

The Effect of Statutory Regulations on Social Workers' Decisions to Report Child Maltreatment

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Abstract. *This study examined social workers' perceptions of the New York State law requiring the reporting of child maltreatment and the relationship of those perceptions with the likelihood that workers would report incidents of maltreatment to child protective services. Data were collected by a mailed questionnaire from a sample of 710 social workers belonging to the New York City chapter of NASW. Findings show that social workers differ in their understanding of the law and that the worker's understanding is related to reporting behavior. The worker's understanding of the law had a small but significant effect on the likelihood of reporting, accounting for 6% of the variance. The binomial effect size of the relationship ($r = .24$) is such that a worker's understanding of the law is sufficient to increase the likelihood of reporting a case of maltreatment from 38% to 62%. Implications for practice are discussed.*

Keywords: *Law and reporting, mandated reporters and social work, maltreatment and reporting*

INTRODUCTION

The United States' child protection system is based on Federal and State statutes. Federal law requires States to have reporting laws. State laws require designated individuals to identify and report suspected child abuse and neglect to a local office or central registry of child protective services. The mandated reporting system has been in effect for more than thirty years, yet despite its long-term existence there is empirical evidence that many incidents of child maltreatment are not reported to child protective services (Delaronde, King, Bendel & Reece, 2000; Hansen et al., 1997; Kalichman, 1999; Kalichman, Craig & Follingstad, 1990; Sedlak & Schultz, 1997; Zellman & Bell, 1990). Previous research has provided many reasons for not reporting including concern that reporting does more harm than good (Hansen et al., 1997; Melton, 2005; Zellman & Bell, 1990) and that reporting would damage the worker/client relationship (Alvarez, Kenny, Donohue & Carpin, 2004; Hansen et al., 1997; Kalichman, 1999). However, failure to report a suspicion of maltreatment is also a legal issue and the question arises as to whether mandated reporters know their State's law. This study examines the understanding that professional social workers have of the New York State reporting law and the relationship of that understanding to differences in reporting child maltreatment.

Background

The Federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act, enacted in 1974, provided money for child protection, established definitions for child abuse and neglect, and established requirements for the reporting of child abuse and neglect at the State level

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(Nelson, 1984). Consequently, while each State is responsible for drafting its own reporting laws, the reporting laws of all jurisdictions share several core components, including: 1) identification of those individuals mandated to report suspected child maltreatment (Child Welfare, 2008, pp. 1-2); 2) a definition of reportable circumstances (Kalichman, 1999); 3) provision of penalties for failure to report (Child Welfare, 2007, para. 3 & 4); and 4) provision of immunity from civil and criminal liability for reporting in "good faith" (Child Welfare, 2008, para. 3 & 4).

Reporting laws in all jurisdictions, however, also share a language that is open to the interpretation of the reader (Carleton, 2006; Davidson, 1995; Foreman & Bernet, 2000). Both opponents and supporters of mandatory reporting laws agree that the language of the State laws is overly vague (Davidson, 1995; Kalichman, 1999; Kalichman, Craig & Follingstad, 1990). Supporters maintain that the broad language of the reporting statutes provides the needed flexibility to include rather than exclude possible cases of abuse (Davidson, 1995). Critics of the language point out that the vaguely worded reporting procedures fail to provide an enforceable standard (Davidson, 1995; Foreman & Bernet, 2000; Kalichman, 1999). Ambiguity of the statute's language leads to confusion regarding what constitutes abuse in a given situation and may result in both reporting circumstances that should not be reported (Leon, 2007) and failing to report circumstances that should be reported (Kalichman, 1999). Whether because of the language of a State's law or ignorance of the law, mandated reporters frequently disregard the law (Melton, 2004; 2005). Indeed, many professionals appear to view reporting as an *option* based on evidence of abuse rather than a *mandate* based on suspicion of abuse (Kalichman & Craig, 1991; VanBergeijk, 2007).

