

Populations at Risk for Child Maltreatment

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Executive Summary

Child maltreatment is a significant issue in today's society. This research project examines the relationship between child maltreatment and age. The hypothesis states children ages 0 to 5 will have a significantly greater number of substantiated maltreatment reports than children ages 6 and older. The literature review covered 10 articles related to child maltreatment and age.

The methodology for conducting this research project included a cross-sectional, more specifically a convenience sample. The sample was composed of children that were from birth to age 18. The sample size was estimated by taking the number of reports received each week and multiplying it by fifty-two weeks. This urban county receives approximately sixty to seventy reports weekly. For the purpose of this research project, sixty-five cases per week was used. The approximate sample size was 3,380 children. This sample was a non-probability sample, more specifically a convenience sample. A logistical regression analysis was used for the statistical analysis.

The findings were that children 0 to 5 had more substantiated maltreatment reports therefore placing this age group at the highest risk for maltreatment. There was a total of 360 referrals used for this research project. There were 180 referrals from each age group. There were 30 reports pulled from each month of the year with 15 referrals being from each age group. Out of the 360 reports 122 (33.9%) were substantiated, 229 (63.6%) were unsubstantiated and 9 (2.5%) were unable to locate. The 9 unable to locate referrals were taken out and only 351 referrals were analyzed. The results of the logistical regression analysis were: standardized regression coefficient, $B = .636$, Wald test, $wald = 7.795$, significance level, $p = .005$ and odds-ratio, $exp(B) = 1.888$. The

logistical regression analysis showed a highly significant relationship between age and maltreatment. The significance level between age and maltreatment was .005. The standardized regression coefficient, B, shows that children age 6 and older are less likely than children age 5 and under to have a substantiated report of maltreatment. In fact, according to odds-ratio, $\exp(B)$, as age increases to 6 and over it is 1.8 times more likely to be an unsubstantiated report of maltreatment.

A major limitation was the lack of generalizability to the population. Another limitation is that the referral information may not be reported correctly or entered into the system correctly.

Abstract

Child maltreatment is a significant issue in today's society. This research project examines the relationship between child maltreatment and age. The hypothesis states children ages 0 to 5 will have a significantly greater number of substantiated maltreatment reports than children ages 6 and older. The literature review covered 10 articles related to child maltreatment and age. The methodology for conducting this research project included a cross-sectional, more specifically a convenience sample. A logistical regression analysis was used for the statistical analysis. A major limitation was the lack of generalizability to the population. The findings were that children 0 to 5 had more substantiated maltreatment reports therefore placing this age group at the highest risk for maltreatment.

Populations at Risk for Child Maltreatment

Introduction

Child maltreatment is an issue that is significantly growing in today's society. "Once thought to be a problem involving only a few thousand children a year, child maltreatment has since been identified as nothing less than a national emergency" (National Association of Counsel for Children, 2004, p.2). Historical values and perspectives play a major role in child maltreatment. The concept of child maltreatment has changed dramatically over time (Crosson-Tower, 2002). "Society is slowly evolving from viewing children as property, subject to the whims of the family and society, to at least recognizing that children may have rights of their own. Each period in history- as well as culture- has a concept of how children should be treated" (Crosson-Tower, 2002, p.1).

Hundreds of thousands of children are victims of abuse and neglect every year (NASW, 2003). Zastrow and Kirst-Ashman (2001) report that indicators reveal a large number of child maltreatment cases remain unreported. "Abuse and neglect are leading causes of death for young children in the United States" (NASW, 2003, p.34). A report of the United States Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect (1995) shows "conservative estimates indicate that almost 2,000 infants and young children die from abuse and neglect by their parents or caretakers each year, or 5 children everyday" (p.23). Another article goes on to suggest that "abuse and neglect kills 5.4 out of every 100,000 children age 4 and under"(McClain, Sacks, Ewigman, Smith, Mercy, & Sniezek, 1994, p. 85). The NASW (2003) reports that in 1993 approximately 2.3 million children were alleged victims of child maltreatment. This figure is an approximation due to the varying

of how cases are reported, how data is gathered and the varying of definitions regarding who can and can't be included in specific categories (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2001).

