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Neighbor's Knowledge and Reaction to Suspected Child Abuse in an Urban Setting

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Neighbors are seen as an important source of child abuse prevention and reporting. This article reports the result of a random telephone survey of a large mid-western city (n = 513) which examined the extent to which respondents suspected their neighbors of physical child abuse. Data was also collected on how respondents learned of such physical abuse, what their response to it was, and whether they noticed a difference in the frequency of the abuse after they did or did not respond. In this urban environment, relatively few knew of their neighbors' physical abuse, and those who did learned of the abuse by either seeing or hearing it occur. Most reported the abuse, many did nothing, but some intervened in the situation. Parents of minor children reacted differently than adults without children. The impact of neighbors' reactions on the future physical abuse of the child was mixed. Neighbors responses to abuse when they witness or hear it might be helpful in reducing immediate child injuries, but their longer-term effects are unclear.

Background and Significance

Neighbors can be important resources for early intervention into child abuse (Gambrill & Paquin, 1992). Korbin and Coulton

(1996) have found that the residents they interviewed were more optimistic that neighbors, rather than the government, were likely to prevent child maltreatment. Further information about the nature of neighbors' knowledge and responses to child maltreatment need to be gathered before this resource can be effectively used in prevention efforts.

Some people have knowledge of their neighbor's child abuse. In a statewide survey of Kentucky, Paquin and Ford (1996) found that 9.4% of the respondents knew of child abuse by their neighbor in the last 3 years. This sample was predominantly rural and it is not known whether an urban population will have a similar level of knowledge of its neighbors' child abuse. Given the higher density of an urban population, it should have greater knowledge of its neighbor's child abuse than a rural one.

How do these individuals learn of their neighbors' child abuse? Does the abuse occur in front of them or do they learn about it after the fact? Paquin and Ford (1996) have found that having children in the home is associated with having knowledge of neighbors' child abuse. Are one's own children, or their peers, the route by which knowledge of the internal affairs of the family are made known in the community? If so, parents of minor children would clearly be the target of prevention involving increased reporting and increased supporting of neighbors.

What do people do with the knowledge of their neighbor's child abuse? Neighbors can report child abuse using formal social control systems such as the police or child protective services. Nationally, neighbors account for 10.4% of all child maltreatment reports (U S Department of Health and Human Services, 1995). A survey of Kentucky found that only 31% of those who had reason to suspect child abuse in the last 2 years (7% of the entire sample) reported it (Dhooper, Royse, & Wolfe, 1991). Qualitative research indicates that people are reluctant to report their neighbors due to fear of revenge and lack of anonymity (Korbin & Coulton, 1996), or simply due to uncertainty of abuse or respect for family privacy and parents' rights to discipline their children (Manning & Cheers, 1995).

Neighbors provide informal services and exercise informal social control mechanisms which could reduce the isolation and stress of abusive families. Neighbors often turn to each other

for help before seeking help from formal helpers (Warren, 1981). Neighbors have several informal options such as talking to the maltreating families in a supportive way, confronting the offending neighbor, volunteering to watch the neighbor's child, or being vigilant in detecting abuse (Korbin & Coulton, 1996). Neighbors share advice and guidance and in this way convey neighborhood norms with regards to child care (Unger & Wandersman, 1985). They may also be responding to violations of those norms through a variety of informal methods of social control. Paquin and Ford (1996) found that 7.2% of their Kentucky sample had at some time taken in a neighbor's abused child. However when neighbors do try to help abusive families, this help often caused friction (Ballew, 1985).

There is evidence that neighborhood sanctions are primarily enforced through further isolation of the abusive family. Families engaged in child abuse are described as being isolated from community support (Garbarino, 1976). The sanctions neighbors use are gossip, social exclusion and embarrassment (Skogan, 1990). Polansky and Gaudin (1983) found that in hypothetical situations respondents would distance themselves from families they believed were neglectful. This reaction further isolates the family and such isolation is suspected of being a contributing factor in family violence. Though we know that neighbors play a role in child abuse and neglect, we are only now beginning to understand the mechanisms of neighbor activity in prevention and intervention.

