

At-A-Glance: Child Protective Services-Investigated Maltreatment by Fathers: Distinguishing Characteristics and Disparate Outcomes

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Introduction

Child welfare systems have yet to effectively engage and leverage fathers as a potential resource for youth, despite legal mandates and research showing that fathers benefit healthy child development (e.g., Dubowitz et al., 2001). This study seeks to advance the development of intervention in this area by first, identifying the distinguishing characteristics of maltreatment attributed to fathers and second, determining whether father-perpetration is associated with disparate Child Protective Services (CPS) investigation outcomes.

A clear understanding of the characteristics of maltreatment attributed to fathers and how these characteristics may differ from maltreatment attributed to other perpetrators (e.g., mothers) is needed to guide efforts to ensure child safety and develop appropriate interventions. Existing evidence suggests that father-perpetrated physical abuse is relatively severe, even fatal (Schnitzer & Ewigman, 2005). However, knowledge remains incomplete, particularly regarding maltreatment types other than physical abuse (e.g., neglect) and developmental time periods beyond early childhood.

Likewise, there is a need to ascertain whether there are disparate CPS investigation outcomes for maltreatment attributed to fathers in order to guide effective policy and practice. Myriad factors prevent better father inclusion in child welfare, including potential bias. CPS systems have historically centered around mothers, who may control access to fathers (Brewsaugh & Strozier, 2016; Maxwell, Scourfield, Featherstone, Holland, & Tolman, 2012). Fears or uncertainty about dangerous fathers (Scourfield et al., 2012), caseworkers' negative views of fathers as violent or inadequate parents, and a lack of tools to engage fathers may lead to greater scrutiny of fathers and disparities (Bellamy, 2009; Brown, Callahan, Strega, Walmsley, & Dominelli, 2009; O'Donnell, Johnson, D'Aunno, & Thornton, 2005). However, whether gender bias may affect CPS investigation outcomes remains largely unstudied.

The study addresses two research questions: 1) What are the distinguishing characteristics of maltreatment attributed to fathers? and 2) Are there differences in investigation outcomes (caseworkers' perceptions of global risk, service referrals, substantiation, out-of-home placement, criminal investigations, and criminal charges filed) for maltreatment attributed to fathers, as compared to mothers, after controlling for maltreatment characteristics, co-occurring risk factors, and child demographics?

Method

Study Sample

This study utilized data from the second National Survey on Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW II), a representative study of children who were investigated by CPS for maltreatment reports in the United States. Baseline data collection took place between April 2008 and December 2009, within four months of a CPS investigation being closed, via in-person interviews with CPS caseworkers, the child, and the child's primary caregiver (Dowd et al., 2013). Two analytic samples of children for whom the (biological or adoptive) mother and/or father were indicated as responsible for alleged physical abuse ($n = 594$) or neglect ($n = 1,349$) were drawn. All measures were from baseline data.

Measures

Independent variables. Independent variables included perpetrator groups, maltreatment characteristics, co-occurring risk factors, and child demographics.

Perpetrator group variables were derived from caseworker data to indicate whether the mother and/or father were responsible for the alleged maltreatment: mother alone, father alone, or mother and father.

Caseworker data were used to measure *maltreatment characteristics*. These included subtype for physical abuse (less severe, more severe, and most severe behavior) and neglect (physical, supervisory, and moral/legal or educational neglect). Severity of physical abuse and neglect assessed the degree of physical harm to the child on a five-point scale: *mild* = 1, *moderate* = 2, *serious* = 3, *severe* = 4, or *grave* = 5. A count variable of number of co-occurring maltreatment types (i.e., physical abuse, neglect, emotional maltreatment, sexual abuse, and other maltreatment) ranged from 1 to 5.

Co-occurring risk factors were based on indications by caseworkers (*yes* = 1, *no* = 0) of prior reports of maltreatment to CPS, a primary caregiver's serious mental health or emotional problems; a primary caregiver's recent history of arrests or detention; active intimate partner violence; and active substance (i.e., alcohol or drug) use by the primary or secondary caregiver.

Child demographics included age, gender (*male/female*), race (*Black, White, Other*), and ethnicity (*Hispanic, non-Hispanic*).

Dependent variables. Caseworker reporting of case investigation outcomes were used. These included caseworkers' overall level of perceived risk: *none* = 1, *mild* = 2, *moderate* = 3, *severe* = 4. In addition, caseworkers reported whether (*yes* = 1, *no* = 0) *services* were provided or arranged for the family, the maltreatment report was *substantiated*, *out-of-home placement* occurred, and there were *criminal investigations* and *charges filed* as a result of the investigation.

Data Analysis

Bivariate analyses, including chi-square tests and ANOVA, were used to determine whether the maltreatment characteristics, co-occurring risk factors, demographics, and case outcomes differed based on the perpetrator group (mother-alone perpetrator, father-alone perpetrator, or mother and father perpetrator). Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression and logistic regression were used to assess perpetrator effects on investigation outcomes, controlling for



maltreatment characteristics, co-occurring risk factors, and child demographics. Interaction effects (see full report) tested whether perpetrator effect varied by child age, gender, race and ethnicity.

