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Child Abuse in Jordan: A Cross-Sectional Study

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Abstract

Child abuse is a serious health problem and affects both the development and academic achievements of abused children. The main objectives of the present study were to study the prevalence of child abuse and its related factors. A cross-sectional study was conducted to collect data from study participants. The study sample included 333 participants. The study questionnaire was composed of two parts, demographic variables, and child abuse-related variables. A convenient sampling technique was followed to collect data from participants through distributed online questionnaires. The data was analyzed using SPSS version 21. Results of the study showed that the prevalence of child abuse was 13.5%. the most common age of child abuse was in the range of 2-9 years. Physical violence was the most common single type of abuse. Slapping was the most common single method of abuse. The school was the most common place in which abuse was likely to occur. Depression and suicide were frequently encountered by abused children. Medical attention was required by one-third of participants. Abuse was witnessed in about 58% of events. Reporting of abuse cases was mentioned in about 4% of abuse events. Taken together, child abuse is a serious health problem and efforts should be input to reduce its prevalence and associated factors.

Keywords: *Child abuse, physical abuse, psychological abuse, slapping, school*

Introduction

The widespread problem of child abuse has serious consequences for public health. More and more people throughout the world are becoming aware of it (Maul et al.,2019). Experts, time, and ethnic groups all have different conceptions of what constitutes child abuse (Raman and Hodes, 2012). Physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse (or psychological abuse), and neglect are the four main categories under which the World Health Organization (WHO) classifies child abuse (WHO, 2006).

Most of the research that has been done on child abuse has been done in Western countries (Al Khatib, 2022). Research carried out in these nations provides important insights into a multitude of aspects related to child abuse, including the prevalence of various types, risk factors, repercussions, identification and reporting techniques, preventive measures, and the

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efficacy of different intervention approaches (Carr et al., 2018; van der Put et al., 2018). The research literature shows that child abuse is a common and complicated problem that affects many children worldwide (Barth et al., 2013). The mistreatment of children bears a heavy cost and results in dire and long-lasting effects (Gilbert et al., 2009; Fang et al., 2012). Countries and regions fluctuate greatly in the frequency of different types of child maltreatment (Akmatov, 2011; Stoltenborgh et al., 2015). The most common form of maltreatment that has been the subject of in-depth research globally is sexual abuse (Moody et al., 2018). According to statistics, women are more likely than men to be sexually abused (Barth et al., 2013). Studies indicate that boys are more likely than girls to experience physical abuse, as well as emotional abuse or neglect (Titus et al., 2003; Asscher et al., 2015). Most child abuse cases go unreported, unrecognized, or unregistered (Crews and Crews, 2010; Moody et al., 2018).

Non-Western countries have lately published studies on child abuse (Raman and Hodes, 2012; Maul et al., 2019). In Jordan and other Arab nations, there is still a dearth of documentation regarding child abuse. As a result, it is difficult to find evidence-based data to support national initiatives on the reporting and intervention of child abuse (Al-Mahroos, 2007; Alzoubi et al., 2018).

Jordan, a country in Western Asia and the Middle East, has made great strides in defending the rights of children, defined by law as any individual under the age of eighteen. The child-friendly legislative framework had been reinforced. Initiatives to improve the health sector's capacity to address and prevent violence against children have been put in place by UNICEF in cooperation with the Jordanian Ministry of Health and other significant players. Additionally, UNICEF has worked to improve the ability of social workers and school counselors to offer psychological support to families and children who have been abused (Chapuis, 2010). Over the last two decades, Jordan has taken a number of steps to protect children from abuse and has allocated funds to child safety-related projects. In 1991, Jordan formally ratified and put into effect the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. In order to promote child safety and protection and to advance effective child rearing techniques, the Jordan River Foundation launched the Jordan River Child Safety Programme in 1997 (Jordan River Foundation, 2017). In 1997, the Public Security Directorate established the Family Protection Department. In an effort to protect families from abuse, a national team has been actively working since 2000 to improve laws, regulations, and programs related to child protection services (UNICEF, 2018). In 2002, the National Council for Family Affairs (NCFA) was founded. Parenting education initiatives for disadvantaged and marginalized children as well as continuous national campaigns to lessen peer-to-peer violence in schools have been implemented (UNESCO, 2010). More accurately, the Ministry of Education has taken the initiative to start pertinent programs in collaboration with UNICEF. Religious leaders and media professionals have participated in national campaigns against child abuse. Moreover, nationwide campaigns have been launched to support the adoption of positive disciplinary techniques rather than punitive ones in the fields of parenting and education (Malkawi, 2016).

Shattnawi et al., (2022) conducted a study to investigate the correlation between Jordanian secondary school students' self-esteem and the frequency of negative childhood experiences. The study sample included 559 secondary school students (7-11 years). The results showed that among the kids who participated in the survey, emotional abuse was the most reported type of abuse (59.6%). Then came emotional neglect (26.3%), physical abuse (31.7%), and physical neglect (12.7%).

