



Localities, social services and child abuse: The role of community characteristics in social services allocation and child abuse reporting

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ABSTRACT

The study presented here explores relationships between a set of locality characteristics, two variables of social services availability and child maltreatment. Data was collected on 173 localities in Israel, ranging from small towns to small cities. In which roughly 34% of the overall child population reside. This study was set to test three hypotheses: worse off localities will have more social services; worse off localities will have higher child maltreatment rates; localities with more available social services will have higher reported child maltreatment rates. The study shows that reporting rates vary across localities. The study established a relation between locality characteristics and availability of social workers but not with the availability of child protection officers. Findings supported earlier studies by finding a relation between locality hardship and higher child maltreatment rate. The study also established a clear relation between availability of social services and reported child maltreatment rates. Our study clearly shows that to prevent child maltreatment, one should address unemployment and better support of single-parent families.

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1. Introduction

In recent years a growing body of knowledge on relations between social networks, community connectedness, neighborhood social ties and child maltreatment has been developed (Coulton, Crampton, Irwin, Spilsbury, & Korbin, 2007). However, research that seeks to uncover the relationship between communities, social contexts and child maltreatment is still lagging behind research into individual and family correlates. Furthermore, it seems that research of communities' etiology to child maltreatment suffers from looking only at communities in western and dominantly Christian countries.

A somewhat less extensive body of knowledge has been developed on the relations between this contextual and community factors and the availability of social services. In other words, is the allocation of funds and of professional resources and workers related to the community or locality context? In many countries (Israel included) social services expenditure and social worker posts are allocated by the national governments to the local authorities who are responsible for providing the service. In Israel, many inequalities between localities exist; these inequalities can be seen in the extent of human and financial resources available to the local services and in the range, level, and quality of these services (Kop, 2007). As a result, the services that children receive are often more a function of where they live than of what they need. Inequality stands out especially in

comparison between Arab and Jewish localities, but it also exists within each sector by itself. Clearly, the issue of inequality in social services distribution is a major one (Saunders, 1994), yet our knowledge of it, especially when analyzed between communities and localities within a country, is somewhat short of the need.

Very little has been written on the relation between the availability of social services and Child Protection Services (CPS) and their "take-up" (i.e. the relations between the availability of child protection services and the rates of reported child maltreatment). Take-up of cash benefits is a much more researched field (van Oorschot, 1995). Take-up of social services is less studied, yet earlier studies in Israel suggested that the availability and quality of child protection services might be directly correlated with the rate of reporting (Ben-Arieh & Haj-Yahia, 2006). Professional literature confirms that the rate of social services take-up (the rate by which the target population receives the benefits of a given program) is easy to relate to issues of service delivery and quality. For example, social security take-up rates in socio-economic affluent or disadvantaged localities were found to be linked to availability and quality of social services (Corden, 1993; van Oorschot, 1995).

The study presented here aimed at narrowing that gap by exploring the relationship between 3 groups of variables. The independent variables include a set of locality characteristics; the social services availability variables and the dependent variable of child maltreatment. By utilizing the locality as the unit of analysis we examined if and how its socio-economic characteristics relate to the availability of social and child protection services and how these two are related to a dependent measure of reported child maltreatment.

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2. The theoretical framework

Two complementary theoretical frameworks support the assumption that communities' or localities' characteristics are connected to social services availability and child maltreatment; the Ecological perspective and the Community Social Organization theory (Coulton et al., 2007; Swanson, 2001).

Within the ecological perspective, a growing number of studies found child maltreatment rates in neighborhoods to be highly correlated with socio-economic measures. In addition they found that lack of social coherence and community disorganization were most apparent in areas where child maltreatment was more prevalent (Garbarino & Crouter, 1978; Garbarino & Kostelny, 1992; Garbarino & Sherman, 1980). Other studies tied low income and rate of vacant housing in neighborhoods with child maltreatment (Zuravin, 1989), and showed how a rise in unemployment led to a rise in reported cases of child maltreatment (Steinberg, Gatalano, & Dooley, 1981).

Community social organization is about patterns and functions of formal and informal networks, institutions or organizations in a community (Kasarda & Janowitz, 1974). It includes the protection and provision of resources for families (Warren, 1971). The concept of social organization is useful in explaining relations between anti-social behaviors (including child maltreatment) and a set of community characteristics, such as poverty, economic decline, and residential mobility (Sampson, 1992).

