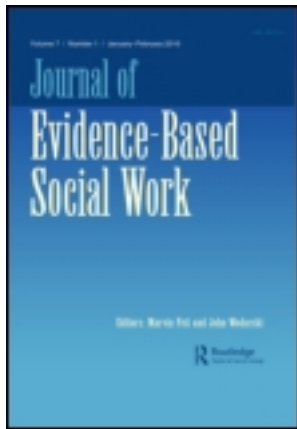


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Emily M. Douglas^a & Patricia J. Serino^a

^a School of Social Work, Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts, USA

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The Extent of Evidence-Based Information about Child Maltreatment Fatalities in Social Science Textbooks

Emily M. Douglas and Patricia J. Serino

School of Social Work, Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts, USA

Previous research has established that child welfare workers lack important information about child maltreatment fatalities and risk factors leading to death. Further, training has not been associated with improvements in knowledge. The authors assessed the presence of evidence-based information about child maltreatment fatalities and risk factors for death in 24 social science textbooks about child abuse and neglect or child welfare. The results indicate that basic information, such as definitions and incidence rates of child maltreatment fatalities are routinely included in social science textbooks, but information about child, parent, and household risk factors are not, and that inaccurate information is often included. Implications of the findings are discussed.

Keywords: Child maltreatment fatalities, social science textbooks, training social scientists

Child welfare researchers and practitioners have increasingly paid attention to child maltreatment fatalities (CMFs). The field's knowledge of risk factors (Chance & Scannapieco, 2002; Graham, Stepura, Baumann, & Kern, 2010; McClain, Sacks, Froehlke, & Ewigman, 1993; Stiffman, Schnitzer, Adam, Kruse, & Ewigman, 2002) and the responses to CMFs that have been implemented within the field have drastically improved (Douglas, 2005; Durfee, Parra, & Alexander, 2009; Durfee & Durfee, 1995; Webster, Schnitzer, Jenny, Ewigman, & Alario, 2003). Recent research shows a lack of knowledge about risk factors by child welfare professionals even in the face of training about CMFs (Douglas, 2012a). This article considers another area where future and current child welfare workers may receive information about CMFs: social science textbooks. We consider the extent to which social science textbooks on child maltreatment address fatalities and the precision of the information that they cover.

CMFs

In 2010, 1,537 children died from maltreatment in the United States (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2011). CMFs describe a range of causes of death that include active (e.g., assault/shaking) and passive behaviors (e.g., neglect/lack of supervision) that result in or contribute to a child's death (United States Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect, 1995). In 2010, 40.8% of the identified CMF victims died from a combination of abuse and neglect, 34.1% from neglect, and 22.9% from physical abuse; the cause of death for the rest was due to less prevalent types of maltreatment such as sexual abuse (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2011).

Age is the most consistent risk factor for CMF victimization. Younger children, especially infants, are at an elevated risk for dying from maltreatment (Anderson, Ambrosino, Valentine, & Lauderdale, 1983; Kunz & Bahr, 1996). Perpetrators of CMFs are usually caregivers, and most often mothers (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2010)—presumably because mothers generally do more caregiving than fathers (Manlove & Vernon-Feagans, 2002; Wood & Repetti, 2004). Individuals who kill children or who are responsible for a child's death are usually younger. (Herman-Giddens, Smith, Mittal, Carlson, & Butts, 2003; Kunz & Bahr, 1996). They are also likely to have developmentally inappropriate expectations of their children (Korbin, 1987) or to see their children as "difficult" (Chance & Scannapieco, 2002; Fein, 1979). Children are more likely to die in households that have non-family members living with them (Stiffman et al., 2002) and in families that are especially mobile (Anderson et al., 1983).

Child Welfare Professionals and Maltreatment Fatalities

The high rate of CMFs have been blamed on having young, inexperienced, and untrained workers (Gelles, 2003; Wexler, 2008), but recent research shows that, on average, child welfare workers who experience the death of a client child are in their mid-30s, have worked in child welfare for six years, and are college-educated in social work or another social science (Douglas, 2012b). Nevertheless, child welfare professionals have significant gaps in their levels of knowledge about risk factors for CMFs. For example, workers erroneously believe that children are more likely to die from physical abuse and that mothers are not most often responsible for their children's deaths. Further, receipt of training apparently makes no difference in workers' level of knowledge (Douglas, 2012a). This brings into question the content being delivered to child welfare workers about fatalities and the source of the information that they receive. Research on a related topic, corporal punishment of children, has demonstrated that authors of child development textbooks fail to include information in most of their books about the harmful effects of spanking children (Douglas & Straus, 2008), even though this has been well-documented in the literature (Gershoff, 2002; Straus, 2001). A similar lack of information about maltreatment fatalities may be present in textbooks addressing abuse and neglect or the child welfare profession.

