

Saint-Jacques, M.-C., Villeneuve, P., Turcotte, D., Drapeau, S., Ivers, H. (2011). The role of media in reporting child abuse. *Journal of social service research*, 1-13.

The role of media in reporting child abuse

ABSTRACT

Some authors postulate that coverage of child maltreatment by the news media increases public awareness about this issue and helps individuals realize the need to report such situations. Can we therefore assert that an increase or reduction in the number of such news stories leads to a corresponding increase or reduction in the number of reports made to child protective services? This article looks at the short-term impact that the media coverage of children in need of protection had on the number of cases reported to child protection agencies. The number of reports (N = 11,646) made to these agencies in the greater Quebec City region (Canada) was tallied each week over a 24 month period. During the same period, a content analysis of the print media was conducted regarding child maltreatment and/or child protection services so as to identify and count the number of articles published (N = 1,211) and single out media frenzy events. The relation between the number of child abuse reports and the number of published newspaper articles was explored with two tools: a) a statistical correlation approach and b) an intervention time-series analyses. Two conclusions were drawn from our analysis. First, a statistically significant relationship does indeed exist between media coverage of child welfare agencies and the number of cases reported to child protection agencies. Second, media frenzy concerning child maltreatment and/or CPS does not show a statistically significant effect on the number of reports made to child protective services. Implications for practice in social services and future research avenues are discussed.

Keywords: child abuse; child maltreatment; child protective services; news media.

INTRODUCTION

Stories about child maltreatment are making the headlines in newspapers because child abuse and neglect has become a recognized social problem whose consequences are being increasingly documented and discussed (Clément & Dufour, 2009; Franklin & Parton, 2001; Gilbert et al., 2009). Many people believe that publishing horror stories about children has contributed to the social recognition of maltreatment, the adoption of laws, and the creation of institutions with more efficient mechanisms for detecting and protecting mistreated children (American Humane Association, 2006; Franklin & Parton, 1991; Johnson, 1995; Watkins, 1990).

The significant role that the media have played in the protection of children becomes obvious when we look back into the past. The Mary Ellen Wilson affair, which occurred in 1874, constitutes one of the main horror stories reported by the press that contributed to the recognition of maltreatment as a social problem in the United States (American Humane Association, 2006; McDevitt, 1996; Watkins, 1990). A Methodist mission worker named Etta Angell Wheeler learned about the situation of the 10-year-old New York girl after being alerted by her foster mother's neighbours. Etta Wheeler realized that the child was in a pitiful state and was severely mistreated, both physically and psychologically. Even though the law at the time forbid excessive punishment, Madam Wheeler was unable to take the child away from the foster family because the authorities at the time disagreed about withdrawing children. Having run out of options for helping this child, Madam Wheeler turned to an influential man, Mr. Henry Berg,

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who was the head of the New York City SPCA. Thanks to Mr. Berg's help, a process was held, witnesses and the child were heard, and the latter was finally removed from her foster family. Berg likewise informed the New York Times which decided to cover the process, thereby making the public aware of the affair but above all, making it aware of the amplitude of maltreatment. The considerable news media coverage surrounding this court case contributed to the creation, in the following years, of the very first child protective agencies (American Humane Association, 2011; Watkins, 1990). This affair showed, for the first time, the important role that the media could play in maltreatment issues.

According to researchers such as Jones, Finkelhor, and Halter (2006), and Whitehead, Chiodo, Leschied, and Dermot (2004), who have studied variations in reporting to child protection agencies, news media coverage of child maltreatment does not only affect the development of institutions and policy, it can also affect people's individual behaviour. These researchers consider that reporting of abused children by the news media not only makes the public more aware of these cases, it also makes them realize the need to report such situations to the proper authorities. Similarly, Besharov and Laumann (1994) consider that citizens feel emotionally compelled to "do something" when child abuse is suspected. The public is told to "take no chances" and to report even the slightest concerns about a child.

Can we therefore assert that an increase or reduction in the number of newspaper articles on maltreatment leads to a corresponding increase or reduction in the number of

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reports to child protective services (CPS)? Based on an examination of the number of newspaper articles published and the number of reported cases over two years, the present study provides a better understanding of the relationship between these two variables.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There has been little empirical research looking into the impact of the media on child protection. It is therefore necessary to consider studies conducted some time ago and others that have examined the impact of the media's coverage of criminality. As Goddard and Saunders (2000) pointed out, "Much of the literature that reviews the media and child abuse is critical rather than evaluative, and is based on approaches with little basis in theory" (p.121). When research into the coverage of child maltreatment in the print media is examined, two themes in particular stand out, that is the events that prompted the media to cover this theme and the nature of the content.

