with economic characteristics of communities, including unemployment rates (Deccio, Horner, & Wilson, 1994; Freisthler, 2004; Gillham et al., 1998), poverty rates (Drake & Pandey, 1996; Freisthler, Midanik, & Gruenewald, 2004; Swanson, 2000), income levels (Garbarino & Crouter, 1978), median residential housing/property values (Drake & Pandey, 1996; Swanson, 2000), and low economic status (Zuravin & Taylor, 1987). Other community characteristics that were found to correlate with child maltreatment rates include child care burdens (Coulton, Korbin, & Su, 1999; Korbin, Coulton, Chard, Platt-Houston, & Su, 1998), residential instability (Deccio et al., 1994; Hyde, 1999; Swanson, 2001), vacant and abandoned housing (Deccio et al., 1994; Zuravin, 1989), lower participation in the labor force among females (Swanson, 2000), overcrowdedness (Garbarino & Kostelny, 1992), and per capita density of liquor stores (Freisthler, 2004; Freisthler et al., 2004).

These studies and others raise a number of issues. First, when using both an ecological approach and a social organization approach, it is necessary to look beyond the socioeconomic structure of a community. Crucial elements of both theories are the availability, adequacy, and quality of the social services in a community (i.e., do deprived communities receive a larger allocation and, therefore, enjoy greater availability of social services?). Furthermore, as Coulton et al. (2007) argued, the availability of social workers and other human services professionals partly explains neighborhood variations in rates of reported child abuse and neglect. In addition to the availability of social services and child protection officers, the quality, training, and skills of social workers are critical. Scholars have argued that the availability and practices of social services, particularly child protective services, are major contributors to rates of reported child maltreatment (Melton, 2005).

Second, the majority of studies were conducted in urban settings; only a few ventured to suburban neighborhoods (Swanson, 2001), and even fewer have looked at rural, small, or medium-sized localities (Ben-Arieh, 2010a). Defining urban and suburban communities is more difficult because neighborhoods are close to one another and many times borders are

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