In the State of New York, those persons designated as mandated reporters include medical professionals, teachers, social workers, and police officers, among others. These professionals are required to immediately report any circumstance in which they have "reasonable cause to suspect" that a child has been abused or maltreated (*State Statute Results*, 2008). Professionals practicing in the State of New York who willingly fail to report a case of suspected child maltreatment are guilty of a Class A misdemeanor and are "...civilly liable for the damages proximately caused by such failure" (*State Statute Results*, 2008). Professionals who report suspected maltreatment in the execution of their job responsibilities are presumed to be acting in good faith and are immune "from any civil or criminal liability that might otherwise result..." (*State Statute Results*, 2008).

A number of studies have identified characteristics of the worker that influence reporting behavior such as the age of the reporter (Zellman & Bell, 1990), gender (Al-Moosa, Al-Shaiji, Al-Fadhli, Al-Bayed & Adib, 2003; Hansen et al., 1997; Kenny, 2001; Tilden et al., 1994; Webster, O'Toole, O'Toole & Lucal, 2005), ethnicity (Ashton, 2004; Kenny, 2001; Levi, Brown & Erb, 2006; O'Toole, Webster, O'Toole & Lucal, 1999; Webster et al., 2005), years of experience (Kenny, 2001; Lane & Dubowitz, 2009; O'Toole et al., 1999), training (Feng & Levine, 2005; Hansen et al., 1997; Sedlak & Schultz, 1997; Tilden et al., 1994; Webster et al., 2005); reporting history (Delaronde et al., 2000; O'Toole et al., 1999; Webster et al., 2005; Zellman & Bell, 1990) and agency setting (O'Toole et al., 1999; Webster et al., 2005; Zellman & Bell, 1990). Moreover, there is some empirical evidence indicating that understanding of the law and attitude

toward the law is related to the reporting of child maltreatment. Several studies have found that workers' perception about the mandate to report is strongly related to actual reporting; workers who believe that they have a legal obligation to report are more likely to be consistent reporters of maltreatment than workers who do not believe they have an obligation (Brosig & Kalichman, 1992; Zellman & Bell, 1990). Other studies have found that workers who believe the law is effective are more likely to report maltreatment than workers who do not perceive the law as effective (Delaronde et al., 2000; Tilden et al., 1994).

A limitation of previous research is that these studies did not examine the provisions of the law directly; rather they asked whether the respondent thought that a particular situation fell under the general provision of the law. Previous research is limited also in providing information about social workers who are a major group working with families and children. Social work is the predominant provider of mental health services (Mechanic, 1999) and services to children (Kadushin, 1999).

The Present Study

This research is a cross-sectional study of professional social workers. Its purpose is to investigate the relationship between the failure of social workers to report suspected child maltreatment and their interpretation of three key aspects of the New York State law: 1) situations that must be reported, 2) sanctions for failing to report, and 3) protection from liability. The study tests the hypothesis that workers who misunderstand the law are less likely to report maltreatment than workers who correctly interpret the law. The protocol for this research was examined and approved by the Institutional Review Board for the protection of human subjects at the author's institution.

METHODS

Sample

The population of interest in this study is professional social workers working with families and children in the New York City metropolitan area. The sample for this study was systematically selected from a general list of members of the local chapter of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW). The membership list included workers who worked with families and children as well as workers who did not. In order to obtain a sufficient sample of workers serving families and children for the required statistical analysis, 4,194 undifferentiated members, approximately half of the total membership, were systematically randomly selected into the study sample (systematic random sampling was conducted by selecting an initial name from the membership list by using a number from a table of random numbers and then by selecting every other name for inclusion in the mailing). Each name selected into the sample was mailed a letter explaining the study and requesting the individual's participation, a self-report questionnaire, and a stamped addressed envelope for returning the questionnaire. The first mailing was followed by three reminders sent at three-week intervals; the third reminder included a "non participant" postcard requesting selected demographic information to determine if non participants differed from participants. A completed questionnaire was accepted as subject consent.

