

## **Child Protection in South Korea and the United States**

### **ABSTRACT**

This paper compares child protective services policy and outcomes in South Korea and Illinois in the United States. Specifically, it addresses the geographic distribution of substantiated child reports and looks for factors that are associated with high rates. The results show without a doubt that there is differential identification of maltreatment across communities in both countries. Both aggregate economic and family characteristics affect the rate of substantiated maltreatment in communities. This suggests both a target for intervention and policy, but also potential strategies to address this problem.

1. child maltreatment
2. communities
3. Intervention

### **INTRODUCTION**

Child maltreatment and a society's response to it has become a major issue for developed countries in recent decades. "Discovered" in the United States in the 1960's, many other countries have developed systems by which abuse or neglect inflicted upon a child by a parent is reported to government authorities, investigated, and then responded to. Response to child maltreatment varies, often depending on the severity of the maltreatment or the household circumstances. Responses range from doing nothing through placing a child in out-of-home care or prosecuting the perpetrator of the maltreatment.

The reporting of child maltreatment, the first step in child protection, is a very local phenomena. In most countries, there are mandated reporters—social workers, police, teachers, health care workers—who must report maltreatment to child welfare authorities if they observe or suspect it. Whether to investigate is the next step, but this decision is usually made centrally. Therefore, the first step in the process is one very much determined by the local community social factors.

There is some evidence that suggests that whether or not abuse occurs is not affected by the socioeconomic status of the family. Abuse can be sexual, physical or emotional abuse. This is probably not the case with neglect, where poverty is a much stronger predictor of whether or not neglect occurs. Neglect includes physical, emotional, educational and medical neglect. However, it is fairly clear in the field that the poor are overwhelmingly disproportionately reported for child maltreatment.

This paper compares child protective services policy and outcomes in South Korea and Illinois in the United States. Specifically, it addresses the geographic distribution of substantiated child reports and looks for factors that are associated with high rates. While the child protection system has been in place in the United States for forty years, in South Korea, one might say that the child protective service system is emerging. In 2000, the Child Welfare Law in South Korea was revised to specify abuse and neglect as a condition requiring child protection through government intervention for the first time. As in the United States, definitions of child abuse and neglect have been articulated, a mandated reporting system with a 24-hour hotline has been implemented, and maltreatment prevention programs have been instituted.

How society addresses child maltreatment reflects general attitudes around social protection and parenting, but also attitudes toward particular subpopulations. In essence, children are protected differently depending on their families' characteristics over and above the reality of the maltreatment. Families in certain subpopulations may be disproportionately identified as potentially abusive or neglectful, and furthermore, intervention (usually foster care) may be differentially applied to the group that has been identified. This has been clear in the United States for many years and research is now addressing this issue in the South Korea. The disproportional reporting is a concern because of the possibility of intrusive and coercive intervention into the families' lives, which may include the separation of the child from the family.

It is important to note that a child being reported in the United States is 30 to 40 times more likely than in South Korea. Although there is clearly a cultural aspect of this, it may be that, in part, it is a function of the newness of the Korean system and a low level of awareness of the problems compared to the United States. Only time and more research will tell.

Although both countries have mandated reporting requirements, it is becoming clearer, at least in the United States, that such responsibilities may be differentially applied across subpopulations. Understanding who is reported, their characteristics, and their outcomes in two countries provides a comparative lens that may lead to richer analyses and better policy. The United State is certainly struggling with making the child protection system a fairer one and a fine-grained comparison with another country could provide new knowledge.

In order to be comparable, the focus of this paper is on urban areas in both countries and how characteristics of urban families and their communities are related to the likelihood of being reported for child maltreatment.

### ***The Need for Research and Analysis to Address Child Maltreatment***

The public health approach to addressing the problem of child maltreatment requires that epidemiological data is required to both understand the problem and to develop interventions. The best data that is available to address child maltreatment is that from administrative data. Although one cannot argue that this data reflects the actual incidence of maltreatment in the general population, it does an excellent job of identifying the reported cases. Although this is clearly second best, it does offer an excellent starting point for intervention, and, because of the difficulty of collecting the ideal data, the only one.

The increasing costs of caring for children in the foster care system, the scarcity of resources, and the commonly accepted notion that out-of-home placement is not a desirable form of treatment for the majority of abused or neglected children all indicate that governments must be proactive if they are to adequately address abused and neglected children's needs. In the US, the fact that foster care populations in the largest states are growing and are increasingly composed of higher risk children heightens the urgency for planning. Policymakers must find a means of averting such an overload by developing a plan for appropriate and timely interventions in communities.

