



December 1996

A Statewide Study of Neighbors' Knowledge of and Reactions to Physical Child Abuse

Gary W. Paquin
University of Kentucky

Janet Ford
University of Kentucky

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>

 Part of the [Social Work Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Paquin, Gary W. and Ford, Janet (1996) "A Statewide Study of Neighbors' Knowledge of and Reactions to Physical Child Abuse," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 23 : Iss. 4 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol23/iss4/10>

This Research Note is brought to you for free and open access by the Social Work at ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact maira.bundza@wmich.edu.



A Statewide Study of Neighbors' Knowledge of and Reactions to Physical Child Abuse

GARY W. PAQUIN AND JANET FORD

University of Kentucky
College of Social Work

Neighbors are believed to have an important influence on child abuse prevention and intervention. This article reports the results of a statewide telephone survey of Kentucky (n = 650) which examined the extent to which respondents suspected neighbors of child abuse (9.4%), and had ever taken in a neighbor's abused or neglected child (7.2%). Variables related to parenting (having a minor child, age, employment status, receiving AFDC benefits) were the only demographic characteristics significantly associated with suspicion of neighbors' abuse; only being the parent of a minor child was significantly associated with taking in a neighbor's child. The results imply that knowledge of and informal intervention in neighbors' child abuse or neglect are related to direct knowledge of the victims through their interactions with one's own children. Programs to enhance neighbors' prevention of or early intervention in child abuse or neglect situations would be most efficient if directed at parents of minor children.

Early intervention into physical child abuse poses real challenges due to the private nature of child abuse and the inability or reluctance of victims to report. Though child abuse often occurs in private, suspicions of child abuse are not uncommon. According to a 1989 Gallup-Poll survey, about 15% of the population (11% of males & 18% of females) claimed to know children they believed had been victims of physical or sexual abuse. This figure was consistent with 1981 Gallup-Poll results (Gallup, 1990). In a statewide survey of Kentucky, 20% of the sample reported they knew of someone who had physically abused his or her own children (Dhooper, Royse & Wolfe, 1991). Purported knowledge of child abuse is not rare but the source of this knowledge (i.e., the

respondent's relationship to the suspected abuse victim and/or perpetrator) is a topic that has not been explored.

This research note discusses the role neighbors have in detecting and informally intervening in child abuse. It examines the results of a statewide survey which specifically asked respondents whether they suspected their neighbors of physically abusing their children (knowledge) and whether they had taken a suspected victim of child abuse or neglect into their home (informal intervention). Answers to these questions were examined in relation to respondent socio-demographic characteristics of gender, age, race, employment status, income level, education, marital status, parental status, and urban vs. rural residence. Based upon the results, suggestions are provided for developing neighborhood-based prevention or early intervention programs.

Neighbors are important resources for early intervention in child abuse (Gambrill & Paquin, 1992). Family members often deny that violence is occurring (Tooley, 1977). Neighbors in proximate positions to see, hear, or otherwise detect evidence of abusive behaviors may not be as vulnerable to fears or loyalties which frequently prohibit or delay reporting by family members. On the other hand, child abuse reporting can pose difficult problems for neighbors. They may be uncertain that abuse has actually occurred or reluctant to interfere with family privacy or parents' rights to discipline their children (Manning & Cheers, 1995). Data regarding the extent of neighbors' knowledge of and willingness to report abuse are important in determining neighbors' usefulness as resources in reporting and/or assisting abusive families.

The 1980 National Study of the Incidence and Severity of Child Abuse and Neglect stated that 49% of the cases known to Child Protective Services (CPS) were "reported by the child, parents, neighbors, and anonymous parties" (Ards & Harrell, 1993, p. 337-338). A national survey reported that 93% of those sampled stated they would act if they personally knew of a child abuse incident (Gil & Noble, 1969); 96% said they would act if they were present when an abuse incident occurred (Gil, 1970). Another national survey found that 25% of the respondents claimed to have done something to prevent child abuse in the past year (National Committee for the Prevention of Child Abuse, 1988). On the other hand, a recent Kentucky survey indicated that only

46 (31%) of 148 persons who had reason to suspect child abuse in the last 2 years had reported it to authorities. Those reporting accounted for only 6% of the total sample of 742 respondents (Dhooper, Royse & Wolfe, 1991).