The first regular coverage of child maltreatment by the print media

Despite the above-mentioned Mary Ellen Wilson affair of 1874, the phenomenon of child abuse was not perceived as a major problem and did not really capture the media's attention until the 1970s (McDevitt, 1996). The growth in the number of written media articles on abused children began with two events (Goddard & Saunders, 2000; Johnson, 1995; Nelson; 1984). The first was the 1962 publication in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, a major medical journal, of the landmark paper defining and documenting the concept of the "battered-child syndrome" (Kempe, Silverman,

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Steele, Droegemueller, & Silver, 1962), the content of which was widely picked up by the newspapers of the time. The second event was one year later when the USA passed the first law dealing specifically with abused children. These two events, which were largely reported by the media, made the public aware of this phenomenon. From that moment on, maltreatment became an acknowledged social problem covered by the media. In the USA, there was particularly sharp growth in the number of newspaper articles published toward the mid-1970s and late 1980s (McDevitt, 1996). Even though it has not been the focus of empirical studies, this increased media coverage of maltreatment and of the work of child protection services has also been noted in Québec, Canada in the last few years, particularly by social workers and social service managers.

The content of newspaper articles on maltreatment

It is worth noting that a very small proportion of all child abuse and neglect cases receive media attention. The stories reported on are often sensational and may involve tragic outcomes such as injuries or even death (for an example, see Meunier, 2011). Indeed, when the media report on child maltreatment, it mainly covers events that are rare, unusual, or unpleasant (Aldridge, 1994; Franklin & Parton, 1991; Galilee, 2005; Laliberte, Larson, & Johnston, 2011; Saint-Jacques et al., 2010). The types of maltreatment that fall into these categories mainly include sexual and physical abuse. This sort of media coverage paints a distorted portrait of maltreatment, since child welfare agencies intervene most often in cases of negligence and exposure to domestic violence, which each represent 34% of maltreatment recorded in Canada (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2010). Studies by

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CPS in the United-States show that negligence is the most common form of maltreatment, representing 78% of examined cases (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010); these issues, however, are rarely brought up in the media. Most child abuse and neglect cases involve chronic situations in which parents facing issues of instability or impairment are not able to provide basic nurturance and care for their children (Child Trends, 2004). This misrepresentation of child maltreatment resembles the media's misleading portrayal of crime. The most frequent crimes are reported less often by the media (Potter & Kappeler, 1998; Reiner, 2002). This misrepresentation also reflects the gap that separates perceptions from reality.

This issue of distorted news coverage may be explained partly by readers' lack of interest in the less sensational stories, by the gap between the public's perception and that of professionals concerning maltreatment (Chan, Chun, & Chung, 2008), but also by the fact that most information about maltreatment situations is confidential. The media coverage is thus focused on more extreme public situations because they give rise to legal proceedings. In the opinion of Aldridge (1994) as well as Franklin and Parton (1991), modern media coverage of maltreatment encourages the development of unfounded fear and moral panic by making the public overly sensitive to certain phenomena without regard for the actual risk. Wilczynski and Sinclair (1998, as cited in Goddard & Saunders, 2000, p.89) suggest, however, that even sensationalist coverage can have potentially beneficial effects, such as greater public awareness for example.

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Another theme that the media scrutinize is the work of child welfare agencies (Ayre, 2001). One noteworthy aspect of this scrutiny is the stereotypical portrayals of social workers as fools, wimps, villains, and bullies (Franklin & Parton, 1991). Furthermore, there is a “blame” sequence – how could this have happened? – that is added in the construction of the news item which implies that measures must be put in place in these agencies to ensure that this type of situation does not occur again. For example, if a child is severely and physically abused by a parent, the child welfare agency is blamed for having failed to protect the child. Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, and Roberts (2006) introduced the term “folk devil” to describe the psychological need to find a guilty party. With the increase in media attention, many child protection professionals have felt increasingly threatened by the ever-increasing weight of liability. Furthermore, a hostile media environment has prompted child welfare workers to adopt a “better safe than sorry” attitude towards service provision (Regehr & Marwah, 2008). However, we cannot affirm that the overall media coverage of maltreatment presents a negative image of social services and their workers. The content analysis of 451 articles dealing with child protection published in the five main French-speaking newspapers in the Province of Québec revealed that, overall, these articles provided a rather neutral assessment of child protective services (Saint-Jacques et al., 2010).

