



Nature and Scope of Child Maltreatment in the United States

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Introduction

Abuse and neglect of children occurs in families from all walks of life, and across all socioeconomic, religious, and ethnic groups. There is no single, identifiable cause of child maltreatment; rather, it occurs as a result of an interaction of multiple forces impacting the family. While certain factors related to parents, children, families, and the environment are commonly associated with a greater incidence of child maltreatment, the presence of these factors alone is not sufficient for abusive situations to develop. Stated differently, the presence of known risk factors does not always lead to family violence, and factors that may cause violence in one family may not result in violence in another family (DePanfilis & Salus, 1992).

There are four main types of child maltreatment: physical abuse, child neglect, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse. Physical abuse is the infliction of physical injury by various methods, even if the perpetrator does not intend harm. Child neglect is the failure to provide for the child's basic needs and can be physical, educational, or emotional. Sexual abuse is the involvement of a child in any kind of sexual act, including prostitution or pornography; many believe this is the most underreported type of abuse. Emotional abuse is an act or omission that has caused or could cause, serious behavioral, cognitive, emotional, or mental disorders. These types of maltreatment often occur together within a family, though they can appear alone as well.

In 2000, nearly 2 million reports of alleged child abuse or neglect were investigated by child protective services agencies, representing more than 2.7 million children who were alleged victims of maltreatment and who were referred for investigation (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2002). Of these children, approximately 879,000 were found to be victims of maltreatment, meaning that sufficient evidence was found to substantiate or indicate the report of child maltreatment.

This reflects a national rate of approximately 12.2 children per 1,000 children younger than 18 years of age in the general population who were found to be substantiated or indicated victims of maltreatment. This estimate represents an *annual* rate of abuse among children under 18. However, an individual child's likelihood of being abused over the course of his or her childhood may be higher. A study that analyzed local data on abuse rates of children in Cuyahoga County, Ohio, estimated that nearly 17 percent of children born between 1998 and 2000 could be expected to have substantiated reports of maltreatment before reaching age 8, though the largest occurrence for any given year of age (birth to age one) was less than 5 percent (Sabol, Polousky, & Billing, 2002).

How Many Children are Maltreated or At Risk of Maltreatment?



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**Recent
Trends In
Observed
Rates of
Maltreatment**

Nearly two-thirds of child victims (62.8%) suffered neglect, including medical neglect, while nearly one-fifth (19.3%) suffered physical abuse and approximately 10 percent suffered sexual abuse. The risk of maltreatment is highest for children under 4 years of age. Moreover, children with a prior history of victimization were more than three times as likely to experience recurrence compared with children without a prior history.

The 2000 Annual Report from the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) indicates that national child abuse incidence rates increased in each year from 1990-1993, and decreased in each year through 1999. The rate of victimization was 13.4 per 1,000 children in 1990. The rate peaked at 15.3 children per 1,000 in 1993, then decreased to 11.8 per 1,000 in 1999, while increasing slightly to 12.2 children per 1,000 in 2000. Meanwhile, the National Incidence Studies (NIS) found that rates of child maltreatment under the *Harm* Standard increased 149 percent from the time the first NIS study (NIS-1) was conducted in 1980 to the time the latest NIS study (NIS-3) was conducted in 1993.

Factors most commonly attributed to the increase in observed rates are: a greater public awareness of the reporting system through media and education; reporting system changes, such as a centralized intake, more effective intake assessments, use of standardized screening tools, and newly implemented data systems; increased rates of substance abuse; and changing standards and definitions of what constitutes abuse, both over time and across professions (Tzeng, Jackson, & Karlson, 1991; Wang & Daro, 1997).

The full report on the *Emerging Practices* project, *Emerging Practices in the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect*, can be found on the National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information Web site:

HTML: <http://nccanch.acf.hhs.gov/topics/prevention/emerging/report/index.cfm>

PDF: <http://nccanch.acf.hhs.gov/topics/prevention/emerging/report.pdf>

A print copy of the report can be ordered by contacting the Clearinghouse at (800) 394-3366, (703) 385-3206 (fax), nccanch@calib.com (e-mail).