Study Objectives: the main objectives of the present study were to explore the prevalence of

child abuse in Jordan and to study child abuse-related factors.

Methods and Subjects

Study Design

A cross-sectional study design was conducted to collect data from participants.

Study Sample

A total of 333 participants filled out the questionnaire.

Study Questionnaire

The study questionnaire was constructed for this study. It included demographic variables such as age and gender, and childhood diseases. The second part of the questionnaire was made to assess childhood abuse. Several variables were included: abuse age, abuse types, abuse methods, abuse place, depression, suicide, medical attention, degree of medical attention, abuse witnessed, and abuse report.

Sampling Technique

A convenient sampling technique was followed to collect data from the participants who filled out the questionnaires online through Google Forms.

Statistical Treatment

The data were analyzed using SPSS version 21. Frequency and percentage were used to describe categorical variables, whereas mean and standard deviation were used to describe continuous variables.

Results

Table (1) offers a comprehensive overview of various demographic and contextual variables within a specified sample. The mean age of the participants is 25.77 ± 8.35 years. The gender distribution reveals that 72.1% of the participants identify as males. Most participants (91.3%) were Jordanians, with smaller proportions hailing from Palestinian (5.1%), Syrian (2.1%), Egyptian (0.9%), and other nationalities (0.6%). A significant proportion of participants (91.9%) reside in urban areas, contrasting with the 8.1% residing in rural settings. The average number of family members is 7 ± 2 . Educational attainment among parents is diverse, with 42.35% having secondary or lower education, 6.6% holding diplomas, 37.84% achieving bachelor's degrees, and 13.21% being high school graduates, offering a detailed breakdown of parental education levels. Approximately 11.7% of participants reported their mothers being exposed to violence, while 88.3% indicated no such exposure. The data indicated that 6.9% of participants had a family member who had been imprisoned, while 93.1% did not. A minority of participants (5.7%) reported experiencing mental illness, while the majority (94.3%) did not. Family income varied, with 12.6% classified as low income, 69.7% as middle income, 4.8% as high income, and 12.9% missing income information. Thirteen and a half percent of participants reported a history of childhood diseases, while 86.5% did not.

Table 1: General Characteristics of Study Participants.

Variable	Description
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Age (M±SD) years	25.77±8.35	
Gender (N, %):		
• Male	240 (72.1%)	93 (27.9%)
• Female		
Nationality (N, %):		
• Jordanian	304 (91.3%)	17 (5.1%)
• Palestinian	7 (2.1%)	3 (0.9%)
• Syrian	2 (0.6%)	
• Egyptian		
• Others		
Residency area (N, %):		
• Urban	306 (91.9%)	27 (8.1%)
• Rural		
Family members (M±SD)	7±2	
Parent's education (N, %):		
• Secondary or less	141 (42.35%)	22 (6.6%)
• Diploma	126 (37.84%)	44 (13.21%)
• Bachelor		
• High graduates		
Mother violence exposure (N, %):		
• Yes	39 (11.7%)	294 (88.3%)
• No		
Family member imprisoned (N, %):		
• Yes	23 (6.9%)	310 (93.1%)
• No		
Mental illness (N, %):		
• Yes	19 (5.7%)	314 (94.3%)
• No		
Family income (N, %):		
• Low income	42 (12.6%)	232 (69.7%)
• Middle income	16 (4.8%)	43 (12.9%)
• High income		
• Missing		
Childhood diseases (N, %):		
• Yes	45 (13.5%)	288 (86.5%)
• No		

Frequency and Distribution of Variables of Child Abuse

The data presented in Table (2) detailed various facets of child abuse. The table discerns the age distribution of individuals who have experienced abuse. Notably, a substantial proportion of abuse incidents occurred during early childhood, with 0.6% of cases reported for those ≤1 year, 5.7% for the age group 2-9 years, 5.4% for 10-13 years, and 1.8% for 14-18 years. A significant majority, accounting for 86.5%, presents missing data in this category. Examining the nature of abuse, the cases were classified into psychological, physical, or a combination of both. Only 0.3% reported psychological abuse, 3.6% experienced physical abuse, 9.6% encountered a combination of both, and 86.5% had missing data. The data revealed that 4.5% involved slapping, 0.3% kicking, 2.1% hitting with a tool, 1.2% using other methods, and 5.4% reported a combination of methods. However, the majority, constituting 86.5%, has missing information. The locations where abuse transpired are categorized as school, home, public settings, other places, or a combination. Instances of abuse occurred in schools for 5.4%, homes for 3.9%, public settings for 1.2%, other locations for 1.8%, and a combination of settings for 1.2%. The majority, 86.5%, has missing data in this regard. The emotional impact of abuse is explored through the presence or absence of depression. Among the victims, 9.6% reported experiencing depression, 3.9% did not, and 86.5% have missing data in this category. The data addressed the suicidal tendencies among individuals who had undergone abuse. Approximately 6.9% of victims reported suicidal thoughts, 6.6% did not, and 86.5% have missing information on this aspect. It is investigated whether individuals sought medical attention following instances of abuse. The data indicates that 4.5% sought medical attention, 9%

