



Examining predictors of re-reports and recurrence of child maltreatment using two national data sources



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ABSTRACT

This study examined predictors of child maltreatment re-reports and recurrence (substantiated re-reports) using two nationally representative data sets: the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW II) and the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS). Maltreatment data from the survey and administrative data sources were merged for children who participated in NSCAW II and had an NCANDS record. Re-report and recurrence data were examined among the sample of 4715 with an NCANDS record and a subsample of 1873 who received a caseworker interview at the NSCAW II 18-months' follow-up because the child was in out-of-home care and/or the family had been involved with child welfare services since the baseline interview. Many of the regression and hazard estimates of the predictors of re-report and recurrence differed across the two samples due to endogenous selection bias that arises from conditioning on the "collider" variable of caseworker interviews which is itself partially an outcome of re-report and recurrence. Similar estimates, on the other hand, were obtained: Children with prior involvement with child protective services were more likely to have re-reports and recurrence than children without prior involvement. Children that the child welfare agency reported as receiving services at the time of investigation were also less likely to have re-reports and recurrence when compared with children not receiving services. The threats to the validity of inferences that are drawn from statistical models and samples that condition on collider variables are reviewed, and the use of administrative data to supplement survey information that is unavailable from caseworkers are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Child maltreatment is a major public health and child welfare issue (Sedlak et al., 2010). Not only does it represent a significant burden of morbidity and premature mortality (Pearl, 2009); in a substantial number of cases it also precipitates the removal of the children from their home and placement into foster care. In 2011, nearly 3.5 million children in the United States were referred to child protective services (CPS) for suspected maltreatment (US Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families, 2012). Tracking of re-reports and recurrence of abuse and neglect is critical to assess the effectiveness of the child welfare system (CWS) in ensuring child safety after child protective intervention and foster home removal. As stated by the U.S. government, "public child welfare agencies are charged with the responsibility of ensuring that children who have been found to be victims of abuse or neglect are protected from further

harm" (US Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families, 2011).

The most recent Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) data reported to the U.S. Congress indicate that approximately 4.8% of child victims experience a recurrence of substantiated maltreatment within 6 months of a previously substantiated index report (US Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families, 2011). Substantiation refers to re-reports that exceed state-specific, evidentiary thresholds for deciding whether or not the maltreatment actually occurred. Understanding the risk and protective factors that affect the odds that maltreatment will reoccur is crucial for adequately assessing the needs of children and families and for providing the appropriate resources and interventions. To date, studies examining predictors of recurrent maltreatment have been limited to maltreatment data from several counties within a state or a single state (Connell, Bergeron, Katz, Saunders, & Tebes, 2007; Connell et al., 2009; DePanfilis & Zuravin, 1999a,b, 2002), or to data from a selected number of states based on the National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect (NDACAN; e.g., Fluke, Yuan, and Edwards (1999)). Most of these studies focused primarily on maltreatment report

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characteristics, with less information on child, family, and environmental factors. This paper uses data from two national sources to examine predictors of subsequent maltreatment in a cohort of children reported for maltreatment: (1) the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) and (2) the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being II (NSCAW II).

1.1. *Maltreatment re-reports and recurrence*

Recurring maltreatment and continued exposure to abuse and neglect negatively affect a child's development and well-being (DePanfilis & Zuravin, 1999a). Although the definition of a new episode of maltreatment varies across studies, a re-report (also called re-referrals, or repeated referrals) generally refers to any subsequent maltreatment report regardless of substantiation of the alleged maltreatment (English, Marshall, Brummel, & Orme, 1999), while recurrence (also described as re-abuse) refers to subsequent maltreatment reports that are substantiated following a substantiated index report (DePanfilis & Zuravin, 1998; Fluke & Hollinshead, 2003; Fluke, Shusterman, Hollinshead, & Yuan, 2008).

Substantiation is assumed to represent a CPS statement about the validity of a report of child maltreatment; most states have a statutory requirement for CWS agencies to decide whether or not to substantiate (McDonald & Associates, 2003). Both policy analysts and researchers using administrative databases have often treated substantiation as an accurate measurement of maltreatment itself, assuming that substantiated cases represent children who have truly been maltreated whereas unsubstantiated cases represent children who have not been maltreated (Besharov, 1988). While some studies suggest that the overlap of true maltreatment with substantiated cases is higher than the overlap with unsubstantiated cases (Fuller & Nieto, 2009; Thompson & Wiley, 2009), some true cases of maltreatment are deemed unsubstantiated simply because investigators lack sufficient evidence to establish that the children have been harmed (Drake, 1996). Some jurisdictions use a third disposition of "indicated" to identify unsubstantiated cases in which there is some reason to believe that maltreatment occurred or risk exists but which do not meet the evidentiary requirements for substantiation (Fluke, Harper, Parry, & Yuan, 2003). In other jurisdictions, indicated is synonymous with the disposition of substantiated (Fuller & Nieto, 2009). Regardless of definition, however, research shows that children in unsubstantiated cases do not differ from substantiated/indicated cases in the degree to which their development is compromised (Casanueva, Cross, & Ringeisen, 2008; Hussey et al., 2005; Leiter, Myers, & Zingraff, 1994). Thus, studies must focus on both re-reports and recurrence.

