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Predictors of substantiated re-reports in a sample of children with initial unsubstantiated reports



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ABSTRACT

Many children with unsubstantiated reports of child abuse and neglect repeatedly return to the child protection system, indicating that unsubstantiated reports may represent actual child maltreatment or risk for future maltreatment. Identifying patterns of re-reporting and predictors that may be associated with later substantiated re-reporting could help to identify children who are very likely to be maltreated. This knowledge may guide the development of policies and interventions to prevent further maltreatment and the risk for re-reports. The aims of this study were to: (1) measure the period between the time of the initial reports that were not substantiated and the time of first substantiated re-reports; and (2) identify factors associated with the risk of later substantiated re-reporting. The study analyzed secondary data from the Longitudinal Studies on Child Abuse and Neglect (LONGSCAN) through survival analysis. Of the 378 children with initially unsubstantiated reports, 81% were re-reported, of which almost two-thirds were substantiated. Children who were younger, non-white, and had caregivers with more depressive symptoms were at increased risk of a substantiated re-report. Among those that were later substantiated, 20% were substantiated within one year. Findings suggest that targeted preventative services should be developed and provided for families who are reported for the first time, even if not substantiated.

During 2014, approximately 2.2 million child maltreatment reports were investigated by child protection services (CPS) workers in the United States. About 20% of the reports were substantiated, but the other four-fifths did not contain sufficient evidence to conclude or suspect under state law that the child was maltreated or at risk of being maltreated (USDHHS, 2014). However, many children who are initially reported but not substantiated continue to return repeatedly to CPS (Fluke, Shusterman, Hollinshead, & Yuan, 2008). Only a few studies have examined the rate of unsubstantiated reports that were later substantiated when re-reported, yielding widely varying estimates ranging from 10 to 15% within 4.5 years (Way, Chung, Jonson-Reid, & Drake, 2001) to 83% within 11–15 years (Thompson & Wiley, 2009). <

Child protection workers have a duty to protect children from maltreatment, and one of their major responsibilities is to investigate suspected maltreatment and determine whether reports should be substantiated. Substantiation is a statement about the validity of a report based on state laws, agency guidelines, and the information gathered during the investigation (DePanfilis & Salus, 2003). However, many reports may not be substantiated for several reasons, such as insufficient evidence to conclude maltreatment, and/or circumstances that do not meet the criteria established by CPS policy in accordance with state law (Drake, 1996; Kohl, Jonson-Reid, & Drake, 2009).

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Policy makers and professionals in child welfare tend to believe that substantiated cases represent children who have truly been maltreated whereas unsubstantiated cases represent children who have not been maltreated (Casaneve et al., 2015; Kohl et al., 2009). However, studies indicate that substantiated and unsubstantiated cases are often similar in terms of the presence of risk factors, outcome for the child, and future risk (Drake, Jonson-Reid, Way, & Chung, 2003; Hussey et al., 2005; Kohl et al., 2009). This indicates that unsubstantiated reports may represent actual child maltreatment (Connell, Bergeron, Katz, Saunders, & Tebes, 2007).

Therefore, CPS workers should pay attention to all reported families rather than focus only on substantiation status. Unsubstantiated reports may eventually show a pattern that can be substantiated; therefore, identification of risk factors for later substantiation is of crucial importance. The initial report to CPS provides a window of opportunity to help vulnerable children who may eventually be victims of abuse and neglect, by providing appropriate early intervention and prevention services. The current study uses Longitudinal Studies on Child Abuse and Neglect (LONGSCAN) data to follow children from young ages until they turn 18; the data are used to examine a continuum of risk exposure to child maltreatment, ranging from children with risk factors but no known maltreatment to those with an early history of maltreatment and foster care placement (Runyan et al., 1998).

1. Rates of repeated reports

Repeated reports to CPS are of major concern because the main goal of CPS is to stop child maltreatment, and re-reports may indicate that the system has failed to ensure the child's safety and to provide protection (Helie, Laurier, Pineau-Villeneuve, & Royer, 2013; Fluke et al., 2008). Also, repeated reports involve vulnerable children, and continuous exposure to abuse and neglect has negative effects on the child's development and well-being (DePanfilis & Zuravin, 1999a).

