

Understanding Infant Abandonment in South Korea

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Abstract

Recently, infant abandonment has become a social problem that was still poorly understood as well as understudied. The purpose of this study was to understand the conditions or characteristics of infant abandonment cases using media reports during the last consecutive three years, 2014-2016. A systematic media search using electronic searches and newspapers was conducted to collect information on infant abandonment cases. The result of this study showed that infant abandonment continues to occur. In majority of cases reported demonstrated that the biological mothers, at same time, perpetrators gave efforts to protect infants when abandoned. However, some cases provided concrete information of murdering a child. Thus, it required various solutions to deal with infant abandonment problem. To have more understanding and develop future strategies, this study analyzed the characteristics of infant abandonment cases by reviewing 1) developmental stage of abandoned infants, 2) gender, 3) the location of abandonment, 4) the condition whether alive or dead. Based on findings of this study, prevention approach and strategies were discussed.

Keywords: *Infant, Abandonment, Characteristics of abandonment cases*

1. Introduction

Infant abandonment is not new social phenomenon but brings high social interest and conflict. Every child has the right to survive and live well as a member of this society. Sadly, the cases of infant abandonment show that our society has failed to maintain this basic human right of infants who are most fragile and dependent to the care of adult and society during the entire their developmental stage. To them, the right to survive is utmost value and should be fulfilled through family and society. With various reasons such as social stigma related to birth out of marriage, poverty, or unwanted pregnancy, and unrealistic social support systems to raise a child or children, biological parent(s) make choice of conceal the birth of a child and it leads frequently a tragic result such as death[1][2][3].

In consideration of characteristics of social status of biological parents, especially mothers who, are found to be undereducated, under influence of poverty, lack of social support, mainly take charge of childrearing, it requires to provide systematic and longitudinal support. Recently, low rate of childbirth is emerging as social risk in South Korea and policy and services are suggested in order to encourage pregnancy and childbirth. To contrast to these various efforts, few efforts show the issues of infant abandonment and preventive strategies.

Lack of understanding may induce this social atmosphere, thus this study aimed to examine the infant abandonment cases using media reports. Since public data and statistics do

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not provide comprehensive information related to infant abandonment, no alternative data other than media reports exists to the date [4][5].

2.Method

2.1. Research design

The content analysis method was employed in this study. A systematic media search using electronic searches and newspapers was conducted to collect information on infant abandonment cases reported in South Korea 2014 -2016.

2.2. Data collection

To collect information of infant abandonment cases from media reports, a systematic media report search was implemented using Internet searching of incidents of infant abandonment between 2014 and 2016. For this study, infant abandonment was defined as “abandoned children aged under 2 years” as previous study defined [2]. There were fifty-four infant abandonment cases reported through online media and daily newspapers between 2014 and 2016. Since this study was conducted in the middle of 2016 year, the number could be varied. To understand the characteristics of infant abandonment cases, the author examined the developmental stage of abandoned infants, gender, the location of abandonment, and condition whether alive or dead.

3. Results

3.1. Incidence of infant abandonment

Fourteen cases reported in the year of 2014. Among these cases, one case was three time of infant abandonment during six years. Twenty-three cases were reported in the year of 2015. One case was three time of abandonment during four years. Two cases occurred in the year before 2015 but caught by the police in the year of 2015. Twenty cases reported in the year of 2016. Of these cases, four cases were regarding sentencing perpetrators to several months in a prison with several years of probation. It depended on their situations when abandoned the child. In these cases, infant abandonment occurred ahead of year of 2016 and perpetrators were caught by the police by chasing absence of entrance of element school while the birth registrations were existed. Among these sentenced cases, one case was two times of abandonment since 2004 by the same biological mother. The finding indicates that the incidences of infant abandonment continue to occur.

While the research aimed to collect information related infant abandonment cases through media report, this study did not include reports from broad casting media. Thus, it is hard to confirm that the information of this study represents the comprehensive information of infant abandonment.

Therefore, the limitations of media reports should be considered. To ensure understanding infant abandonment cases and providing effective prevention strategies, the public data must be provided and research efforts are required.

Despite of limitation, surprisingly enough, the variation of circumstances and process of abandonment was huge. In certain cases, it seems to be serious intention of murdering a child. But majority of cases showed troubling and painful circumstances that the biological mothers and at the same time mostly perpetrators of infant abandonment were facing [6]. When a child

is born, all responsibility and parenting burden with severe social stigma put them on crisis. At that point, there was no way to pursue the biological fathers to fulfill responsibility for being a parent through the current family policy. Few media report mention about the responsibility of the biological father when infant abandonment occurred. It indicates public attitude that infant abandonments were personal decision-making process thus the society takes role to punish them. Whilst the media reports give information related the situation of abandonment, except several cases, no mention about the following procedure after a child found. It shows lack of interest of child's well-being.

3.2. Characteristics of the abandonment

This study analyzed the characteristics of infant abandonment cases as following 1) developmental stage of abandoned infants. 2) gender of abandoned infant, 3) the location of abandonment, 4) the condition whether alive or dead. Since the information provided through media reports varied, this study included cases only providing related information required for the purpose of this study.

