

FACTORS INFLUENCING CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT BEHAVIOUR BY SOCIAL WORKERS IN THE NORTHERN PROVINCE, SOUTH AFRICA

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INTRODUCTION

Recent media reports (Sunday Times (Insight), 28 Feb. 1999:19; *Sowetan*, 29 Jan. 1997:9; *Sowetan*, 2 Oct. 1997:5; *Sowetan*, 31 Oct. 1997:6 and *Sowetan*, 20 Oct. 1997:4) and police records reflect a disturbing increase in reports of abuse of children in South Africa. South African Police Services Child Protection Units and specialized individual officers (e.g. social workers in child welfare societies and government's welfare departments) dealt with 28 482 child abuse cases in 1995 (National Programme of Action 1997). During 1995-1996 officially reported cases of sexual crimes against children in South Africa demonstrated an increase in Rape (38%), Sodomy (35%), and Incest (15%) (Department of Welfare 1996/1997). Apart from abuse at home, at school, and in the neighbourhood, child abandonment, child labour and the commercial sexual exploitation of children are widespread problems. In the Northern Province 1807 children were abandoned, 806 sexually abused, 841 neglected and 1742 experienced other forms of abuse in 1996. Reported crimes against children increased by 11,7% between 1993 and 1996 (*ibid.*). However, some caution must be exercised in interpreting the statistics, as undoubtedly only a very small percentage of crimes against children reported has been reported. Underreporting and the lack of systematic research, record keeping and a central register make figures difficult to estimate.

Multiple problems are experienced when child abuse cases are brought to court. The special difficulties which the current system presents in obtaining convictions for crimes against children and the collapse of such cases leads to ongoing and sometimes heightened risk to the victim or other children. These problems include: secondary abuse, when children are required to give testimony in adversarial courts designed for adults; lack of appropriately trained personnel at all stages; endless delays and remands due to congestion in the court system; problems experienced with the law of evidence; lack of independent representation for the child victim; the lack of effective policies for bail and sentencing; lack of witness protection for victims and their families; and lack of back up resources to enable the court to make orders in the best interests of children and their families (National Programme of Action 1997).

In South Africa at present the rights and needs of children are dealt with in many different laws, including customary and religious laws and by courts of several kinds. Amendments have been made over the years in a piecemeal, uncoordinated way, and there has not been a strategy to create a legal system, which will promote the wellbeing of children in a comprehensive, holistic manner (South African Law Commission 1997). At present there are large numbers of children in South Africa who do not enjoy the protection that the notion of childhood implies.

Sec 4 of the Prevention of Family Violence Act 133 of 1993 and Sec 42 of the Child Care Act 74 of 1983 in South Africa stress that: *Any person who examines, attends to, advises or cares for*

any child in circumstances which ought to give rise to a reasonable suspicion that such a child has been ill-treated or suffers from any injury the probable cause of which was deliberate, shall immediately report such circumstances to a police official or to a Commissioner of Child Welfare or a Social Worker. Section 6 makes it a criminal offence for any person who examines, treats, or attends to, advises, instructs or cares for any child not to report any suspicion (Du Plessis 1996). The Prevention of Family Violence Act (1993) allows a presiding officer to grant an interdict preventing assaults or threats against an applicant or a child living with either the applicant, or the offender, or both. An offender who contravenes such an order may be arrested. Sec 28(1) of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act 108 of 1996 contains a Bill of Rights which states (1996): *Every child has the right to be protected from malnutrition, neglect, abuse or degradation.*

There are, however, difficulties in implementing these Acts. There are bureaucratic delays and further serious stumbling blocks. The need to create a legal framework within which children will be protected and empowered to realise their full potential has become apparent in view of the extent and severity of violence against children and of their abuse in South Africa, which often goes unreported.

Therefore, the aim of the present study is to identify child abuse reporting behaviour and how reporting decisions are made among social workers in the Northern Province.

