Short Communication

Exploring cross-generational adult drinking patterns and physical child maltreatment: a study of Hong Kong adults

J.H. Kim a,*, M.C.M. Leung b, B.H. Yip a, X. Su a, S.M. Griffiths a

a The School of Public Health 4/F, Prince of Wales Hospital, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shatin, New Territories, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region
b The Department of Economics, 9th Floor, Esther Lee Building, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shatin, New Territories, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region

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Introduction

Physical child abuse is defined as physical aggression or neglect, resulting in injury or serious potential harm to a child's physical or emotional health or dignity. In recognition of its long-term social effects, physical child abuse has been a focus of decades of research and a number of international child welfare campaigns including the World Health Organization (WHO) Global Campaign for Violence Prevention. It is worth noting that one of the few behaviors that has been examined as both a risk factor and a consequence of physical child abuse is alcohol use. The relationship between physical child abuse and drinking is, however, comparatively under-studied in most Asian countries such as China. This is presumably due to the historically low drinking levels in most areas of China as compared with countries such as the US, particularly among women.1,5 Currently, there are no Chinese population-based studies of parental alcohol use as a predictor of physical aggression toward children. The handful of existing studies of Chinese populations have only examined the consequences of parental physical maltreatment on their children's drinking patterns, noting that minors who experienced such maltreatment were at moderately higher risk of adolescent drinking,3,4 socially maladaptive drinking patterns,4,5 and developing alcohol dependence in adulthood.5 In the past two decades of globalization, however, there have been rapidly increasing drinking population levels in China as well as rising rates of alcohol misuse.1,2 The time has therefore come for an examination of the inter-relationship between drinking patterns and use of physical force against children in China.

This population-based study will shed light on the inter-generational relationship between child physical maltreatment and drinking by first examining whether parental alcohol use patterns are significant risk factors for corporal punishment and physical child maltreatment. This study will then examine whether self-reported history of physical punishment in childhood is associated with later development of maladaptive alcohol consumption patterns as an adult. The findings from this Chinese study may inform future policy and be used for advocating prevention strategies for both child abuse and alcohol misuse.

The study's sampling frame comprised Hong Kong Chinese residents aged between 18 and 70 years. Trained interviewers conducted an anonymous, random, and cross-sectional
telephone survey using a structured, Cantonese-language questionnaire in June 2006 (n = 9896, response rate = 65.2%). Details of data collection are reported in a previous paper.5 The ethical approval was obtained from the sponsoring university. The study instrument obtained sociodemographic information about the respondents (see Table 1). Those who drank alcohol in the past year (excluding unusual/accidental consumption) were classified as past-year drinkers, whereas respondents who had consumed five alcohol servings on one occasion in the preceding 30 days were classified as past-month binge drinkers. Alcohol dependence and alcohol abuse were determined from a standard battery of questions based on DSM-IV criteria and detailed in a previous paper.6 Respondents were also asked about whether their own parents had a habit of drinking (father only, mother only, both parents, neither parent drank).

Respondents who resided with a minor (<18 years of age) in the household (including non-physical children) were asked whether they had used any contact form of corporal punishment on this minor in the past year (e.g. spanking, slapping) (Yes/No). Due to the differing conceptualizations of physical abuse, respondents were thereby asked if they had intentionally hit the minor for non-corrective reasons (e.g. out of irritation, bad mood, or for no real reason) (Yes/No), and whether they had (intentionally or not) physically injured the minor from hitting them (Yes/No). Affirmative responses to either of these aforementioned criteria were coded as having engaged in physical child maltreatment. The respondent was also asked whether their own parents used physical discipline on them (‘Never,’ ‘rarely,’ and ‘frequently’).

