

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](https://www.sciencedirect.com)

Child Abuse & Neglect

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/chiabuneg

Media portrayal of a hidden problem: An analysis of Hong Kong newspaper coverage of child maltreatment in 2016

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Newspaper
Print media
Child abuse and neglect
Child maltreatment
Mass media

ABSTRACT

The news media plays a vital role in providing child protection information and resources, shaping the public's understanding and perceptions of child maltreatment, and exposing system failures and setting policy agendas. To date, little is known about how child maltreatment is portrayed in the media in societies where these issues remain largely hidden and under-recognized. The purpose of the present study was to systematically examine newspaper coverage on child abuse and neglect in Hong Kong in order to assess how child maltreatment is currently presented and framed within public discourse.

A total of 579 newspaper reports relevant to child maltreatment from four local newspapers in 2016 were reviewed. Similar to prior findings, cases involving sexual abuse received disproportionately more attention compared with other maltreatment types. The vast majority of news reports focused on specific cases or events, and seldom discussed child maltreatment as a broader social issue. Differences in reporting style and media framing were also compared by newspaper credibility, and for free versus paid newspapers.

As a mass communication tool, more guidelines are needed to formulate public messages about child maltreatment that can improve individual, community, and structural capacities to prevent, identify, and respond to children who are victimized by abuse and neglect. This is especially important in jurisdictions where no mandatory reporting framework exists to help identify vulnerable children, and where the majority of child maltreatment is brought to the attention of authorities by families and those living within the child's community.

1. Introduction

The news media plays a vital role in informing and educating the public about child maltreatment, influencing public perceptions and attitudes towards child protection, and empowering victims or observers of abuse to take action (Saint-Jacques, Villeneuve, Turcotte, Drapeau, & Ivers, 2012). Crucially, how the news portrays child maltreatment as a social and public health problem can guide policy initiatives geared towards its effective prevention and response. In many Western countries, including the US, UK, Canada, and Australia, ample studies have examined how child maltreatment is framed, presented, and represented in the news media (Arthur, 2012; Gillespie, McCosker, Lonne, & Marston, 2014; Hove, Paek, Isaacson, & Cole, 2013; Lonne & Gillespie, 2014; Lonne & Parton, 2014; Weatherred, 2017). Some studies also specifically examined how these coverage may change public opinion, mobilize community action, and affect policy decisions (McDevitt, 1996; Saint-Jacques et al., 2012). However, less is known about how child maltreatment is discussed in the news media in other regions of the world, particularly in countries with less robust child

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2018.07.002>

Received 29 January 2018; Received in revised form 27 June 2018; Accepted 2 July 2018
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protection systems (e.g. fragmented reporting or response) and where child maltreatment remains largely under-recognized.

The purpose of this study was to systematically examine the newspaper coverage on child maltreatment cases that occurred in Hong Kong within a 12-month period in 2016. Study findings will lay the groundwork for understanding how the print media disseminates news and knowledge on child maltreatment in Hong Kong, and how it may be informing or misinforming the public about issues on child protection. Further, how child maltreatment is presented and framed in the media, and how the media can be used more effectively for informing and changing child protection policies will be discussed within the context of culture.

1.1. Child maltreatment in Hong Kong

In 2016, the population of Hong Kong was 7,014,790, of which 15.5% were children (Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department, 2016). However, among over one million children residing in this densely populated city, only 892 cases of child abuse and neglect were officially documented by the Hong Kong Social Welfare Department (2016). These statistics strongly juxtaposed with findings from community-based surveys of children and parents in Hong Kong, which demonstrated that child maltreatment are both extensive and on the rise. For example, in a representative household survey of over 1000 children between ages 12 and 17 years, 36% experienced physical assault by their mother, 61% experienced psychological aggression, and 27% experienced neglect; higher rates were reported when asked about perpetration by fathers (Chan, 2012). Another study investigated the incidence of maltreatment-related pediatric hospitalizations and found that rates of hospitalization for non-sexual maltreatment among children had more than doubled between 2001 and 2010 (Ip, Chan, Chow, & Wong, 2013).

