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Gordon A. Crews

The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, gordon.crews@utrgv.edu

Angela D. Crews

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Do you know *how* your children are?
International perspectives on child abuse, mistreatment, and neglect

Gordon A. Crews, Ph.D.
and Angela D. Crews, Ph.D.,
Marshall University
(Huntington, WV. USA)

Introduction

In the early 1980s, televised public service announcements in the United States queried, “Parents ...it is 10:00 pm, do you know where your children are?” These were launched through the media as reminders for American parents to take a moment and think about their children and to strive to inform themselves of their children’s activities. Similar broadcasts to urge parents to interact with their children and to provide simple parenting tips have followed in various forms since this time. An interesting realization is that almost all of these “messages” were directed *towards* the parents *by* the government *for* the children.

Given the proliferation of new threats to the safety of all children on a global scale (e.g., inappropriate solicitations over the internet, diminishing international social and political conditions, trafficking, etc.), some might argue that these efforts should be rejuvenated, refocused, rebroadcast internationally, and their *direction* should be changed. With the global changes in the new millennium, it is more proper for them to originate *from* the children *to* the parents and *from* the government.

Obviously, protecting children on an international level from violence, exploitation and abuse is an integral component of protecting their rights to survival, growth and world development. In turn, this helps them develop into productive citizens who can contribute to their communities (from local neighborhoods to the global community). This is true for any nation and culture. Unfortunately, each year an estimated 300 million children worldwide are subjected to daily violence, exploitation and abuse (Daro, 2006). This includes the worst forms imaginable of child labor, involvement in armed conflict, exposure to female genital mutilation, child marriage, being sold into slavery, or being solicited over the internet.

The purpose of this article is to offer a brief overview of the state of children internationally as it pertains to their levels of abuse, neglect, and needs. The enormity of this topic is obvious, but it is hoped that a basic understanding and appreciation of the definitions, nature and extent, and myriad issues involved can be derived.

Nature and Extent: International Problems and Issues

Child abuse, mistreatment, and neglect are problems threatening the health and welfare of children and adolescents internationally. Increased international communication and exposure has brought awareness in many that child maltreatment is a phenomenon intrinsic to all human society since the beginning of time. Infanticide, ritual mutilation, corporal punishment and

battering, sexual exploitation, slavery and abandonment are still present in many societies. In many cultures, children are still commonly regarded as parental property. And, family is seen as the one entity in almost all cultures that outsiders do not intervene upon very easily. Obviously, this inherently protects abusing families from external inspection and intervention.

The investigation and study of child maltreatment, including the use of inappropriate physical and emotional means to discipline and control children, is only beginning in many parts of the world. Most international communities have tended to focus only upon societal, or extra-familial, abuses to children. In many others, the focus has been on issues relating to child labor, beggary, prostitution and marriage. In some more developed countries, attention has turned toward more intra-familial abuses and issues.

One must acknowledge that culture (Segal, 1999) has a tremendous impact on child-rearing practices, the value placed on children, and how they should and should not be treated in society. Each culture has its own unique norms and mores surrounding these matters and view them as extremely private matters. Also, child abuse, mistreatment, and neglect as identified in the United States and the United Kingdom is not necessarily applicable across cultures or national boundaries. Therefore, how “westerners” see the issues may be in stark contrast to the views of others. Many would argue that this is why there can be no universal standard for optimal child care or what constitutes abuse and neglect. Also, many of the situations causing the abuse or neglect are beyond the control of the family (i.e., political, societal, economic, or public health conditions).

An interesting side issue (Lune, 2002) to all of this is that the provision of health and social services to unpopular population groups (*i.e.*, illegal aliens, immigrants, homeless) has a long history across the world, much of it defined by moral debates and questions of “deservedness.” The desirability (*i.e.*, societal views of individual’s worth) of various constituencies has an effect on the willingness of governments and communities to take responsibility for their needs, or even to acknowledge an association with them. Typically, policy makers have distinguished between the “deserving poor” and “the general poor” or between those who are in need “through no fault of their own” and those who can be said to have brought their problems on themselves. It always has been easier to invest public money in the wellbeing of sympathetic groups rather than those who are too closely identified with social problems or social ills. Sadly, this also explains how many children are viewed in developed and well as non-developed countries.