It would thus seem that the media coverage of maltreatment sometimes over-represented extreme situations or breakdowns in the system. We might hypothesize, on the one hand, that this over-representation might encourage the public to report children

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who are in need of protection. On the other hand, it might decrease the public's
confidence in child protection services and thereby reduce the number of reports made.

Reporting children to CPS: the role of the media

One of the questions that media sociology tries to answer concerns the consequences of
messages transmitted in the media (Gough, 1996). Several decades of analysis of the
media's impact on people's behavior have shown that there is indeed an effect, but that
it is difficult to evaluate its scope (Gerbner, 1989; Reiner, 2002). Reiner (2002) pointed
out that there has been a great deal of research into the direct impact of the media, as if
it injected an ideology into people's brains. In his opinion, it is more likely that the
media participates in a complex interactive process with other cultural and social
practices.

In the more specific case of child maltreatment, several indirect effects have been noted
such as the fact that the media play a creative role in the process by recognizing the
problem of child maltreatment, defining the concept, promoting interventions, and
allocating funds (Johnson, 1995; Jones et al., 2006; Whitehead et al., 2004). Labeling is
one of the most pertinent pre-conditions for a situation to occur (Reiner, 2002). In order
for an act of maltreatment to be committed, it must first be defined as such by the legal
system and labeled thus by the population. The media make an important contribution in
the labeling process by helping shape the conceptual borders of maltreatment. An
important mechanism in this process is inscription, which refers to the media's
exploitation of socially deviant subjects (McCormick, 1995). The media may also play a

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major role in emphasizing certain categories of maltreatment and by changing the public's perceptions and awareness, thereby leading to apparent fluctuations in types of maltreatment. The treatment of the news may obscure the institutional and social factors involved in a more thorough analysis of the problem. This distorted message is transmitted to the population as established facts (McCormick, 1995). Moreover, Klein, Campbell, Soler, and Ghez (1997) have suggested that the belief that a problem is widespread and that it constitutes a threat to the community may be related to people's greater sense of responsibility, thereby affecting attitudes about intervening. The goal of the present study was to document the specific role of the media (that is encouraging people to act), which is measured here through the public's greater propensity to report cases of children needing protection to the authorities after articles on maltreatment were published.

Impact of the news media on the number of child maltreatment reports to CPS

At the time the present article was written, only one study (McDevitt, 1996) had *empirically* examined the impact of the media coverage of child maltreatment on the number of reports made to child protective services (CPS). Analyzing the titles of articles, this researcher counted up the number of articles per year dealing with abused children in two American newspapers, one national and one local, from 1963 to 1989. The counting of the number of abused children was conducted using national data brought together by the American Humane Association and the National Committee for the Prevention of Child Abuse. At the local level, the data were collected by counting the number of new cases at the Allegheny County Children and Youth Services. The

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results show that both the number of articles and the number of cases reported to welfare agencies steadily increased during this period.

Large correlations (in the order of 0.70) were indeed observed between these two variables but McDevitt (1996) noted that “increases in news stories were occurring at the same time [i.e. during the same year], not preceding the increases in maltreatment reports” (p.269). By analyzing the annual data transversely, it was of course impossible for her to conduct an in-depth examination of the link between these two variables. After examining other possible causes for this correlation, such as changes in policy and socio-economic conditions, she concluded that these, rather than news media coverage seemed to be responsible for the observed increase in the number of reports to CPS.

While McDevitt’s (1996) conclusions regarding the importance of changes in policy and socio-economic conditions certainly appear quite relevant, the yearly and relatively simultaneous increases in the number of published articles and the number of situations reported to CPS nonetheless seem worthy of further investigation.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

An examination of newspaper coverage seems particularly relevant. We attempted to improve on certain limitations in McDevitt’s (1996) study by adopting an approach that allowed us to control the nature of the relation between publication of news stories about CPS and the reporting of child abuse or neglect to the CPS. To do so, a longitudinal perspective was employed.

