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Measuring child maltreatment in the United Kingdom: A study of the prevalence of child abuse and neglect[☆]

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Abstract

Objective: To provide reliable measures of the prevalence of all forms of child maltreatment in the UK that will be robust in the context of social and cultural differences due to social class, ethnicity and, region.

Methods: Two thousand eight hundred sixty-nine (2,869) young adults aged 18–24, obtained by random probability sampling throughout the UK, were interviewed face to face by trained interviewers. Maltreatment was defined using a post hoc assessment of a range of experienced behaviors and treatments while the respondents were aged 16 or under.

Results: Over 90% of respondents reported that they came from a warm and loving family background. Maltreatment (both intra and extrafamilial) was experienced by 16% of the sample. Serious maltreatment was experienced by 7% of respondents for physical abuse, 6% for emotional abuse, 6% for absence of care, and 5% for absence of supervision, and 11% reported sexual abuse involving contact. Attitudes to maltreatment were explored through the examination of respondents' views of different behaviors and experiences that children may have been exposed to.

Conclusion: The maltreatment of children in the UK today remains an extensive social problem. Prevalence data reveal that children are most at risk in the home for physical and emotional abuse and neglect. They are at greater risk of sexual abuse outside the home, particularly in dating relationships.

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Introduction

Main sources of data on the extent of child maltreatment in the UK are official statistics such as the child protection register (Department of Health, 2000), children referred to child protection services (Department of Health, 2001), or statistics on offenses against children (Kilsby, 2001). With the exception of the few UK prevalence studies conducted on specific forms of maltreatment, either sexual (Baker & Duncan, 1985; Kelly, Regan, & Burton, 1991) or physical (Smith, Bee, Heverin, & Nobes, 1995), or both (Creighton & Russell, 1995), very little is known about other forms of maltreatment that are not reported to the authorities.

This article provides the results of a national study undertaken to assess the prevalence of abuse (physical, sexual, and emotional) and neglect, collectively described as maltreatment (Cawson, Wattam, Brooker, & Kelly, 2000). The research is the only UK study, and one of the few worldwide, to have addressed the issue of maltreatment comprehensively, in a large random probability sample of the general population. The study sought to establish measures of maltreatment which are robust and replicable and which address borderline areas where there is known to be uncertainty and public debate. For this reason the research was based in a context of broader aspects of child rearing.

Attitudes are important to understand when measuring prevalence since there may be a relationship between attitudes, perceptions, self-reporting, and experience of maltreatment. Previous studies have found that many people do not perceive childhood experiences such as “being whipped or beaten to the point of laceration” (Steele, 1997) as abuse because there is a tendency to believe that the discipline they experienced was normal and deserved (Bower & Knutson, 1996). Subjective and objective definitions of maltreatment will give varying prevalence rates (Carlin et al., 1994). However, such factors should not affect responses to descriptive questions such as, “has anyone ever hit you with an object?” This is reflected in discrepancies detected in studies where respondents are requested to reply to a range of selected violent behaviors and subsequently asked whether they rate themselves as abused. For example, a study of over 4,500 university students found that while 9% of the sample could be “conservatively” classified as physically abused, only 27% of this group also labeled themselves as abused (Berger, Knutson, Mehm, & Perkins, 1988). Experience of physical abuse has also been found to impact on attitudes toward the appropriateness of physical punishment. People reporting histories of physical abuse, who rate their own experiences as deserved or normal, rate physical punishment as more appropriate than those who have not been so treated (Kelder, McNamara, Carlson, & Lynn, 1991), and a direct relationship has been established between childhood experience and disciplinary attitudes (Bower & Knutson, 1996). The present study therefore collected data on attitudes, experiences of specified behaviors, and self-assessment of abuse. In this initial analysis, maltreatment was researcher assessed according to levels of severity of the behavior (likelihood of leading to harm), actual harm reported, frequency of behavior, and relationship of the perpetrator. Details of researcher-assessed definition levels (serious, intermediate, and cause for concern) inclusion criteria and rates of self-assessed abuse for each category are given below.

Subjects and methods

A random probability sampling technique was employed using the Postcode Address File as the basic sampling frame. Six hundred and thirty-three postcode sectors throughout the United Kingdom were selected with probability proportional to the population of 18- to 24-year-olds after stratification. A total

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