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Child Abuse & Neglect



Research article

A national study on the prevalence of child abuse and neglect in Suriname[☆]



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ABSTRACT

The prevalence of child maltreatment in Suriname has never been subjected to a reliable assessment. The only data available include rough estimates of a range of internationally comparable indicators extrapolated from child protection and police corps statistics for offenses against children. This study aimed to provide a reliable estimate of the prevalence of all forms of child maltreatment in Suriname. One thousand three hundred and ninety-one (1,391) adolescents and young adults of different ethnicities completed a questionnaire about child maltreatment. The study sample, obtained by random probability sampling, consisted of students (ages 12 through 22) from five districts in Suriname. A significant proportion of Surinamese children experienced maltreatment. In total, 86.8% of adolescents and 95.8% of young adults reported having been exposed to at least one form of child maltreatment during their lives. Among the adolescents, 57.1% were exposed to child maltreatment in the past year. When the definition of the National Incidence Study was applied, 58.2% of adolescents and 68.8% of young adults had been exposed to at least one form of maltreatment. Among adolescents, 36.8% reported having experienced at least one form of maltreatment in the past year. The results indicate the (extremely) high lifetime and year prevalence of child maltreatment in Suriname. The serious and often lifelong consequences of such maltreatment indicate that a national approach to child abuse and neglect, including the development of a national strategic plan, a national surveillance system and changes to the state's programmatic and policy response, is urgently needed.

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Introduction

Child maltreatment is a global public health concern because of its severe, lasting physical and mental health effects, which often persist into adulthood (Anda et al., 2006; Felitti, Anda, & Nordenberg, 1998; Gilbert et al., 2009; Mills et al., 2013). It is estimated that approximately 40 million children worldwide under the age of 15 are subjected to child maltreatment each year and that 25–50 percent of all children have been physically abused (World Health Organization, 2001).

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Although child abuse and neglect occurs in families of all income levels, a disproportionately high number of reported cases of abuse occur in lower income families (Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996). Unfortunately, data describing the general prevalence of child maltreatment are unavailable in many low- and middle-income countries, where malnutrition and infection are considered major pediatric problems (Stoltenborgh, Van Ijzendoorn, Euser, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2011). This is the case in Suriname, a developing country in northern South America with an estimated population of 530,000. More than half of Suriname's population lives in the capital city of Paramaribo. In Suriname, 70% of all households live below the poverty line. Approximately 21.5% of the Surinamese population between ages 15 and 24 is unemployed, and approximately 6% of the population is illiterate. The number of highly educated people in Suriname is low (IndexMundi, 2014). Estimates indicate that 34% of children who enter primary school do not pass any exam (Ministry of Education and Development, 2005). Suriname has no mandatory child maltreatment reporting system or standard protocol response to suspected maltreatment.

Despite the lack of reliable prevalence data in this country, interest in child abuse and neglect is increasing (Doek & Graafsma, 2012). Currently, rough estimates of the prevalence of child maltreatment in Suriname are derived from a range of internationally comparable indicators of child protection (Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS); UNICEF; MICS-3, 2006; MICS-4, 2010) and police corps statistics on offenses against children. In the MICS-4 (2010) survey, respondents to household questionnaires were asked a series of questions assessing how adults tended to discipline children during the month preceding the survey. The results showed that 86% of children between the ages of 2 and 14 were subjected to at least one form of violent psychological or physical punishment by parents, other caregivers or family members, with 60% being subjected to any physical punishment and 12% being subjected to severe punishment. 2010 police corps statistics showed that 240 children (there are approximately 40,000 10–18-year-olds in Paramaribo; General Bureau Statistics, Suriname, 2014) in Paramaribo were the victims of at least two forms of child maltreatment, i.e., physical and sexual abuse. Another systematic survey has been conducted on the prevalence of child abuse in Nickerie (Van den Berg, Visser, Lamers-Winkelman, & Graafsma, 2009), a district in northwestern Suriname with approximately 34,000 inhabitants (General Bureau Statistics, Suriname, 2012). Data were gathered using 345 questionnaires, which were completed by children and young people under the age of 19. The results indicated a year prevalence of 37.4% and a lifetime prevalence of 61.2% (Van den Berg et al., 2009). Lifetime prevalence rates indicate the number of individuals who have been maltreated at some point in their lives; year prevalence refers to all cases of child maltreatment during the past year.

This research presents the results of a national self-report study undertaken to assess the year prevalence and lifetime prevalence of maltreatment (physical, sexual, and emotional) and neglect in Suriname. The first purpose of the study was to provide more precise information about the lifetime prevalence and year prevalence of child maltreatment by surveying a large-scale nationally representative sample in Suriname. The second purpose was to compare our data with the sentinel data (reports from professionals) of the National Incidence Study – 4 (NIS-4; Sedlak et al., 2010) and the Netherlands' Prevalence Study on Maltreatment of Children and Youth (Euser et al., 2013). Based on previous results, we expected high rates of both lifetime prevalence and year prevalence of child maltreatment. To the best of our knowledge, this study is the first to specifically produce a valid measurement of the lifetime prevalence and year prevalence of child maltreatment in Suriname.

Methods

Studied Area

The study was conducted in five areas of Suriname: Paramaribo, Nickerie, Sipaliwini, Marowijne and Brokopondo. These five areas are located throughout the country and are therefore geographically and culturally representative. Furthermore, Paramaribo and Nickerie are urban areas, while Brokopondo, Marowijne and Sipaliwini are rural. Suriname, officially known as the Republic of Suriname, is situated on the northeastern Atlantic coast of South America. It is bordered by French Guyana to the east, Guyana to the west, and Brazil to the south. First explored by the Spaniards in the 16th century and later settled by the English in the mid-17th century, Suriname was colonized by the Dutch in 1667. When slavery was abolished in 1863, workers were brought in from India and Java. Suriname's independence from the Netherlands was granted in 1975. With an area just under 64,000 sq. mi, Suriname is the smallest sovereign state in South America. Currently, approximately seven ethnicities are represented in Suriname, all of which have their own cultural characteristics. The official language is Dutch, but Sranan Tongo is a widely spoken lingua franca (World Factbook, 2014).

Participants

The participants were 1,391 secondary and vocational education students in Suriname, of which 1,120 were adolescents (12–17 years old, boys: 42.9%; $M = 15.04$ years, $SD = 1.42$) and 246 were young adults (18–22 years old, boys: 43.5%, $M = 18.53$, $SD = 0.91$). The age data were missing for 25 of the children. These children were excluded from the analyses. Data collection was conducted in July 2013 (Paramaribo, Marowijne and Brokopondo) and February 2014 (Sipaliwini). Data from the study conducted earlier (Nickerie) was collected during June and July 2008. The demographic characteristics of the total sample are summarized in Table 1.

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