



How can county-level maltreatment report rates better inform child welfare practice?



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ABSTRACT

Building on knowledge about community-level characteristics associated with child maltreatment, this study identifies new ways that county-level variation in child maltreatment report rates can be used to assess the adequacy and equity of child welfare services. With data from multiple sources linked to maltreatment data from NCANDS, multi-level models identified county and state-level characteristics associated with county-level maltreatment reports. Characteristics previously found to be associated with child maltreatment reports at the community level were associated at the county level. Further, most counties with high risk characteristics for child maltreatment also had high child maltreatment report rates. Still, 16 counties in the highest risk quartile for child maltreatment were in the lowest quartile of maltreatment reports. Findings illustrate additional ways that national child maltreatment data can be used to inform child welfare practitioners and policymakers and inspire data-informed efforts to improve child welfare services.

1. Rationale and aims

It is widely accepted that official child maltreatment reports do not reflect the actual level of maltreatment, but rather reflect “the tip of the iceberg” (Fallon et al., 2010). Official reports also vary substantially across and within states. Rather than evidence of undue state intervention or inadequate state response, such variation has generally been accepted as a reflection of different community demographics, norms, preferences, and laws (IOM/NRC, 2014; Nelson, 1984). Despite the limitations of official maltreatment reports as a measure of actual maltreatment, researchers have sought to identify factors associated with official maltreatment report rates. Such research has focused on various levels of the social ecology including the family, neighborhood, county, and state. Most studies have focused on urban areas in a limited number of states, and have identified some consistent findings. For example, substantial child welfare research indicates that community poverty is a risk factor for child maltreatment and child welfare system intervention (Coulton, Crampton, Irwin, Spilsbury, & Korbin, 2007; Freisthler, Merritt, & LaScala, 2006).

Given current knowledge of how substantially certain community characteristics, such as poverty, increase chances of child welfare system involvement, and of the importance of community context to child safety, it is surprising that more research has not investigated how well community characteristics identified as risk factors for child maltreatment align with reported county and state-level maltreatment

rates. Should we expect higher maltreatment rates or higher report rates in counties and states in which higher percentages of children experience risk factors for maltreatment, such as poverty, unemployment, resource shortages, and inadequate social safety nets? What are the explanations, implications, and public responsibility if counties and states with high maltreatment risk characteristics have comparatively low rates of official maltreatment reports and/or substantiated maltreatment?

This study aims to build upon research that has identified community-level factors associated with child maltreatment to identify ways that state and county-level variation in child maltreatment reports can be used to inform child welfare practitioners and policymakers. We focus on how knowledge gained from efforts to understand the social ecology of child maltreatment can inform the public child protective services response and foster efforts to assess the equity and adequacy of child welfare services. We first address the following research question: Are county-level child maltreatment report rates associated with previously-identified community-level risk and protective factors for child maltreatment? Next, we consider how knowledge about risk and protective factors for maltreatment can be applied at the county level to inform child welfare practitioners.

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2. Background

2.1. Measuring child maltreatment

Child maltreatment is difficult to measure due to varying conceptions of the conditions that should “count” as maltreatment, as well as the difficulty of identifying such conditions (Fallon et al., 2010). To counter widely accepted limitations to the use of official maltreatment reports as a measure of actual maltreatment, the U.S., Canada, and the Netherlands have implemented supplemental incidence studies that seek to identify maltreatment that goes unreported as well as that which is reported (Euser et al., 2013; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2010; Sedlak et al., 2010). The U.S.-based National Incidence Study (NIS) elicits reports from community members and knowledgeable professionals in contact with children. Yet, even though NIS maltreatment rates generally exceed official reports, it is still widely believed that both official reports and NIS estimates reflect only a portion of actual maltreatment (Fallon et al., 2010). Although “tip of the iceberg” is commonly used as a metaphor for known maltreatment, we don’t know the size of the exposed tip (official reports and NIS estimates) compared to the submerged portion (unknown or hidden maltreatment).

Despite the limitations of official reports, for several reasons researchers often use official reports to indicate maltreatment. Official report data from the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) are now available from nearly every state at both the state and county level, and are a good source of child maltreatment data, as long as researchers are careful to understand the associated strengths and limitations. Official reports have been submitted to NCANDS by most states since the early 1990s, which allows for comparisons over time. Further, although cross-state comparisons are discouraged due to differing state laws and norms, the data do allow assessments of variation in the service system response both within and between states. NIS data, by contrast, come from samples and are not estimated at the state or county level, so it is not possible to use NIS data to compare maltreatment rates across counties and states.

