



The contributing factors to child abuse and the aftermath of violent exploitation: An examination through the lens of Thailand

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Abstract

Child abuse is a significant concern in Thailand, encompassing various forms of harm such as physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect. This study investigates the underlying causes and effects of child abuse in the country. Data were gathered through detailed interviews with 20 experts in the field of child abuse and analysed via content analysis. The research identifies seven main risk factors for child abuse in Thailand: parenting styles, societal structure, insufficient parenting skills and family preparedness, family separation, peer influence, substance abuse, and economic conditions. Furthermore, the study highlights the repercussions of child abuse, including perpetuating cycles of violence, creating double victims, and leading to mental health issues in children. The recommended approach to address these issues involves enhancing parental education and developing strong community support networks to support families facing challenges, aiming to reduce the risks and improve mental health outcomes for children.

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Introduction

Child maltreatment refers to harmful actions or the failure to act in a way that causes injury to a child's physical and mental well-being. It encompasses four main categories: physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect. The situation of child abuse in Thailand is increasingly concerning. Reports from the Department of Women's Affairs and Family Institutions under the Ministry of Social Development and Human

Security (2015) reveal a rising trend in child abuse cases. These statistics are supported by evidence from service centres under the Ministry of Public Health (2015). In 2013, there was a 35 percent increase in reported cases of abuse, with support centres handling 31,966 cases. This averages 87 cases daily, or approximately 3 every hour. Of these incidents, 60 percent involved children, and 40 percent involved women. This is a significant increase from the 20,582 cases reported in 2012, which averaged 56 cases per day. A closer look at the child

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abuse statistics reveals that about 90 percent of the victims were girls, predominantly between the ages of 10–15 years (61%) and 15–18 years (22%). The most frequent form of abuse was sexual, accounting for 69 percent of cases (13,226 cases), followed by physical abuse (4,256 cases). The abusers were often individuals trusted by the children, such as boyfriends or friends. Factors contributing to these incidents include environmental influences like inappropriate media exposure, proximity, and opportunistic circumstances.

In 2007, Thailand implemented the Act for the Protection of Victims of Domestic Violence, recognizing the complex and sensitive nature of addressing domestic violence, which typically involves intimate personal relationships. This context differs significantly from physical abuse between strangers. Utilizing criminal measures under the Penal Code for domestic violence cases was seen as less effective, as criminal law focuses more on penalizing offenders rather than on rehabilitating them or safeguarding the victims of domestic abuse. Thus, a specialized law for the protection of domestic violence victims was deemed more suitable. This specific law allows for different forms, methods, and procedures compared to general criminal proceedings. It offers offenders opportunities for reform and aims to prevent further abuse, while also striving to maintain healthy family relationships. The law further acknowledges the state's responsibility to protect children, youths, and family members from violence and mistreatment. Statistics show the impact of this law over the years. In 2011, 65 cases were brought under this act. The number rose to 94 in 2015, indicating an increased awareness or reporting of domestic violence. However, by 2017, the number of cases had decreased to 49, suggesting potential changes in the incidence of domestic violence, reporting rates, or the effectiveness of preventive measures (Office of Planning and Budget, Office of the Ombudsman, 2019).

In Thailand, various news outlets have reported several instances of child abuse in different forms. A notable case involved physical violence, where a man wearing a red shirt was reported to have strangled and slapped a schoolboy, accusing him of stealing money from a teacher (Thai Rath Online, 2018). There have also been incidents of emotional and psychological abuse, such as an instance where a teacher publicly criticized a student's floral arrangement on Facebook, calling it unattractive (Khaosod Online, 2018). In addition, there have been distressing reports of sexual violence. One such case was reported where a mother entrusted her 1-year and 6-month-old daughter to a known

individual in a nearby village for childcare, only to later find out that the child had suffered a broken arm and had been sexually abused (Thai Rath Online, 2018). Furthermore, there have been cases of neglect and abandonment. For example, a construction worker discovered an infant left in a backpack beside a temple wall; the baby was still alive and was quickly reported to the police and taken to a hospital for care (Thai Rath Online, 2018).

