



Pergamon

Child Abuse & Neglect 30 (2006) 881–891

Child Abuse
& Neglect

Characteristics of child abuse in immigrant Korean families and correlates of placement decisions[☆]

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Received 14 January 2004; received in revised form 16 February 2006; accepted 12 March 2006

Abstract

Objective: This study examined the characteristics and patterns of child abuse among immigrant Korean families in Los Angeles and critical variables that contribute to the type of placement made by the child protective services (CPS) system.

Method: Data were obtained from reviewing and analyzing 170 active Korean case files maintained by the Asian Pacific Unit (APU) of the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (LAC-DCFS) during July through September, 2001. Logistic regression analysis was employed to examine the odds of children being kept in or removed from the home.

Results: Some of the major findings from this study include: (1) immigrant Korean families are more likely to be charged with physical abuse (49.4%) and less likely to be charged with neglect (20.6%) in comparison with all other groups in Los Angeles (13.2% and 27.1%, respectively); (2) the circumstance under which physical abuse occurred most frequently was corporal punishment used by Korean parents with an intention to discipline their children; and (3) the context under which emotional abuse occurred among the Korean families was likely to be children's witnessing domestic violence. In addition, the logistic regression showed that response status, referral source, living arrangement, victim's relationship to perpetrator, and chronicity of abuse were significant in predicting out-of-home placement.

Conclusions: An analysis of Korean child abuse cases reported to child protective service revealed that culture and child rearing practices shaped the patterns of child maltreatment. A culturally sensitive approach

[☆] This study was funded by the California Social Work Education Center (CalSWEC).

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is strongly suggested for effective child abuse prevention and intervention services with this group by CPS agencies.

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Keywords: Child abuse; Child maltreatment; Physical abuse; Child neglect; Emotional abuse; Korean immigrant; Child protective services; Placement decisions

Introduction

Cross-cultural competency in child welfare practice is critical to effective service delivery to families from diverse ethnicities and cultures (Baumrind, 1994; Hong & Hong, 1991). As the population of ethnic minorities has doubled in the United States from 34 million in 1970 to 69.8 million in 2000 (US Census Bureau, 2003a), more families from minority groups have been brought to the attention of the child welfare system. Studies have shown that ethnic minority families are at a greater risk of child maltreatment than those in mainstream groups (Connelly & Straus, 1992; Widom, 1989). In particular, African American and Native American families are over-represented in the reported cases of child abuse and neglect (US Department of Health and Human Services, 1998). The high number of cases reported from ethnic minority communities makes the cultural competency of child welfare workers essential to their practice with ethnic minority families.

Despite the increased need for child protective services (CPS) among minority groups, the amount of research on child maltreatment within these groups is limited. Empirical research on child maltreatment among Korean Americans is especially lacking. Except a few studies that describe the conception of and attitudes towards child abuse among the population (Park, 2001; Song, 1986), no studies have been conducted to empirically examine the nature and patterns of child maltreatment among Korean immigrant families. The scarcity of research on child abuse among Korean immigrants hampers practitioners from developing a culturally competent understanding of the dynamics of child maltreatment assessment, prevention, and intervention efforts.

Korean American families, similar to other Asian American families, are in general viewed as stable and free from serious family problems (Kitano & Daniels, 2001). This “model minority” image of Korean Americans distorts the actual diverse realities they experience. For example, contrary to the general stereotype of a model minority, immigrant Korean families were reported to experience the highest rate of spousal abuse among various Asian immigrant groups in Los Angeles County (Rhee, 1997). Similarly, the Los Angeles County Attorney’s office revealed that Korean immigrant males constituted the highest percentage of all Asian defendants accused of spousal abuse (Chun, 1990). Furthermore, the Korean Family Service Center in Los Angeles reported that domestic violence was one of the leading reasons to seek help from the agency (Korean Family Service Center, 2003).

Since no empirical studies have been conducted on the patterns of child abuse in Korean immigrant families, this study aims to fill the gap in knowledge about the characteristics and patterns of child abuse in this population by examining child maltreatment cases reported to CPS in Los Angeles County and critical variables that contribute to the choice of placement made by CPS.

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