

A RAND NOTE

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REPORT DECISION-MAKING PATTERNS AMONG MANDATED CHILD ABUSE REPORTERS

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Abstract—The goal of this investigation was to examine whether reporting decisions could be described by a coherent process that was consistent across incidents of suspected abuse. Using case vignettes imbedded in a national mail survey of mandated reporters, we examined the relationship between a series of judgments about the cases described in the vignettes and reporting intentions. These judgments included seriousness of the incident; whether the incident should be labeled “abuse” or “neglect”; whether the law would require a report; and whether the child and, separately, the rest of the family would benefit from a report. These five abuse-relevant judgments were strongly related to each other and together accounted for a substantial amount of the variance in reporting intentions. The law’s demands most closely related to reporting intentions; benefits of reports were least closely related. Varimax rotation of a factor analysis revealed two factors: The first included seriousness, the abuse label, and the law’s requirements, along with reporting intentions. The two benefit judgments loaded on the second factor. There were small differences in reporting judgments and patterns as a function of type of abuse. The implications of these findings for mandated reporter behavior are discussed.

Key Words—Reporting, Decision-making/decision-making process, Intentions to report, Mandated reporters.

INTRODUCTION

COMPLIANCE WITH THE CHILD ABUSE REPORTING LAWS that exist in every state is far from complete (e.g., Finkelhor, Gomes-Schwartz, & Horowitz, 1984; James, Womack, & Stauss, 1978; Morris, Johnson, & Clasen, 1985; Saulsbury & Campbell, 1985). The limited guidance that these laws provide concerning the factors that make an incident reportable (e.g., Giovannoni & Becerra, 1979; Herzberger & Tennen, 1988; Meriwether, 1986) contribute to at least some noncompliance with the reporting mandate. Vague, nonbehavioral definitions of what constitutes abuse and neglect under the law leave reporters considerable leeway in deciding whether abuse or neglect has occurred, and if so, whether or not it is reportable. Given uneven compliance and limited guidance, it is critical to understand how mandated reporters decide whether or not to report cases of suspected maltreatment.

While a number of studies have identified specific case characteristics that may be associated with reporting (e.g., Giovannoni & Becerra, 1979; Hampton & Newberger, 1985; Morris et al., 1985), our goal in this investigation was to establish whether a coherent process could be identified that characterized the report decision-making process across cases and reporters. Identification of such a process would be extremely useful in furthering our understanding of

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reporting behavior. Such a process might also have relevance to the design and implementation of screening models in child protective services (CPS) agencies. We hypothesized that any coherent decision-making process would be based in a set of abuse-relevant judgments that might be applied by potential reporters across specific cases. Using data from a national survey of professionals mandated to report child abuse and neglect, we identified five such abuse-relevant judgments and estimated their importance in reporting decisions.

METHODS

This paper presents data from a national survey of 1,196 mandated reporters about their child abuse reporting behavior. Family/general practitioners, pediatricians, child psychiatrists, clinical psychologists, social workers, public school principals, and child care providers in 15 nationally representative states responded to a mail survey in the spring of 1987. The response rate was 59%.

At the very beginning of the survey form, before respondents described their own reporting behavior and something about the nature of their professional work, each respondent read and responded to five vignettes, each of which very briefly described a case of possible maltreatment. The vignettes were preceded by a statement acknowledging that the level of information was obviously limited, and that in real life respondents would no doubt attempt to collect additional information before making a reporting decision, but that we would appreciate their making a best decision on the basis of the information provided.

After each vignette, respondents answered six questions about the incident described. (See Figure 1 for the six questions.) The first five questions asked respondents to make abuse-relevant judgments about (1) the seriousness of the incident; (2) whether the incident should be labeled "abuse" or "neglect" (as appropriate); (3) whether the law would require a report in this instance; and (4) whether the child; and (5) separately, the rest of the family would benefit from a report. The sixth item asked respondents to indicate how likely they would be to report the incident if they encountered it.

Through extensive, open-ended pretesting, we had concluded that the first five questions captured issues that professionals often considered in deciding whether or not to report suspected maltreatment. The sixth question was the ultimate outcome variable, likelihood of reporting the case described. This question measures the respondent's behavioral intention to report. While behavioral intentions are obviously not the same as actual behavior, they have been found to be significant predictors of actual behavior in a number of studies across a broad range of behaviors (e.g., Ajzen & Fishbein, 1988; Sheppard, Hartwick, & Warshaw, 1988).

