

# Reported Child Abuse and Neglect

Eugene M. Lewit

**T**hroughout history, children have been subject to substantial cruelty, including abandonment to die of exposure. Today, although society seeks to protect children through child abuse laws, the task remains huge and complex. Not the least reason for this complexity is the lack of universally agreed upon standards as to what constitutes child maltreatment.<sup>1</sup>

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Defining child maltreatment is largely a matter of social norms. Casual observation in public places where parents and their children can be found provides frequent instances of children being hit or severely scolded. Such acts, even hitting a child with an object such as a belt, are not generally considered abuse according to either the legal or informal norms of current American society. Yet, such actions against children are considered abuse in Sweden and several other countries and by a number of Americans as well.<sup>2</sup>

Despite some ambivalence about the definition of child maltreatment, concern for the welfare of children in the United States has a long history. Historically, protecting children was a function of public and private child welfare agencies at the local level. In 1974, the federal government enacted legislation that gave it a more direct role in child protection policy.<sup>2</sup> The Fed-

eral Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (Public Law 93-247) established uniform operating standards with respect to the identification and management of child maltreatment cases. However, individual states continue to maintain their own definitions of maltreatment, investigative procedures, services, and monitoring systems. Consequently, because responsibility for addressing the various forms of child maltreatment is dispersed among many different government entities, there is only a limited amount of uniformly collected and reported information on this serious problem.

The current American definition of *child maltreatment* includes physical injury, sexual abuse, psychological or emotional harm, and general, medical, and educational neglect. Although these fundamental categories identify a number of undesirable acts against children, the categories are fairly nonspecific and

often call for a judgment as to the outcome, purpose, or intent of an action rather than identify the specific components of the act itself. To impose some uniformity on the reporting of child abuse and neglect, the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect has established a set of working definitions.<sup>3</sup> These definitions, presented in Table 1, still leave much latitude for interpretation, particularly because several categories include acts that "could have caused" injury to a child. Moreover, the specific actions that constitute the various types of maltreatment are defined under state law and, hence, may vary from one jurisdiction to another.

The area of child abuse and neglect comprises a complex set of topics, including the different types of maltreatment, the consequences of these actions, and possible responses to prevent maltreatment in the first place and to address the consequences of

Table 1

### Definitions of Selected Terms Used in National Child Abuse and Neglect Statistics

**Maltreatment** An action or failure to act by a parent, caretaker, or other person defined under state law as a perpetrator of abuse or neglect, that resulted in death; physical, sexual, or emotional harm; or risk of harm to a child.

**Neglect or Deprivation of Necessities** A type of maltreatment that refers to the failure to provide needed, age-appropriate care.

**Physical Abuse** A type of maltreatment that refers to physical acts that caused or could have caused physical injury to a child.

**Sexual Abuse** A type of maltreatment that refers to the involvement of the child in sexual activity to provide sexual gratification or financial benefit to the perpetrator, including contacts for sexual purposes; prostitution; pornography; exposure; or other sexually exploitative activities.

**Psychological or Emotional Maltreatment** A type of maltreatment that refers to acts or omissions that caused, or could have caused conduct, cognitive, affective, or other mental disorders, such as emotional neglect, psychological abuse, or mental injury.

**Medical Neglect** The failure to provide for appropriate health care of the child, though financially able or offered financial or other means, except when a parent or other person responsible for the child's welfare is legitimately practicing religious beliefs, and by reason thereof does not provide specified medical treatment for a child.

**Death as a Result of Child Maltreatment** A child's death as a result of abuse or neglect, because either (a) injury resulting from the abuse or neglect was the cause of death; or (b) abuse or neglect was a contributing factor to the cause of death.

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect. *National child abuse and neglect data system: 1990 summary data component*. Working Paper No. 1. Washington, DC: DHHS, April 1992.

maltreatment when prevention fails. This entire journal issue is devoted to sexual abuse, a single subset of activities that represent approximately 15% of substantiated cases of abuse and neglect in the United States.<sup>4</sup> A comprehensive review of all facets of child maltreatment is beyond the scope of this short article; its intent is rather to examine the sources, limitations, and strengths of national data on reported cases of child abuse and neglect. It is hoped that this examination of data that are often sensationally reported will increase appreciation for the complexity of the problem and interest in developing effective interventions.

First, the article examines sources of national data on child abuse, the number of cases reported, and recent trends in the data. Then the issues of substantiation rates and the various categories of abuse are addressed, followed

by brief examinations of the characteristics of the victims of abuse and of child fatalities related to maltreatment.

### Sources of Data

Theoretically, information on child abuse and neglect can be gleaned from child protective service (CPS) agencies, national surveys of individuals, and the criminal justice system. Of these various sources, the most frequently cited data on child abuse and neglect, and the primary focus of this article, are based on reports alleging these activities that are referred for investigation to CPS agencies in each state.<sup>3,4</sup> Because these data are based on reports of suspected cases of child maltreatment, they contain several sources of error, including instances of real abuse and neglect that are not reported, reported cases that do not meet definitional criteria in all jurisdic-

tions, and false reports of abuse and neglect.