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The specific goal of this study was to determine whether media coverage of child maltreatment can have an observable effect on the number of situations of suspected child abuse or neglect reported to child protective services. Do the newspapers influence how people behave when they become aware of a situation in which a child may need such services? In order to examine this question, data were collected on the number of reports made to CPS, and then were related to the number of newspaper articles about CPS over a two-year period in the greater Quebec City region, in Canada.

Over the last few years in this region, several incidents related to child maltreatment have made the headlines, including the breaking up of a teen prostitution ring, disclosure of sexual abuse committed by a well-known radio talk show host, and the airing of a documentary which was highly critical of child protective services. Based on Reiner's (2002) proposals, one must wonder whether all the media frenzy about such stories helped determine the perception of what is acceptable and not acceptable, and whether it increased the public's and child welfare agencies' sensitivity to maltreatment (in general or in specific types of cases). This in turn might have played a role in the number of reports made to child protective services.

METHODOLOGY

The mandate of child protective services in the province where Quebec City is located is to ensure the protection of children under the age of 18 who are living in a situation which poses a serious risk to their safety or development. This risk can either come from their immediate environment (physical abuse, sexual abuse, serious neglect, or

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abandonment by their parents), or may be the result of their own behavior (running away, violence, drug abuse, suicide attempts, etc.), which their parents are not able to address. If CPS receives information (called a report) indicating that a child is or may be in such a situation, an evaluation is conducted and, if necessary, social and/or complementary services are provided to attempt to correct the situation.

Sample

This study was conducted in the greater Quebec City area, a French-speaking region in Canada. The total population for this region was 638,917, of which 138,000 were children (Centres jeunesse du Québec, 2006). The study was based on an analysis of reports made to child protective services in the region and on articles about maltreatment published in newspapers in the region. No sampling techniques were applied, as all the reports and articles that appeared over this 24-month period were included in the analysis.

Number of reports made to CPS

The above mentioned 24-month period was divided into two complete annual cycles. The first cycle was from March 28, 2004 to April 2, 2005, and the second from April 3, 2005 to April 1, 2006. During the two study cycles, a total of 11,646 reports were received by the CPS. These constituted the dependent variable.

Reports made to child protective services were entered electronically by the CPS workers. They included information about the date the report was made. This

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information was transferred into a database to which researchers had access. The advantage of using this database was that it guaranteed the validity of the data.

Number of articles published regarding child maltreatment and/or CPS

The selection of newspaper articles dealing with child maltreatment and CPS was conducted using daily press reviews made available by the provincial CPS association. These press reviews covered the province's five leading daily newspapers: Le Devoir, La Presse, Le Soleil, le Journal de Québec, and le Journal de Montréal. The weekly readership of each of these newspapers was between 594,989 and 1,922,597, with the exception of one newspaper (Le Devoir) which had a smaller readership of 169,200 (Centre d'études sur les medias, 2006). These comprehensive press reviews included all articles dealing with families, children and youth. A wide range of topics were included, such as child obesity, access to daycare, learning disabilities in children, child maltreatment, child and family services, etc. As was the case regarding reports made to child protective services, discussed above, the time period for which we used these press reviews was March 28, 2004 to April 1, 2006.

From these very comprehensive press reviews, we specifically selected all articles dealing with child maltreatment and/or CPS. This was done by keeping only articles where the title, summary or text contained one of the following keywords or their synonyms: child welfare, child abuse, child maltreatment, child neglect, juvenile court, children's court, youth protection, CPS, foster care, foster family, reception center, or

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report to CPS. Furthermore, the articles selected included those providing descriptions of specific child maltreatment situations but also more analytical or commentary pieces.

Four research assistants trained by a member of the research team identified these articles by reading through their content. The article selection process was validated every month based on a random sample. Overall, 1,211 relevant articles for the present study were published during the 24 month study period (independent variable). The publication date of the articles was entered into the database so as to be able to count up the number of articles per week.

Procedure

The number of reports made to child protective services in the greater Quebec City region and the number of articles in the newspapers regarding child maltreatment and/or CPS were tallied each week over a 24 month period (divided into two cycles). The data for the dependent and independent variables were analyzed using two different types of procedures. First, the main analysis examined the relationship between the number of relevant articles published every week and the number of reports to CPS received during the same and following weeks. More specifically, non-parametric correlation coefficients (Spearman's r) were calculated for the weekly data, as a function of the study cycle. This type of analysis was preferred to the Pearson correlation due to the non-normal distribution of the number of published articles.

