



Child abuse and neglect re-reports: Combining and comparing data from two national sources



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ABSTRACT

This study compared child-level estimates of child maltreatment re-report and recurrence in two national sets of data on child maltreatment: state administrative data submitted to the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) and caseworker interviews from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW). Maltreatment data from NCANDS and NSCAW were merged for 2230 children that had intersecting information from both sets. The percentage of child cases with at least one re-report of abuse or neglect over the study period differed depending on the data set. The NCANDS re-report estimate was 32.3% (95% CI 26.5%, 38.6%) whereas the estimate based on NSCAW caseworker interviews was 22.9% (95% CI 17.6%, 29.2%). More than a quarter of the children with observations from the union of the two data sets had a re-report identified by one source but not the other (set difference). Most often, the set difference in re-reports appeared in NCANDS, but was not reported by an NSCAW caseworker. When the set difference from NCANDS was added to the re-reports by NSCAW caseworkers, the resulting union of re-reports increased the point estimate in the NSCAW–NCANDS intersection to 40.9% (95% CI 34.3%, 47.8%). Restricting the comparisons to only substantiated re-reports (recurrence) narrowed the differences in absolute terms but the set difference in recurrence rates was proportionally similar. Potential explanations for non-intersecting re-reports and recurrence between the two data sets were examined. Findings illuminate methodological challenges that may arise when child maltreatment re-report and recurrence data from administrative and survey sources are merged, and the value of the union of state-level administrative data with national survey data for studies of safety and well-being of children reported for maltreatment.

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1. Introduction

Allegations of child abuse or neglect bring children and families to the attention of the child welfare system (CWS). In 2011, child protective services (CPS) agencies across the nation received an estimated 3.4 million such allegations or referrals. More than 2 million of the allegations were formally investigated or received an alternative response, and 18.5% of investigated reports were classified as substantiated (US Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children & Families, 2011). Substantiation refers to investigated reports that exceed state-specific, evidentiary thresholds for deciding whether or not the maltreatment actually occurred (also called indicated reports in some jurisdictions). Many children and families will have no further contact with the CWS after the initial maltreatment investigation has closed. Others may be re-reported multiple times for new episodes of maltreatment. Tracking of re-reports and recurrence (substantiated re-reports) of abuse and neglect is critical to assessing the effectiveness

of CWS in ensuring child safety: “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. Whether the child is placed in out-of-home care or maintained in the home, the child welfare agency’s first concern must be to ensure the safety of the child” (US Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children & Families, 2011). The most recent Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) data indicate that approximately 4.8% of child victims experience a recurrence of child maltreatment within 6 months of a substantiated index report (US Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children & Families, 2011).

The primary source of administrative data on child maltreatment used for the CFSR is the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS), a voluntary census-type national reporting system that currently includes data from all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. NCANDS was established in response to the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act of 1988 and is administered by the Children’s Bureau within the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS).

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NCANDS is an official data system of the Children's Bureau and has been in operation since 1989 (US Department of Health and Human Services Administration on Children Youth & Families, 1992). If reports are screened out because, for example, eligibility criteria for investigation were not met (e.g., perpetrator not a caregiver), there was not enough information for a CPS response to occur (e.g., no identifying information provided), or response by another agency (e.g. police, truancy officers) was deemed more appropriate, the information is not included in the NCANDS system (US Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children & Families, 2012). Thus, NCANDS contains all screened-in referrals to the CWS that received a disposition or a completed response, representing the universe of known child maltreatment cases. 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 repeat maltreatment, allowing NCANDS to emerge as a resource for conducting longitudinal studies of repeated involvement with the CWS (Fluke, Shusterman, Hollinshead, & Yuan, 2008).

Two national surveys provide additional national data on child maltreatment. Since 1974, the National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS) has been conducted approximately once each decade. The NIS is intended to supplement the NCANDS data on official child maltreatment reports already collected by the Children's Bureau. It is uniquely designed to estimate more broadly the number of children who are abused or neglected nationally by including both cases reported to authorities and those that are not. The study is sponsored by the Children's Bureau and the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE) within ACF, DHHS. The NIS provides information about the nature and severity of the maltreatment, characteristics of the children, perpetrators, and families, and its periodicity allows for an examination of changes in the incidence of child maltreatment over time. The NIS data are aggregated, however, and not linkable to individual cases of maltreatment at the child-level (Sedlak et al., 2010).