A number of national surveys add to the picture of child abuse and neglect in this country. One such survey is the federally funded second National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-2). This survey is cited briefly by Finkelhor in this journal issue.<sup>5,6</sup> The NIS-2 was an intensive effort to collect data in a small (29) but representative sample of counties throughout the United States. These data were then extrapolated to the national level. A strength of these data is that mandated reporters (health care providers, educators, and such) were interviewed to obtain an estimate of the number of probable cases of maltreatment that they actually observed, not merely the number of cases they reported to child protection or law enforcement agencies. Weaknesses of these data include

the inability to specify the extent of duplication among reported cases; a complex, multi-stage sampling strategy that may have introduced bias into the survey; and limited information on the professionals participating in the study.<sup>7</sup> In addition, this data collection effort is repeated only every six to seven years (the most recent figures are for 1986), and consequently these data cannot be used to assess current trends in abuse and neglect.

In addition, adults have been surveyed to determine their experiences of abuse as children. These surveys cannot tell us anything about current levels of maltreatment, may be subject to recall error, and often use broad and inconsistent definitions of abuse. Such surveys do suggest, however, that CPS data may substantially understate the level of abuse in the general population. (See the article by Finkelhor in this journal issue.) Surveys have also been performed on the adult population to determine the respondents' experience with child and spousal maltreatment at the time of the survey.<sup>2</sup> If the questions were answered truthfully, these surveys would be free of some of the biases found in CPS data, but in all likelihood they are subject to underreporting bias since respondents may be reluctant to disclose abusive behavior even if guaranteed confidentiality.<sup>2</sup>

Because of space constraints and the limitations of general population surveys, this article does not analyze data from such surveys. Data from the criminal justice system are also not reviewed because, although severe child abuse may be considered a crime and result in prosecutions by the criminal justice system, there is not yet any regular annual compilation of national criminal justice data that provides useful information about all aspects of child abuse and neglect in all jurisdictions. (See the article by Finkelhor in this journal issue.)

### CPS-Based Data

The two primary sources of information on child maltreatment in the United States today are the Annual Fifty-State Survey of the National Committee for the Prevention of Child Abuse (NCPCA)<sup>4</sup> and the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) of the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect.<sup>5</sup> Although both of these sources produce annual data on child abuse based on reports from state CPS agencies, they ask somewhat different questions and follow different procedures, and hence their reports differ in precision, level of detail, and timeliness.

Since 1982, the NCPCA has conducted annual telephone surveys of state child protective service agencies to determine the number and characteristics of reports of suspected child abuse, the number of abuse-related child fatalities, and changes in the status of child welfare services.<sup>4</sup> States are contacted early in a calendar year and queried about their experiences in the previous year. A major limitation of using the data collected in this survey to provide a direct estimate of children reported for suspicion of various kinds of maltreatment is the wide variation among states in data collection and reporting procedures. Another problem is that most states can only provide data on the number of reports received, not the number of children subject to reporting. Since some of these reports apply to the same family or child, often for the same offense, this so-called duplicated reporting typically overstates the actual number of children reported for suspicion of maltreatment. The NCPCA follows a number of estimation procedures to adjust the data for inconsistent reporting among states, but can do little to correct for duplicate reporting.<sup>8</sup>

As part of the adjustment process, data from reporting states are projected onto the national population to obtain

national estimates. Different states appear in different categories of data and in different years, which introduces some imprecision into the estimates. For example, California, Washington, and West Virginia could not provide data on substantiated cases for the years 1991 to 1993, and a number of larger states including California and New York could not provide data on child abuse and neglect fatalities in 1993. Accordingly, the available reported data are projected onto a national population base to obtain national estimates of substantiated cases and of fatalities from maltreatment. This method treats the states that do not report as though they have the same rates of substantiation and death as the states that do report.

In contrast to the NCPCA data collection effort, the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect (NCCAN) has been working since 1989 under a federal mandate to establish the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS), a nationwide data collection and analysis program on child maltreatment.<sup>3</sup> At present, this activity is a voluntary data base development program in which each state is sent forms and instructions for data collection. States are provided with technical assistance on reporting procedures and with feedback from a standard report of the data they submit each year. The process allows states to contribute to the construction of the national data base and to alert the NCANDS team to limitations of their data. In turn, the NCANDS team can encourage and help the states develop the capacity for uniform reporting of the desired data.

Despite these efforts to improve data collection, the NCANDS is at present subject to many of the same important data problems as the NCPCA, including that (1) most states cannot provide unduplicated counts of children subject to abuse if children are subject to

more than one investigation, and (2) states vary in the way they handle unsubstantiated reports, and many states completely expunge these records so no information is available about unsubstantiated reports.<sup>3</sup> The NCCAN attempts to deal with these and other problems by using ratios based on data from states that are able to supply certain data components to make estimates for states that do not supply those components. For certain detailed items, only data from the subset of states that supply the detailed data are analyzed, and frequently this data includes duplicated counts.

### Current Data on Child Abuse

The most current national data on the number of reports of child abuse and neglect come from the NCPCA's 1993 Fifty-State Survey.<sup>4</sup> As illustrated in Figure 1, according to this survey an estimated 2,984,000 reports of alleged child maltreatment were made to CPS agencies in 1993. The rate of reports for child abuse or neglect in 1993 was 45 reports per 1,000 children. The number of maltreatment reports and the rate of reporting increased by approximately 50% between 1985 and 1993.