Methodology

The authors' questions were asked as part of the Cincinnati Area Biennial Survey conducted by the University of Cincinnati's Institute for Policy Research. A random-digit dialing method was used. A weighted sample produced a standard error of (5%. the refusal/non-response rate was 51%. Of the entire survey sample frame for the City of Cincinnati, 443 out of the 513 cases responded to the question, affirmatively or negatively, as to whether they were aware of their neighbors' child abuse. Twelve (12) respondents did not know the answer to the question of abuse in the neighborhood and fifty eight (58) refused to answer it.

The following questions were asked as part of the survey:

You see your next door neighbor roughly turn his young boy over his knee and repeatedly spank him. Would you report this to the authorities?

There were then three other scenarios presented which describe a neighbor: 1) hitting a boy on the back with a looped belt, 2) pushing him to the ground with punches to the face and stomach, and 3) punching and kicking until the boy falls unconscious, bleeding. After each scenario, the respondents were asked whether they would report the incident to the authorities. Responses to these questions are included in this paper to examine the difference between those respondents who considered severe spanking a reportable activity from those who did not and to differentiate those individuals requiring more severe forms of violence before they would report.

These hypothetical questions preceded the following.

Let's continue on this topic. Please remember, I will not be asking for anyone's name and your answers are completely anonymous and confidential. I am not connected to a law enforcement or social service agency.

Think about your current neighborhood. In the past three years, have you ever had a strong reason to believe that any of your neighbors who live within a city block from you have physically abused a child?

Think about a child abuse incident involving a neighbor for which you became most concerned. Which of the following best describes how you first became aware of the incident?

1. They were inside their home and you heard them;
2. They were outside their home and you heard or saw them;
3. You were told by a child from the neighbor's household;
4. You were told by an adult for the neighbor's household;
5. You were told by another neighbor;
6. You heard about it through your child, who is 12 years old or younger;
7. You heard about it through your child who is over 12 years old; or
8. You saw the victimized child's appearance

What, if anything, did you do in response to this incident?

After the incident that you have in mind, did your neighbor's behavior toward the child:

1. get more violent,
2. stay the same,
3. get less violent, or
4. the violence didn't reoccur at all
5. Don't know

If you are concerned about the safety of the child in question, you should probably report it to the County Social Services Department for investigation. In Hamilton County that would be 241-KIDS.

With regard to the question in which respondents are asked how they became aware of the incident, the responses were further content-coded into direct or indirect knowledge. If respondents had seen or heard the abuse from inside or outside the neighbor's home, this was coded as having direct knowledge; if they were told about it, this was considered indirect knowledge.

The open-ended question asking what the respondent did in response to the incident were content-coded into formal or informal social control strategies. If respondents contacted the authorities, this was construed as using formal social control, if they directly intervened, spoke to the parents, or withdrew contact from the family, this was coded as using indirect social control.

Following coding, the data analysis was conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) and COMPAREZ, an epidemiological analysis package developed by Dr. Mark Myatt and his colleagues. Assessing significance in crosstabulations of categorical data is usually done referencing a computed chi-square statistic to a theoretical chi-square probability distribution. However, it is possible to compute the exact probability value of any crosstabulation, even those that contain infrequent or empty cells; these exact methods are based on Fisher's exact test for 2×2 tables developed by R.A. Fisher. Exact tests were used in this paper where X^2 is not indicated.

1. What percentage of adults in an urban area will have knowledge of their neighbor's child abuse?

2. How do adults obtain knowledge of their neighbor's physical child abuse?
3. How do adults react to their neighbor's physical child abuse?
4. What changes do neighbors notice in the reoccurrence of physical child abuse after they exercise formal or informal social control?

Findings

What percentage of respondents in an urban area will have knowledge of their neighbor's child abuse?

Only 38 of the 513 (7.4 %) respondents stated they had strong reasons to believe their neighbors had abused their children in the last 3 years. This percentage increases to just under 9% when only looking at those 443 cases where respondents clearly responded "yes" or "no" to the question. Despite prior studies, 8% of 275 respondents without children had this suspicion compared to 11% of 164 respondents with children, and this difference was not significant. Gender, race, and whether the respondent had a lower definition of abuse, were not significantly associated with whether a respondent had a strong suspicion as to a neighbor's child abuse.