Of the questionnaires that were distributed, responses were received from 2,112 individuals, a response rate of 50%. This number includes 257 “non participants” who differed from respondents in that they were slightly older and less likely to work with families or children. The respondents were sorted into the population of interest, those working with families and children. Seven hundred ten (710) individuals who worked with families and children and who completed the questions of interest comprise the sample for this study.

Sample Characteristics

The sample of 710 was predominately White (67.6%) and female (78%). Three percent (3%) were Asian; close to 14% were Black (9.7% Black American and 4.1% Black Caribbean); 11% were Latin; 4% identified themselves as “other.” Ninety-two percent had at least a Master’s in Social Work (MSW). The sample had a mean of 13 years experience as a professional social worker (post MSW). This sample comprised higher proportions of minorities, a higher percentage with a Master’s degree, and had slightly more years of experience than the most recently reported national sample of social workers (Gibelman & Schervish, 1997).

Measurement

The study focused on the relationship between the likelihood of reporting suspected child maltreatment and social workers’ understanding of three aspects of the reporting law: 1) situations that must be reported; 2) sanctions for failing to report; 3) protection from liability.

Data on the “likelihood of reporting maltreatment” were collected using eight vignettes of probable maltreatment, two adapted from Hong and Hong (1991) and six taken from incidents known to local child protective agencies (See Figure 1, next page). The vignettes were used in a previous study (Ashton, 2004) and rated for seriousness by a sample of social service workers. On a scale of 1, “not serious” to 7, “very serious”, the vignettes in this study ranged in seriousness from 5.3 to 6.8; thus, all of the vignettes represented reportable situations. Other studies have indicated that the use of vignettes is a valid measure for the likelihood of reporting child maltreatment (Feng & Levine, 2005; Hansen et al., 1997; Zellman & Bell, 1990).

Dependent Variable: To measure the “likelihood of reporting” respondents were asked to read each of the eight vignettes and rate the likelihood that they would report the incident depicted in the vignette to child protective services using a scale from 1, “almost certain not to report” to 5, “almost certain to report.” Responses for all eight vignettes were added together for an overall score of “likelihood of reporting” (Cronbach $\alpha = .77$). The scale has a theoretical range of 8 to 40; the higher the score, the more likely the individual will report incidents of probable child maltreatment.

Figure 1. Case Vignettes

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1. *Both parents work long hours; they leave very early in the morning and come home late at night. Their nine-year-old son is left on his own. The boy gets himself ready for school in the morning and lets himself in after school. The parents tell their son to eat food prepared and left in the refrigerator, warming it up if he wants. He usually eats it cold. He goes to bed by himself because his parents are usually not back by his bedtime.*
 2. *A sixteen-year-old yells and curses at his parents during a recent argument. His parent punches him in the mouth.*
 3. *The classroom teacher notices that a nine-year-old boy has red marks on his palms and legs. When asked about the marks, the boy tells the teacher that yesterday he went to a friend's house to play instead of going home to do his homework. When his father found out, he hit him on the palms and legs repeatedly with a stick. The child says that his father does this whenever he does not do his homework.*
 4. *A six-year-old wets the bed. Parents punish the child by immersing his lower body in a tub of very hot water.*
 5. *Recently when asked a question, a 10-year old child mumbled a rude answer under his breath. His parent banged the child against the wall, bruising his shoulders.*
 6. *A 12-year-old is caught stealing candy from the corner store. When his parents found out what the child did, they beat him with a stick and burned a mark on his arm to remind him not to steal again.*
 7. *The parents discipline their eight-year-old child by hitting him with a strap whenever he misbehaves.*
 8. *A family recently arrived in the metropolitan area from a rural location. Last week after school, their 10-year-old son went off with a group of new friends instead of coming straight home. His parents disciplined him in their usual way, which is to make him kneel in the closet for several hours.*
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Independent Variables: Independent variables included seven personal and professional characteristics of mandated reporters identified in previous research as being related to reporting behavior. They are: 1) age, 2) gender, 3) ethnicity, 4) years of professional experience, 5) hours of training within the last two years, regarding child development, maltreatment, parenting, and reporting procedures, 6) reporting history (i.e. the number of times the respondent made a report to child protective services within the last five years), and 7) agency auspice, i.e. public or private. In addition, there were three independent variables pertaining to the mandated reporting law: “situations that must be reported”; “sanctions for failing to report”; and “protection from liability”.