When attempting to collect statistics on child abuse and neglect, one must understand that the very concept of "child maltreatment" is controversial in many international arenas. Only recently, and only in particular countries and cultures, has the abuse of children come to be seen as a major social problem and a catalyst for many people's suffering and personal problems (Daro, 2007). Sadly, children have been abused throughout human history, but for people to think about child abuse and to create legal definitions and government agencies that can remove children from their homes, is relatively new.

Given these issues, statistics on rates of child abuse and neglect are controversial. It could be argued that almost any statistic on the incidence (number of new cases each year) and

prevalence (percentage of people in a population who have had such experiences) of child abuse and neglect will be disputed by some “expert”. Many will argue that very complex and subtle scientific issues are involved in most studies that generate these statistics (Daro, 2007). In addition, even the most objective scientific research will have imperfections. Almost any examination of the methodology of child abuse research projects will reveal an inherent bias based upon the researchers’ opinions and judgments, thus skewing some factual information and logic.

Moreover, many abused and neglected children never come to the attention of government authorities or individuals who can make efforts to protect a particular child. This is particularly true for neglected and sexually abused children, who may have no physical signs of harm. In the case of sexual abuse, fear and feelings of shame may prevent children from seeking help. Therefore, it becomes painfully obvious that official government statistics do not generally indicate completely sound rates of child abuse and neglect. Obviously, government and official statistics are based on cases that are reported to social service agencies, investigated by child protection workers, and have sufficient evidence to determine that a “legal” definition of "abuse" or "neglect" was met (Crews & Montgomery, 2001).

Determining Accurate Nature and Extent Estimates of the Problems

According to Pinheiro (2006), nearly 50 million births go unregistered every year throughout the world. Most reports support that South Asia generally has the largest number of unregistered children, with more than 23 million of births not registered each year. This region alone is responsible for over 47 per cent of the unregistered births worldwide. In addition, sub-Saharan Africa, 55 per cent of children under five have not been registered. It is obvious that if the true documentation and numbering of juveniles is not possible, then the determination of the true nature and extent of victimization is also impossible.

Estimates suggest there were about 317 million economically active children aged 5 to 17 as of 2004, of whom 218 million could be regarded as illegal child laborers (Daro, 2007). Of the latter, 126 million were engaged in hazardous work. It is estimated that more girls under age 16 are in domestic service than in any other category of child labor (Pinheiro, 2006). It is also estimated that 5.7 million children are trapped into forced or bonded labor. Data collected from 1987 to 2005 indicate that in developing countries, 36 per cent of women aged 20-24 were married or in union before they reached 18 years of age (most common in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia) (Daro, 2007). An estimated 14 million adolescents between 15 and 19 give birth each year.

According to the latest estimates for 2002 (UNICEF, 2008), some 1.2 million children are trafficked worldwide every year. Latest estimates (Bales, 2008) suggest that more than 250,000 children are currently serving as child soldiers. An estimated 90 per cent of global conflict-related deaths since 1990 have been civilians, and 80 percent of these have been women and children. Of the 1.39 million people involved in forced commercial sexual exploitation and 40–50 per cent are children.

An estimated 133 million children worldwide are orphans (aged 0–17 who have lost one or both parents) (UNICEF, 2008). Of these children, 15 million were orphaned by AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome), more than 12 million of them in sub-Saharan Africa. Asia appears to have the highest number of orphans due to all causes, with 74 million children.

