



Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute

Engelberg Center for Children and Youth



National Index of Child Maltreatment in Israel: Process of Development

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The Index was initiated and funded by the MeHalev Initiative

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Executive Summary

1. Introduction

Israeli children who have suffered maltreatment and are known to social services are only the "tip of the iceberg." Numerous victims remain unknown to the agencies and this impedes the formulation of policy and the development of responses. An appropriate response to the problem warrants complete, consistent data on its extent. Such data would facilitate activities of protection, treatment and rehabilitation, as well as prevention, and information campaigns. In May 2015, Israel launched the MeHalev ("From the Heart") initiative for the prevention of child maltreatment. The initiative is a cooperative endeavor of the EBS Company (formerly, Traiana), headed by Gil Mandelzis, and the BCG Consulting firm; the Haruv Institute, founded by the Schusterman Family Foundation in Israel, which was chosen to lead it; the Israel National Council for the Child, and the Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute (MJB). The goal of the initiative is to promote practical measures to reduce and prevent the problem in Israel, including the development of an index to measure its extent.

The complexity of measuring child maltreatment, as may be seen from the literature, is reflected in the difficulty of formulating a consensual definition of the phenomenon, in the multiplicity of measuring tools, and in the absence of an organized database to consistently and comprehensively collect data, including on the entire range of components of child maltreatment. Partially, the complexity derives from the many different systems charged with addressing the problem, each of which defines it in its own way, deals only with certain aspects, and collects data according to its own procedures.

To date, there has been no attempt in Israel to collate the collected data in an integrated set of measures to yield current, extensive and reliable information on the problem and its components, and permit follow-up of change over time. The development of a national index to measure child maltreatment is designed to fill this gap and confront the problem effectively. MJB was asked to take charge of the development of the index.

The index is important for the following reasons:

- ◆ It creates a common language between stakeholders; the process of development demands agreement over the definitions, indicators, and methodology.
- ◆ It gathers data from several sources and provides reliable, comprehensive data to serve as a decision-making platform at the policy level.
- ◆ It allows for ongoing follow-up of the extent of the problem and the monitoring of changes in extent, in policy outcomes and in treatment, including in international comparisons.
- ◆ It helps focus public attention on the problem and place it on the public agenda.
- ◆ The data contribute to research on the topic, helping to improve treatment and intervention.

The development of the index requires, among other things, broad expertise in the area in question, the common understanding and broad agreement of professionals and policymakers as to its validity, and a determination of the limits of the area measured. Accordingly, in the first stage of development,

lasting a year (June 2015-May 2016), efforts were directed at establishing a multidisciplinary committee to support the process, serve as consultant, and help learn the methods of measurement in this area. The learning revolved around: 1) the challenges of index development; 2) an examination of the prevalent definitions of child maltreatment in western countries; 3) an analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of the methods of data collection on the topic worldwide (data sources and tools); 4) an examination of the data sources and means of data collection in Israel.

The data were collected by means of a review of the professional and research literature and of interviews with stakeholders, including personnel responsible for managing administrative data files and researchers. An inter-disciplinary committee was established to accompany the process of index development and serve as consultant. The data were collated in two documents: one deals with the difficulties of the issues involved in defining the topic and their implications, and a review of the definitions of child maltreatment used by various bodies in Israel and abroad; the other discusses methodological aspects: it includes a review of the existing databases abroad and the prevalent data-collection methods, as well as a description of the data sources in Israel, their advantages and disadvantages. Each document was sent out to members of the multidisciplinary committee in advent of the discussions on the topic. The committee convened twice. It comprised professionals and experts from a variety of areas related to child maltreatment: representatives of the government, the NII, health professionals (pediatrics and psychiatry) and academics. The insights emerging from the surveys, the interviews, the feedback on the materials, and committee discussions helped formulate recommendations for the construction of the index.

2. Main Insights Emerging from the Literature Review and Interviews

a. Definitions

One basis for developing an index is determining the definitions to be used. The purpose of the first document sent out to committee members was to provide vital data towards reaching a decision on the matter. These were its main points:

- ♦ *Difficulty formulating a consensual definition:* One challenge to index development is the formulation of a uniform, consensual definition of child maltreatment. The difficulty is both conceptual and operational. In other words, it relates both to the question of the components to be included, and to the cutoff point of poor or harmful treatment (in the case of abuse) or unmet needs (in the case of neglect). Another difficulty is uncertainty over the question of whether child maltreatment should be defined on the basis of the perpetrator's characteristics and conduct, the child's experience, the repercussions for the child, the context of the surroundings – or a combination of all these.
- ♦ *Implications of the absence of a consensual definition:*
 - A concern that the findings of the measurement would be influenced by differential definitions deriving from personal values and conceptions or from professional predispositions
 - A limited ability to identify the groups at the greatest risk who require an immediate response and, on the other hand, the moderate cases who might still benefit from preventive care

- A limited ability to keep track over time of changes in the extent and frequency of the problem and for international comparisons, and to monitor the effectiveness of preventive activities
- Disagreement over the components of the definitions, and which definitions to include, make it difficult to formulate explicit handbooks to guide professionals in identifying the problem and providing responses. Differential definitions prevent professionals and the public from identifying cases of maltreatment.

