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## The Child-Abuse Numbers Game

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In the past 20 years, programs to protect abused and neglected children have expanded enormously. In 1986, according to the American Humane Association, about 2.1 million children were reported to the authorities as suspected victims of abuse and neglect. This is 14 times the estimated 150,000 children reported in 1963.

In state after state, and community after community, the exploding number of reports is used as proof that there is a child abuse "crisis." But most experts will agree that there probably is no real increase in child abuse -- only in its recognition. Although many cases still go unreported, years of public-awareness campaigns and professional education have had their intended effect. Americans are much more sensitive to the plight of maltreated children, and are more willing than ever to report it.

A comparison of the two large-scale, federally funded studies of the incidence of child abuse and neglect confirms this conclusion. The first study, conducted in 1979 and 1980, reported a rate of 10.5 maltreated children per thousand children. The second study, conducted in 1986 and released this June, found a rate of 16.3. Some have seen the difference as an indication that child maltreatment increased by more than 50% in six years. However, as the later report is careful to note, the increase "probably reflected an increase in the likelihood that professionals will recognize maltreatment rather than an increase in the actual occurrence of maltreatment."

Moreover, raw reporting statistics are grossly misleading. National reporting statistics from the American Humane Association indicate that, since the early 1980s, about 60% of all reports have proven to be "unfounded" -- that is, they were dismissed after investigation. This is in sharp contrast to 1975, when only about 35% of all reports were "unfounded." Thus, of the 2.1 million reports, only about 40% are substantiated. That is about 840,000 children.

Furthermore, since many children are reported simply because they are the siblings of apparently maltreated children, it is illuminating to think in terms of the number of families who are reported. An average of 1.8 children are named in each report, so the actual number of substantiated family cases is about 470,000. The 1986 federal study found about 20% of these to be repeat reports on the same child, so that the unduplicated count of families in which substantiated maltreatment occurs is about 375,000 per year.

Approximately 1,100 children die under circumstances suggestive of parental maltreatment each year, according to the 1986 study. This would make it the sixth-largest cause of death for children under age 14.

Between 25% and 45% were previously reported to child protective agencies, according to a recent federal study by Jose D. Alfaro, head of research for the New York City Children's Aid Society. Many thousands of other children suffer serious injuries after their plight becomes known to the authorities.

Program advocates tend to blame these deaths on inadequate funding. Certainly, more staff and treatment resources are always needed. However, the current flood of unfounded reports is a more immediate culprit. Unfounded reports are consuming the limited resources of child protective agencies. For fear of missing even one abused child, workers perform extensive investigations of more than 500,000 families for what turn out to be unfounded reports.

Even when a home visit based on an anonymous report turns up no evidence of maltreatment, workers usually interview neighbors, teachers and day-care personnel to make sure that the child is not abused. And even repeated anonymous and unfounded reports do not halt a further investigation. All this takes time.

Forced to allocate a substantial portion of their limited resources to unfounded reports, child protective agencies are increasingly unable to respond promptly and effectively when children are in serious danger.

The word "maltreatment" encompasses much more than the brutally battered, sexually abused, or starved and sickly children that come to mind when we think of child abuse. Both federal studies found that only about 30% of all "maltreated" children are physically abused, and only about 10% of these children (3% of the total) suffer an injury severe enough to require professional care. Thus, nine-tenths of the cases labeled "physical abuse" are really situations of excessive or unreasonable corporal punishment that, although a matter of legitimate government concern, are unlikely to escalate into a dangerous assault against the child.

Sexual abuse makes up about 14% of the total. This is probably a low figure, and major efforts are being made to increase the reporting of suspected child sexual abuse.

Physical neglect makes up less than 20% of all cases. The three largest categories are failure to provide needed medical care (8%); abandonment and other refusals of custody (9%); and failure to provide food, clothing and hygiene (2%). Physical neglect can be just as harmful as physical abuse. More children die of physical neglect than from physical abuse. But, again, the number of cases where serious physical injury has occurred is low, perhaps as low as 4% of all physical neglect cases.

Educational neglect and emotional maltreatment constitute about half of all maltreatment cases. (Percentages cannot be exact because about 15% of the children suffer more than one form of

maltreatment.) Educational neglect, at 28%, is the single largest category. Emotional abuse, mainly "habitual scapegoating, belittling and rejecting behavior," accounts for 17% of the total. And various forms of emotional neglect, defined as "inadequate nurturance" and "permitted maladaptive behavior," add an additional 5% to the total. While some forms of emotional maltreatment are deeply damaging to children, most cases do not create the need for aggressive intervention that cases of serious physical abuse or neglect do.

Therefore, about 80% of all substantiated cases of "child maltreatment" involve excessive corporal punishment, minor physical neglect, educational neglect, or emotional maltreatment. These are forms of emotional or developmental harm to children that pose no serious physical danger. Children living under such conditions need society's help and protection, but they should not be lumped together with cases of brutal battering. Failing to recognize the difference makes it many times more difficult to provide them with long-term, supportive services they need while providing immediate and forceful intervention to children in life-threatening situations -- like Lisa Steinberg in New York City.

Moreover, the overwhelming bulk of these cases are really forms of social deprivation with roots in the family's poverty. Almost all of these families fall below the poverty line. Half receive Aid to Families With Dependent Children. Compared to the general population, families reported for maltreatment are four times more likely to be on public assistance and almost twice as likely to be black. Protecting these children means lifting them from the grinding poverty within which they live.

Recognizing how statistics are badly misused would go a long way toward reducing the current hysteria about child abuse. It also would make people less likely to believe that every bruised child is an abused child. Up to now, though, most child welfare officials -- in federal, state, and local agencies -- have been reluctant to correct the public's misconceptions about the size of the problem, because they fear that such honesty will discredit their efforts and lead to budget cuts.

Child maltreatment is a serious national problem. It shouldn't be exaggerated in order to gain public and political support.

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