

7

Child Maltreatment and Foster Care Placements

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7

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In January 1996, preliminary findings from the Third National Study of the Incidence of Child Abuse and Neglect of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) began to circulate in government and professional circles. The preliminary results indicated a substantial increase in the rates of most forms of child maltreatment between the time of the second survey, conducted in 1986, and the third survey, conducted in 1993. Although the data for the third survey had been collected between September and December, 1993, and the preliminary results were available in January, 1996, it took nine more months for HHS to release the final report of the survey. The report opened with the finding that the number of abused and neglected children doubled between 1986 and 1993.

Although the release of the final report was delayed for nine months, the data were made public only one month after President Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act, or what is conventionally called “welfare reform.” Coincidence or not, the publication of the results of the federal government’s decennial survey of child maltreatment suggested that welfare reform would lead to an even larger increase in the number of children abused and neglected by parents and caretakers.

The fact that the federal government collects incidence and prevalence data on child maltreatment suggests that the occurrence of child maltreatment and child placements could be tracked over time to determine whether federal and state welfare reform legislation does have an impact on the frequency and severity of child maltreatment. Unfortunately, this notion is far too optimistic. The status of government statistics on the occurrence of child maltreatment is comparable to the Groucho Marx/Woody Allen commentary about a bad Catskills resort—the food is bad and the portions are small. Trend data on child maltreatment and children placed in out-of-home care as a consequence of child maltreatment are meager, and the quality of the data is quite variable.

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This paper first examines the sources of data on child maltreatment and children placed in foster care. Second, it presents findings on the extent of maltreatment and the number of children placed in foster care. Third, it examines trend data on abuse, neglect, and foster care placements. The data indicate that, as of yet, no evidence shows that welfare reform legislation is producing an increase in abuse, neglect, or foster care placements.

Sources of Data on Child Maltreatment and Foster Care

No single data source provides reliable and valid data on the occurrence of child abuse and neglect and on the number of children in foster care and their status over time. A variety of data sources collectively present a rough portrait of maltreated children and their placements; the most recent data are for 1998. The data sources are as follows:

- **The National Incidence Survey of Reported and Recognized Child Maltreatment (NIS).** The Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act of 1974 (PL 93-247) established the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect (NCCAN) and instructed it to “make a full and complete study and investigation of the national incidence of child abuse and neglect. . . .” (Section 2b(6)). The NCCAN (now the Office on Child Abuse and Neglect) has conducted three national surveys of recognized and reported child maltreatment. The studies, conducted in 1979–1980, 1986, and 1993¹ surveyed nationally representative samples of professionals who come into contact with suspected cases of child maltreatment. The survey extrapolates information from those reports to develop a national estimate of the incidence of child abuse and neglect.
- **The National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS).** The NCCAN/Office of Child Abuse and Neglect of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services also sponsors the collection of state data on official reports of child abuse and neglect, dispositions, victims, services, and perpetrators as part of the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS). The data can be derived from Summary Data Component

¹Kenneth Burgdorf, *Recognition and Reporting of Child Maltreatment* (Rockville, Md.: Westat, 1980); National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect, *Study Findings: Study of National Incidence and Prevalence of Child Abuse and Neglect: 1988* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1988); National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect, *Study Findings: Study of National Incidence and Prevalence of Child Abuse and Neglect: 1993* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1996).

reports (SDC) filed by states. Fifty states and the District of Columbia submitted reports for 1998.²

- **Prevent Child Abuse America Reports from the States.** The private, nonprofit group Prevent Child Abuse America (formerly the National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse) conducts its own annual survey of child abuse reporting and child abuse fatalities. The data are derived from states that voluntarily participate in the survey.³
- **The Voluntary Cooperative Information System (VCIS—American Public Welfare Association).** As yet, there exists no federal enumeration of the number of children residing in out-of-home care, although a system that can provide such data has been developed (see below). The Voluntary Cooperative Information System of the American Public Human Services Association (formerly the American Public Welfare Association) collected data on children residing in out-of-home care until 1995.
- **The Child Welfare League of America (CWLA), *Child Abuse and Neglect: A Look at the States: 1999 CWLA Stat Book*.** This volume provides national and state-by-state data on child welfare, including child abuse and neglect reports and investigations, child maltreatment fatalities, children in out-of-home care and children adopted. The sources for the Stat Book are the NIS, NCANDS, VCIS, and CWLA's own state agency survey.⁴
- **Forthcoming data systems.** As noted above, the federal government does not yet have a comprehensive data source that enumerates and tracks the number of children residing in out-of-home care. HHS is implementing national data systems to collect data on children in out-of-home care. The Adoption and Foster Care Reporting System (AFCARS) and the State Automated Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS) will collect aggregate and case-level data on children in out-of-home care.

²U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, *Child Maltreatment 1998: Reports from the States to the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2000).

³Ching-Tung Wang and Kathryn Harding, *Current Trends in Child Abuse Reporting and Fatalities: The Results of the 1998 Annual 50 State Survey* (Chicago: Prevent Child Abuse America, 1999).

⁴Child Welfare League of America, *Child Abuse and Neglect: A Look at the States: 1999 CWLA Stat Book* (Washington, D.C.: CWLA Press, 1999).

