

Current issues and challenges in the definition and operationalization of Child Maltreatment: A scoping review

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Abstract

Background: Studies show considerable variability in the definitions and operationalization of child maltreatment (CM). The effects are far-reaching and extend from academic research, policy making and implementation of monitoring systems to cross-country and cross-sector comparisons.

Methods: A multidisciplinary network of experts conducted a scoping review using a thematic approach to summarize findings. Studies were included if the substantive content of the article was related to issues, challenges, and debates in defining CM. The review followed methodological guidance for the conduct of scoping reviews and was reported in accordance with the PRISMA-ScR checklist.

Results: A systematic search including eight international databases identified 7,372 potentially relevant papers. From a total of 55 full-text studies were assessed for eligibility, 25 studies satisfied the inclusion criteria. Three primary themes emerged: 1) the creation of new strategies to define CM, including the integration of child and victim perspectives, 2) the difficulties in defining specific CM types, especially child sexual abuse (CSA), neglect, and emotional abuse, and 3) the real-world implications for research and prevalence estimates, prevention and policy.

Conclusions: Despite longstanding concerns, the challenges regarding the definitions of CM persist. Few studies have tested and implemented CM definitions in practice. The results support ongoing international cross-sectoral processes to develop uniform, coherent definitions of CM.