Not shown in Figure 1 are data from the NCANDS, the data collection project of the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect. NCANDS data has lagged behind NCPCA data because the NCANDS effort has focused on building uniform data-reporting capacity in the 50 states, the District of Columbia, Guam, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Interestingly, the NCANDS and the NCPCA report almost identical estimates of the number of reports of maltreatment during 1990-92. Since both organizations rely on reports from state CPS agencies for their national estimates, the similarities of their estimates suggest that the source of the data, rather than the procedures followed in attempting to adjust for

problematic data, may be the key factor in the precision of these national estimates.

In contrast, as shown in Figure 1, the estimate of reports of abuse based on the 1986 NIS-2 is quite a bit lower than the NCPCA estimate for 1986, despite the fact that the NIS-2 was designed to identify unreported as well as reported cases of child maltreatment. The main reason the NIS-2 estimate is lower than that of the NCPCA is that the NIS-2 was intended to yield an unduplicated count of cases of child abuse and used a definitional standard of maltreatment which required that professionals be reasonably confident that maltreatment had occurred. The NCPCA survey data is based on suspicion of maltreatment and does not correct for duplicate counts.<sup>9</sup> Given the divergence between the NIS-2 and NCPCA estimates for 1986, it will be interesting to see the level of concordance between the NIS-3 estimates to be prepared for 1994 and those produced for that year by the NCPCA and the improved NCANDS system.

A key question raised by the steep upward trend in reported cases of suspected child abuse over the last decade is whether this trend represents an actual increase in instances of maltreatment or merely changes in reporting procedures. There are no quantitative data with which to address this important question directly; however, the NCPCA does query state officials as to the most important factors accounting for changes in reports of maltreatment in their state.<sup>4</sup> In recent years, states responding to this query have cited increased public awareness, changes in reporting systems and procedures, deteriorating economic conditions, and increasing levels of substance abuse and violence as factors in the rise in reports.

Anecdotal reports from several states cited in the NCPCA report highlight the influence of changes in reporting procedures on reported

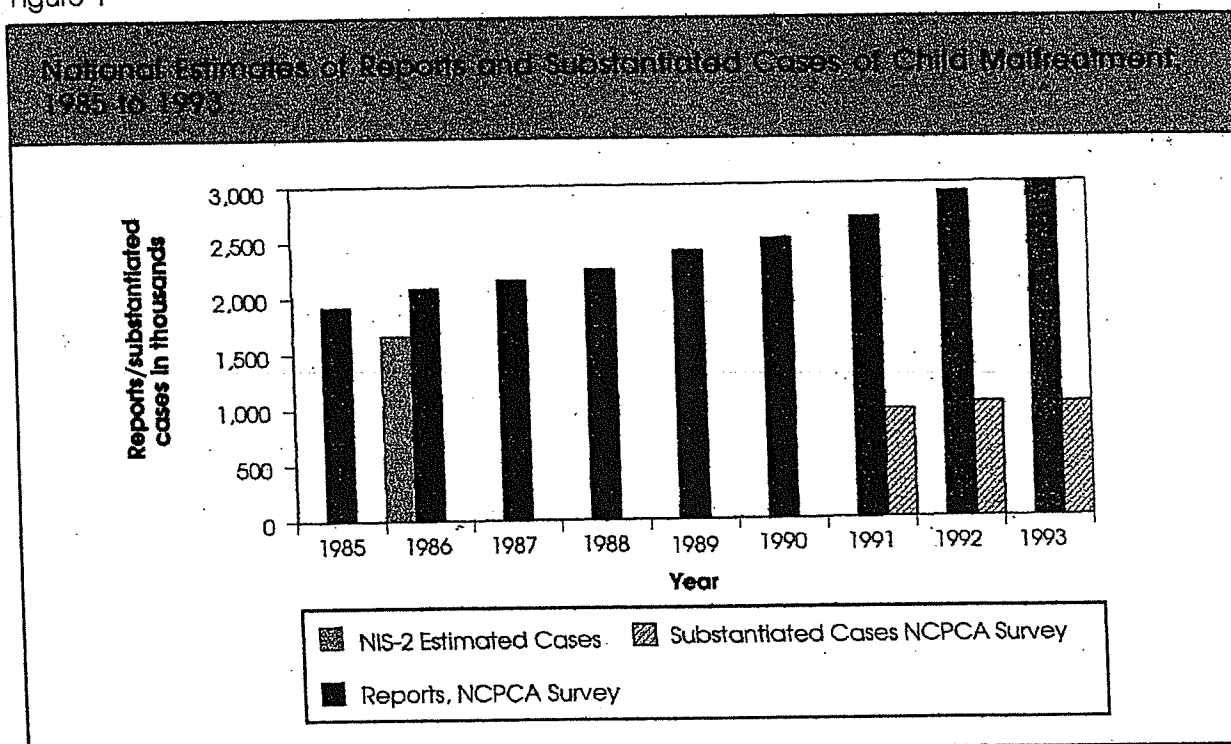
child abuse and neglect statistics.<sup>4</sup> For example, in North Carolina, the implementation of direct on-line data entry by county staff in 1992 resulted in a more accurate count of actual reports and a 23% increase in reports. In Wyoming, a 20% decline in reports followed a change in the rules that transferred jurisdiction of allegations of abuse by non-caregivers to the police from the CPS agency which reports in the national survey.

