



## The influence of unemployment and divorce rate on child help-seeking behavior about violence, relationships, and other issues

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This study examined the influence of community unemployment and divorce rate on child help-seeking behavior about violence and relationships via a telephone and Internet helpline.

**Methods:** Time series analysis was conducted on monthly call volumes to a child helpline ('De Kindertelefoon') in the Netherlands from 2003 to 2008 and on the topics discussed (primarily Violence and Relationships) from 1994 to 2008 in answered calls and chats.

**Results:** As unemployment rises, the number of calls to the helpline increases. With increased unemployment, the share of conversations about Violence and about Relationships is found to be higher. When the divorce rate goes up, the number of calls to the helpline increases, but the share of Violence and of Relationships decreases. In addition, the share of contacts about Violence is increasing over time, while the share about Relationships is decreasing. Furthermore, the showing of violent movies is associated with fewer attempted helpline calls. Finally, seasonal variation in call volumes and the shares of calls about Violence and Relationships are found.

**Conclusion:** Our data provide a unique and direct perspective on child help-seeking behavior. Our results suggest that more resources need to be devoted to resolving children's problems during times of unemployment as they seek more help particularly with respect to violence. Increased training of counselors with regard to children reporting incidents of violence is particularly important, as the share of contacts about violence is increasing over time and during a recession. Resources are especially needed as, on average, less than half of the calls to child helplines are actually answered.

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### Introduction

Childhood is characterized as a vulnerable period in which many young people experience distress. Being able to cope with this by seeking help is important for a healthy transition to adulthood (Schonert-Reichl & Muller, 1996); if children receive help when they are in distress, troubled behaviors such as violence, substance abuse, and suicide may be reduced (Grinstein-Weiss, Fishman, & Eisikovits, 2005). However, it is estimated that only about 10% of all children attempt to alleviate their distress by approaching some type of helping agent (Priebe & Svedin, 2008). In particular, they face difficulties obtaining *formal* help (i.e., professionals) as opposed to *informal* help (i.e., friends and family).

One formal, and fast-growing, help-seeking possibility for children is to use (telephone or computer) helplines (Potter & Hepburn, 2003). Helplines can be contacted without the consent of parents or anyone else, anonymously, and often free of charge and consequently lack the barriers often associated with the use of many other health services (Tylee, Haller, Graham,

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Churchill, & Sancu, 2007). Counselors provide young people with information, referrals for emergency situations, solutions to problems, and support for issues such as violence at home or at school, abuse, bullying, sexuality, and health. Little is known about this type of formal help-seeking behavior by children. The few studies about helplines focus on the age, gender, and ethnicity of callers (Franks & Medforth, 2005; Kliewer, Lepore, Broquet, & Zuba, 1990), seasonal variations in calls (Morken, Sund, & Linaker, 2004), content analysis of the calls (Hepburna, 2005; Potter & Hepburn, 2003), and on the effects of the help received (Fukkink & Hermanns, 2009). The last study finds that helplines were effective in reducing stress among children.

The literature on help-seeking behavior by children in general and via helplines in particular has largely ignored the influence of socio-economic factors, such as unemployment and divorce, on help-seeking behavior. This is remarkable as macro effects like recession have been found to have an influence on children's welfare. For instance, Berger et al. (2011) showed that the rate of children's abusive head trauma increases significantly during economic recession and consequently, they argued that prevention efforts should be increased during times of economic hardship. Parental unemployment has also been found to have negative consequences for children, particularly on psychological and physical health, self-esteem, drinking behavior, and depression, as well as the occurrence of physical abuse of children (Frojd, Marttunen, Pelkonen, von der Pahlen, & Kaltiala-Heino, 2006; Pedersen, Holstein, & Kohler, 2005; Piko & Fitzpatrick, 2007; Sleskova et al., 2006). As suggested by Catalano (1991) the link between economic insecurity and child abuse could be found to be even stronger with additional aggregate-time series research.

Research on the effects of parental divorce shows correlations of divorce with children's behavioral and emotional problems (D'Onofrio et al., 2007) and a negative effect of divorce on children's well-being (Amato & Cheadle, 2005; Hansagi, Brandt, & Andreasson, 2000). Such studies have found higher levels of misbehavior and aggression, higher risk of committing suicide, less competence, more under-controlled behavior, poorer academic performance and reduced likelihood of participating in tertiary education (e.g., Ruschena, Prior, Sanson, & Smart, 2005). Other researchers show the link between divorce and child abuse. They find that experiencing parental divorce during childhood is associated with increased likelihood of being subject to child abuse and/or witnessing violence (Affi, Boman, Fleisher, & Sareen, 2009; Dong et al., 2004; Oliver, Kuhns, & Pomeranz, 2006). According to research of Wilson (2001) girls are particularly at greater risk for (sexual) abuse after divorce, both from family members and those outside the family.

Further studies on the influence of unemployment and divorce rates on children's help-seeking behavior could reveal information about the causes of help-seeking and produce information relevant for planning the type of training needed by counselors and the capacity of services for children. This is important because less than half the calls placed to helplines are actually answered (Child Helpline International, 2010). The primary purpose of our study is to empirically investigate the relationship between unemployment, divorce rates, and children's help-seeking behavior in a field setting that directly examines young people's behavior.

## Methods

### Data

Our data were at the aggregate level and were based on monthly summaries of contacts with the child helpline and on public records. For example, unemployment was measured at the nationwide level and might be referred to as "community unemployment."

### Criterion variables

Data used in the current study are from 'De Kindertelefoon' (Childline), the most widely used child helpline in The Netherlands. This helpline provides information, advice, and support to children between 8 and 18 years of age by means of a toll-free telephone number and an online chat service, 365 days per year, 6 hours per day. Children communicate anonymously with a trained volunteer (763 in total in 2009). The volunteers prepare a record of each conversation, including the child's details (age and gender) and the topic (which follows a prescribed protocol). Records of all answered telephone calls are collected from 1994 to 2008, and of online chats from January 2003, when they were first introduced. Due to a system failure the data from January–June 2008 for answered calls and chats are not available.

The records show that the topics of Violence and Relationships are the major topics discussed (64% of the total conversations). The category Violence includes the topics of sexual harassment, bullying, and physical, sexual, and psychological abuse. The category Relationships refers to issues about being in love, dating, friendships, having sex, contraception, pregnancy, and homosexuality. The rest of the conversations (36%) include topics with respect to the situation at home, health, school, and loneliness. The study included only sincere conversations; prank conversations were excluded. The average age of the children in our dataset is 13.5 years; 67% are female. The helpline has also recorded the number of attempted calls since January 2005. The number of attempted chats is not recorded. The number of attempted calls greatly exceeds the number of conversations (Fig. 1).

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