METHODS

Sample and procedure

According to the Department of Welfare (1996/1997) there were 206 public welfare service providers (127 social workers, 19 chief social workers 60, senior social workers) in 1994 in the Northern Province. One hundred and three practising professional social workers were selected for further training by their respective regions, providing direct social work services (casework, group work and community work) from both the public sector and private welfare organisations. They were selected from different Health and Welfare districts scattered around the six regions of the Northern Province (population of more than 5,2 million) for the study. A questionnaire was administered to them under the supervision of the second author (3 were incomplete and discarded) during the pilot training programme for the reorientation of the social welfare practitioners towards developmental social welfare. The training was organised by the National Department of Welfare and Population Development as a response to the developmental needs of social workers. Social work lecturers employed by the two local universities, i.e. the Universities of the North and Venda, were appointed and contracted as facilitators for the reorientation programme. One of the facilitators administered the questionnaires to the social workers, who all gave their informed consent to participate in the study.

The mean age of the social workers was 33,2 years (SD=7,8); the age range was from 23 to 59 years. Twenty-two (21,4%) were men and 81 women (78,6%); 18 were White and 85 Black. All had at least a Bachelor's degree; 6,4% had a Masters. Since completing their training as social workers, they had on average been working for 8,4 years (SD=7).

Inventory

A Child Abuse Reporting Survey measure was used that was developed and used in the US with about 1 200 professionals (health care providers, principals and child care providers) (Zellman & Bell 1990). In particular the version for social workers was used for this study.

The measure consisted of two parts: (1) background and experiences of social workers (40 items), including past reporting (and non-reporting) behaviour, reasons for doing so and information on professional setting, experience, attitudes, etc., and (2) responses to vignettes that measure reporting intentions. Each respondent received five vignettes (a roughly equal mix of neglect, physical abuse and sexual abuse vignettes). Only five vignettes were included so as to limit respondent burden. The vignettes were preceded by a statement acknowledging that the level of information was obviously limited and that in real life respondents would no doubt attempt to collect additional information before making a reporting decision, but that we would appreciate their making the best decision possible on the basis of the information provided. After each vignette respondents made five judgements about the incident described. These judgements concerned (1) seriousness; (2) labelling of the incident as *abuse* (or *neglect*, as appropriate); (3) whether the law would require a report in this instance; and the likelihood that (4) the child and (5) the rest of the family would benefit from a report. A sixth item asked respondents to indicate how likely they would be to report the incident if they encountered it. Zellman and Bell (1990) had determined on the basis of open-ended pretesting with mandated reporters in a variety of professions that the first of these questions captured issues that professionals frequently considered in deciding whether or not to report suspected maltreatment.

The English version of the measure was pilot-tested twice on a sample of 15 social workers, and the test-retest reliability was 0,71. Cronbach alpha and split-half reliability coefficient for the Child Abuse Reporting Measure were 0,61 and 0,69, respectively, for this sample.

RESULTS

Social workers

Fifty-seven social workers had not had any specialised, formal training in assessment and reporting of child abuse and neglect; 25 had 10 or less hours and 19 more than 10 hours. Twelve reported as survivors of physical child abuse (up to the age of 16), 6 experienced sexual child abuse and 2 both. Seventy-five felt that having had such an experience would make a person more likely to report abuse or neglect than those who did not have that experience. The average time allocation in their practice was divided into 40% children, 34% families and 30% adults. Sixty-four percent said that they serve as a resource person on abuse or neglect for other professionals and 36% did not. The social workers would see per week on average 89 clients, of which 27 would be children 18 years or under. Sixty-eight said that in cases where they suspected child abuse or neglect, they are expected to report it directly and 28 report through someone else. Fifty-four replied that there is a team or individual to review potential reports as her or his primary job, and 42 felt very confident, 41 somewhat confident and 18 not very confident about their ability to report cases of abuse and neglect themselves. Eighty-two percent of the clients of the social workers were estimated to be Black, 16% White and 2% other. The clients were rated as 64% from low-income, 29% middle-income and 7% high-income level.

Reporting behaviour

Social workers felt that, on the basis of what the child says (80%), what the adult tells you (66%), and on the basis of what is directly observed (87%), they are obliged by the law in their Province to make a child abuse or neglect report.

About two-third of the respondents were found to have made a child abuse report at some time in their professional careers (see Table 1).