Although official reports have limited utility for measuring actual maltreatment, they are useful for assessing Child Protective Services (CPS) system involvement. CPS involvement is an important phenomenon in itself, due to its substantial consequences (good and bad) for families and communities. Because official reports are so commonly used in studies to understand and explain maltreatment risk and protective factors, knowledge about such risk and protective factors more precisely pertains to official maltreatment reports than to other maltreatment measures. Hence, we may know more about the risk factors for being reported for maltreatment, or for a community having a relatively high rate of maltreatment reports, than we know about risk factors for actual experiences of maltreatment (Coulton et al., 2007).

2.2. Community-level factors associated with child maltreatment

Inspired by early conceptualizations of the ecology of child maltreatment (Belsky, 1980), community-level influences on child well-being (Garbarino & Sherman, 1980), and theories of community social capital and collective efficacy (Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997), researchers have used increasingly sophisticated approaches to identify community-level (primarily neighborhood-level) factors associated with child maltreatment. Some of these studies have implemented the Child Abuse Potential Inventory with parents in multiple neighborhoods (e.g., Coulton, Korbin, & Su, 1999), but most community-level child maltreatment studies have used official reports as the dependent variable. The primary aim of this research has been to assess the extent to which characteristics of communities constitute distinct influences on maltreatment distinguishable from family and child-level influences. Some researchers go further to distinguish between community-aggregated “person-centered” characteristics (such as poverty rate, unemployment rate, race/ethnicity, and single-parenthood rate) and

“place-centered” characteristics, such as population density, housing stability, and the density of alcohol or fresh food outlets (Freisthler et al., 2006).

Multiple studies and high-quality review articles have identified community-level factors consistently associated with child maltreatment. Such factors include poverty rate, residential instability, unemployment rate, single parenthood rate, drug and alcohol availability, child care and social service availability, and population density (Coulton, Korbin, Su, & Chow, 1995; Coulton et al., 1999; Coulton et al., 2007; Drake & Pandey, 1996; Freisthler, Midanik, & Gruenewald, 2004; Freisthler et al., 2006; Zuravin, 1989). In addition to such structural or demographic characteristics of communities, studies have also identified associations between community child maltreatment rates and community social processes, such as social support networks, collective efficacy, and community social capital (i.e., reliance and social trust among neighbors) (Freisthler & Maguire-Jack, 2015; Freisthler et al., 2006; Molnar et al., 2016).

Scholars have argued that future research should work to identify mechanisms or pathways through which community factors have associations with child maltreatment (Coulton et al., 2007; Finno-Velasquez, He, Perrigo, & Hurlburt, 2017; Freisthler et al., 2006). Such efforts may want to distinguish different pathways or mechanisms for different measures of maltreatment. Claudia Coulton et al. (2007) nicely conceptualize potentially different pathways of influence for effects on parental behavior (i.e., actual maltreatment) versus maltreatment reports. The authors argue that reports are likely influenced by community members’ definitions, observations, and decisions to report, which may be distinct from maltreatment behaviors. One study found that scores on a measure of child abuse potential varied less among neighborhoods than did official maltreatment reports in the same neighborhoods, suggesting that community characteristics may affect reporting behavior more so than actual maltreatment (Coulton et al., 1999). In sum, current evidence suggests that community-level maltreatment report rates may reflect both actual maltreatment, influenced by economic factors and resources, as well as community members’ decisions to report, which we know less about, but may reflect expectations for public services responsiveness (Coulton et al., 2007; Finno-Velasquez et al., 2017).

2.3. Geographic variation in maltreatment reports and the service response

Official child maltreatment reports, substantiation rates, and victimization rates vary substantially among states and counties. Rather than being interpreted as indicators of varying levels of harm to children, or varying adequacy of the public service system response, such variation is typically attributed to differing state and local laws, preferences, and norms (IOM/NRC, 2014; Nelson, 1984). Although state laws and norms do vary, we have little evidence to explain the extent to which state and county-level variation in maltreatment reflects variation in laws, standards, and/or demographics. In a recent report, the Institute of Medicine and National Resource Council (2014) called for more efforts to explain the variation in child maltreatment reports among states. They specifically observed a need for more studies that assess the extent to which state variation in reports reflect differing state laws and child maltreatment definitions. As an example of such research, the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) found that the level of evidence required for substantiation was associated with state child victimization rates. States with stricter substantiation standards tend to have lower victimization rates (GAO, 2011). Another study found that counties in states with universal mandated reporter laws have higher rates of neglect (Palusci & Vandervort, 2014). A recent study found that maltreatment reports, especially neglect reports, were associated with state minimum wage. During an observation window extending from 2004 to 2013, as states increased the minimum wage level, maltreatment report rates tended to decrease (Raisson & Bullinger, 2017).

In addition to policy differences, researchers have also investigated

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