Current Study

Our purpose was to assess the presence of evidence-based information about CMFs in social science textbooks which address child abuse and neglect or the child welfare system. The research questions addressed were: To what extent do textbooks that address child abuse and neglect contain evidence-based information about maltreatment fatalities? Specifically, what is the nature of this information: (1) definitions, (2) rate of death, (3) causes of death, and (4) risk factors for parent, child, and households/situations? We answered these questions through a thorough a multi-disciplinary, cross-sectional review of social science textbooks.

METHOD

Procedures

Content from social science textbooks was obtained through the online search engine, Google Books, which stores scanned copies of millions of books from across the globe. Using this search engine, we searched for books with the following key words: (1) child welfare, (2) child maltreatment, (3) child abuse, and (4) child death. Within each electronic text, we searched for the terms (1) death, and (2) fatality. Textbooks that were identified to contain information regarding

TABLE 1
Discipline of Textbooks Reviewed

<i>Discipline</i>	<i>N</i>
Criminal justice	5
Family studies	7
Mental health	1
Pediatrics	3
Psychology	2
Social work	6

CMFs were reviewed and checked for content specific to the research questions for this project: (1) definitions, (2) rates, and (3) risk factors. We collected information for each of these variables in an Excel sheet which we later uploaded into SPSS.

Data Collection/Instruments

We collected the following identifying information from 24 social science textbooks: (1) authors, (2) title, (3) year published, and (4) discipline. Then, as previously noted, we assessed the CMF content: definition present, rate of CMF occurrence, number of children who die per year, and if neglect or abuse was given as the primary cause of CMFs. We also recorded the inclusion of several risk factors: (1) child characteristics—age, gender, race, and being seen as a difficult child; (2) parental characteristics—age, gender, mental health concern, employment status, and parent having inappropriate age expectations of child; and (3) household/situational characteristics—recently experienced a major life event, high degree of family mobility, having non-family members living in the household, and family unemployment.

RESULTS

Table 1 displays the disciplines of the 24 textbooks that were included in this analysis: criminal justice, family studies, mental health, pediatrics, psychology, and social work. A complete list of the textbooks that we reviewed is in the Appendix. Table 2 displays the extent to which definitions and information concerning prevalence of CMFs was present in the textbooks. Most often, textbooks provided a definition of CMF ($n = 18$), who is responsible for killing children ($n = 16$), and if neglect was given as a more frequent cause than abuse for CMFs ($n = 7$). We also recorded content about the number of children who die each year ($n = 10$) and the rate of CMFs ($n = 9$).

TABLE 2
Child Maltreatment Fatality (CMF) Definitions and Rates in Textbooks

<i>Area of Content</i>	<i>N</i>
Number of children who die from CMF each year	10
Rate of children who die from CMF each year	9
A definition of CMF	18
Who kills/is responsible for children's deaths each year	16
Neglect causes CMFs more frequently than abuse	7

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TABLE 3
Prevalence of Evidence-Based Information about Risk Factors in Textbooks

<i>Risk Factor</i>	<i>N</i>
<i>Child Risk Factors</i>	
Any child risk factor content	16
Age—Younger more at risk	14
Gender—Boys more likely to die	3
Race—African Americans over-represented	5
Seen as a difficult child	10
<i>Parent Risk Factors</i>	
Any parent risk factor content	16
Age—Parents are younger	7
Gender—Mothers more likely	8
Mental health concern	10
Unemployed	8
Parent has inappropriate age expectations of child	5
<i>Household/Family Risk Factors</i>	
Any household/family risk factor content	14
Recently experienced major life event	3
High degree of family mobility	5
Non-family members living in household	5
Family unemployment	8

Table 3 displays the extent to which information about child, parent, and household risk factor was present in the textbooks. Child characteristics connected with fatality occurrences were mentioned in 15 of the 24 books. Pertaining to child risk factors, age was mentioned most often ($n = 14$); gender was mentioned least often ($n = 3$). African American over-representation was included in 5 texts, and being seen as a “difficult child” was present in 10. Some textbooks provided information that has not been examined by the literature or about which there is conflicting evidence, examples were: disabled and premature children being more at risk.

Parental risk factors for CMF were present in 16 of the textbooks. Parental mental health was noted in 10 of the texts. The higher prevalence of maternal responsibility for CMF and parental unemployment were noted in 8 texts. Parent having inappropriate age expectations of a child prior to the death was mentioned the least often, $n = 5$. Some textbooks provided information that has not been examined by the literature or about which there is conflicting evidence: parental health problems, exhaustion, frustration, isolation, socioeconomic status, substance abuse, domestic violence, and parent having history of abuse.

Household, or family, risk factors were recorded in 14 of the textbooks. Family unemployment was reported most often, $n = 8$. Having a high degree of family mobility and having non-family members living in the household were mentioned in 5 books. CMF households having recent experience with a major life event was included least frequently, in 3 of the 24 books. Some textbooks provided information that has not been examined by the literature or about which there is conflicting evidence: financial problems/socioeconomic status, domestic violence, and lack of involvement from extended family.

