

RESEARCH

Current Trends in Child Abuse Reporting and Fatalities: NCPA's 1994 Annual Fifty State Survey

—by Deborah Daro

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Overview

To determine the volume of child abuse reports and the availability of child welfare resources, the National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse (NCPA) initiated an annual national telephone survey of child protective service (CPS) agencies in 1982. The initial surveys focused exclusively on increases in the number of reports and the effects of budget cutbacks. Beginning in 1986, NCPA developed a more standardized instrument which focused on the number and characteristics of child abuse reports, the number of child abuse fatalities, and changes in the funding and scope of child welfare services. The purpose of this article is to summarize the key findings from our most recent survey, conducted between January and March of this year.

Reporting rates

In 1994, an estimated 3,140,000 children were reported to Child Protective Services (CPS) agencies as alleged victims of child maltreatment. This figure is based on information collected from 42 states. Child abuse reports have increased steadily since 1989, with an average annual increase of 5%. Between 1993 and 1994, the increase was 4.5%, slightly higher than the 3.2% rise which occurred between 1992 and 1993. Overall, the total number of reports nationwide has increased 63% since 1985.

Case characteristics

The chart below indicates the percentage of all reported cases and of substantiated cases by primary abuse type.

REPORTS BY MALTREATMENT TYPE (1994)		
	Reported (28 states)	Substantiated (36 states)
Neglect	45%	49%
Physical Abuse	26%	21%
Sexual Abuse	11%	11%
Emotional Abuse	3%	3%

This is the first time in the history of this survey that reporting and substantiation percentages are essentially identical. In prior years, sexual abuse was substantiated at a higher rate than it was reported, and neglect at a lower rate. This year's similarity in the distribution of reported and substantiated cases suggests that type of abuse alone might not be as critical a factor as in the past in determining whether a case will be substantiated. Neglect cases are now as likely to be substantiated as cases involving other forms of maltreatment.

Another interesting shift is the decline in the proportion of reported cases involving child sexual abuse. While such cases represented 16% of all

reports in 1986, this percentage has gradually declined over the years, to 11% of all reports in the 1995 survey. To a certain extent, the rapid increase in the number of reported cases of child sexual abuse observed in the mid to late 1980's reflected the increased awareness and attention to a form of maltreatment which had been virtually ignored prior to this time. Child welfare agencies across the country were inundated with cases, many of which had involved several years of ongoing abuse. After almost ten years of attention to this problem, perhaps the reservoir of cases involving years of abuse have been reduced. Further, improvements in professional practice and the rapid expansion of child assault prevention services have produced an environment in which cases are identified closer to the onset of the abuse. This shift might also reflect a change in the type of cases professionals and the public are willing to report to CPS and the classification systems used by child welfare systems in describing the reports they do receive.

Service rates and foster care usage

A critical question concerns what happens to the child or family after a case has been substantiated. In the current survey, only 19 states could estimate the percentage of substantiated cases which received CPS services. Figures ranged from 29% to 100% with an average of 72% receiving some type of service. This figure is consistent with the 70% reported in 1993. While this level of service is notable given the increased number of reports, approximately 290,000 confirmed cases of child abuse received no services to remediate the negative consequences of maltreatment. Of those who did receive services, the most common intervention reportedly offered by the responding agencies were individual or family counseling.

One intervention common across all child protective service agencies is the removal of the child from the home either during the investigation or after allegations of maltreatment have been substantiated. When asked the total number of children removed from the home where abuse occurred, 22 states provided figures for 1994. Over 68,000 children from these states were placed in alternative care for some period of time in 1994. Approximately 14% of substantiated child victims were removed from their homes in 1994 (according to data from 16 states) as compared to 17% removed in 1993 (based on data from 22 states). Only 5% of all children reported for maltreatment were removed from their homes. Because of the small number of states providing data on these questions, caution is warranted in generalizing this finding. However, these data do contradict the prevailing notion on the part of the public and some policy makers that child welfare workers commonly remove children from their parents. The vast majority of confirmed child abuse cases involve services being provided to

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Child abuse fatalities

One of the greatest tragedies is the death of a child from abuse or neglect. Although such deaths are relatively infrequent, the rate of child maltreatment fatalities confirmed by CPS agencies has risen steadily over the past eight years. The rate of fatalities rose from 1.3 per 100,000 to 1.92 between 1985 and 1994, a 48% increase. Between 1991 and 1994, overall death rates remained unchanged.

In 1994, an estimated 1,271 children died from abuse or neglect. This estimate is based on data from 34 states comprising 76.4% of the U.S. population under eighteen years of age. Estimates for earlier years are based on at least 80% of the child population. Seventeen states did not provide the number of child maltreatment fatalities for 1994, and eight states still had some number of deaths under investigation at the time of the survey.

According to information from at least 19 states, 45% of the children who died between 1992 and 1994 had prior or current contact with CPS agencies. This substantial percentage may reflect the fact that many states only investigate deaths of children with current or prior CPS contact, thereby ensuring that a high percentage of the reported deaths will involve such children. On the other hand, the inability of child welfare agencies to provide sufficient services to all victims or to conduct comprehensive investigations of all reports most likely contribute to this pattern.

Child welfare funding

In 1993, all states were provided new funding for child welfare intervention and prevention services when Congress approved the Federal Family Preservation and Support Services Program (see Zlotnik,

this issue, p. 14). In 1994, states were required to initiate a comprehensive planning process to determine how best to allocate these revenues, growing from a 1994 appropriations level of \$60 million to over \$900 million by 1998. When asked how the state planned to allocate these new resources, the liaisons indicated that, on average, 54% of the funds would be allocated to family support services (with responses ranging from 25% to 100%), while 44% of the funds would be allocated to family preservation (responses ranged from 10% to 75%). Finally, an average of 2% would be allocated to other purposes such as technical assistance and planning.

The continuation of these funds was endangered in March when the U.S. House of Representatives passed the Personal Responsibility Act (HR4). The Child Protection Block Grant, which is Title II of the Personal Responsibility Act, would replace 23 existing child and family service programs. Ninety-six percent of the states surveyed expressed serious concerns about this legislation and feared that it would have a negative impact on social service delivery. Seventy-one percent of liaisons thought the legislation would result in less money for basic services. Liaisons raised a variety of other issues as well, including a concern that the legislation would decrease focus on child abuse prevention and that the relaxed state accountability to the Federal Department of Health and Human Services would remove important protective standards for children (see News, this issue, p. 20, for additional updates about this pending legislation).

A complete discussion of these and other findings can be found in D. Wiese and D. Daro. *Current Trends in Child Abuse Reporting and Fatalities: The Results of the 1994 Annual Fifty State Survey* available from NCPA, 332 S. Michigan Av., Suite 1600, Chicago IL 60604.

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CALL FOR NOMINATIONS

Nominations are being sought for the 1995 election to APSAC's Board of Directors. APSAC's Nominating Committee seeks outstanding professionals to serve on APSAC's Board of Directors for three-year terms. Nominees should be leaders in the field who have been APSAC members for at least one year and who are willing and able to devote significant time to APSAC. Nominations are sought that maintain or achieve a balance on the Board along the lines of race or ethnicity; discipline (social work, psychology, law, medicine, nursing, law enforcement, etc.); area of expertise (physical abuse, sexual abuse, psychological maltreatment, prevention, neglect); gender; and geographic region. Nominations include a 200-400 word letter of recommendation, the candidate's vita, and a completed Candidate Nomination Form. **Nominations must be received by September 30, 1995.**

To receive a Candidate Nomination Form and further instructions, call 312-554-0166.