♦ *Current definitions in the literature:*

- Various countries have made an effort to define child maltreatment in order to allow for ongoing measurement of the problem and to provide care for the victims. Many researchers have suggested their own definitions for different types of maltreatment. An examination of the more accepted, current definitions reveals that as similar as they may be, they differ in principle and this affects the question as to the identity and extent of the population involved. The review also indicates that many of the definitions are vague, omitting explicit reference to vital components, for instance: whether child maltreatment is indicated only if premeditated; whether the focus should be on the conduct of the perpetrator or on the situation of the child; and whether child maltreatment should refer only to harm that has actually been done or also to the risk of harm.

b. Data-Collection Methods (Sources and Tools)

Methodology poses another challenge to index development. The second document sent out to committee members surveyed the advantages and disadvantages of accepted data-collection methods abroad, the salient measurement tools in use today, and the existing databases in Israel. These were the main insights emerging from it:

- ♦ *Accepted data-collection methods around the world:* The databases on child maltreatment show that many countries collect data on the problem and in some, the practice has been longstanding. Most countries collect administrative data, some conduct surveys to broaden the extent of the children presented and learn more about the problem. However, the data collection is often fragmented and partial, and the components collected vary greatly. In many countries, data systems and services do not share their data. Non-sharing, and differences in the system and data, make it difficult to collate and integrate the information. System differences also impede data comparisons not only between countries, but also within the same country. This difficulty stems from the different data components collected, the different definitions of the types of child maltreatment, of the target populations, and more.

Given the complexity of identifying the problem, its varying detection and treatment, no data-collection system is capable of representing it completely. Nonetheless, it was found that certain methods do improve capability. The addition of self-reporting by children or parents, and surveys of professionals (from social and other services, such as schools) improve estimations of the extent of the problem over administrative data alone. However, both self-reporting and parental reporting are problematic. They are tainted by bias of one sort or another, including denial and attempts at concealment. The conclusions emerging from the literature are that the choice of method of data

collection and use should correspond to the research question, and that multiple data sources have a better chance of representing the extent of the problem more fully.

- ♦ **Salient measurement tools:** In some countries, a system of definitions was formulated to serve professionals and a broad research platform was developed, including measurement tools. These countries include England (Working Together to Safeguard Children), the U.S. (NIS; NCANDS), Canada (CIS) and Holland (NPM).

The National Incidence Study used in the U.S. is a survey of professionals. The definitions and tool were formulated by a research team to measure child maltreatment. The data were collected from staff of the Child Protection Services (CPS) and from professionals in universal services (for example, daycare centers, schools and the health system) and from therapeutic services (social services and shelters for homeless youth). In other words, the reports cover children both known and unknown to the social services. The survey was first conducted in 1979 and since then, every decade.

The NPM (Prevalence of Child Maltreatment) is the name of a tool used in Holland. There, they adopted the NIS but added a survey of adolescents to the research design. The first round of surveys was conducted in 2005, the second – in 2010.

- ♦ **Data sources in Israel:** As noted, the preparations for developing an index included examining all the databases existing in Israel on child maltreatment. The examination revealed that while there are databases on child maltreatment in Israel, most of them do not measure the full extent of the problem, but are limited to the data they do gather, as is true of most countries. Furthermore, some have no clear definitions of the different types of maltreatment, and the data collected is often general rather than focused on child maltreatment. The examination nevertheless concluded that the databases are capable of serving the needs of the index if the necessary adjustments are made.

3. Guiding Principles for Constructing a National Index for Measuring Child Maltreatment in Israel

Based on the data collected in the literature review, and on consultations with experts, guiding principles were formulated for the development of the national index and approved by members of the advisory committee accompanying the process. The principles are:

- 1) To use definitions accepted in western countries, which are consistent with the decisions made by the committee, in order to facilitate comparison between Israel and other countries
- 2) To use existing data-collection infrastructures to improve the feasibility of measurement and reduce costs
- 3) To integrate data sources to facilitate a fuller presentation of the extent of the problem
- 4) To collect demographic data for a deeper understanding of the problem.

These principles were translated into operative decisions for the construction of the index:

- 1) **Adoption of NIS definitions.** According to this definition, a maltreated child is one whose physical or mental health or welfare was harmed or there was a real fear that this happened by the acts or omissions of parent(s) or other person(s) responsible for the child's welfare. The NIS definitions

contain many components that the committee considered important. These relate to: the situation of the child and the conduct of the parent/s; harm or omission in the physical and emotional sense and as regards wellbeing; parent offenders and also other responsible adults; potential harm and the dimension of intent regarding the types of listed offenses. The NIS definitions are also more widespread than the others, so that using them would increase the potential for international comparisons.

2) *Adoption of the NIS methodology as used in Holland.* The research literature recommends using several data sources to cover the full extent of the problem. Consequently, a decision was taken to draw on three data sources, similar to the format in Holland: (1) a survey of professionals in social services; (2) a survey of professionals in universal services (for example, schools and hospitals); and (3) a survey of adolescents.

3) *Use of infrastructures and tools already used in Israel:*

- ◆ Use of computerized infrastructure and the tool of the 360⁰ National Program for Children and Youth at Risk for the survey of professionals.
- ◆ Use of computerized infrastructure and components of the epidemiological survey of violence against children and youth In Israel (Lev-Wiesel and Eisikovits, 2016) for the survey of adolescents.

A pilot is planned for 2017 among a representative sample of children, which will apply the principles formulated and use the tools chosen. In 2018 a report is to be issued, for the first time, presenting the extent of child maltreatment in Israel beyond the children known to the social services.

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