The discrepancies between known and undocumented cases of maltreatment may indicate serious underreporting (Besharov, 2005; Finkelhor, 2005), and underscores child maltreatment as a hidden problem in Hong Kong. Indeed, some evidence has pointed to a lower level of knowledge and social involvement in protecting children from abuse compared with other types of family violence. For example, findings from a representative survey of 885 Hong Kong adults showed that violent behaviors were least likely to be perceived as abusive when perpetrated against children as opposed to spouses or elders (Chan, Chun, & Chung, 2008). Traditional Chinese values that endorse the use of physical discipline, demand absolute obedience and emotional restraint from children, and regard children as parents' property (Zhai & Gao, 2009) also mean that violence against children may be least likely to be appropriately identified or deemed reportable. Moreover, a unified understanding and definition of child maltreatment remains lacking across many Chinese societies, thus public agencies are less likely to intervene without clear indications of severe and intentional maltreatment in hopes of preserving family harmony and privacy (Qiao & Chan, 2005; Qiao, Whittaker, & Zhang, 2017). In fact, official statistics of child maltreatment in Hong Kong in the past decade consistently showed extremely low numbers of victimization (i.e. approximately 900 cases per year, which is 4 times lower than the documented cases of spousal abuse in Hong Kong, and a rate that is over 10 times lower than that reported in the US) (Hong Kong Social Welfare Department, 2015b, 2016; U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2017).

Although Hong Kong has a robust multi-disciplinary and inter-agency response to handle maltreatment (Hong Kong Social Welfare Department, 2015a), little has been done to promote initial identification and reporting of suspected maltreatment (Hong Kong College of Paediatricians, 2015). The public's lack of awareness and knowledge on children's rights and protection likely contributes to the low rates of reporting and confirmed victimization. Such was the case in Singapore, which shares similar socio-cultural ideologies and background as Hong Kong. However, since Singapore implemented its large-scale public education efforts on recognizing abuse and engaging its citizens in child protection, a steady increase in confirmed reports of child abuse and neglect have been observed within the past decade (Singapore Ministry of Social and Family Development, 2016). The Singapore experience shows that the public's attitudes and engagement towards child protection are amenable to change within predominantly Chinese societies, and suggests that the mass media can play a central role in propelling these initiatives.

1.2. Newspapers as source of information and advocacy

As a readily accessible and important source of information for the general public, printed newspapers reflect how child maltreatment is currently constructed and discussed as a broader social issue (Wilczynski & Sinclair, 1999), and provide information on the current state of the problem and its response (Lonne & Gillespie, 2014). Further, printed newspapers not only have the potential to raise awareness widely, it can help expose system failures and positively influence perception and propensity towards taking action given accurate, informative, and representative reporting (Sims, 2008). This is supported by the agenda-setting theory of media influence (McCombs, Shaw, & Weaver, 2014), which posits that the media agenda ultimately shapes public and policy agendas because concentrated reporting on certain issues can raise awareness and lead the public to perceive those issues as more salient than others. Therefore, the mass media serves a critical function of informing and capturing the attention of the public and policymakers, who often do not have direct experience with childhood maltreatment and can only derive their understanding of these issue through the media (Mejia, Cheyne, & Dorfman, 2012; Sample & Kadleck, 2008).

Because the printed news media is such a powerful source of child maltreatment information for the public, some public agencies have proposed specific reporting guidelines for news coverage on child abuse and neglect. For example, the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control (2016) in the US issued a set of suggested practices for journalist in 2016, which stipulated that reports should: (1) include factors contributing to child maltreatment; (2) explore long-term consequences of maltreatment to emphasize importance of early prevention; (3) discuss prevention strategies that are based on evidence; and (4) preserve and protect victims and their families. In Australia, the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2017) explicitly requested media reports to include contact details of support services. In Northern Ireland, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to

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