## **DATA**

The development of automated child welfare information systems in both the United States and Korea provides the opportunity to conduct this research.

Data on child abuse and neglect reports and services provided to children and families are an important source of information to gauge the safety of children in a society.

Administrative data typically provide information on reports made to the child protection authorities and the authorities' service responses to the reports. The potential drawback of administrative data on child maltreatment records for research is that they reflect the combination the event of the abuse and/or neglect that actually happened and the reporting of that event. Depending on reporting practice of a society, the child maltreatment 'rates' calculated by reports information from child protective agencies could be more or less representative of the true incidence of child maltreatment. The National Incidence Study in the United States showed that only a minority of children who were determined to be maltreated were reported to child protective services (Sedlak and Broadhurst, 1996).

Administrative data is data regularly and consistently collected in support of an organization's function(s) and stored within an organization's information system (Goerge, 1997). Administrative databases are created primarily to monitor utilization, to determine the consumption of resources and to ascertain the capacity to supply services (U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, 1991). Administrative data is not collected primarily for research purposes, but can become a source for research and statistical compendia. Administrative data is culled from systems that have two basic functions. A particular system may stress one of these functions over the other. The first function is for compliance, accountability or reimbursement from an external or oversight agency (usually a federal one). The second is internal tracking of individuals or the services that they receive for the purpose of benefit provision, financial functions, decision support and supporting other activities of the organization. The tracking function is what we think about when we refer to management information systems (MIS) or case management systems. Typically, the tracking system provides richer data, since external reporting in the human services typically is limited to eligibility and benefit receipt.

The characteristics of administrative data point to both the strengths and weakness of it. These characteristics are often contrasted with those of survey data collected through questionnaires where the researcher has control over the items and how the data is going to be collected. The following section addresses some of the major characteristics of administrative data.

### ***Population Coverage***

While it is still the case that management information systems are not universal for every child or family-related program of interest, they are very common across the domains of

interest in developed countries. A particular administrative database typically covers the population receiving a particular service or resource, or those having a particular status. In many cases, data on all individuals who have ever been in the database is kept in the database or archived so that longitudinal information is available. Although data may be purged from the real-time, online systems, historical data is often available in archival formats.

### ***Geographic data***

Given the fact that administrative data, by definition, will cover the population of individuals or families with a particular status or receiving a particular service and that the address data is often available, developing indicators at the state or local level (or small region monitoring) is quite possible (Coulton, 2007). Unlike national social surveys, the population coverage in administrative data allows for state and local indicators to be produced.

### ***Collection of data***

Unlike social surveys or census data collection, administrative data collection is done by a professional whose primary responsibility is not data collection. There are both positive and negative aspects of a professional collecting data. These workers are often affected by the data that they enter into the system because of accountability mechanisms or quality assurance, not to mention the results of an analysis of the administrative data, depending on how many operational or policy decisions are based on information from the MIS (Leginski, 1989). Also, there are other issues (e.g., worker's use of time or confidentiality) that affect the quality of the data entry. Data collection can vary over time because of change in policy, operations or agency mandates. Finally, workers may take shortcuts or not provide certain data when they understand which data are more or less important in the operation of the agency.

On the positive side, these workers may have an interest in the quality of the data they collect if they actually use the data for their own decision-making (Goerge et al., 1998). For data items that are necessary or mandatory for the successful completion of administration functions, the amount of missing data can be minimal. There may also be considerable access to the subjects or paper records so that incorrect data is more likely to be corrected than in social surveys or census data. Also, since the data are collected within the normal conduct of business, there is no interviewer that is inserted into the process that may disrupt the lives of those studied or bias responses. This may be particularly important around indicators of child abuse .

Since individual records must be accessed in administrative databases and individuals

must usually be contacted in the normal course of providing service or aid, identifying information, such as names, addresses, Social Security numbers, are usually accurate and maintained over the period in which the individual is in contact with the organization. This information allows for updating of service records, tracking individuals and families over time, and linkage of records to other databases.

