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## Research article

# Child maltreatment re-offending in families served by the United States Air Force Family Advocacy Program

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## ABSTRACT

The current study examined child maltreatment re-offending in United States Air Force (USAF) families. In a clinical database containing 24,999 child maltreatment incidents perpetrated by 15,042 offenders between the years 1997 and 2013, 13% of offenders maltreated a child on more than one date (i.e., they re-offended). We explored several offender demographic characteristics associated with who re-offended and found that civilians re-offended at a similar rate as active duty members, males re-offended at a similar rate as females, and younger offenders were more likely to re-offend than older offenders. We also explored incident characteristics associated with who re-offended: Re-offending was more likely if the initial maltreatment was neglect or emotional abuse and re-offenders were likely to perpetrate subsequent maltreatment that was the same type and severity as their initial incident. The current data indicate that young offenders and offenders of neglect and emotional maltreatment are the greatest risk of re-offending. These offender and incident characteristics could be used by the USAF to guide their efforts to reduce re-offending.

## 1. Introduction

Although several studies have examined child maltreatment within United States Air Force (USAF) families (e.g., Foster et al., 2010; McCarthy et al., 2015; Mollerstrom, Patchner, & Milner, 1995), to date, no research has focused on the extent to which child maltreatment offenders within USAF families maltreated a child on more than one date (i.e., re-offending). In addressing this gap in the literature, the current study used an epidemiological approach to determine the prevalence and patterns of child maltreatment re-offending within USAF families. Specifically, the goals of the current study were to (1) establish the prevalence of child maltreatment re-offending within USAF families, (2) examine whether characteristics of child maltreatment offenders (e.g., military status, gender, age) are associated with their likelihood to re-offend, and (3) examine whether characteristics of an initial child maltreatment incident (e.g., type and severity) are associated with the prevalence and characteristics of subsequent child maltreatment incidents. These goals were accomplished by examining 24,999 child maltreatment incidents perpetrated by 15,042 offenders between the years 1997 and 2013 within a clinical database that is managed by the USAF Family Advocacy Program (FAP).

Child maltreatment is obviously an undesirable phenomenon: In addition to the negative consequences of a maltreatment incident, child maltreatment within USAF families may be detrimental to family functioning as well as the mission readiness of the USAF. Thus, the USAF FAP supports a network of services and programs to prevent child maltreatment (e.g., Aronson, Perkins,

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Morgan, Cox, & Robichaux, 2017; Bowen, Jensen, & Williams, 2017; Milner, 2015; Travis et al., 2015). To support the USAF FAP's mission of preventing child maltreatment, it is necessary to identify patterns in when and for whom child maltreatment is likely to occur, which includes identifying not only who is likely to be an offender, but also identifying who, among those who offend, are likely to subsequently maltreat a child on a separate occasion. However, as mentioned above, re-offending within USAF families has not been previously examined.

Our first goal was simply to examine the prevalence of child maltreatment offenders who maltreated a child on at least two separate occasions. That is, among child maltreatment offenders, what proportion will be identified as an offender of a subsequent incident of child maltreatment? Although previous studies of child maltreatment recidivism have been conducted using civilian data (e.g., Dakil, Sakai, Lin, & Flores 2011; Depanfilis & Zuravin, 1999; Drake, Jonson-Reid, Way, & Chung, 2003; Horikawa et al., 2016; Marshall & English, 1999), prevalence rates are difficult to compare with data from military sources due to differences between civilian populations and military populations in maltreatment definitions, reporting agencies, and demographic characteristics (c.f., McCarroll, Ursano, Fan, & Newby, 2004; Rentz et al., 2007). One study conducted with United States Army data (i.e., Martin et al., 2007) has examined child maltreatment re-offenders within military populations and, thus, was deemed to be the most comparable population and provide the most comparable rate as the current study. Martin et al. (2007) found that 10% of child maltreatment offenders within United States Army families re-offended at least one subsequent incident of child maltreatment during the period covered in their database (i.e., 2000–2004). Although the database used in the current study covers a longer period of time than the database used by Martin et al., which may increase opportunities for detecting re-offending in the current study (c.f., Connell et al., 2009), and studied a population in a different branch of the military, we still hypothesized that most child maltreatment offenders would not re-offend.