Each respondent received five vignettes selected from a set of 12 core vignettes that we devised. These core vignettes included four cases of possible neglect, three of physical abuse, and five of sexual abuse. (See Figure 2 for one version of each of the 12 core vignettes.)

To analyze the effects of a range of case characteristics (e.g., severity, history of previous abuse, family socioeconomic status), we varied each core vignette on several factors, each with two or more levels. The number of factors that were varied within each core vignette ranged from two to five. (See Table 1 for presentation of these factors and their levels by core vignette.)

The objectives of the vignette design required that each respondent receive a unique set of vignettes. The computer programs we designed for assigning core vignettes and variations achieved the following four goals:

- Each core vignette was received only by members of professions for which the situation was

1. Based on the information you have been provided, how serious is this incident?

Extremely serious.....	1
Very serious.....	2
Somewhat serious.....	3
Not very serious.....	4
Not at all serious.....	5

2. In your own professional judgement, does the incident described above constitute neglect (abuse)?

Definitely yes.....	1
Probably yes.....	2
Probably no.....	3
Definitely no.....	4

3. In your view, would you be required by law to report this incident?

Definitely required to report.....	1
Probably required to report.....	2
Probably not required to report....	3
Definitely not required to report..	4

4. All things considered, what overall impact would a child abuse report be likely to have on this child?

Highly positive impact.....	1
Somewhat positive impact.....	2
Somewhat negative impact.....	3
Highly negative impact.....	4

5. All things considered, what overall impact would a child abuse report be likely to have on the rest of this family?

Highly positive impact.....	1
Somewhat positive impact.....	2
Somewhat negative impact.....	3
Highly negative impact.....	4

6. How likely would you be to report this case?

Almost certainly would report.....	1
Very likely to report.....	2
Somewhat likely to report.....	3
Not very likely to report.....	4
Almost certainly would not report..	5

Figure 1. Vignette questions and response options.

appropriate (right side of Table 1). Moreover, when a vignette was sent to more than one group, wording was customized to the work place setting of the respondent.

- Each professional received a roughly equal mix of neglect, physical abuse, and sexual abuse vignettes. (Since #7 and #8 vignettes were very similar, the program ensured that no respondent received both of them.)

Five-year-old Mara shows up for her regular checkup wheezing and coughing heavily and having difficulty breathing. Her mother reports that Mara has not taken her daily asthma medication for the last two weeks because the prescription ran out and she can't afford to buy more until she gets paid at the end of the month.

When 4-year-old Melanie fails to show up for her first day at your nursery school, you phone to see what happened. Melanie answers the phone and tells you that her mommy and daddy are both at work. When you ask to speak to someone else, she tells you that she is home alone. When you call the next day after she misses another day, you find Melanie at home alone again.

Mrs. Arnold, a mother who you suspect is mildly retarded, brings 18-month-old John to the clinic's waiting room without an appointment. He needs immediate attention, having swallowed an unknown amount of antihypertensive medication.

A counselor, Mrs. Varon, comes in to talk to you about a 13-year-old white student, Chris Manning. She is concerned because Chris has missed 18 out of the last 30 days of school, and when he does show up, he is withdrawn and disturbed. Mrs. Varon also tells you that she has heard that Chris' mother is heavily into cocaine. When you call the Manning home, Chris answers and tells you he is home alone. He doesn't expect his mom back that evening, he says, since she usually spends the night at her boyfriend's.

Physical Abuse Vignettes

The Reeds, a well-dressed middle-class family who are new to your school, comes to see you because neither parent can get their 6-year-old son Kevin to obey. Mr. Reed tells you that he uses a belt on Kevin just as his dad did to him but lately it isn't working. Mr. Reed admits that he hit Kevin yesterday and the belt left a red mark on his neck. When you ask to see it, you observe several raised welts.

When the Alvarados, who are all long-time patients in your practice, bring in 6-month-old Juan for a checkup, Mrs. Alvarado complains that Juan cries a great deal—much more than her other children ever did. She believes he does it to make her mad, and she often slaps his mouth to make him stop.

