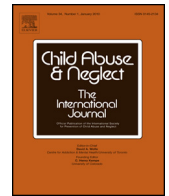


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Child Abuse & Neglect



Research article

Child maltreatment in Taiwan for 2004–2013: A shift in age group and forms of maltreatment

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ABSTRACT

Cases of child maltreatment are being increasingly reported in Taiwan. However, the trend or changes of child maltreatment in Taiwan are fragmentary and lack empirical evidence. This study analyzed the epidemiological characteristics of substantiated child maltreatment cases from the previous decade, using mortality as an indicator to investigate the care of children who experienced substantiated maltreatment in the past to determine any new developments. Data for analysis and estimates were retrieved from the Department of Statistics in the Ministry of the Interior from 2004 to 2013. Trend analyses were conducted using the Joinpoint Regression Program. The child maltreatment rate in Taiwan was found to have nearly tripled from 2004 to 2013. A greater increase in the maltreatment of girls than boys and the maltreatment of aboriginal children than non-aboriginal children was noted from 2004 to 2013. When stratified by age group, the increase in maltreatment was most pronounced in children aged 12–17 years, and girls aged 12–17 years experienced the greatest increase in maltreatment. In terms of the proportional changes of different maltreatment forms among substantiated child maltreatment cases, child neglect was decreasing. The increase in sexual abuse was higher than for any other form of maltreatment and surpassed neglect by the end of 2013. Furthermore, the mortality rate of children with substantiated maltreatment record is increasing in Taiwan, whereas the mortality rate among children without any substantiated maltreatment record is decreasing. The results of this study highlight the need for policy reform in Taiwan regarding child maltreatment.

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Introduction

Cases of child maltreatment are being increasingly reported in Taiwan and have more than quadrupled between 2004 (i.e., 8,494) and 2013 (i.e., 34,545; [Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2014a, 2014b](#)). The 2010 US Country Reports on Human Rights Practices stated that in Taiwan, “Child abuse continues to be a widespread problem” ([Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor of United States, 2011](#)). According to guidelines set forth by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) for measuring a child’s well-being, an investigation led by the [Child Welfare League Foundation in 2008](#) revealed that Taiwan’s performance was ranked fourth from the bottom in the dimension of children’s subjective well-being and second from the bottom for personal safety compared with 22 other OECD countries. Another investigation

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in 2013 by [Child Health Alliance Taiwan](#) revealed that for the dimension of health and safety and subjective well-being, Taiwan's performance was ranked third from the bottom compared with 24 other OECD countries, a highly unfavorable result. Several relevant empirical studies have revealed that numerous major causes of adult deaths as well as chronic physical and mental diseases are closely related to adverse childhood experiences, even exhibiting a strongly graded or dose–response relationship with these experiences ([Chapman et al., 2004](#); [Dong et al., 2004](#); [Felitti et al., 1998](#)); therefore, child maltreatment, with the potential for a lifelong impact on the victim, is a serious public health concern in Taiwan.

In the past, efforts have been made to reduce child maltreatment in Taiwan, mainly through statutory provisions. The Children Welfare Act, the provisions of which were mostly declaratory, was promulgated in 1973 ([Ministry of Justice, 2004](#)). The general belief of parenting behaviors in the Taiwanese sociocultural context at that time was best represented with the Chinese proverb, “Even a vicious tiger will not eat its cubs.” The maintenance of parental authority and children's obedience through harsh discipline were emphasized in child rearing for filial piety ([Wu, 1981](#)). Until 1993, similar to several Asian countries, Taiwan ratified the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child, circa 1990s ([Shin, 2013](#); [Vitavasiri, 2013](#); [Woon, 2013](#)), amended the Children Welfare Act ([Ministry of Justice, 2004](#)), and adopted the concepts of a child's best interests and “the parent of the nation” (i.e., *parens patriae*) from Western countries. In addition, the Children's Bureau of the Ministry of the Interior established a national databank of substantiated child maltreatment cases in 1999 ([Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2014a, 2014b](#)). In 2003, Taiwan promulgated the Children and Youth Welfare Act, which combined the Children Welfare Act and the Youth Welfare Act. In 2006, an amendment to the Educational Fundamental Act resulted in the banning of corporal punishment in the education system ([Ministry of Justice, 2013](#)). In 2011, the Children and Youth Welfare Act was modified into the Protection of Children and Youths Welfare and Rights Act ([Ministry of Justice, 2015](#)). Despite laws on child maltreatment changing in Taiwan to shift the issue of child protection from merely a private family matter into the public arena (also by imposing heavier penalties and widened mandatory reporting as approaches; [Wang, 2011](#)), no consistent evidence for a decrease in child maltreatment cases was noted ([Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2014a, 2014b](#)).

