

CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES Current Trends in Child Abuse Reporting and Fatalities: NCPA's 1995 Annual Fifty-State Survey

—Deborah Daro

The number of reported and substantiated cases of child abuse remained high last year, based upon data collected by the National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse (NCPA) as part of its annual survey of child welfare administrators.¹ Overall, an estimated 996,000 children were confirmed victims of abuse and neglect in 1995, out of a total of 3.1 million reports. These figures are based on information collected from child protective service (CPS) administrators in 37 states and the District of Columbia indicating that each state averaged a 2% increase in reports between 1994 and 1995. This increase is slightly less than the 2.6% rise which occurred between 1993 and 1994. Overall, the total number of reports nationwide has increased 49% since 1986.

Fifteen out of every 1,000 U.S. children were substantiated as victims of child maltreatment in 1995, a figure that represents an average substantiation rate of 32%. By way of comparison, 34% of the reports filed in 1994 were substantiated. As a result of the declining substantiation rate, 4% fewer children were accepted on to CPS caseloads across the country in 1995 than were accepted in 1994. One interpretation of this statistic is that it reflects the stricter standards for confirmation being established in many states—standards that have resulted in fewer reported cases qualifying for formal CPS interventions.

Case characteristics

Cases involving charges of physical neglect continue to represent the most common type of reported and substantiated maltreatment. In 1995, 26 states provided the following breakdown for reported cases: 53% involved neglect, 26% physical abuse, 10% sexual abuse, 3% emotional maltreatment, and 7% other. For substantiated cases, 34 states gave the following breakdowns: neglect

¹Detailed descriptions of the study's methodology and specific findings can be found in *Current Trends in Child Abuse Reporting and Fatalities: The Results of the 1995 Annual Fifty-State Survey*, available from the National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse, 332 S Michigan, Suite 1600, Chicago, IL 60604

54%, physical abuse 25%, sexual abuse 11%, emotional maltreatment 3%, and other 6%. Similar to last year, these two patterns are essentially identical.

In prior years, substantiated cases tended to include a higher percentage of sexual abuse and a lower percentage of child neglect than was observed in the larger pool of all reports. The current similarity between the distribution of reported and substantiated cases among types of maltreatment suggests that type of abuse, alone, may 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.

The 1995 data confirmed a continuing decline in the proportion of reported cases involving child sexual abuse. While such cases represented 16% of all reports in 1986, in the most recent survey, sexual abuse cases were only 10% of all reports. To a certain extent, the rapid increase in the number of reported cases of child sexual abuse observed in the mid- to late 1980s reflected the in-

creased awareness and attention to a form of maltreatment that 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, it is possible that the reservoir of cases involving years of abuse has been reduced, causing child welfare to be less burdened with such cases. 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.

Whatever the reason, the decline in the percentage of reported cases involving child sexual abuse coupled with the changes in the pattern of substantiated cases noted here has resulted in a downward trend in the number of sexual abuse cases currently on CPS caseloads. Looking at the absolute number of child sexual abuse cases substantiated by the 31 states able

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to provide us this information for both reporting periods, the number of such cases dropped almost 9% between 1994 and 1995. Nationwide, we estimate that approximately 109,230 new cases of child sexual abuse were accepted for service last year.

Presenting problems

Families reported for child maltreatment often display a number of problems that can contribute to the likelihood that they will engage in abusive behavior. Identifying these problems is a first step toward prevention. To assess whether specific patterns are shared by families on CPS caseloads across the country, respondents were asked to describe the major problems presented by their caseloads. Thirty-seven state liaisons responded to this question, with 81% (30 states) naming substance abuse as one of the top two problems exhibited by families reported for maltreatment. This is an increase over the 76% of the state liaisons that listed this response in 1994, and the 63% that indicated this pattern in 1993.

The second most frequently cited problem area noted by the respondents involved issues of poverty and economic stress. Eighteen liaisons (49%) indicated that these issues and the accompanying problems of poor housing and limited community resources were common among those families reported and substantiated for maltreatment. Sixteen liaisons (43%) also reported that their clients frequently lack specific parenting skills due either to various mental health problems, poor understanding of a child's normal developmental path, or young maternal age. Finally, seven liaisons (19%) reported that a significant percentage of their adult clients struggle with domestic violence and often present their own history of battering.

Service rates and foster care usage

A critical question concerns what happens to a child or family after a case has been substantiated. In the current survey, only 16 states could provide an estimate as to the

percentage of substantiated cases that had received CPS services. Figures ranged from 35% to 100%, with an average of 76% receiving some type of service. This figure is consistent with the 72% reported in 1994. While this level of service is notable given the increased number of reports, approximately 238,000 confirmed cases of child abuse had received no services to remediate the negative consequences of maltreatment. Of those who had received services, the top two most common interventions reportedly offered by

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the responding agencies were individual or family counseling, used by 47% (15 states), and family support services (25%) such as parent aid, parenting education, and child care. Four states also mentioned referrals as the most frequently received service by families on their caseloads.

One service common across all CPS agencies is the removal of a 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, 19 states provided figures for 1995. More than 91,000 children from these states had been placed in alternative care for some period of time in 1995. For the fifteen states that provided both the number of children removed and the total number of substantiated child victims, approximately 22% of child victims had been removed from their homes in 1995 as compared to 24% removed in 1994 (based on data from 18 states). Further, only 5% of all children reported for maltreatment in these states had been removed from their homes.