Reporting suspected abuse to authorities is only one mechanism neighbors may utilize as an intervention. Neighbors often turn to each other for help before seeking help from formal helpers. Neighbors share advice and guidance and in this way convey the neighborhood norms with regard to child care (Warren, 1981; Unger & Wandersman, 1985). The power of these norms will depend on such factors as agreement on values, a willingness to take action when norms are violated and opportunities to monitor behavior (DuBow & Emmons, 1981). Unfortunately, there is evidence that neighborhood sanctions against abusers are primarily applied in the form of isolation of the abusive family (Gaudin & Pollane, 1983). Families engaged in child abuse have been described as being already isolated from community support (Garbarino, 1976; Powell, 1979). Herrenkohl (1978) found that in 128 families who had been involved in child abuse, about 40% were in conflict with their neighbors. Thus, neighborhood social control mechanisms may actually increase the level of abuse by further isolating the family members and increasing their level of stress.

Ecological variables impact on abusive families through the community. Neighborhood characteristics are seen as an indication of the probability that child abuse will occur (Garbarino & Sherman, 1980). Lower income neighborhoods have a higher number of child abuse/neglect reports, with "social conditions" mediating this relationship. Social conditions include percentage of female headed households, percentage of married mothers in the labor force and percentage of residents of less than one year. Anecdotal data indicate that the structure of the neighborhood in which the abuse takes place will influence whether it is reported to authorities, handled informally or even noted (Warren, 1981). Stack (1974) reported frequent exchange of resources among poor African-American neighbors, and Korte (1983) found that neighbors played a significant role in child care among single parents living in a lower-class African-American neighborhood. Fischer (1982) found that in non-urban areas marriage,

parental responsibilities, and home ownership served to tie people to their communities and promoted greater contact between neighbors.

Proposals have been made to utilize community social supports (Whittaker, Schinke & Gilchrist, 1986; Pancoast, 1980; Collins, 1980) and neighbors (Gambrill & Paquin, 1992) in assisting abusive or neglectful families. The impact of the local community is profound upon these families, and rehabilitation will be extremely difficult without community support. Unfortunately, these families are least likely to have such support (Whittaker, Schinke & Gilchrist, 1986).

While some anecdotal data is available regarding whether neighbors assist abusive families, there is no quantitative data about the extent to which neighbors assist abused children. It seems likely that helping a victim is easier than helping a violent perpetrator. It is also probable that providing some type of respite to parents or temporary care to abused children is the most appropriate form that neighbors' assistance to families who abuse may take. Who is helping abused children in the neighborhood and how pervasive is this help? Those data are important building blocks in further investigation of the development of effective strategies for neighbor intervention in child abuse.

Methodology

Data for the study were collected through a statewide survey conducted by the University of Kentucky's Survey Research Center during the months of October and November of 1991. This center has been conducting statewide surveys of public opinion in Kentucky twice a year since 1979. Telephone interviews were completed with 650 adults (aged 18 or over) who were contacted using a random digit dialing technique which ensures that all residential numbers (including new and unlisted numbers) in the state have an equal chance of being selected. While it is not known whether urban or rural dwellers in Kentucky differ in their access to telephone service, the United States Bureau of Census estimates that 92% of American households have telephones (Bureau of Census, 1991). The sample had a margin of error of +4% at the 95% confidence interval.

Characteristics of the sample

Of the respondents, 53% were female; 38% were aged 50 years or older, 29% were younger than 35; 91% were white, 8% were black. Over half worked full (47%) or part-time (12%), while 25% were retired and 17% were not employed; 14% earned under \$10,000, 25.5% had incomes of over \$30,000 and 52% had incomes between \$10,000 and \$30,000; 4% were receiving Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). In regard to education, 22.5% had not completed high school, 38% had a high school degree, and 39.5% had pursued education beyond high school. In terms of marital and parental status, 66.5% were married, 24% were separated, widowed or divorced, and 9.5% were never married; 41% had children under the age of 18 living in the house. Over half (64%) lived in small towns or rural areas, 24.5% lived in cities or suburbs. These percentages reflect the overall population of Kentucky based upon 1990 census data (U.S. Bureau of Census, 1991).

