



Neighborhood informal social control and child maltreatment: A comparison of protective and punitive approaches[☆]

Clifton R. Emery^{a,b,*}, Hai Nguyen Trung^a, Shali Wu^c

^a School of Social Welfare, Yonsei University, Republic of Korea

^b Department of Psychology, Tsinghua University, Beijing, China

^c Department of Marketing, School of Economics and Management, Tsinghua University, Beijing, China

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ABSTRACT

This paper introduces a new measure of informal social control of child maltreatment (henceforth ISC_CM) by neighbors. Research literature typically uses collective efficacy (Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997) to examine neighborhood informal social control. We argue that double standards about the application of informal social control to family versus street crime requires a measure of informal social control specific to child maltreatment. We also argue that how neighbors intervene may matter as much as whether they intervene. Neighbors may engage in ISC_CM aimed at protecting the child and calming the parent, or more punitive ISC_CM aimed at deterring future abuse. We tested the relationship of both with very severe physical abuse and with abuse related child behavior problems. We used a random, 2-stage cluster design of Hanoi to collect the sample. Thirty Hanoi wards were randomly selected using probability proportional to size sampling. A simple random sample of families in each ward was then drawn using local government lists of ward residents. Based on power analysis, the target sample size was 300. Of 315 residents contacted, 293 participated, yielding a response rate of 93%. Random effects regression models (which estimate a random effect for each ward) were run in *Stata 11*. We found that protective ISC_CM is associated with lower odds of very severe physical abuse and lower reported externalizing problems when abuse is present. Perceived collective efficacy and punitive ISC_CM is not associated with lower odds of very severe physical abuse. Implications for research, policy and practice are discussed. We conclude that further investigation of neighbor ISC_CM is needed to replicate the findings in other cultural contexts, ultimately followed by experimental manipulation of ISC_CM in a neighborhood context to examine the effects on child maltreatment. If further research corroborates the current findings, the development of neighborhood intervention programs to enhance protective ISC_CM may assist materially in reducing very severe child abuse and negative consequences stemming from such abuse.

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* Corresponding author address: School of Social Welfare, Yonsei University, Republic of Korea.

Neighborhood characteristics in general (Fledderjohann & Johnson, 2012; Sulimani-Aidan & Benbenishty, 2013), and neighborhoods characterized by social disorganization in particular (Gracia & Herrero, 2006), are important in the study of child maltreatment. Coulton, Crampton, Irwin, Spilsbury, and Korbin (2007) argue that there are three pathways by which neighborhoods affect maltreatment: (1) behavioral, (2) definition, recognition and reporting, and (3) selection. Coulton et al. (2007) note two major research traditions on maltreatment and neighborhood: social disorganization, represented by Sampson, Morenoff, and Gannon-Rowley (2002) and ecological transactional development, led by developmental psychologists (cf. Belsky & Jaffee, 2006; Bronfenbrenner, Moen, & Garbarino, 1984). The concept of informal social control, and hence, informal social control of child maltreatment (ISC_CM), stems from the social disorganization tradition.

Informal social control occurs when ordinary people (as opposed to employees of the state) undertake actions to achieve public order and prevent crime (Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997). Despite a burgeoning literature on relationships between neighborhoods, informal social control, and child maltreatment (Guterman, Lee, Taylor, & Rathouz, 2009; Molnar, Buka, Brennan, Holton, & Earls, 2003; Sabol, Coulton, & Korbin, 2004; Yonas et al., 2010), as well as several multi-million dollar neighborhood intervention studies, evidence on neighborhood ISC_CM remains mixed (Daro & Dodge, 2009).

