



# Predictors of re-entry into the child protection system in Singapore: A cumulative ecological–transactional risk model



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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the risk factors of re-entry for 1,750 child protection cases in Singapore using a cumulative ecological–transactional risk model. Using administrative data, the present study found that the overall percentage of Child Protection Service (CPS) re-entry in Singapore is 10.5% based on 1,750 cases, with a range from 3.9% (within 1 year) to 16.5% (within 8 years after case closure). One quarter of the re-entry cases were observed to occur within 9 months from case closure. Seventeen risk factors, as identified from the extant literature, were tested for their utility to predict CPS re-entry in this study using a series of Cox regression analyses. A final list of seven risk factors (i.e., children's age at entry, case type, case closure result, duration of case, household income, family size, and mother's employment status) was used to create a cumulative risk score. The results supported the cumulative risk model in that higher risk score is related to higher risk of CPS re-entry. Understanding the prevalence of CPS re-entry and the risk factors associated with re-entry is the key to informing practice and policy in a culturally relevant way. The results from this study could then be used to facilitate critical case management decisions in order to enhance positive outcomes of families and children in Singapore's care system.

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## Introduction

Child maltreatment is a global problem. According to the World Health Organization, approximately 23% of people report being physically abused as children, whereas 20% of women and 5–10% of men report being sexually abused as children (Butchart, Harvey, Mian, & Furniss, 2006). The negative effect of child maltreatment is well documented in research literature (Trocmé, Tourigny, MacLaurin, & Fallon, 2003). According to a recent meta-analysis, child maltreatment may lead to a range of long-term mental health problems, chronic diseases and risky lifestyles (Norman et al., 2012). Therefore, protecting children from maltreatment and the associated adverse outcomes is the primary goal of state child welfare agencies (Connell, Bergeron, Katz, Saunders, & Tebes, 2007).

Despite the efforts to prevent maltreatment recurrence, there are children who are involved with the Child Protection Services (CPS) on multiple occasions. According to Thompson and Wiley (2009), the rate of re-entry ranged from 16% to 62% depending on the length of follow-up. In an 8-year follow-up study, the re-entry rate was as high as 67% for children

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aged 4–12 years (Proctor et al., 2012). Re-entry in CPS is usually indicative of continued and chronic maltreatment, which is associated with worse long-term outcomes (Chaffin, Bard, Hecht, & Silovsky, 2011; Éthier, Lemelin, & Lacharité, 2004; Fluke, Shusterman, Hollinshead, & Yuan, 2008). As such, it is not only an immediate concern of CPS but also potentially a long-term cost to society (Thompson & Wiley, 2009). Preventing re-entry is thus one of the critical objectives of CPS and an important measure of effective intervention.

### *A cumulative ecological–transactional model*

The aforementioned concerns highlight the importance of identifying the risk factors of CPS re-entry. Many studies in this area have been guided by the ecological–transactional framework of human development and child maltreatment (Belsky, 1993; Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Cicchetti & Lynch, 1993; Sameroff, 1975). This framework posits that risk factors occur at different levels from specific child characteristics to broad societal–cultural contexts (Belsky, 1993; Sidebotham & Heron, 2006). Past studies have shown that risk factors on the following three proximal levels are of the most interest to CPS: (1) child case characteristics, (2) household environment, and (3) parental background. According to the ecological–transactional model, the most proximal factors occur at the child level, including children's characteristics such as gender and race. The second proximal level is the family environment, such as family structure and household income, which interact directly with children's characteristics. The third proximal level is parental background, such as parental age and parental education.