Early Tuesday morning you receive a phone call from Mrs. Nash, a parent of an eighth grade student. Mrs. Nash reports that when driving the carpool yesterday afternoon, she heard 14-year-old Jennifer Hackett telling the other girls that her stepfather, a carpenter, had been beating her a lot recently, and that the broken wrist she said she had gotten from falling off her bike was actually caused by her stepfather. When Jennifer comes to your office, you ask her about what you heard. Jennifer says she made up the story to amuse her friends.

Sexual Abuse Vignettes

Early Monday morning you receive a phone call from Carol Nash, the married sister of 14-year-old Jennifer Hackett, whom you have been seeing for some time. Mrs. Nash reports that last weekend she overheard Jennifer telling a friend on the phone that her stepfather, a carpenter, had exposed himself to her several times recently. Mrs. Nash decided to call you because she knew Jennifer was seeing you that day. When you ask Jennifer about what you heard, she starts to cry and refuses to talk about it.

Louise Madden, a 24-year-old woman whom you have been seeing for some time because of difficulties relating to men, reveals that her father molested her from the time she was 5 until her parents divorced when she was 10. Her father is now living in a nearby town. He has recently married a woman with two young children.

James Simmons, a 3-year-old white boy, was referred to you by his preschool. The referral was made because James had fondled several children on the playground and masturbates frequently. When you speak with James' mother, Mrs. Simmons angrily states that she is sure that James' male babysitter, whom she hired so that James would have more time with men, has been abusing her son. Physical findings are negative.

The Collins, a black family you have been seeing for years, brings in 6-year-old Linda because of vaginal discharge. The lab report indicates that Linda has gonorrhea.

During his annual physical, Richard Lewis, an accountant, reveals that recently he has been drinking heavily. When you question him, he confides that several times recently when he has gotten drunk, he has lost control of himself and has fondled his 14-year-old daughter, Gina.

Figure 2. Examples of the twelve core vignettes.

- No professional received vignettes that mentioned only minority or nonminority families.
- The factor design was as balanced as possible across all members of a professional group.

These objectives were achieved through the use of arithmetic sequences to assign vignettes (Zellman & Bell, 1987), procedures that provided the control necessary for the first three objectives, together with faster convergence to the last objective than random assignment could have allowed. Once assigned to a professional, vignettes were printed in random order.

Table 1. Vignette Generation Design

Vignette	Sex	Age	Factors	Respondent Group				
				Primary Care Physicians	Mental Health Providers	Child Care Providers	Elementary Principals	Secondary Principals
Neglect No Medication	F	5	Perpetrator Intent: lazy/poor/incompetent; Previous incidents: yes/no SES: clinic/office; Prior relationship: yes/no; Age: 4/8; Gender: Previous incidents: yes/no	X	X	X	X	X
Latchkey Child	F/M	4/8	SES: clinic/office; Prior relationship: yes/no; Age: 4/8; Gender: Previous incidents: yes/no	X	X	X	X	
Ingested Pills	F/M	18 months	SES: clinic/office; Perpetrator intent: retarded/upset with child gender; Gender: Previous incidents: yes/no	X				
Left Alone/Drugs	M	13	Severity: mother selling drugs to kids/not selling; Gender; Race: black/white					X
Physical Abuse Son Hit With Belt	M	6/14	Age: 6/14; Prior relationship: yes/no; Severity: moderate/severe; Perpetrator intent: anger/learned; SES: welfare/middle class	X	X	X	X	X
Infant Slapped	M	6 months	Ethnicity: Hispanic/ white; Prior relationship: yes/no	X	X	X		
Teen Beaten	F	14	SES: attorney/carpenter; Recants: yes/no	X	X			X
Sexual Abuse Teen Molested	F	14	SES: attorney/carpenter; Recants: yes/no; Severity: rubbed breasts/exposed; self/intercourse	X	X	X		X
Adult Abused as a Child	F	24	Risk: not remarried/2 young stepchildren; Access: known address lives nearby/left state--no known address		X			
Boy Molested	M	3/8	Age: 3/8; Perpetrator relationship: Babysitter/estranged father; Race: black/white	X	X	X	X	
Gonorrhea	F	6	Race: black/white; Prior relationship: yes/no	X				
Father Admits Fondling	F/M	6/14	Age: 6/14; Gender: SES: accountant/machinist; Perpetrator intent: father drunk/child provocative	X	X	X	X	X

Note: This vignette has its own metric and is not included in the analyses.