### Substantiation and Type of Abuse

Reporting allegations of abuse is only the first stage in the child protection process. Such reports call for an investigation and a determination as to whether there is sufficient evidence under state law to conclude that maltreatment occurred or that a child is at risk for maltreatment.<sup>8</sup> Substantiation procedures vary among states, as do rates of substantiation. Moreover, failure to substantiate a report of child abuse and/or neglect does not indicate that the maltreatment did not occur; instead, failure to substantiate may reflect the resources available to CPS agencies for investigating reports, the priorities agencies establish for pursuing competing reports, or the evidentiary circumstances of individual cases.

Data from the NCPCA's surveys suggest that for the years 1991 to 1993 approximately 35% of reported allegations of maltreatment were subsequently substantiated. This percentage amounts to approximately one million substantiated reports annually.<sup>4</sup> Of NCANDS reports, 39% were substantiated or showed indications of maltreatment in 1992 based on a slightly different sample of states.<sup>10</sup> Both the NCPCA and the NCANDS data contain some duplicated counts of substantiated cases of maltreatment. Although the precise number of duplicated cases is

Figure 1



There are no definitive national data on the actual incidence of child abuse and neglect. The most frequently reported statistics are based on reports alleging these activities that are referred for investigation to child protective service (CPS) agencies in each state. Since these data are based on reports of maltreatment, they miss instances of real abuse and neglect that are not reported, may count more than once acts of maltreatment that are reported more than once, and may include false reports of maltreatment. Another important source of error in national data on reported child maltreatment is that the procedures followed by state CPS agencies in responding to and monitoring reports of abuse and neglect vary among states and over time.

As explained in more detail in the text of this article, the three major sources of national data on reported maltreatment attempt to deal with the limitations of available data in different ways. In its annual survey of fifty states, the National Committee for Prevention of Child Abuse (NCPCA) attempts to statistically adjust and project incomplete and nonuniform data to obtain timely and methodologically consistent estimates. The National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) of the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect is a government-sponsored effort to develop a national uniform data collection and analysis program. Estimates of the number of reports of child maltreatment from the recently initiated NCANDS (not shown here) are almost identical to estimates from the NCPCA Survey. In contrast to these annual data collection activities, the National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS) only collects data on a sample of counties every six to seven years, but is an intensive effort designed to provide an estimate of all cases of child maltreatment including those not reported to CPS or law enforcement agencies.

- Data from the NCPCA annual surveys show a gradual but steady increase in the number of reported cases of child abuse and neglect since 1985 (and even earlier [not shown]). In 1985, maltreatment of 1.9 million children was reported to CPS agencies. In 1993, the number reported was almost 3.0 million—an increase of more than 50% in eight years.
- The 1986 NIS-2-based estimate, which is supposed to account for underreported cases of maltreatment, is substantially below the 1986 NCPCA estimate probably because the NIS-2 was intended to yield an unduplicated count of child abuse cases and used a definition of *maltreatment* which required that professionals be reasonably confident that maltreatment had occurred.
- Approximately one million cases of maltreatment were substantiated annually in 1991 to 1993—some 35% of the reported cases of abuse. Data series on both initial reports and substantiated cases contain duplicated reports of maltreatment and so overstate the number of children actually reported to CPS agencies.

Sources: McCurdy, K., and Daro, D. *Current trends in child abuse reporting and fatalities: The results of the 1993 annual fifty-state survey*. Working Paper No. 808. Prepared by the National Center on Child Abuse Prevention Research. Chicago: National Committee for Prevention of Child Abuse, April 1994; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect. *Executive summary: Study of national incidence and prevalence of child abuse and neglect*. Washington, DC: DHHS, 1988.

not known, data from detailed studies in several states suggest that as many as 10% of substantiated cases may represent duplicated counts of children.<sup>11</sup>

Comparison of the estimate of child maltreatment cases for 1986 from the NIS-2 with the number of substantiated cases reported for 1991 to 1993, provides some evidence for the possible degree of underreporting of abuse in CPS-based data. The NIS-2 used a definition of maltreatment that is similar to substantiation/indication standards used in some states; and, in addition, the NIS-2 attempted to identify cases of maltreatment known to potential reporters but not reported by them. The NIS-2 count of cases from 1986 exceeds the number of substantiated cases for recent years by approximately 60%, which suggests that improved reporting alone could lead to a significant increase in the number of cases substantiated by CPS agencies.

### Types of Maltreatment

Data are also collected on the types of abuse or neglect that children suffer. This information is necessary to provide appropriate prevention and treatment services and to monitor the impact of targeted programs and social forces on child maltreatment.

