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## Defining maltreatment according to substantiation: Distinction without a difference?<sup>☆</sup>

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### Abstract

**Objective:** To examine whether children with substantiated maltreatment reports between 4 and 8 years of age differ from children with unsubstantiated reports on any of 10 behavioral and developmental outcomes.

**Method:** Longitudinal data from 806 children and their adult caregivers collected in four US study sites were pooled and analyzed using Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) and multivariate linear regression.

**Results:** There were no significant differences between the mean scores of children with unsubstantiated and substantiated maltreatment reports filed between 4 and 8 years of age for any of the 10 behavioral and developmental outcomes. In the multivariate analysis, substantiation status was not significantly associated with any of the 10 outcomes after adjusting for prior functioning, prior maltreatment status, and sociodemographic characteristics. Findings from within-site analyses were generally consistent with the pooled analyses in finding no association between substantiation status and the outcomes examined.

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**Conclusions:** In this high-risk sample, the behavioral and developmental outcomes of 8-year-old children with unsubstantiated and substantiated maltreatment reports filed between ages 4 and 8 were indistinguishable. Future research should attempt to replicate these findings on probability samples that represent the full range of childhood maltreatment risk and with models that control for the impact of social services.

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## Introduction

What do unsubstantiated and substantiated allegations of child maltreatment really measure? The answer to this question has important implications for policy-makers, who frequently rely on counts and rates of substantiated reports to gauge the demand for, and effectiveness of, Child Protective Services (CPS); for child welfare agencies, whose interventions are often tied to substantiation status; and for researchers, who routinely use official reports as their sole measure of childhood maltreatment experiences (Drake, 1996b).

The substantiation process begins when a case of alleged or suspected maltreatment is brought to the attention of Child Protective Services. Many of these reports are screened out by CPS workers and never investigated. Currently, only 60% of alleged maltreatment reports received by CPS are accepted or “screened in” for investigation (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2001, p. 1). Following an investigation, CPS typically assigns one of two dispositions to the report. The disposition of “substantiated” is used to identify reports where the investigation yields sufficient evidence to conclude that maltreatment occurred. The disposition of “unsubstantiated” refers to investigations that do not find sufficient evidence of maltreatment. Some states include a third disposition—“indicated”—to identify cases where there is reason to suspect that maltreatment occurred, but where the evidence does not meet legal or policy criteria for substantiation. For descriptive and research purposes, indicated cases are commonly grouped with substantiated cases—a practice that we follow in this paper. Currently, 29% of investigated reports in the US are substantiated or indicated (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2001, p. 3).

Within the child welfare community there is a lack of consensus on the meaning of substantiation status. At one end of the continuum is a relatively small, but vocal minority who argue that unsubstantiated reports are predominantly false reports. Proponents of this position have pointed to the high rate of unsubstantiated reports as evidence of excessive inappropriate reporting (Besharov, 1990, 1998). At the other end of the continuum are those who argue that the majority of unsubstantiated reports involve maltreatment, harm, or service needs (Drake, 1996b). According to this latter perspective the distinction between unsubstantiated and substantiated has little practical value for policy, practice, and research purposes (Drake, 1996b; Giovannoni, 1989; Leiter, Myers, & Zingraff, 1994).

At the heart of this debate are fundamental questions about the reliability and validity of the substantiation process. Reliability refers to the likelihood that, when presented with the same tangible evidence surrounding a specific allegation, the substantiation decision made by two different caseworkers, county agencies, or states will agree. Given that the substantiation decision is typically influenced by factors beyond the evidence surrounding a specific allegation, such as chronicity or history of abuse (English, Marshall, Coghlan, Brummel, & Orme, 2002) and reporter identity (Drake, 1995; Zuravin, Orme, & Hegar,

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