Extent of and Trends in Child Maltreatment and Foster Care Placements

This section describes the data sources that provide information on the extent of and trends in child maltreatment and foster care placements.

National Incidence Survey (NIS) estimates. According to the third NIS survey (NIS-3), the number of recognized and/or reported cases of child maltreatment increased between 1986 and 1993.⁵

The rates and number of children who are recognized as maltreated were compared on the basis of two definitions of maltreatment. Using the general definition of child maltreatment, the number of cases increased from 1,424,400 (22.6 per 1,000 children) to 2,815,600 (41.9 per 1,000).⁶ Under the more stringent *harm definition*, which required that an act of commission or omission result in demonstrable harm, the number of abuse and neglect cases increased 67 percent, from 931,000 (14.8 per 1,000) in 1986 to 1.5 million (23.2 per 1,000) in 1993 (figures 1 and 2).⁷

NCANDS estimates. The NCANDS data system did not begin tabulating state child abuse and neglect reports until 1990. Before that, state data on child abuse and neglect reports—including data on fatalities—were collected by the National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse (now Prevent Child Abuse America) and the American Association for Protecting Children/American Humane Association.

Data from NCANDS record only the cases actually reported to state agencies and then reported to NCANDS. In 1998, more than 2.97 million children were reported to state agencies for investigation, according to data submitted by fifty states and the District of Columbia.⁸ The actual number of confirmed child victims increased from 790,526 in 1990 to 903,395 in 1998, an increase of 14.2 percent. (Note: forty-four states participated in the survey in 1990, and fifty states and the District of Columbia submitted data in 1998.)

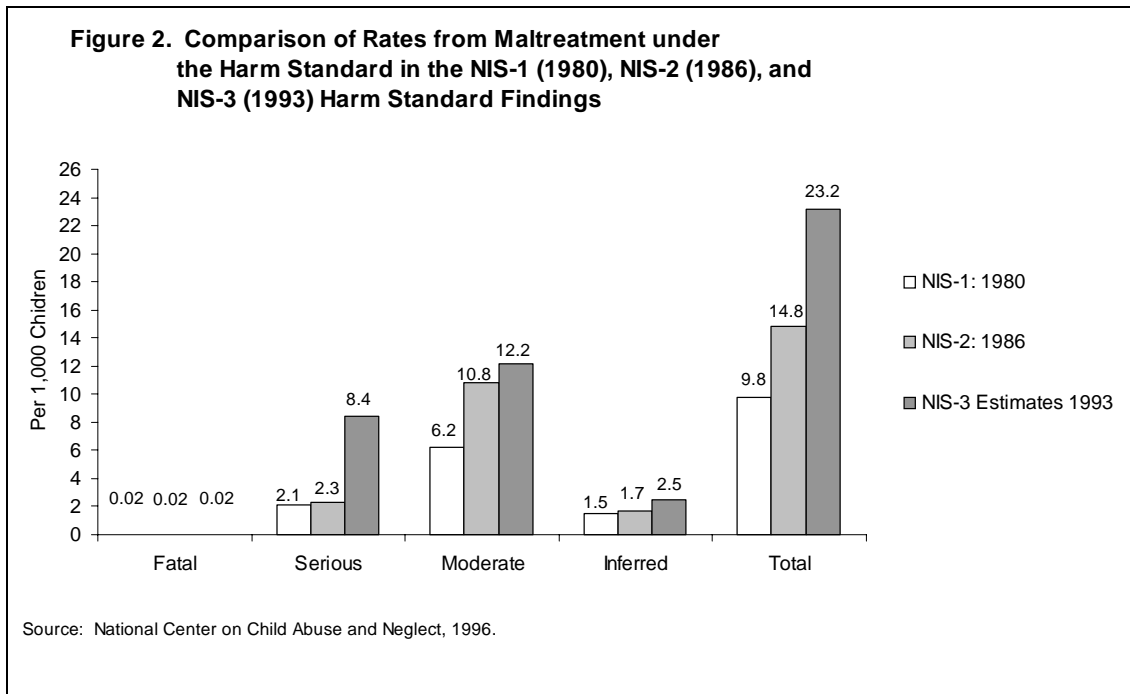
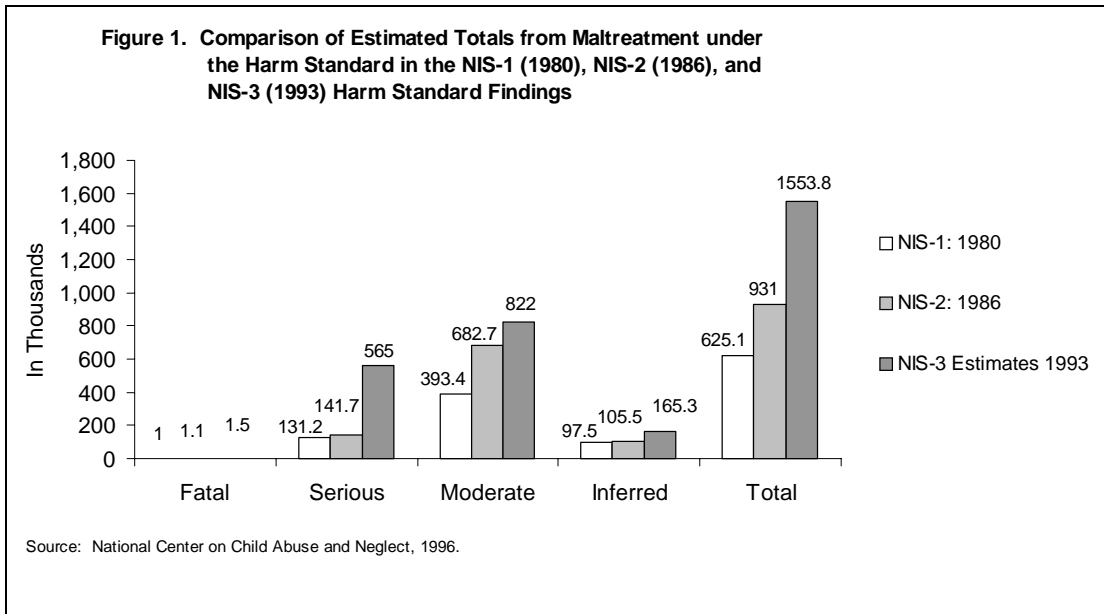
⁵National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect, 1996.