It is estimated that more than 130 million women and girls alive since the early 21st century have been subjected to female genital mutilation/cutting (UNICEF, 2008). This occurs mainly in countries from Senegal in West Africa to Somalia in East Africa and to Yemen in the Middle East, but is also practiced in some parts of south-east Asia. Reports from Europe, North America and Australia indicate that it is practiced among immigrant communities in those regions as well.

According to a recent UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund) report dealing with child well-being, the United States (and United Kingdom) ranked the lowest among first world nations with respect to the well being of their children (Daro, 2007). This study also found that child neglect and child abuse were far more common in single-parent families than in families where both parents were present. Recently, a study conducted by the Center for Disease Control (2007) found that 1 in 50 infants in the United States were victims of nonfatal neglect or abuse. Researchers found over 91,000 cases of neglect over the course of one year (October 2005 to September 2006). During 2006, an estimated 3.3 million referrals, involving the alleged maltreatment of approximately 6.0 million children, were made to child protective service agencies across the country. An estimated 3.6 million children received an investigation or assessment.

Between 2005 and 2006 (UNICEF, 2008), an estimated 1,530 children in the United States died due to child abuse or neglect with the overall rate of child fatalities was 2.04 deaths per 100,000 children. More than 40 percent of child fatalities were attributed to neglect, while physical abuse also was a major contributor to child fatalities. More than three-quarters (78.0%) of the children who died due to child abuse and neglect were younger than 4 years old. Infant males (younger than 1 year) had the highest rate of fatalities at 18.5 deaths per 100,000 males of the same age in the national population. Infant females had a rate of 14.7 deaths per 100,000 girls of the same age.

By 2008 (UNICEF), nearly 80 percent (79.4%) of perpetrators of child maltreatment were parents and another 6.7 percent were other relatives of the victim. Women comprised a larger percentage of all perpetrators than men, 57.9 percent compared to 42.1 percent. More than 75 percent (77.5%) of all perpetrators were younger than age 40. Of the perpetrators who maltreated children, less than 10 percent (7.0%) committed sexual abuse, while 60.4 percent committed neglect. Of the perpetrators who were parents, more than 90 percent (91.5%) were the biological parent of the victim.

International Overview of Child Abuse and Neglect

On October 11, 2006 the United Nations (UN) released the first *UN Secretary General's Study on Violence against Children* entitled, *State of the World's Children 2006*, which addressed international violence against children within the family, schools, alternative care

institutions and detention facilities, places where children work, and communities (Daro, 2007). This study was very extensive and was supported by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the World Health Organization (WHO), and the Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights (OHCHR). This was the first global study conducted by the United Nations on all forms of violence against children. It was also the first to engage directly and consistently with children.

UNICEF's *State of the World's Children 2006* report surveyed 20 countries: Australia, Belgium, Canada, China, Croatia, Denmark, Germany, Israel, Italy, New Zealand, Norway, Palestine, Portugal, Russia, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Taiwan, Turkey, and the United Kingdom, providing the first comprehensive overview of the state of child abuse and neglect on the international level (Daro, 2007). Results from this study indicate that almost 53,000 children died worldwide in 2002 as a result of homicide. From 80% to 98% of children suffer physical punishment in their homes, with a third or more experiencing severe physical punishment resulting from the use of implements. Additionally, 150 million girls and 73 million boys under 18 experienced forced sexual intercourse or other forms of sexual violence during 2002. Between 100 and 140 million girls and women in the world have undergone some form of female genital mutilation/cutting. In sub-Saharan Africa, Egypt and the Sudan, 3 million girls and women are subjected to genital mutilation/cutting every year. In 2004, 218 million children were involved in child labor, of which 126 million were in hazardous work. Earlier estimates from 2000 suggested that 1.8 million children were forced into prostitution and child pornography, and 1.2 million were victims of human trafficking (Leeb, Paulozzi, Melanson, Simon, & Arias, 2008).

