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Volume 2, Number 8
December 2016

CENTRE FOR RESEARCH
ON CHILDREN AND FAMILIES



CENTRE DE RECHERCHE
SUR L'ENFANCE ET LA FAMILLE

INVESTIGATING CHANGES IN THE SCREENING PROCESS FOR SEXUAL ABUSE

Analyse des changements sur le processus d'examen des cas d'agression sexuelle

UN RÉSUMÉ EXÉCUTIF EN FRANÇAIS EST DISPONIBLE À LA FIN DU DOCUMENT

David Silva, MSW and Delphine Collin-Vézina, Director, Centre for Research on Children and Families, Ph.D.



INTRODUCTION

The incidence of child sexual abuse (CSA) has shown an increase since the 1970s (Leventhal, 2001; Putnam, 2003), presumably due to growing public awareness (Putnam, 2003). However, findings in the US (Finkelhor, & Jones, 2004) and Canada (Trocmé, Fallon, MacLaurin, Sinha, Black, Fast, Felstiner, Hélie, Turcotte, Weightman, Douglas, & Holroyd, 2010) have suggested remarkable declines of investigated cases of CSA by Child Protective Services (CPS) starting in the 90s and throughout the first decade of the years 2000. Analyzing these trends, Finkelhor and Jones (2004) concluded that the decline in the US was partially attributable to a true reduction in the incidence of CSA. The same conclusion may not be generalizable to other countries considering variations in legal and organizational contexts (Collin-Vézina, Hélie, & Trocmé, 2010). In particular, standards used by agencies to screen in cases for investigation have not been fully investigated, a gap this research aims to elucidate.

Indeed, CSA reports received at CPS agencies go through different procedures before they are evaluated or founded (Jones, & Finkelhor, 2001), including a screening process at the intake level limiting the number of cases that are screened in for investigation. The impact of this screening process on cutting down the number of CSA cases known to CPS may suggest a false belief that the incidence of CSA has changed. In fact, the decrease may reflect new, more conservative standards used by agencies to screen in those cases.

In Québec, agencies are mandated to investigate maltreatment situations in accordance to the Youth Protection Act (YPA; 2014). Intake departments are mandated to make a decision based on the nature, gravity, persistence, and frequency of the facts reported, the child's age and personal characteristics, the capacity of the parents to put an end to the situation, and the community resources available to help the child put an end to the situation (YPA, 2014). Unlike its predecessor, the latest YPA revision provided a definition of CSA, specified that the situation could only be screened in if the parents have not taken steps to put an end to the CSA situation, and encouraged the redirection of services to community organizations in cases that did not involve a risk to the child. These modifications have likely introduced major changes in screening procedures, yet to be documented.

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Few studies have focused on the screening criteria of cases reported to Quebec CPS, even less examining CSA reports, and none conducting the analyses over a long time period. Tourigny, Jacob, Daigneault, Hébert, and Wright (2009) extracted information from CPS reports pertaining to CSA situations in Québec during a three-month period in 1998, and found several characteristics that increased the odds of screening in CSA reports, including when the victim was a girl. Conversely, CSA reports were less likely to be screened in when the source of the report was either anonymous, in the “other” category, the father, or a police officer. Similarly, analyzing CSA reports made to one Quebec CPS agency over a two-year period, Silva (2011) examined the screening criteria for 303 reports, and reported that the longer a file remained open prior to making a decision significantly increased the odds of screening out a report. The author hypothesized that a pre-evaluation process occurred before making a decision resulting in either connecting the family to other resources or disconfirming the evidence of CSA.



In light of the complex incidence of CSA trends in Quebec and the few studies that have investigated organizational factors potentially impacting these rates, the current study aimed to analyze variables related to the screening process in Quebec CPS agencies over a 10 year period, as a way to better understand screening processes of CSA situations and their potential influence on the rates of confirmed CSA cases. Specifically, the examined characteristics will be contrasted before and after the amendment of the YPA in order to test the hypothesis that more restrictive criteria at the intake level highlighted in the revision of the Act in 2007 may, at least partly, explain the reported decline of CSA cases in Quebec CPS.

METHODS

The database used in this study consists of datasets representing the entire population of children that came into contact with CPS between 2002 and 2013, which were retrieved from the computerized client information system utilized by 16 CPS agencies across the province of Québec. The longitudinal administrative data contained a number of variables regarding the children, their family, and the organization of services. Cases involving a situation of CSA (YPA, L. R. Q., chapter P-38 g (s) and P-38 d (1)) were selected. The final sample consisted of 53 848 files. The decision to screen in or out the report for further services was used as the dependent variable. The characteristics of the cases were used as independent variables. First, bivariate analyses were used to examine the separate influence of each variable on the screening decision. Second, stepwise regression analyses were performed to predict the decision to screen in or out CSA reports. These variables were entered in three hierarchical blocks: (1) Characteristics of the child, (2) Administrative characteristics, and (3) Report date.