⁶The general definition was labeled the *endangerment standard*. This definition includes children who have been harmed by acts of abuse and neglect and children who have not yet been harmed, but who experience abuse and neglect that, according to the view of community professionals, puts them in danger of being harmed. See National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect, 1996, 2–9.

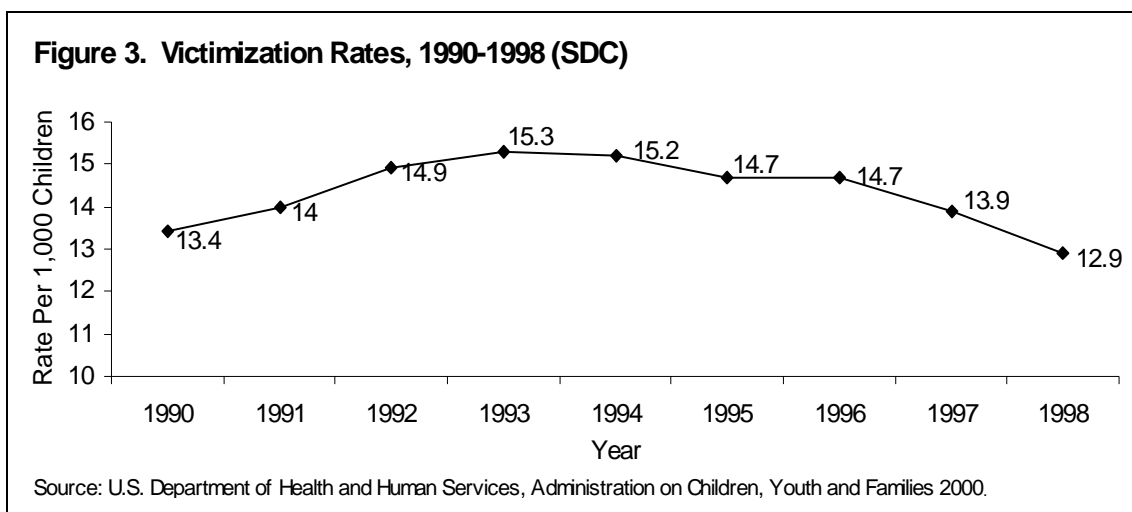
⁷The *harm standard* requires that a child have suffered demonstrable harm as a result of maltreatment. See National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect, 1996, 2–9.

⁸U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, 2000.

7: Child Maltreatment and Foster Care Placements



Although the number of victimized children increased between 1990 and 1998, the rate of confirmed child maltreatment increased from 13.4 per 1,000 in 1990 to a peak of 15.3 in 1993. Thereafter, the rate of child abuse victimization declined (figure 3). The steepest declines were for the two years following the enactment of welfare reform legislation. In 1996, the rate was 14.7 per 1,000 children; it dropped to 13.9 in 1997 and to 12.9 in 1998.⁹ Thus, the rate of victimization is presently the lowest it has been in the decade since the NCANDS data collection began.