Analysis Goals

Our analyses were driven by two goals. The first was to study the relationship between the five abuse-relevant judgments and the measure of reporting intention. We wanted to assess the degree to which the abuse-relevant judgments influenced respondents' inclination to report the incidents described in the vignettes. We planned in these analyses to explore a number of hypotheses. One was that the perception that the reporting law required a report in a specific instance would increase the intention to report. Another was that perceptions that a report would not be helpful to the child would reduce the respondent's likelihood of reporting. We also hypothesized that greater severity and application of the abuse or neglect label would increase intent to report.

The second goal was to examine the relationships among the abuse-relevant judgments. We wanted to know, for example, if judgments about the seriousness of an incident are related to use of the label abuse or neglect to describe the incident (e.g., Herzberger, 1988). What is the relationship, if any, between perceptions of seriousness and the perceived efficacy of making a report? Do respondents believe that when the suspected abuse is more serious, the child is more likely to benefit from a report?

Analytic Controls

The analyses to answer these questions required accounting for the fact that each respondent had received a unique subset of vignettes, and that the same core vignette included a number of factors that were varied across respondents. In particular, we had to take steps to avoid spuriously inflated correlations among the vignette outcomes across vignettes that could occur if different vignettes were perceived by respondents as describing clearly serious and reportable incidents in some cases and clearly trivial and nonreportable ones in others.

We imposed these needed controls by creating adjusted responses for each of the five abuse-relevant judgments and the measure of behavioral intention. The adjustment involved replacing raw responses with standardized residuals from regressions of the raw responses on the vignette factors for each vignette. The standardized residuals eliminate the contribution of the vignette and vignette factors to each response. By using the adjusted responses, we can draw inferences from our analyses as if every respondent had received the identical set of vignettes.

Relationships Among Judgments

Across all 12 vignettes, the mean likelihood of reporting was 68 on a 100-point scale on which 0 = *definitely would not report* and 100 = *definitely would report*. This figure indicates that respondents fell between somewhat and very likely to report. On the four vignettes that most unambiguously portray abuse (teen beaten, teen molested, gonorrhea, and father admits fondling), the mean likelihood of reporting was 82, which is between "almost certainly would report" and "very likely to report."

To test whether the five questions that measured perceived seriousness, labeling, the law's demand, and benefits to child and family did, in fact, figure in decisions about whether or not to report a given incident, we derived correlation coefficients among them. We focused initially on the relationship of the first five measures to likelihood of reporting and then examined the relationships among the five abuse-relevant judgments themselves across all 12 core vignettes.

Table 2. Correlations Among Six Vignette Items

	Seriousness	Abuse?	Law Requires a Report	Report Benefit to Child	Report Benefit to Rest of Family	Likelihood of Report
Seriousness	1.00 ^a	.58	.49	.33	.23	.53
Abuse?	.58	1.00	.62	.37	.26	.61
Law Requires a Report?	.49	.62	1.00	.42	.30	.81
Report Benefit to Child	.33	.37	.42	1.00	.61	.49
Report Benefit to Rest of Family	.23	.26	.30	.61	1.00	.37
Likelihood of Report	.53	.61	.81	.49	.37	1.00

^a Cell entries represent the correlation of the standardized residuals of responses to the specified vignette items. The data for these correlations are drawn from all 12 core vignettes.

As shown in Table 2, the five abuse-relevant judgments are indeed rather strongly related to reporting intentions. Judgments about what the law requires in a specific instance are most strongly related to likelihood of reporting ($R = .81$), while perceived benefits to the rest of the family (excluding the child) are least strongly related ($R = .37$). A regression analysis in which we regressed likelihood of reporting on the five abuse-relevant judgments (shown in Table 3) indicates that together these five judgments account for a substantial amount of the variance in likelihood of reporting ($R^2 = .71$). It appears that we have been fairly successful in identifying general factors that professionals consider in deciding whether or not to report cases of possible abuse that come to their attention.

