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# Changes in the prevalence of child maltreatment in Vietnam over 10 years

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## ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** In the context of the shortage of studies on child maltreatment changes over time in limited resource settings, this paper explored the changes in the prevalence of multiple types of child maltreatment over a period of 10 years in Vietnam and tested the moderating role of some demographic characteristics in these changes.

**Methods:** We used data from two prevalence studies conducted in 2004 and in 2014 using similar methodologies. Both studies used self-report questionnaires which were completed by randomly selected students aged 12–17 years from different provinces in Vietnam. We also compared Hanoi subgroups to examine the trend using the most equivalent samples.

**Results:** While the prevalence estimates of sexual abuse and neglect were unchanged over 10 years, the prevalence of physical abuse and emotional abuse declined. The decrease in the prevalence of physical abuse was larger for younger adolescents and boys than for their counterparts. For sexual abuse, older adolescents reported an increase in the prevalence of sexual abuse. In the Hanoi sample comparison, only the prevalence of emotional abuse declined and this reduction was smaller for younger adolescents than for the older group.

**Conclusion:** Despite the reduction of emotional and physical abuse in the whole sample and emotional abuse in the Hanoi sample, all types of child maltreatment were still highly prevalent in Vietnam. We argue that interventions on all types of child maltreatment should be further implemented. Similar studies could be conducted to evaluate the effect of child protection policies on the prevalence of child maltreatment.

## 1. Introduction

Child maltreatment is highly prevalent in Asian countries and has negative consequences for child development (Fang et al., 2015; Tran, Alink, van Berkel, & van IJzendoorn, 2016; Tran, van Berkel, van IJzendoorn, & Alink, 2017). However, there is a gap in our knowledge about whether and how the prevalence of maltreatment in Asian countries changes over time. Research on prevalence changes over time may provide important knowledge that can be used to inform policy makers to help them improve national child protection programs. In this study we investigated the changes in the prevalence of child maltreatment in Vietnam over a period of 10 years.

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The possible consequences of child maltreatment on development across the life-span have been well studied. Meta-analytic evidence shows that different types of child maltreatment are associated with a variety of mental and physical health problems such as depression, anxiety, overweight, and extensive hospital visits (Hemmingsson, Johansson, & Reynisdottir, 2014; Hillberg, Hamilton-Giachritsis, & Dixon, 2011; Norman et al., 2012; Wegman & Stetler, 2009). Adults with child maltreatment experiences have been found to be more likely to be involved in delinquency and to maltreat their own children (Berlin, Appleyard, & Dodge, 2011; Mersky & Reynolds, 2007; Thompson, 2006). In addition, adults with a history of child maltreatment have on average lower educational levels, lower employment rates, and a lower income (Currie & Widom, 2010; De Jong, Alink, Bijleveld, Finkenauer, & Hendriks, 2015). Consistent with studies in both Western and Asian countries, child maltreatment studies in Vietnam showed that child maltreatment is associated with poorer emotional, cognitive, and physical health functioning during childhood and in adolescence (Loan, 2010; Nguyen, 2006; Nguyen, Dunne, & Anh, 2009; Tran et al., 2017).

Because of the negative consequences of child maltreatment for the victims, their families and societies, it is necessary to conduct studies on the prevalence of child maltreatment to estimate the magnitude of the problem. Moreover, conducting prevalence studies periodically to estimate the changes of the different types of maltreatment over time is valuable to evaluate the impact of policy and other changes in the country on the occurrence of child maltreatment. These periodically conducted studies should use the same methodology to be able to compare estimates at different time points. The National Incidence Studies (NIS) (Sedlak et al., 2010) in the United States and the Netherlands Prevalence study of Maltreatment of children and youth (NPM) (Euser et al., 2013) are examples of periodically conducted national prevalence studies. Both the NIS and NPM studies were conducted with Child Protection Services (CPS) agencies and sentinels who are professionals having frequent contact with children and who are able to provide information on the occurrence of child maltreatment. In addition, there are a number of studies on child maltreatment trends using prevalence data reported by children (Finkelhor, Turner, Ormrod, & Hamby, 2010; Knutson & Selner, 1994). Research also showed that some demographic characteristics are related to the occurrence of child maltreatment. For example, girls are at higher risk of sexual abuse than boys (Black, Heyman, & Smith Slep, 2001; Stoltenborgh, van IJzendoorn, Euser, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2011), but studies in some countries in Asia such as China, Vietnam found that the child sexual abuse prevalence among boys were at higher than among girls (Ji, Finkelhor, & Dunne, 2013; Tran et al., 2016). Reviews showed that the risk on emotional abuse has been shown to increase with age (Black, Heyman et al., 2001) and lower socio-economic status appears to be associated with sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse and neglect (Black, Heyman et al., 2001; Black, Smith Slep, & Heyman, 2001; Stith et al., 2009). However, to our knowledge, the role of these demographic characteristics in changes in child maltreatment prevalence over time has never been examined.

In Asia, especially in Asian countries with limited resources, there is a paucity of child maltreatment studies. No published studies on the temporal changes of child maltreatment prevalence in Asian countries have been found. Vietnam is no exception to this. Based on a number of studies, child maltreatment seems highly prevalent in Vietnam (Emery, Trung, & Wu, 2015; Emery, Nguyen, & Kim, 2014; Loan, 2010; Nguyen, 2006; Tran et al., 2016; Tran, Dunne, Vo, & Luu, 2015). We recently showed that in Vietnam, the prevalence rates of most types of child maltreatment including emotional abuse, neglect, physical abuse, and witnessing parental conflict were much higher compared to the Netherlands (Tran et al., 2016). To get a more dynamic view on child maltreatment prevalence in Vietnam, in the current paper we address the temporal changes of child maltreatment prevalence across a 10-year period. Here, we aim (1) to examine the changes in the prevalence of different types of child maltreatment in Vietnam over 10 years, and (2) to explore the moderating roles of gender, age, parental education, and metropolitan level (urban vs rural areas) in the temporal changes in the prevalence of child maltreatment.

We used data from two prevalence studies using similar methodologies: one performed in 2004 (Nguyen, 2006; Nguyen et al., 2009) and one in 2014, the Vietnam Prevalence study on child Maltreatment (VPM-2014) (see also Tran et al., 2016). Both studies used a partly overlapping self-report questionnaire completed by secondary and high school students (aged 12–17 years). Besides the comparison between two samples, we also compared subgroups of the samples consisting of participants living in Hanoi to get an insight on the child maltreatment trend using the most equivalent samples.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

#### 2.1.1. The 2004 study

The 2004 study (see Nguyen, 2006; Nguyen et al., 2009) was conducted in a purposely-selected urban district and rural district in two province/city of Northern Vietnam, namely Hanoi city and Hai Duong province. In each district, two secondary schools (for children aged 12–14 years) and two high schools (for children aged 15–17 years) were randomly selected. In these schools, 6 classes per grade were randomly selected. The sample thus consisted of a total of four secondary schools and four high schools. Questionnaires that had more than 10% missing questions or questionnaires that had all items in any of scales missing were excluded. The final sample consisted of 2591 students from 61 classes (Nguyen, 2006; Nguyen et al., 2009). In the 2004 study, students who were 18 years or older were excluded ( $n = 12$ ) to be comparable with the VPM-2014 sample. Therefore, the sample of the 2004 study comprised of 2579 students, with 47.9% boys, 99.2% Kinh, which is the majority ethnic group of Vietnam, 51.6% from urban areas, and a mean age of 15.0 years ( $SD = 1.5$ , range 12–17). The sample in the 2004 study was equally distributed among the two provinces.

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