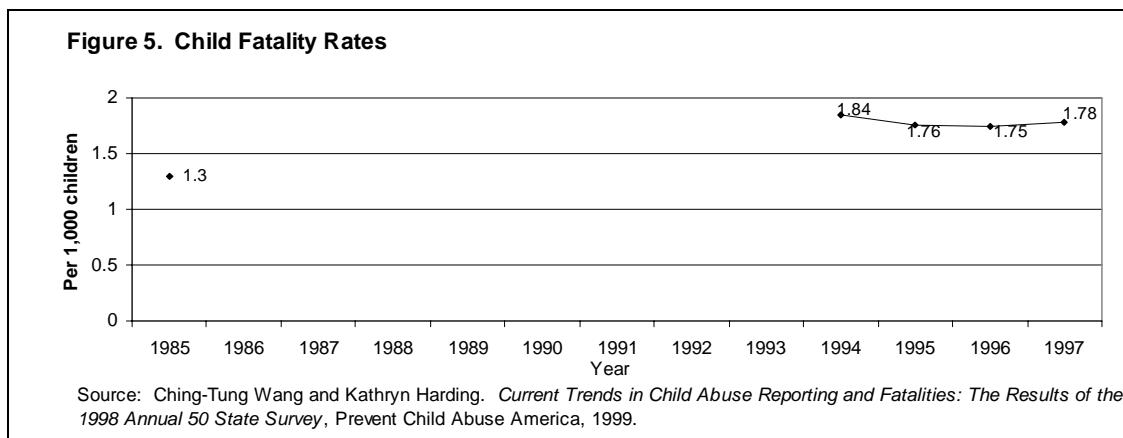
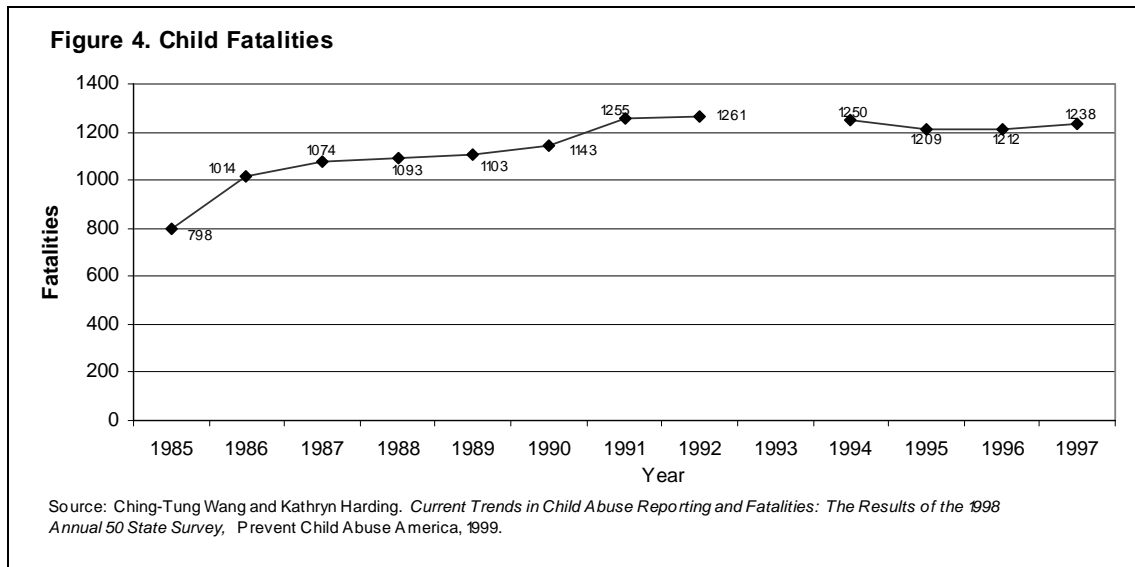
Fatalities. Prevent Child Abuse America projected that nationwide, 1,238 child abuse fatalities occurred in 1997,¹⁰ an increase from 1,143 in 1990 and a decrease from a high of 1,250 in 1994 (figure 4). The rate of child maltreatment fatalities was 1.78 per 100,000 children in the population in 1997 and 1.84 per 100,000 children in 1990.¹¹ No changes occurred in the rate of child maltreatment fatalities between 1995 and 1997 (figure 5).

⁹Administration on Children, Youth and Families, 2000.

¹⁰This projection is based on data from forty-three states. A total of 935 fatalities occurred in those states.

¹¹Wang and Harding. No rate or projection is available for 1998 because too few states representing too small a percentage of the U.S. population of children reported data for 1998 to Prevent Child Abuse America.

7: Child Maltreatment and Foster Care Placements



Children in foster care. CWLA estimates that, on any given day, 530,496 children are residing in out-of-home care, a figure that represents an increase from the 1990 VCIS estimate of 400,000. The organization estimates that 198,576 children entered out-of-home care in 1996 and 198,903 children exited; 12,702 children re-entered out-of-home care between 1994 and 1996. Finally, CWLA estimated that 22,817 children were legally adopted through public agencies in 1996.¹²

¹²Child Welfare League of America.

How Reliable and Valid Are the Estimates?

The picture that emerges from existing data sources is that child abuse and neglect appear to have increased substantially between 1990 and 1998. Both the number of cases and the rate of child maltreatment have increased, as has the number of children in out-of-home care. Readers should be cautious in accepting the apparent increases at face value, however. First, data on recognized and reported child maltreatment are not data on the actual or true occurrence of abuse and neglect. Rates and numbers of reporting and recognition depend on a variety of factors, not the least of which is the definition of what constitutes abuse and neglect. First, state definitions vary quite a bit, and over the past thirty years, states have revised and expanded their legal definitions of child maltreatment. Second, standards for screening reports vary. Some states investigate nearly all reports, whereas other states require investigation of only a portion of reports. In 1997, Pennsylvania screened out none of its 22,688 reports of child abuse and neglect, whereas Colorado screened out 20,293 of its 50,940 reports.¹³ Third, state data management information systems vary. Not all states actually participate in annual NCANDS or NCPCA tabulations. Within states, changes in state laws and incidents of child abuse fatalities can influence rates of recognition and reporting. A widely reported incident of abuse can result in a spike in reports. In addition, for the past three decades, ongoing training efforts have aimed at increasing reports of abuse and neglect. At the same time, staffing and resources can “cap” how many reports a state child protective system can actually handle.