Efforts to combat child violence are being undertaken by various organizations, including initiatives to support and safeguard children who have been mistreated or not properly cared for. These efforts are spearheaded by entities like the Child Rights Protection Centre, which offers rehabilitation programs for abused children. In a broader context, the United Nations has developed the UN Model Strategies on Violence Against Children. This comprehensive framework is designed to protect children from crimes, violence, and discrimination, and to ensure they receive appropriate criminal justice. It serves as a guideline for nations to adopt and implement in their strategies against child violence. The UN Model Strategies encompass 17 different strategies, organized into three primary categories. The first category focuses on general preventive measures, aimed at reducing the risk of violence against children. The second category enhances the capability of the criminal justice system to address incidents of violence against children effectively. The third category involves strategies for both prevention and response to violence against children within the justice system itself. This holistic approach ensures a multi-faceted and thorough strategy in dealing with the issue of child violence at various levels.

Addressing child violence effectively requires insights from experts with firsthand experience in child protection, law enforcement, social work, and psychology, as their specialized knowledge is crucial in understanding the complex, multi-faceted causes of child abuse. Experts such as these are uniquely positioned to identify subtle risk factors and systemic issues that may not be evident in broader studies, allowing for a more nuanced, context-specific perspective on child violence. Their perspectives are invaluable in uncovering patterns, motivations, and environmental influences that contribute to child abuse within Thailand, thereby enhancing our understanding of both immediate and long-term impacts on affected children. This study, therefore, focuses on gathering insights from these experts to identify the specific risk factors contributing to child violence in Thailand and the outcomes of such abuse. By analysing their informed viewpoints, the research aims to develop

actionable strategies and policies tailored to the unique socio-cultural landscape of Thailand, with the ultimate goal of supporting targeted interventions that mitigate this pressing issue and enhance child protection efforts nationwide.

Literature Review

Child abuse, as defined by Siegel & Welsh (2017), includes a range of detrimental acts towards a child's physical, emotional, and sexual health, and is categorized into physical, sexual, emotional abuse, and neglect. A global review of literature reveals complex risk factors and consequences, necessitating comprehensive interventions. Familial dynamics, evident in factors such as family conflict and inconsistent discipline in South Africa, and a history of family abuse and substance abuse in Kentucky, play a significant role in child abuse (Meinck et al., 2015; Pierce et al., 2017). Economic hardships and social instability, like those seen in Croatia and during the COVID-19 pandemic, exacerbate child maltreatment risks (Ajduković et al., 2018; Lawson et al., 2020). Parental mental health and substance abuse are consistently linked to child maltreatment (Doidge et al., 2017; Motorca et al., 2021). Specific risks for children, especially girls, include previous sexual abuse and lack of peer support (Clayton et al., 2018; Meinck et al., 2017), while behavioural and developmental challenges, as seen in Thailand, are also significant factors (Swangpun et al., 2019). The psychological impact of child abuse includes increased suicide attempts and mental health challenges, highlighting the importance of coping mechanisms and support for vulnerable populations, including refugees and girls at risk of sexual abuse (Martin et al., 2016; Thoresen et al., 2021). This body of research underscores the need for multifaceted strategies to address the diverse and complex dynamics of child abuse globally.

The body of research on child maltreatment presents a harrowing picture of its extensive and enduring effects. Various studies underline that all forms of child abuse, be it physical, emotional, or sexual, lead to a wide array of psychiatric and behavioural problems, such as anxiety, depression, aggression, and conduct disorders (Ivanov et al., 2015; Vachon et al., 2015). Immediate consequences include physical injuries and psychological trauma (Lemesle et al., 2015), while long-term impacts extend to serious health issues like suicide, substance abuse, and chronic physical conditions (Tonmyr, 2015). The ripple effects of child abuse are profound, affecting educational