(1) The development stage of abandoned infants was mostly in more or less than one week after birth. Infants of forty-seven cases were more or less than one week after birth. It indicated the high risk of infant abandonment among newborn babies. The childbirth could be a crisis for biological parent(s) thus crisis intervention approach should be widely designed and provided in the community. Previous studies heightened the critical stage of newborns at risk of abandonment. The first and foremost important goal is protecting the life of infant. In order to protect life, safe place should be afforded. Safe haven laws allow parent(s) to give up babies in safe places anonymously. This arguable policy and still controversial in assessing the impact to reduce infant abandonment. But meaningful and main success is saving infants by providing safe places [7][8].

(2) The gender of abandoned infants was no specific difference between boy and girl. Interestingly, several cases did not mention about the gender of babies. It is interesting findings that there exist no gender differences since the case of Chinese or Malaysia was high proportion of boy infant abandonment. Korea might overcome sexual discrimination at least when abandoning a child. Lack of information of the gender of abandoned infants shows little recognition and respect to abandoned infant. Moreover, few mention about the following efforts for the death of abandoned infants such as funeral procedure. Most attention to find and arrest of perpetrators in order to charge crime victims of infant abandonment was highlighted on media reports.

(3) The location of abandonment varied. There were differences between secret abandonment and open abandonment. Many types of the location of secret abandonment were public rest rooms or waste disposal sites. In these situations, frequently infanticide was executed before abandonment. The locations of open abandonment were residential site, church, or child centers.

(4) The findings implied the high risk of secret abandonment since a newborn infant cannot endure any harsh circumstances such as public rest rooms or waste disposal sites. Again, this critical and intense period could be passed when better alternatives provided. While the location of abandonment is important to survive the life of infant, the presence of finders in the community is highly important. Even though, secret abandonment occurred. Neighbors did make attention to the cry of babies or suspicious presences it increased the potential abandoned infants. Thus, public education and awareness is needed for infant abandonment

incidents. With relation to the role of neighbors, it is considerate to pay attention to their psychological impact as finders of infant abandonment. No literature mentions the psychological impact or post intervention. Future research is necessary to this area.

(5) The condition whether live or dead was varied along case circumstances. Some infants were murdered right after birth and abandoned. Others were found despite the harsh circumstances such as wrapping with garbage bag. In the cases of being found live, there were good neighbors who had attention to crying infants and carried infants to the safe place promptly. The public awareness and education regarding infants in danger may be an important strategy to prevent infant deaths through abandonment. Without help of those finders, there was less hope that abandoned infants could be survived.

4. Conclusions

The parental responsibility should be highlighted when a child is born. But there still exist parents under the extreme stress and endangered through pregnancy and childbirth. Until they gain ability to raise a child and prepare to be parent, emergency plan and intervention have to be provided to lessen their problem and empower their ability of parenting. It could be designed through primary prevention, secondary prevention, and tertiary prevention approach. Educational program for prevention unwanted pregnancy, providing prenatal care and social services for the high-risk pregnant women considering abandonment baby. Lastly, for the imminent risk of abandonment and infanticide, anonymous delivery could be a strategy to prevent newborns from danger and under a safe care.

The principle of the superior interest of the child is important standard to make decision when controversial issues addressed such as family preservation versus child's displacement with child abuse cases. With similar vein, infant abandonment could be viewed as parent(s) as perpetrators versus a child as victims. This polarized stance may not help to encourage parent(s) to grow up to be competent parent(s). It necessitates much patience for parent(s) not ready yet up to growing up. Previously when parent(s) was not ready to raise a child, adoption was the solution. But new adoption policy enacted, before adopting a child, birth registration is required. It is hard to identify whether new adoption policy might have impact on increase of infant abandonment. There some concerns existed that it might put newborns on danger from unwanted birth.

To ensure the superior interest of the child, new adoption policy requires the birth registration before proceed the adoption. As far as the statistics indicated, majority of biological mothers who wanted to give up their newborns were teenagers, low educated, lack of social support, in poverty, and suffered with social stigma toward birth out of marriage. Family policy should be designed to meet to their needs and problems.

Beyond this, future efforts have to focus on understanding the impact of abandonment to not only children but also mothers and finders as well as whole neighbors. Through this process, it could create social atmosphere to take responsibility to prevent infant abandonment problems. For doing so, family policy must take important role to prevent infant abandonment by providing education of planned pregnancy, crisis intervention for emergency delivery, and comprehensive services to raise children in the community [9].

Child wellbeing and right should be best principle in developing policy and services. As the result of this study showed, the variation of circumstances of infant abandonment is huge. It cannot be avoided punishing in an appropriate manner when necessary. However, there exists harsh reality that parent(s) and child might face after following child's birth. Thus, whether family policy or child welfare policy should focus on both infants and their mothers

whose delivery is crisis.

The superior of best interest of child could be fulfilled when parent(s) is well prepared as parent(s). To achieve this goal, family first and protection of maternity value should be disseminated and have impact to policy makers and professionals and whole society.

The dignity of human life and human right to survive should be a profound value to this society and view infant abandonment problem not as personal problems but as our responsibility to not protect most fragile life.

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