

MIGRANTS AND MALTREATMENT: COMPARATIVE EVIDENCE FROM CENTRAL REGISTER DATA

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Abstract—This paper reports the results of a series of studies on the abuse and neglect of migrant farmworker children. These investigations were conducted between 1983 and 1985 in the states of New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Florida, and Texas. Names of approximately 24,000 migrant children obtained from annual migrant education censuses were individually cross-referenced with the appropriate state data bases to determine if they had been involved in a confirmed incident of maltreatment. The information acquired was converted to incidence estimates that were contrasted with the rates for all children in the respective states and were decomposed to identify high-risk cohorts within the migrant population. One finding common to all five assessments was that migrant children were significantly more likely to be maltreated than other children, although these incidence rates varied appreciably from one state to another. The emphasis of this paper is on the unique methodology employed in the research, issues pertaining to provisions for accessing central registers and protecting confidentiality of subjects, the generalizability of the findings, and cross-state incidence differentials for both migrants and children from nonmigrant families.

Key Words—Migrant maltreatment, Central registers, Economic stress.

INTRODUCTION

POVERTY AND STRESS arising from economic hardship are considered important antecedents of child maltreatment. Children from poor families are involved in an unusually large number of confirmed incidents and are disproportionately represented in state and national statistics on neglect, physical and psychological abuse, and sexual victimization. While the apparently pronounced rate of maltreatment among families from lower socioeconomic classes has been attributed to biased reporting, there are compelling theoretical reasons to expect such a relationship between poverty and the risk of abuse and neglect (Pelton, 1978). There is also a body of research suggesting that parents in adverse economic circumstances

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will be more inclined to abuse or neglect their children even after taking other possible explanatory factors into consideration (Galston, 1964; Garbarino, 1976; Garbarino & Crouter, 1978a, 1978b).

Perhaps the strongest empirical evidence contradicting the notion that class differentials in maltreatment levels are primarily due to the discriminatory nature of the reporting and monitoring system is provided by the National Study of the Incidence and Severity of Child Abuse and Neglect (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1981), which estimated that families with incomes of less than \$7,000 annually had a maltreatment incidence of 27.3 children per thousand compared to a rate of 10.5 children per thousand for the general population. These findings are particularly persuasive because they were derived from child protection agency records as well as other sources and are therefore minimally affected by the distortions that are commonly associated with official statistics.

Although child maltreatment tends to be concentrated among families in economic distress, it is not clear why the chronically disadvantaged should have an appreciably higher incidence rate. For example, research by Gil (1971) and Light (1973) indicates that maltreatment may be more related to a recent change in one's employment status rather than an enduring consequence of not having a job or of being destitute. People for whom poverty is a permanent condition will have more opportunity to develop strategies for coping with the stresses that emerge during periods of material deprivation and may not experience the feelings of frustration and anger that characteristically accompany a job loss. The potentially arduous chain of adaptive responses referred to by Steinberg, Catalano, and Dooley (1981), which can be precipitated by an occupational dislocation, may not apply to the plight of people who are frequently unemployed or who will virtually never have sufficient resources to properly care for and nurture their children. When considered from this perspective, migrant farmworker families provide an unusually interesting group for further examining the relationship between child maltreatment and poverty.

Events such as job seeking or relocating to another area and a reduced living standard do not necessarily have traumatic implications for members of migrant families since periodic unemployment occurs more or less routinely, although the exact occasion is not predictable. When seasonal and intermittent joblessness is part of a family's economic life, the interactions between parent and child may not be affected by recurrent economic setbacks which would otherwise induce a sense of failure or diminish self-esteem. Moreover, a family's formal and informal support systems should remain intact and accessible since its social status has not been fundamentally altered. While migrants tend to lose this access when they are away from home, some are able to compensate by relying upon the often viable extrafamilial networks that are formed during these periods. This series of observations suggests that the relationship between economic stress and maltreatment is more complex than previously thought and is dependent upon the social and cultural context of the population whose well-being is in jeopardy. The idea that etiologies are population-specific is consistent with the assertion that child maltreatment is a function of multiple factors (Belsky, 1980; Starr, 1979), a view compatible with the ecological interpretation of the phenomenon advanced by Bronfenbrenner (1979).