Because definitions vary across studies, repeat maltreatment rates show an extremely wide range from very small percentages for low-risk cases that were followed for 24 months to 85% for families who were followed for up to 10 years, as reported in a literature review of 45 studies with CWS populations (DePanfilis & Zuravin, 1998). Other reviews of the maltreatment literature have reported repeat maltreatment rates that range from 3.5% to 22% at 6 months to 22.6% at 18 months' follow-up (Hindley, Ramchandani, & Jones, 2006).

1.2. *Sources of national data about re-reports and recurrence*

In addition to varying definitions of repeat maltreatment, another reason for the wide variation in rates of re-reports and recurrence is the source of the data on which rate calculations are based. The problem of accurate surveillance of child maltreatment has been compared to an iceberg in which only the tip is made visible by official registries. The bulk of the problem is submerged and largely undetectable except by local "sentinels", such as family members, neighbors, and teachers who may or may not disclose the maltreatment, and of course by the perpetrators and victims themselves, who often keep quiet out of fear, shame, and desire to shield the perpetrator from criminal prosecution.

The federal government has funded periodic national probability studies (National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect–NIS) to estimate the magnitude of underlying incidence of child maltreatment in the U.S. population, but these are aggregated data that are not linkable to individual cases of maltreatment.

There are only two nationally representative data sources that provide information on individual cases of child maltreatment: the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) and the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW II). NCANDS is a voluntary federal reporting system that receives data from all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. Annually, states submit case-level data by constructing an electronic file of child-specific records for each report of maltreatment that resulted in a disposition (or finding) during the reporting year. A unique identifier is assigned to each child report, permitting longitudinal analysis of safety. Because it provides the ability to study safety longitudinally, NCANDS has emerged as the one national data set used during the last two decades to conduct longitudinal studies of repeated involvement with the CWS due to child maltreatment (Fluke, Shusterman, Hollinshead, & Yuan, 2005a; Fluke et al., 1999, 2008). The NCANDS findings for substantiated cases are published annually in the Child Maltreatment report series, available 18 months after the close of the data collection year (Fallon et al., 2010).

1.3. *Sources of bias in estimates of re-reports and recurrence*

Even though most states voluntarily submit case-level data to NCANDS, there are gaps in coverage. Reports of maltreatment can be screened out because, for example, eligibility criteria for investigation were not met, there was not enough information for a CPS response to occur, or response by another agency was deemed more appropriate. Such information is not included in the NCANDS system (US Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families, 2012). One way to fill in the gaps is to collect information directly from the investigators and caseworkers who handle such cases. This is the approach that NSCAW takes to collecting data from investigators and caseworkers on re-reports and recurrence for a nationally representative cohort of cases that have been screened-in for investigation for maltreatment.

NSCAW II is a longitudinal survey of a cohort of 5872 children ranging in age from birth to 17.5 years old at the time of sampling. Children were sampled from child welfare investigations closed between February 2008 and April 2009 in 83 counties nationwide. The cohort included substantiated and unsubstantiated investigations of abuse or neglect, and children and families who were and were not receiving services. Face-to-face interviews or assessments were conducted with children, parents and nonparent adult caregivers (e.g., foster parents, kin caregivers, group home caregivers), investigative and services caseworkers; and a paper or web-based survey with the child's teacher.

Baseline data collection on all 5872 investigated cases was completed between April 2008 and September 2009. The first follow-up (Wave 2) was conducted between October 2009 and January 2011, approximately 18 months after the baseline interview for each child. At Wave 2, a services caseworker interview was attempted if the child was in out-of-home care or if the child and/or family had been involved with child welfare services since the baseline interview. The restriction of Wave 2 data collection to active foster care cases and re-opened child welfare cases was necessary in order to locate a reliable informant to provide the requested information. Because a majority of investigated cases are closed and never re-opened, attempting data collection for all cases not only is expensive but would likely misspend resources and result in much missing data. At the same time, a sample strategy that conserves survey resources can also be expected to result in data gaps of its own, particularly if the information is inaccurate or incomplete about whether the child and/or family had been involved with

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