Data from the 1993 NCPA survey categorized by type of abuse and neglect are reported in Figure 2. The categories are not mutually exclusive. Neglect is the most common form of reported and substantiated maltreatment. The distribution of certain types of maltreatment varies between reported and substantiated cases. For example, 30% of reported cases concern physical abuse, but physical abuse accounts for only 25% of substantiated cases. Sexual abuse, however, comprises a higher proportion of substantiated cases (15%) than reported cases (11%).<sup>12</sup>

As in all child abuse data, there is great variation in the ways that states classify cases.<sup>3,4</sup> Some states group less severe

forms of maltreatment in the "other" category. Arizona classified over 40% of its substantiated cases as "other" in 1993.<sup>4</sup> Pennsylvania CPS refers most neglect cases to another agency and does not report these cases in the state's statistics.<sup>4</sup> In both the District of Columbia and New York, neglect accounted for over 80% of substantiated cases in 1993, while in Hawaii more than 50% were cases of physical abuse.<sup>4</sup>

### Victims of Maltreatment

Data are available from various states in the NCANDS on the age, race or ethnic group, and gender of victims.<sup>11</sup> Generally, the reported number of victims declines gradually with increasing age. The highest percentage of victims, 7% of the total, is in the under one-year-of-age group. The percentage falls below 6% by age 8 and below 4% at age 16.<sup>11</sup> More than 50% of the victims of maltreatment are reported as white, 26% as black, and 10% as Hispanic.<sup>3</sup>

About 53% of reported child victims of abuse and neglect are female and 46% male. This gender difference is the result of the much higher frequency of sexual abuse among females. Except for sexual abuse, maltreatment appears to occur with equal frequency in both sexes.<sup>3</sup>

### Trends in Child Abuse Fatalities

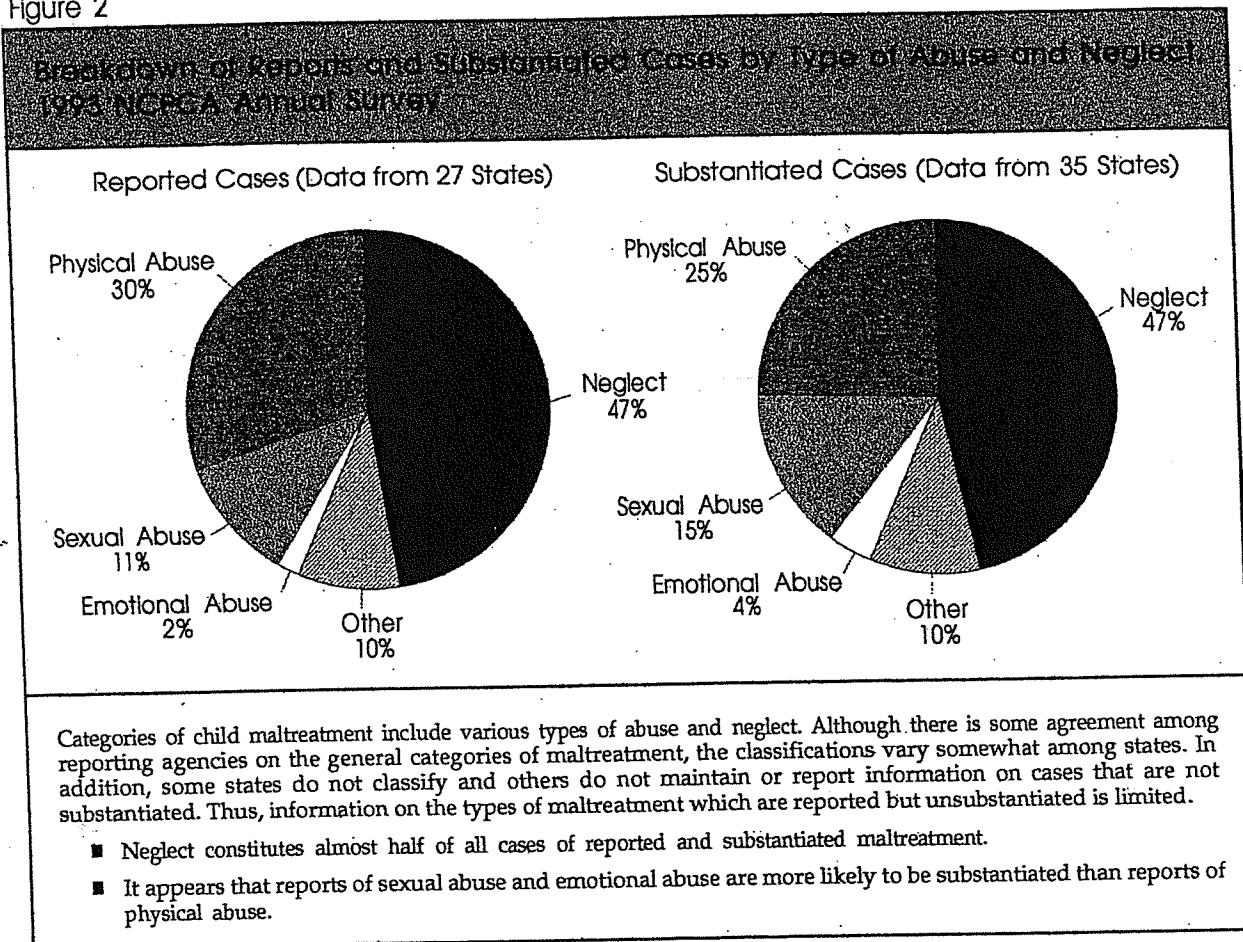
Although deaths of children from abuse or neglect are relatively infrequent, they represent the most tragic consequences of maltreatment. In 1992, according to the NCPA, an estimated 1,149 children died from abuse or neglect.<sup>4</sup> Child maltreatment fatalities are related to age. On the basis of data from 23 states, the NCPA reports that 86% of children who died as a result of maltreatment were under age five while 46% of victims were less than one year old.<sup>4</sup>