TABLE 1
Lifetime prevalence, annual incidence and failure to report child abuse and neglect

Item	Number
1. Ever reported child abuse and neglect	63
2. Ever reported in last year...	61
3. No of times reported last year	M=14 (SD=42); 0=6 times; 1-2=27; 3-9=35; 10+=33
4. Percent who reported in last year/percent ever reported *	97
5. Ever failed to report ...	27
6. Ever failed to report in past year ...	19
7. No of times failed to report in past year ...	M=2,8 (SD=4,4); 0=25; 1-2=46; 3+ =19

*Cell entry in this row indicates reports in the last year divided by the percent they had ever reported

Reporting rates in the last year followed a pattern very similar to that for ever reporting. A comparison of their ever-report rate to last-year rate reveals that over 97% of those who had ever reported had done so in the past year.

Reasons for reporting

Table 2 indicates the reasons for reporting for those respondents who had ever reported.

TABLE 2
Reasons for making child abuse reports rated by ever-reporters from
1 = very important to 4 = not at all important by frequency (F) and in percent (%)

Reasons for reporting	1		2		3		4	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
1. Stop maltreatment	85	82,5	13	12,6	3	2,9	2	1,9
2. Help family see seriousness of problem	84	81,6	12	11,7	3	2,9	3	2,9
3. Get help for child or family	76	73,8	16	15,5	7	6,8	4	3,9
4. Ensure continued treatment	70	68,0	24	23,3	9	8,7	0	0
5. Legal requirement	64	62,1	22	21,4	11	10,7	6	5,8
6. Police would act quickly and effectively to protect the child	61	59,2	21	20,4	19	18,4	2	1,9
7. Bring CPS expertise to bear	53	51,5	36	35,0	8	7,8	6	5,8
8. Work place reporting policy	57	55,3	27	26,2	17	16,5	12	11,7
9. Fear of lawsuit if not reported	22	21,4	30	29,1	26	25,2	25	24,3

An overwhelming number of respondents attributed their past reports to the most positive and protective reasons cited. As shown in Table 2 the three most important reasons for child abuse reporting were: (1) Stop maltreatment, (2) Help family see seriousness of problems, and (3) Get help for child or family. The demands imposed by the reporting law were also a significant motivator for reporting. In contrast, bringing CPS expertise or police protection to bear on a case, work place reporting policy, and in particular *fear of lawsuit if failure to report* were less likely to be rated important motivators of past reports.

Failure to report

Twenty-seven of the respondents admitted that at some time in their careers they had suspected abuse or neglect but had decided not to make a report. The failure to report rate in the last year was 19%. Thus, of the people who had ever failed to report, most had done so at least once in the past year (72%).

Those respondents who indicated that they had ever failed to report were asked about the importance of 21 different reasons underlying their decisions not to do so. The ten most important reasons for not reporting are listed in Table 3 in descending order of importance.

TABLE 3
Influencing factors for not reporting child abuse and neglect rated from
1=very important to 4=not at all important by frequency (F) and in per cent (%)

Possible consequences	1		2		3		4	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
1. Lacked sufficient evidence that abuse or neglect had occurred	41	39,8	35	34,0	17	16,5	10	9,7
2. Police would respond insensitively	38	36,9	23	22,3	17	16,5	25	24,3
3. Abuse or neglect was not serious enough to report	28	27,2	33	32,0	19	18,4	33	32,0
4. Treatment already accepted	32	31,1	24	23,3	19	18,4	28	27,2
5. Could help the child better myself	26	25,2	31	30,1	33	32,0	33	32,0
6. CPS services are of poor quality	27	26,2	24	23,3	32	31,1	20	19,4
7. Initial impressions proved misleading	26	25,2	30	29,1	21	20,4	26	25,2
8. CPS overreacts to reports	31	30,1	24	23,3	17	16,5	31	30,1
9. Increased risk of abuse and neglect	30	29,1	21	20,4	25	24,3	27	26,2
10. Family unit would be disrupted	29	28,2	14	13,6	36	35,0	24	23,3

The three major reasons for failure to report were: (1) *not reportable*, including a number of evidence-based reasons for not reporting (e.g. evidence was insufficient that abuse or neglect had occurred); (2) *I can do better than the system*, including a range of criticisms of the police and CPS agencies; and (3) that the abuse and neglect were considered not serious enough to report.

