

CHAPTER 4

What Is the Scope of the Problem?

Each year, hundreds of thousands of children in the United States are victims of maltreatment. Knowledge of the scope of the problem is drawn primarily from data reported by State child protective service (CPS) agencies to the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS). Not all maltreatment, however, is known by the authorities. This chapter summarizes the 2000 NCANDS findings related to the number and characteristics of child maltreatment victims and perpetrators reported to CPS and also discusses estimates of the actual incidence of abuse and neglect, including incidents that are not reported to CPS.

REPORTED CHILD MALTREATMENT VICTIMS

The number of children actually maltreated is unknown. In 2000, there were an estimated 879,000 victims of maltreatment nationwide.¹² The term “victims” refers to those children who were found by CPS to have experienced abuse or neglect (i.e., substantiated cases).

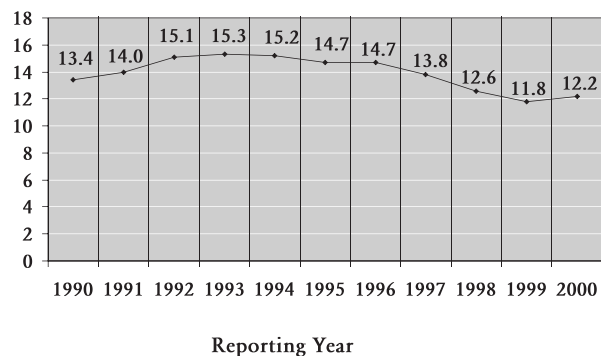
During that same year, an estimated 3 million referrals were made to CPS regarding one or more children in a family, and nearly two-thirds of those referrals were “screened in” for investigation of potential maltreatment. “Screened in” indicates that the referral was deemed appropriate for investigation or assessment based on State statutes

and agency guidelines. The CPS processes for screening referrals, conducting investigations, and substantiating maltreatment are described further in Chapter 9, “What Does the Child Protection Process Look Like?”

For every 1,000 children in the population in 2000, approximately 12 were victims of maltreatment.¹³ Exhibit 4-1 presents NCANDS data on the reported annual victimization rates over the past 11 years.

Exhibit 4-1 Trend of Reported Victimization 1990–2000

Rates Per 1,000 Children



Source: *Child Maltreatment 2000*

Types of Maltreatment

The following findings describe reported child victimization rates by major types of maltreatment as stated in NCANDS for 2000:

- **Neglect.** More than half of all reported victims (62.8 percent) suffered neglect (including medical neglect), an estimated rate of 7 per 1,000 children.
- **Physical abuse.** Approximately one-fifth of all known victims (19.3 percent) were physically abused, an estimated rate of 2 per 1,000 children.
- **Sexual abuse.** Of all reported maltreated children, just over one-tenth (10.1 percent) had been sexually abused, an estimated rate of 1 per 1,000 children.
- **Psychological maltreatment.** Less than one-tenth (7.7 percent) were identified as victims of psychological maltreatment, or less than 1 per 1,000 children.¹⁴

Keep in mind that some children are reported as victims of more than one type of maltreatment.

Characteristics of Victims

Overall, in 2000, 52 percent of victims of child maltreatment were girls and 48 percent were boys. While rates of most types of maltreatment were similar for both sexes, more girls than boys were sexually abused.

The youngest and most vulnerable children—children under the age of 3—had the highest victimization rate, approximately 16 per 1,000.¹⁵ Overall, rates of victimization declined as children's age increased. (Victimization patterns by age, however, differ by type of maltreatment.)

While children of every race and ethnicity were maltreated, victimization rates varied. Out of all children reported as maltreated in 2000:

- 50.6 percent of victims were White;
- 24.7 percent of victims were African American;
- 14.2 percent of victims were Hispanic;
- 1.6 percent of victims were American Indian-Alaska Native;
- 1.4 percent of victims were Asian-Pacific Islander.¹⁶

It is important to remember that these figures represent those children who have been referred to CPS, investigated, and found to have credible evidence of maltreatment. Other studies suggest that there are not significant differences in the actual incidence of maltreatment by race, but rather that certain races may receive different attention during the processes of referral, investigation, and service allocation.¹⁷

Fatalities

According to NCANDS, an estimated 1,200 children known to CPS died of abuse and neglect in 2000. Over two-fifths of these children (43.7 percent) were less than 1 year old. Child maltreatment fatalities were more frequently associated with neglect (34.9 percent) than with other types of maltreatment, including physical abuse.

CHILD MALTREATMENT PERPETRATORS

The majority of victims reported to NCANDS in 2000 (78.8 percent) were maltreated by a parent. This is not surprising given that child maltreatment is defined as the abuse or neglect of children by parents or caregivers. The definition of who is considered a caregiver (e.g., babysitter, daycare worker, residential facility staff, relatives, or household members) varies

from State to State. Approximately three-fifths of perpetrators of maltreatment (59.9 percent) were women. Nearly 42 percent of that group of women perpetrators were younger than 30. While mothers were more frequently identified as perpetrators of neglect and physical abuse (the most common forms of maltreatment), fathers were more frequently identified as the perpetrators of sexual abuse.¹⁸

NONREPORTED CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT

Not all victims of abuse and neglect are reported to CPS and not all reports are verifiable. As

such, the statistics presented above likely under-represent the true scope of child maltreatment. The *Third National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect* (NIS-3) surveyed community-level professionals (e.g., educators, medical professionals, and mental health care providers) who came into contact with children in 1993. The study estimated that less than one-third of the children who were identified as having experienced harm from abuse or neglect had been investigated by CPS.¹⁹ General population surveys also suggest that maltreatment is higher than the official reports. For example, based on what parents say they did in disciplining their children, a 1995 Gallup Poll estimated the number of physical abuse victims to be 16 times the official reported number of victims for that time period.

Key Sources of Child Abuse and Neglect Statistics

The primary sources of national statistics on child abuse and neglect are two reports sponsored by the Children's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services:

- **Child Maltreatment: Reports from the States to the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS).** NCANDS collects national information on maltreated children known to State CPS. The annual NCANDS report presents national and State level findings on the number and sources of child abuse and neglect reports, investigation dispositions, types of maltreatment, characteristics of children victimized, relationship of perpetrators to victims, and services provided for child maltreatment victims.
- **National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS).** NIS is designed to estimate the actual number of abused and neglected children nationwide including both cases reported and cases not reported to CPS. NIS bases estimates on information provided by a nationally representative sample of community professionals (e.g., educators, law enforcement personnel, medical professionals, and other service providers) who come into contact with maltreated children.

The most recent reports from these studies are available from the National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information, 800-FYI-3366, nccanch@calib.com, or online at www.calib.com/nccanch.