



Pergamon

Child Abuse & Neglect 29 (2005) 1281–1296

Child Abuse
& Neglect

Overreporting and underreporting of child abuse: Teachers' use of professional discretion[☆]

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Received 27 July 2000; received in revised form 20 February 2004; accepted 23 February 2004

Abstract

Objective: According to mandatory reporting laws for professionals, the relationship between initial recognition that a child may have been abused and the subsequent reporting of that suspected case of child abuse to the responsible agency would, at first glance, appear to be clear. However, this relationship has developed into one of the major social policy controversies of the recent past. Our major goal is to present research findings that address this social policy debate concerning the problems of underreporting and overreporting, focusing specifically on teachers.

Method: A factorial survey design, that combines the advantages of the factorial experiment with those of surveys, was employed in a probability sample of teachers ($N=480$) who responded to vignettes in which case characteristics were systematically manipulated. Teachers responded with judgments about whether the vignette was child abuse and the likelihood that they would report this suspected case. Characteristics of the teachers and their work setting (school) were also measured.

Results: When comparing the teachers' recognition and reporting scores, we found that they gave the same score for 63% of the vignettes they judged, gave higher reporting than recognition scores (overreporting) for 4% of the vignettes, and gave higher recognition than reporting scores (underreporting) for 33% of the vignettes. Discrepancies between recognition and reporting (over and under reporting) were related to characteristics of the case, teacher, and school where the teacher was employed.

[☆] This research was partially supported by grants from the National Institute of Mental Health Grant 1 RO1 MH47319, The Urban University Program of Kent State University, and Research and Sponsored Programs of Kent State University.

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Conclusions: Teachers in our Ohio sample evidence the use of professional discretion in making judgments about the recognition and reporting of child abuse and do not appear to make these judgments with equal certainty. Their use of discretion is more likely to result in underreporting than overreporting.

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Keywords: Underreporting; Overreporting; Child abuse

Introduction

According to mandatory reporting laws, the relationship between recognition and reporting of child abuse should be clear. When suspected, child abuse is to be reported to the responsible agency. However, the relationship between recognition and reporting of child abuse has developed into a major social policy controversy of the recent past (Gelles & Loseke, 1993).

When child abuse was “discovered” in the 1960s, early social policy was shaped by the belief that child abuse was rare and that it “only had to be identified to be ‘cured’ ” (Zellman & Faller, 1996, p. 360). From the standpoint of legislators, the passage of mandatory reporting laws gave the opportunity to provide “no cost rectitude” (Nelson, 1984, p. 75). Legislators did not foresee that child welfare services would soon be faced with a tremendous increase in rates of reported child abuse and associated costs. Initial medicalization of the problem was expanded to mandate additional reporters of child abuse, so that professionals, such as teachers, would detect maltreatment before severe injuries occurred. Later definitions of child abuse were expanded from physical abuse to sexual and emotional abuse and to different types of child neglect. Social policy separated suspicion/recognition, confirmation/substantiation, and intervention/treatment, so that recognition is performed by one individual who reports to an official agency, whose investigation then determines “whether to process the case further into the system” (Zellman & Faller, 1996, p. 372). Mandatory reporting laws called for a clear relationship between recognition and reporting and leave little room for professional discretion.

Thus, expanding definitions of abuse, enlarging the group of mandated reporters, campaigns to increase reporting, and a public health model (the notion of identifying less serious abuse before it advances to serious consequences) all contributed to a tremendous increase in reported child abuse. Since budgetary support did not keep pace with increased reports of abuse, a crisis resulted for CPS agencies charged with substantiation and intervention. One result of this crisis was that CPS agencies began to employ narrower definitions that screened out less severe cases (Zellman & Fair, 2002). However, teachers have continued to report abuse based on wider definitions, resulting in a problematic relationship between CPS and schools (Zellman, 1990; Zellman & Fair, 2002). This is the context for continuing policy concerns with under- and overreporting.

The process through which child abuse was constructed and reacted to as a social problem has contributed to its ambiguity for professionals (Besharov, 1987; Dingwall, Eekelaar, & Murray, 1983; Giovannoni & Becerra, 1979; Kalichman & Brosig, 1993; Nelson, 1984; Pfohl, 1977; Valentine, Acuff, Freeman, & Andreas, 1984; Zellman, 1991; Zellman & Fair, 2002). Early social policy and a continuing body of research has focused on the problem of underreporting (Ashton, 1999; Crenshaw, Crenshaw, &

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