To address the study’s first objective, the analysis of respondents’ alcohol consumption and practice of child corporal punishment and physical child maltreatment was limited to those with a minor residing in their household (n = 3016). Unadjusted odds ratios for the demographic, drinking-related, and history of physical discipline used by the respondent’s own parents were examined as possible factors associated with: 1) past-year child corporal punishment; and 2) past-year child physical maltreatment. Each of the drinking variables (past-year drinking, binge drinking, alcohol abuse, and alcohol dependence) were then examined separately as possible correlates of corporal punishment and physical maltreatment, after adjusting for the aforementioned background variables (background-adjusted models, see Table 1). Finally, a multivariable regression model using backward elimination was conducted on all variables to determine the factors independently associated with child corporal punishment and physical child maltreatment.

To address the second objective, this study examined whether the history of being beaten by one’s own parents was significantly associated with past-month binge drinking, past-year alcohol abuse, and past-year alcohol dependence (n = 9896), after adjusting for the respondent’s birth cohort (born 1950 or earlier, 1951–1960, 1961–1970, 1971–1980, born after 1981), educational attainment (up to grade 11/technical school vs grade 12 or higher), and the drinking behaviors of the respondent’s parents. All analyses were conducted using SPSS 21.0 with α = 0.05. Interaction effect for all multivariable models was examined but could not be fully explored due to the small subgroup sample sizes.

**Past-year prevalence of the parental use of physical force against children in Hong Kong**

Although banned in schools, physical corporal discipline of children is considered normative in Chinese society.4,8 In this study, 23.7% of males and 29.9% of females reported using corporal punishment on a household minor in the past year. This prevalence was substantially lower than the 57.5% reported from data collected nearly two decades earlier4 which may partly reflect study methodology differences and partly reflect an actual decline in the use of corporal punishment in favor of other non-contact punishment methods that are common in Hong Kong (e.g. yelling, forcing children to leave the house).

By contrast, past-year physical child maltreatment was reported by much lower percentages of respondents (2.9% among males 3.8% among females) which was similar to the 4.4% reported in a Hong Kong study conducted around the same time4 but substantially lower than the 43.1% lifetime prevalence reported in a recent meta-analysis of Chinese populations.9 Unlike other parts of China, Hong Kong government possesses routinely updated intervention guidelines for suspected child abuse incidents,10 which likely reflects a lower social tolerance of child maltreatment in Hong Kong. Another possible reason for the large discrepancy with non-urban Chinese populations is that Hong Kong’s extremely small per capita living area discourages residents from spending time at home. The majority of people engage in social drinking outside the home, away from other family members.4

**Parental drinking as a predictor of use of physical force against children among Hong Kong Chinese**

Current alcohol use patterns were not consistent predictors of the use physical force against children. For instance, no drinking-related variables were significantly associated with the use of corporal punishment in the adjusted or multivariable models (Table 1). The only risk factors associated with the use of corporal punishment were being currently married/cohabitating or divorced/separated, being 26–35 years of age, being a housewife, and a history of being beaten by one’s own parents (multivariable odds ratio $\text{OR}_{mv} = 1.77–3.12$). The surprising lack of an association with binge drinking is likely due to the fact that in Chinese culture, heavy episodic drinking is almost exclusively conducted outside the home as part of work-related gatherings and festive social activities. It is uncommon to drink heavily in solitude or even at home in Chinese culture.2,6 Physical child maltreatment was only significantly higher in individuals with chronic, ‘hardcore’ drinking problems (i.e. alcohol dependence) rather than in heavy, episodic drinkers. Nearly, one in eight adults with alcohol dependence (12.5%) reported engaging in physical child maltreatment in the past year. Alcohol dependence was significantly associated with physical child maltreatment in both the socio-economic status-adjusted model (adjusted odds ratio $\text{OR}_{mv} = 4.16$) and the stepwise multivariable regression model ($\text{OR}_{mv} = 3.89$). In addition to alcohol dependence, housewives ($\text{OR}_{mv} = 1.66$) and those with a past history of being beaten frequently as by their own parents ($\text{OR}_{mv} = 3.26$).
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