performance, employment prospects, and relationships, thus impeding societal and economic progress (Abbasi et al., 2015). Additionally, abused children face heightened risks of peer victimization (Benedini et al., 2016), mental health disorders, and genetic modifications (Hecker et al., 2016). The lifelong implications of childhood violence include poor overall health and emotional instability (Brown et al., 2023), leading to social, cognitive, and attachment issues, as well as perpetuating a cycle of violence across generations (Dodaj & Sesar, 2020; Heidari et al., 2021). Furthermore, there's a noted correlation between child abuse and the development of psychopathy, aggressive behaviour in adulthood, and extreme criminal activities such as serial killings (di Giacomo et al., 2021; Pitzanti, 2021).

The studies collectively emphasize the critical need for targeted interventions and preventative measures to mitigate the impacts of child abuse, including breaking the intergenerational cycle of violence and addressing the wide-ranging consequences of childhood maltreatment (Trangkasombat, 2008). Within the Thai context, child sexual abuse (CSA) is a significant concern, often under-researched in terms of services, policy, and legislation (Chotchaisathit, 2014). For instance, studies examining Thailand's child protection system post-Child Protection Act 2003 indicate that while there have been improvements in systematic responses, there remain critical gaps in community awareness, data collection, and intervention enforcement, particularly at the local level (Auemaneekul, 2013). Additionally, Thailand's community beliefs and attitudes toward discipline and punishment often hinder effective intervention, as highlighted in qualitative research on Bangkok parents' perceptions of child discipline (Auemaneekul, 2013).

More recent studies underscore the connections between parental stress, economic hardship, and increased risk of child abuse. For instance, Jeharsae et al. (2022) reported associations between caregiver stress levels and self-reported child abuse, revealing significant behavioral issues stemming from socioeconomic challenges in Thailand's Deep South. Moreover, McCoy et al. (2021) examined the feasibility of the Parenting for Lifelong Health program within Thailand's public health system, which showed promising reductions in harsh parenting and child maltreatment. However, despite these positive results, broader application and scalability of such interventions remain limited.

A cross-country analysis comparing child sexual abuse policies and practices in Thailand and India further underscores the lack of collaborative, cross-national research on CSA prevention and intervention efforts in

Thailand, as well as the need to align Thailand's policies more closely with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) standards (Jatchavala et al., 2024). These studies identify knowledge gaps in integrated intervention models that address not only family and parenting dynamics but also broader economic and social stressors within the Thai socio-cultural landscape. This study aims to bridge these gaps by exploring comprehensive, multi-dimensional strategies for preventing and mitigating child abuse, ultimately contributing to a more robust, culturally informed approach to child protection in Thailand.

Methodology

Participants

The study involved 20 essential informants selected through a purposive sampling strategy, chosen for their specialized roles and expertise in areas of child protection, anti-trafficking, and social services. This approach aligns with recommendations for focused qualitative sampling, especially in studies addressing sensitive social issues (Bryman, 2016; Patton, 2014). The selection criteria included (1) professional experience in fields directly related to child welfare, (2) a minimum of five years in roles involving direct intervention, policy development, or advocacy concerning child abuse, (3) affiliation with institutions or organizations recognized for their influence on child protection efforts, and (4) geographical and socio-economic diversity to capture varied perspectives on child abuse across Thailand. This criterion-driven sampling enhanced the diversity of perspectives and mitigated potential biases, ultimately supporting the study's external validity (Creswell & Poth, 2016). To further enrich the sample, the snowball sampling technique was employed, allowing initial participants to recommend additional informants with relevant expertise, thereby expanding the sample to include voices from harder-to-reach groups (Noy, 2008). The informants comprised individuals from prominent institutions and organizations actively engaged in child protection, including the Head of the OSCC at Pathumthani Hospital, officers from the Anti Human Trafficking Division, law enforcement representatives from regional police divisions, leaders from NGOs such as the Childline Foundation 1387 and the FACE Foundation, social workers, academic experts from the Police Cadet School, and officials from the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security.