did not, and 86.5% have missing data regarding medical attention. For those seeking medical care, the degree of attention was categorized as minor first aid, outpatient treatment, hospitalization, or a combination. Minor first aid was administered in 3.6% of cases, outpatient treatment in 6%, hospitalization in 2.1%, a combination of these in 1.8%, and 86.5% have missing data. The presence or absence of witnesses during instances of abuse was explored. Approximately 7.8% of cases had witnesses, 5.7% did not, and 86.5% had missing data regarding the presence of witnesses. The crucial aspect of reporting abuse is examined. A mere 0.6% of victims reported the abuse, 12.9% did not, and 86.5% had missing data on whether the incidents were reported.

Table 2: Frequency and Distribution of Variables of Child Abuse.

Variables of child abuse	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Abuse age:		
• ≤1 year		
• 2-9 years	2 19 18 6 288	0.6% 5.7% 5.4% 1.8%
• 10-13 years		86.5%
• 14-18 years		
• Missing		
Abuse types:		
• Psychological		
• Physical	1 12 32 288	0.3% 3.6% 9.6% 86.5%
• Combined		
• Missing		
Abuse methods:		
• Slapping		
• Kicking		
• Hitting with a tool	15 1 7 4 18 288	4.5% 0.3% 2.1% 1.2%
• Others		5.4% 86.5%
• Combined		
• Missing		
Abuse place:		
• School		
• Home		
• Public setting	18 13 4 6 4 288	5.4% 3.9% 1.2% 1.8%
• Others		1.2% 86.5%
• Combined		
• Missing		
Depression:		
• Yes	32 13 288	9.6% 3.9% 86.5%
• No		
• Missing		
Suicide:		
• Yes		
• No	23 22 288	6.9% 6.6% 86.5%
• Missing		
Medical attention:		
• Yes	15 30 288	4.5% 9% 86.5%
• No		
• Missing		
Degree of medical attention:		
• Minor first aid		
• Outpatient treatment	12 20 7 6 288	3.6% 6% 2.1% 1.8%
• Hospitalization		86.5%
• Combined		
• Missing		
Abuse witness:		
• Yes	26 19 288	7.8% 5.7% 86.5%
• No		
• Missing		
Abuse report:		
• Yes	2 43 288	0.6% 12.9% 86.5%
• No		
• Missing		

Discussion

The present study showed that the prevalence of child abuse was 13.5%. Varying degrees of child abuse were reported in Jordan. In their study, Shattnawi et al. (2022) reported that emotional abuse was the most reported type of abuse (59.6%). Then came emotional neglect (26.3%), physical abuse (31.7%), and physical neglect (12.7%).

The most frequently associated age with child abuse was in the range of 2-9 years and 10-13 years. However, the findings of the present study agreed with other studies in which the focus was made on 7-11 years (Shattnawi et al., 2022).

The most frequent type of abuse in our study was the combined form (71.11%) which included both psychological (2.2%) and physical violence (26.66%), and others. The results of this study showed different patterns of abuse because psychological abuse in this study was the least, whereas in other studies, psychological abuse was the most prevalent form (Shattnawi et al., 2022; Horino et al., 2023). This variation can be attributed to the perception of abuse in participants or their parents.

The most prevalent method of abuse was slapping and combined forms. It is worth mentioning that slapping is one of the acceptable forms of student punishment on social norms (Fayez et al., 2014).

The most common place in which child abuse is likely to occur is school. This is plausible because children at this stage are in school (Fayez et al., 2014; Shattnawi et al., 2022; Horino et al., 2023).

Most children with abuse reported experiencing depression. This is in line with other studies that reported high levels of depression among abused children. A recent study showed that the level of depression among persons with mental health reached a peak of approximately 74% (AlHamawi et al., 2023).

The results of the present study showed that slightly more than half of abused children had experienced suicide as ideas or attempts. However, the link between abuse and suicide among children was reported (Braquehais et al., 2010).

About one-third of abuse cases needed medical attention and this may be due to physical abuse experienced by abused children. Previous literature reported such findings in our study (Bahrami et al., 2021).

The findings of this study showed that abuse was witnessed in about 58% of cases. This may be due to the occurrence of abuse in educational settings such as school. This finding, however, is in line with other studies (Melkman, 2024).

The results showed that abuse was reported in 4.44% of cases. Reporting cases of abuse is an important concern that may work to reduce the abuse (Steele et al., 2024).

Conclusion

Child abuse is a real problem that impacts children's safety and development. The prevalence of child abuse in this study was 13.5%. Physical abuse by physical violence was prevalent. There must be efforts to be made to reduce child abuse.

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