Finally, the data themselves are subject to inaccuracies. Consider the inaccuracies noted during the discovery and monitoring stages of a class action suit against a county department of child welfare. As part of the monitoring of the consent decree, the department was required to select sixty case files for external review. One of the sixty files was on a child who had been dead for ten years. Worse, the file included a risk assessment supposedly conducted two years before the review—eight years after the child had died. Three other files were of children who had been adopted and thus were no longer part of the child welfare system.

This error rate is rather substantial, especially in light of the fact that the department itself selected the cases that would be reviewed externally. As a rule, criminologists consider homicide and fatality data to be the most reliable and valid. Yet, even child fatality data are subject to variability. Some states and jurisdictions routinely autopsy all child deaths, but others autopsy only a fraction of child deaths. Experts generally assume that many child abuse fatalities are misclassified as accidents, suicides, or sudden infant death syndrome.¹⁴

¹³U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, *Child Maltreatment 1997: Reports from the States to the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1999).

¹⁴P. McLain, J. Sacks, and R. Frohke, “Estimates of Fatal Child Abuse and Neglect, United States, 1979–1988,” *Pediatrics* 91 (1993): 338–343.

Data on out-of-home care have the same problems as other child welfare data. Until AFCARS and SACWIS are fully implemented (and there are questions as to whether they ever can be), no federal data source will be tracking child maltreatment in out-of-home care. The VCIS was, as the name implied, voluntary. With the retirement of project director Toshi Tartara, the VCIS ceased to collect annual data. Even during the time when data were collected, not all states volunteered to provide data and annual estimates were based on extrapolations from the largest states.

Thus, most of the data on child maltreatment reporting and children in out-of-home care depend on cooperation of local and state administrators. In some years, the response rate is actually 100 percent (for example, 1999), whereas in other years the rate is as low as 80 percent.

Implications and recommendations. The nation still lacks a reliable and valid means of measuring the occurrence of child abuse and neglect and tracking the travel of children through the various services and placements that exist in the national child welfare system. The forthcoming AFCARS and SACWIS systems may improve the reliability and validity of data sources; however, many states remain unable or unwilling to fully participate in those systems. Rather than comply with the regulations, some states are considering accepting the monetary penalty for nonparticipation. The lack of a national data system is particularly problematic, because child welfare is a nearly \$20 billion system.

Data systems that assess the occurrence of child abuse and neglect need to be developed. Just as the U.S. Department of Justice has implemented the National Survey of Crime Victims to augment official crime data reports collected by the Uniform Crime Statistics, the federal government needs to develop or fund a direct measure of child abuse and neglect. Given the Department of Justice's experience in this area, the Bureau of Justice Statistics could be funded to collect such information.

States need to develop information systems that are user-friendly and provide reliable data. Legacy management information systems, such as AFCARS or SACWIS should be replaced with real-time, internet-based management information systems.

Those who report on the occurrence of child abuse and neglect should be encouraged not to equate child abuse reporting with the actual occurrence of child abuse. Federal and state reports, as well as press releases to the media, should carefully qualify data by pointing out that reported and recognized cases are not the same as actual cases of child maltreatment.

All government publications on child abuse and neglect and foster care should include the rate of occurrence per 1,000 children. All tables and figures in such reports should also include rates.

7: Child Maltreatment and Foster Care Placements

Data that actually track children in the child welfare system are needed. The current data source merely provides a snapshot of children in out-of-home care and documents entrances and exits from such care. Caution should be exercised in reporting on existing data sources. Fluctuations in child abuse and neglect reports, foster care placements, and even child abuse fatalities do not necessarily reflect changes in the actual occurrence of abuse and neglect or foster care placements.

Trends in child maltreatment and foster care. The caveats noted above should be acknowledged in considering the current trend data on child abuse and neglect and on children placed in foster care. As of 1998, those data indicated the following situation:

- Reports of child abuse and neglect have stabilized at about 3 million children per year.
- Rates of confirmed child maltreatment rose from 1990 to 1993, fell slightly between 1993 and 1996, and declined steeply between 1996 and 1998.
- Child abuse fatalities are stable at about 1,200 per year.
- Foster care placements have increased each year. Adoptions were stable at about 22,000 until 1996.
- New data suggest that adoptions increased to 36,000 in 1998 and to 40,000 in 1999.

Welfare Reform and Child Abuse and Neglect

The key question to be addressed is, Has welfare reform legislation affected the occurrence of child abuse and neglect and the number of children placed in foster homes? The qualified answer is that no evidence indicates that welfare reform legislation has produced an increase or decrease in child maltreatment reports, child abuse and neglect fatalities, or the number of children placed in foster care. Some data show that the rate of child victimization has fallen nationally since the enactment of federal welfare reform legislation.