Survey Questions Related to Child Abuse

Two questions were developed with recommendations from a panel of experts in survey research at the University of Kentucky Survey Research Center:

1. In the past two years, did you ever have strong reason to believe that any of your neighbors have used an excessive amount of force or otherwise physically abused their children?
2. Have you ever taken a neighbor's child into your home when you thought they had been abused or neglected? (Not necessarily overnight).

Cross tabulation through SPSS-X was used to analyze the association between responses to these questions and demographic variables.

Results

Responses to Question 1: Of the persons questioned, 9.4% (n = 61) stated that they had reason to suspect that their neighbors had abused their children in past two years. Demographic variables significantly associated with respondents' suspecting

neighbors of abuse were: age, employment status, receiving AFDC benefits, and being a parent of a child under age 18. Persons aged 50 or over were least likely to suspect abuse (4% percent reporting suspicion); 11.9% of respondents aged 35–49 and 16.9% of respondents between the ages of 18–34 reported suspecting their neighbors of abuse ($X^2 = 18.29$, $df = 2$, $p \leq .01$). Retired persons were much less likely to suspect their neighbors of child abuse: only 1.9% of retirees did so, compared to 13% of unemployed respondents, 10.5% of persons employed full-time, and 16% of part-time employees ($X^2 = 16.37$, $df = 3$, $p \leq .01$). Over a quarter of AFDC recipients (26.1%) suspected neighbors of abuse as compared to 8.8% of non-AFDC recipients ($X^2 = 7.73$, $df = 1$, $p \leq .01$). Finally, 15.7% of parents of minor children reported suspicion of abuse as compared to 5% of respondents who had no children under age 18 ($X^2 = 20.78$, $df = 1$, $p \leq .01$).

Responses to Question 2: Fewer respondents (7.2%, $n = 47$) reported taking in their neighbor's child after suspected abuse or neglect. The only demographic variable significantly associated with this item was parental status ($X^2 = 10.46$, $df = 1$, $p \leq .01$). Eleven percent (11.2%) of parents of children under 18 reported taking in an abused child vs. only 4.5% of respondents without minor children. Variables which approached a significant relationship with this item were gender and age, with more women and persons between the ages of 35–49 reporting having taken in a neighbor's child. Only a third (32.8%, 20 of 61) of the respondents who suspected their neighbors of child abuse (i.e., answered "yes" to Question 1) reported taking in a neighbors' child. Apparently, most of the respondents who reported taking in a neighbor's child (27 of 47, 57.4%) were doing so because of suspected neglect rather than abuse or had done so more than 2 years prior to the survey. It is not known whether different actions (such as contacting authorities) were taken by the other respondents who reported suspecting neighbors of abuse.

Discussion

The variables found to be significantly associated with suspecting abuse of neighbor's children and taking in the abused or neglected child appear to be related to persons in the parenting

stage of their lives and specifically to being the parent of a child currently under age 18. Race, income, marital status, urbanization and other variables previously associated with stronger community ties were not found to be associated with suspicion of neighbors' child abuse.

Given that this study presents the responses of a population that is predominantly rural, application of these results to other populations should be done with extreme caution. However, it appears that efforts to improve informal resources to abusive or neglectful families, at least in Kentucky, should be directed at parents of minor children.

The results imply that knowledge about neighbors' abuse of their children does not follow the generalized network of informal distribution of information which would depend on the strength and density of network ties. Of more importance may be the specific relationship of the respondent's family with the victim. The most likely conduit of information about abuse may be interaction between the children of neighboring families. Further study is needed to examine whether knowledge of child abuse is derived primarily through child-to-child contact and parental observation of children's friends. Parents may suspect abuse of a neighbor's child because their own children report hearing of the abuse or because they (parents) directly observe physical evidence of abuse or neglect of a neighbor's child who is a playmate of their own child(ren). Hearing beatings or seeing them occur firsthand may be less likely sources of information about abuse, a possibility that further research should examine.