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 1.30 per 100,000 to 1.81 between 1985 and 1995, a 39% increase. In 1995, an estimated

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1, 215 children were confirmed as victims of abuse or neglect, based on data from 34 states comprising 67% of the U.S. population under eighteen years of age. Estimates for earlier years are based on at least 87% of the child population. If data were available from all 50 states and the District of Columbia for all nine years, the actual rate of change and total scope of the problem might vary somewhat from these projections.

Between 1992 and 1995, overall death rates remained unchanged. However, these data are not complete and as such should be viewed as estimated data. Seventeen states did not provide the number of child maltreatment fatalities for 1995, and five states still had some number of deaths under investigation at the time of the survey.

According to information from at least 22 states, 46% of the children who died between 1993 and 1995 had 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 contributes to this pattern.

At least 26 states were able to report the types of maltreatment that had caused the children's deaths. These percentages remained fairly stable over the years. Between 1993 and 1995, 37% died from neglect, 48% died from abuse, and 15% died as a result of both forms of maltreatment. Young children remain at high risk for loss of life. Based on data from all three years, this study found that 85% of these children were under the age of five, while an alarming 45% were under the age of one at the time of their death. In 1995, the rate of fatalities for children under five was 5.1 per 100,000 children.

Child welfare funding

For the third consecutive year, state funding for child protective services improved. Twenty-three of the 42 states (55%) responding reported an increase in resources between 1994 and 1995. Three states (Hawaii, Kansas, and North Carolina) experienced budget cuts. While the remaining 16 states maintained stable funding, this funding level often prohibited needed staff or service enhancements, particularly in the area of child abuse prevention. Though 23 states reported an increase in funding, this did not necessarily translate into more staff. In 1995, 16 states (38%) hired new investigatory staff, 15 states (36%) were able to enlarge their supervisory staff, and 15 states (36%) increased the number of case managers.

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. As part of this legislation 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 states are allocat-

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ing these new resources, the liaisons indicated that, on average, 56% of the funds are being allocated to family support services (with responses ranging from 25% to 100%), while 40% of the funds are being allocated to family preservation (responses ranged from 0% to 75%). Finally, an average of 4% is being allocated to other purposes such as administration, training, technical assistance, and planning.

Recent actions in the U.S. Congress have limited the availability of these funds and have proposed that all child welfare funding, including those dollars specifically allocated to child abuse treatment and prevention, be allocated through a single block grant formula. When asked about the potential impact of this

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strategy on their child welfare system, 28 state liaisons (70% of those responding) indicated that the impact will be negative and 8 respondents (20%) were uncertain of the potential impacts. Three state liaisons (California, Colorado, and Michigan) reported that the overall impact would be positive and one state (South Carolina) reported that this change in federal policy would have no impact on their overall child welfare operation.

Despite concern with this strategy, 32 state liaisons identified as least one potential benefit that might result from the shift to block grant funding. The most common benefit cited was an increased flexibility in the planning and delivery of child welfare services. Twenty-seven respondents (84%) listed this benefit. In addition to this factor, six respondents (19%) indicated that the proposed change would foster a greater sense of cooperation and coordination among various public and private agencies in their local communities, and four respondents (12%) indicated that the change might result in less bureaucracy and paperwork.

A comparable number of respondents (33) identified potential negative consequences of the proposed change. Of these respondents, 24 (73%) expressed the concern that the block grant approach would result in fewer federal dollars being provided to each state to support child welfare services. As a result, respondents said certain programs would most certainly need to be cut. In addition, 11 of the respondents (33%) fear that the block grant system will eliminate key practice guidelines and standards, producing inconsistencies in the quality of child welfare service across states. Nine respondents (27%) said that the shift to a single block grant will "politicize" the planning process, forcing specific programs to compete with each other for legislative attention and support.

Conclusion

Child abuse reports remain at a high rate. Last year, child abuse reports rose 2%, exceeding 3.1 million in 1995. Overall, a slight decrease in the number of substantiated cases occurred, with an estimated 996,000 new

cases being accepted on to child welfare caseloads in 1995. For the second consecutive year, the proportions of cases involving various forms of maltreatment were essentially the same among the reported and substantiated cases, suggesting that a greater number of neglect cases and fewer child sexual abuse cases entered the system last year compared with prior years. Of those cases that were substantiated, approximately 76% received some form of service, and 22% of the substantiated cases involved the use of foster care.

Although the data suggest a slight decrease in the total number of child abuse fatalities, the number of these cases continues to be disturbing. An estimated 1,215 children were killed last year as a result of child abuse or neglect. Looking across the past three years,

46% of these fatalities involved children who had had current or prior contact with local child protective service agencies. The vast majority of these cases (85%) involved children under the age of five and almost half were under the age of one (45%). Despite the increased implementation of child death review committees, and administrative attention to the issue of child abuse fatalities, essentially no change in this statistic has been observed over the past ten years.

While 55% of the respondents indicated that their agency had experienced increased state funding between 1994 and 1995, these increases were relatively small and may well be offset by the decline in funding expected from federal sources. Indeed, 70% of the respondents had serious concerns about the recent move in Congress to block grant child welfare and related services. These concerns reflect not only the potential loss of funding but also the loss of federal leadership in this area, particularly with respect to supporting the increased emphasis on family support and other prevention services adopted by many child welfare administrators since passage of the Federal Family Support and Prevention Initiative.

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