There are multiple studies of re-reporting rates but only a few followed cases with unsubstantiated index reports followed by reports that were eventually substantiated. English et al. (2002) found that one-third of cases that were initially unsubstantiated were substantiated within 18 months. Way et al. (2001) found that 10–15% of the unsubstantiated reports were re-reported and substantiated within 4.5 years. In Florida, 21.5% of families with unsubstantiated reports had substantiated re-reports within 5.4 years, and the average interval between the initial unsubstantiated-to-substantiated reports was 466 days (1.28 years; Bae, Solomon, & Gelles, 2007). In general, the rate of re-reporting increases as does the length of the follow up. Thompson and Wiley's (2009) study on the Midwest infants sample of the LONGSCAN found that the majority (83%) of unsubstantiated reports were eventually followed by substantiated ones 11–15 years later.

2. Risk factors associated with substantiated Re-Reports

Child maltreatment is a phenomenon that is likely to occur as a result of a complex interplay of different stress producing factors. According to the ecological developmental theory, a child develops within a series of multiple, nested social systems beginning with direct interaction with the family and extending through indirect influence from the community, society, and cultural traditions (Bronfenbrenner, 1976, 1979). Bronfenbrenner (1976, 1979) claimed that a person's development is affected by everything in the surrounding environment, and divided the person's environment into five different levels: the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, the macrosystem, and the chronosystem.

The first level (micro) consists of individual factors with some related to the parent and others to the child. Risk factors at the second level (meso) are related to the communication or the dynamics in the family. Risk factors at the third level (exo) are related to the social system surrounding the family, including informal support, formal support that can be based on existing governmental family policy, and the community. The fourth level (macro) describes the culture in which individuals live. Cultural contexts include developing and industrialized countries, socioeconomic status, poverty, and ethnicity. Finally, the chronosystem level includes a patterning of environmental events and transitions over the life course, as well as sociohistorical circumstances (Bronfenbrenner, 1976, 1979).

A range of studies have examined risk factors that correlate with substantiated re-reports to understand the individual, familial, community, and systemic issues related to repeatedly reported and substantiated. Child characteristics have been found to be correlated with substantiated re-reports in many studies. Younger children are at greater risk to be substantiated on re-reports compared to older children (Bae, Solomon, & Gelles, 2009; Fuller & Nieto, 2009; Fluke et al., 2008; Lipien & Forthofer, 2004). Bae et al. (2009) found that children aged less than 12 years old were more likely to experience multiple maltreatment recurrences, compared to those aged more than 12 years old. The odds that a child victim will experience multiple recurrences relative to a single recurrence decreases by 2.6% for each one year increase in the age of child victim. Also, Lipien and Forthofer (2004) found that the risk of recurrence decreased steadily as child's age increased, and children under 4 years old were at greatest risk for recurrence. Fluke et al. (2008) found that the cumulative percentages for substantiated re-report declined as children age; the rate of substantiated re-report decreased from 10.10% for infants to 2.78% for children older than 18. Older children may have had decreased risk of substantiated re-report because adolescents age out of the system before a subsequent allegation of maltreatment can occur (Fluke, Yuan, & Edwards, 1999). However, some studies found that age was not a significant predictor of substantiated re-reporting (Cheng & Celia, 2015; Kohl et al., 2009; Thompson & Wiley, 2009). Thompson and Wiley (2009) explained the non-significant results as "Perhaps the risk factors that are significant in other samples simply are not as potent in this particular group of families" (p. 97).

Two studies found females to be re-reported and substantiated more often than males (Fluke et al., 2008; Jonson-Reid, Drake, Chung, & Way, 2003). However, other studies did not find sex to be related to substantiated re-reporting rates (Bae et al., 2009; Cheng & Celia, 2015; Thompson & Wiley, 2009). Findings regarding the child's race have also been mixed. Bae et al. (2009) and Fluke

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