“One thing is certain: The chances are that any reported figures reflect a small percentage of actual cases” Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2001, p.190). Child maltreatment consequences cost the nation billions of dollars a year. (Mayden, 2000). The total child welfare spending per child (under 18) varies greatly from state to state.

Prevention, identification, investigation, treatment and administration of services are key roles that social workers can play when working with families and children (NASW, 2003). “The profession of social work should facilitate child protection through comprehensive efforts to ensure the healthy development of children (NASW, 2003, p.34). “Social workers can provide assistance that protects children by helping families recognize and build on their own strengths and the strengths of the community” (NASW, 2003, p.33).

Due to the increasing number of child maltreatment victims, the varying risk characteristics of victims, the cost to society and the need for consistency in research this study examined the relationship between child maltreatment and age. The purpose of this research project was to determine which ages of children are at the highest risk for maltreatment and to learn how to provide better preventative services to this population. The hypothesis for this research project was children 0 to 5 years of age will have a significantly higher number of substantiated maltreatment referrals than children ages 6 and older. Research statistics identify “young” children as being at the highest risk for child maltreatment. This research study is going to identify “young” children with an age range, 0 to 5.

Literature Review

Child maltreatment is such a broad topic that it is researched in several different ways. This literature review will begin with the different methodologies used in research procedures and then go into the articles that are based on age.

Sabol, Coulton, & Polousky (2004) discussed research that took place in an urban county in Ohio. “This study uses period life table methods to estimate the cumulative and age-specific rates of maltreatment during early childhood. The period life table estimates in this study are based on the experiences of children whose age was between birth and 10 in a particular period, in this case 1999 through 2001” (Sabol, et al, 2004, p. 969). The findings for this study “estimate that 31% of all children in the county will have experienced at least one maltreatment report before they reach their 10th birthday. The greatest chance of maltreatment report occurs in the birth to age 1 interval. The probability of a report declines in each yearly age interval up to ages 5 and 7 when there is a slight increase” (Sabol, et al, p. 973).

Another article by McClain, Sacks, Ewigman, Smith, Mercy, & Sniezek (1994) “used a death certificate-based model to estimate the occurrence of fatal child abuse and neglect and to examine geographic patterns of fatal abuse and neglect among children younger than 5 in the United States, between 1979 and 1988” (p. 82). The authors “estimated that from 868 to 1815 deaths from child abuse and neglect annually occur among this population” (McClain, et al, 1994, p. 85).

The article by Wolfner and Gelle (1993) “presents a profile of violence toward children in the United States, based on the results from the Second National Family Violence Survey. A national probability sample of 6,002 households was surveyed by

telephone in 1985, of which 3,232 households had a least one child under 18 years old living at home. Minor violence, or physical punishment, was most common among mothers, caretakers 18 to 37 years old, fathers who were unemployed, caretakers with blue-collar occupations, households with two to four children at home, and among caretakers who used alcohol and other drugs, male children and children 3 to 6 years old. The highest rates of violence occurred in families located in the East, families whose annual income was below the poverty line, families where the father was unemployed, families where the caretakers held blue-collar jobs, families with four or more children in the home, caretakers who used drugs at least once, male children and children 3 to 6 years old” (p.197).

The last research article by Sidebotham, Heron, & ALSPAC (2003) “was to determine characteristics of children that may be predisposed to maltreatment. The research is based on a large cohort study: the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children” (p. 337). “Out of 14,256 children participating in the study, 115 have been identified as having been placed on local child protection registers prior to their 6th birthday” (Sidebotham, Heron & ALSPAC, p.340). The findings from this study showed that “ while child factors are significant, they are only a small part of the overall complex set of circumstances and conditions that ultimately lead to abuse or neglect. This study showed that the parents attitude toward the child(ren) may be more important than the child’s characteristics” (Sidebotham, Heron, & ALSPAC, 2003, p. 350).