This comprehensive representation from both governmental and non-governmental sectors aimed to strengthen the generalizability of findings by integrating a broad range of expert perspectives, consistent with best practices for data triangulation in qualitative research (Denzin, 2012; Tracy, 2024).

Research Tool

The research employed a carefully designed interview questionnaire as the primary tool for data collection, aimed at capturing the nuanced dynamics and risk factors associated with child abuse as outlined in the literature. This tool's development involved a systematic approach, beginning with an extensive review of established theories and research on child maltreatment, including concepts from ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and attachment theory, which informed the structure and content of the questions to ensure a thorough examination of relevant factors (Papalia et al., 2017, 2018; Siegel & Welsh, 2017). The topics and questions were meticulously crafted to address key aspects such as familial dynamics, economic stress, parental mental health, and specific child vulnerabilities highlighted in prior studies (Meinck et al., 2015; Ajduković et al., 2018). To enhance the questionnaire's relevance and clarity, a subject matter expert reviewed and provided feedback, which was integrated into subsequent revisions to better align the tool with real-world scenarios of child abuse. Following these adjustments, a pilot test was conducted on a small representative group, allowing the research team to refine the questions further by identifying any ambiguities and ensuring that the tool effectively captured the complex factors influencing child maltreatment (Lawson et al., 2020). This pilot phase, in particular, helped refine questions related to economic hardship and parental substance abuse, ensuring their clarity and applicability. Through this rigorous process, the interview questionnaire was optimized for reliability and validity, thereby enhancing its capacity to gather meaningful, comprehensive data on child abuse's multifaceted nature (Thoresen et al., 2021).

Data Collection

This qualitative study utilized documentary research, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions to explore the causes of child abuse within Thai society. Documentary analysis involved examining books, journals, and relevant Thai and foreign research documents to gain a comprehensive understanding of

the factors driving violence and child abuse. The data collection for this study took place over a one-year period, from September 2019 to February 2020, allowing sufficient time for thorough interviews, focus groups, and in-depth exploration of the research objectives. This duration was essential for gathering detailed insights and ensuring the reliability of findings across diverse sources and regions. Field research included in-depth interviews with key informants, supplemented by observational data, with interviews lasting between 30 to 45 minutes. Focus group discussions were organized with justice system officials, academics, NGO workers, and community leaders to facilitate diverse insights into the issue. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Committee of Research Ethics (Social Sciences) at Mahidol University (Certificate of Approval No. 2019/195.1009). Recognizing the sensitivity of the topic, particularly concerning child abuse, the researchers implemented enhanced ethical protocols to support participants' well-being. Informed consent was obtained after providing participants with detailed information about the study, emphasizing their right to confidentiality, withdrawal without repercussions, and protection of their privacy and dignity throughout. During interviews, researchers were trained to approach sensitive topics carefully and were prepared to provide immediate referrals to psychological support services if any participant experienced distress. To maintain confidentiality, data from interviews and discussions are reported in aggregate only, with all identifying information securely protected. Additionally, all data will be destroyed upon study completion, upholding strict confidentiality standards. This ethically rigorous approach ensures that the study respects the vulnerability of participants while adhering to high standards in sensitive research.

Data Analysis

For data analysis, the researchers transcribed all focus group discussions and one-on-one interviews verbatim, meticulously documenting observations and extracting key information from documents to ensure accurate interpretation (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Qualitative data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, incorporating a structured coding process to identify recurring patterns and themes related to the causes of child abuse (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Initially, open coding was applied to categorize data, followed by axial coding to establish connections between themes, which enabled a deeper understanding of underlying issues (Saldaña & Omasta, 2016). This multi-step coding strategy enhanced

transparency and allowed for a more nuanced analysis, aligning with best practices for qualitative rigor (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). To ensure accuracy and reliability, triangulation was employed by integrating data from three primary sources: in-depth interviews, documentary research, and focus group discussions. Cross-referencing information across these methods minimized potential biases and strengthened the validity of the findings (Patton, 2014). This rigorous analytical approach not only provided a comprehensive view of the factors contributing to child abuse in Thailand but also enhanced the study's transparency and replicability, offering a robust framework for interpreting complex social dynamics in child welfare research (Denzin, 2012).

