

# OC D | Special Report

## Child Maltreatment In America: A Profile Of The Victims, Perpetrators, And Protective Services System

Reports of child abuse and neglect flood the offices of child protective services across the United States every year. An estimated 3 million allegations were reported in 2004, driving up the rate of referrals from 39.1 referrals per 1,000 children recorded the previous year to 42.6 per 1,000 children.

Allegations investigated by child protective services (CPS) involved more than 3.5 million children, 872,000 of whom were confirmed to have been victims of abuse or neglect. However, CPS investigations alone offer an incomplete picture of child abuse and neglect. In Pennsylvania, for example, CPS agencies account for only 30% of the allegations that are investigated or assessed by the child welfare system.

Nevertheless, data reported by CPS agencies help to define and track child maltreatment. This information is routinely collected by the federally sponsored National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) and reported by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services each year. The department also reviews state CPS policy and the services they offer.

This report, drawn from recent NCANDS data and relevant Department of Health and Human Services reports, is intended to provide a snapshot of child maltreatment in America, from reporting to characteristics of perpetrators, victims, the types of maltreatment children experience, and the agencies that investigate these tragic circumstances.

### Reporting Of Child Maltreatment

Each week, CPS agencies across the U.S. receive, on average, about 60,000 allegations of child maltreatment, including reports of neglect and physical, sexual, psychological, and other types of abuse.

The allegations are reported by sources ranging from teachers and social service workers to neighbors and rela-

tives. CPS agencies investigated more than two-thirds of the allegations they screened in 2004. Evidence was found to substantiate claims of maltreatment in more than 25% of the cases.

It is important to note that certain characteristics of the NCANDS data make it difficult to make definitive state to state comparisons. Differences in the legal definitions of child abuse and neglect and different procedures and criteria used for screening and investigating referrals are among the factors that complicate state to state comparison. In Pennsylvania, for example, CPS agencies focus their investigations on child abuse and only the most serious cases of neglect. Less serious cases of child neglect are addressed through general protective services investigations rather than CPS investigations and are not classified as child abuse.

### Who Reports Abuse And Neglect?

About 56% of all of the reports of child maltreatment made nationwide in 2004 came from professional sources. These sources include educational, legal, law enforcement, social services, medical, and mental health personnel, and daycare and foster care providers. The remaining 44% of the allegations were reported by nonprofessional sources, such as friends, neighbors, parents, and anonymous sources.

Professionals are required by law to report alleged maltreatment in almost all states, including Pennsylvania. Sixteen states also require some, if not all, nonprofessionals to report alleged maltreatment. In Kentucky, for example, all nonprofessionals are required to report maltreatment, including victims. In Pennsylvania, friends and neighbors are the only nonprofessional sources who are mandated to report child abuse or neglect.

Educational personnel reported 16.5% of the child maltreatment allegations made in 2004, the most by any single source. Next, were legal and criminal justice personnel, who

reported 15.6% of the alleged acts of abuse and neglect; social services, 10.5%; relatives, 7.9%; medical personnel, 7.9%; parents, 6.2%; friends or neighbors, 5.5%; and mental health workers, 3.8%. About 9.4% of referrals were reported anonymously. Child care providers, foster parents, and victims each accounted for fewer than one percent of the reported allegations.

Not only did professional sources report the greatest share of alleged child maltreatment, the cases they reported accounted for more than 67% of the investigated allegations that resulted in substantiated findings of child abuse and neglect. Reports made by nonprofessional sources, on the other hand, accounted for 81% of those that were determined to be intentionally false.

### The Victims

Acts of child abuse and neglect are committed against children of all ages. However, the youngest, most vulnerable children have the highest rates of victimization. More girls identified as victims of abuse or neglect in 2004, but their numbers were only slightly higher than boys. Nearly three-quarters of all victims had no prior history of being abused or neglected.

The 2004 victimization rate in the U.S. was 11.9 victims per 1,000 children. If there is any good news in such numbers, it is that the rate has gradually fallen since 1993, when it peaked at 15.3 victims per 1,000 children.

In Pennsylvania, 4,628 children were identified as victims of maltreatment, 105 more than in 2003.<sup>1</sup> The state's victimization rate of fewer than 2 victims per 1,000 children was among the lowest reported in the nation.

National data suggest that certain characteristics or circumstances place children at a greater risk of being identified as victims of maltreatment. For example:

- Children with allegations of multiple types of maltreatment were nearly three times more likely to have been identified as a victim than children who were alleged to have been physically abused.
- Children who were alleged to have been sexually abused were 71% more likely to have been identified as victims than children with a physical abuse allegation.
- Children who were disabled were 68% more likely to have been identified as a victim of maltreatment than those not disabled.
- Children who were reported by educational personnel were twice as likely to have been identified as a victim of maltreatment than children whose cases were reported by social and mental health services.