“Situations that must be reported” was operationalized by asking respondents: “In your opinion, which of the following statements *best* reflects New York State’s reporting

requirements? a) Take no chances; report any situation for which you have a reasonable cause to suspect maltreatment; b) Use your discretion; report only those situations where you can substantiate abuse or neglect; c) Report only situations involving serious harm to a child; d) Avoid reporting, if you can do so safely; use agency and community resources to work with victims and perpetrators; e) Unable to answer. I am not aware of the State's reporting requirements." Responses were dichotomized into response , "a" which reflects the language and intent of the statute, versus all other responses.

"Sanctions for failing to report" was operationalized by asking respondents the following: "What is the likelihood that you would be criminally prosecuted (that is, arrested and/or incarcerated) if you failed to report a case of suspected child abuse or neglect? a) not at all likely; b) hardly likely; c) somewhat likely; d) very likely." Responses were scored 1 to 4, with higher scores reflecting a stronger belief in the likelihood that sanctions would be carried out for not reporting, as stated in the law.

"Protection from liability" was operationalized by asking respondents, "What is the likelihood that New York State law would protect you from being sued by a parent you report for maltreatment? a) not at all likely; b) hardly likely; c) somewhat likely; d) very likely." Responses were scored 1 to 4, with higher scores reflecting a stronger belief that the worker would be protected, as stated in the law.

Analysis

Frequency distributions were obtained for independent and dependent variables. Correlation analysis was used to identify relationships between the "law" variables, demographic variables (age, gender, ethnicity), professional variables (years of experience, hours of on-the-job training, reporting history, agency auspice – public or private) and likelihood of reporting. In order to test the study hypothesis, hierarchical multiple regression analysis was used. In Model 1, personal variables (age, gender, ethnicity) were entered as a block to determine their effect on the likelihood of reporting. In Model 2, professional variables (years of experience, hours of training, reporting history, and agency auspice) were entered in a block to determine what influence they added to the likelihood of reporting, over and above personal characteristics. Lastly, in Model 3, the law variables, dummy coded into "1" for the "correct" response and "0" for all others, were entered as a block to determine their added effect on likelihood of reporting.

The Bonferroni t-statistic for multiple computations was used to adjust the probability of falsely rejecting the null hypothesis when multiple statistical tests are made (Pedhazur, 1997). The criterion of an alpha of .05 based on the Bonferroni correction was used to reject the null hypothesis. The sample of 710 individuals had the power to detect a small effect size of $r = .10$ within the population 84% of the time using the .05 level of significance (Cohen, 1988).

RESULTS

The sample varied on the likelihood that they would report the incidents depicted in the eight vignettes to child protective services. The actual range of scores for "likelihood

of reporting” was the same as the theoretical range, 8-40; some respondents would not report any of the cases while some respondents would report all eight cases. The median score for “likelihood of reporting” was 35; over half the respondents were “almost certain” to report at least four of the incidents depicted in the vignettes. The distribution was negatively skewed, meaning that as a sample, respondents were more likely to report the incidents depicted in the vignettes than to not report them (Table 1, next page).

The vast majority of this sample of social workers working with families and children, 82%, knew that the law requires them to report *any suspicion* of maltreatment to child protective services; however, there was a small percentage of the sample (approximately 15%) that had a different interpretation of the law and another 2.7% of the sample admitted that they did not know the law (Table 1).