Lack of Proper Common View of Phenomena

All but one of the countries surveyed in the UNICEF's *State of the World's Children 2006* report considered sexual or physical abuse of a child by a caretaker to constitute child maltreatment (Pinheiro, 2006). Other behaviors also frequently mentioned as abusive included homeless children, child prostitution, abuse or neglect within foster care, and abandonment by parents or caretakers. In contrast to these areas of agreement, notable regional variation existed in the unwillingness to label other behaviors as abusive, such as failure to secure medical care based on religious beliefs, female circumcision and physical discipline. Interestingly, the behavior least often mentioned by respondents as being considered child abuse in their country was physical discipline. Slightly less than half of the respondents reported this behavior constituted abuse in their country.

International Views on Proper Child Rearing

Many (Crews and Montgomery, 2001) argue that aggressive behavior is a universal characteristic of the human species. The expression of anger and frustration in an aggressive and explosive manner appears in infancy and increases in frequency and intensity during toddlerhood and early childhood. In the preschool years when children start to engage in extensive peer interactions, aggression becomes a salient issue because it may in fact damage and harm on others and have adverse effects on peer relationships. Research has consistently revealed that

aggressive children are likely to acquire a negative social reputation and be rejected in the peer group. Therefore, it is not unexpected to find this as a major concern of parents internationally.

In many collectivistic cultures (Mathurin, Gielen, and Lancaster, 2006), aggressive behavior is strictly prohibited, and there are many sociopolitical constraints imposed on this prohibition. Achieving and maintaining social order and stability are the primary goals in many traditional and contemporary societies. According to collectivistic principles (Chen, Chen, Wang, and Liu, 2002), the interests of the individual must be subordinated to those of the collective. Individual behaviors that may threaten group functioning and the well-being of the collective are clearly not allowed; almost all types of under controlled behaviors, including aggression and disruption, are viewed as highly problematic and “abnormal”.

Lack of Uniform and/or Clear Definitions of Child Abuse, Mistreatment, and Neglect

Before exploring the myriad international issues related to child abuse and neglect, one must first understand the extent and characteristics of these problems. This is not a simple task in that there are many issues and definitional questions which arise almost immediately. These are presented below to illustrate the difficulties in attempting to determine the true extent of various types of child abuse and neglect and controversies dealing with international definitions of child abuse. One of the most basic limiting issues surrounding this research is how to define what is universally defined as abuse and/or neglect.

When a child misbehaves or is disobedient, parents or other caregivers are faced with the decision of how to best discipline and correct the child’s misbehavior. Internationally, opinions vary about the most effective methods of discipline and punishment. Parental child-rearing attitudes and beliefs about discipline are influenced by determinants such as religious affiliation, socioeconomic class, cultural factors, and regional norms.

Many parents still consider corporal punishment the most effective form of punishment aimed at correcting or preventing unwanted behaviors. They use varying degrees and types of physical punishment. While how to raise children varies from culture to culture, the purpose of controlling their behavior appears to be universal: (1) stopping a child’s unwanted behavior, (2) preventing the reoccurrence of unwanted behavior, or (3) because the child failed to do something (s)he was supposed to do. Common types of corporal punishment such as spanking and slapping are considered in this context. However, it is important to note that more severe forms of punishment such as beating and hitting may also be viewed as part of culturally acceptable corporal punishment.

In most cultures, the practice of corporal punishment persists and is often considered necessary to instill children’s compliance and respect. Unfortunately, many times the child’s age and developmental needs are ignored as the “beatings” are administered. Parents are too often unaware of the inappropriateness of the beatings. Many would argue that this predominate cultural belief supporting the use of corporal punishment is the biblical axiom “spare the rod and spoil the child”. Also, often, physical discipline is seen as a form of “tough love.” Parents may discipline a child believing that the harder they hit the child, the more they demonstrate love

and/or religious adherence. Correspondingly, children often accept “beatings” as a normal part of growing up.

