



Research article

Relationship between child abuse exposure and reported contact with child protection organizations: Results from the Canadian Community Health Survey



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ABSTRACT

Much of what is known about child abuse in Canada has come from reported cases of child abuse and at-risk samples, which likely represent the most severe cases of child abuse in the country. The objective of the current study is to examine the prevalence of a broad range of child abuse experiences (physical abuse, sexual abuse, and exposure to IPV) and investigate how such experiences and sociodemographic variables are related to contact with child protection organizations in Canada using a representative general population sample. Data were drawn from the 2012 Canadian Community Health Survey: Mental Health collected from the 10 provinces using a multistage stratified cluster design ($n = 23,395$; household response rate = 79.8%; aged 18 years and older). Physical abuse only (16.8%) was the most prevalent child abuse experience reported with the exposure to specific combinations of two or more types of child abuse ranging from 0.4% to 3.7%. Only 7.6% of the adult population with a history of child abuse reported having had contact with child protection organizations. Experiencing all three types of child abuse was associated with the greatest odds of contact with child protection organizations (AOR = 15.8; 95% CI = 10.1 to 24.6). Physical abuse only was associated with one of the lowest odds of contact with child protection organizations. Preventing child abuse is widely acknowledged as an important, but challenging public health goal. Strategies to increase reporting of child abuse may help to protect children and to connect families with necessary services. One obvious priority would be physical abuse.

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Introduction

Child maltreatment, which includes all types of abuse and neglect of children, is a global public health problem that is associated with significant burden of suffering (Gilbert et al., 2009). Nationally representative data from the 2012 Canadian

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Community Health Survey indicated that 32% of the general adult population reported experiencing child abuse including physical abuse (26%), sexual abuse (10%), and/or exposure to intimate partner violence (IPV) (8%) (Afifi et al., 2014). Results from a comparable United States (US) survey have shown similar prevalence of physical abuse (18%) and sexual abuse (11%) (Afifi et al., 2011).

To date, much of the child maltreatment literature has focused on individual types of child abuse or neglect or on the number of types of child maltreatment experienced (multiple vs. single or total count of child maltreatment types). A 2001 review of the literature specifically examining multiple types of child maltreatment identified 29 studies that addressed the issue; the authors concluded that co-occurrence of multiple types of child maltreatment was common (Higgins & McCabe, 2001). Since 2001, additional studies have examined multiple child maltreatment types vs. a single type of child maltreatment (Arata, Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Bowers, & O'Farrill-Swails, 2005; Dong et al., 2004; McGee, Wolfe, & Wilson, 1997; Scher, Forde, McQuaid, & Stein, 2004) others used a count of child maltreatment types experienced (Afifi et al., 2007, 2008; Clemmons, DiLillo, Martinez, DeGue, & Jeffcott, 2003; Clemmons, Walsh, DiLillo, & Messman-Moore, 2007; Teicher, Samson, Polcari, & McGreenery, 2006) and some included the number of adverse childhood events experienced including child maltreatment and other household dysfunction or other types of victimization (Felitti et al., 1998; Finkelhor, Ormrod, Turner, & Hamby, 2005; Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Turner, 2007; Kessler et al., 2010). However, to date, no study has examined how specific co-occurrences of child abuse types might be related to contact with child protection services. This is important since co-occurring exposure may lead to more detrimental health outcomes, which might be ameliorated by child protection organizations' involvement.

Child maltreatment types have been found to be highly interrelated with odds ratios for bivariate associations between physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, emotional neglect, and physical neglect ranging from 2.4 to 17.7 (Dong et al., 2004). Data from reported cases of child maltreatment in Canada indicate that investigation of multiple types of child maltreatment is associated with increased odds of substantiation of maltreatment (Trocmé, Knoke, Fallon, & MacLaurin, 2009) and with out-of-home placement (Black, Trocmé, Fallon, & MacLaurin, 2008). Experiencing more than one type of child maltreatment may be an indicator of greater severity in many cases.

Little is known about the prevalence of child protection organization involvement in the general population and how this relates to child abuse histories in Canada. Across Canada, child protection organizations become involved with families when a child is or may be in need of protection. Although their focus is child maltreatment, they also help young people in trouble with the law. Their maltreatment-related involvement can take the form of supporting caregivers in their parenting role (Albert & Herbert, 2006) or out-of-home placement (including adoption services) for children removed from their families. Although the legislation varies slightly among Canadian provinces and territories, most jurisdictions specify a role for child protection organizations when a child is or may be at risk due to any of five main types of child maltreatment: neglect, exposure to IPV, emotional maltreatment, physical abuse, and sexual abuse. In some jurisdictions, extrafamilial sexual abuse (e.g., baby sitter or stranger), where there is no indication of poor supervision, may not come to the attention of child protection agencies (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2010).

Although it remains unknown whether reporting child maltreatment to child protection organizations leads to better outcomes (Gilbert et al., 2009) with any health or social services, it is important to understand the characteristics of those having contact with such organizations, compared to those who do not have contact. This is necessary in determining service provision, but also in understanding who is not coming in contact with such services. Current knowledge of child abuse history and child protection organization involvement in Canada comes from a 1990 survey conducted with a representative Ontario sample, which showed that only 5.1% of respondents with a history of childhood physical abuse and 8.7% of those with a history of childhood sexual abuse reported childhood contact with child protection organizations (MacMillan, Jamieson, & Walsh, 2003). In addition, in 2011, 0.5% of children aged 14 years and younger living in private households were identified as foster children in the Canadian census (Statistics Canada, 2012). In Manitoba and the Northwest Territories, the figure was close to 2% (Statistics Canada, 2012). We are not aware if certain child abuse experiences or experiencing specific combinations of child abuse types are associated with a greater likelihood of child protection organization involvement. For example, perhaps existing child protection services are more likely to identify some types of child abuse than others. Our knowledge regarding child abuse histories and contact with child protection organizations are mostly generated from at-risk samples, clinical data, and children reported to authorities for child maltreatment. Although these data are important, they do not inform us about child abuse that occurs in the general population. To date, no studies have comprehensively examined multiple combinations of specific child abuse types and contact with child protection organizations using a nationally representative sample in Canada. Very few populations have representative data on childhood contact with child protection organizations, which makes the current study novel.

The research objectives are: (1) to estimate the prevalence of the co-occurrence of different types of child abuse; (2) to examine the relationship between sociodemographic variables and contact with child protection organizations among individuals with a history of child abuse in Canada; and (3) to examine how individual child abuse types, specific combinations of child abuse experiences, and the number of types of child abuse experienced are associated with the likelihood of contact with child protection organizations in Canada.

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