Taiwan's child protection services, similar to those in the United States, have used procedures designed to ensure child safety. Social workers from the Center for Prevention of Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault in each locality are statutorily required to investigate and determine whether a case is “substantiated” after reports of possible child maltreatment. In the past decade, the expansion of mandatory reporting from professional fields (e.g., involving medical workers, educational staff, and social workers, village heads, and neighborhood magistrates) has led to a steady increase in mandatory reporting, from 52% in 2004 to 89% in 2013 ([Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2014a, 2014b](#)). The number of child maltreatment cases reported has increased, the ratio of substantiated cases resulting from such reports has decreased significantly ($p < .001$) from 92% to 47% during 2004–2013. Similar to other countries, Taiwan is concerned with the increase in child maltreatment reports because many of these cases are determined to be unsubstantiated. Such instances necessitate additional investigations, which can strain the limited resources available to child protection services and prevent children in real danger from receiving adequate assistance ([O'Donnell, Scott, & Stanley, 2008](#)).

Child maltreatment prevention and intervention strategies are a complex public health topic, involving biological, psychological, and societal structures that are neither monolithic nor static. Taiwanese society has been undergoing rapid changes over the past decade. Wealth disparities and the number of maternal incarcerations are increasing ([Directorate-General of Budget, Accounting and Statistics, Executive Yuan, Taiwan, 2013](#); [Ministry of Justice, 2011](#)) with social media changing communication practices. Several news reports concerning child abuse, demonstrating the consequence of an incarcerated mother having committed their child to an inadequate caregiver, have emerged.

The complete depiction of how these changes impact child maltreatment in Taiwan is fragmentary and lacks empirical evidence. In fact, most Taiwanese studies on child maltreatment have involved conducting community surveys to estimate the prevalence of child maltreatment. The respondents of community surveys are typically recruited from the general or student population. Moreover, these surveys are self-reported and use a cross-sectional design. Therefore, to better understand the trend of child maltreatment, another approach would entail considering substantiated maltreatment cases as an alternative metric. We used these routinely recorded data because they are sentinel reports; they are national empirical data to analyze the trend in understanding the complex problem of child maltreatment, which results from a combination of psychobiological factors, culture, stress, and the expectations of upbringing, poverty, and other variables in a rapidly changing environment. Although measuring substantiated maltreatment cases might lead to underestimation compared with investigating the prevalence of child maltreatment for research purposes in Taiwan by relying on self-reported data in community surveys ([Chou, Su, Wu, & Chen, 2011](#); [Feng, Chang, Chang, Fetzer, & Wang, 2015](#); [Yen et al., 2008](#)), this approach would in fact reflect a sample of child maltreatment victims who have requested assistance over the years. Therefore, substantiated maltreatment cases might be of special value for enhancing our understanding of child maltreatment from a different perspective. Our trend analysis on child maltreatment involves conceptualizing and quantifying child maltreatment as an approach to comprehending its scale and the affected children's characteristics over the past decade in a variable and dynamic changing sociocultural context, which is essential for more effective prevention and intervention in Taiwan. Therefore, we analyzed the epidemiological characteristics of substantiated child maltreatment cases from the previous decade (i.e., the 2004–2013 period) and used mortality as an indicator to investigate the care of children who experienced substantiated maltreatment in the past, so that changes in child maltreatment in Taiwan can be identified to develop an effective and reliable child protection network.

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