Only whether a respondent was in poverty, as defined as a 3 or more person household with an income of \$15,000 a year or less (the federal poverty guideline), had a significant relationship to knowledge of their neighbor's child abuse, with nearly a third of those in this category (6 out of 19 respondents) suspecting such abuse ($X^2 = 11.7$, $df=1$, $p < .001$).

How do respondents obtain knowledge of their neighbors' physical child abuse?

Of the 34 respondents who described the way they became aware of their neighbor's physical child abuse, most learned through seeing or hearing the violence directly (See Table 1).

Of those respondents who had no minor children but who were aware of such abuse, 12 (71%) learned it from direct knowledge while of those with minor children 11 (73%) did so by direct knowledge. The respondents in poverty were as likely as the other income groups to learn of the abuse through direct means. Of

Table 1

How Respondents Learned of Their Neighbor's Physical Child Abuse

<i>Method</i>	<i>Count</i>	<i>Percent*</i>
Heard or saw abuse outside the neighbor's home	15	44%
Heard it in the neighbor's home	9	26.5%
Were told of abuse by a child from the neighbor's household	4	12%
Were told of abuse by an adult from the neighbor's household	2	6%
Were told of abuse by another neighbor	2	6%
Heard about it through their own child, who is 12 years or younger	2	6%

* Percent based on denominator of 34 respondents who described the way they learned of neighbor's physical child abuse (4 respondents reported no method).

those with a lower definition of reportable abuse, 5 out of 12 (41%) saw or heard this abuse directly while 18 of 22 of those not considering severely spanking reportable, did so (82%). This relationship was statistically significant ($p = .046$). Men were no more likely to witness abuse than women.

How do respondents react to their neighbor's physical child abuse?

Of the 38 respondents who answered the question regarding how they reacted to their neighbor's physical abuse, the responses were varied with the bare majority reporting the family to the authorities (See Table 2.).

Though being a parent made respondents no more likely to know of neighbor's child abuse, it did impact on the way in which they reacted, when strategies are divided into formal, informal, and doing nothing ($p = .028$). Of those 19 respondents with no minor children, who reported a response to the suspected abuse, 9 (42%) contacted the authorities and 8 (42%) did nothing, while those with minor children 12 out of 18 (66%) contacted the

Table 2

How Respondents Reacted to their Neighbor's Physical Child Abuse

<i>Method</i>	<i>Count</i>	<i>Percent*</i>
Called either the police or child protective services	20	53%
Directly intervened	5	13%
Let the child into his/her home	1	3%
Later spoke to the parents	1	3%
Kept his/her child away from the neighbor's household	1	3%
Did nothing	10	26%

* Rounded percent based on denominator of 38 respondents who described how they reacted to their neighbor's child abuse.

authorities and only one (5.5%) of those with children reported no action. Parents reacted to the abuse and rarely let it pass, more often intervening directly into the situation.

Broadly, there appears to be very little difference in respondents' reactions if they learn of the abuse directly through sight or sound or indirectly through word of mouth. (See Table 3). However, of the 15 respondents who witnessed the abuse, 9 (60%) contacted the authorities, 3 (20%) intervened or spoke to the neighbor and 3 (43%) did nothing. Of the 7 who heard the abuse inside the home, 3 (43%) called the authorities, 1 (14%) intervened and 3 (43%) did nothing. As the knowledge of the abuse was less direct, the protection strategies decreased unless the child victim complained of the abuse, in which case, 3 (75%) called the authorities, 1 (25%) intervened, no one stated that they did nothing.