Given the paucity of relevant data, this answer must be qualified. The data are only as recent as 1998, a mere two years after the passage of federal welfare reform legislation. More important, because a key component of welfare reform was devolution to the states, state-by-state trend analysis is required to identify the short-term effects of welfare reform legislation. Because data are collected by states, tracking changes in child maltreatment reporting, victimization fatalities, and out-of-home care for each state is possible.

Few data indicate an effect of welfare reform on child abuse and neglect or on placements of children in foster care, but that does not mean an effect will not be seen in the future. Critics of welfare reform legislation believe that it will ultimately increase the rates of

abuse and neglect as well as the number of children placed into out-of-home care. The key impact may occur after individual welfare recipients reach the sixty-month lifetime limit for receiving benefits, which will not occur until July 1, 2001, at the earliest. Even then, one would expect some kind of lag between the expiration of eligibility for benefits and the onset of maltreatment, recognition of maltreatment, and response by child welfare agencies and the courts.

Conversely, welfare reform may result in a decrease in the occurrence of child abuse, victimization, fatalities, and out-of-home placement. If, as the proponents of welfare reform hoped, welfare reform brings about a reduction in out-of-wedlock births and increases in work and intact families, the changes could be expected to reduce the occurrence of maltreatment and the need for out-of-home placement of maltreated children.

The possibility of welfare reform increasing or decreasing the occurrence of child abuse and neglect notwithstanding, it is important to conclude this paper by reasserting that—as yet—no evidence indicates that welfare reform has increased the risk of children’s abuse and neglect, or that it has produced a major increase in placements of children into kin, foster, or residential care. What data we have suggests a small reduction in the rate of child victimization and a continued stable (albeit unacceptable) rate of child abuse and neglect fatalities.

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7: Child Maltreatment and Foster Care Placements

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Comments

*Stephanie J. Monroe**

I agree with many of Richard Gelles' remarks. Concerning his comments on what has happened since the implementation of welfare reform, it is true that we have no evidence of a change in reports of child abuse and neglect after welfare reform. However, as people move off welfare, I expect that we will see fewer such reports. Past reports have been the result of caseworkers' having access to many people in poverty. As people move out of poverty and into work, caseworkers will not have the same kind of access and the number of reports will decrease. It remains to be seen whether that means that the actual rate of abuse will decrease.

An estimated 3 million reports of abuse and neglect are filed every year. Of those 3 million reports, about 1 million are substantiated. Disagreement exists about what that means for the other two-thirds: Do the reports reflect actual abuse? If so, is the abuse serious or is it the abuse that we typically see, which is less serious, emotional abuse (such as truancy) or neglect that is not serious enough to warrant placing children in out-of-home care.

Many legislators question the validity of the NIS-3 data, especially because it is based on a survey of only forty-two counties nationwide. Although we understand that the size of this sample is not uncharacteristic of a representative sample, we are concerned about basing public policy on a sample as small as this.

Whether or not one believes that the actual number of abuse and neglect cases is 1 million or 2.8 million, the number of reports coming into child protective services, including a large number of unsubstantiated reports, is cause for concern. The reports have so overwhelmed the already overburdened child protective system that surveys of state administrators indicate that child protective services routinely place children in jeopardy.

Approximately one-third of state child protective services agencies were unable to investigate reports within twenty-four to forty-eight hours, as required by law. In New York City, for example, in 11 percent of cases, no home visit had occurred within forty days of the report. In the same period of time, children had not been examined in 22 percent of cases. Alleged perpetrators had not been interviewed in 17 percent of cases. The potential for compromising child safety is obvious. More than half of the children who die from abuse and neglect come from families who were previously investigated by child protective services.

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7: Child Maltreatment and Foster Care Payments

Forcing state child protective services agencies to allocate a substantial portion of their limited resources to investigate reports that turn out to be unsubstantiated makes child protective services less able to respond promptly and efficiently when children are in danger. Richard Gelles' opening statistics are typical of those reported by child protective services offices across the country; they explain why 25 to 50 percent of the deaths from child abuse involve children previously known to authorities.

The large number of unsubstantiated reports results, in part, from the breadth of child abuse reporting laws and from the fact that for thirty years, politicians and program administrators have supported efforts to encourage even more reports of suspected child abuse and neglect. Under threat of civil and criminal penalties, mandated-reporter laws require most professionals who have contact with children to report suspected child abuse and neglect; about twenty states require all citizens to report abuse; and in every state, any citizen can make a report.

These reporting laws, associated with public awareness campaigns and professional education programs, have been strikingly successful. In 1993, there were approximately 3 million reports of child abuse and neglect, a twenty-fold increase from 1963, when about 150,000 children were reported to authorities.

Is this vast increase in reporting an increase in actual child maltreatment or simply the filing of more reports? Unfortunately, except for the NIS-3 data, few data point one way or the other. Improving the system would require reducing the number of unfounded and false reports. Underreporting and inappropriate reporting are linked and must be addressed together before further progress can be made in combating abuse and neglect.

The last reauthorization of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act included a new requirement that the national clearinghouse for information related to child abuse and neglect begin collecting data on false and unsubstantiated reports of child abuse and neglect; these data are critical for policy makers.

We also have seen a significant increase in the number of children moving into foster care and state reliance on kinship care. More data are needed on kinship care, especially if, as people predict, kinship-care arrangements become the next wave of publicly funded entitlement.