### *Units of analysis*

Administrative data of the kind discussed in this paper is typically collected at the individual or case level. Very often individuals within a particular case are linked within a database, although much of the activity will be assigned to the grantee or head of household. For example, members of a family will share parts of their same agency identification number and the relationships between members will be tracked. However, the ability to group individuals depends very much on the purpose of the dataset. For example, a birth certificate database should accurately identifying the relationship between a child and his or her parents. This may not be the case in school records, where the important person for a child relative to his or her education is the legal guardian, who may be a parent, a relative, or a foster parent.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Research on child abuse and neglect interventions has focused on two ends of a spectrum. One end is research in clinical settings with small samples from which it is difficult to generalize to the population of children who come to the attention of the human service system. The Panel on Research on Child Abuse neglect found research has been “plagued by lack of controlled experiments,” studies have limited sample size, uses questionable measures to assess performance, and that common assessment strategies have not been used across different interventions (p. 254).

The other end of the spectrum is large scale statistical studies that rely on aggregate reports from state agencies. These types of study have the problems of lack of comparable data (p. 254) because of different policies in states; a lack of explication of

those different policies in states; and the inability to disentangle aggregate data into its components which would allow making the results more comparable.

It is obvious that families affect the nature and condition of a neighborhood and that neighborhood can have a significant effect on how families function.

Much of the current neighborhood effects literature focuses on the debate between whether the neighborhood characteristics or the family characteristics have primary effect on such issues as crime or child development.

It is important to determine how much of an effect neighborhood characteristics beyond simply aggregating family characteristics affect how children are protected and how the child protective system responds.

Some of the research on this neighborhood effects suggests that the variation in the rates of child abuse (which is actually the reporting of child abuse and neglect) is explained by poverty, residential mobility, female-headed and single parent households (Garbarino and Crouter, 1978), which lead to a conclusion that child maltreatment is a result of neighborhood social disorganization. However, it may be that the service system's response to the reporting of abuse and neglect, over and above the characteristics of children and families, may be what ultimately determines the outcomes for children and their families. The hypothesis that investigators respond very differently to varying levels of maltreatment suggests that another intermediate factor, in addition to the characteristics of the neighborhood, may be the response of the service system. The research to date has not been very sophisticated and has not really used sample sizes large enough to get at a full analysis of multiple hypotheses.

Reformers of the child protective system are clearly moving towards the neighborhood level as the locus of reform (Schorr, 1988; OBRA 1993). Not only do the residents of the neighborhood have to be more involved in protecting all children, but the focus of child protective services must be to locate workers and services in communities that are high risk. There is also recognition that until neighborhood life (safety, violence, drugs, jobs) improves, it will be difficult to improve child protection even if child protective services improve tremendously.

## **RESULTS**

### ***Description of the sample***

The analysis in South Korea was conducted across seven largest metro areas at the level of the "dong" or neighborhood that is a local administrative governmental unit. There are 1,233 dongs across the seven metro areas and they vary in geographic size. Some of these dongs may have as many as 20,000 residents. In Chicago, the analysis was conducted at the census tract level. There are 834 census tracts in Chicago. Census tracts usually have between 2,500 and 12,000 persons living in them and were originally intended to be relatively homogenous from a socioeconomic perspective.

The difference between the Korean and American urban populations is evident when one compares the characteristics of these small geographic units. The average rate of public

assistance receipt in 2.5 percent in the Korean dong, while 9.5 percent in the Chicago census tracts. The mean divorce rate is 2.3 percent in dong, and 9.1 percent in census tracts. Perhaps the most striking difference is in single mother households, where it is 3.7 percent in dong and 36 percent in Chicago census tracts. Single father households are at 1.3 percent in Korea, while 6.7 percent in Chicago. A point of similarity is education where the rate of high school completion is on average about two-thirds in dong and census tracts.

It is also important to note the racial differences. Although changing slightly with other Asians living in Korea, the country is one of the most ethnically homogenous in the world. In Chicago, for the time period of this study, about 40 percent are African-American, 25 percent are Latino, and 30 percent are white, with the remainder Asian and Native American.

As mentioned above, the mean child maltreatment rate is much greater in Chicago than in the urban areas of South Korea. In Chicago, 110 per 10,000 0-18 year old children are substantiated victims of child maltreatment, while the similar number is 3.5 in South Korea. The range in Chicago is 0 to 1882 and in Korea 0 to 240. There is less difference in the maximum rate than in the means, suggesting that there are some communities in both countries that have very high rates. The next section discusses the multivariate analysis of these rates.

### ***Multivariate Results***

There are some general similarities at a multivariate level in what is associated with high maltreatment rates in the two countries. We conducted a number of analyses with various groupings of covariates. The specification in Table 2 shows the best model when both the substantive and statistical significance is taken into account.

