

# RESEARCH New National Child Abuse Numbers Released

—by David Finkelhor

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New child abuse statistics for 1993 have been published by the National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse (NCPCA) as part of its annual 50-state survey. The most interesting finding to emerge from this report is that from 1992 to 1993 the estimated number of reports of suspected child abuse nationwide saw the smallest increase in years (up only 2.5%) and for the first time ever substantiated child abuse cases actually declined by a small amount from 1,021,000 to 1,016,000.

NCPCA researchers Karen McCurdy and Deborah Daro caution against jumping to hasty conclusions. Much of the state data on which the report is based are still tentative, and will be revised later on. Moreover, since year-to-year estimates of child abuse reports can bounce around quite a bit, it takes several years of data to establish a clear trend. Still, it is possible that 1993 will mark a year when the tide of child abuse reporting, which has grown 50% since 1985, or at a rate of more than 5% per year, will start to level off.

A leveling off of the reports and substantiations does not, of course, necessarily mean that there has been any decline in the actual amount of child abuse. Just as much of the increase in reports may have to do with changes in awareness and investigatory practices, a leveling off may have to do with such factors. The fact that substantiated cases actually declined, while reports increased, clearly suggests the possibility that CPS capacities have reached a saturation point, with many possibly true cases of abuse not getting adequate investigation.

However, another section of the report reveals that also in 1993 for the first time in four years, the funding picture for CPS agencies actually improved, with 52% of the states reporting a budget increase and only five experiencing budget cuts. It is possible that the effects of such increased funding—more case workers to investigate and substantiate more cases—would not be reflected in 1993 statistics because new staff are just being hired. States will also be getting a new infusion of federal funds from the new Family Support and Preservation Act of 1993. So it will be interesting to see if the number of substantiated cases stays level in the face of these developments.

Curiously, and supportive of the idea that the leveling off may be part of a larger national trend, the Uniform Crime Report figures on violent crime also showed an overall decline for 1993. One interpretation is that the economic upturn, perhaps combined with more general political and social optimism, is having some generalized effect.

Unfortunately, however, the 50-state survey

and the comparison to general crime figures highlights again the rather dubious state of child abuse statistics. There still really are no true complete and accurate national child abuse statistics. Unlike crime statistics, states do not yet have a uniform system of counting child abuse. For example, some states count child abuse by the case (which can include several children) while others count by the children. In addition, many states do not have any way of eliminating children who may have been subject to several reports from being counted multiple times.

Later this year the federal government will publish the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) report, which will contain the most complete statistics for 1992 (its data is over a year behind the 50-state survey). But this report also has most of the same problems, including no uniformity in state definitions, some duplicated counting, and some states' inability to provide crucial information. The goal of NCANDS is to work with the individual states on their data collection procedures to ultimately weave together a uniform national data system. How long this will take is unclear.

Finally, keep your eye out next year for the third National Incidence Study, which like previous efforts is using systematic data-gathering in a sample of U.S. counties to (1) try to project national estimates, including cases known to professionals but not to child protection authorities, and (2) to report on trends since its last effort in 1986. The results will almost certainly show a huge increase compared to 1986, which may be what grabs the headlines. They will not tell us much about whether reports and substantiated cases have plateaued in the last year or two.

For copies of the 50-state survey, "Current trends in child abuse reporting and fatalities" (Working Paper 808), write National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse, 332 S. Michigan Av., Suite 1600, Chicago IL 60604. A donation of \$2.00 is suggested.

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## APSAC FACTS

Twenty-nine states are home to approved APSAC chapters. Professionals are actively forming chapters in 12 additional states and in Puerto Rico. Professionals in Australia, Canada, and the U.S. Armed Forces stationed overseas have expressed interest in developing APSAC chapters as well.

**APSAC's Fourth National Colloquium will be held June 26-30, 1996, in Chicago. Mark your calendars now!**