No universal standard exists for optimal child care or for child abuse because child-rearing beliefs and behaviors differ cross-culturally. There are many practices or disciplines that are considered acceptable in a particular culture but as abusive or neglectful by outsiders. Thus, international cultural conflicts in child abuse definitions can arise. Future international cross-cultural definitions of child abuse must involve a determination of the parameters for acceptable and unacceptable behavior both between and within cultures. Until this time, child abuse must be understood and examined within the cultural context in which it occurs.

Child-rearing attitudes and behaviors influence the identification, prevention, and management of abuse across nations. Awareness of child abuse varies across countries, often depending on the political, economic, and cultural environment of the country. From a practice perspective, disparity in definition can pose significant problems in both the development and achievement of case goals. If parents and potential reporting members disagree about what constitutes abusive or inadequate care for children, they will have difficulty setting goals to reach adequate levels of care and will have difficulty knowing when or if they have reached these goals. Without an agreed set of parameters in the care of children, workers and mothers might rely on either vague notions of adequate care or overly specific rules that may not be generalizable to the many complex dilemmas of child-rearing. While vagueness encourages each actor in the child protection system to interpret what the other means by adequate care, specific rules fail to encourage generalization of principles to specific situations not yet conceived by workers and mothers. In either scenario, children continue to be vulnerable to care that may not meet their growing needs.

Finally, the implication that more inclusive definitions of child neglect can result in larger caseloads must be addressed. Such an environment, more inclusive definitions will be hard to sell, even if it means more children will be protected. Without public support for bigger caseloads, such a policy can only increase public frustration with the child welfare system and not necessarily serve children any better.

Lack of Effective Surveillance, Monitoring, and/or Reporting Mechanisms

At the international level (Rodriguez, 2002), the scope of child neglect and its attendant harm to children has been difficult to estimate due to a lack of common reporting standards, differing societal expectations for what constitutes inadequate care for children, and a lack of common definitional parameters. Although the growth in reports of neglect has been noted in many countries, some of this growth can be attributed to changing definitions of what constitutes neglectful circumstances.

Adoption of legal mandates for abuse reporting has been slow in many countries globally, particularly for child maltreatment occurring within the home. Many countries prefer voluntary reporting. Despite laws in countries requiring consultation with child protective services, numerous factors influence the abuse reporting behavior of professionals. In the absence of specified mandatory child abuse reporting laws or guidelines, professionals in industrialized

countries must rely entirely on subjective and situational factors when deciding whether to contact protective services.

Cross culturally, people hold a number of attitudes that may influence their reporting decisions, particularly with regard to the perceived negative consequences of reporting. Internationally, some commonly cited reasons for failing to report suspicions include concerns about disruption of treatment, inferior services provided by protective services, and further harm to the child outweighing the benefits. Mandatory reporting may also deter treatment seeking or self-disclosure by perpetrators of abuse.

Despite legal requirements in countries with mandatory reporting, professionals still express reluctance to report. Many international studies still find a strong failure to report by many social workers, mental health professionals, psychologists, and psychiatrists. Other studies have implied selective compliance with mandatory reporting laws even among highly experienced psychologists, with a substantial percentage failing to report because they believed reporting would endanger therapeutic relationships and client welfare. The justification for such resistance to complying with statutes has been heatedly debated with some recommending more flexible reporting approaches as alternatives to existing legal mandates. Clearly, professionals sometimes elect to disregard the law for a variety of reasons. Hence, identifying those factors that influence a professional's decision to report would serve as a framework to consider the ramifications of any potential revisions in public policy and mandatory reporting laws.

Barriers and Solutions to International Problems

International Barriers to Prevention Efforts

Respondents in the UNICEF's *State of the World's Children 2006* report rated the significance of a number of possible barriers to child abuse prevention for their country as (1) not a significant barrier (2) of moderate significance, or (3) of major significance (Daro, 2006). Overall, the most commonly cited barriers to prevention were limited resources, general support for corporal punishment and use of physical discipline, and a lack of effective systems to investigate abuse reports.