I have four recommendations:

- The AFCARS and the SACWIS systems are essential for collecting reliable data on child abuse and neglect, but some states actually are considering not participating and just taking the penalty. The penalty may need to be enhanced to make that a difficult choice for states to make.
- The issue of mandatory reporting needs to address both overreporting and underreporting.

7: Child Maltreatment and Foster Care Payments

- Kinship care could be an important alternative to traditional foster care, but kinship-care arrangements may need to be means tested so that they do not become another publicly funded entitlement.
- We need to collect data about child abuse and neglect that represents more than forty-two counties nationwide. The federal government surely can spend some dollars to help the states develop the kind of technology they need in order to report those data to us. Whether the states are willing to do it remains to be seen.

Discussion

Child Welfare Data System

Matthew Stagner: I do not disagree with the general points made by both Stephanie Monroe and Richard Gelles, but I would raise several minor corrections or issues. Data quality in this system is a problem.

Part of the data quality problem relates to the nature of the child welfare system, the flow of funds, and the management of the system. There is some reason for optimism as child welfare systems rely increasingly on data in their management. The SACWIS dollars have helped the child welfare systems do that, and the data they produce are tied more closely to the purposes of the agencies and the ways the agencies operate. One would hypothesize that some of those data will get better over time as the agencies themselves use it, rather than see it as something they have to collect and report to the federal government.

Stephanie's response to Richard emphasized the voluntary nature of NCANDS and the difficulties of a voluntary data collection system with the states, and there are some parallels there with a welfare world under devolution. We can ask states for data. That is different from the AFCARS system, where there is a mandatory requirement. The response rate in the data we are collecting in NCANDS is actually quite good—80 percent of the states cooperate in a voluntary system—and we have seen tremendous improvements. Over time, we are getting more and more of the detailed case data, which is especially difficult to get states to give to a government contractor under a voluntary system.

There is often misunderstanding about the differences between AFCARS—which is as a data system, with data elements reported to the federal government—and SACWIS—which is as a funding stream to support the enhancement of data systems. Clearly, the two are linked. There was an enhanced federal match to help states create better data in the hope that this would improve the data collected through AFCARS, but situations such as that of New York, where the state has developed (using SACWIS dollars) a system in which the city does not want to participate, are different from the question around AFCARS.

In response to Stephanie Monroe and the question about whether we would hypothesize more or less reporting under a new welfare system, I see an opposite hypothesis. Even though we

7: Child Maltreatment and Foster Care Payments

have fewer cases in the TANF system, the fact that we now have a system in which caseworkers are much more involved in the lives of families means that we could actually see more reporting of child abuse.

None of us would have expected the numbers in the system to decline so rapidly, but my initial hypothesis was that when you take a system that was about writing checks and only seeing families very occasionally and create one with much more personal contact with families, there might be more improvement.

Two other data systems are going to be helpful for us. The first one, the large study of the child welfare system that is embedded in the welfare bill, should help us understand that system and understand the quality of survey data and administrative data and how those two do or do not match up. Second, the child welfare waivers are creating some studies that will lend some insight into key areas.

Mandatory Reporting

Wade F. Horn: Just a brief comment on the issue of mandatory reporting and the 3 million reports. The current standard for mandatory reporters is mere suspicion that child abuse or neglect has occurred. What that means is that if Dr. Wiener or I are in an office with a client and we say, “Gee, I wonder if. . .” there is a legal requirement at that point that we report.

Now, what is remarkable is not that 3 million reports occur and two-thirds are not substantiated, but that 20 million do not get reported and 90 percent are not substantiated. The reason why it does not get to 20 million and 90 percent is because Jerry Wiener and I do not report when we say, “Gee, I wonder if. . .” We instead, and so do most mandatory reporters, ignore the mere suspicion standard and go to a reasonable evidence: “Do I have reasonable evidence that abuse has occurred here?” Yet, the law does not reflect what mandatory reporters actually do.

Now, the downside. Those who would say, “Do not raise the bar” also say, “We do not want to miss any kids who have been abused if we raise the bar for reporting.” But the downside to having such a low bar is that the system is completely inundated with reports. I may be one of the few here who actually was a caseworker in child protective services. This was back in 1977, and I had a caseload of twenty-two kids, or twenty-two families. People would kill for a caseload of twenty-two families today. I knew everybody by their first name. I knew the family histories. Today, I guarantee that most people are wrestling with caseloads of at least seventy-five, often 125 to 150 in the inner cities.

Although it is almost impossible to do politically, I urge policymakers to revisit this standard. I think the standard causes people to overreport or to routinely ignore their legal obligation to report.

Kinship Care

Ann Segal: Congress required the Department of Health and Human Services to report on kinship care. The effort was, unfortunately, somewhat narrowly focused on the child welfare system's kinship care. The first thing you find when you go into this subject is that we have three pots and they all have to be watched. We have got the pot that becomes child-only cases under TANF; the pot that goes into the child welfare system and becomes foster care cases; and the third pot, which gets no funding whatsoever, where the child has been dislocated out of his or her family. Those three potential outcomes are really child welfare outcomes, but they are not all going to be in the child welfare system.