To the open question *Thinking about one specific time you did not report, what were the major reasons for not reporting in that instance?*, the following major three clusters of answers were given in descending order of importance:

Child: lack of evidence, not serious, contradictory statements, refusing to talk about the incident, child no longer in danger, child no longer staying with perpetrator.

Offender: is aggressive, fear of further abuse, fear of making enemies with perpetrators, offender is the only breadwinner in family, offender displayed real guilt feelings and willingness to change.

Family/community: unwillingness to give evidence, family pressure, fear of breaking up the family, worsening problem in the community, own idea of punishing the perpetrator, solved by itself, counselling done.

Patterns of reporting behaviour

To provide a clearer picture of reporting behaviour, the two variables that measured lifetime reporting behaviour were combined into a single variable with four categories that described each respondent's reporting history: (1) no reporting and no Failure To Report (FTR); (2) any reporting and no FTR; (3) any reporting and any FTR; and (4) no reporting and any FTR. These four categories were labelled (1) no involvement; (2) consistent reporting; (3) discretion; and (4) FTR only. Variables with the same categories using reporting behaviour over the past year were created. Regarding lifetime reporting behaviour (in brackets past year reporting) 26% (27%) had

no involvement, 42% (44%) consistent reporting, 19% (13%) discretion and 6% (4%) only FTR. The most common lifetime and past year reporting pattern was consistent reporting, which is what the law requires. Almost 20% indicated that they had reported at some time, but had also failed to report. One fourth had neither reported nor failed to report.

Consequences of reporting

Problems encountered or expected - as a social worker - in the process of making reports of child abuse and neglect in descending order of importance were:

- (1) Police treated family insensitively (59%);
- (2) CPS staff is poorly trained (54%);
- (3) CPS staff is inflexible, or uses no discretion (25%);
- (4) Telephone lines are repeatedly busy (25%);
- (5) Don't/Didn't know whom to report to (13%).

Table 4 indicates the seriousness of consequences expected for the social worker from making a report.

TABLE 4
Consequences expected for the social worker from making a report rated from 1=very serious to 4=not at all serious by frequency (F) and in percent (%)

Possible consequences	1		2		3		4	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
1. Parental anger or threats	34	33,0	28	27,2	22	21,4	19	18,4
2. Court appearance and testimony	37	35,9	25	24,3	16	15,5	25	24,3
3. Risk of lawsuit	26	25,2	33	32,0	25	24,3	19	18,4
4. Personal upset or worry	30	29,1	22	21,4	25	24,3	26	25,2
5. Loss of patient/client you reported	26	25,2	26	25,2	24	23,3	27	26,2
6. Loss of rapport with patient/client	25	24,3	25	24,3	25	24,3	28	27,2
7. Loss of future patients/clients due to reputation as a reporter	26	25,2	26	25,2	24	23,3	27	26,2
8. Time lost from normal work	16	15,5	19	18,4	24	23,3	44	42,7
9. Loss of income	9	8,7	11	10,7	14	13,6	69	67,0

The most serious consequences for the social worker were related to parents' negative reactions, court appearance and risk of law suit and least serious were loss of income and time lost from normal work.

Table 5 indicates problems encountered or expected by the child in the process of making a report.

TABLE 5
Problems encountered or expected in the process of making
reports of child abuse or neglect by frequency (F) and in percent (%)

Item	F	%
1. Police treated family insensitively	59	57,3
2. Child Protection Services (CPS) staff poorly trained	54	52,4
3. CPS staff inflexible or use no discretion	25	24,3
4. Telephone lines repeatedly busy	25	24,3
5. Don't/Didn't know who to report to	13	12,6
6. Other problem as specified below:	23	22,3
▪ Medical staff (negative attitude, in-availability)		
▪ Parents (uncooperative, insensitive to victim)		
▪ CPU (staff not well trained, in-availability)		
▪ Court system (prolong cases, poor)		
▪ Child (giving contradictory statements)		

The major form of problems that children may encounter or expect is insensitive, untrained, inflexible and unavailable police. In addition, problems with medical staff, parents and the court systems were also mentioned.

Table 6 shows vignette outcomes according to the type of abuse and reporting behaviour.