The next articles discussed relate to age and maltreatment. The National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect (NCCAN) (1988) “collected data concerning cases of child maltreatment which was recognized and reported to the study by “community

professionals” in a national probability sample of 29 counties throughout the United States” (p.9). “Maltreatment defined according to the original standards increased in incidence with increasing age. There were age differences in both abuse and neglect, with maltreatment increasing with age in both cases. Specifically analyses of the components of these patterns revealed that, for abuse, 0-2 year olds were significantly less abused than children in all the older age brackets and that the 3-5 year olds were significantly less abused than the 12-14 year olds. For neglect, children aged 5 and under were significantly less neglected than older children, but other differences in overall neglect did not prove to be statistically reliable” (NCCAN, p. 5-10). The Administration for Children and Families (ACF) (2002) published “this report presents national data about child abuse and neglect known to child protective services agencies in the United States in 2002. The data were collected and analyzed through the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) by the Children’s Bureau, Administration on Children, Youth and Families in the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The NCANDS collects case-level data on all children who received an investigation or assessment by a child protective services agency. States that are unable to provide case-level data submit aggregated counts of key indicators” (p.1). The report states, “the youngest children had the highest rate of victimization. The rate of child victimization for the age group of birth to 3 years was 16.0 per 1,000 children of the same age group. The victimization rate of children in the age group of 4-7 years was 13.7 per 1,000 children in the same age group. Overall, the rate of victimization was inversely related to the age of the child. Children younger than 1-year-old accounted for 9.6 percent

of victims, and children age 1-9 years accounted for approximately 6.0 percent for each single-year age” (ACF, 2002, p.2).

Mraovich and Wilson (1998) state, “ The main objective of the study was to investigate the relationship between age of the very young victim and the type of abuse perpetrated against the victim. The study used secondary data from 1990 – 1996. The data included all cases of substantiated abuse of children. The study examined ages 0 to 7, and took place in a Midwestern county in the United States” (p. 900). The findings showed “neglect was the most common form of primary substantiated abuse recorded for this population of children under the age of 7 years, although the incidence of neglect decreased as chronological age of the child increased. Sexual abuse increased in occurrence as the children got older. No significant age differences were observed for physical abuse and emotional abuse” (Mraovich & Wilson, 1998, p.902).

Kelli Connell-Carrick (2003), completes a “review of the empirical literature on the correlates of child neglect” (p.390). The review was completed on research from 1990 to 2002 and included 24 research articles on neglect. “Three out of twenty-four studies specifically indicated that young age was a risk factor for neglect and only one study found females between the age of 15 and 17 are at greatest risk of physical neglect. The research indicates that children under the age of 3 suffer neglect more than any other age group, with children under one suffering neglect twice that of other ages. The study also found that the risk of neglect decreases as the child’s age increases. Even with the limited number of studies that have included age as a risk factor in predicting neglect, the findings indicate that young children are at greater risk of neglect, including fatal neglect” (Connell-Carrick, 2003, p.410).

The article by Jones and McCurdy (1992) “examines the relative impact of demographic characteristics of the child, family structure and economic variables on types of child abuse and neglect. The current analysis is based on data from the Second National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect, which collected information from both child protective service agencies and non-child protective service agencies in a national sample of 29 counties. The findings show that both sexual abuse and physical neglect occur at younger ages than previously shown” (p.201).

The last article by the U.S. Advisory Board (1995) states “The vast majority of victims are under 4 years of age, an age when they are most vulnerable to physical attacks and to dangers created by lack of supervision severe neglect and are isolated from teachers or other who might intervene to protect them. Death rates among children age 4 and under who die from homicide have hit a 40 year high” (p.24).

In summary a total of ten research articles were reviewed for this research project. Two out of the ten articles found that young age was not a risk factor for certain types of maltreatment. One article found that neglect occurred in older children more than younger children and one article found that other factors have more influence on maltreatment. One out of the ten articles found that age was a risk factor for certain types of maltreatment, but not for others. This article found neglect decreased with age, but sexual abuse increased with age. The article found no age difference for physical abuse and emotional abuse. Six out of the ten articles found that young age was a risk factor for certain types of maltreatment. Two of these articles found that children four and under were at the highest risk for maltreatment. Two articles looked at children ages three and under. One found that this age group, 0 to 3, is at the highest risk for neglect and the

other found that this age group was at the highest risk for overall maltreatment. One article found that the highest rate of violence was for children ages three to six. Another article found that the greatest chance for a maltreatment report was for children ages birth to one.