There is strong reason to believe that these official statistics undercount the actual number of maltreatment-related fatalities in the United States. Accumulated evidence suggests that some fatalities currently labeled as accidental, child homicides, and Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) might be attributed to maltreatment if they were subjected to comprehensive investigations. A recent analysis suggested that there may be twice as many deaths caused by child abuse and neglect each year as are reported by either the NCPA or the NCANDS.<sup>13</sup>

Figure 3 presents data on maltreatment-related deaths for the years 1985 (the earliest year for which data are reported by the NCPA) through 1992. Over this eight-year period, reported deaths ranged from an estimated 878 to 1,195 per annum, and the death rate ranged from 1.3 to 1.9 deaths per 100,000 children.<sup>14</sup> Although the death rate and number of deaths increased by approximately 50% during this period, the same rate of increase as in the number of reports of maltreatment (see Figure 1), almost all the increase in deaths in these data occurred between 1985 and 1986.<sup>15</sup> Total projected fatalities and national death rates have varied modestly since 1986, but on average they have changed little over this time span. This consistency is surprising because reported cases of maltreatment increased steadily over this time period and because states have paid increased attention to cases of possible abuse-related mortality through more complete record keeping and increased use of multidisciplinary death-review committees, which focus their attention on analyzing the circumstances of child fatalities in a county or state.<sup>3</sup>

Although the vast majority of cases of maltreatment do not result in death, the relative constancy of the rate of maltreatment-related fatalities in recent years raises an important question about whether the observed increase in the

Figure 2



Source: McCurdy, K., and Daro, D. *Current trends in child abuse reporting and fatalities: The results of the 1993 annual fifty-state survey*. Working Paper No. 808. Prepared by the National Center on Child Abuse Prevention Research. Chicago: National Committee for Prevention of Child Abuse, April 1994.

reports of child abuse reflects a real increase in abuse or only an increase in reporting.<sup>16</sup> This is an important issue not only for those concerned about the well-being of children, but also for those evaluating the efficacy of child protective services. A steady death rate in the face of rising reports of maltreatment would suggest increasingly effective child protective services if it were not for uncertainty about the reasons for the increase in reports of maltreatment themselves.<sup>17</sup>

## Conclusion

Previously often disregarded by the American public, the topic of child abuse and neglect has recently garnered heightened attention in the public media. Stories of large

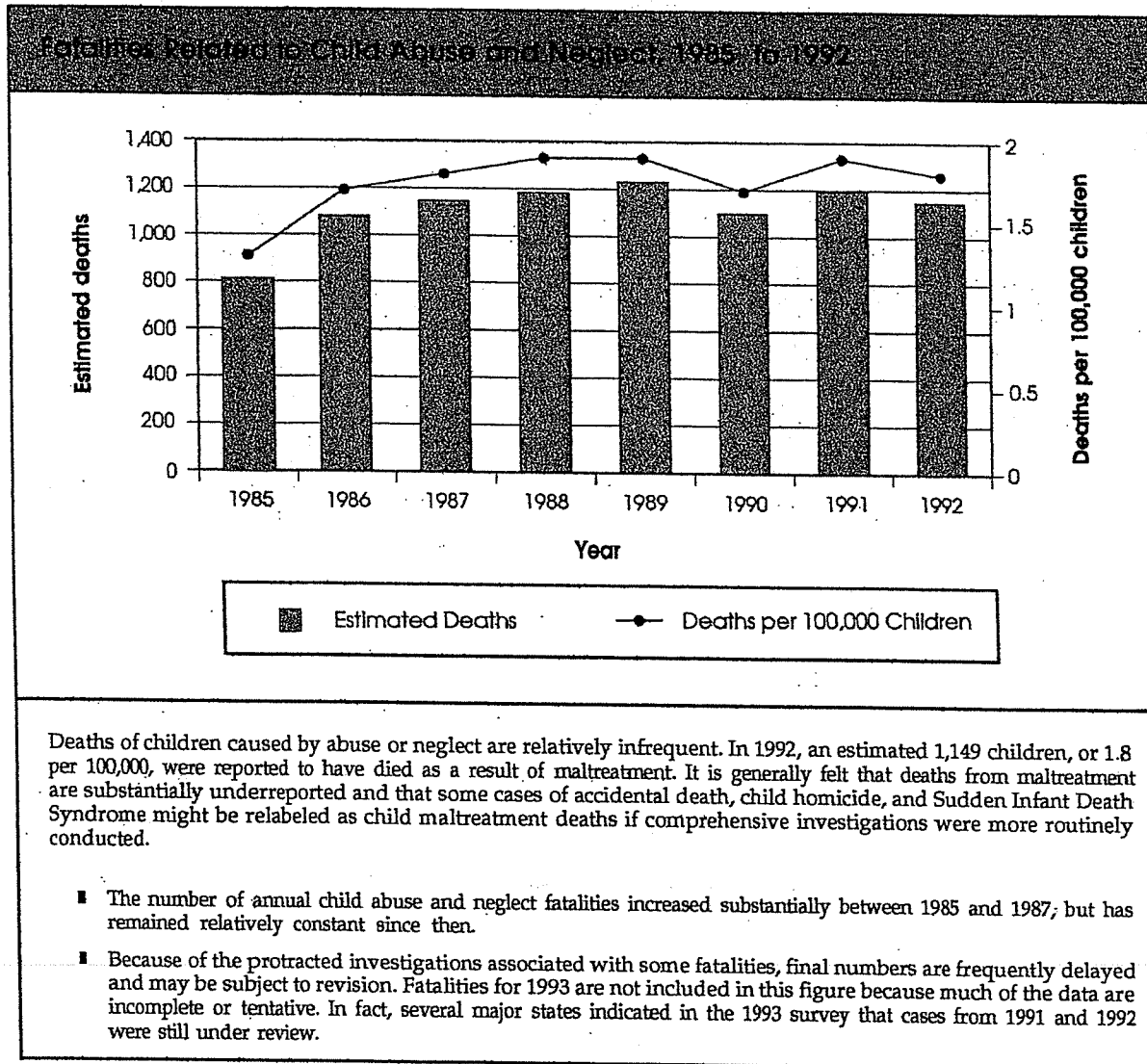
numbers of children living in horrifying squalor and of young children returned to their natural families only to be murdered by abusive parents fill front pages and national television.<sup>18</sup> Yet, despite these sensational accounts, it is difficult to really know what is happening nationally regarding the incidence of child maltreatment.