Results

Risk Factors of Child Abuse

From the in-depth interviews and field studies, the causes of violence against children became clearer, as follows:

Parenting styles

The in-depth interviews and field studies highlight that parenting styles and family environments are critical factors in the occurrence of child abuse. Parents who have experienced violence are more likely to perpetuate this cycle within their own families, as one interview with an administrator from the One Stop Crisis Center (OSCC) noted, "the parenting style of caregivers plays a significant role." Children often mirror the behaviour they observe, such as smoking, drinking, and domestic violence, which they may view as acceptable. A professor at the Royal Police Cadet Academy stated, "if parents smoke, drink, and abuse each other, children may view this behaviour as acceptable." A positive family environment fosters healthy development, while a negative one increases the risk of violent behaviour, as emphasized by a police officer from the Metropolitan Police Bureau: "children absorb behaviours from their guardians, which become ingrained as they grow." Financial status alone does not determine the likelihood of child abuse, as issues of neglect and inadequate care are present across all socio-economic levels. A child protection expert from the Childline Thailand Foundation highlighted, "if you smoke and drink but tell children not to, they will mimic your actions because they absorb the environment they are in." These insights underscore the need for positive role modeling and attentive parenting to break the cycle of abuse and ensure healthy child development.

Societal structure

The social structure in Thailand has both positive and negative impacts on families and children, with increasing competition among families often leading to inadequate childcare, weakened parent-child relationships, and heightened risks of domestic violence and exploitation. Professionals interviewed highlighted that “when children lack attachment to their parents, they are easily pushed out of the family system,” making them vulnerable to human trafficking, particularly boys from broken families. In competitive environments, parents may prioritize work over childcare, leading children to seek support from peers rather than their parents, increasing their exposure to negative influences. A police officer noted, “when families use violence, some children internalize this behaviour and eventually display it in their relationships or towards their children,” emphasizing how parental neglect and drug abuse can predispose children to societal dangers. Additionally, a social worker pointed out that the absence of parental care often leads to children seeking affection online, where they are easily deceived or exploited. Overall, the findings underscore the need for comprehensive support to address these challenges and protect vulnerable children in Thailand.

Insufficient parenting skills and family preparedness

The findings reveal that insufficient parenting skills and family preparedness are significant factors affecting child development in Thailand. Many parents lack adequate knowledge and understanding of child-rearing, often leading to negative consequences for their children. As noted by professionals from the One Stop Crisis Center (OSCC), “the knowledge and understanding of child-rearing among Thai parents are quite low, and we do not provide enough education on this matter.” This gap in parenting skills sometimes results in the use of physical violence, with a police officer from the Anti Human Trafficking in Persons Division stating that “many parents or guardians lack a deep understanding of how to properly care for their children, and as a result, they may resort to using physical violence.” This issue is further compounded by a lack of emotional control, leading children to replicate violent behaviours as they grow. The administrators at the Childline Foundation emphasized that “the root cause of resorting to violence often stems from parents lacking the necessary parenting skills.” A lawyer from the Bangkok Shelter for Children and Families pointed out that “parenting skills are vital” and that proactive education and guidance are essential to equip parents with the necessary skills. Moreover, the founder of The Hug Project Thailand observed

that parents “genuinely care for their children, but they may lack the know-how to properly raise and nurture them,” often due to their own difficult childhood experiences, which can perpetuate cycles of violence or neglect. Social workers from the A21 Foundation highlighted the need for better communication within families, noting that simple gestures like asking a child if they are tired are not yet norms in many households. Collectively, these insights underscore the urgent need for improved parenting education and support to foster a nurturing environment for children across all social classes in Thai society.

