



Caseworker re-reports of maltreatment are under-represented

NSCAW Analysis Alert #2

Summary

Reports of subsequent maltreatment, as provided by the services caseworkers in the NSCAW (both General and Restricted Releases), are substantially under-represented in the caseworker interview data. As a result, estimates of the number of re-reports or the proportion of children who were re-reported are severely biased and should not be included in statistical analyses. It is appropriate, however, to use the caseworker's re-report data to classify children on the basis of re-report and compare differences between children who were re-reported and those who were not.

Background

NSCAW researchers at RTI International have conducted an evaluation of caseworker-provided data about CPS re-reports. Re-reports are those CPS investigations involving the child that occurred after the investigation that led to the child's inclusion into the NSCAW. The researchers have found that re-reports are substantially under-represented in the caseworker interview data. Based on a comparison of caseworker data and agency administrative files of re-reports, approximately 60% of all re-reports are missing from the caseworker interview data.

Two sources account for the missing re-report data. Approximately 45% can be attributed to the NSCAW method for identifying the need for a caseworker interview (See Sections 4.5.3 and 4.8.3 of the NSCAW Data File User's Manual, the DFUM, for more information on how caseworker interviews were triggered). The other 55% is primarily due to a failure of the caseworker interview to capture the re-report due to interviewer error, respondent caseworker error, errors in the case files consulted during the interview, or other interview related reasons.

The missing data cause estimates of the proportion of re-reported children to be severely biased. Negative biases exist for virtually every subgroup considered, including estimates at the state level. This bias is due to the lack of symmetry in the errors. There are more false negative errors in the data file than false positive errors, resulting in a net underestimation of the proportion of children who had at least one re-report. Analyses that involve the number of re-reports as either a dependent variable or independent variable will be severely biased.

Fortunately, analyses that dichotomize children on the basis of re-reporting are not subject to bias. For the child characteristics considered in our preliminary assessment, no significant differences were found between children who were correctly classified as having been re-reported and those who were incorrectly classified. These findings suggest that use of the

caseworker's re-report data as a basis for characterizing children who were re-reported should not lead to important biases or false inferences.

The RTI investigation was limited for several reasons. First, the administrative data acquired from the agencies and that were treated as the gold standard for the error analyses, may themselves be subject to error. If re-reports are also missing from the agency files, the estimates of the caseworker false negative error rates are understated. However, this would not change the conclusions of the analysis. Secondly, several important agencies did not respond to the request for administrative data. Consequently, the data used in the error analyses only represent 60% of the NSCAW population. This Alert will be updated if further data are collected from the nonresponding agencies.

Recommendation

The caseworker data can be used to compare differences between children who were re-reported for maltreatment and those who were not, but it cannot be used to estimate the number of re-reports or the proportion of children who were re-reported.

Please email questions to NDACANsupport@cornell.edu.