International Policy Characteristics

According to the UNICEF's *State of the World's Children 2006* report, 82% of respondents reported that their country had an official policy regarding child maltreatment (Pinheiro, 2006). About two-fifths indicated that their countries had longstanding policies (i.e., over 15 years), and another 30% noted that their countries established these policies between 1990 and 2000. Two thirds of the respondents indicated that policies, once enacted, were revised on occasion but were not subject to an annual review. Most of these policies included criminal penalties for abusing a child, and provisions for removing a child to protect them from further abuse. Respondents also reported that their policies often included the possibility of both mandatory *and* voluntary reporting of suspected cases.

International Surveillance Methods

In the UNICEF's *State of the World's Children 2006* report, respondents from most countries reported using one or more surveillance methods to monitor child abuse and neglect cases or to examine the public's general awareness of child abuse (Pineiro, 2006). Overall, 68% of the countries had conducted population surveys, 38% had conducted structured public opinion polls, 64% maintained an official count of cases (i.e., a child abuse registry), and 39% maintained official records of child abuse fatalities. Of the 46 respondents who reported that their country maintained official counts of all suspected abuse cases, most (85%) included all four types of abuse in their records (e.g., physical, sexual, neglect, and psychological maltreatment).

International Prevention Strategies

Given the size of these problems on an international level (Klevens and Whitaker, 2007); many child maltreatment experts have recently called for greater attention to primary prevention. The aim of primary prevention efforts is to prevent abuse before it occurs. Recent reviews (Kindler, 2008) have focused on identifying programs or strategies that have been effective in preventing child abuse or neglect. To add to these efforts, the goal of this review was to identify gaps and future directions for developing and evaluating interventions from a public health perspective.

Public health (Gauthier, Stollak, Messe, and Arnoff, 1996) focuses mainly on primary preventive interventions and develops these based on known, modifiable risk factors. Preventive interventions targeting risk factors that are highly prevalent in a population will generate a greater impact on the problem at the population level than targeting factors that are less prevalent. Given equal impact, interventions that are delivered by individuals to individuals (vs. delivered by society to individuals, society, or to the environment) or that require more individual involvement or effort or repeated doses tend to be more costly, and thus less attractive from a public health perspective.

Regarding effectiveness, respondents from developed countries generally found prevention strategies in general more promising than their counterparts working in developing countries (Daro, 2007). In contrast, those working in developing countries were more optimistic than their colleagues in developed countries about the potential benefits of professional training as a child abuse prevention strategy.

Conclusion

It appears that there may be hope for an emerging global agreement on the major behaviors that constitute child abuse and neglect. It must be expected that some differences will continue to exist between the definitions embraced in various parts of the world. This will probably be true in developing versus developed countries. Local cultural and social conditions will always frame the relative emphasis professionals may place on the various behaviors of their people. This is especially true in generally perceived private matters such as possible child abuse and neglect. This will probably always be the case despite the fact that those working in diverse arenas are dealing with situations and offenses involving many of the same characteristics.

As has been repeatedly discussed, children who have experienced physical mistreatment, sexual abuse and parental or societal neglect can be found in many countries around the world, regardless of a country's economic conditions. Sadly, much of the world's response to child abuse and neglect, however, will always inherently be linked to levels of funding. Although the proportion of developing countries establishing formal child abuse policies and response systems is growing, wide discrepancies remain in terms of service availability. Although much has been, and is being, learned about how to establish effective surveillance and response systems, it is clear that a significant number of children will remain at high risk for experiencing violence and other negative outcomes.

Given all of this information, it is hoped that national and international partnerships will continue to make efforts to improve service availability and quality to children across the world. It appears that the best bet will continue to be through ongoing education and training programs and dissemination of best practices. Fortunately, it also appears that this is being realized on an international level.

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Keywords

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