

Reducing Unfounded Reports

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In the past 20 years, there has been an enormous expansion of programs to protect abused and neglected children, in large part encouraged by federal funding. In 1988, more than 2.4 million children were reported to the authorities as suspected victims of child abuse and neglect. This is more than 12 times the estimated 150,000 children reported in 1963. Specialized "child protective agencies" have been established in all major population centers. Federal and state expenditures for child protective programs and associated foster care services now exceed \$3.5 billion a year.

There now exists a nationwide infrastructure of laws and agencies to protect endangered children — and it has made a difference. Increased reporting and specialized child protective agencies have saved many thousands of children from death and serious injury. The best estimate is that, nationwide, child abuse deaths are down from 2,000 to 3,000 a year to about 1,000 a year. In New York State, for example, within 5 years of the passage of a comprehensive reporting law that also mandated the creation of specialized investigative staffs, there was a 50% reduction in child fatalities, from 200 a year to fewer than 100.

Nevertheless, there are still major gaps in protection. Of the estimated 1,000 children who die under circumstances suggestive of parental maltreatment each year, between 35% and 50% were previously reported to child protective agencies. Many thousands of other children suffer serious injuries after their plight becomes known to the authorities.

Unfounded Reports

At the same time that many children are going unprotected, about 60% or 65% of all reports are labeled unfounded (or a similar term) after investigation. This, by the way, is in sharp contrast to 1975, when only about 35% of all reports were "unfounded."

Unfortunately, the determination that a report is unfounded can be made only after an unavoidably traumatic investigation that is, inherently, a breach of parental and family privacy. To determine whether a particular child is in danger, caseworkers must inquire into the most intimate personal and family matters. Often, it is necessary to question friends, relatives, and neighbors, as well as school teachers, day-care personnel, doctors, clergymen, and others who know the family.

Moreover, the current flood of unfounded reports is overwhelming the limited resources of child protective agencies. For fear of missing even one abused child, workers perform extensive investigations of vague and apparently unsupported reports. Even when a home visit based on an anonymous report turns up no evidence

of maltreatment, they usually interview neighbors, school teachers, and day-care personnel to make sure that the child is not abused. Even repeated anonymous and unfounded reports do not prevent a further investigation. But all this takes time.

As a result, children in real danger are getting lost in the press of inappropriate cases. 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.

Some Unfounded Reports Are Necessary

There are, of course, many reasons for the high rate of unfounded reports: Evidence of child maltreatment is hard to obtain, overworked and inadequately trained workers may not uncover the evidence that does exist, and many cases are labeled unfounded as a means of caseload control or when there are no services available to help the family.

Moreover, a certain level of unfounded reporting is necessary to make the system work; it is an inherent—and legitimate—aspect of reporting *suspected* child maltreatment. We ask hundreds of thousands of strangers to report their suspicions; we do not ask that they be certain.

These realities, it seems to me, make an unfounded rate of 30% to 40% acceptable. It is the last 20% to 30% of unfounded reports that is the cause for concern. They could be removed from the system without threatening the fundamental mission of child protective agencies by doing two things: (a) develop improved definitions (and guidelines) for what should be reported and what should not be reported, and (b) implement these definitions through public and professional education and through the screening of hotline reports.

Better Definitions

Few unfounded reports are made maliciously. Studies suggest that at most from 5% to 10% are knowingly false. Many involve situations in which the person reporting, in a well-intentioned effort to protect a child, overreacts to a vague and often misleading possibility that the child may be maltreated. Others involve situations of poor child care that, though of legitimate concern, simply do not amount to child abuse or neglect. In fact, a substantial proportion of unfounded cases are referred to other agencies for them to provide needed services for the family.

Thus, we need better definitions of child abuse and neglect, incorporated into public awareness and professional education materials, that provide real guidance about what should be reported or not reported. Generalized statements about children who are “abused,” or “neglected,” or “in danger” will not do. Better definitions will not come easily, but they will be more than worth the effort.

Screening Reports

Better definitions of reportable conditions will only partly reduce the level of unfounded reports. The new definitions will need to be enforced. This will be the role of intake staff.

For fear that a case they reject will later turn into a child fatality most agencies now shirk their central responsibility to screen reports before assigning them for investigation. According to the American Humane Association, only a little more than half of the states allow their hotline workers to reject reports, and even those that do usually limit screening to cases that are "clearly" inappropriate.

Child protective agencies used to do much more screening. But that was before the recent media hype and before cases like *Mammo v. Arizona* (1983), where the agency was successfully sued for the death of a young child after the agency refused to accept a report from the noncustodial father. Overreacting to similar cases, some child protective agencies assume that they should not screen reports at all, that is, that they must assign all reports for investigation. This is a mistake. The proper lesson to be drawn from *Mammo*, and cases like it, is not that screening reports is not allowed, but rather that decisions to reject a report must be made with great care.

Just as child protective agencies have a duty to investigate reports made appropriately to them, they also have a duty to screen out reports for which an investigation would be clearly unwarranted. They should reject reports whose allegations fall outside the agency's definitions of "child abuse" and "child neglect" as established by state law. (Often, the family has a coping problem more appropriately referred to another social service agency.) They also should reject reports when the caller can give no credible reason for suspecting that the child has been abused or neglected. They may have to reject a report in which insufficient information is given to identify or locate the child (although the information may be kept for later use should a subsequent report about the same child be made).

The kind of intake decision-making that I am proposing cannot be done by clerks, nor by untrained caseworkers. The agency's best workers should be assigned to intake—where they can have the greatest impact. In fact, I would suggest that we make an assignment to intake a promotion, in which we place our most experienced and qualified staff.

Conclusion

This article has focused on one deficiency in the nation's child protective system: unfounded reports. I believe that the failure to address this problem imperils the future credibility of child protective efforts. However, I want to emphasize the importance of strong child protective efforts at the state and local level—and of strong yet flexible leadership at the national level. The nation's child protective capacity is many times greater now than it was 10 short years ago. Given the choice between what things were like then and what things are like now, I would unhesitatingly choose our present

system—warts and all. But that is not to say that we cannot try to do better. That is the spirit in which I hope the reader will take these remarks.

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