The literature review showed that there is little consistency in research for the relationship between age and maltreatment. The age range in which researchers examine is not consistent. There is also little research on maltreatment and age in general. Most of the literature categorizes research into neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse.

Not one research article that was reviewed compared ages 0 to 5 and 6 and older. This research study categorized age in this form due to children age 0 to 5 being most vulnerable because of several factors. These factors include them not being able to protect themselves, them not being around people that will report maltreatment (school), they cannot verbalize well and unsupervision is detrimental to this age group. This research study looked at maltreatment as all forms of abuse and neglect. Maltreatment was not categorized. This research article studied maltreatment this was because all forms of abuse and neglect are critical and damaging to children. The type of abuse and/or neglect should not be a factor when children are at risk. Also, through work experience at a child protective services agency, when maltreatment is found in a family there is usually more than one type of maltreatment occurring.

Methodology

For the purpose of this research project the definition of maltreatment came from the article, *A history of child protection* (2001), which states, “To label a behaviour or act

as “maltreatment” depends on: the intentionality of the act; the impact of the act upon the child, value judgements about the act; and the cultural and societal standards that apply. It is common practice to define child maltreatment or “child abuse” into four main forms: physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse and neglect. Child maltreatment and child abuse are used interchangeably” (Tomison, p.46).

The data used came from a comprehensive data set used by the child welfare agencies in a south eastern state. This comprehensive data set is used by all child welfare agencies in this state to record specific information regarding maltreatment reports. The data set keeps track of maltreatment reports, characteristics regarding the victims and perpetrators of maltreatment, services provided to the victims and perpetrators, the number of reports involving the victim and perpetrator and numerous amounts of other information. The data is collected for all alleged maltreatment reports received by the agency. The data is received when a person calls in a referral (Referral Sheet, see appendix A). Every time a referral is received it is entered into the system. The data collected is used primarily for preventative services and secondary for research.

Reliability and validity helped to determine whether or not the research was going to be effective. According to Nachmias and Nachmias (2000), “reliability refers to the extent to which a measuring instrument contains variable error, that is errors that appear inconsistently between observation during any one measurement” (p.154). “Validity is concerned with the question “Am I measuring what I intend to measure?” (Nachmias and Nachmias, 2000, p.149). The data used for this research was not tested for reliability and validity. The data is only collected when someone calls in a suspected report of child maltreatment. Due to the data being self-reported there is no test for reliability and

validity. Since the data was not tested for reliability it was difficult to generalize the findings to the whole population. The validity of the research may be compromised due to the information being reported incorrectly or the person entering the data entering it incorrectly.

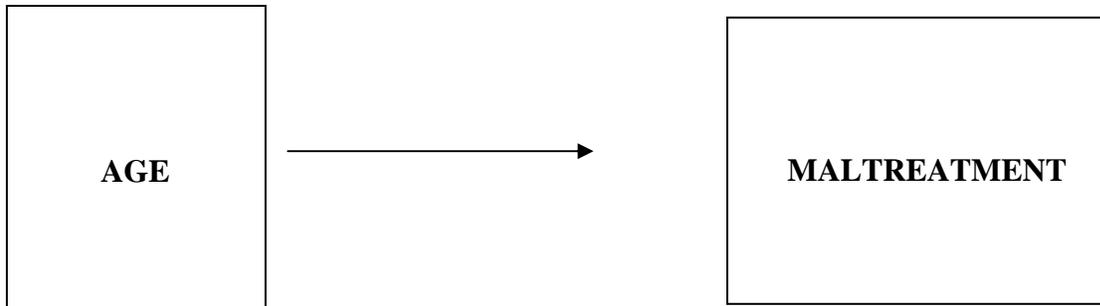
The research hypothesis was children ages 0 to 5 will have a significantly higher number of substantiated maltreatment referrals than children ages 6 and older. The data used for this hypothesis were secondary data. The data were collected from one urban county in a south eastern state.