Some recent data reviewed in this article suggest that the level of abuse and neglect may be stabilizing after a long period of reported increases. Yet, the available data on reports of abuse are based on allegations reported to CPS agencies, not actual cases of maltreatment, and these data include duplicate reports. Even data on substantiated cases of abuse reflect duplicated reports and

variable criteria for substantiation. Accordingly, changes in these data may reflect changes in the propensity to report suspected abuse and neglect, and changes in the way reports are tabulated and presented, as much as changes in the incidence of maltreatment.

There is a need for better national data systems to help us understand the problem of child maltreatment. The NCANDS project of the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect, with its interactive approach to collecting, coordinating, standardizing, analyzing, and disseminating information on child maltreatment is an encouraging development, but much remains to be done. On the surface, improved data collection efforts may appear to do little for children

Figure 3



Source: McCurdy, K., and Daro, D. *Current trends in child abuse reporting and fatalities: The results of the 1993 annual fifty-state survey*. Working Paper No. 808. Prepared by the National Center on Child Abuse Prevention Research. Chicago: National Committee for Prevention of Child Abuse, April 1994.

who are maltreated. These children experience abuse and neglect firsthand. A more accurate counting of the instances of maltreatment does nothing to lessen the victims' ordeal. But accurate statistics are vital if society is to effectively combat maltreatment. Accurate data on caseloads are necessary to the planning, staffing, and budgeting of CPS agencies. Accurate data on changes in rates of maltreatment are necessary for evaluating CPS programs to determine what works and what

doesn't. Data on cases of abuse and neglect that are not reported or that lie outside the purview of CPS agencies are necessary to get a full picture of the scope of child maltreatment.

Recent data on child maltreatment, some of which this article reviews, present a mixed picture of society's response to the problem. The most encouraging finding is that the rate of child fatalities associated with maltreatment has remained fairly sta-

ble over the past seven years. Funding for child protection services has also increased in many states, although recent data suggest that, on average, only 70% of reported cases are pursued by CPS agencies.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps most disturbing is the report that more than 40% of children whose deaths are attributed to maltreatment had contact with CPS agencies prior to or at the proximal time of their deaths—a percentage that has not changed over several years.<sup>4,18,19</sup>



Ultimately, any effort to use national data to monitor the incidence of child maltreatment must accommodate the fact that, despite increased interest in this problem, a large number of cases of abuse and neglect are still not being reported. The current incompleteness in reporting indicates that levels of reported and substantiated cases of abuse are likely to rise as more resources are devoted to iden-

tifying and addressing maltreatment. This upward bias in national incidence data will impede assessment of policies designed to address the problem of child abuse and neglect, and it will be necessary to focus on carefully defined and measured indices of maltreatment in order to accurately judge whether, how, and why any progress is being made in combating this scourge.

