

Study examines risk factors in recurrent child abuse, neglect

May 7 2013, by Sharita Forrest

(Medical Xpress)—The shorter the intervals between previous child maltreatment incidents, the greater the likelihood that the child will experience abuse or neglect in the future, suggests a new study by a social work professor at the University of Illinois.

The study, which included more than 18,000 cases of [child maltreatment](#) in Illinois, also sheds light on the characteristics of victims, their caregivers, family structure and other factors that may increase [children](#)'s [risk](#) of maltreatment.

Saijun Zhang, a research assistant professor in the Children and Family Research Center at the university, examined the intervals between maltreatment reports to determine if the elapsed time between them was predictive of future maltreatment.

"This study specifically focused on the type of cases that we call 'chronic maltreatment,' in which a child or family has three or more maltreatment incidents within a certain period of time," Zhang said. "Chronic maltreatment is a serious concern because it indicates unresolved harm to the children. These families also consume a disproportional amount of [child welfare](#) resources because they require repeated child protection responses and services."

Zhang's data came from the Illinois Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS), the administrative database that logs all [child maltreatment](#) reports, investigation procedures and findings. The

study sample was limited to children who were the subject of at least two maltreatment reports, substantiated or unsubstantiated, from July 1, 2005, through June 30, 2006. Zhang then tracked those children for the next five years.

Children who were in [foster care](#) at any time during the study period as well as children who were older than 14 years when the study began were excluded.

The average number of maltreatment reports preceding a subsequent report during the five-year observation period was 3.3, Zhang found. And the shorter the interval between reports, the greater the [likelihood](#) that the child would be the subject of a subsequent maltreatment report.

"Compared with cases that had an interval between reports of more than two years, the odds of experiencing a subsequent maltreatment report were 1.7-2.3 times greater for cases with intervals of 13-24 months, seven to 12 months and less than six months, respectively," Zhang said.

The researchers also examined whether the number of children and the number of adults in the household had differing impacts on maltreatment.

"Our study shows that a larger number of children at home is associated with increased likelihood of maltreatment, perhaps because caregivers are overburdened by child care and other demands," Zhang said. "And having four or more adults in the home seems to increase the likelihood of maltreatment in the future too, perhaps because there are resource inadequacies in these kinds of households."

A family's having received child welfare services during the year preceding the study heightened risk of maltreatment.

Children who were at greater risk of maltreatment were white, female, younger than age 8, had disabilities and were living with their biological parent(s), as opposed to living with non-relatives.

Understanding the relationship between recurrence risk and past maltreatment, including the intervals between previous incidents, "will help improve the precision of the tools that caseworkers currently use for assessing risk of future maltreatment," Zhang said.

Co-authors of the study were Tamara Fuller, the director of the Children and Family Research Center, and Martin Nieto, a senior research specialist in the center. The center is a unit in the School of Social Work at Illinois.

The study, titled "Didn't We Just see You? Time to Recurrence Among Frequently Encountered Families in CPS," appears in the May issue of the journal *Children and Youth Services Review* and is available online.

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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