### Types Of Maltreatment

Neglect is by far the most common type of maltreatment experienced by children. In 2004, neglect was experienced by 62% of the victims identified in CPS investigations.

Another 17.5% of the victims had been physically abused. Sexual abuse accounted for nearly 10% of confirmed victims of maltreatment; 7% were found to have been psychologically abused; and 2% had been medically neglected. Some 14.5% of the victims experienced other types of maltreatment, such as abandonment, threats of harm, and congenital drug addiction.

Most of the acts of maltreatment endured by these children were initially reported by professional sources.

Educational personnel, for example, reported 24% of the confirmed cases of physical abuse. Law enforcement reported another 22% of the cases and 11% of the cases resulting in children being identified as victims of physical abuse were reported by medical personnel. Only 27% of the victims of physical abuse were reported by friends, relatives, and other nonprofessional reporting sources.

Reporting of confirmed cases of neglect and other types of abuse followed similar patterns.

Law enforcement sources, for example, reported the largest share of cases in which children were subsequently found to have been the victims of neglect and sexual abuse. Nearly one-third of medical neglect were reported by medical personnel.

### Age And Risk Of Maltreatment

National data show that, overall, the youngest, most vulnerable children have the highest rates of being victims of abuse and neglect.

In 2004, for example, the rate of victimization of children ages birth to 3 years was 16.1 victims per 1,000 children, with children under the age of 1 year accounting for more than 10% of all victims. Children ages 4-7 years had a rate of 13.4 victims per 1,000 children, while the oldest age group, children 16-17 years old, had a victimization rate of 6.1 victims per 1,000 children.

Neglect was the most common type of maltreatment experienced by young children. Nearly 73% of victims ages 3 years or younger experienced neglect, compared to 52.4% of victims ages 16 years or older.

Another very vulnerable group, children with disabilities, accounted for 7.3% of all victims of maltreatment. Children with the following risks were considered to have a disability: mental retardation, emotional disturbance, visual impairment, learning disability, physical disability, behavioral problems, or other medical problems.

Older victims were more likely to have experienced physical abuse and sexual abuse. For example, among victims 12-15 years old, 22.8% had been physically abused and 16.5% had been sexually abused. Among victims ages 4-7 years, 16.8% had been physically abused and 9.1% sexually abused.



## Recurrence

For a state to meet the national standard for recurrence set by the Department of Health and Human Services, no more than 6.1% of all children who had been identified as victims during the first six months of the review period can become victims again within six months. In 2004, 42% of the states met that standard, including Pennsylvania, which reported that less than 3% of child maltreatment victims had experienced additional abuse or neglect.

Several factors influence the likelihood of a child being abused or neglected more than once. For example, an analysis of the NCANDS data found that:

- Recurrence is 84% more likely among children who have been victims of maltreatment more than once than among children who are first-time victims.
- Victims with a disability are 61% more likely to become victims of maltreatment again than children without a disability.
- The oldest children, ages 16-21 years, are the least likely age group to experience a recurrence. For example, they are 52% less likely to reexperience abuse or neglect than the youngest children, ages birth-3 years.

## Foster Children

The Department of Health and Human Services also sets a standard for states regarding the number of children who are abused or neglected while in foster care. To meet the standard, states must show that no more than 0.57% of all children in foster care had been maltreated during the period under review.

Compliance was high in 2004, with 84% of the states reporting data that met the standard, including Pennsylvania, which reported that 0.16% of children in foster care had been found to have been maltreated. In 2000, fewer than 60% of the states that reported such data complied with the standard.

## Child Deaths

In 2004, an estimated 1,490 U.S. children died from abuse or neglect, a rate of about 2.03 deaths per 100,000 children, based on data from state child welfare systems and other sources available to states. It was roughly the same rate of fatalities reported in 2003.

The overwhelming number of children who died were the youngest and most vulnerable. Children under the age of 4 years accounted for 81% of the deaths nationwide in 2004. Another 11.5% of the children who died as a result of abuse or neglect were 4-7 years of age.

Most died at the hands of a parent. One or more parents were identified as the perpetrators in about 79% of the maltreatment cases that led to the death of a child. In 31% of those cases, the act of abuse or neglect that led to the death was committed by the child's mother acting alone.

In Pennsylvania, 44 children died of abuse and neglect

in 2004. Children under the age of 1 year accounted for 43% of those deaths. Parents were found to have committed the lethal acts of abuse or neglect in 85% of the fatalities reported by the state.<sup>2</sup>

Among the types of maltreatment blamed for children's deaths, neglect was identified as the cause in 35.5% of fatalities reported nationwide. Multiple types of maltreatment accounted for 30%. Physical abuse alone was the cause of 28% of the fatalities reported.

## The Perpetrators

Most children who are abused or neglected are victimized by people they know and trust. Most are abused or neglected by parents, who either act alone or together.

