



Child maltreatment re-notifications in Germany: Analysis of local case files



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ABSTRACT

Studies on child maltreatment rereferral are rare outside the US and virtually absent in Germany. The present study replicates American studies, and investigates rates and risk factors of re-notifications using case files from the local child protection system in two German cities. The data included 397 notifications and re-notifications, and initial notifications were followed up to be matched with re-notifications, for up to 22 months. Statistical analyses used Chi-square tests of group independence and logistic regression analyses. During the 22 months, 10.3% of the total cases were re-notifications. Six factors were significantly associated with re-notifications at the bivariate level: age of the youngest child, mental health problems of caretakers, response time, case judgment of acute danger, placement, and in-home service provision. Three factors significantly predicted the odds of re-notification at the multivariate level: response time, case judgment of acute danger, and in-home service provision. It was concluded that the German child protection system responds differently to re-notifications compared to initial notifications, as hypothesized. Interpretations and implications for practice were discussed.

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1. Introduction

Repeat maltreatment is associated with additional suffering of already-disadvantaged children. Compared with children who experience no maltreatment, or a single episode of maltreatment, children exposed to chronic or recurrent episodes of maltreatment have shown worse outcomes (Éthier, Couture, & Lacharite, 2004; Jonson-Reid, Kohl, & Drake, 2012). Therefore, preventing repeat maltreatment is crucial in child protection practice. If children are revictimized after a child protection report has been made, this may reveal weaknesses in the child protection system. Although repeat maltreatment may not always be preventable, experts argue that the number of repeat maltreatments indicates how well the child protection system is performing (Inkelas & Halfon, 1997; Solomon & Åsberg, 2012), and how often the system fails to secure the safety of children at risk of further harm (DePanfilis & Zuravin, 1998; Fluke, Shusterman, Hollinshead, & Yuan, 2008).

Moreover, child protection rereferrals, which may indicate repeat maltreatment, negatively affect the resource capacity of Child Protective Services (CPS) in terms of worker caseloads and cost increase of child protection (Wolock, Sherman, Feldman, & Metzger, 2001). According to Loman (2006), rereferrals consume most of the workers' time, and most of the money available to the CPS in the US. Chronically rereported families, with four or more new reports, constitute about a fifth of the

total CPS sample families, but were estimated to consume half of the whole expenditure for services over five years (Loman, 2006). To assist case workers with risk assessment, and to advance CPS system quality, there has been a call to investigate rates and risk factors of repeat maltreatment, and their interactions with CPS responses to initial referrals and rereferrals (Fluke et al., 2008).

Repeat maltreatments and rereferrals have been studied in various countries, including Australia (Bromfield & Higgins, 2005), Canada (Hélie, Laurier, Pineau-Villeneuve, & Royer, 2013), Sweden (Sundell, Vinnerljung, Löfholm, & Humlesjö, 2007), and the UK (Devaney, 2009; Hamilton & Browne, 1999). However, most of the research on repeat maltreatments and rereferrals has been conducted in the US. In a review of risk factors for recurrent maltreatment by Hindley, Ramchandani, and Jones (2006), over 90% of the studies were from the US. An update of this review was entirely based on studies from the US (White, Hindley, & Jones, 2015). To date, Germany, despite being the most populous country in continental Europe, has been missing from this literature. As the rates and correlates of repeat maltreatment depend on contextual factors, studies of different child protection systems are necessary to test the robustness of findings. Germany may be significant in this context, because its child protection philosophy differs from Anglophonic countries (Gilbert, 1997). Using local case files of the child protection system in two German cities, the present study estimated the overall rate of re-notifications, compared child and family characteristics as well as system and service characteristics between notifications and re-notifications, and investigated factors associated with child maltreatment re-notifications.

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2. Background: child maltreatment and child protection in Germany

Along with other countries in continental Europe (e.g., Netherlands, Belgium), the German child protection system has been described as “family service oriented” (Gilbert, 1997). Parents in need have a legal right to receive child and youth welfare services (e.g., counseling services, family preservation services, foster family placement) even if there has been no maltreatment or no risk of future harm. Therefore, the rates of children whose families receive some form of child welfare service are relatively high, namely, 63 out of 1,000 children below the age of 21 in 2011 (Fendrich & Tabel, 2012). Even in cases where a child is placed out of the family, maltreatment as the primary reason comprises only a minority of the cases; 20% in 2011 (Fendrich & Tabel, 2012). Temporal removal of parental rights due to maltreatment and parental inability or unwillingness to improve the child’s situation has been on the rise, but is still quite rare, specifically 10 per 10,000 below the age of 18 in 2011 (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2012); however, a permanent termination of parental rights is nearly impossible. As a consequence, most of the placements, even with prior maltreatment episodes, are voluntary (Kindler, 2012).

Due to the focus on prevention and cooperation with in-need families, the federal law has only recently defined child welfare procedures and caseworker duties for child maltreatment notifications (Meyesen & Eschelbach, 2012). After a report has been made, each case has to be investigated thoroughly, with home visits and interviews with parents and children. The results of the assessment have to be discussed with at least one colleague, and a decision has to be made whether the child is endangered; that is, whether the child has been maltreated or is at serious risk of maltreatment. Caseworkers at the child and youth welfare authority (Jugendamt) who are responsible for the investigation are normally trained, but not exclusively specialized in this task. They also do case planning and management with families in need. On average, a full-time caseworker at the child and youth welfare authority is responsible for 33 cases with ongoing services (Pothman & Tabel, 2012).