Family separation

Conflicts within families, such as differences between spouses, often escalate and lead to separation or divorce, profoundly impacting children’s well-being. The director of the Anti-Human Trafficking and Child Abuse Center (ATCC) in Chonburi Province noted that “delinquent children, victims of abuse or human trafficking, often result from broken families,” where children are expelled from new family settings, exposing them to harsh treatment and abuse. A former police investigator emphasized that the absence of warmth and care at home forces these children into survival mode, leading them to display defiant behaviours and making them vulnerable to human trafficking. Police officers from the Anti-Human Trafficking in Persons Division highlighted that family fragmentation, often due to divorce, leads children to seek solace in risky activities like socializing with peers or excessive gaming, which is exacerbated by parental stress and work-related issues. A social worker from the A21 Foundation further explained that in fractured families, children often internalize the effects of violence and instability, lacking positive role models, which compounds their challenges. These insights underscore the urgent need for support and intervention to mitigate the negative impact of family separations on children’s lives.

Peer influence

Peer influence plays a critical role in shaping the thoughts and behaviours of children and adolescents, often surpassing the influence of family. As observed by a police officer from the Investigation and Suppression Division, Provincial Police Region 1, “associating with friends involved in drug use can result in drug addiction,” highlighting how peer pressure can lead to harmful activities like drug abuse or illegal income generation. This influence extends to involvement in the commercial sex industry, as noted by the management of the Anti-Human Trafficking and Child Abuse Center (ATCC),

where at-risk youths in Pattaya are often persuaded by peers already in the sex trade to join, initially lured by the promise of good earnings. Once these youths experience financial gain, they tend to continue voluntarily. The choice of friends is therefore pivotal in determining whether children engage in positive or negative behaviours, underscoring the need for proactive measures to guide them toward healthy relationships and decisions.

Substance abuse

Substance abuse has devastating effects on individuals, families, and even national stability, leading to the destruction of lives and escalating domestic violence, particularly affecting vulnerable children. A legal practitioner from a children's shelter in Bangkok emphasized that "domestic violence or abuse often arises from issues related to substance addiction, such as drugs or alcohol," noting cases where both parents become involved in violence due to addiction, and even instances where children are exposed to addictive substances through breastfeeding. A medical social worker at the One Stop Crisis Center (OSCC) highlighted that substance use during pregnancy can have lasting repercussions, stating that "substances can infiltrate the child's genetic composition," leading to a higher likelihood of the child developing addiction and exhibiting aggressive behaviour. These insights underscore the critical need to address substance abuse to protect individuals, preserve family units, and maintain societal stability.

Economic conditions

Poverty has far-reaching consequences, deeply affecting families and contributing to various societal challenges. Interviews with law enforcement and professionals working with disadvantaged children reveal that poverty often drives children to engage in risky behaviours and illicit activities. A police officer from the Investigation and Suppression Division of Provincial Police Region 1 noted that children from disadvantaged backgrounds may, "driven by the desire for certain items, resort to inappropriate means," including prostitution and illicit trade, as they compare themselves to wealthier peers. A legal practitioner from a children's shelter in Bangkok recounted a case where an uncle, unable to provide proper care due to economic constraints, had to tie his young nieces and nephews to house posts while he worked, illustrating the desperate measures some caregivers are forced to take. These insights underscore the urgent need for comprehensive support and interventions to address the challenges posed by poverty on families and children.

Consequences of Child Abuse

The act of using violence against children has repercussions that extend beyond the children themselves, affecting the individuals responsible for the violence, the people around them, society, and the nation. Through in-depth interviews and field research, a more detailed comprehension of the substantial and widespread consequences of violence has been obtained.

Cycle of Violence

The long-term impact of violence against children often perpetuates a cycle where victims become perpetrators as they grow older. An attorney specializing in children and youth observed that many violent children come from abusive families, noting, "They tend to exhibit such behaviours towards others as well, continuing this pattern." A former child and youth development expert from the Department of Juvenile Observation and Protection added, "The impact of experiencing violence often leads the victims to become perpetrators in the future, creating an endless cycle." This view is supported by The Hug Project Thailand, an NGO, which highlighted cases where individuals who were abused or exploited as children, such as in prostitution, later forced others into similar situations. These insights underscore how the cycle of violence is perpetuated by the traumatic experiences and behaviours children endure, leading them to replicate such actions in their own lives.