Using the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods data (well known for the development of neighborhood informal social control and solidarity as components of collective efficacy), Molnar, Buka, Holton, and Earls (2003) found no relationship between neighborhood informal social control and physical abuse of children. The Strong Communities neighborhood intervention, uniquely focused on increasing collective responsibility for children, succeeded in engaging communities, increasing parent self reported positive interactions with children, and decreasing neglect, but observed changes in parents' collective efficacy, their perceptions of their neighbors' use of physical punishment, and their reports of their own use of physical punishment were modest at best. However, given many other positive results in evaluations of Strong Communities, the gaps in desired results may have had more to do with low statistical power for some comparisons and a delay in baseline measurements (two years into the project) than with true null relationships (Melton, 2013). Guterman et al. (2009) found a significant relationship between perceived neighborhood process (including informal social control) and physical abuse. Yonas et al. (2010) found that perceived collective efficacy (which includes neighborhood informal social control) moderates the relationship between neglect and child externalizing behavior problems but not between physical and sexual abuse and child externalizing behavior problems. Likewise, Molnar et al. (2003) found no relationship between collective efficacy and physical abuse. There are reasons to think that these null findings might have been significant had the authors (1) used a different measure or sampling technique (2) examined a non-western collectivist culture, or (3) possibly even conducted their analyses differently. Differences between the US and 'extremely collectivist' cultures like Vietnam have been found in the resolution of social dilemmas (Parks & Vu, 1994, p. 713), with Vietnamese subjects characterized as having high amounts of cooperation even in highly competitive conditions. Yonas et al. (2010) might have found a protective effect against neglect but not abuse because American neighbors are willing to provide supplementary care for neglected children in the neighborhood, but may still be unwilling to intervene directly in cases of physical abuse, which would involve confronting the parents. Vietnamese people may be more willing to make their neighbors' business their own. Further, the abuse sample in Yonas et al. (2010) comes from a CPS sample. If CPS samples represent a harder core group of abusive families less amenable to neighborhood influences than the general population, Yonas et al.'s (2010) null finding may not be generalizable to population samples.

Moreover, it seems that both Yonas et al. (2010) and Molnar et al. (2003) measured informal social control of social deviance outside the home (neighbors would intervene if "children were skipping school", p. 40) but not informal social control by neighbors of violence in the home. If neighborhood informal social control outside the home does not correlate well with informal social control of private space, the collective efficacy measure used by Yonas et al. (2010) and Molnar et al. (2003) may inadequately capture neighborhood effects on child maltreatment. Finally, Yonas et al. (2010) lump together neighborhood solidarity and informal social control in the collective efficacy measure, and physical and sexual abuse in the abuse measure. Disaggregation may have produced different results.

We argue that these mixed results occur to some extent as a result of measuring the wrong variables. Most research (cf. Guterman et al., 2009; Molnar et al., 2003; Yonas et al., 2010) on neighborhood ISC_CM uses Sampson et al.'s (1997) collective efficacy measure of informal social control, a measure that asks questions about control of street crime and deviance, and social problems in public spaces. Finding a relationship then depends on whether or not informal social control of public spaces correlates well with ISC_CM in the neighborhoods sampled. Empirical relationships between collective efficacy and family violence are at times counterintuitive, possibly because neighborhoods willing to control street crime may have a more traditional, hands-off approach to family violence (Emery, Jolley, & Wu, 2010). In other words, willingness to intervene against street crime may for some neighborhoods be negatively correlated with willingness to intervene against family violence, rendering a weak or inconsistent relationship between collective efficacy and maltreatment. (Momentarily oversimplifying the problem for heuristic purposes, two different kinds of people may intervene informally to stop crime on the street, (a) those who believe that parents beating children is illegal and immoral, and (b) those who believe parents beating children is necessary to control children's behavior. People of type (a) will also informally control physical child abuse. People of type (b) may not. If types (a) and (b) tend to cluster in different neighborhoods, studies of collective efficacy will find relationships with child maltreatment when high collective efficacy neighborhoods in the sample are mostly of type (a), and will not find relationships with child maltreatment when high collective efficacy neighborhoods in the sample are mostly of type (b).) There is plenty of literature to suggest a relationship between collective efficacy and violent crime on the street (cf. Sampson et al., 1997), but as the literature shows, its relationship to violence behind closed doors is more tenuous. Yet, to

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