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Second, since certain special topics contributed to an especially large amount of media attention in some weeks, we also decided to examine specifically how this media frenzy was correlated (or not) with the number of reports made to CPS. In order to do so, intervention time-series analyses (Box & Tiao, 1975) were conducted on the total number of articles per week in order to identify the weeks associated with an unexpected number of articles. The concept of unexpected articles refers to outliers, namely extreme observations, that were greater than what would normally be expected each week, taking into account the average number of articles published each week and the natural variation from one week to the next. Only one independent variable, the observation cycle, was included in the model. Contrary to conventional regression analysis, which requires independent observations, intervention analysis takes autocorrelation into account, which is the degree of correlation between successive data (Franklin, Allison, & Gorman, 1996). The two-tailed alpha level for detecting the number of unexpected articles was set at 1%. Intervention analysis has been found to be more sensitive than visual analysis in measuring the impact of certain predictors on the dependent variable (Franklin et al., 1996).

Ethical considerations

The data examined here were extracted from an anonymized database. The newspaper articles were from the public domain. This project was submitted to and approved by the ethical research committee of Université Laval.

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Results

Main analysis

During the first data collection cycle, 5,180 reports were made to child protective services in the greater Quebec City region, for an average of 99.7 reports per week. During the second cycle, 6,383 such reports were made, for an average of 122.8 reports per week, a 23% increase (see Figure 1).

In terms of the number of articles regarding child maltreatment and/or CPS, the first cycle saw 457 articles published, for an average of 8.6 week. This compares with 754 during the second cycle, or an average of 14.5 articles per week, a 65% increase (see Figure 1).

INSERT Figure 1 HERE

Results of the main analysis show that there was a statistically significant positive relationship over the two cycles between the number of articles published regarding child maltreatment and/or CPS and the number of reports made to CPS within the same week ($r_s(104) = .47, p < .001$). This relation was higher in cycle 2 ($r_s(51) = .48, p = .003$) than in cycle 1 ($r_s(51) = .16, p = .27$).

Cross correlations were also conducted to examine whether or not the variation in the number of reports made to CPS followed, during the following weeks, the variation in the number of articles published. Results showed that the number of articles published

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in a given week regarding child maltreatment and/or CPS was indeed positively and significantly associated with the number of reports made to CPS during the following week ($r_{s-1}(103) = .24, p < .05$).

Results also showed that the number of articles in a given week was however not significantly associated with the number of reports made to CPS in the next two to six weeks.

Analysis specifically regarding media frenzy events

An intervention time-series analysis was conducted to identify the weeks associated with an “unexpected” number of articles dealing with child maltreatment and/or CPS. These correspond to the events of media frenzy labeled A to F in Figure 1. During these weeks, six special topics stood out: the kidnapping of a child and a horrible infanticide (event A), a TV documentary about children placed by CPS, pointing to a lack of permanency planning (event B), the annual “CPS week” media blitz (event C), a United Nations committee looking into “time-out” procedures in reception centers at the request of a Quebec civil liberties group (event D), the release of a blistering documentary/commentary about CPS (event E), and a government commission holding hearings regarding future possible amendments to be made to the Youth Protection Act, in part to improve permanency planning (event F).

A second intervention time-series analysis was conducted to study whether these six media frenzy events were associated with a significant variation in the number of

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reports. Each week was associated with a dichotomous independent (predictor) variable, taking a value of 1 in the week of the media event and a value of 0 for all the other weeks. The unstandardized regression coefficient of the predictor was used to estimate the contribution of this week (event) to the prediction of the number of reports. As can be seen in Table 1, results show that none of the “special topics” media events were significantly associated with variation in the number of reports made to child protective services.

INSERT Table 1 HERE

Discussion

Do newspaper articles influence people’s tendency to report their suspicions of child maltreatment to CPS? Can a relationship be established between the fluctuation in media coverage regarding child maltreatment and/or CPS and the number of reports made to CPS? This issue seems all the more relevant considering, as we have seen, that the number of reports made to CPS in the greater Quebec City region increased by 23.2% between cycle 1 (2004-2005) and cycle 2 (2005-2006) while the number of newspaper articles dealing with child maltreatment and/or CPS increased by 65%.