The second source of survey data on child maltreatment is the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW), a longitudinal study with two cohorts, one initiated in 1998 and the other in 2008. NSCAW is sponsored by OPRE. The NSCAW studies are intended to answer a range of fundamental questions about the well-being, service needs, and service use of children who come in contact with the CWS. Data are collected at the level of the child who has been the subject of an investigation of abuse or neglect. The child and the child's current caregiver are followed longitudinally to examine child and caregiver health and mental health and exposure to violence. In-person interviews conducted with the child's current caseworker collect information about the index report of maltreatment that brought the child and family into the study. Information about any subsequent reports of maltreatment is gathered from in-person interviews with caseworkers on children who were in out-of-home care or had an open or re-opened child welfare case. There is no follow-up data collected from caseworkers on closed cases that were never re-opened.

The restriction of NSCAW data collection to children in out-of-home care or with open/re-opened child welfare cases conserves resources and minimizes the high costs and respondent burden of in-person longitudinal surveys. But this approach also can leave large gaps especially if the information that is used to identify the eligible sub-samples for caseworker interviews is incomplete or faulty. A recent report conducted by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (2012) notes the important role administrative data can play in supplementing federal survey data. The cost considerations and desire for strategies to enrich the quality and complexity of national survey data sets have led researchers to identify possible linkages between administrative and survey data at the individual case level. Although merging data sets can be an opportunity to improve the understanding of a given phenomenon, this process may also illuminate data quality issues and areas of difference between the two sets of re-report data (Goerge &

Lee, 2001). This study seeks to describe the areas of intersection and set difference in re-reports (defined as any subsequent report after the index report) and recurrence estimates (defined as any subsequent report substantiated or indicated after the index report) comparing (1) administrative data that states reported to NCANDS, and (2) survey data collected from county-level child welfare caseworkers participating in NSCAW. Second, the study explores explanations for differences in the two data sets to illuminate potential methodological challenges that can arise when merging NCANDS and NSCAW as sources of child maltreatment re-report and recurrence data.

1.1. Measurement of re-reports and recurrence

Recurring maltreatment and continued exposure to violence negatively affect a child's development and well-being (DePanfilis & Zuravin, 1999a). Definitions of new episodes of maltreatment after the index report vary widely across studies. Some studies count only substantiated reports (Fluke, Edwards, Bussey, Wells, & Johnson, 2001; Fluke, Yuan, & Edwards, 1999; Palusci, 2003), while others consider all investigated reports regardless of substantiation (Way, Chung, Jonson-Reid, & Drake, 2001). Still other studies provide separate estimates of all new reports versus only those that were substantiated (Bae, Solomon, Gelles, & White, 2010; Connell, Bergeron, Katz, Saunders, & Tebes, 2007). In some efforts, the family is the unit of analysis (DePanfilis & Zuravin, 1998), in others it is the child (Jonson-Reid, Drake, Chung, & Way, 2003) or the perpetrator (Way et al., 2001). The length of the follow-up period also varies greatly. Study periods span a few months (Fluke et al., 2001) to several years (DePanfilis & Zuravin, 1999b; Fluke et al., 2008). Studies also have different criteria for determining whether additional reports are new incidents or instead are rolled into the index report. For example, some studies count as a new report those that occurred as recently as 24 h after the index report (Connell et al., 2007; Fluke et al., 2008). Others build in longer delays, such as a week after (Jonson-Reid, Emery, Drake, & Stahlschmidt, 2010; Way et al., 2001), 2 weeks after (Drake, Jonson-Reid, & Sapokaite, 2006; Jonson-Reid et al., 2003), or the duration of the investigation of the original report (assuming that during the time the file is open new reports are still part of the index report that involved the family with the CWS).

As a consequence, recurrence rates show an extremely wide range from 0% 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 cases investigated by the CWS at the local and state levels (DePanfilis & Zuravin, 1998). Other reviews of the maltreatment literature have reported recurrence rates that range from 3.5% to 22% at 6 months to 22.6% at 18 months follow-up (Hindley, Ramchandani, & Jones, 2006). These variations may be explained in part by the differing contexts, processes, and systems surrounding CWS investigations in counties and states across the country (Helie & Bouchard, 2010).

To date, research using merged data sets to estimate and describe re-reports and recurrence has focused primarily on supplementing information about maltreatment (based on only one report source) with health, economic, educational, and other indicators (Drake, Jonson-Reid, Way, & Chung, 2003; Drake et al., 2006; Jonson-Reid, 2003; Jonson-Reid, Chung, Way, & Jolley, 2010; Jonson-Reid, Emery, Drake, & Stahlschmidt, 2010; Jonson-Reid et al., 2003; Way et al., 2001). In studies that merge data from several states, recurrence data come from one data source—NCANDS (Fluke, Shusterman, Hollinshead, & Yuan, 2005; Fluke et al., 1999, 2008; Palusci & Ondersma, 2012).

1.2. Methodological challenges in merging child maltreatment data sets

Beyond noting variations in the definitions of recurrence and timing, few methodological challenges involved in linking child maltreatment data have been described. In Florida, four data sets collected by the

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