Moreover, these abuse-relevant judgments are strongly related to each other. Perceived seriousness of the incident is strongly correlated with the respondent's description of the incident as "abuse" ($R = .58$), with use of the abuse label is more likely the more serious the rating of the incident. Application of the abuse label was also strongly correlated with a perception that the law required a report ($R = .62$). Interestingly, the correlation between seriousness and what the law required was lower, although still substantial ($R = .49$). Part of the explanation

Table 3. Likelihood of Reporting as a Function of Abuse-Relevant Judgments

Judgment	Coefficient ^a
Seriousness	.16*
Abuse?	.16*
Law Requires a Report?	.89*
Report Benefit to Child	.14*
Report Benefit to Rest of Family	.07*
R^2	.71

^a Cell entries are coefficients from a regression of question 6 on questions 1 to 5. The variables used in this regression are adjusted responses based on standardized residual from regressions that account for the factors varied in each vignette.

* Significant at $p > .0001$.

for this lower correlation lies in the unique pattern of judgments that characterize the neglect vignettes, as described below.

The two items that assessed the benefits of a report correlated most highly with each other ($R = .61$), an outcome that was not necessarily expected. It seemed as likely that reports perceived as benefiting children might be seen as harmful or disruptive to their families, particularly when the alleged perpetrator was a family member, as was the case in 10 of our 12 core vignettes. (In one of the remaining two vignettes, whether the alleged perpetrator was a family member or not was varied. In the twelfth vignette, the identity of the perpetrator was not specified.)

The two benefit items related more tenuously to the other vignette outcomes. Anticipated benefit to the child related only moderately to perceptions of seriousness, use of the abuse label, and perceptions of what the law required, while correlations between anticipated benefit to the rest of the family and these items were even lower. Varimax rotation of a factor analysis confirms these patterns. Items 1 (seriousness), 2 (abuse?), and 3 (what the law requires) load strongly on the first factor, along with Item 6, likelihood of reporting. Items 4 (benefit to child) and 5 (benefit to rest of family) load on a second factor. Loadings on both factors averaged above .80. (The vignette that describes Louise Madden, an adult who alleges she was abused as a child, was excluded from the factor analysis, because the vignette outcome items had to be slightly reworded to accommodate Louise's adult status.)

The factor analysis suggests that professionals may consider two different issues in deciding whether to report an instance of suspected maltreatment. One set of issues concerns the characteristics of the alleged maltreatment, particularly whether the would-be reporter believes it is serious and whether he/she defines it as abuse or neglect. These two judgments are highly related to a third: what the law is believed to require in the case in point. The latter judgment is most closely related to a decision to report, as discussed above. The second set of issues concerns the efficacy of a report—that is, whether the would-be reporter believes that a report would benefit the child or the child's family. These judgments, while positively related to each other, are less strongly related to likelihood of reporting.

The results to this point tell a consistent story: Across respondents and vignettes, judgments of seriousness, reportability and to a lesser extent expected efficacy of a report explain a substantial amount of the variance in likelihood of reporting.

Effects of Abuse Type

The above analyses obscure small but interesting differences in decision making by type of maltreatment. As shown in Table 4, respondents discriminated among types of abuse on every vignette measure. Sexual abuse vignettes were rated the most serious, while physical abuse vignettes were rated least serious. Professionals were more inclined to apply the abuse/neglect label to incidents of alleged sexual abuse than they were to apply it to incidents of physical abuse or neglect.

Respondents were far more inclined to believe that the law expected a report from sexual abuse vignettes than from vignettes describing physical abuse or neglect. Yet professionals were inclined to believe that reports of these sexual abuse cases would be more likely to harm than benefit the child reported. In fact, anticipated benefit to the child was lowest for the sexual abuse vignettes.

Respondents believed that reports of physical abuse or neglect would be more likely than not to have a negative impact on the rest of the family. This impact rating was less negative for the sexual abuse vignettes: Respondents believed in these cases that the rest of the family was as likely to benefit as to suffer. Respondents indicated they would be far more likely to report sexual abuse than either physical abuse or neglect.

Table 4. Responses to Vignette Outcomes By Abuse Type

Vignette Type	Seriousness	Abuse?	Judgment			
			Law Requires a Report	Report Benefits to Child	Report Benefits to Rest of Family	Likelihood of Report
Neglect (4 vignettes)	78 ^a	73	63	60	47	65
Physical abuse (3 vignettes)	75	73	70	60	47	65
Sexual abuse (4 vignettes) ^b	83	83	83	47	50	83

^a Scale 0–100: 100 = extremely serious, definitely abuse/neglect, law definitely requires a report, benefits highly positive, respondent definitely would report; 0 = not at all serious, definitely not abuse, report definitely not required by law, benefits not at all positive.