Substantive and Empirical Issues

This study partially addresses the question of whether economic and social impoverishment determines the abuse and neglect of children by establishing the incidence of maltreatment for migrant farmworkers, a segment of the population that is inveterately and desperately poor. If the propensity to abuse or neglect children is contingent upon the degree of poverty, rates of maltreatment between this low status group and the general populace should be sig-

Table 1.0

Poverty
Unemployment
Social Isolation
Mobility
Economic Insecurity
Lack of Social Support
Low Education
Poor Self-Concept
Low Self-Esteem
Crowded Housing
Greater Potential for Abuse
Limited Child Care
Poor Health Status
Cultural Traditions
Dual Wage-Earning
Limited Parental Resources
Stress
History of Maltreatment
Prejudicial Community Attitudes
Inadequate Social Services
Limited Emotional Resources
Low Job Satisfaction
Higher Levels of Unemployment

nificantly different. Both economic stress and social isolation are common factors, although the latter is more prominent for those who are unemployed for long periods rather than for those who are employed for short periods for purposes rather than for long-term limitation.

The particular characteristics of migrant families among farmworker families. The anti-social nature of the environment, a number of characteristics that are associated with high risk and are prevalent in these areas, should exert a significant influence on the child that the influence of these factors that are equally prevalent in the likelihood of abuse.

The primary cause of child abuse within a state, be it urban or rural, is the migrant population discussed earlier. This is a considerably greater problem in one state to another.

Another relevant factor is the mobility of the threat, whether intrastate or interstate migration.

Table 1. Characteristics of Migrants that Enhance or Mitigate the Risk of Maltreatment

Enhance Risk	Mitigate Risk
Poverty	Value children
Unemployment	Adaptive
Social Isolation	Support from extended family
Mobility	Religious beliefs
Economic Insecurity	Strong parent-child attachment
Lack of Social Support	Proficient in mobilizing and using resources
Low Education	Intolerance of abusive parenting practices
Poor Self-Concept	Strong sense of family loyalty
Low Self-Esteem	
Crowded Housing	
Greater Potential for Interpersonal Conflict	
Limited Child Care Opportunities	
Poor Health Status	
Cultural Traditions Emphasizing Physical Discipline	
Dual Wage-Earners	
Limited Parental Competence	
Stress	
History of Maltreatment	
Prejudicial Community and Societal Attitudes	
Inadequate Socialization	
Limited Emotional and Material Resources	
Low Job Satisfaction and Higher Alienation	
Higher Levels of Alcoholism and Depression	

nificantly different unless the anticipated relationship is suppressed by intervening conditions. Both economic standing and child maltreatment could be due to the influence of other common factors, although spurious effects cannot be detected with the cross-sectional methods that are employed. However, since the present investigation was performed for exploratory purposes rather than to rigorously test a set of hypotheses, this is not considered a serious limitation.

The particular empirical outcome that should emerge is that the rate of abuse and neglect among farmworker children would substantially exceed that of children from nonmigrant families. The anticipated magnitude and direction of this difference is predicated on the large number of characteristics that have been identified in the literature that place all children at risk and are prevalent among migratory workers (see Table 1). The role of these antecedents in enhancing the vulnerability of migrant children has not been documented, although each should exert a similar effect on their probability of maltreatment. We additionally presumed that the influence of these risk components would not be totally subsumed by other factors that are equally as pervasive among migrants and have been demonstrated to mitigate the likelihood of abuse and neglect.

The primary comparisons of importance were between migrants and the general population within a state, between these two groups across states, and within certain subclasses of the migrant population. Due to the relationship between chronic poverty and child maltreatment discussed earlier, we speculated not only that the incidence rate among migrants would be considerably greater than for nonmigrants, but that this pattern would be similar from one state to another.

Another relevant question was whether the rate for interstate migrants, who are the most mobile of the three categories of farmworkers, would be smaller than for the more stationary intrastate or resettled migrants. Our expectation was that the level of abuse and neglect among interstate migrants would not be as great as that of migrants who do not travel simply because,

work. Families with prior farmworker experience are more inclined to move, in part because their employment prospects are better. When they are not traveling, most migrants live in or adjacent to major crop or commodity production regions. States with longer or multiple growing seasons and whose agricultural sectors are more diversified, such as Texas, California, and Florida, have the largest populations of migrants. These are referred to as the home bases of farmworkers, many of whom spend the off-season in a single area and move to other states when their crop cycles begin.

This migration from one state to another at one time included such large numbers of people that it was represented by three separate streams (Central, Eastern, and Western). The streams also have distinctive ethnic compositions, with Hispanics constituting the majority population of the Western and Central Streams, and Blacks the largest ethnic category among Eastern Stream migrants. While many migrants still typically have to relocate to engage in agricultural work, they now tend not to travel as frequently or over such large distances as was once the case.