The 2004 NCANDS data identify several characteristics of those who commit child abuse or neglect. For example:

- Of all perpetrators of child maltreatment, 78.5% were parents. Another 6.5% were other relatives and 4% were unmarried partners of parents.
- Nearly 92% of perpetrators who had a parental relationship with the victim were the child's biological parent.
- About 63% of parents who maltreated a child committed neglect.
- Nearly 73% of perpetrators who were friends or neighbors of the family committed sexual abuse.
- About 58% of all perpetrators had neglected one or more child.
- Nearly 58% of all perpetrators were women. Their median age was 31 years and more than 40% were younger than age 30.
- The median age of men who abused or neglected a child was 34 years, with about 44% of them being under the age of 30.

Evidence suggests that victims of maltreatment are more than twice as likely to be abused or neglected by their mothers. Nearly 39% of all victims of maltreatment in 2004 were abused or neglected by their mothers, who had acted alone. Fathers acting alone were identified as the perpetrator in 18% of the cases in which children were found to be the victims of abuse or neglect. Another 18% of victims had been maltreated by both parents acting together.

## Child Protective Services

Investigating child abuse and neglect in the U.S. is largely the responsibility of CPS agencies in each state. These agencies maintain a reporting hotline, receive reports of alleged abuse and neglect, screen those reports, investigate allegations that pass initial screening, and assess the safety of the children involved.

CPS agencies are also involved in providing services to prevent future incidences of child abuse and neglect and to help remedy conditions found during an investigation that

threaten the health, safety, and overall well-being of the child.

### Preventive Services

Preventive services are provided to parents whose children are at risk of abuse and neglect. These services are designed to help parents and caregivers better understand child development and improve their abilities to raise children appropriately and effectively.

Examples of the preventive services that are offered parents and caregivers include respite care, parenting education, housing assistance, treatment for substance abuse, daycare, home visits, individual and family counseling, and homemaker help.

Nationwide, 26.7 children per 1,000 children received preventive services in 2004. In 2003, the rate was 25.3 per 1,000 children. In Pennsylvania, 83.3 children per 1,000 children were given preventive services, one of the highest rates in the nation.

### Post Investigation Services

Also known as remedial or post response services, these are services that are offered on a voluntary basis by child welfare agencies or ordered by the courts to help ensure the safety of children. Such services are usually based on an assessment of family strengths, weaknesses, and needs.

Examples of post investigation services commonly provided include individual counseling; case management; family-based services provided to the whole family, such as counseling or family support; in-home services; and foster care.

More than 76% of the states require workers to provide short-term services during an investigation of child maltreatment, if needed, including Pennsylvania. More than 59% of the victims of child abuse or neglect across the U.S. received post investigation services in 2004.

Children may be removed from their homes during or after an investigation and placed in foster care. In 2004, it was estimated that 268,000 children were removed from their homes as a result of a child maltreatment investigation. Other findings from the NCANDS data include:

- About 19% of children who were victims of maltreatment were placed in foster care as a result of an investigation in 2004, up from 15% the previous year.
- About 66% of children who were removed from their homes had experienced neglect; another 10.6% had been physically abused; 4% had been sexually abused; and 14% of them had experienced several types of maltreatment.

There are several reasons why some children and families receive post investigation services or family reunification services and not others. For example, there may not be enough services available for families or the waiting lists may be long. Other factors are suggested in the findings of an analysis of national data on who receives post investigation services. For example:

- Child victims with a disability were 70% more likely to receive post investigation services than children without a disability and were 94% more likely to be placed in foster care.
- When compared with physical abuse victims, victims of multiple types of maltreatment were 65% more likely to receive services.
- Children who had been abused or maltreated by persons other than their parents were 60% less likely to receive post investigation services than those who had been abused or maltreated by their mothers.
- Prior victims of maltreatment were 75% more likely to have been placed in foster care than children who had not previously been abused or neglected.

Such interventions to protect children only began to draw serious attention from government and the courts in the early 1960s, when researchers and child advocates raised concern over the extent of child abuse and neglect in the U.S. By 1967, 44 states had adopted mandatory child abuse reporting laws. However, it was not until 1974 that Congress passed the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act, which provided states with funds to investigate and take steps to prevent child maltreatment.

Today, CPS agencies are critical components of every state's child welfare system and one of the busiest. In 2004, screening and intake workers each handled an average of more than 65 investigations per year, up from the following year's average caseload of 63 investigations per worker.

### References

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*This Special Report, written by Jeffery Fraser, is based on the publications cited above. It is not intended to be an original work but a summary for the convenience of our readers. References noted in the text follow:*

<sup>1</sup>Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare (2004). 29th Annual Child Abuse Report. [www.dpw.state.pa.us/Child/ChildAbuseNeglect/ChildABuseAnnualRpts/003672869.htm](http://www.dpw.state.pa.us/Child/ChildAbuseNeglect/ChildABuseAnnualRpts/003672869.htm).

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.