The sample varied considerably in their perception of sanctions being enforced for failing to report maltreatment. Only 21.7% believed that they would likely be prosecuted for failing to report, as written in the State law. Over 40% believed that being sanctioned was hardly likely or not at all likely (Table 1).

There was considerable variation, also, in the workers’ perception that the law would protect them from liability. Most of the sample indicated, rightly, that the law provides protection from liability; 45% believed it was “very likely” they would be protected; 27.7% believed it was “somewhat likely” they would be protected. Close to a third did not believe they would be protected (Table 1).

Correlation analysis found that the law variables were associated with each other and that each was related to the likelihood of reporting. Of the personal and professional variables, reporting history was correlated with likelihood of reporting and ethnicity was related to one of the law variables; White respondents were more likely than respondents of other ethnic groups to understand that they could be criminally prosecuted for failing to report maltreatment. None of the other professional or demographic variables were related to either the law variables or likelihood of reporting (Table 2).

Hierarchical multiple regression analysis (Table 3) confirmed the hypothesis that workers who misunderstand the law are less likely to report maltreatment than workers who correctly understand it. In Model 1, the personal variables combined explained less than 2% of the variance in reporting and most of the effect was contributed by ethnicity; Asian respondents were less likely to report maltreatment than were respondents of other ethnic groups (Table 3). In Model 2, the addition of the professional variables produced an R^2 of .032 and added .017 ($p < .05$) to the variance in the likelihood of reporting, most of it contributed by “reporting history;” respondents with a higher number of previous reports were more likely to report current incidents of maltreatment (see Table 3). Hierarchical regression Model 3 shows the effect of the worker’s perception of the law on the likelihood of reporting. The addition of the law variables produced an R^2 of .094 and added .062 to the variance in the likelihood of reporting ($p < .0001$). Most of the variance contributed by the law variables came from “situations to be reported” and “sanctions for failing to report.”

Table 1. Frequency Distributions for Personal, Professional, Law and Likelihood of Reporting (n = 710)

<i>Personal Variables</i>						
Age	Mean	44.3	Median	45	SD	12.4
		<i>n</i>				%
Male		158				22.3
Female		552				77.7
<i>Ethnicity</i>						
Asian		21				3.0
Blk American		69				9.7
Blk Caribbean		29				4.1
Latin		82				11.5
White		480				67.6
Other		29				4.1
<i>Professional Variables</i>						
Yrs experience	Mean	13.1	Median	10	SD	10.7
Hrs of training		<i>n</i>				%
None		164				23.1
1 to 4 hours		255				35.9
5 to 10 hours		126				17.7
Over 10 hours		165				23.2
Reporting History	Mean	5.7	Median	2.0	SD	15.4
Agency auspice		<i>n</i>				%
Public		346				48.7
Private		364				51.3
<i>Law Variables</i>						
Situations to Report		<i>n</i>				%
*Take no chances		586				82.5
Use discretion		83				11.7
Report serious harm only		15				2.1
Avoid reporting		7				1.0
Unaware of law		19				2.7
<i>Sanctions for failing to report</i>						
*Very likely		154				21.7
Somewhat likely		252				35.5
Hardly likely		238				33.5
Not at all likely		66				9.3
<i>Protection from liability</i>						
*Very likely		320				45.1
Somewhat likely		197				27.7
Hardly likely		113				15.9
Not at all likely		80				11.3
Likelihood of Reporting	Mean	34.0	Median	35.0	SD	4.5
					Skewness	-1.2

*The correct response according to the State statute.