Our second goal was to examine whether characteristics of child maltreatment offenders were associated with re-offending. These analyses were exploratory because no previous research has focused exclusively on child maltreatment re-offenders within USAF families, and the only study on child maltreatment re-offenders within the United States Army did not explore offender characteristics (Martin et al., 2007). Because at least one parent or guardian of a child victim had to be an active duty military member for an incident to be included in the USAF database, there were both active duty military members and civilians who were offenders. Thus, we examined offenders' military status as a potential moderator of re-offending. The direction of this moderation is purely exploratory though: Martin et al. (2007) restricted their analyses to incidents where the active duty soldier was the offender; thus, excluding incidents where the civilian parent of a child victims was the offender. Therefore, there are no published data specifically comparing rates of re-offending of military offenders and civilian offenders. Also, because meta-analyses have concluded that offenders' gender and age are both associated with initial child maltreatment offending in civilian populations (e.g., Stith et al., 2009), we examined offenders' gender and age as potential offender characteristics associated with re-offending.

Our final goal was to explore whether characteristics of the initial child maltreatment incidents were associated with child maltreatment re-offending. The first characteristic we examined was the severity of the initial incident. When determining whether a reported incident of maltreatment occurred, the USAF FAP determines whether an incident was mild, moderate, or severe. We examined whether the severity of an initial incident was associated with re-offending and with the severity of any subsequent incidents. The second incident characteristic we examined was type of maltreatment of the initial incident. Each incident was classified as being one or more of four child maltreatment types: Physical abuse, neglect, emotional abuse, or sexual abuse. We examined whether offenders of a specific type of maltreatment were likely to re-offend. The type of maltreatment also allowed us to examine whether re-offenders subsequently re-offended the same child maltreatment type or different child maltreatment types.

With these goals in mind, we posited several hypotheses. With respect to our first goal, we expect the overall prevalence of re-offending to be low as was found in Martin et al. (2007). With respect to our second goal, prior research in civilian sample has found that offenders whose initial incident was child neglect were more likely to offend a subsequent incident of child maltreatment than offenders whose initial incident was not neglect (e.g., Hindley, Ramchandani, & Jones, 2006; White, Hindley, & Jones 2015). Therefore, we hypothesized that an initial incident of child neglect would be associated with a greater likelihood of subsequent re-offending. With respect to the hypotheses about incident severity and child maltreatment type, one can entertain two competing hypotheses. On the one hand, the severity of an incident and each specific type of child maltreatment may be preceded by unique risk factors. To the extent these risk factors predict specific types and severities of maltreatment and are present across time, we would expect re-offenders to subsequently perpetrate incidents of the same type and severity as the initial maltreatment incident. On the other hand, risk factors for different types of maltreatment (i.e., child physical abuse and child neglect) have been shown to have substantial overlap (Stith et al., 2009) and previous research using civilian databases has shown considerable "cross-type" re-offending (Jonson-Reid, Drake, Chung, & Way, 2003). Thus, it is plausible to expect the severity and type of maltreatment in re-offense incidents to be unassociated (or weakly associated) with the severity and maltreatment type of the initial incident. In this latter case, the risk factors that are present at different times may manifest into different types of maltreatment (e.g., the same risk factors may manifest as physical abuse at time 1 and as neglect at time 2). Notably, these possibilities are not contradictory, it is possible that re-offending is primarily the same type as the initial incident and find offenders engaging in a considerable amount of "cross-type" re-offending.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Database

The current study used the USAF's Family Advocacy System of Records (FASOR), which is a clinical database maintained by the

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