Research article

Family profiles of maltreated children in Singapore: A latent class analysis

Grace S. Chng[a],*, Dongdong Li[a], Chi Meng Chu[a], Tabitha Ong[b], Felicia Lim[b]

[a] Centre for Research on Rehabilitation and Protection, Ministry of Social and Family Development, Singapore
[b] Child Protective Service, Ministry of Social and Family Development, Singapore

A B S T R A C T

Children who enter the child protection system often have complex family problems and have experienced early adverse experiences. Using latent class analysis, this study aimed to identify family classes of child protection cases in Singapore, to ascertain the prevalence of these family classes, and to test the association of family class membership to subsequent recurrence of harm. A sample of 440 cases who entered the Child Protective Service in Singapore was analyzed based on eight familial factors on the household and caregiver levels. A four-class solution was found to demonstrate the best fit: (a) the large household group was intergenerational and majority lived with extended family members, (b) the harsh parenting group showed high levels of parenting problems and the caregiver justifying his abuse/neglect, (c) the high criminality group had high levels of caregiver substance abuse and caregiver arrest and incarceration history, and (d) the low disadvantage group rated low on all the familial factors. A Cox Regression revealed that in comparison to the low disadvantage group, the harsh parenting group was twice as likely to have recurrence of harm. There were also differences across family classes with regard to age at entry into child protection, gender composition and abuse types. The findings and practice implications are discussed.

1. Introduction

Families are inherently critical to the healthy growth and development of a child. Under optimal conditions, parents act as a buffer for young children against stress and provide the appropriate scaffolds for the successful regulation of behavior and physiology. However, in the absence or failure of the parental buffer, the development of the child can be significantly compromised either by the absence of adequate input or the presence of threatening input. These are also known as neglect and abuse respectively (Petersen, Joseph, & Feit, 2014).

Past research has established that maltreated children are at an increased risk for an array of developmental, health, mental health, and relational problems (Kim & Cicchetti, 2010; Petersen et al., 2014; Thornberry, Henry, Ireland, & Smith, 2010). Academically, maltreated children are at a higher risk of underperforming (Jonson-Reid, Drake, Kim, Porterfield, & Han, 2004) and have lower expectations of future academic and employment success (Thompson et al., 2012). More significantly, the detrimental effects of maltreatment are often not short-term but have been shown to persist into adulthood. Widom, DuMont, and Czaja (2007a), Widom, White, Czaja, and Marmorstein (2007) followed a sample of abused children into young adulthood. They found that as compared to a group of matched controls, childhood physical abuse and experiencing multiple types of abuse elevated the lifetime risk for a

diagnosis of major depressive disorder and psychiatric comorbidity. In another study, emotional maltreatment, regardless of being expressed as active abuse or passive neglect, was shown to increase the odds of lifetime diagnoses of mental disorders (Taillieu, Brownridge, Sareen, & Afifi, 2016). Childhood maltreatment also predicted intimate partner violence victimization and perpetration in young adulthood for both genders (Gomez, 2011). It was found to be associated with higher rates of alcohol use and excessive drinking in adulthood (Oberleitner, Smith, Weinberger, Mazure, & McKee, 2015; Widom, White et al., 2007). Amongst the youth offending population, maltreated youth offenders were shown to be more likely to reoffend as compared to their non-maltreated counterparts (Li, Chu, Goh, Ng, & Zeng, 2015).

1.1. Child protection and welfare in Singapore

With a population of 5.6 million (Department of Statistics Singapore, 2017) in Singapore, the Child Protective Service (CPS) in the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) is the lead agency for protecting children and young persons from abuse and neglect in Singapore. The CPS works closely with other agencies to safeguard the interest and welfare of the child. In a report on 1,935 child protection cases investigated from 2005 to 2014, 60% of these cases were physical abuse cases, 30% were sexual abuse cases, 6% were neglect cases and 5% were emotional abuse cases (Ministry of Social & Family Development et al., 2016). Majority of victims were aged between 7 and 12 years, with females accounting for 54% of the overall cases. A higher proportion of sexual abuse victims was female while a higher proportion of physical abuse victims was male.