The mobility of many migrants and their geographic dispersion makes it difficult to study them using conventional procedures. There are only few areas of the country with significant concentrations of farmworkers, and they may be gone from their homes for long periods. During peak season many live in labor camps that are privately owned and protected from unauthorized entry, and it is not practical to contact them at their work site. Because of the obvious costs and disadvantages of recording personal observations on even a small number of families and the obstacles to measuring maltreatment, we relied upon data acquired from the secondary sources alluded to earlier.

METHOD

This research can best be characterized as five independent state-based assessments of the incidence of maltreatment among migrants integrated by a common data collection process, substantive emphases, and analytical framework. States were self-selected into the research program through a request from a migrant education agency to have an assessment conducted. After this request was received, project research staff contacted the state social service agency responsible for the child abuse and neglect register, and usually submitted a proposal that contained a detailed description of the research purpose and procedures. The proposal was then evaluated to ensure that the research satisfied the statutory provisions regulating access to case records and that the work could be accomplished without interfering with the register's normal operation. Permission was given to proceed only after these issues were resolved either through formal assurances or, in some instances, legally binding agreements.

Once a decision was made authorizing continuation of the research, the state's subject population was delineated. In states having relatively small enrollments, this group comprised all migrant children eligible to receive educational services, while in larger states it consisted of a representative sample that was randomly selected from the Migrant Student Record Transfer System (MSRST), an automated repository of health and education records on migrant children. Following the sample selection, a computerized listing of all qualified subjects was assembled. The listing included any child under the age of 18 (since anyone older is considered an adult under child protection law) and contained information that could be used to positively establish a child's identity if his or her name had been subsequently matched to that of a child who was abused or neglected. This identifying data included the name and gender of one parent or caretaker, the birthdate and gender of the child, and similar information on siblings.

The listing was then provided to social service personnel familiar with the capabilities of the register facility who would enter each name individually, along with the gender and birthdate, to determine whether that particular child had been involved in a case of maltreatment that had been opened and confirmed during the assessment period. The search operation was performed by the register computer which used either a soundex or phonetic detection algorithm. Rather than attempting to arrive at an exact match, the computer was instructed to respond with all names that most closely resembled the subject child's. In most cases, a child was not considered to have been maltreated unless the name, sex, and birthdate on both the source listing and register data base corresponded exactly.

On the few occasions when this information was discrepant, register personnel would resolve the question by invoking the same criteria they would normally employ to judge whether a child or perpetrator had a prior maltreatment history. If there was any possibility that a migrant child could be erroneously classified as maltreated, that child was simply eliminated from further consideration. Research staff would verify the identity of all maltreated children, principally to ensure that the procedures were being scrupulously applied, but this was done only after register personnel had arrived at their decisions. Data on the case in which the child appeared, such as date of occurrence, type of abuse or neglect, perpetrator, source of report, and disposition, were obtained for any migrant child who was the alleged victim and were incorporated into a separate data set. Once the names of all children in indicated cases had been processed, the information from the subject listing was merged with that extracted from the register files through sequential identifiers.

Legal statutes governing the use of the central registers and the confidentiality of their records dictated that strict precautions be implemented to ensure that the rights of the subjects would not be violated. The potential for disclosure was minimized by restricting access to the data to either employees of the cooperating social services agencies or to a small number of authorized researchers. If the subject listing was generated at Cornell, all names and identifying information were expunged prior to the last file configuration step to protect the anonymity of the subjects. Any information on maltreated children was also deidentified before final processing, and in one case only the social services staff executing the search were permitted to use the subject listing. Once the data from the child abuse records were transmitted to Cornell, they were retained on tapes or other medium in the central storage facility and secured through the regular computer security system.

A total of some 24,000 migrant children was included in these assessments, which were started in 1983 and continued over a 3-year period. The initial assessment in the series was conducted in New York State, followed by Pennsylvania and Florida in 1984, and Texas and New Jersey during 1985. Primary differences between assessments are summarized by state in Table 2, which indicates the year the study was performed, the size of the samples and populations, cooperating social service agencies, and the source of the information on migrant children who were neglected or abused. It should be noted that 3 of the 5 incidence assessments were based on complete populations of migrant children, while the other 2 encompassed samples of 5% or greater. Estimates from the latter assessments are projections and are subject to significant statistical variability because the elements in the frame were selected using simple random sampling procedures. The question of the reliability of the estimates and records affecting their accuracy is considered in more detail in the discussion section.