Results

Bivariate Analyses

Tables showing bivariate analyses can be found in the full FRPN report. In general, physical abuse attributed to the mother and father together was associated with the highest risk, including severity of injury and co-occurrence, intimate partner violence, and caregiver substance use. Likewise, neglect attributed to both mother and father was the most severe (harmful/injurious), and physical neglect was overrepresented in this group. Children were younger, on average, when physical abuse and neglect were attributed to both mother and father.

Father-only maltreatment tended to be associated with lower or comparable risk than maltreatment involving mothers. Less severe physical abuse behavior types were more often attributed to the father alone than to mother and father together. Physical abuse and neglect attributed to father alone were associated with significantly lower caregiver serious mental health problems than other perpetrator groups. Children were oldest, on average, when physical abuse and neglect were attributed to father alone.

Black and Hispanic children were overrepresented in maltreatment attributed to the mother alone, whereas White children were overrepresented in physical abuse and neglect involving fathers alone or with mothers.

Regression Analyses

Tables detailing multivariate analyses can be found in the full report. Multivariate analysis indicated no significant perpetrator effects on caseworker perceptions of risk, services being provided/arranged, substantiation, and out-of-home placement. Neglect attributed to the father alone and the mother and father together was associated with significantly more criminal investigations than neglect attributed to the mother alone, controlling for maltreatment characteristics, co-occurring risk factors, and child demographics. Physical abuse and neglect perpetrated by the father alone were associated with significantly more charges filed than physical abuse perpetrated by the mother alone in controlled analysis.

Discussion

Findings show diversity in the risk of maltreatment attributed to fathers. In general, there were patterns of higher risk when mothers and fathers together, but not fathers alone, were indicated to be responsible. These findings add important nuance to the scientific literature, which has reported higher risk for maltreatment involving fathers, but has focused on younger children.

Findings also suggest disparities in responses to CPS reports of maltreatment that disadvantage fathers. In particular, father involvement in neglect (alone or together with the mother) was associated with more criminal investigation and father-alone involvement in neglect and physical abuse was associated with more criminal charges filed. These findings may suggest individual and systemic gender bias, in line with past research (Amato, 2018; Brewsaugh, Masyn, & Salloum, 2018). It is possible that law enforcement professionals are more often involved when maltreatment involves fathers because fathers are assumed to present more danger to children, mothers, or caseworkers themselves, or because of the lack of appropriate intervention tools (Baum, 2017). Institutional factors—for example cross-reporting laws mandating co-reports of maltreatment to law enforcement in certain circumstances—may also play a role in these apparent biases (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016).



Limitations

This analysis has important limitations to bear in mind, including missing data and various measurement challenges. Most study variables relied on caseworker report, which represents one incomplete perspective, and many measures were single-item and dichotomous. Many co-occurring risk factors about primary or secondary caregivers, who were not necessarily mothers and fathers, were asked. Questions pertaining to only the primary caregiver may have been particularly limited in capturing co-occurring risk factors related to the father. Finally, the effects of perpetrator for sexual and emotional abuse could not be examined because mother-perpetrated sexual abuse was too rare and because perpetrator information was not collected for emotional abuse.

Implications for Practice

Different patterns of risk associated with alleged perpetrator suggest diversity in service needs. A continuum of prevention and intervention services to address father-perpetrated maltreatment is needed to safeguard child well-being and support positive father-child relationships. There is a need for empirically supported maltreatment prevention for expectant and current fathers (Smith, Duggan, Bair-Meritt, & Cox, 2012). In cases of indicated maltreatment, one promising program is *Caring Dads*, a group-based, community intervention program for fathers who have abused or neglected their children or exposed their children to intimate partner violence. It involves 17 weeks of empirically based, manualized group parenting intervention, outreach to mothers, and collaborative case management with fathers and other involved professionals. This program has exhibited significant effects, moderate in effect size, in fathers' over-reactivity to their children and respect for their partners commitment and judgment. In addition, significant small effects were found in fathers' hostility and verbal anger, and parental laxness and hostility (Scott & Lishak, 2012).

Trainings for individuals involved in responding to maltreatment reports and coordinated diversion efforts between child welfare and criminal justice systems are needed to address apparent individual and systemic bias against fathers. These trainings may also promote father engagement, which is difficult when there is bias in the system. The development of alternative criminal justice responses, including diversion programs, and coordinated efforts between child welfare and criminal justice systems that balance children's rights, safety, and needs for their fathers are also indicated. Findings suggest a need to shift away from criminalization and toward recognizing and providing mental health services for fathers. Finally, the disparate levels of criminal investigation and charges resulting from child maltreatment involving fathers has implications for child mental health that should be considered by child welfare systems.



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