The research design used for this project was a cross-sectional design. The cross-sectional design does not have a control group. The cross-sectional design is used mostly in social science research. Nachmias and Nachmias (2000) define a cross-sectional design as “a research design most predominant in survey research and used to examine relations between properties and dispositions” (p.116). Nachmias and Nachmias (2000) stated the advantages of a cross-sectional design are “they allow researchers to carry out studies in natural, real life settings using probability samples, thus increasing the external validity of their studies” and “they do not require random assignment of individual cases to comparison groups” (p.117). Nachmias and Nachmias (2000) state the disadvantages of a cross-sectional design are “the lack of adequate control over rival explanations makes it difficult for researchers to make unambiguous references” and “because researchers often cannot manipulate the independent variable, the direction of causation must be logically or theoretically inferred” (p.117).

The variables of interest for this research study were maltreatment and age. The operational definition for maltreatment was the number of substantiated reports for

neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse. The second variable, age, was operationally defined in the hypothesis as two groups including children ages 0 to 5 and children ages 6 and older.

Figure 1



The conceptual model illustrated in Figure 1 shows there is an association between the number of substantiated maltreatment reports and age. Age was broken down into two categories due to the literature not being consistent. The literature was not consistent on age ranges for maltreatment reports. The ages were broken down this way due to an intuitive choice based on work experience. It has been my experience, from working with child protective service, that children age 0 to 5 years will have more substantiated maltreatment reports due to them not being able to protect themselves, not being around adults who would report the maltreatment (school) or being able to verbally discuss the maltreatment incidents.

For this research project intrinsic threats to validity were not anticipated. Intrinsic threats to validity “include changes in the individuals or the units studied that occur during the study period, changes in the measuring instrument or the reactive effect of the observations itself” (Nachmias & Nachmias, 2000, p.96). Extrinsic threats to validity

cannot be controlled for with this research project. Extrinsic threats to validity, according to Nachmias and Nachmias (2000), “may have produced differences between experimental and control groups prior to the research operation” (p.95).

One threat to external validity was representativeness of the sample or generalizability. This research project cannot be generalized to the whole population. This research project did not contain a random sample from the general population.

The subjects were collected from the 2004 comprehensive data set for this urban county. The data were for one year. The reason the 2004 data set was chosen is due to it being the most current data available and it will provide the most relevant data needed to work with maltreated children. The reason this urban county was used is because until recently, this was the largest county in this south eastern state. This data was used in order to help generalize the findings to the populations in this south eastern state.

The sample was composed of children that were from birth to age 18. This sample was a non-probability sample, more specifically a convenience sample. Nachmias and Nachmias (2000) describe a non-probability sample as “there is not way of specifying the probability of each unit’s inclusion in the sample, and there is not assurance that every unit has some chance of being included” (p.176). Nachmias and Nachmias (2000) describe a convenience sample as “selecting whatever sampling units are conveniently available” (p.168). The children had to have a reported allegation of maltreatment called into the agency. The sample was composed of both female and male children. The sample included the ages of the children and the findings of the reports for the children. The data for the sample was collected when a source called the child abuse hotline and when a child protective services worker investigated the report to determine

the findings (unsubstantiated or substantiated). The hotline worker takes the initial information down and enters it into the comprehensive data system. The child protective services worker investigates the referral and then enters their findings into the comprehensive data system.

The sample size used was large. The sample size was estimated by taking the number of reports received each week and multiplying it by fifty-two weeks. This urban county receives approximately sixty to seventy reports weekly. For the purpose of this research project sixty-five cases per week was used. The approximate sample size was 3,380 children.

Maltreatment was a nominal level variable. Montcalm and Royse (2002) define nominal levels of measurement as “the simplest form of measurement” and “requires that we assign names or terms to represent the different categories or classification into which we sort our observations” (p.29). Age was operationally defined as ages 0 to 5 and ages 6 and older. Typically the level of measurement that would be used for age would be interval, but since this research project groups age into two discrete categories age was measured nominally.

The statistical test used for this research project was logistical regression. According to Moncalm and Royse (2002), logistical regression is used when the dependent variable is nominal and the independent variables are interval, ordinal or nominal. (p.287) In this case both maltreatment and age are nominal variables.