Double Victims

The management of the Anti-Human Trafficking and Child Abuse Center (ATCC) in Chonburi Province highlights the severe consequences faced by vulnerable children who do not receive timely intervention. As noted in their work, "children, especially those addicted to drugs or forced to distribute drugs, are at risk of death due to their activities." Without assistance, these children often continue to be victimized, and disturbingly, those who were once involved in the sex trade may grow up to participate in or facilitate these same harmful activities. This underscores the critical role of organizations like the ATCC in breaking the cycle of violence and exploitation, emphasizing the need for comprehensive intervention and protection to prevent these children from becoming double victims—first as children and later as adults perpetuating the cycle of abuse.

Child Mental Health Issues

Interviews with experts from the Anti-Human Trafficking and Child Abuse Center in Chonburi and the One-Stop Crisis Center in Pathum Thani reveal a troubling rise in mental health issues among children exposed to violence. The director of the ATCC noted a significant increase in cases, with “about 85 percent of the 40 children under the center’s care” suffering from mental health problems. A police officer from the Anti Human Trafficking in Persons Division highlighted that these children often struggle with emotional maturity, showing “two personalities”—compassionate at times but prone to violence when triggered. The psychological impact of violence leaves many children fearful, mistrustful, and socially withdrawn, unable to form healthy relationships. A medical social worker from Pathum Thani Hospital emphasized that without proper support, these children face ongoing emotional and social difficulties, which can severely affect their development. These findings underscore the urgent need for comprehensive mental health support for children affected by violence to ensure their long-term well-being.

Discussion

This research in Thailand aligns with global literature on child abuse, emphasizing the complexity of risk factors and the critical need for comprehensive interventions that address both individual and societal influences. Similar to findings in international studies, familial dynamics such as family conflict, inconsistent discipline, and substance abuse are significant factors contributing to child abuse within the Thai context (Meinck et al., 2015; Pierce et al., 2017). Moreover, economic hardships and social instability, particularly highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic, exacerbate risks of child maltreatment, mirroring trends seen globally, including in Croatia (Ajduković et al., 2018; Lawson et al., 2020). Parental mental health and substance abuse continue to be major risk factors linked to child maltreatment, reflecting widespread patterns observed in various studies (Doidge et al., 2017; Motorca et al., 2021). Unique risks for Thai children, such as peer influence, behavioural challenges, and substance exposure, are consistent with global findings that recognize the impact of environmental and social contexts on child welfare (Clayton et al., 2018; Swangpun et al., 2019). This study extends these understandings by highlighting that child abuse is not

merely an isolated, personal issue but is deeply embedded within social structures and contexts. Such abuse affects both the physical and mental health of the individual, with ripple effects on society as a whole, contributing to broader public health and social challenges. Violence experienced by children has both immediate and long-term repercussions, manifesting in increased risks for mental health challenges, suicide attempts, and behavioural issues, underscoring the necessity of effective coping mechanisms and support systems for vulnerable populations (Martin et al., 2016; Thoresen et al., 2021). Notably, the findings reveal that child abuse often perpetuates a cycle of violence, where victims may become perpetrators as adults, thus transmitting violence across generations and exacerbating societal challenges (Dodaj & Sesar, 2020; Heidari et al., 2021). Furthermore, the study recognizes links between child abuse and severe behavioural outcomes in adulthood, including increased aggression, psychopathy, and even extreme criminal behaviour, such as serial offenses (di Giacomo et al., 2021; Pitzanti, 2021). These results add a critical dimension to the understanding of child abuse in Thailand by underscoring how social context and familial patterns contribute to this cycle, suggesting that breaking this cycle will require both systemic interventions and support for individuals. In essence, the findings reinforce the importance of targeted, multi-level interventions that address both the personal and societal dimensions of child abuse. Effective prevention and intervention strategies must focus not only on protecting children but also on mitigating the social factors that facilitate the perpetuation of abuse across generations. This study thereby contributes to the global discourse on child abuse, emphasizing the need for holistic approaches that incorporate societal context, break the cycle of violence, and prioritize the mental well-being of children to foster healthier future generations.