RESULTS

The sample of 53,848 CSA reports is composed of 13,360 boys (24.8%), and 40,488 girls (75.2%). The children’s age ranged from 0 to 17 years ($M=9.97$; $SD=4.60$), with a slightly higher number of children in the 13-17 years age group (38.3%), compared to the 0-6 years (29.4%) and 7-12 years (32.3%) groups. 38,669 (71.8%) reports pertained to inactive clients (*i.e.*, families not already receiving CPS services), and 15,179 (28.2%) reports pertained to already active files. 10,479 (19.5%) reports were made by the child or someone with a personal affiliation to the child; 40,881 (75.9%) were made by a professional in the public system; and, 2,488 (4.6%) were made by Private professionals. The screening decision was taken in four days or less for 30,770 (57.1%) reports, and in more than four days for 23,078 (42.9%) reports. 27,120 (50.4%) reports were received before the YPA amendment in 2007, and 26,728 (49.6%) were received after the amendment. Of the 53,848 reports, 26,281 (48.8%) were screened in for further evaluation, and 27,567 (51.2%) were screened out and closed at the intake level.



As of 2007, there has been a decline in total numbers of reports per annum, together with a marked decline in the proportion per annum of cases screened in for investigation by total number of cases reported to CPS. Thus, while 2830 of the 4310 CSA cases reported to CPS in 2002 were screened in (65.7%), only 1699 of the 4414 reports in 2012 were screened in for investigation (38.5%).

Table 1 presents the characteristics of the child, administrative characteristics, and the time of report, which were all significantly related to the screening decision. As such, all variables were retained for further consideration in the stepwise regression analysis.

Table 1: Characteristics of the child, administrative characteristics, and time of report by screening decision (Chi²)

Variable		Total (%)	Screened in (%) (n=26,281)	Screened out (%) (n=27,567)	Sign.
Gender	<i>Male</i>	24.8	50.1	49.9	0.00**
	<i>Female</i>	75.2	48.4	51.6	
Age	<i>0 to 12 years</i>	61.7	53.3	46.7	0.00**
	<i>13 to 17 years</i>	38.3	41.5	58.5	
Status at intake	<i>Not Active</i>	71.8	45.5	54.5	0.00**
	<i>Active</i>	28.2	57.3	42.7	
Source of the report	<i>Personal, Private professional and Others</i>	24.1	54.9	45.1	0.00**
	<i>Professional in the public system</i>	75.9	46.9	53.1	
Number of days to make decision	<i>Four days or less</i>	57.1	64.9	35.1	0.00**
	<i>More than four days</i>	42.9	27.4	72.6	
Report date	<i>2002-2007</i>	50.4	55.5	44.5	0.00**
	<i>2008-2012</i>	49.6	42.0	58.0	

Table 2 presents the stepwise regression analysis results. Six variables were significantly correlated with the screening decision. The three blocks entered predicted 71.1% of reports that were screened in, and 66.0% of reports that were screened out.

Table 2: Stepwise regression analysis predicting screening decision in CSA cases (retained or not retained for investigation)

Variables	Category	Wald	Significance	Exp(b)	CI
<i>Block 1</i>					
Gender	<i>Male</i>	Constant			
	<i>Female</i>	3.48	0.070	0.96	0.91-1.00
Age at intake	<i>0 to 12 years</i>	Constant			
	<i>13 to 17 years</i>	390.54	0.000**	1.50	1.44-1.56
<i>Block 2</i>					
Status at intake	<i>Not active</i>	Constant			
	<i>Active</i>	644.02	0.000**	0.58	0.56-0.61
Source of the report	<i>Personal, Private professional and Others</i>	Constant			
	<i>Professional in the public system</i>	138.94	0.000**	1.30	1.25-1.36
Number of days to make decision	<i>Four days or less</i>	Constant			
	<i>More than four days</i>	6347.13	0.000**	4.66	4.49-4.84
<i>Block 3</i>					
Date received	<i>2002-2007</i>	Constant			
	<i>2007-2013</i>	593.97	0.000**	1.59	1.53-1.65
*CI = Confidence Interval of 95%					

Results demonstrate that reports were more likely to be screened in when children were reported at a younger age. Other administrative factors influenced the likelihood of a case to be retained for investigation beyond the child's age (*i.e.*, file already active; sources of referral as personal, a private professional, or in the "other" category; and, screening decision made in four days or less). Above and beyond all variables, reports received prior to 2007 were more likely to be screened in. Conversely, reports were more likely to be screened out when: the child reported was an adolescent (13-17 years), the child was not already receiving CPS services, the source was a professional in the public system, the screening decision took longer than four days, and the report was received after 2007. Gender was no longer significantly correlated with the screening decision.