Additional studies embraced both theoretical frameworks and showed that communities and neighborhoods are etiologically significant to child maltreatment (Coulton et al., 2007; Korbin, & Coulton, 1997). A brief review shows consistently child maltreatment to be associated with economic characteristics of communities including: unemployment rate (Deccio, Horner, & Wilson, 1994; Freisthler, 2004; Gillham et al., 1998), poverty rate (Drake & Pandey, 1996; Freisthler, Midanik, & Gruenewald, 2004; Swanson, 2000), income level (Garbarino & Crouter, 1978), median residential housing/property value (Drake & Pandey, 1996; Swanson, 2000), and low economic status (Zuravin & Taylor, 1987). Other community structures that were found to correlate with child maltreatment rates include: child-care burden, (Coulton, Korbin & Su, 1999; Korbin, Coulton, Chard, Platt-Houston, & Su, 1998), residential instability (Deccio et al., 1994; Hyde, 1999; Swanson, 2001), vacant housing (Deccio et al., 1994; Zuravin, 1989), lower female labor force participation (Swanson, 2000), over crowdedness (Garbarino & Kostelny, 1992), and per capita density of alcohol outlets (Freisthler, 2004; Freisthler et al., 2004).

An in depth review of these studies and others, surfaced a number of issues. First, when utilizing both an ecological approach and a social organization approach there is a need to look beyond the socio-economic structure of a community. A crucial element of both theories would be the availability and quality of the social services offered in a community. In that regard one need to ask if social services are allocated and available in line with the community social need? (i.e. do deprived communities get a bigger allocation and therefore a higher availability of social services). Further, as Coulton et al. (2007) argue, the availability of social workers and other professionals is a partial explanation for neighborhood variation in official rates of child abuse and neglect. Indeed, availability of social workers seems a logical pre-requisite for reporting to the social services, as you need someone to report to, to have reported cases. Nevertheless, it is probably not just the mere existence or availability of social workers or child protection officers (CPOs), but also the services quality, what the social workers are looking for and how adept they are at recognizing maltreatment. In a similar vein, scholars argued that the availability and practices of the social services at large and the CPS in particular are a major casual contributor to rates of reported child maltreatment (Melton & Holaday, 2008). Yet, almost no studies were found that looked on the relations between the availability and

quality of the social services, and the reported child maltreatment rates.

Second, the majority of studies were conducted in urban settings, only a few ventured to suburban neighborhoods (Swanson, 2001) and virtually none has looked at rural, small or medium size localities. Given that communities are harder to define in urban and suburban areas (since neighborhoods are close to each other and many times cross borders), it is surprising that localities, which usually are more geographically homogenous and easier to define as a community, were not studied more in this context.

Third, most studies were done in the USA. Only a few were conducted in other western countries and very few, if at all, were done in non-Western and non-Christian communities. Again, given the vast literature on the differentiating nature of neighborhoods and communities across cultures, one can only wonder why such studies were not more common (Coulton et al., 2007; Gillham et al., 1998).

Finally, most studies looked on social and economical structural factors and virtually none has focused on cultural or religious structural factors. Yet, communities are not defined by their social or economical status alone. The religious composition of a community, the religion practiced by the community members, their national status (especially among minorities) and other cultural characteristics, are all crucial for understanding community, let alone studying it.

The aggregate-level study reported here embraced the social organization and ecological perspectives and sought to fill some of these gaps. Its main goal was to explore whether structural conditions associated with localities in a less western country, relates to the availability of social services and to reported rates of child maltreatment. It further seeks to explore the mediating role of the availability of social services on the rate of reported child maltreatment.

3. Methodology

This paper reports on a cross-sectional study of the correlates of social services availability and child maltreatment rates in Israel. The study utilized the locality as the unit of analysis. Data was collected on 173 localities in Israel, ranging from small towns with as little as 1500 habitants to small cities with as much as 50,000 habitants.

The study was set to test three hypotheses: First, the availability of social services will be negatively related to the socio-economic characteristics of the locality (i.e. worse off localities will have more social services available to the population). Second, child maltreatment rates will be related to the socio-economic characteristics of the locality (i.e. better off localities will have lower rates of child maltreatment). Third, the availability of social services will be positively correlated with reported child maltreatment rates (i.e. localities with more social workers and CPOs will have higher rates of child maltreatment).

3.1. Localities in Israel

The units of analysis for the study reported here were 173 towns and cities (localities) in Israel, each of them with an overall population of 1500–49,999 people. Using these localities as our unit of analysis, enabled us to utilize an extensive set of characteristics variables and data in the sociological, economical, religious and national realms, and yet to use relatively homogenous localities and avoid the big and divers cities.

3.2. Child maltreatment rates – the dependent variable

Our study utilized official reports of child maltreatment investigations among children aged 0–14. In Israel all these investigations are carried out by special child investigators (See Sternberg, Lamb, & Hershkowitz, 1996 for details). The official data published annually by

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