Table 2. Correlations between Personal, Professional, Law, and Likelihood of Reporting Variables (n = 710)^a

	Situations to report	Sanctions for failing to report	Protection from liability	Likelihood of reporting
Situations to report		.11	.16*	.22*
Sanctions for failing to report			.13*	.11*
Protection from liability				.10*
Age	.08	-.03	.04	-.01
Gender	.07	.00	.08	.03
Ethnicity:				
Asian	.05	.01	.04	.10
Blk American	.00	.06	.05	.05
Blk Caribbean	.00	.08	.01	.01
Latin	.04	.04	.02	.01
White	.03	.12*	.01	.06
Other	.04	.05	.01	.01
Yrs experience	.07	-.04	.05	.03
Hrs of training	.09	.05	.00	.02
Reporting history	.02	.02	.05	.18* ^b
Agency auspice: public/private	.08	.03	.00	.02

*p < .05 (Bonferroni correction for multiple computations, C = 16).

^a Pearson correlations except where noted.

^b Spearman's rank-order correlation

Table 3. Summary of Regression Analysis for Likelihood of Reporting by Personal, Professional and Law variables (n = 710)

Variable	Model #1		Model #2		Model #3	
	B	β	B	β	B	β
Personal						
Age	-.007	.020	-.023	-.063	-.028	-.077
Gender	.367	.034	.429	.040	.605	.056
Ethnicity						
Asian	2.839	.107*	2.796	.105*	2.559	.096*
Blk Am.	.946	.062	.917	.060	1.014	.067
Blk Carib.	.066	.003	.288	.017	.521	.023
Latin	.123	.009	.132	.009	.083	.006
Other	.472	.021	.527	.023	.795	.035
Professional						
Yrs experience			.026	.061	.022	.051
Hrs of Training			.051	.024	.003	.001
Report history			.034	.116*	.033	.113*
Agency auspice			.231	.026	.396	.044
Law						
Situations to Report					2.474	.209**
Sanctions for failing to report					.974	.089*
Protection from liability					.514	.057
R ² for the Model	.015		.032		.094	
Sig R ²	NS		.017		.000	
R ² change	.015		.017		.062	
Sig R ² change	NS		.015		.000	

*p < .05

**p < .01

The findings reveal that respondents who believed that *any* suspicion of maltreatment should be reported, that they would be prosecuted for failing to report, and that the law protects them from being sued by a parent or caretaker, were more likely to report child maltreatment than respondents who interpreted the law to permit flexibility in reporting, believed that they would not be prosecuted for failing to report, and believed that they could be sued for reporting.

DISCUSSION

This study examined social workers' perceptions of the law requiring the reporting of child maltreatment and the relationship of those perceptions with the likelihood that workers would report incidents of maltreatment to child protective services. The study also looked at the effect of several personal and professional characteristics that have been found in previous research to be related to reporting behavior. The findings of this

study support previous research that shows that ethnicity is related to reporting behavior (Ashton, 2004; Kenny, 2001; Levi, Brown & Erb, 2006; O'Toole et al., 1999; Webster et al., 2005). In the present study, Asian respondents were less likely to report child maltreatment than were respondents of other ethnic groups. The findings of this study also support previous research which indicates that past reporting behavior influences the likelihood of future reporting (Delaronde et al., 2000; O'Toole et al., 1999; Webster et al., 2005; Zellman & Bell, 1990). The present study found that respondents who had reported a higher number of incidents of maltreatment in the past were more likely to report a current incident of maltreatment than respondents who had fewer past reports.

The primary focus of this study was the relationship between the worker's understanding of the law and the worker's reporting behavior. The findings reveal that social workers differ in their understanding of the reporting law and that the likelihood of reporting maltreatment is related to that understanding. In order to protect children from maltreatment it is critical that mandated reporters know what to report. It is reassuring to see that most, 82%, of the social workers in this study understood that they are to report any suspicion of maltreatment. Close to three percent (3%) were not knowledgeable about what to report; the other 15% of this sample had an interpretation of the law that permitted professionals working with families and children more flexibility in reporting, namely: reporting only situations that can be substantiated; reporting only situations involving serious harm to a child; or avoiding reporting and using agency and community resources to work with victims and perpetrators. Indeed, there may be some workers in this group who essentially oppose the idea of reporting altogether as there is evidence from earlier studies that some professionals see the system of mandated reporting as an ill-conceived policy that fails to prevent the recurrence of maltreatment and which diverts resources from actual service delivery to investigation (Melton, 2004; 2005).