Two analysis strategies were adopted to answer the research question. The first was used to examine the relations between the number of newspaper articles dealing with child welfare and the number of reports made. This allowed us to determine that a statistically significant positive relationship existed between the number of articles published regarding child maltreatment and/or CPS during a given week and the number

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of reports made to CPS during that same week and the following. This impact did not, however, appear to extend beyond this time period, at least not in a statistically significant way.

These results led us to think that the media not only influenced the public's attitudes and perceptions but also their behaviour. The fact that people took action was possibly due to the raising of their awareness that such situations do indeed occur, even in their community, and that it is important to report them to the proper authorities to protect the child. News stories seemed to encourage people who might have been hesitating or who might not have known how to proceed to actually make a report to CPS, and this despite, among other things, the time required and apprehensions that they might have about the suspected abuser learning who made the report.

A second strategy was adopted to examine the impact of the influx of child welfare stories written by the media on the number of reports made to the child protection agency. Six periods were identified which covered ten weeks from 2004 to 2006 that gave rise to media frenzy. However, the analysis showed that none of these large "media events" appeared to be significantly associated with variations in the number of cases reported to child protection.

These results, which might seem surprising given the conclusions drawn from the preceding correlational analysis, support the following conclusion. There was a modest but positive relation between reports made to child protection agencies and media

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coverage of child welfare, but this could not be explained by the impact of events of media frenzy. As we have seen, the vast majority of media coverage involved analysis of or commentary on the broader CPS picture (how services were organized, weaknesses in the current law such as permanency planning, etc.), as opposed to “regular stories” or “current events,” which more often presented specific recent (or very recent) situations of child maltreatment whose emotional impact on the readers was potentially greater.

The literature on this issue is limited. Nonetheless, the results obtained here are in keeping with the viewpoints of Jones et al. (2006) and Whitehead et al. (2004), who considered that the news media, by making the public more aware that child maltreatment does sometimes occur, makes them realize the need to report their suspicions to the proper authorities. On the other hand, the author of the only previous empirical study found on this topic concluded, after having looked at correlations between yearly totals of relevant newspaper articles versus yearly totals of reports made to CPS that, while a correlation does exist between the two variables, causality cannot be inferred because this correlation is more likely due to major changes in policy and, possibly, important changes in socio-economic conditions in the time period and geographic areas examined (McDevitt, 1996).

Indeed, correlation is necessary but not sufficient to establish a causal relationship. As Rubin and Babbie (2010, p.156) have pointed out, such causality between two events can only be inferred if three criteria are met: One is that a *correlation* must be observed

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between the two variables. Another is that the cause must occur *before* the effect. Finally, one must not be able to *explain away* the correlation between these two variables with a third variable which could cause the two under consideration.

In the time period and geographic area examined in our study, no major changes occurred in policy or socio-economic circumstances which could refute the significant correlations observed between the number of newspaper articles and the number of reports made to CPS; this was, incidentally, contrary to the situation faced by McDevitt (1996). In terms of policy changes affecting programs for low-income families, the main one which occurred during this study period was an increase in the amount provided by an earned income supplement program (very similar to the Earned Income Tax Credit) (Villeneuve, 2007). It is quite difficult to imagine how this increase in an existing benefit could somehow have contributed, in a significant way, to the observed increase in the number of reports made to child protective services. Moreover, the overall socio-economic situation affecting families in the geographic area examined in our study did not vary a great deal during the period we examined, the average quarterly unemployment rate going from 5.6% during the first cycle to 5.9% during the second cycle (Institut de la statistique du Québec [ISQ], 2010).

Another major difference with McDevitt's (1996) study was that the datasets employed here not only allowed us to examine the relationship between the number of newspaper articles and the number of reports made to CPS on a much more precise, *weekly* basis, but also to control the antecedent position of the independent variable with respect to the

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dependent variable. Following the principles outlined above, we were thus able to infer causality between these two variables.

