



The whole picture: Child maltreatment experiences of youths who were physically abused[☆]



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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the current study was to describe the maltreatment experiences of a sample of urban youths identified as physically abused using the Maltreatment Case Record Abstraction Instrument (MCRAI). The sample ($n = 303$) of 9–12 year old youths was recruited from active child protective services (CPS) cases in 2002–2005, and five years of child protective service records were reviewed. The demographic and maltreatment experiences of MCRAI-identified youths with physical abuse were compared to maltreated youths who were not physically abused and youths who were identified as physically abused by CPS when they entered this longitudinal study. *T*-tests and chi-square tests were used to compare the demographics and maltreatment experiences of the sample MCRAI-identified physically abused to the sample MCRAI-identified as nonphysically abused maltreated by gender. Of the total sample, 156 (51%) were identified by MCRAI as physically abused and 96.8% of these youth also experienced other types of maltreatment. Whereas youth with the initial CPS identification of physical abuse showed little co-occurrence (37.7%) with other forms of maltreatment. The MCRAI-identified physically abused youths had a significantly higher mean number of CPS reports and higher mean number of incidents of maltreatment than MCRAI-identified nonphysically maltreated youths. Lifeline plots of case record history from the time of first report to CPS to entry into the study found substantial individual variability in maltreatment experiences for both boys and girls. Thus, obtaining maltreatment information from a single report vastly underestimates the prevalence of physical abuse and the co-occurrence of other maltreatment types.

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Introduction

Child physical abuse is one of the most frequent forms of child maltreatment, second only to neglect (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [USDHHS], 2013). Physical abuse may receive more attention from caseworkers than other types

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of maltreatment because it can leave visible evidence on the child (DePanfilis, 2006). Although physical abuse may bring the child to the attention of child protective services (CPS), simply classifying a child as physically abused may omit important information about the child's history of maltreatment. Children's individual experiences of physical abuse, including rates of co-occurrence with other types of maltreatment and history of reports to CPS, are not well understood. Delineating the complexity of child physical abuse experiences will help to identify patterns that may aid intervention and prevention efforts for those at highest risk of deleterious outcomes. Reviewing historical CPS case reports can provide a better picture of a child's maltreatment experience than using a single report. Therefore, we examined the case reports of a sample of maltreated children in Los Angeles County to identify how those with physical abuse differed from maltreated children without physical abuse and to understand individual patterns of maltreatment experiences across childhood and early adolescence.

Child physical abuse is defined by the federal government as "non-accidental physical injury (ranging from minor bruises to severe fractures or death) as a result of punching, beating, kicking, biting, shaking, throwing, stabbing, choking, hitting (with a hand, stick, strap, or other object), burning, or otherwise harming a child, that is inflicted by a parent, caregiver, or other person who has responsibility for the child" (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013, p. 3). A nonaccidental injury is considered abuse regardless of intention to harm. Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) specifically defines child physical abuse as "nonaccidental bodily injury that has been or is being inflicted on the child" and includes "willful cruelty or unjustifiable punishment of a child" and "corporal punishment or injury" (Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services [LACDFCS], n.d.). Among substantiated cases of maltreatment in 2012, physical abuse occurred 18.3% of the time, compared to 78.3% for neglect (USDHHS, 2013). In 2012 in the United States, there were 124,544 reports of confirmed child physical abuse (USDHHS, 2013). In 2013 in Los Angeles County, there were 38,945 reports of physical abuse (LACDFCS, 2013). Alarming, this number has grown from 22,547 in 2002 (LACDFCS, 2002) in spite of the fact that the population of children 0–17 years of age in Los Angeles County decreased by 13% over that time (Kids Count Data Center, 2014). In 2002, at the time of the current study's data collection, 11 of every 1,000 children had a substantiated case of physical abuse in Los Angeles County (Kids Count Data Center, 2014). The state of California had a similar rate of 12 of 1,000 (Kids Count Data Center, 2014). Physical abuse can result in child fatalities, one of the most tragic consequences of child maltreatment (Jonson-Reid, Chance, & Drake, 2007). Of the children who died from maltreatment in 2012, almost 50% were victims of physical abuse alone or in combination with another type of maltreatment (USDHHS, 2013).

Prior studies have found that although boys are more likely than girls to experience physical abuse (Sobsey, Randall, & Parrila, 1997; Thompson, Kingree, & Desai, 2004), girls experience more detrimental consequences such as an increased risk of physical and mental health problems in adulthood (Thompson et al., 2004). Negative psychological consequences of physical abuse include internalizing behaviors such as suicidal behavior and depression (Brown, Cohen, Johnson, & Smailes, 1999) and externalizing problems (Dodge, Pettit, Bates, & Valente, 1995; Kaplan et al., 1998). Severe physical abuse is associated with more aggression in school-aged children (Manly, Kim, Rogosch, & Cicchetti, 2001) and is strongly related to violence, particularly among girls (Hubbard & Pratt, 2002). Another negative outcome of physical abuse concerns living placement changes. Research has demonstrated that physically abused youth are more likely than youth with exposure to other forms of maltreatment to have multiple placement changes (Barth et al., 2007; Connell et al., 2006; Leathers, 2006) which may be both a result of as well as subsequent catalyst of mental health and behavior problems (James, 2004; Newton, Litrownik, & Landsverk, 2000).

Physical abuse often does not occur in isolation, and children frequently experience multiple types of maltreatment (Clemmons, Walsh, DiLillo, & Messman-Moore, 2007). Children initially identified as experiencing a particular type of maltreatment by CPS are often found to suffer from other forms of maltreatment after a review of current and past case records (Negriff, Schneiderman, Smith, Schreyer, & Trickett, 2014; Trickett, Mennen, Kim, & Sang, 2009). Evidence has indicated high rates of co-occurrence, with some research suggesting that less than 5% of reported maltreatment happens in isolation (Ney, Fung, & Wickett, 1994). One study found that 89% of physically abused children also experience some form of psychological abuse (Claussen & Crittenden, 1991), whereas other studies found co-occurrence rates of 13.6% or higher for sexual and physical abuse (Hobbs & Wynne, 1990; Negriff et al., 2014). In another sample of maltreated women, 11.2% reported both emotional and physical abuse as children (Moeller, Bachmann, & Moeller, 1993). In addition, many children experience more than two types of maltreatment (Moeller et al., 1993), which is likely to be more detrimental than experiencing just one type of maltreatment. A combination of physical abuse, physical neglect, and verbal abuse was associated with the most negative outcomes, such as diminished enjoyment of life and hope for the future, compared with other types of co-occurrence (Ney et al., 1994). Physically abused children are 1.59 times more likely to have lifetime major depressive disorder compared to nonmaltreated children, but multitype maltreated children are 1.75 times more likely to have major depressive disorder compared to nonmaltreated children (Widom, DuMont, & Czaja, 2007). Accurately assessing and incorporating the spectrum of maltreatment experiences for physically abused youths will help to identify patterns that may aid intervention and prevention efforts targeting those at highest risk of deleterious outcomes.

Current Study

The purpose of the current study was to describe the maltreatment experiences of a sample of urban youths identified as physically abused using the Maltreatment Case Record Abstraction Instrument (MCRAI: Mennen, Kim, Sang, & Trickett, 2010). The MCRAI is a comprehensive tool for abstracting data on youths' maltreatment history from CPS records to allow

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