DISCUSSION

Our purpose in this study was to assess the extent of evidence-based information about CMFs in social science textbooks about child abuse and neglect or child welfare. The results indicate that

the majority of the textbooks that we reviewed (70%–75%, $n = 17$ or 18) contained information concerning a definition of CMF, the ways that children die, and who is responsible for children's deaths. There is considerably less information about incidence rates, as well as child, parent, and household/family risk factors in the books that we reviewed. Providing students with information about risk factors for fatalities is an important first step in preparing future human and social science providers to be able to prevent CMFs.

The textbooks that we reviewed varied widely in their inclusion of material concerning causes of death and child, parent, and family/household risk factors. For example, of the 24 books, only 7 stated that children were more likely to die from neglect than abuse and 1 erroneously stated that children were more likely to die from abuse than neglect. This is potentially problematic because the media tends to cover abuse-related deaths more frequently than deaths associated with neglect (e.g., Adams, 2001). This may explain why previous research has found that child welfare workers think that children die more often from abuse than from neglect (Douglas, 2012a).

The most frequently cited risk for children was age, but even then, only 14 of the 24 books provided this information. Even less frequently cited, this time by 10 books, was the fact that being described as a "difficult child" increases the risk for CMF victimization. The remaining child risk factors were only mentioned by a handful of books. Some books mentioned factors that place a child at risk for non-fatal maltreatment, but for which there is insufficient evidence concerning fatal maltreatment. For example, several textbooks mentioned that if children are disabled or premature they are more at risk for a fatality. Research has documented that if a child is described as "difficult," that he or she is more at risk for fatality (Chance, 2003; Graham et al., 2010), but we know of no research which shows that children who are disabled or premature are more likely to become victims of CMFs.

The inclusion of parental risk factors was even lower than child risk factors. Parental mental health concerns were mentioned by 10 textbooks. The remaining parental risk factors, including that mothers are most often responsible for their children's deaths, was mentioned in only 5–8 books. A number of books also provided information about risk factors that have been confirmed by single research studies, for which there is conflicting information, or which have not been confirmed by research. Two textbooks cited domestic violence as a risk factor for perpetrating CMF. We know of only one study which has examined this factor, which confirmed that families with domestic violence were more likely to suffer a CMF (Yampolskaya, Greenbaum, & Berson, 2009). Four textbooks noted parental socioeconomic status as a risk factor for perpetrating CMFs. We are aware of conflicting research about this risk factor, with one study showing that children in households where their mother did not have a high school diploma were more at risk (Stiffman et al., 2002), while another found that mothers with a high school diploma and higher income levels were more at risk (Chance & Scannapieco, 2002). Similarly, 3 textbooks cited parental social isolation as a risk factor for CMF. We only know of one study which has examined social isolation in a comparative study of fatal versus non-fatal child maltreatment and those researchers found that parental social isolation did not place a child at higher risk for CMF (Chance & Scannapieco, 2002). Other textbooks made claims about risk factors or characteristics of parents in families where children became CMF victims, including substance abuse and parent having history of abuse themselves. These are factors that place a child at-risk for maltreatment in general, but we know of no research which confirms that children are at a higher risk for fatal maltreatment when these factors are present in their parents' lives.

With regard to family/household risk factors, family unemployment was cited most often, by 8 books. The remaining risk factors, including family mobility and experiencing a major life event, were mentioned in only 3–5 books. We did not find misinformation stated about household risk factors that have not been previously mentioned in this article.

Limitations

This study is not without limitations. First, using Google Books as the search engine for this study had pros and cons; it allowed for a wide search of social science books but the website needed to be accessed multiple times in order to access the full text content. Google Books randomly blocks access to a select number of pages, which changes daily or with each search. In order to read the full CMF content in many books, we needed to gain access to the book multiple times. Second, we did not read all of these books, only conducted keyword searches, so it is possible that we may have missed information about CMFs that are present in the books.

CONCLUSION

This review and analysis of CMF content in social science textbooks shows that authors of books on child abuse and neglect or child welfare, do not include substantive information about CMFs or the risk factors that increase the likelihood that children will die and sometimes include information that is false, stands as speculation, or not fully confirmed by research. It is true that a CMF is a very unlikely outcome of a child abuse or neglect case, but it is also true that it is the worst outcome of maltreatment. Further, despite the resources that we have poured into this problem, we have made no progress in reducing CMFs (Finkelhor, Jones, & Shattuck, 2010), while other forms of maltreatment have declined (Jones & Finkelhor, 2003; Jones, Finkelhor, & Halter, 2006; Jones, Finkelhor, & Kopiec, 2001). Finally, the U.S. Congress has recently held hearings about the need to better address CMFs (*Child deaths from maltreatments*, 2011), which indicates a growing national priority around this issue. As we consider new ways to help prevent CMFs and to better prepare future human and social service providers who will work with abusive and neglectful families, we recommend that authors of social science textbooks that address child abuse and neglect content include more information and more accurate information about the risk factors that increase the likelihood of CMFs. Without accurate information, human and social service providers may be ill-equipped to recognize risk when they see it, which places children at further risk for fatality.

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APPENDIX: BOOKS INCLUDED IN ANALYSIS AND REVIEW

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