Findings

The research hypothesis was children ages 0 to 5 will have a significantly higher number of substantiated maltreatment referrals than children ages 6 and older.

Logistical regression analysis was used to determine the probability that children age 0 to 5 would have more substantiated maltreatment referrals than children age 6 and over.

The predictor variable was age. Logistical regression analysis was used because of the likelihood of a dichotomous outcome.

Table 1 shows there was a total of 360 referrals used for this research project. There was 180 referrals from each age group. There was 30 reports pulled from each month of the year with 15 referrals being from each age group. Out of the 360 reports 122 (33.9%) were substantiated, 229 (63.6%) were unsubstantiated and 9 (2.5%) were unable to locate. The 9 unable to locate referrals were taken out and only 351 referrals were analyzed.

Table 1- Frequencies

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Children ages 0 to 5	180	.50	.50	.50
Children ages 6 and over	180	.50	.50	100.0
Total	360	100.0	100.0	
Substantiation	122	33.9	33.9	33.9
Unsubstantiation	229	63.6	63.6	97.5
Unable to locate	9	2.5	2.5	100.0
Total	360	100.0	100.0	

Table two shows the results of the logistical regression analysis. The results are: standardized regression coefficient, $B = .636$, Wald test, $wald = 7.795$, significance level, $p = .005$ and odds-ratio, $\exp(B) = 1.888$.

Table 2- Variables in the Equation

	B	Wald	Sig. (p)	Exp (B)
Age	.636	7.795	.005	1.888

Discussion

The logistical regression analysis showed a highly significant relationship between age and maltreatment. The significance level between age and maltreatment was .005. The standardized regression coefficient, B, shows that there is a significantly less likelihood of substantiation among older children. In fact, according to odds-ratio, $\exp(B)$, children ages 6 and over are 1.8 times more likely to be an unsubstantiated report of maltreatment.

The expected findings of this research study were that children ages 5 and under would have a significantly higher number of substantiated maltreatment reports than children ages 6 and older. After reviewing the literature there was sufficient evidence to conclude that children ages 3 and under was at a higher risk of having substantiated maltreatment reports than any other age group. Due to their being little research on the specific age group, 5 and under, and the reasons for children 3 and under being at a high risk, I feel that this research will find that children 5 and under are at the highest risk. The reason why children 3 and under have a higher risk of substantiated maltreatment reports would be the same reasons for children ages 5 and under. Children age 3 and under would be included in the age group being studied.

The actual findings are consistent with the hypothesis that children age 0 to 5 have a significantly higher number of substantiated maltreatment referrals than children age 6 and over. The research showed a significant relationship between age and maltreatment.

There were limitations to this research project. First, the information is not generalizable. The findings of this study cannot be used for the entire population. The

second limitation is that the referral source could provide inaccurate information. The third limitation is the hotline worker and/or the child protective services investigator may enter the information into the TWIST system incorrectly. The final limitation is that all the data for the year may not be up to date in the system. Child protective service investigators are overwhelmed and sometimes they get behind on entering data into the system. This could skew the findings of the research due to all the needed information not being available. This research project took out 9 referrals due to the findings being unable to locate. This could have skewed the data to some degree. The 9 referrals taken out should have had little to no effect on the results.

For this research a significance level of less than or equal to .05 was used in order to decrease the likelihood of Type I error. In order to decrease the likelihood of Type II error an adequate sample size was obtained.

This research study will help provide social workers with the most up to date data in order to work with this specific age group of children. This research will help social workers to understand what age group is at the highest risk for maltreatment. This knowledge will help social workers realize that age is a risk factor for maltreatment and that children age 5 and under need to have in depth assessments and priority over older children. This research will help social workers to provide better preventative services to families with children age 5 and under.

This research study will help future research to be consistent with age ranges. Other researchers may realize that there is not any consistency when measuring the correlation between age and maltreatment. This research study may direct other researchers to be consistent when they study the relationship between age and

maltreatment. This research study may also engage other researchers to look at other characteristics that may correlate to maltreatment (gender, religion, etc.). If research is completed on characteristics related to maltreatment then preventative services would be more effective.

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