Those who believed harsh spanking to be a reportable event did not differ from those who didn't, in how they received their knowledge of neighbor's physical child abuse and how they reacted to it. Only 1 (25%) member of this subgroup, who believed severe spanking reportable, used formal mechanisms of social control, whereas 3 (75%) used such mechanisms based on indirect

Table 3

Reactions to Abuse Based Upon Method of Learning of It

<i>How Knowledge of Abuse was Obtained</i>	<i>Used Formal Methods of Social Control</i>		<i>Used Informal Methods of Social Control</i>		<i>Did Nothing</i>	
	<i>Count</i>	<i>Percent*</i>	<i>Count</i>	<i>Percent*</i>	<i>Count</i>	<i>Percent*</i>
direct knowledge	12	52%	5	22%	6	26%
indirect knowledge	4	50%	1	12.5%	3	37.5%

* Percent based on denominator of 23 for those respondents with direct knowledge and 8 for those respondents with indirect knowledge.

knowledge, but this was not a statistically significant difference. Those who did not believe harsh spanking to be reportable were more likely to use formal means for dealing with the situation 10 (91%) formal methods based on direct knowledge versus one (9%) using such methods based on indirect knowledge ($p < .001$). The low income group were as likely as the other income groups to contact the authorities as result. Six out of ten respondents (60%) who knew of their neighbor's child abuse and who had incomes below \$15,000 a year, contacted the authorities compared to 9 out of 19 (47%) of all higher income groups.

The respondents' specific reactions to their neighbors' physical child abuse were captured in an open-ended question and some of the responses were telling of the concern neighbors had for children they believed to be abused. Respondents were creative in their use of strategies to protect their neighbor's children. One respondent who knew the abuser very well, stated: "I used the key to their home that I had and removed the child out of the back door while another neighbor was distracting the parent." Another neighbor with fewer ties to the suspected abuser stated: "I visited the home and introduced myself and offered to take the child to church with me, in order to see if the abuse was true." Or "I called 911 (emergency services telephone number) and no one came so I set up a neighborhood child abuse watch program."

**What changes do neighbors notice in the reoccurrence
of physical child abuse after they exercise formal or
informal social control?**

Given the many factors that impact on child abuse, it is not possible to assess the "effectiveness" of neighbors reactions to child abuse without extensive qualitative data. The perception of whether the neighbor's behavior was in any way changed after someone had reacted or not reacted to an abuse incident would however go to the perception that a respondent's reaction did or didn't have an impact. The neighbor's physical child abuse after a reaction was variable. Ten (10) of the respondents who used formal or informal means in reaction to their neighbor's child abuse believed that despite doing something, the violence stayed the same or got worse (See Table 4).

Respondents in poverty seemed to have greater knowledge of their neighbors' abuse, replicating the results of a prior study (Paquin & Ford, 1996). The perceived effectiveness of these respondents reactions to the abuse were identical to other income levels, with 4 out of 9 (44%) of low income respondents stating the level of violence stayed the same or got worse after their reaction, versus 5 out of 11 (45%) of those with higher incomes. It appears that regardless of whether these respondents used formal

Table 4

Status of Continued Abuse after Respondents' Reactions

<i>Methods of Social Control Used</i>	<i>Things Got Better or Stopped</i>		<i>Things Stayed the Same or Got Worse</i>	
	<i>Count</i>	<i>Percent*</i>	<i>Count</i>	<i>Percent*</i>
Formal	7	47%	8	53%
Informal	3	60%	2	40%
Did Nothing	5	83%	1	17%

* Percent based on denominator of 15 for those respondents who used formal means, 5 for those respondents with indirect knowledge and 6 for those respondents who did nothing. Respondents who did not know whether or not there was a reoccurrence of the abuse were excluded (n = 6).

or informal social control methods to protect children, they only detected an improvement half of the time.