It is increasingly apparent that the formal child protective service system cannot effectively address the growing number of reports of child abuse and neglect without the assistance and support of other social services and of the general public. Particularly in situations of neglect, or where abuse is uncertain, neighbors may play an important role in preventing initial or further child abuse by providing respite to the family in stress, providing care and support to the victims of abuse or neglect, or using informal social control mechanisms on the abusive family. Resources, such as training and stipends, could be directed to parents of minor children to enhance their ability to intervene to prevent the abuse of neighbor's children. Specific data regarding

how and when families report abuse to authorities, take a child in, or otherwise initiate use of formal and informal resources are needed to develop strategies to promote neighborhood-based prevention and early intervention programs.

References

- Ards, S., & Harrell, A. (1993). Reporting of child maltreatment: A secondary analysis of the national incidence surveys. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 17, 337-344.
- Collins, A. H. (1980). Helping neighbors intervene in cases of child maltreatment. In J. Garbarino, S. H. Stocking & Associates, (Eds.), *Protecting Children from Abuse & Neglect*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Dhooper, S. S., Royse, D. D., & Wolfe, L. C. (1991). A statewide study of the public attitudes toward child abuse. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 15, 37-44.
- Dubow F. & Emmons, D. (1981). The community hypothesis. In D. A. Lewis (Ed.), *Reactions to Crime*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Fischer, C.S. (1982). *To Dwell Among Friends: Personal Networks in Town and Country*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Gallup, G. (1990). *The Gallup Poll Public Opinion, 1989* Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc.
- Gambrill, E., & Paquin, G. (1992). Neighbors: A neglected resource. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 14, 253-272.
- Garbarino, J. (1976). A preliminary study of some ecological correlates of child abuse: The impact of socioeconomic stress on mothers. *Child Development*, 47, 178-185.
- Garbarino, J., & Sherman, D. (1980). Identifying high-risk neighborhoods. In J. Garbarino, S. H. Stocking & Associates, (Eds.), *Protecting Children from Abuse & Neglect*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass
- Gaudin, J. M., & Pollane, L. (1983). Social networks, stress, and child abuse. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 5, 91-102.
- Gil, D. G. (1970). *Violence Against Children: Physical Child Abuse in the United States*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Gil, D. G., & Noble, J. H. (1969). Public knowledge, attitudes and opinions about physical child abuse in the United States. *Child Welfare*, 47, 395-401.
- Herrenkohl, R. C. (1978). Research: Too much, too little? In M. Lauderdale, R. N. Anderson, & S. E. Cramer *Child Abuse and Neglect: Issues on Innovation and Implementation*, vol. 1. Washington, D.C.: D.H.E.W.
- Korte, C. (1983). Help-seeking in a city: Personal and organizational sources of help. In A. Nadler & B. M. DePaulo (Eds.), *New Directions in Helping: Vol. 3. Applied Perspectives on Help-seeking and Receiving*. New York: Academic Press.
- Manning, C., & Cheers, B. (1995). Child abuse notification in a country town. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 19, 387-397.

- National Committee for the Prevention of Child Abuse. (1988, Feb.). *Public Attitudes and Actions Regarding Child Abuse and Its Prevention - 1988*. Chicago: Author.
- Pancoast, A. H. (1980). Finding and enlisting neighbors to support families. In J. Garbarino, S. H. Stocking & Associates, (Eds.), *Protecting Children from Abuse & Neglect*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Powell, D. R. (1979). Family-environment relations and early childrearing: The role of social networks and neighborhoods. *Journal of Research and Development in Education*, 13, 1-11.
- Stack, C. B. (1974). *All Our Kin*. New York: Harper.
- Tooley, K. M. (1977). The young child as victim of sibling abuse. *Social Casework*, 58, 25-28.
- Unger, D. G., & Wandersman, A. (1985). The importance of neighbors: The social, cognitive and affective components of neighboring. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 13, 139-169.
- U.S. Bureau of the Census (1991). *County and City Data Book*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Warren, D. I. (1981). *Helping Networks*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Whittaker, J. K., Schinke, S. P., & Gilchrist, L. D. (1986). The ecological paradigm in child, youth and family services: Implications for policy and practice. *Social Service Review*, 37, 483-503.