The preceding methodology was used to enumerate abused and neglected migrant children for the five states participating in this project component. Counts of maltreated migrant children obtained from the search process described earlier were placed in ratio to the at-risk population of farmworker children to produce state-specific cross-sectional incidence rates for the year being considered. Although these rates were determined by the same set of proce-

Table 2. State, Year

State/Year
New York/1983
Pennsylvania/1984
Florida/1984
New Jersey/1985
Texas/1985

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Table 3. Frequency

Attribute
Age
<5
5-9
10-14
≥15
Gender
Female
Male
Migrant Status
Interstate
Intrastate
Resettled
Family Structure
Single Parent
Two Parent
Other

* Percentages n
b Information
for these states

Table 2. State, Year Conducted, Sample and Population, Cooperating Social Service Agency, and Data Source of Incidence Assessments

State/Year	Sample (Population)	Cooperating Agency	Data Source
New York/1983	7,408 (7,408)	Dept. of Social Services	State Central Register
Pennsylvania/1984	4,711 (4,711)	Dept. of Public Welfare	Abuse Registry
Florida/1984	3,429 (52,486)	Dept. of Health and Rehabilitative Services	Client Information System
New Jersey/1985	2,694 (2,694)	Division of Youth and Family Services	Child Abuse Registry
Texas/1985	5,751 (115,020)	Dept. of Human Services	Child Abuse and Neglect Referral Information System

dures, they cannot be used by themselves to contrast states since each one reflected a different population (see Table 3 for relevant descriptive data), was derived from a separate source, and had a different degree of statistical precision. Retrospective or cumulative estimates were also produced from a number of the studies, although these are not reported here.

FINDINGS

Incidence rates for migrants and the populace within each of the five states and cross-state differentials are presented in Table 4, which also provides the components of each migrant estimate. Rates of abuse and neglect for migrants ranged from a maximum of 46.4 children per thousand in the state of Florida to a minimum of 5.1 children in Pennsylvania. The inci-

Table 3. Frequency Distributions of Selected Descriptive Attributes on Migrant Children Included in State Incidence Assessments

Attribute	State				
	New York ^a	Pennsylvania	Florida	New Jersey	Texas
Age					
<5	2,081 (28.1)	978 (19.2)	541 (15.8)	252 (8.9)	50 (<1.0)
5-9	2,404 (32.5)	1,681 (33.1)	1,252 (36.5)	1,095 (38.5)	1,653 (28.7)
10-14	2,035 (27.5)	1,500 (29.5)	1,103 (32.2)	886 (31.1)	2,657 (46.2)
≥15	888 (12.0)	921 (18.2)	534 (15.6)	613 (21.5)	1,391 (24.2)
Gender					
Female	3,578 (48.2)	2,512 (49.3)	1,660 (48.4)	1,382 (48.6)	2,799 (48.7)
Male	3,830 (51.7)	2,587 (50.7)	1,769 (51.6)	1,464 (51.4)	2,952 (51.3)
Migrant Status					
Interstate	1,558 (21.0)	2,226 (44.6)	1,632 (47.6)	593 (20.8)	930 (16.2)
Intrastate	1,546 (20.9)	595 (11.9)	470 (13.7)	251 (8.8)	895 (15.6)
Resettled	4,163 (56.2)	2,166 (43.4)	1,327 (38.7)	2,166 (70.4)	3,926 (68.3)
Family Structure ^b					
Single Parent	1,296 (17.5)	614 (12.0)			
Two Parent	5,919 (78.9)	4,415 (86.6)			
Other	193 (2.6)	66 (1.4)			

^a Percentages may not total to 100 due to rounding error or missing data.

^b Information on family structure was acquired only from New York and Pennsylvania because the subject listing for these states was generated directly from certificates of eligibility rather than from the MSRTS data base.

Table 4. Estimated State Maltreatment Incidence Rates for Migrants and the General Population and Differentials

State	Maltreated Children (Number at Risk)	Rate ^a	Population Rate	Rate Differential
New York	298 (7,408)	40.2	6.3	+6.4
Pennsylvania	25 (4,711)	5.1	1.6	+3.2
Florida ^b	2,434 (52,486)	46.4	18.2	+2.6
New Jersey	31 (2,694)	11.5	7.1	+1.6
Texas	2,260 (115,020)	19.6	12.9	+1.5

^a Incidence rates are expressed as children per thousand at risk.