The clearest point of agreement is that, in both places, the higher the median property tax, the lower the rate of child maltreatment. This is consistent with a great deal of the previous research that show that poverty is related to maltreatment and particularly the reporting of maltreatment. This variable seems to be more important than the rate of households receiving public assistance in Chicago, where there may be a higher spatial correlation of low property values and family poverty. In Korea, both variables have important effects.

Aggregate family characteristics also have an important impact. However, there seems to be difference in how family factors affect maltreatment between Korea and U.S. because of the process of single parent family formation. In Chicago, communities with high divorce rates are likely to have lower maltreatment rates, while in Korea, communities with low divorce rates have lower rates. In Chicago, communities with high single parent rates have higher maltreatment rates, while in Korea, those communities have low maltreatment rates. An explanation for the difference is, that in Korea, divorce is still the primary reason for single parent households. In U.S., particularly in Chicago and with poor families, it is driven by never-married motherhood.

In Chicago, rates of maltreatment are low in communities with higher educational attainment, while in Korea, there is no effect of education on the rate of maltreatment.

## **DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

The results show without a doubt that there is differential identification of maltreatment across communities in both countries. It is clear that poorer communities have higher rates and communities in which there are fewer stable two-parent families have higher rates of maltreatment.

Since the U.S. Advisory's Panel report, there has been an attempt to address the problem of child maltreatment through public health approaches, although the primary focus continues to be on the investigation of these reports and subsequent intervention at the family level—this intervention ending in foster care placement in a about one-third of the cases.

The academic literature in recent years has focused a great deal on the effect of social capital on negative social phenomena, such as child maltreatment. Both poverty and family instability have been shown to be strongly related to low social capital at the neighborhood level. Recent efforts to intervene reflect the research. The two primary approaches to is addressing the issue of child maltreatment seems are local community-building efforts (Melton, Holaday, and Kimbrough-Melton, 2008) and home-visiting programs. Both of these approaches address the lack of social capital in communities and in the families. The US Advisory Panel recognized the former strategy in the early 1990s. Home visiting programs operate under the assumption that parents cannot rely on either their families or their communities to support them. Whether program expectations are becoming more aligned with what families need and communities can support is the big question for home visiting program.

As the United States has focused on place-based or community-based interventions to reduce maltreatment, the research in South Korea suggests that such interventions might also be appropriate. However, while South Korea does look to western countries as one model for protecting children, it is also clear that policy must reflect the attitudes and customs of Korean society, as it does in the United States. There are clearly going to be differences in how high child maltreatment rates will be addressed in the United States and Korea simply because of the differences in culture and socioeconomic characteristics. However, if the community-level dynamics show similarities, it may be that similar strategies can be effective in both countries.

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Table 1. Characteristics of the Variables Used in the Study

Variable	Chicago		Korea	
	Mean	Std Dev	Mean	Std Dev
Divorve rate	0.091	0.060	2.27	0.85
Percentage of Single Father Headed Households	0.067	0.079	1.33	0.52
Percentage of Single Mother Headed Households	0.358	0.252	3.70	1.25
Rate of Households Receiving Public Assistance	0.095	0.111	2.49	2.41
Rate of High School Completion	0.694	0.167	66.58	12.59
Number of Rooms per Person			1.04	0.05
Mean Property Tax	2187.5	1712.3	94.64	230.53

Table 2. Tobit model of the rate of substantiated cases in communities

City	Chicago		Korea	
	Estimate s	t Value	Estimate s	t Value
Busan			-20.52	<0.01
Daegu			-0.82	
Daejun			21.63	<0.01
Kwangju			18.06	<0.01
Ulsan			3.93	
Inchon			6.4	<0.05
<u>Racial Composition</u>				
Percentage of Blacks	0.017589	1.92		
Percentage of Whites	0.017968	1.52		
<u>Economic Characteristics</u>				
Rate of Households Receiving Public Assistance	0.010601	-0.39	1.47	<0.01
Median Property Tax	0.002523	-2.51	-0.03	<0.01
<u>Family Characteristics</u>				
Divorve rate	0.100191	-2.16	7.17	<0.01
Percentage of Single Mother Headed Households	0.056984	4.57	-2.28	<0.05
Percentage of Single Father Headed Households	0.25923	13.46	-2.13	
<u>Education</u>				
Rate of High School Completion	0.032998	-2.04	0.08	
<u>Housing Characteristics</u>				
Percentage of Rooms With 1.01 or More Occupants	-0.024	-0.88		
# of Rooms in House			-24.29	