Discussion

Only 7.4% of the Cincinnati sample admitted strong suspicion of their neighbor's recent physical child abuse, resulting in only 38 cases where reaction to neighbor's child abuse could be explored. Though less than the 9.4% who similarly had such a suspicion in a prior study of a Kentucky sample (Paquin & Ford, 1996), this difference was not significant. The lack of difference was surprising given the greater population concentration in the urban Cincinnati sample versus the more rural Kentucky sample, and therefore the greater opportunity to be exposed to neighbor's physical child abuse. One explanation is that the methods by which respondents learned of their neighbor's child abuse were discovered might have been different between urban and rural populations. In the Kentucky study, being a parent was significantly related to such suspicion, while no such relationship existed in the current sample. The respondents in this study tended to learn about child abuse through directly seeing or hearing the abuse occurring perhaps due to urban crowding. Also the prior presenting of several hypotheticals, in the survey questionnaire, in which the person sees the neighbor abusing the child, may have biased responses, in that respondents may have reported only those incidents which they actually saw, thereby reducing the number reported. If a respondent did not state that they had a strong suspicion of their neighbor's abuse, then the other abuse-related questions were not asked of them. Incidents in which the abuse was seen occurring by the respondents made up half of the events reported.

Those who were poor are more likely to have a strong suspicion of their neighbor's child abuse. Greater levels of child abuse associated with the stresses of poverty have been a consistent finding in physical child abuse studies (Korbin, et al., 1998) and if those respondents who are poor are more likely to be living near others who are poor, then this finding is confirmed.

Any findings from this study, which indicate how neighbors discover abuse, what they do about it, and how effective they are in reducing it, are merely suggestive given the very small

sample size. There were only 38 respondents who suspected their neighbors of abuse who could have responded to each of those questions.

Few respondents learned about their neighbor's child abuse from children. Therefore, having a child, in this sample, was not the route by which knowledge was more likely to come. Learning about abuse was more likely to take place first hand. Those with a lower threshold in defining abuse were more likely to consider abuse from indirect knowledge, than those who saw abuse requiring beating with a belt or more severe forms of violence. Perhaps those with a lower threshold were more outraged by stories of abuse and were therefore likely to respond on that basis.

When it came to how people reacted to such abuse, most contacted the authorities and parents took a more active stance against child abuse, than non-parents. Neighbors used formal social control mechanisms more frequently than informal, through this finding may also be biased due to the structure of the question. Presumably, neighbors would use informal methods of intervening before more formal methods and the question encouraged them to provide only the most extreme action taken and then only of one family. Those who see abuse are more likely to react. Based on prior research, neighbors are reluctant to intrude on the domain of the family, and usually need strong evidence of abuse before they will do so. Witnessing beatings or hearing screams puts an immediate pressure on the neighbor to react. Those who did not see harsh spanking as reportable were more likely to use formal means for dealing with the situation than those who did. This reaction may well be because the neighbors who did not see harsh spanking as reportable, were responding to more severe kinds of abuse than spanking and were concerned enough to contact the authorities as a result. Unfortunately this study did not collect data on the severity of the event in question.

Dealing with abuse was a frustrating situation for neighbors. It appears that whether these respondents used formal or informal social control methods to protect children, they only detected an improvement in about 50% of the situations. If they did nothing, the situation seemed to improve most of the time, but it might be assumed that where neighbors did nothing, the abuse was not as severe as the situations in which they did react. If this were

not true, there would be little incentive for neighbors to become involved in trying to prevent the child abuse in their immediate neighborhood. A possible solution is represented by the reaction of one person: when no one responded to his/her complaint, he/she formed a child abuse watch program. An organized neighborhood response to child abuse could help neighbors not feel alone in their concern, pressure action from authorities where a dangerous situation is perceived and open up the possibility of neighbors supporting families in crisis by providing positive, not just negative attention.

This study was conducted in one midwestern city and its applicability to other settings must be made with caution. There is a need for continued research in this area using more extensive questionnaires with a larger sample in order to obtain a larger number of those individuals who strongly suspect their neighbors of child abuse so that more powerful statistical analyses could be used. In addition, qualitative studies, as presented by Korbin and Coulton (1996), which track the neighbor's reactions to a variety of neighborhood child abuse incidences over time, as well as the sequence of coping strategies used in response to each incident (Paquin, 1992). Understanding how neighbors' perceive these patterns of child abuse incidents and the institutional responses to them, could provide valuable information in developing new community-based interventions in child abuse prevention. If neighbors contact the authorities and nothing appears to happen from their perspective, have they "done their duty" and simply withdraw from the problems or will they continue to stay engaged?

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