There are no valid national figures on the number of maltreated or endangered children reported to child and youth welfare authorities in Germany each year. Collection of national data on child protection notifications has started in 2012, but the statistical procedure is still not well established. As there may be several notifications for one child, and each notification may be about a family with several children, the number of notifications differs from the number of affected children. Moreover, there is no mandatory reporting system in Germany, which hinders the collection of valid national figures on child maltreatment. Local data suggest that there is a child maltreatment notification for 1 to 3% of all children each year, and a substantiation rate of 52% has been reported for one of the “Länder” in the federal German system (Lamberty, de Paz Martinez, & Müller, 2012). As with most other developed countries, the number of child deaths related to maltreatment has decreased over the last 30 years, with a rate of 12 per 1,000,000 children below 14 years between 2004 and 2005 (Pritchard & Williams, 2010). Sentinel studies such as the “National Incidence Study” in the US (Sedlak et al., 2010) or “Child Maltreatment in the Netherlands” (Alink et al., 2011) are missing in Germany. Therefore, prevalence rates for different forms of maltreatment in the child population in Germany cannot be estimated. There are, however, at least three retrospective studies utilizing interviews or questionnaires with representative samples of adolescents or adults on the prevalence of physical and sexual abuse (Häuser, Schmutzer, Brähler, & Glaesmer, 2011; Stadler, Bieneck, & Pfeiffer, 2012; Wetzels, 1997), which indicate prevalence rates below or within the range of results from comparable European studies (Stoltenborgh, Bakermans-Kranenburg, Alink, & van Ijzendoorn, 2012; Stoltenborgh, van Ijzendoorn, Euser, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2011).

Thus far, no empirical study has examined repeat child maltreatment and rereferral to child and youth welfare authorities in Germany; until recently, data systems enabling researchers to track referred

children were missing, even on a local scale (Galm & Derr, 2011). Nevertheless, there have been small-scale studies using a retrospective research design. A few survey studies investigated repeat sexual victimization or chronic physical abuse of survey participants (e.g., Krahé, Scheinberger-Olwig, Waizenhöper, & Kolpin, 1999). Moreover, in a sample of 60 child protection cases that had been open for services over a year (average 3 years), about 75% had at least one additional substantiated maltreatment incident after the first report (Kindler, 2012). It is therefore important to study repeat maltreatment and families with multiple referrals to the child and youth welfare authorities in Germany.

3. Rereferral and recurrence rates in developed countries

Rereferral is defined as a subsequent referral (where the allegation is accepted for investigation) regardless of prior substantiation. Recurrence is defined as a founded or substantiated referral both at the initial report and at subsequent reports (English, Marshall, Brummel, & Orme, 1999; Fluke et al., 2008). Findings from a literature review showed a wide range of recurrence rates in the US from a low 1% or 2% for cases of low risk to a high 50% for CPS populations (DePanfilis & Zuravin, 1998). Although it is difficult to integrate findings because of different definitions, units of analyses, and follow-up periods, rereferral rates in the US also vary widely for cases or families investigated by the CPS from a low 13% to a high 68.5% (Connell, Bergeron, Katz, Saunders, & Tebes, 2007; Drake, Jonson-Reid, & Sapokaite, 2006). Rereferral or rereport rates are generally higher than those of recurrence or substantiated rereports in studies. Rereferral rates among 12,329 referrals made to the CPS were 15.9% within 6 months, 24.0% within 12 months, and 28.6% within 18 months, compared with recurrence rates of 6.4%, 9.1%, and 10.6% for each period respectively (English et al., 1999). In another US sample, 17.4% of 1,820 CPS cases had a rereport, 5.3% had a substantiated rereport, and 4.0% had the child placed into foster care for 36 months (Kohl, Jonson-Reid, & Drake, 2009).

As expected, longer follow-up periods tend to be associated with higher rates of rereferral or rereports. For example, almost half of the 4,947 children in a welfare administrative data set from the US were rereported to the CPS during a 3-year follow-up period, and 68.5% were rereported to the CPS after 7.5 years (Drake et al., 2006). In one of the largest US samples, approximately 13% of 22,584 CPS cases experienced a rereferral during the first 6-month follow-up period, and an additional 14% over the following 12-month period, resulting in a total rereferral rate of approximately 40% for 3.75 years after the initial report (Connell et al., 2007). In another US sample, 42.3% of 149 cases were rereported to the CPS over a period of 11 to 15 years, although nearly half of all rereports occurred within 1 year of the indexed event (Thompson & Wiley, 2009).

There are only a handful of studies reporting rereferral or recurrence rates with non-US samples. A study with a large Canadian sample reported a 5-year recurrence rate of 36% (Hélie et al., 2013), and an Australian research team found a rereferral rate of 65% and a recurrence rate of 24% during a seven-year follow-up period, with a small sample of 100 cases (Bromfield & Higgins, 2005). In the only European study, researchers in the UK reported a rereferral rate of 24% during the 27-month follow-up period, using a sample of 400 cases (Hamilton & Browne, 1999). Without comparable data, it cannot be said that family-service-oriented child protection systems, such as those in continental Western Europe, are more effective in reducing the number of child protection notifications compared with adversarial systems. In this context, it is strongly recommended to do a study of rereferral and recurrence rates in different national settings.

4. Risk factors

This study examined risk factors for rereferral and recurrence, which have been identified only in English-speaking developed countries.

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