

# The Course and Characteristics of Chronic and Isolated Child Maltreatment

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# Background

- λ **Research in the field of child maltreatment tends to:**
  - υ Attempt to predict whether maltreatment will occur
  - υ Investigate the impact of maltreatment after it has occurred
- λ **Creates impression of CM as a single event phenomena**



# Background

*isolated maltreatment:* single incident or inter-related events in a single time period

*chronic maltreatment:* recurrent incidents of maltreatment over a prolonged period of time



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# Aim

- λ To determine whether some children experienced chronic as opposed to isolated child maltreatment
- λ To compare the characteristics of chronic and isolated child maltreatment



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# Sample

## λ Identified all families:

- υ living in a regional child protection jurisdiction;
- υ with a child aged between 0 and 4 years;
- υ who was the subject of a notification to child protection for the first time;
- υ between July 1 and December 31 1994

## λ Random sample of 100 children selected

## λ Referent child selector for entire family



# Method

## Follow forward research design

- λ July 1 1994 to June 30 2002
- λ Child Protection case files were data source
- λ Audited every notification through to case closure
- λ Using a pro forma, collected qualitative and quantitative raw data
- λ Notification was proxy measure of maltreatment



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# Method

**QUANTITATIVE:** descriptive, correlation, logistic regression & survival analysis

**QUALITATIVE:** case studies investigating thematic differences between:

- ∪ Isolated  
2 x randomly selected families with single notification
- ∪ Typical  
2 x randomly selected families with 3-4 notifications
- ∪ Chronic  
2 x families with greatest number of notifications



# Quantitative Results

- λ 374 notifications and 82 substantiations recorded
- λ Min = 1; max = 22 notifications/family
- λ Min = 0; max = 6 substantiations/family
- λ 65/100 families had > 1 recorded notification
- λ 24/100 families had > 1 recorded substantiation
- λ The average duration of family involvement with child protection was 3.3 years
- λ Families averaged three to four notifications with approximately 10-months between each notification



# Case Study 1: Isolated

- υ Single parent family
- υ 2 girls aged 4 years and 2 years
- υ 1 notification to child protection
- υ Involved with child protection for 69 days
- υ No further notifications in 8-yr study period



## Notification 1

- *District nurse arrived to visit family*
- *Mother and children could be seen inside the house*
- *Mother appeared to be sleeping on the couch, but the district nurse could not rouse her*
- *District nurse advised that mother had a history of drug use*



## Investigation

- υ *Upon child protection arrival mother conscious, but drug affected*
- υ *Using speed while on methadone program*
- υ *Contracted both Hepatitis B&C*
- υ *Planning to admit into a detox program*
- υ *Maternal grandmother usually primary carer*
- υ *Grandmother overseas on holiday*
- υ *Children in mother's care*
- υ *Children's father violent towards mother*



## Intervention

- υ *Mother consented to voluntary respite placement for children*
- υ *Mother eager to access family day care and parenting program when offered*
- υ *Children returned from respite placement*
- υ *Attend day-care & parenting program*
- υ *Maternal grandmother returned from overseas*
- υ *Family commitment to support mother if grandmother absent again*



# Case Study 2: Chronic

- υ Two parent family at initial notification
- υ 2 children: boy 1.5 yrs and girl 3.5 yrs
- υ Family involvement spanned 7 years
- υ 17 notifications - second highest number of notifications (not substantiations) in sample
- υ Notifications fell into five identifiable clusters and one isolated event



## 1, 3 & 4: Supervisory neglect

- ◆ *Son (1.5 yrs) sustaining physical injuries caused by supervisory neglect*
- ◆ *Both parents, but particularly mother*
- ◆ *Mother intellectual disability*
- ◆ *Spanned a period of 2.5 yrs*
- ◆ *No intervention provided until notification 4 when family were linked with services*

## Notification 2 occurred in isolation

- ◆ *Allegation that daughter was fearful of father*
- ◆ *Not corroborated by child's school*



## 5 & 6: Lack of Support

- ◆ *Mother and father separated*
- ◆ *Father was violent towards mother prior to separation*
- ◆ *Son in father's care, daughter (7 yrs) in mother's care*
- ◆ *Mother not coping as support network previously put in place had broken down*
- ◆ *Child protection re-connected mother to appropriate supports*



## 7 - 10: Custody Dispute

- ◆ *Allegations and counter-allegations made by both parents*
- ◆ *Parents pursuing custody through FLC*
- ◆ *Mother alleged:*
  - *father drinking in children's (6yrs & 8yrs) presence; and*
  - *not keeping mother apprised of son's medical condition*
- ◆ *Father alleged mother's boyfriend was physically abusing children and had assaulted the father*
- ◆ *Child protection:*
  - *dismissed mother's allegations; and*
  - *did not follow up father's allegations as the father obtained an intervention order on the children's behalf*



## 11 & 12: Inadequate Parenting Capacity

- ◆ *Concerns re mother's ability to parent 9 year old daughter (7 year old son resides with father)*
- ◆ *Mother withdrawn from support services*
- ◆ *Abandonment, neglect and physical abuse alleged*
- ◆ *Mother acknowledged, but minimised, problems*
- ◆ *Advised things better now, mother's version of events accepted and case closed*
- ◆ *Mother's ID did not appear to have been considered in decision making*



## 13 & 17: Chronic Neglect and Sexual Abuse

- ◆ *Allegations of chronic environmental neglect from multiple sources*
- ◆ *Allegations that daughter (9.5 yrs) was being sexually abused by male boarder*
- ◆ *Child protection investigations concentrated on environmental neglect not sexual abuse*
- ◆ *Concerns re chronic neglect, not prioritised as father pursuing custody*



- ◆ *Police later (n.17) confirmed sexual abuse*
- ◆ *Removed and charged perpetrator*
- ◆ *Mother had been aware of abuse but did not immediately come forward*
- ◆ *No intervention as child no longer at risk*
  - *perpetrator removed*
  - *father still pursuing custody*
  - *mother now acting protectively*



# Findings

- λ In some families maltreatment was isolated
- λ However, in *most* families maltreatment was recurrent over a prolonged period (chronic)
- λ Typical involvement comprised one cluster
- λ All families had multiple interlinked problems
- λ Difficult to differentiate families statistically



# Findings cont.

## λ Case studies elicited several areas of difference:

- υ Protective factor present (e.g. family support)
- υ Readiness to change
- υ Willing to seek/accept support
- υ Type of problem (temporal vs. enduring)
- υ Type of child protection service provision (therapeutic vs. regulatory)



# Global Implications

- λ **Most of families lived in areas of highest poverty within region & had multiple inter-linked problems**
  - υ target poverty and exclusion at the community level
- λ **Presence of single protective factor can make difference**
  - υ assist families to develop positive social support networks
- λ **Readiness to change was present in isolated cases**
  - υ in health area trialing programs to foster motivation to change - investigate suitability for this group



# Implications for Child Protection

## λ Type of problem was important factor in determining course

- υ Thorough assessment of problem and subsequent family needs

EG:

- υ Does family need short-term support or long-term support?
- υ Is the parenting capacity below adequate even with support?



# Implications for Child Protection

## λ Type of child protection service provision impacted maltreatment chronicity

- υ Notifications occurred in clusters
- υ Recurred until family problem resolved
- υ Maltreatment on-going during problem
- υ Regulatory approach to intervention did not address problem or reduce notifications
- υ Family support and linking families with appropriate services alleviated family problems



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