DISCUSSION

CPS intake workers are faced with the difficult task of deciding whether to screen in or out CSA reports based on the limited information that they receive. Workers are asked to balance the child's need for protection and to respect their individual rights by avoiding the provision of intrusive services in often-reluctant family member's lives. This study looked at six variables in order to determine which factors influenced the odds that a report would be screened in or out of CPS agencies in the province of Québec over a 10-year period.

Two characteristics of the child, gender and age at the time of the report, were examined. Gender did not have a statistically significant effect on the screening decision, but age did. Younger children were more likely to be screened in (0-12 years), and adolescents (13-17 years) were more likely to be screened out. These findings conflict with those of Finkelhor and Jones (2004)

that showed that, in US states, preschool-aged children were less likely to be screened in. We believe that awareness towards CSA cases perpetrated on young children have expanded lately in Quebec, namely by the creation of a Child Advocacy Centre specialized in addressing CSA cases that involve victims aged 0 to 12. Heightened credibility to the disclosures made by the young victims may have resulted from the emergence of these specialized services. In regards to CSA cases that involve alleged teenage victims, the revision of the YPA may have limited CPS involvement in sexual violence perpetrated by strangers or acquaintances. These cases are likely to be perceived as not falling under the CPS jurisdiction, especially when parents are taking steps to address the issue.

Three administrative characteristics were examined: the CPS status at the time that the report was received, the source of the report, and the number of days the intake worker took to make a decision. Findings show that, beyond the child's age, a child that was already receiving CPS services was more likely to be screened in if a new report was received. This suggests that the intake worker had access to a greater amount of information, and could therefore be more concerned about the safety of the child.

When the source of the report was personal (e.g., the child himself or a family member), a private professional (e.g., a doctor or a lawyer), or "other" category, the report was more likely to be screened in. This suggests that greater credibility is given to a child that discloses CSA, and they can provide first-hand information on the abuse. Private professionals may positively influence the screening decision due to their credibility or their access to physical evidence. Conversely, cases reported by a professional in the public sector may have been screened out on the basis that these children were already receiving services to address the CSA experiences, consistent with the YPA revision that encourages CPS to connect families to community resources when risk to the child is deemed reasonable.

Longer average screening periods in days increased the odds that the report would be screened out supporting Silva's (2011) study. It appears that during intake, Quebec workers conduct a pre-investigation, and either unsubstantiated the allegations, or link the family to community resources.

Results from this study demonstrate that CSA reports, above and beyond all other factors considered, were more likely to be screened in when they were received prior to 2007, and were more likely to be screened out when they were received after 2007. This corroborates our hypothesis that changes in policy and practices have limited the number of CSA cases that are screened in for CPS in the province of Quebec.

Finally, results from this study demonstrate that CSA reports, above and beyond all other factors considered, were more likely to be screened in when they were received prior to 2007, and were more likely to be screened out when they were received after 2007. This corroborates our hypothesis that changes in policy and practices have limited the number of CSA cases that are screened in for CPS in the province of Quebec. The decline in incidence of CSA in Quebec in the last few years may, indeed, reflect changes in policies and practices regarding screening procedures, making it less likely for cases to be investigated upon initial report to CPS. Future studies are needed to document the outcomes associated with this change. There is no mechanism in place that allows CPS agencies to follow cases that were screened out. A longitudinal study of families for which a report was screened out would provide important information on the outcome of referring to community services, on the outcome of those services, and if those victims are referred back to CPS at a later time.

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ON THE RADAR is a dissemination initiative from the Centre for Research on Children and Families (CRCF) that promotes its members' research work. This research was supported by a gift from the Royal Bank of Canada foundation to support the CRCF's Children's Services Research and Training Program.

