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Child Abuse & Neglect

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/chiabuneg

Child maltreatment reporting in the general population: Examining the roles of community, collective efficacy, and adverse childhood experiences[☆]

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Child maltreatment reporting
Collective efficacy
Experimental studies
Community

ABSTRACT

According to bystander theory, factors such as the community environment, collective efficacy, and history of adverse childhood experiences could be related to likelihood of reporting or intervening against maltreatment. An online survey was conducted with 946 general population Californians obtained through mixed-mode random probability and quota-based recruitment methods. Using an experimental vignette design, participants were randomly assigned to two scenarios: a) potential child abuse occurring in their neighborhood; b) potential child abuse in an unfamiliar neighborhood. Weighted multivariate logistic regression models assessed relationships between the vignette condition, collective efficacy, appraisal of the behavior, and likelihood of reporting or intervening. The results suggested that perceiving the vignette as occurring in your own neighborhood was associated with lower odds of viewing the behavior as appropriate and considering it abusive. Higher collective efficacy scores were associated with lower odds of viewing the incident as inappropriate but higher odds of personally intervening. Adverse childhood experiences were positively related to reporting the incident to child protective services and intervening. Bystanders may be more likely to give parents in their own neighborhood "the benefit of the doubt" by viewing their abusive behaviors as less severe, potentially leading to underreporting. Neighborhood collective efficacy might increase willingness to personally intervene, but not contact systems such as child protective services or police, suggesting that enhanced trust in communities does not extend to these institutions. Our findings have implications for neighborhood and education interventions to enhance understanding of and willingness to intervene on behalf of children.

1. Introduction

Child maltreatment remains a significant concern in the United States, with approximately 12–13% of U.S. children experiencing maltreatment before age 18 (Wildeman et al., 2014). These children are at risk for negative mental and physical health consequences throughout the life course (Afifi, Mota, MacMillan, & Sareen, 2013; Fuller-Thomson, Brennenstuhl, & Frank, 2011; Sperry & Widom, 2013). Despite the high prevalence and significant consequences, child maltreatment remains both under-reported in some situations and over-reported in others (Finkelhor, Turner, Shattuck, & Hamby, 2015; Sedlak et al., 2010). This suggests that many children

[☆] This study was funded by a grant from the College of Health and Human Services at California, State University, Sacramento. The material has not been published in whole or in part elsewhere. The paper is not currently being considered for publication elsewhere, and we have no conflicts of interest to report.

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experiencing maltreatment are not referred into the social service system, while others not experiencing maltreatment are investigated. Better understanding of factors associated with likelihood of reporting or intervening against maltreatment in the general population could inform efforts to make reporting of suspected maltreatment more sensitive and specific in order to better protect children.

2. Background

2.1. Non-Mandated reporting

Child Protective Services (CPS) relies upon institutional and community surveillance to identify children who are experiencing maltreatment (USDHHS, 2017). In the state of California, there are two main groups of potential reporters: 1) mandated reporters (i.e., individuals who due to profession or workplace are legally obligated to report suspicions of maltreatment); and, 2) those without a mandate (e.g., friends, relatives, or neighbors) who are able to report suspicions but have no legal obligation to do so. The predominance of research on reporting has focused on mandated reporters (Adiar et al., 1997; Ashton, 2004; Laskey et al., 2012) who file the majority of reports to CPS (USDHHS, 2017). Even though mandated reporters have a legal obligation to report and are more likely to be trained versus the general public, research suggests that some populations of mandated reporters may demonstrate bias against some populations (Laskey et al., 2012), report at different rates due to personal characteristics (Ashton, 2004) and may not believe that CPS will be able to respond effectively (Foster, Olson-Dorff, Reiland, & Budzak-Garza, 2017). In addition, in the State of California, individuals who are mandated to report potential maltreatment at their workplace are not obligated to do so if they encounter a situation out of their workplace, potentially causing confusion.

Therefore, it is not surprising that the limited amount of research on non-mandated reporters suggests similar problems. Non-mandated reporters may have inaccurate ideas about what constitutes abusive behavior and how child welfare systems work. Studies have found that between 46 to 71% of respondents believe that any CPS report immediately results in the removal of a child from their home (Horizons, 2008; Walsh & Jones, 2015), demonstrating ignorance of the investigative process. In addition, general community members are less likely to have suspicions of maltreatment substantiated (McDaniel, 2006), and their referrals may not be taken as seriously as those from professionals (Munro, 1996).

That non-mandated reporters may be ill equipped to accurately report child maltreatment is problematic given the likelihood of encountering a maltreated child. Approximately half of individuals in the general population report knowing a child who they suspect may be abused (Bensley, Ruggles et al., 2004; Horizons, 2008). Yet, while these individuals may have suspicions about abuse, only 19 to 40% report ever referring a suspected abused child to CPS (Bensley, Ruggles et al., 2004; Horizons, 2008). The general population may be willing to intervene in other ways, however, as one study found that 84% of individuals suspecting abuse responded in some manner, including talking to the parents, involving the schools, or calling police (Bensley, Wynkoop Simmons et al., 2004). But while individuals may be willing to help in some ways for children they know, it is unclear if they are as likely to intervene when they encounter unknown potentially abusive parents and their children in public arenas. Indeed, although half of those surveyed from a general population sample reported witnessing an act of child abuse in public, only a quarter reported intervening in any way (Christy & Voight, 1994). This suggests that the general population may not be effectively intervening to help unknown children in need of assistance.

2.2. Bystanders, adverse childhood experiences, and child maltreatment intervention

Several studies have applied the bystander model of intervening in violence, originally described by Latane and Darley (1970) to violence against children (Christy & Voight, 1994; Hoefnagels & Zwikker, 2001; Cismaru, 2012). In this framework, bystanders experience a five-step decision making process when confronted with potentially abusive scenarios. They must notice the incident, interpret it as significant, decide that it is their duty to intervene, select a way to intervene, and complete the intervention. Throughout this process, characteristics of the child (e.g., perceived vulnerability), the reporter (e.g., personal history, perceptions, beliefs, mandated reporter status), and the situation (e.g., physical and social context) can influence decision-making.

One characteristic of the reporter that could impact their willingness to act against child abuse could be their own personal history of maltreatment. Research suggests that individuals who experience abuse as children are more likely to become perpetrators themselves as parents (Ben-David, Jonson-Reid, Drake, & Kohl, 2015; Thornberry & Henry, 2013). While there are many potential mechanisms for this association, one potential theoretical explanation could be an internalized normalization of abusive behavior (Dunlap, Golub, Johnson, & Benoit, 2009). Limited evidence suggests that for most abusive behaviors, those who experienced the behavior as children are less likely to view it as abusive (Bensley, Ruggles et al., 2004). Individuals who have experienced or witnessed physical aggression in childhood may consequently be less likely to view harsh physical discipline as abusive, to report the behavior, or to intervene.

Similarities between the bystander and the child victim in question may also determine willingness to protect. Bystanders may be more likely to report cases when they share characteristics with the child, such as gender or other demographic factors (Christy & Voight, 1994; Hoefnagels & Zwikker, 2001). Bystanders may also be more likely to intervene if they are demographically similar to others who witnessed the abuse (Christy & Voight, 1994). These findings suggest that the larger social context can influence child reporting. Individuals may feel more confident around people they believe are like them, making them more likely to intervene when witnessing potential abuse. Potentially, they could also feel more comfortable intervening in their own community environment where they know the area. Being in their own community environment could also enhance a person's belief that they are responsible

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