Study Limitations

These findings must take into account some limitations of this study. First, the measure of media coverage was based on the number of articles and did not take into account the detail of their content, length, or place in the paper. That being said, the length of an article was not necessarily proportional to the number of persons reading it. For whatever reason, shorter “current event” stories sometimes attracted more attention than more developed analytical pieces. Finally, the concept of “media frenzy events” used here was essentially based on temporal and frequency indicators.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

The organizations that receive and analyze reports about children whose safety and development may be compromised currently have no tools that allow them to anticipate fluctuations in these reports. Since CPS must analyze these situations in a relatively short period of time, knowledge of the factors that influence the frequency of reports would make it easier to organize the work and to maximize its quality. Several managers and social workers in this field believe that the media have an impact on the number of reports made to their agencies. Our study partially corroborates their belief. The media do indeed play a role: an increase in the number of articles about CPS or maltreatment leads to, in the short term, an increase in reports. This information makes

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it possible to anticipate the moments when more workers will be needed to analyze new reports.

The media thus have a certain impact on the public which could be used by child protection agencies to keep it better informed. Increased screening of maltreated children and families in difficulty requires more public awareness, a role in which mass media can be quite effective (Hoefnagels & Mudde, 2000). This increased screening could be very useful given that a considerable proportion of children in need of protection do not receive any aid precisely because no one has reported their situation to the authorities (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2010).

Other issues relating to this research topic need to be explored further. For instance, it would be useful to analyze in more detail the media's impact on reports made to CPS. One such issue would be the effect of media coverage on the various types of people who make such reports: neighbors, professionals, family members, and other direct or indirect witnesses who are neither professionals nor family members.

In addition to the short-term direct effect on reports made to CPS, the media may also influence the public's perception of child maltreatment by over-representing the most sensational "attention-grabbing" cases and under-representing "ordinary maltreatment" such as negligence, which is the type of maltreatment most often encountered in families. This does not necessarily have negative consequences: creating the impression in the public that certain types of maltreatment are widespread could lead people to feel

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more concerned about this problem and therefore act when they become aware of a difficult situation (Klein et al., 1997).

Furthermore, the media play a part in shaping the public's perception of the role and effectiveness of CPS. Unfortunately, this sometimes results in a negative perception of these agencies and their personnel (Ayre, 2001; Franklin & Parton, 1991). Goddard and Saunders (2000) point out that CPS must learn to work with the media by understanding their motivations and using them constructively. In this vein, several social work organizations have chosen to be proactive by helping the media and their readers to understand the difficulties that parents and children face and the services offered to them (Association des centres jeunesse du Québec, 2006; Franklin & Parton, 2001; Laliberte et al., 2011).

This study also showed that the media led people to take concrete action by reporting children they believed to be in difficulty to the CPS. If such is the case, greater screening of children and families in need of help might occur. We cannot know however if all these reports are well-founded. The media coverage of maltreatment could lead to an increase in false positives. Moreover, little is known about the bandwagon effect that the media can create when they cover family dramas. As with the media coverage of suicide, we have to question ourselves and work in concert with the media so as to better document the potentially negative effects that might ensue from a heavy coverage of horror stories like infanticide. Further research on these and related issues is very much needed.

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CONCLUSION

A weekly tally of the number of reports made to CPS over a two-year period, as well as newspaper articles about maltreatment, was drawn up. Results showed a statistically significant positive relationship between the number of articles published regarding child maltreatment and/or CPS during a given week and the number of reports made to CPS during that same week and the following week. On the other hand, the presence of media frenzy events in the newspapers did not seem to provoke an increase in reporting. These results led us to conclude that the media did indeed play a role, particularly in encouraging people who were hesitating to report a child in difficulty or who did not know how to take action. At the same time, these results also showed that the media were a cog in a larger system intended to protect children from abuse and negligence. Finally, the results showed that media coverage of maltreatment was far from explaining the overall fluctuation in reports made to CPS. We must therefore continue in our efforts to determine which elements explain these fluctuations so as to better protect children and support these organizations in their work.

