



Fatal and non-fatal child maltreatment in the US: An analysis of child, caregiver, and service utilization with the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data Set[☆]



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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to compare children who are fatally and non-fatally maltreated in the United States. In this first national-comparison study, we used the Child Abuse and Neglect Data Set of children and families who encounter/receive support from child welfare services. We found that children who were fatally maltreated were younger, were more likely to live with both their parents, and that their families experienced more financial and housing instability compared to non-fatally maltreated children. Overall, families in which children die use/receive fewer social services, as compared to families in which children live. We discuss the results with regard to child welfare practice and research.

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Introduction

In 2010, 1,560 children, or 2.07 per 100,000 children, in the United States died as a result of abuse or neglect (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2011). Child maltreatment fatalities (CMFs) are most often perpetrated by victims' parents or caregivers (Kunz & Bahr, 1996). Maltreatment-related fatalities have received significant attention in the last several decades (Graham, Stepura, Baumann, & Kern, 2010; Granik, 1991; Jonson-Reid, Chance, & Drake, 2007; Stiffman, Schnitzer, Adam, Kruse, & Ewigman, 2002) but there are still significant gaps in our knowledge of what places a child at-risk for fatal maltreatment. A number of studies have compared children who have died from abuse or neglect with children who died from other causes (Sabotta & Davis, 1992; Schnitzer & Ewigman, 2008; Stiffman et al., 2002). Only a handful of studies have compared the characteristics of families that perpetrated fatal and non-fatal child maltreatment (Chance & Scannapieco, 2002; Graham et al., 2010), and none have used a national sample. This article compares the child, family, and perpetrator characteristics of families substantiated for fatal and non-fatal child maltreatment using the U.S. National Child Abuse and Neglect Data Set (NCANDS).

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Child maltreatment fatalities

CMFs result from a wide variety of inflicted and uninflicted behaviors on the part of caretakers. This can include actively killing a child through beatings, a shaking injury, or suffocation, or passively killing a child by not providing necessary medical treatment, leaving a newborn unattended, or not providing necessary supervision for children (National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System, 2000). The annual *Child Maltreatment* report aggregates US state-level data from NCANDS and is published by the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. Statistics from the 2010 report show that 1,560 children died from maltreatment, which is a rate of 2.07 per 100,000 live children (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2011). Previous research, however, has shown that CMFs are undercounted and the number of victims each year is much higher than official statistics because maltreatment can be difficult to recognize in young children and because there are often no witnesses to the events leading up to the death (Ewigman, Kivlahan, & Land, 1993; Herman-Giddens et al., 1999). Despite this, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2003) has estimated that aside from Mexico, the United States has more CMFs than any other rich nation.

The annual *Child Maltreatment* report also provides statistics on the type of maltreatment that children suffered. In 2010, 76.7% of victims experienced neglect, and 25.1% experienced physical abuse. (These figures tally to more than 100% because children often experience multiple forms of maltreatment; U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2011.) UNICEF also reports that most CMF victims die of neglect (UNICEF, 2003).

Despite the important information that is included in the annual *Child Maltreatment* report, large quantities of information about victim, family, and household characteristics are not included. The NCANDS dataset provides researchers with the opportunity to examine the potential differences between fatal and non-fatal child maltreatment, something which has received sparse attention in the professional literature (Chance & Scannapieco, 2002; Graham et al., 2010). The NCANDS dataset provides an opportunity to examine child, family, and service characteristics that are related to non-fatal maltreatment and to explore their potential relationship to maltreatment fatalities. Further, to date, no published research has used the NCANDS dataset to examine CMFs in detail (M. Dineen, personal communication, June 13, 2013), which makes it an untapped resource for studying this outcome of abuse and neglect. Thus, our analyses seek to address this gap.

Sources of data

US studies examining victim and family social characteristics tend to fall into one of three categories. The first category includes studies which describe victims and perpetrators of CMFs (Kunz & Bahr, 1996; Smithey, 1997, 1998). These studies are often specific to certain US states (Anderson, Ambrosino, Valentine, & Lauderdale, 1983; Bonner, Crow, Testa, & Niec, 1997; Herman-Giddens, Smith, Mittal, Carlson, & Butts, 2003; Margolin, 1990; Welch & Bonner, 2013) or population-specific (Lucas et al., 2002). The second category includes studies which compare children who died from maltreatment with children who died from all other causes. Such studies often use data from medical examiners (Sabotta & Davis, 1992; Schnitzer & Ewigman, 2008; Stiffman et al., 2002). Studies in the third category compare fatal and non-fatal maltreatment among families receiving child welfare services. There have been two such studies, both conducted using Texas data (Chance & Scannapieco, 2002; Graham et al., 2010). To date there has been no research on CMFs using a database of child maltreatment nationwide.

Demographic characteristics of victims, perpetrators, and families

The most consistent risk factor for CMF victimization is age. Younger children, especially under 1 year, are at the greatest risk of dying from maltreatment. In the United States in 2010, 47.7% of CMF victims were under the age of 1, and 79.4% of victims were under the age of 4 (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2011). These findings are consistent with the literature using international (Brandon et al., 2006; UNICEF, 2003), United States (Kunz & Bahr, 1996), and US state datasets (Anderson et al., 1983; Beveridge, 1994). Most studies have found a slightly higher rate of male than female victimization; in 2011, 60.1% of victims were male (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2011). A national US study of parent-perpetrated homicide found that between 1976 and 1985, 55% of victims nationwide killed by their parents were male (Kunz & Bahr, 1996). Similar findings have been reported using data from state child welfare records (Anderson et al., 1983), child fatality review teams (Beveridge, 1994), and military records (Lucas et al., 2002). Some racial and ethnic minority victims are overrepresented as compared to their presence in the population at large (Herman-Giddens et al., 2003; Kunz & Bahr, 1996), which is consistent with non-fatal child maltreatment (Knott & Donovan, 2010). One study of data from multiple state-level child fatality review teams found that African American children were represented at 3 times their rate in the general population (Levine, Freeman, & Compaan, 1994), a finding that was confirmed by a recent US study of fatal child neglect in Oklahoma (Welch & Bonner, 2013).

Throughout the world, the majority of perpetrators of CMFs are parents or other caregivers (UNICEF, 2003). According to US national statistics, in 2010, 79.2% of CMFs were perpetrated by birthparents: 51.1% were committed by mothers or mothers and another individual, 18.7% were committed by fathers or fathers and another individual, and 21.9% were committed by mothers and fathers together (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2011). Similar figures were found from the U.S. Uniform Crime Reports of parent-to-child homicides, with 52.5% of perpetrators being mothers (Kunz & Bahr, 1996); a study of fatal maltreatment in Iowa found that mothers were responsible for all deaths 41% of the time and for neglect deaths, 53% of the time (Margolin, 1990). A recent study in Oklahoma spanning three decades found that mothers were responsible

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