Social workers differed in their interpretation of the other two aspects of the law – whether they would be sanctioned for failing to report and whether they would be protected from liability when reporting. And in fact, these two aspects are ambiguous. The law states that failure to report is a crime, yet enforcement is very unlikely because prosecution becomes complicated when specific cases are under examination. Similarly, protection from liability is not absolute (McLeod & Polowy, 2000). The differences in worker response to these two aspects of the law reflect the uncertainty of their application in real life.

The study has some limitations which must be noted. First, generalizations from this sample are limited to the geographical region (New York City area) from which this sample was drawn; nonetheless, the finding that perception of the law is related to reporting behavior among social workers is consistent with findings from studies concerning other mandated reporters in other geographical locations (Brosig & Kalichman, 1992; Delaronde et al., 2000; Zellman & Bell, 1990). Second, the current study focused on intended behavior using vignettes. Although vignettes have been verified as valid measures for likelihood of reporting maltreatment, the vignettes in this study could be strengthened by: having fewer incidents of physical maltreatment and more incidents of neglect; being consistent in the amount of detail; and specifying how the reporter would learn about the incident. Ideal vignettes would also match intake

information of a typical service agency. Moreover, in an agency setting, incidents coming to the worker's attention might be checked for prior reports or other data. It should also be noted that the vignettes omitted other types of maltreatment including sexual, emotional and medical abuse. These types of abuse are quite different from physical abuse in that they are more subtle and more complicated, and may result in reporter responses that are very different from the response to either neglect or physical maltreatment.

Despite its limitations, this study provides information about an important group of mandated reporters, who previously have not been studied regarding the relationship of their knowledge of the law and their reporting behavior. The addition of the law variables added 6% to the variance in reporting and, although the strength of the relationship between knowledge of the law and the likelihood of reporting child maltreatment represents only a medium effect size (Cohen, 1988), it is large enough to have practical implications. The binomial effect size display (BESD) illustrates the practical implications. Rosenthal (1991) and Rosenthal and Rosnow (2008) propose using the BESD as an appropriate tool in demonstrating that small correlations can reflect an important social effect in a way that is easy to understand, requiring no particular statistical expertise. In the present case, the BESD shows that the size of this relationship where $R^2 = .06$, $r = .24$, is such that a worker's understanding of the law is sufficient to increase the likelihood of reporting a case of maltreatment from 38% to 62%. It is true that the BESD provides an estimated prediction but it is a prediction of improvement and indicates that knowledge of the reporting law affects practice. An increase of 24% in the likelihood of reporting maltreatment is a considerable impact on practice and calls for agencies to periodically review State law requirements. The finding in this study that on-the-job training was not related to knowledge of the law suggests that agency supervisors should review their in-service training to assess what is effective and what is not. Using agency listservs and e-communication, as well as face-to-face meetings and workshops, supervisors can incorporate various techniques, including case presentations, clinically based vignettes, surveys, and policy updates, to help workers learn and stay abreast of State reporting requirements. Agency supervisors must also help workers recognize and agree on values underlying the mandate to report so that all workers regardless of racial or ethnic background are knowledgeable and effective providers of services to children and families.

Future research is needed to understand the complex psychosocial processes involved in decisions to not report - the combined and interactive effects of worker characteristics, case specifics, the agency environment in which the worker practices, and innovations in practice interventions. In addition, this study raises the question about the steps workers should take to protect children and help families in situations where the worker identifies a reportable incident but decides, for whatever reason, not to report the incident to child protective services. It may be that the dichotomy of report/not report is no longer valid and that research is needed to understand what it is that workers do in addition to (or instead of) reporting suspicions of child maltreatment.

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