*Child case characteristics.* Past studies have examined the re-entry risk based on children's demographic and case characteristics. As for demographic background, the majority of studies have found that the risk of CPS re-entry decreases with age (Connell et al., 2007; Drake, Jonson-Reid, Way, & Chung, 2003; Fluke et al., 2008; Fuller & Nieto, 2009; Kahn & Schwalbe, 2010; Lipien & Forthofer, 2004). Moreover, the risk of CPS re-entry is higher for Caucasian children than for minority groups such as African Americans (Connell et al., 2007; Fuller & Nieto, 2009; Kahn & Schwalbe, 2010; Lipien & Forthofer, 2004) and does not differ across genders (Fuller & Nieto, 2009; Hélie, Laurier, Pineau-Villeneuve, & Royer, 2013; Kahn & Schwalbe, 2010; Lipien & Forthofer, 2004; Thompson & Wiley, 2009). In contrast, there are studies that report inconsistent age, gender, and race differences. For example, one study reported that the risk of re-entry is lower for infants and young children who receive more services (Palusci, 2011). Another study reported that girls have a slightly higher risk of re-entry than boys (Fluke et al., 2008). Similarly, there are also studies that report that some minority groups, such as Africans, Indians, and Alaskans (Fluke et al., 2008) and people of aboriginal descent (Hélie et al., 2013) have a higher risk of CPS re-entry. These inconsistent findings highlight the importance of culturally relevant studies.

As for case characteristics, past studies have consistently shown that prior involvement in CPS predicts higher risk of re-entry (DePanfilis & Zuravin, 2002; English, Marshall, Brummel, & Orme, 1999; Fluke et al., 2008; Hélie et al., 2013). As for service duration, the results are mixed. Some studies have found that a shorter service period is indicative of a higher risk of re-entry (Jonson-Reid, 2003; Yampolskaya, Mowery, & Dollard, 2013), whereas others have found no significant effect of length of service (Hélie et al., 2013). Apropos of case types, there are inconsistent findings as well; specifically, some studies have reported that sexual abuse victims are the least likely to experience re-entry compared to physical abuse and neglect victims, possibly because sexual abuse victims are likely to receive more extensive services that reduce the likelihood of CPS re-entry (Connell et al., 2007; Fuller & Nieto, 2009; Lipien & Forthofer, 2004). However, other researchers have found that physical or sexual abuse victims have a higher risk of CPS re-entry (Thompson & Wiley, 2009). In another study, physical abuse cases were not found to be significantly different from sexual abuse or neglect cases (Kahn & Schwalbe, 2010). These discrepancies in findings could be due to the level and effectiveness of services provided to clients in different studies and again imply the necessity of context-based research (Kahn & Schwalbe, 2010).

*Household environment and parental background.* Household environment also ranks among the most important proximal factors that affect CPS engagement and re-entry. Past studies have shown that household poverty is one of the strongest predictors of child maltreatment and CPS re-entry (Connell et al., 2007; Kahn & Schwalbe, 2010; MacKenzie, Kotch, & Lee, 2011; Sidebotham & Heron, 2006). In addition, studies have documented that non-intact families (such as single-parent or re-formed families), large families, and families with violence exposure tend to have higher risk (Fowler et al., 2013; Palusci & Ondersma, 2012; Proctor et al., 2012). As for parental background, it is now widely recognized that parental problems are strongly related to a child's CPS re-entry (Sidebotham & Heron, 2006). The extant literature suggests that young parents, lower parental educational achievement, and unemployment status are consistently strong indicators of CPS engagement and re-entry (Begle, Dumas, & Hanson, 2010; MacKenzie, Kotch, & Lee, 2011; Sidebotham & Heron, 2006). All these factors may affect the risk of CPS re-entry through influencing the household environment and the parent–child interactions. For example, a single teenage mother with low educational achievement is less likely to provide a safe, stable, and nurturing home environment for her child to cope with adverse events (Schofield, Lee, & Merrick, 2013). Therefore, repeated and chronic child abuse is more likely to occur in such households (Belsky, 1993).

The ecological–transactional framework provides guidelines for identifying a set of risk factors for each level and could thus inform intervention programs. For example, identifying all possible significant parental factors could help inform the development and delivery of more effective parenting programs. More importantly, advocates of this framework have emphasized the importance of the interplay of a variety of factors at multiple levels. In other words, factors at different levels influence each other reciprocally and dynamically throughout human development (MacKenzie, Kotch, Lee, Augsberger, & Hutto, 2011). Guided by this framework, past studies have tested the mediation effects and interaction effects among different

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