THE RATE OF PHYSICAL CHILD ABUSE IN CHINESE FAMILIES: A COMMUNITY SURVEY IN HONG KONG

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to describe the extent and pattern of parental child battering in Chinese families in Hong Kong. It was hypothesized that the unique feature of filial piety in Chinese culture will create a different pattern of child abuse in Hong Kong when compared to Western societies.

Method: A telephone survey of 1,019 households randomly selected from the local residential telephone directory was completed. Three hundred and fifty-nine fathers and 660 mothers of a child at or under the age of 16 participated in the study. The occurrence of child abuse was assessed by the Chinese version of the Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus, 1979).

Results: The base rate of physical child abuse was 526 per 1,000 children for minor violence and 461 per 1,000 children for severe violence. Minor violence was most likely directed at children aged 3–6 years or children without siblings in the family; and committed by mothers, parents aged 19–37 years, or housewives/unemployed fathers. The highest rate of severe violence occurred among boys or children aged 3–6 years; and was committed by mothers, parents aged 19–37 years, or housewives/unemployed fathers. Common risk factors of child abuse were identified for Chinese and US families.

Conclusions: When compared to US families, Chinese families showed slightly lower rates of minor violence but higher rates of severe violence toward children. Children aged 3–6 years were the most vulnerable victims and female caregivers the most likely abusers in both US and Chinese families. Our findings also suggested that it cannot be assumed that results based on local official statistics and clinical samples regarding the extent of child abuse and characteristics of the victims and abusers can be accurately extended to community samples. © 1998 Elsevier Science Ltd

Key Words—Chinese child abuse, Chinese family violence, Violence against children.

INTRODUCTION

CHILD ABUSE HAS received substantial attention and research in the West during past decades (D’Antonio, Darwish, & McLean, 1993; Finkelhor & Dziuba-Leatherman, 1994; Finkelhor & Korbin, 1988; Korbin, 1991; Levinson, 1989), however, the problem has been relatively unexplored within the Chinese societies. This paper focuses on parental child-battering and adopts the term ‘‘child abuse’’ throughout to refer to this form of child abuse.

Traditional Chinese culture emphasizes the ethic of xiao (hsiao), or filial piety, which includes moral principles that are conducive to child abuse. According to this ethic, children are considered property of their parents and can be dealt with by their parents with little or no interference from outsiders. Wu (1981; 1996) summarizes various filial behavior Chinese children display when interacting with their parents including: sacrificing one’s own life for the parents’ sake, suffering self-inflicted bodily pain to fulfill parents’ wishes or demands, attending sick parents, having strong

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