Over a period of eight years after case closure, the overall re-entry rate in the child protection system due to further concerns of abuse or neglect was 10.5% (Li, Chu, Ng, & Leong, 2014). Using a sample of 1,750 Singaporean maltreated children, Li et al. found that three out of the seven risk factors which predicted re-entry pertained to the family. These factors were household income, family size and maternal unemployment. Furthermore, Li et al's study revealed that an accumulation of these factors led to a higher likelihood of re-entry to the child protection system. Hence, there is a need to examine the characteristics of families that enter the child protection system. Understanding these families will enable the provision of timely and effective support for the reduced likelihood of their repeated contact with the child protection system. In the following sections, we shall explore family characteristics at the household and caregiver levels which may elevate the risk of child maltreatment.

1.2. Household characteristics as risk factors for child maltreatment

Family composition, such as large families, single parent families or families with a step-parent, has demonstrated an increased risk for maltreatment (IJzendoorn, Euser, Prinzie, Juffer, & Bakersmans-Kranenburg, 2009). In large families, the presence of more children may create a higher chance of quarrels and fights between siblings. Thus, large families may require more parental discipline and bring about increased parental stress. In extreme cases, higher parental stress and discipline can contribute to child abuse (Van Zeijl et al., 2006).

For the single-parent family, a single parent struggles more as compared to a two-parent family due to higher financial limitations and lower available support. The increased parenting stress can increase the risk of child maltreatment (Barnhart & Maguire-Jack, 2016). Berger, Paxson, and Waldfogel (2009) found that as compared to children who were from families with biological mother-father pairs, involvement rates with child protective services were higher for children who lived in single-mother families and for children who lived in families with a non-biological cohabitating father. Additionally, past studies have also shown an increased risk of recurrence of maltreatment for families with more children (three or more) and for single-parent families who lived alone with their children (Bae, Solomon, & Gelles, 2009; Drake, Jonson-Reid, & Sapokaite, 2006).

For step-families, step-parents can experience the added stress of possible rejections from step-children for closer relationships due to a lack of genetic relatedness. Coupled with other risk conditions such as a past stressful divorce, step-parents may invest less as compared to biological parents for sufficient caregiving environments (IJzendoorn et al., 2009).

1.3. Caregiver characteristics as risk factors for child maltreatment

The problems caregivers face can often have direct impact on their children as they are integrally involved in the care of the child. The most commonly identified risk factors among caregivers for maltreatment are mental health issues and substance abuse (drugs and alcohol) issues (Carnochan, Rizik-Baer, & Austin, 2013). In an analysis of administrative data of maltreated children in Florida, Dubowitz et al. (2011) found that maternal drug use was one of five risk factors that significantly predicted a subsequent report to child protective services for abuse and neglect. Mothers who indicated they had ever used drugs were 1.7 times as likely to have a child reported to child protective services for abuse and neglect as compared to mothers who had never used drugs. In a Canadian community sample, parental history of substance abuse (alcohol and drugs) was found to be associated with more than a twofold increased risk of physical and sexual abuse (Walsh, MacMillan, & Jamieson, 2003). Additionally, this risk was significantly elevated when both parents had substance abuse problems as compared to father only with substance abuse problem. In a systematic review of cohort studies published between 2003 and 2009, caregiver or parental history of substance abuse (alcohol misuse, illicit drug use, or both) was also found to be a consistent risk factor for maltreatment recurrence (White, Hindley, & Jones, 2014). The risk of maltreatment recurrence also increased where there was a history of high caretaker criminal behaviour (Fuller & Wells, 2003) and assaultive behaviour (Sledjeski, Dierker, Brigham, & Breslin, 2008).

Mental health issues like depression have also been shown to increase the risk of child maltreatment (Barnhart & Maguire-Jack, 2016). Mothers with depression showed less emotional availability during mother-child interactions as compared to non-depressed