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## Research article

## Change and consistency in descriptions of child maltreatment: A comparison of caregivers' perspectives 20 years apart

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## ABSTRACT

Although approximately one-fifth of child maltreatment reports originate with family members, friends, neighbors, or community members, their efforts to identify and report child maltreatment are still not well understood. Nor is it well understood how these individuals' perceptions of what constitutes maltreatment may change over time. This study examined descriptions of behavior perceived as maltreatment by caregivers of minors in Cleveland, Ohio, USA neighborhoods. Data were obtained from two neighborhood-based cross-sectional surveys of caregivers of minors: one conducted in 1995–1996 and the other in 2014–2015. The sample consisted of 400 caregivers living in 20 census tracts with varying profiles of maltreatment risk in the 1995–1996 study, and 400 caregivers living in the same 20 census tracts surveyed in 2014–2015. Each time point, participants were asked to provide three examples of behaviors they considered to be child abuse and neglect. All responses were categorized using the 1995–1996 coding scheme. Logistic regression analyses including all 800 participants, adjusted for individual and neighborhood characteristics, and accounting for residential clustering in neighborhoods, showed that participating in the 2014–2015 survey was associated with 51% increased odds of mentioning an act of neglect and a 39% decreased odds of mentioning an act of physical abuse. No significant temporal changes were observed for inadequate supervision, emotional or verbal abuse, sexual abuse, and parental misbehavior. Associations between specific types of maltreatment and individual and neighborhood characteristics were observed. Potential practice implications and future research directions include seeking greater familiarity with caregivers' perceptions of maltreating behaviors to better understand how these perceptions might “translate” into child maltreatment reports and investigations.

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## 1. Introduction

Most attention to the definitional criteria of child maltreatment and reporting behavior has seemingly gravitated towards mandated professional reporters: e.g., physicians and educators (Block, Poplin, Wang, Widaman, & Runyan, 2016; Delaronde, King, Bendel, & Reece, 2000; Gilbert, Spatz Widom, Browne, Fergusson, & Webb, 2009; Mathews & Kenny, 2008; Palusci, Vandervort, & Lewis, 2016; Pietrantonio et al., 2013). Yet, in 2016, 18% of the approximately 2.3 million reports to Child Protective Services in the U.S. originated from persons such as family members, friends, neighbors, community members, or other categories of non-mandated reporters (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services [HHS], Administration for Children & Families, Administration on Children, Youth & Families, Children's Bureau, 2018). Another 7% of reports were received anonymously, and an unspecified portion of the anonymous reports may likewise have originated from these types of individuals.

For the purposes of this research, we have directed our attention to caregivers of children under 18 years of age living in urban neighborhoods. This is a segment of the population on what could be termed the “front lines” of everyday home and residential settings, and who are determining whether behaviors directed at children should be considered maltreatment in the context in which families live. Information related to caregivers' perceptions of what constitutes maltreatment is sparse and derived from a similar methodology. Beginning with the work of Giovannoni and Becerra (1979), studies reporting on perceptions of child maltreatment held by the public have largely relied on an investigator-developed, vignette approach to data collection in which participants were asked to identify or rate specific actions or behaviors as constituting child abuse or neglect (Bensley et al., 2004; Dhooper, Royse, & Wolfe, 1991; Portwood, 1998, 1999; Price et al., 2001) or to rank certain actions according to severity (Ferrari, 2002). Vignettes were broadly organized into categories corresponding to physical abuse, psychological/emotional abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect. Findings from studies conducted by Portwood (1998, 1999) suggested that participants perceived virtually all presented vignettes (e.g., slapping a child, calling a child names, failing to wash child's hair for a week) as constituting maltreatment, with sexual abuse ranked as its most severe form. On the whole, while these investigations indicated that classification of specific behaviors as abusive or neglectful may differ by personal and group characteristics (Dhooper et al., 1991; Dickerson, Lindner, Scurich, & Quas, 2017; Ferrari, 2002; Portwood, 1999), some common themes have emerged around what constitutes maltreatment: e.g., excessive physical discipline, denial/restriction of needed resources such as food, and sexual activity between adults and young children.

Existing investigations have clearly made substantial contributions to our knowledge about behaviors considered maltreatment. However, there are limitations. First, although an investigator-designed set of vignettes ensures that all participants respond to the same stimuli, this methodology excludes consideration of participant-generated actions considered maltreatment. Our research instead asks for participant-generated lists behaviors that would be considered maltreatment. While this approach has the disadvantage of not all participants responding to the same stimuli, it has the advantage of potentially identifying behaviors that investigators did not include a priori, thus allowing a more context- or respondent-focused picture.

A second limitation of existing definitional studies is that they are cross-sectional, revealing perceptions held at a single time point. The degree to which these perceptions change over time is unknown. Recent research on child maltreatment rates suggests that there have been important changes in substantiation rates over time (e.g., Finkelhor, Saito, & Jones, 2015), and data show an increase in reports of child maltreatment over the past five years (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services [HHS], Administration for Children & Families, Administration on Children, Youth & Families, Children's Bureau, 2018). However, the reasons for these changes remain speculative and include economic fluctuations, criminal justice system involvement, improved mental health treatment, and shifting cultural norms around caring for children (Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2013). Understanding caregivers' views about maltreatment may shed light on whether the observed change is related in some way to how individuals define, and thus report, maltreatment.

Soliciting caregivers' views about what constitutes child abuse and neglect is also important because this information may reflect underlying social norms around maltreating behavior(s), which may provide targets for intervention. For example, social norms pertaining to physical discipline as a common, acceptable, and effective method for correcting children's behavior may be a substantial driver of its use among parents (Klevens & Whitaker, 2007; Porzig-Drummond, 2015; Taylor, Hamvas, Rice, Newman, & DeJong, 2011). Based on an understanding of the relevant norms, interventions targeting persons' perceptions of what is normative behavior have shown promise in reducing forms of violence (see Perkins, Craig, & Perkins, 2011; and an overview of several programs in Lilleston, Goldmann, Verma, & McCleary-Sills, 2017).

This paper adds to the literature a consideration of whether behaviors identified as child maltreatment by caregivers has changed over time, potentially contributing to changes in rates of child maltreatment reports. We compare caregiver descriptions of behaviors that constitute maltreatment in a neighborhood-based sample of Cleveland, Ohio, USA caregivers at two time points: 1995–1996 and 2014–2015. Although we cannot assume that caregivers' descriptions would necessarily result in a report or subsequent substantiation, these perceptions, and their changes over a twenty-year period, may be important in understanding broader trends in child maltreatment.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Overview

The data reported in this paper are based on two studies examining the relationship of neighborhood conditions and perceptions of child maltreatment: i.e., repeated cross-sectional studies. The first study, *Neighborhood and Household Factors in the Etiology of Child Maltreatment* (90-CA-1548: Korbin & Coulton, 1999) was undertaken in 1995–1996. The second study, *Neighborhood Factors and Child*

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