TABLE 6
Vignette out comes by abuse type and likelihood of reporting as a
function of abuse-relevant judgements (across all vignettes)

Judgement (range)	Neglect (one vignette)	Physical abuse (two vignettes)	Sexual abuse (two vignettes)	Likelihood to report: <i>p</i>
1. Seriousness (1-5)	1,73 (.85)	2,06 (1,99)	1,50 (.70)	,381**
2. Abuse? (1-4)	1,41 (.60)	1,79 (2,0)	1,34 (58,5)	,390**
3. Law requires a report (1-4)	2,21 (.97)	1,94 (.93)	1,72 (84,5)	,281**
4. Report benefit to child (1-4)	2,39 (.93)	2,45 (1,0)	2,25 (1,14)	,089
5. Report benefit to rest of family (1-4)	2,59 (1,02)	2,00 (1,05)	2,58 (1,21)	,081
6. Likelihood of report (1-5)	2,69 (1,26)	2,40 (1,14)	1,94 (1,08)	,249*

* = $p < ,05$; ** = $p < 01$

Sexual abuse vignettes were rated more serious and more likely judged as abuse than neglect or physical abuse, respectively. Participants were far more inclined to believe that the law expected a report on sexual abuse vignettes than on vignettes describing physical abuse or neglect. Yet social workers were inclined to believe that reports of these sexual abuse cases would be more likely to harm than benefit the child and family. The anticipated benefit to the child was lowest for physical abuse vignettes.

Perceived seriousness, judgement of abuse and legal requirement were significantly related to reporting intentions, whereas the benefit to the child or the family was not related.

DISCUSSION

According to the 1996 census 15% of South Africa's total population is aged 5 years or younger; a further 21% is aged from 6 to 14 years and, therefore, children form nearly half the population (South African Law Commission 1998). As the foundation for the citizenry of tomorrow, their rights, their needs, and their potential must be acknowledged if a better life is to be built for all South Africans.

Similar to findings of reporting behaviour of social workers in the US, this study found about two third ever reporting. The US sample was much lower (55,4%) than this study (97%) in reporting in the past year from those who had ever reported (Zellman & Bell 1990). More than 40% of those who had failed to report in this study cited lack of sufficient evidence as a very important reason for having done so. The importance of this judgement clearly implies that some professional judgement and discretion enter into reporting decisions. Among US social workers almost 60% cited lack of sufficient evidence as a very important reason for having done so (Zellman & Bell 1990).

Important in the context of non-reporting is that more than 40% felt that the police would respond insensitively, and also that more than 26% of the professionals consider their ignorance about how to report a very important reason for past decisions not to do so.

The use of discretion (43% saw this as very important) in reporting child abuse may be a factor in the high rate of under-reporting. The need to re-visit the current legal framework which requires professionals to report any reasonable suspicion or belief that child abuse has occurred has become apparent in view of the extent and severity of violence against children and of their abuse in South Africa, which often goes unreported. Concern about the quality of police and CPS responses has been expressed and needs to be addressed. The lack of effectiveness of child protection services has also been found in other studies (Zellman & Antler 1990).

In line with the study by Zellman and Bell (1990) sexual abuse vignettes were rated the most serious, while physical abuse vignettes were rated the least serious. Social workers were more inclined to label incidents of alleged sexual abuse as abuse than they were to label incidents of neglect as abuse or neglect or of physical abuse.

In this study perceived seriousness, labelling and the law's demands were significantly related to reporting intentions, whereas benefits to child and family were not related. However, Zellman and Bell (1990) found in the American sample that all five abuse-relevant judgements were strongly related to reporting intentions. This means that social workers in this study were more inclined to believe that reports of child abuse or neglect cases would more likely harm than benefit the child and family reported. This finding needs to be further investigated and should inform child protection services.

CONCLUSION

The present study explored child abuse reporting behaviour and how reporting decisions are made among social workers in the Northern Province. The study revealed that the majority of social workers used their discretion in terms of determining which cases are worth reporting and which ones are not worth reporting. This finding may have far-reaching implications. More research should be conducted to determine whether the discretion exercised by social workers in terms of reporting child abuse cases is not a critical factor in the high level of under-reporting. Furthermore, in view of the extent and severity of violence against children and of their abuse, the need to create a legal framework within which children will be protected and empowered to realize their full potential has become apparent.

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