

Changing Public Perceptions of Child Abuse and Neglect in Singapore (Revised)

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Summary

Aims

- This study is a replication of our earlier studies (Monograph 1 & 2) on public (1994) and professional (1997) perceptions of child abuse and neglect in Singapore.
- The aims of the study were to:
 1. Compare changes between 1994 and 2010 in the public's perceptions of child abuse and neglect (CAN), attitudes toward reporting CAN, and judgments of its seriousness.
 2. Compare current public and professional attitudes towards CAN

Methodology

- Data from 2010 was compared to data collected in 1994 (please refer to Monograph 1 for more details)

Sample

- Current Study
 - In 2010, we surveyed 500 members of the public (400 public housing residents and 100 private housing residents). In 2011, we surveyed 1155 professionals who were likely to encounter abused and/or neglected children.
- Monograph 1
 - In 1994, we surveyed 401 members of the public (all were public housing residents)

Procedure and Materials

- Members of the public were randomly sampled from four housing types (i.e., HDB 1-3 room flats, HDB 4 room flats, HDB 5 room flats and above, and landed property).
- Professionals were either recruited through advertisements, or referred to us by their colleagues.
- As only public housing residents were sampled in the 1994 survey, comparisons of public perceptions of CAN between 1994 and 2010 focused on residents of public housing only.
- The professionals were compared against the full sample of the public surveyed in 2010 which included the landed housing residents.
- Members of public and professionals were surveyed on the same questionnaire used in 1994. The survey measured:

1. **Perceptions of CAN** - the extent to which 18 behaviours from the four major categories of child maltreatment constituted abuse and neglect (i.e., “is abuse”, “can be abuse”, and “not abuse”)

The four categories were:

- Physical abuse (e.g., burning a child and caning a child)
- Emotional maltreatment (e.g., locking a child out of the house and always criticising a child)
- Neglect (e.g., ignoring signs of illness in a child and leaving a child alone in the house)
- Sexual abuse (e.g., having sex with a child and adults appearing naked in front of a child)

2. **Attitudes towards reporting CAN** - Members of public and professionals were asked:

- Whether or not CAN should be reported
- What types of CAN should be reported
- To whom should CAN be reported
- Whether or not they supported mandatory reporting
- Who ought to be mandated to report CAN

3. **Perceptions of Seriousness of CAN behaviours**

Findings

Perceptions of CAN

Influence of demographic characteristics on public perceptions of CAN

- In both the 1994 and 2010 surveys, respondents with higher educational attainment gave more tentative responses as they were more reluctant to label physically and emotionally abusive behaviours as either abuse or not abuse, compared to their less educated counterparts.
- Compared to non-parents, parents were more likely to perceive that leaving a child alone was abusive.
- However, changes in public perceptions between the 1994 and 2010 surveys were still evident after accounting for demographic differences.

Similarities and changes in public perceptions of CAN

- The public continued to agree strongly that behaviours with more obvious harm, such as having sex with a child and burning a child, constituted CAN.
- However, the public showed more hesitation to explicitly label behaviours with less visible harm as CAN (e.g., caning a child, always criticizing a child, leaving a child alone in the house and adults appearing naked in front of a child) .
- There was increased acknowledgement that most behaviors with less visible harm to the child were potentially abusive.

Comparison of current public and professional perceptions of CAN

- Both the public and professionals tend to perceive behaviours with more obvious harm as abusive. They also showed the same trend of acknowledging that behaviours with less visible harm can be abusive, but stopped short of labeling them as child abuse.
- However, the public were generally less likely to perceive behaviours suggestive of physical abuse, emotional maltreatment and neglect as abusive compared to the professionals. For example, the public were less likely to perceive caning a child as abusive compared to burning a child.
- For behaviours suggestive of sexual abuse, the public were more likely to perceive adults appearing naked in front of a child as abusive compared to the professionals. The public were also less likely to perceive that failing to protect a child from sexual abuse was a form of abuse.

Attitudes towards reporting

Similarities and changes in public attitudes on reporting CAN

- The public continued to be supportive of reporting CAN.
- The public also felt more strongly than in 1994 that sexual abuse, emotional maltreatment and neglect should be reported.
- Majority of the public still prefer to see CAN reported to the police, and more respondents than in 1994 reported that they would also notify Singapore Children's Society of CAN.
- The public were more supportive than in 1994 of mandatory reporting of CAN for certain individuals. They felt more strongly than before that it should be compulsory for professionals who have regular contact with children (e.g., teachers) and that it should not be compulsory for members of the public.

Reasons for and against supporting mandatory reporting

- Reasons stated for supporting mandatory reporting
 1. More children will be protected
 2. It is one's duty to protect children from harm
 3. Seriousness of CAN
- Reasons stated for not supporting mandatory reporting
 1. Respect for one's right to choose whether or not to report CAN
 2. Difficulty in identifying CAN
 3. Limitations in the enforcement of mandatory reporting
 4. Concerns about the safety of the person reporting CAN

Seriousness of incidents

Comparison of current public and professional ratings of the seriousness of incidents

- Both the public and professionals rated sexual and physical abuse incidents as being more serious compared to incidents suggestive of neglect and emotional maltreatment (e.g., fostering a child out to a relative and bringing the child home on weekend).
- Overall, the situations under which behaviours occurred appeared to have little influence on public and professional ratings of incidents involving sexual abuse. In contrast, context appeared to matter more when judging the seriousness of incidents involving physical abuse, emotional maltreatment and neglect. For example, striking the child with a wooden stick was judged to be more serious than caning a child for not excelling in an examination.
- Compared to the professionals, the public assumed that incidents were more serious than what was presented in the context provided.

Conclusions

1. For both the public and professionals, perceptions of CAN may depend on the **visibility of harm** that behaviour has on the child. The presence of visible harm to the child (e.g., physical injuries) increased the likelihood of respondents perceiving the behaviour as abusive.
2. The public experienced difficulties discerning whether behaviours suggestive of **neglect and emotional maltreatment** were abusive.
3. For both the public and professionals, the seriousness of an incident may depend on how easy it was to establish that the perpetrator intended to harm the child. When it was easy to infer that the individual intended to harm the child and engaged in behaviour that could lead to observable harm, respondents were more likely to judge the incident as being serious.
4. More dialogues are needed to clarify what behaviours actually comprise CAN, especially for **neglectful and emotionally maltreating behaviours**.
5. A possible way to address this in public education could be to focus on the long-term detrimental consequence of neglect and emotional maltreatment on children.

Note: This research study was published in November 2015 and revised in January 2016 as **Research Monograph No. 10R**.

The full report is available at:
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And also online at:
https://www.childrensociety.org.sg/resources/ck/files/CAN%20Monograph_Revised.pdf