^b Confidence intervals at the .05 uncertainty level for the rates in Florida and Texas are 10.4 and 3.6, respectively.

ence rates for each state's general population had a similar order of magnitude, but were uniformly lower than those for migrants. Rates of maltreatment among farmworker children exceeded those observed for the general population by a factor of two or more in three of the five states. The largest disparity was observed in New York State where the rate of abuse and neglect estimated for migrant families was more than six times the rate recorded for the population at large.

Figure 1 presents sets of incidence rates for each of the states arranged according to the three classes of migratory workers. The pattern was generally as expected with rates for interstate migrants being consistently smaller than those for intrastate and resettled migrants. One exception to this was in Texas where the incidence rate for interstate migrants was larger than that of the resettled category. An unanticipated finding of special significance was that intrastate children appeared to sustain the highest risk of the three groups since the largest rates were computed for this migrant classification. This may signify that mobility in and of itself does not inhibit reporting or that relocation is one response to being involved in an investigation or of being contacted by child protection authorities. Since we do not have any information about whether the maltreatment occurred before or after the relocation of the family, it is not possible to conclusively resolve this question.

DISCUSSION

The preceding findings demonstrate that children of migrant farmworkers, a group besieged by extreme and sustained poverty, are at high-risk for abuse and neglect compared to the general population. Evidence from the five state assessments indicates that the incidence of maltreatment, as reflected in confirmed reports made to child protection agencies, was consistently higher among migrants than for all children. There were, however, substantial differences between states in the apparent vulnerability of migrant children who live or travel there with their parents. Migrants in New York State were more than six times more likely than nonmigrant children to have been maltreated, while the risk to children in Texas was only about one and one-half times greater. Moreover, migrants whose movements were confined to one state's boundaries displayed significantly higher maltreatment incidence rates than resettled or interstate farmworkers. With but one exception, these dissimilarities between the three classes of farmworkers were also observed across states.

Figure 1

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Assuming that among migrants members of racial tend to have more whose propensity and social class of ing rates could be more likely to be (Bolger, 1988). differences across the ways in which groups, and the worker population

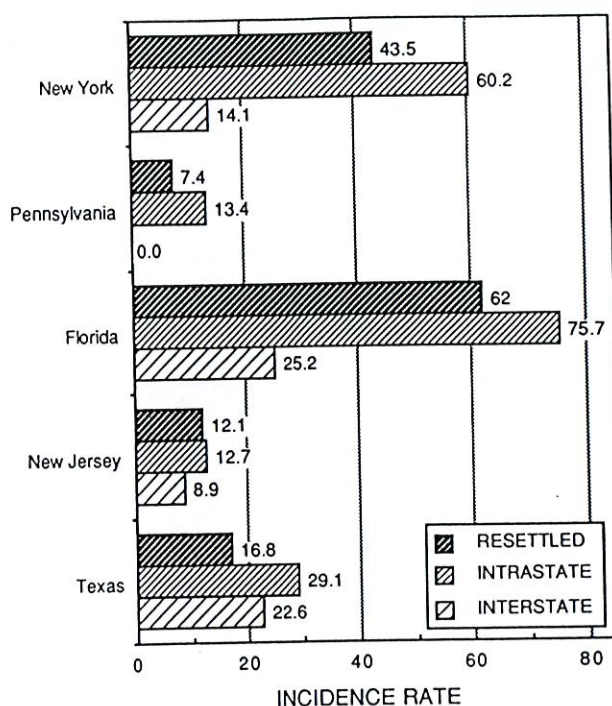


Figure 1. Maltreatment incidence rates for interstate, intrastate, and resettled migrants.

Some of the results are undoubtedly influenced by sampling fluctuations and other sources of error. Even with relatively large sample sizes, estimates for migrants in Texas and Florida could depart from the actual rates by as much as 25%. Evaluations of the samples on selected attributes suggested an acceptable degree of convergence between their sampling and population distributions, but this information cannot be used to verify the accuracy of the incidence estimates. Equally as important, the general population figures may be affected by undercounting due to factors mentioned previously. The overestimation of the incidence rates of migrants in those states, combined with the probable underestimating of the correct rates for the general population, may reduce the differences between the two groups below the levels reported here. It is also possible, however, that the rates for migrants are artificially low because of undercounting among the interstate cohort.