Overreporting Child Abuse

Stephanie J. Monroe: The critical point for Congress is for states to begin to really look at the federal definition of child abuse and neglect, which was recently changed to allow them to focus on the most serious cases of child abuse and neglect. Some of the mandatory reporting laws may need to be modified to deal only with that most serious form of child abuse and neglect, where the child really is at imminent risk of harm.

Wade F. Horn: I would not go that far, because I do think mandatory reporters ought to have a requirement to report, but the standard ought to be reasonable evidence that abuse or neglect has occurred, as opposed to mere suspicion. Sometimes people interpret "two-thirds unsubstantiated" to mean that the system is broken somehow, but they are focusing on the wrong piece that is broken.

When Dr. Wiener suspects that someone might have a medical disorder and refers him or her to a specialist, the standard of whether he made the right referral is not that 100 percent of patients had the disorder, but that it was reasonable that he send the one person. That is what I am trying to get at, not that 100 percent of the reports are founded.

Stephanie J. Monroe: My point is that the reports on serious cases, which need intervention, are made, with perhaps removal of a child for safety, instead of the thousands of reports that result in the removal of kids into a broken foster care system. Kids are abused and neglected in the system to which they are removed. We need to think about where we are taking kids from and where we are putting them, and determine whether there is a way to more appropriately target our response to the actual needs of the family and what is happening in that circumstance.

Richard J. Gelles: This is a pitch to the Feds and the foundations in attendance. They should cease funding interventions without evaluations and start funding evaluations of interventions. The question of where we are taking kids from and where we are putting them can be answered with research. However, I should caution that each state's definition of child abuse and neglect is different. For example, Pennsylvania has a very high threshold for what constitutes reportable abuse

7: Child Maltreatment and Foster Care Payments

or neglect—injury or harm has to exist. As a result, Pennsylvania has a low rate of reporting but a high rate of placement of children into foster care or other forms of out-of-care homes.

The variation of definitions and practices constitutes a kind of natural experiment in which one can examine data across states to sort out the impact of definitions and practices. Before we change laws, we ought to examine the impact of existing state laws—of course the federal agencies and foundations have not demonstrated an interest in such a task—they are still fatally attracted to funding the “cure de jur” interventions to support and assist families and reduce placement of children in out-of-home-care.

Surveys versus Full-Census Data Systems

Douglas J. Besharov: They also are fatally attracted to these large data systems. Some of us think we would have higher quality data earlier and data that can change as state practices change if we funded randomized surveys of what the agencies are doing instead of requiring the agencies to create these big infrastructures that count every case.

We know that the surveys will be less expensive, so what about that? Why not do surveys, Howard?

Howard Rolston: I will speak about the welfare area, not the child welfare area. One is the way the money is allocated. We can often learn more from a good survey than from ongoing mandatory administrative reporting. But Congress sets up the law not to give us Feds millions of dollars to go out and procure those surveys. They put the requirements on the states so the program dollars pay for it. It is how things get funded.

But in the welfare area, where states can report either on samples or on the universe, most of them report on the universe despite our urging them to report better quality data on samples. We still have thirty states reporting the universe, and it is not nearly as high-quality data as it would be from a good representative sample.

Ann Segal: I agree with Howard. I think there is another purpose to the data systems. It is not all for researchers or for the Feds to learn something from. It should be for management of the systems, and if that is true, then you do not just want a sample, you do want to follow all the cases. We have a mixed set of purposes here. It would be great if we had research dollars over and above that to do what you are talking about, but the primary purpose would be to make the systems work better.

Douglas J. Besharov: In industry now, quality control is samples. Industry does not watch every widget. It takes a random sample of the widgets and makes a decision based on that.

Ann Segal: However, children do not die in the widgets, and I think the systems and the workers get held accountable for the very case that may not be in your sample. This is a different kind of system.

7: Child Maltreatment and Foster Care Payments

Jason Turner: I agree that Doug is right, that we put tremendous amounts into the large data systems that do not function. They are overly complex. The New York City welfare system was so complex that when we wanted to get people into work assignments, we found that the system was auto-assigning people between categories, and we could not even find them. We had to disable parts of the system, like Hal in “2001,” so that we could find people. And we ended up giving the local offices big, thick packages of everyone in their office so that they could manually go through the records and call people in, and now we have finally got the system in place.

You need a blend. You need an overall system to count everybody in some major categories, and then any time you are going to do a management initiative of any kind or find out what is going on in the system, the only way to do it is to do a sample.

Douglas Steiger: I wanted to confess that one of the other motives behind this is, of course, distrust. We assert data reporting to make sure that things are found. Anyone who has read the *Washington Post* recently knows that there is a horrible situation in the homes for the mentally retarded. The local politicians, or the local bureaucracies, did not want to discuss this.

You get into circumstances, particularly in child welfare, where nobody wants to talk about situations like this so there is distrust when we assert reporting systems to force people to give us numbers. It may not apply in every circumstance here, but from a federal level, if we do not trust states or cities to report things or to react properly, we will assert data reporting to get us the information or to force people to look at them.

Douglas J. Besharov: I think in this case, though, if you marry the two systems, you get every case and then you sample from the full universe of cases.