

background

Report # 87

Child Maltreatment: Victims And Perpetrators

December 2006

Child Maltreatment In America

Young And Vulnerable

Children Under Age 3 More Likely To Be Maltreated

Each year, American children of all ages, genders, and family income status are abused or neglected. The numbers are troubling. More than 3 million allegations of child maltreatment are reported to government child protective services (CPS) each year — and CPS investigations alone provide an incomplete picture of child abuse and neglect. In some states, including Pennsylvania, many neglect cases are handled by other agencies.

Who are the victims and who are the perpetrators of these acts? Sadly, the youngest children are the most vulnerable and parents are most likely to be the ones who abuse or neglect them.

Despite their limitations, data reported by CPS agencies help to define characteristics of child maltreatment and track trends across the United States. 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.

Among the characteristics that emerge are profiles of the victims of child maltreatment and the perpetrators.

Profile Of Victims

Only about 25% of the allegations received by CPS agencies result in an investigation that confirms that a child has been a victim of abuse or neglect.

Based on data from CPS investigations, the victimization rate was 11.9 victims per 1,000 children in 2004. 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 vic-

tims per 1,000 children.

In Pennsylvania, 4,628 children were identified as victims of maltreatment, 105 more than in 2003.¹ The state's victimization rate of fewer than 2 victims per 1,000 children was among the lowest reported in the nation.

National data show that nearly three-quarters of all victims had no prior history of being abused or neglected, the youngest children have the highest rates of victimization, and more girls become victims, although their numbers are only slightly higher than boys.

The 2004 NCANDS data suggest certain characteristics or circumstances place children at higher risk of being identified as victims. For example:

- 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.

Related Reports

Child protective services are on the front line of efforts across the nation to investigate allegations of maltreatment, protect the young victims, and provide services to prevent further abuse and neglect.

See Report 88

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

Another 17.5% of the victims had been physically abused. Sexual abuse accounted for nearly 10% of the victims of maltreatment; 7% were psychologically abused; and 2% had been medically neglected. Some 14.5% of the victims experienced other types of maltreatment,

(Continued on back)

(Continued from front)

such as abandonment, threats of harm, and congenital drug addiction.

Age And Risk

Overall, the youngest, most vulnerable children have the highest rates of being victims of abuse and neglect.

In 2004, 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. The oldest age group, children 16-17 years old, had a victimization rate of 6.1 victims per 1,000 children.

Nearly 73% of victims ages 3 years or younger experienced neglect, compared to 52.4% of victims ages 16 years or older.

Children with disabilities are another vulnerable group, accounting for 7.3% of all victims. Their disabilities include mental retardation, visual impairment, learning disability, physical disability, and behavioral problems.

Older victims are more likely to have experienced physical abuse and sexual abuse. Among victims 12-15 years old, 22.8% had been physically abused in 2004 and 16.5% had been sexually abused. Among victims ages 4-7 years, 16.8% had been physically abused and 9.1% sexually abused.

Foster Children

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

In 2004, 84% of the states reporting data met the standard, including Pennsylvania, which reported that 0.16% of children in foster care had

been maltreated. In 2000, fewer than 60% of the states met 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.

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.

In Pennsylvania, 44 children died of abuse and neglect in 2004. Children under the age of 1 year accounted for 43% of those deaths.²

Perpetrators

Most children who are abused or neglected are victimized by people they know. Usually, it's their parents acting alone or together. In 2004, for example:

- 78.5% of perpetrators were parents; 6.5% were other relatives; and 4% were unmarried partners of parents.
- 63% of parents who maltreated a

child committed neglect.

- 73% of perpetrators who were friends or neighbors of the family committed sexual abuse.
- 58% of perpetrators were women.

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.

Most acts of maltreatment that resulted in a child's death were also committed by parents. One or more parents were identified as the perpetrators in about 79% of the cases that led to a death. 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, parents committed the lethal acts of abuse or neglect in 85% of the fatalities reported by the state.



references

This report is based on the following publications:

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2006). Administration on Children, Youth and Families. *Child Maltreatment 2004*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office. www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/pubs/cm04/index.htm

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2003). Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau, and Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation. *National Study of Child Protective Services Systems and Reform Efforts: Review of State CPS Policy*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office. www.aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/CPS-status03/state-policy03/index.htm

References noted in the text follow:

¹ Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare (2004). 29th Annual Child Abuse Report. www.dpw.state.pa.us/Child/ChildAbuseNeglect/ChildAbuseAnnualRpts/2004ChildAbuseRpt/003672869.htm.

² Ibid.

Children, Youth & Families background is published by the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development (OCD), a program of the University of Pittsburgh School of Education. These reports are based on available research and are provided as overviews of topics related to children and families.

OCD Co-Directors: Christina J. Groark, PhD.; Robert B. McCall, PhD.

background Editor: Jeffery Fraser, e-mail: jd.fraser@comcast.net

University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development, 400 N. Lexington Avenue Pittsburgh, PA 15208; (412) 244-5447; fax: (412) 244-5440

This report and others can be found on the Internet by visiting: <http://www.education.pitt.edu/ocd/family/backgrounders.asp>