^b The Louise Madden vignette was excluded because of its unique metric.

Regressions of likelihood of reporting by type of maltreatment confirm some of the ways in which respondents differentiated on the basis of abuse type. As shown in Table 5, the R^2 s for each of the three equations were very high and similar, but the regression coefficients did vary by abuse type. Although the law's requirements dominated decision making for each type of abuse, likelihood of reporting the neglect vignettes was less influenced by what the law was perceived to require, and was relatively more affected by judgments of seriousness and by use of the neglect label than was the case for the physical or sexual abuse vignettes. The perceived requirements of the reporting laws were more powerful predictors of anticipated reporting for the sexual abuse vignettes than they were for the physical abuse or neglect vignettes. Anticipated benefit to the rest of the family was not significantly associated with likelihood of reporting for sexual abuse vignettes, the only relationship that was not significant.

These data indicate that while our five abuse-relevant judgments appear to capture much of the variance in ratings of likelihood of reporting, they relate somewhat differently to that outcome as a function of abuse type. Professionals appear to attach relatively more weight to their judgments of seriousness, particularly the likely benefit to the child, in deciding whether

Table 5. Likelihood of Reporting as a Function of Abuse-Relevant Judgments by Type of Abuse

Judgment	Vignette		
	Neglect	Physical Abuse	Sexual Abuse
	($N = 4$)	($N = 3$)	($N = 4$) ^b
Seriousness	.23***	.14**	.14**
Abuse?	.27**	.17**	.10**
Law requires a report?	.74**	.93**	.96**
Report benefit to child	.19**	.12**	.13**
Report benefit to rest of family	.07*	.10**	.03**
R^2	.71	.74	.71

^a Cell entries are coefficients from a regression of question 6 on questions 1–5. The variables used in this regression are adjusted responses based on standardized residual from regressions that account for the factors varied in each vignette.

^b Madden vignette is excluded because of its unique metric.

* Significant at $p < .01$. ** Significant at $p < .001$.

to report suspected neglect than in situations involving suspected physical or sexual abuse. In sexual abuse incidents in particular, the major factor in the reporting decision appears to be the mandated reporter's judgment concerning whether the law requires a report.

These analyses may help explain why CPS agencies are receiving so many reports of sexual abuse. The perceived seriousness of these cases, combined with a very strong sense that the law requires they be reported, increases the likelihood of a report being made when sexual abuse is suspected. Even though professionals may question the benefit of such reports, these other factors dominate and translate into a high likelihood of reporting.

In contrast, professionals are less likely to believe that the law requires a report in cases of possible neglect, and such considerations also figure slightly less in their inclination to report. Perceived seriousness, application of the neglect label, and anticipated benefits to the child are more important in neglect reporting decisions than they are in predicting either physical or sexual abuse reporting. As the number of sexual abuse cases increases, would-be reporters may contrast these very serious cases with the suspected neglect they see and thus be less inclined to apply the neglect label or to report the incident than they were in the past.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Two sets of judgments appear to bear heavily on the likelihood of reporting suspected maltreatment. The first set includes the kinds of case characteristics that have been most addressed in the literature: seriousness and operational definitions of abuse (e.g., Giovannoni & Becerra, 1979; Herzberger & Tennen, 1988). Combined with an assessment of what the reporting law was perceived to require in the case in point, these judgments were the major contributors to reporting decisions across vignettes.

A second cluster of judgments concerns the predicted efficacy of making a report in a given case. Judgments of perceived benefit of a report for the child and for the rest of the family were positively correlated with each other and were significant predictors of likelihood of reporting, although the strength of the relationship between perceived benefit and intended reporting was smaller than that for the relationship between the seriousness/abuse label/legal requirement cluster and the likelihood of reporting outcome.

The relative contributions of these judgments to likelihood of reporting varies somewhat by type of abuse. In sexual abuse cases, the legal reporting requirement is the major contributor to reporting intention. In incidents of possible neglect, respondents' use of the neglect label and the anticipated benefits of a report are more important factors in explaining variation in likelihood of reporting, although the law's requirements still dominate decision making.

While seriousness and the label of abuse are addressed, albeit in a limited and general way, in reporting legislation, judgments by mandated reporters of the potential efficacy of a report are not. It may be that efficacy is presumed; certainly the framers of these laws did not intend potential reporters to consider likely outcomes when making reporting decisions.