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1. Technically, the term *child maltreatment* refers to a variety of activities harmful to children, including physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, and general, educational, and medical neglect. The popular term for these activities is *child abuse*. This article uses the terms interchangeably. The specific types of child abuse—physical, sexual, emotional—are identified as such.
2. Straus, M.A., and Gelles, R.J. Societal change and change in family violence from 1975 to 1985 as revealed by two national surveys. *Journal of Marriage and the Family* (August 1986) 48:465-79.
3. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect. *National child abuse and neglect data system: 1990 summary data component*. Working Paper No. 1. Washington, DC: DHHS, April 1992; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect. *Child maltreatment 1992: Reports from the states to the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect*. Washington, DC: DHHS, 1994.
4. McCurdy, K., and Daro, D. *Current trends in child abuse reporting and fatalities: The results of the 1993 annual fifty-state survey*. Working Paper No. 808. Prepared by the National Center on Child Abuse Prevention Research. Chicago: National Committee for Prevention of Child Abuse, April 1994.
5. For a brief review of the federally funded second National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-2), see the article by Finkelhor in this journal issue, p. 35.
6. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect. *Executive summary: Study of national incidence and prevalence of child abuse and neglect*. Washington, DC: DHHS, 1988.
7. Daro, D., Jones, E., and McCurdy, K. *Reliability and validity of the National Incidence of Child Abuse and Neglect Study conducted by Westat Associates in 1988: Methodological review*. Chicago: National Committee for Prevention of Child Abuse, 1988.
8. In order to correct for inconsistent reporting among states, the NCPA calculates on a state-by-state basis the percentage change in reports from one year to the next and then computes the mean rate of change of all states that report data. The mean percentage change in reports between a baseline year, such as 1986, and the current year is then multiplied by a count of children reported as maltreated by the American Humane Society in the baseline year to obtain an estimate of children reported to be subject to abuse and neglect in the current year. This method is based on the assumption that individual state reporting practices do not vary substantially from one year to the next. When the NCPA identifies a state where reporting practices have changed substantially, it appears to ignore that state in constructing its national estimate for the year in which the change in reporting occurred. In describing its adjustment procedures, the NCPA has reported that its national estimates were adjusted to an unduplicated national estimate of children reported for abuse in 1986 issued by the American Humane Society. It appears, however, that the baseline count used by the NCPA was of duplicated reports and hence that the NCPA data reflect duplicated reports. (Personal correspondence with Karen McCurdy). The NCPA follows similar, though not exactly the same, estimation procedures in determining the number of children confirmed as victims of maltreatment and the number of child maltreatment fatalities confirmed by CPS agencies. (See note no. 4, McCurdy and Daro.)
9. Comparison of NIS-2 data and CPS-based NCPA counts is complicated. The NIS-2 used two definitions of *maltreatment*. One corresponded to the NIS-1 definition to al-

low for comparisons over time. The other was more inclusive and counted children who were endangered but not necessarily harmed yet. This article uses data based on the second definition. They yield an estimate of maltreated children which is more than 60% greater than the estimate resulting from the more restrictive definition. Using the more inclusive definition, the NIS-2 found that only 46% of cases of maltreatment had been reported to CPS. However, only 44% of children reported to CPS were countable as maltreated under the NIS-2 revised definition. Hence, there is a fairly substantial number of children who are counted in only one dataset. This large pool of children is one potential source of growth in abuse statistics over time. (See note no. 7, Daro, Jones, and McCurdy.)

10. Most states use only two categories, *substantiated* and *unsubstantiated*, to reflect dispositions of investigations of reported abuse and neglect. Some states use a third category, *indicated*, to denote cases for which, although maltreatment cannot be substantiated, there is reason to suspect that the child was maltreated or at risk of maltreatment. (See note no. 3, *Child maltreatment 1992: Reports from the states to the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect*.)
11. See note no. 3, *Child maltreatment 1992: Reports from the states to the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect*.
12. A slightly different picture is presented by data on substantiated cases of maltreatment from 49 states in the 1992 NCANDS. In the NCANDS, types of maltreatment are also not mutually exclusive because states may count victims in more than one category if they suffered more than one type of maltreatment. In these data, 49% of substantiated types of maltreatment were classified as neglect, 23% as physical abuse, 14% sexual abuse, 5% emotional maltreatment, 3% medical neglect and 12% other/unknown. (See note no. 3, *Child maltreatment 1992: Reports from the states to the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect*, p. 14.)
13. McClain, P.W., Sacks, J.J., Froehle, R.G., and Ewigman, B.G. Estimates of fatal child abuse and neglect, United States, 1979 through 1988. *Pediatrics* (February 1993) 91:2:338-43.
14. The NCPA data on child maltreatment fatalities are subject to several sources of imprecision. Not all states report annually, and the reported number of maltreatment fatalities is subject to revision in subsequent years. For each year in its data series, the NCPA projects data from the reporting states on to the national population of children. This method can introduce substantial error in any particular year if large states do not submit reports. This article does not report NCPA data for 1993 because data from states representing 40% of the child population under 18 were missing, and reports from many other large states were listed as still under review.
15. McClain and colleagues found no evidence of any increase in their estimates of abuse and neglect fatalities between 1979 and 1988. (See note no. 13, McClain, Sacks, Froehle, and Ewigman.)
16. Most maltreatment fatalities are attributed to the physical abuse or neglect of young children and infants. Accordingly, one explanation for the relative constancy of the fatality rate despite a substantial increase in reports of maltreatment might be that most of the increase in the incidence or reporting of maltreatment involved older children or forms of maltreatment other than physical abuse and neglect. Comparisons of the distributions of victimized children by age and maltreatment type, however, do not reveal any substantial shifts in these distributions in recent years. (See note no. 3, *Child maltreatment 1992: Reports from the states to the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect*.)
17. The maltreatment-related death rate is only a simple and very limited criterion by which to evaluate the CPS system. However, it is a measure of the ability of CPS to intervene effectively in very-high-risk cases.
18. Ingrassia, M., and McCormick, J. Why leave children with bad parents? *Newsweek*. April 25, 1994, pp. 52-58.
19. This may, however, be something of a reporting artifact because the deaths of children who were known to CPS may be more likely to be classified as resulting from maltreatment than deaths of children who had no contact with CPS.