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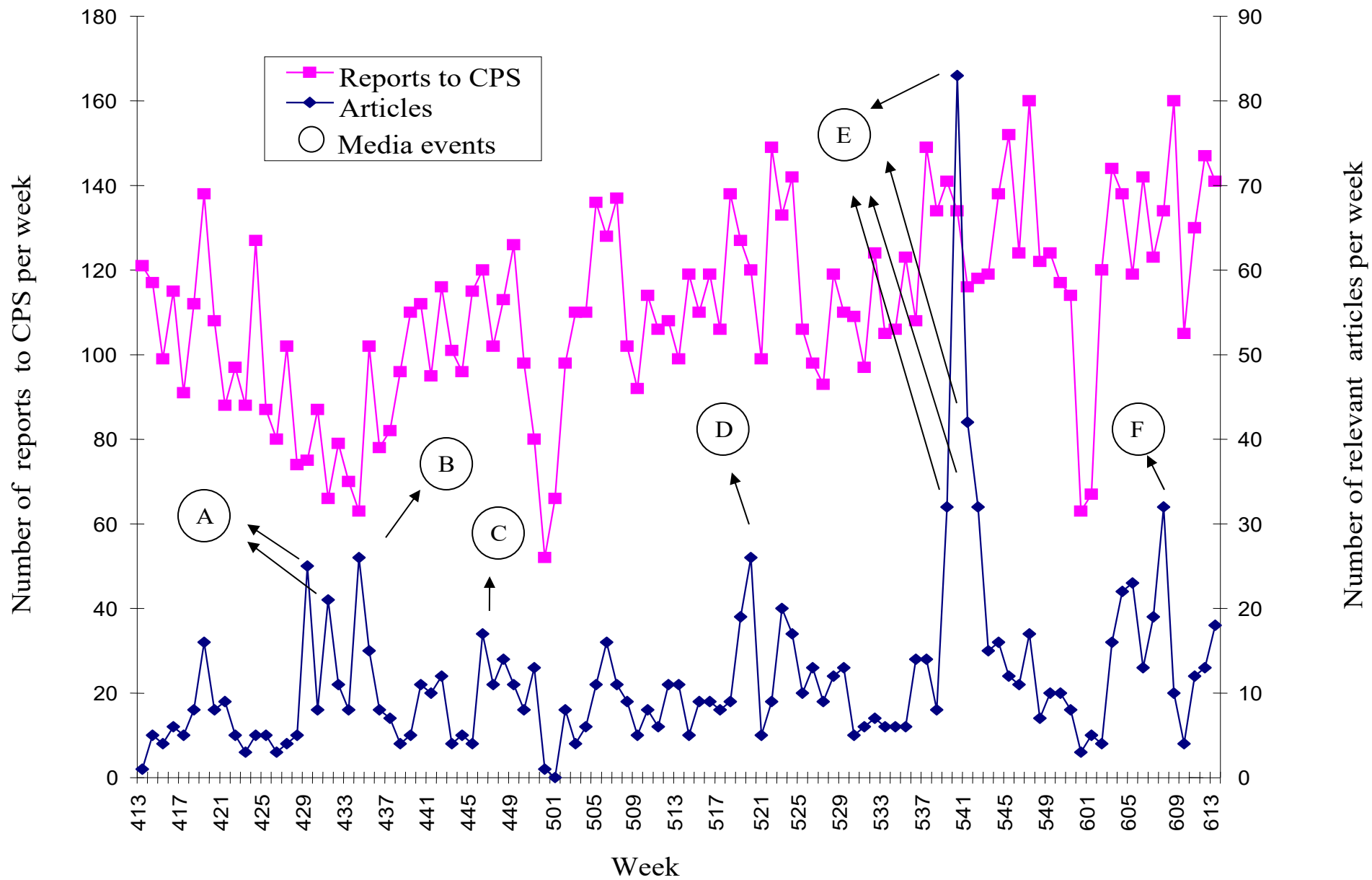
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Note 1: The weeks on the x-axis are numbered thus: The first number refers to the year while the two other numbers refer to the week in that year. So, for instance week 413 is the 13th week of 2004, which is the first week in April. The first study cycle began in week 413 and the second cycle, in week 513 (i.e. the 13th week of 2005).

Note 2: Letters A, B, C, D, E and F refer to six media events.

Table 1

Prediction model for number of reports according to the cycle and media events from April 1, 2004 and March 31, 2006

Predictor	Number of reports	
	Coefficient	<i>p</i>
Y-intercept	101.48	.001
Cycle 2	19.57	.001
Week 429 ^a	-12.31	.49
Week 431	-22.99	.19
Week 434	-28.02	.12
Week 446	13.78	.43
Week 520	4.39	.80
Week 539	14.96	.43
Week 540	11.12	.59
Week 541	-5.48	.79
Week 542	-2.50	.89
Week 608	-0.86	.96
AR(1) ^b	0.39	.001

^a Week 429 = 29th week of 2004

^b First-order autocorrelation = correlation between the number of reports made in a given week and the preceding week (one-week lag)