For more information:

3506 University, suite 106
 Montréal, QC
 H3A 2A7
 514.398.1727
pamela.weightman@mcgill.ca



RÉSUMÉ EXÉCUTIF

Introduction

L'agression sexuelle des enfants (ASE) a fait l'objet d'études approfondies au cours des années, mettant l'accent sur l'épidémiologie, les facteurs de risques, les séquelles et le traitement de ce problème social (Collin-Vézina, Daigneault, & Hébert, 2013). Bien que la recherche démontre que l'incidence de l'ASE se soit multipliée depuis les années 1970 (Leventhal, 2001; Putnam, 2003), des conclusions américaines (Finkelhor & Jones, 2004) et canadiennes (Trocmé, Fallon, MacLaurin, Sinha, Black, Fast, Felstiner, Hélié, Turcotte, Weightman, Douglas, & Holroyd, 2010) indiquent un déclin notable des cas examinés d'ASE par les Services de protection de l'enfance (SPE) depuis les années 1990. Tandis que les chercheurs ont exploré diverses hypothèses pour expliquer cette diminution (Finkelhor & Jones, 2004), les normes utilisées par les agences pour examiner des cas faisant l'objet d'enquêtes n'ont pas été entièrement étudiées, un écart que cette recherche vise à élucider. Peu d'études se sont consacrées à ce sujet. Tourigny, Jacob, Daigneault, Hébert, et Wright (2009) ont découvert diverses caractéristiques qui ont accru les probabilités de rétention des signalements d'ASE, notamment lorsque la victime est une fille. Inversement, les signalements d'ASE étaient moins susceptibles d'être retenus lorsque la source du signalement était anonyme, dans la catégorie « autre », le père, ou un policier.

La présente étude vise à analyser des variables liées au processus de dépistage des agences de SPE du Québec, afin de vérifier l'hypothèse que des critères plus restrictifs suite à la révision de la Loi en 2007 pourraient, du moins partiellement, expliquer la diminution des cas d'ASE signalés par les SPE au Québec.

Méthodes

Une base de données comportant 53 848 enfants qui ont été en contact avec les 16 agences de SPE du Québec (Canada) entre 2002 et 2013 a servi à déterminer l'influence des différentes caractéristiques sur la décision de rétention des cas d'ASE. Des analyses bivariées ont été utilisées pour examiner l'influence séparée de chaque variable sur la décision de rétention. Deuxièmement, des analyses de régression séquentielle par blocs hiérarchiques ont été exécutées aux fins de prévisions de la décision d'exclure des signalements d'ASE.

Résultats & Discussion

Les résultats ont montré qu'il était moins probable de retenir des signalements lorsque : (1) l'enfant est un adolescent, (2) l'enfant reçoit déjà des services par les SPE, (3) la source est un professionnel du système public, (4) la décision a pris plus que quatre jours, et (5) le signalement a été déposé après 2007. Inversement, il était plus probable que les signalements soient retenus lorsque (1) l'enfant a été signalé à un âge plus jeune, (2) l'enfant recevait déjà des services par les SPE, (3), la source du signalement était personnelle, un professionnel privé ou une catégorie « autre » et (4) la décision de sélection a été prise en quatre jours ou moins, et au-delà de toutes les variables, (5) les signalements ont été déposés avant 2007.

Les enfants plus jeunes étaient plus susceptibles d'être retenus (0-12 ans) et les adolescents (13-17 ans) plus susceptibles d'être non-retenus. Nous croyons que la sensibilisation des cas d'ASE perpétrés sur de jeunes enfants s'est récemment élargie au Québec, octroyant une crédibilité accrue à la divulgation par les jeunes victimes. Quant aux victimes adolescentes, la révision de la L.P.J. pourrait avoir limité l'intervention des SPE dans les cas de violence sexuelle perpétrés par des étrangers ou des partenaires, notamment lorsque des mesures sont prises pour traiter le problème. Au-delà de son âge, un enfant qui recevait déjà des services donnés par les SPE avait plus de chances d'être retenu si un nouveau signalement était déposé, montrant ainsi un meilleur accès à l'information afférente à la sécurité de l'enfant. Lorsque la source du signalement était une source personnelle, un professionnel privé ou une catégorie « autre », le signalement allait plus probablement être retenu. Ceci indique qu'une plus grande crédibilité est accordée à l'enfant qui divulgue une ASE, et des informations plus pertinentes sur l'agression peuvent être fournies. Des professionnels privés peuvent influencer positivement la décision de rétention, en raison de leur crédibilité ou de leur accès à la preuve physique. Inversement, les cas signalés par un professionnel du service public peuvent avoir été exclus, sur le fait que ces enfants reçoivent déjà des services traitant ces expériences d'ASE. Des périodes d'examen plus longues de quelques jours accroissent la probabilité de non-retenir le signalement, suggérant ainsi une enquête préalable.

Finalement, au-delà de tous les facteurs en considération, les signalements d'ASE déposés avant 2007 avaient plus de chances d'être retenus, et plus de risques d'être non-retenus s'ils ont été reçus après 2007, ce qui corrobore notre hypothèse que les changements de procédures et de pratiques ont limité le nombre de cas d'ASE évalués dans le cadre des SPE, expliquant en partie la récente diminution de l'incidence d'ASE.