Assuming that the data we report here are at least statistically correct, maltreatment rates among migrants could still appear to be inordinately high because the disadvantaged and members of racial minorities are treated inequitably by child protective systems. Farmworkers tend to have more frequent contact with mandated reporters, such as health care providers, whose propensity to report incidents of abuse and neglect is heavily influenced by the race and social class of the perpetrator (Hampton & Newberger, 1985). The effect of higher reporting rates could be compounded since allegations originating with professional sources are also more likely to be investigated and substantiated (Eckenrode, Levine-Powers, Doris, Munsch, & Bolger, 1988). This could partly explain why rates within states vary so appreciably, while differences across states are uniquely determined by their child welfare standards and statutes, the ways in which these are applied to migrants and prominent cultural and socioeconomic groups, and the extent to which the precursors of risk are represented in each state's farmworker population.

Clearly more research is necessary to definitely establish whether chronic poverty is the principle reason for the higher maltreatment incidence rates observed for migrants or whether this is due to other conditions. Poverty probably accounts for some of the variation in maltreatment between migrants and nonmigrants, but there is still significant variability in maltreatment rates within this population that is not simply attributable to being poor. For example, in New York State, the cumulative incidence of maltreatment was considerably greater for single parent families even after adjusting for migrant status (Alvarez, Doris, & Larson, 1988). Maltreatment may be more prevalent among intrastate migrants because of social isolation, insufficient social resources, and lower levels of social and cultural integration in comparison to the other migrant groups. Abuse and neglect among migrant families may also be related to ethnicity, since the cohorts having the highest rates are characterized by specific distributions of minorities. Additional more intensive studies explicitly designed to examine these potential antecedents could ascertain the particular dynamics of abuse and neglect in the migrant population and perhaps identify other factors that would explain the elevated and disparate rates detected in this investigation. Economic status appears to have the predicted relationship with maltreatment, although that may not be independent of other influential etiological parameters.

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Résumé—L'article ici présenté est le résultat de plusieurs études sur les mauvais traitements et la négligence à l'égard d'enfants de travailleurs agricoles migrants. Ces recherches ont été effectuées entre 1983 et 1985 dans les états de New-York, New Jersey et Pennsylvanie, Floride et Texas. L'étude comprenait à peu près 24,000 enfants de travailleurs migrants dont les noms avaient été obtenus lors de recensement annuel se rapportant à l'éducation de tels enfants. Ces noms ont été vérifiés en les comparant à des données appropriées de l'état pour déterminer si ces enfants avaient été impliqués dans un incident confirmé de mauvais traitement. L'information ainsi obtenue a été convertie en estimation d'incidence et cette estimation a été comparée avec les taux pour tous les enfants des états respectifs et ont été décomposés pour identifier des groupes à risques élevés à l'intérieur de la population migrante. Un point commun à toutes les cinq évaluations a été que les enfants migrants sont, de façon significative, plus aptes à être maltraités que les autres enfants bien que les taux d'incidence varient de façon appréciable d'un état à l'autre. L'article met l'accent sur une méthodologie unique qui a été employée sur des problèmes en relation avec l'accès aux registres centraux et des problèmes de la protection de la confidentialité des dossiers, la possibilité de généraliser les données et enfin les différences d'incidence d'état à état à la fois pour les enfants de migrants et pour les enfants contrôlés.

Resumen—Este artículo reporta los resultados de una serie de investigaciones acerca del abuso y la negligencia de los niños de peones migratorios. Estas investigaciones fueron llevadas a cabo entre 1983 y 1985 en los estados de New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Florida y Texas. Los nombres de aproximadamente 24,000 niños migratorios que fueron obtenidos de los censos anuales acerca de la educación de migrantes fueron comparados individualmente con las colecciones apropiadas de datos estatales para determinar si habían sufrido un incidente confirmado de maltrato. La información adquirida fue convertida en estimados de frecuencia que fueron contrastados con las frecuencias para todos los niños en los estados respectivos y fueron decompuestas para identificar cohortes de alto riesgo en la población migratoria. Un descubrimiento en común entre las cinco evaluaciones fue que los niños migratorios tenían un mayor chance de ser maltratados que los otros niños, aunque los porcentajes de frecuencia variaron apreciablemente de un estado al otro. El énfasis de este artículo es en la metodología usada en la investigación, en los problemas con respecto al acceso a registros centrales y la protección de la confidencialidad de los sujetos, en la generalizabilidad de los resultados, y en las diferencias estatales en frecuencias entre los niños migratorios y los niños provenientes de familias que no son migratorias.

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