Our data indicate, however, that mandated reporters do weigh potential efficacy in making decisions about reporting. Since in many cases would-be reporters believe that a report is more likely to harm than to help the child or family, concerns about efficacy put professionals in a bind. While they are required under the law to report suspected abuse and neglect, they often must do so believing that their report will not be helpful to anyone, and may in fact be harmful.

Such individual-level behavior echoes broader concerns about the efficacy of reports as CPS systems are forced to deal with ever growing numbers of reports of ever more serious abuse. Our own field work data, reported elsewhere (Zellman & Antler, 1990), indicate that attempts

by CPS systems to cope with growing numbers of reports through more rigorous screening of calls, the implementation of risk assessment models, or defining certain kinds of incidents as out of scope have led to more screen-outs of calls, particularly where “mild” abuse or neglect is alleged. According to both mandated reporters and CPS staff, some would-be reporters have decided not to report cases when they are reasonably confident that a report would not be accepted or acted upon—in other words, no benefit to child or family at some considerable cost to both.

Our vignette data find respondents fairly willing to report abuse and to be guided by legal mandates to do so. Perceived seriousness and application of the abuse label increase perceptions of reportability and the likelihood of a report in specific instances. Judgments about the ultimate benefit of a report for a child and for the family also influence reporting decisions. The contribution of these latter judgments to reporting intentions raises concern about mandated reporters’ continued compliance with the reporting laws in the face of growing recognition that only a small fraction of the children reported to overloaded CPS agencies can be helped.

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Résumé—Le but de cette étude a été d’analyser si les signalements de cas suspects d’abus avaient été motivés par un processus de décision cohérent et constant. Utilisant des fiches de cas cliniques, envoyées à des professionnels mandatés à signaler dans le cadre d’une étude nationale, nous avons étudié la relation entre une série de jugements portés sur ses fiches et les intentions de signaler. Étaient compris dans ces jugements: la gravité de l’incident; le fait que l’incident pouvait être étiqueté d’abus ou de négligence; l’exigence légale ou non de signaler; et l’existence ou non d’un bénéfice soit pour l’enfant soit pour le reste de la famille, généré par le signalement. Ces jugements étaient fortement corrélés entre eux et prenaient une part importante dans les variations d’intention de signaler l’abus. Le critère le mieux corrélé aux intentions de signaler était l’exigence légale; le moins bien corrélé, l’existence d’un

bénéfice. L'analyse par rotation du hasard d'un facteur a mis deux caractéristiques en évidence: la première liait la gravité, l'étiquetage de l'abus et les exigences légales aux intentions de signaler. La seconde caractéristique incluait les deux jugements, liés aux bénéfices pour l'enfant ou la famille. Il n'y avait que de très petites différences dans les jugements et les comportements face au signalement devant différents types d'abus. Les implications de ces observations concernant le comportement des professionnels mandatés à signaler sont discutées.

Resumen—El objeto de esta investigación fué el de examinar si las decisiones de denunciar podían ser descritas por un proceso coherente y al mismo tiempo consistente a través de los incidentes de abuso sospechado. Usando viñetas de casos presentes en una encuesta nacional por correo de denunciantes bajo mandato, examinamos la relación entre una serie de juicios acerca de los casos descritos en las viñetas y las intenciones de denunciar. Estos juicios incluyeron: la seriedad del incidente, si el incidente debía ser llamado "abuso" o "negligencia"; si la ley requería una denuncia; y si el niño y, separadamente, el resto de la familia serían beneficiados por la denuncia. Los cinco juicios relevantes al abuso estaban fuertemente relacionados entre ellos y en conjunto daban cuenta de una porción sustancial de la varianza en las intenciones de denunciar. Los requerimientos de la ley tenían la relación más estrecha con la intención de denunciar; los beneficios de la denuncia la relación menos estrecha. Rotación Varimax de un análisis factorial reveló dos factores: el primero incluyó la seriedad, el tipo de abuso, y los requerimientos de la ley, junto con las intenciones de denunciar. Los dos juicios de beneficio cargaban en el segundo factor. Se encontraron diferencias pequeñas en los juicios y patrones de la denuncia como función del tipo de abuso. Se comentan las implicaciones de esto hallazgos para la conducta de denunciantes bajo mandato.