Implications

This study underscores the critical need for a comprehensive, multi-faceted approach to addressing child abuse in Thailand, with significant implications for both policy and practice. Policymakers should prioritize the development and implementation of parental education programs, targeting organizations such as the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security (MSDHS) and the Department of Children and Youth (DCY), to equip parents with the skills necessary for raising children in safe, non-abusive environments.

These programs should be accessible across Thailand, with a focus on reaching vulnerable populations who may lack resources or support. For example, collaborations with local NGOs, such as the Hug Project Thailand and Childline Thailand Foundation, could ensure that these resources reach families in need. In addition to enhancing parenting skills, addressing broader economic conditions that contribute to child abuse is essential. Policies aimed at reducing economic disparities—such as improving access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities—could be implemented through partnerships with the Ministry of Public Health and the Ministry of Education. These agencies, along with support from organizations like the Thailand Research Fund (TRF), could focus on providing services in disadvantaged areas to alleviate poverty-related stressors that often lead to child abuse. Strengthening community support networks is also vital for families dealing with challenges like separation, substance abuse, and peer influence. Community-based organizations, such as the Center for Combating Human Trafficking and Child Abuse (CCHTCA) and the FACE Foundation, should receive adequate funding to offer resources, counseling, and guidance. Additionally, local government offices and district health centres could facilitate accessible support networks for families. Public awareness campaigns led by agencies like MSDHS and the Department of Mental Health could destigmatize seeking help for child abuse and mental health issues, encouraging families to utilize these support services. For child protection professionals, this study emphasizes the need for comprehensive training that covers the various risk factors associated with child abuse, including societal dynamics and economic challenges. Organizations like the Police Cadet Academy and the Anti-Human Trafficking Division could benefit from training initiatives that equip professionals to recognize and address mental health issues often experienced by abuse victims. Collaborative, community-based interventions that involve local organizations, schools, and community centres are essential for establishing strong support networks. For example, local schools could partner with community centres and NGOs like the A21 Foundation to deliver resources and support to at-risk families. Overall, implementing policies and partnerships that target the root causes of child abuse—such as income inequality, limited access to essential services, and inadequate support systems—is crucial for creating a safer environment for children in Thailand. By addressing these underlying issues and providing support to both parents and children through collaboration among government agencies, NGOs, and community

organizations, policymakers and practitioners can work together to break the cycle of abuse and improve the long-term well-being of children across the country.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study sheds light on the complex dynamics of child abuse in Thailand, identifying seven key risk factors: parenting styles, societal structure, parenting skills and family preparedness, family separation, peer influence, substance abuse, and economic conditions. These findings underscore the urgency of addressing child abuse comprehensively, taking into account the unique characteristics of the Thai context. The study also highlights the enduring repercussions of child abuse, including the perpetuation of cycles of violence, the creation of double victims, and the emergence of mental health issues in children. To effectively combat this issue, a multi-pronged approach is recommended, involving professional training, community support networks, public awareness campaigns, and policy measures targeting root causes. By addressing these aspects, Thailand can make significant strides towards safeguarding the well-being of its children and breaking the cycle of abuse, contributing to the broader global discourse on child protection.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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Ethics Approval

Ethical approval for this research was obtained from the Committee for Research Ethics (Social Sciences) of Mahidol University (Reference Number: 2019/195.1009). Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Author Contribution

UL conceptualized the research framework, developed the theoretical foundation, and conducted the literature review on factors contributing to child abuse in Thailand. WK designed the methodology, oversaw data collection and analysis, and interpreted findings on the aftermath of violent exploitation. Both authors collaboratively drafted and revised the manuscript, with WK managing journal correspondence and the final revision. Both UL and WK approved the final manuscript for submission.

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