APSAC ALERT

Volume #11 Issue #1

Special Points of Interest:

- *The* Child Maltreatment *series of reports can be understood as a measure of CPS workload, as states work within their own laws, policies, and resources. It is not a true measure of the incidence or prevalence of child maltreatment.*
- *The most prevalent type of maltreatment served by the CPS systems is neglect.*
- *Two thirds of the reports made to public child protective services systems came from professionals, such as educators (20.5%), legal and law enforcement (18.7%), and social services personnel (10.7%). Friends, neighbors, and relatives submitted 16.6% of reports.*
- CM 2018 *is the first edition of this report since states were required to include sexual trafficking; 27 states reported 741 unique victims.*

Understanding *Child Maltreatment 2018*

Janet F. Rosenzweig, PhD, MPA

Overview

Child Maltreatment 2018 (CM2018), released in January 2020, is the 29th edition of an annual report on the status of child maltreatment in the United States published by Administration for Children Youth and Families, Children's Bureau (ACF), of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (USDHHS). This report is best read and understood as a measure of the workload of the Child Protection Services agencies in the United States. Although this information is critical for planners and advocates, it should not be confused with a measure of the incidence and prevalence of child maltreatment, as was reported periodically by the National Incidence Studies (NIS). It provides useful state-level data for program planners and advocates and an interesting view of the variations among states. However, variations in the definitions, intake policies between states, and changes in state reporting policies and procedures from year to year limit its utility.

Description of the Data

The information in this report is derived from data voluntarily submitted by each state's Child Protection Services (CPS) system to a federal database known as the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data Set, or NCANDS. NCANDS contains data on all screened -in referrals to CPS agencies receiving a disposition, including, in many states, those receiving an alternative response in Federal Fiscal Year (FFY) 2018. This dataset does not record information about "screened-out" referrals, which are referrals that do not meet a specific state's legal standard to warrant an investigation or other follow up. In 2018, an estimated 3.4 million children fell into this category.

If a state does not submit an NCANDS report, or is missing data on a specific data element, an estimate is generated applying the national average rate per

1,000 children to the state's child population. States have the option to submit actual numbers or corrections to their data files in subsequent years.

The *Child Maltreatment* annual reports are often used to identify trends in the incidence of child maltreatment. However, as in prior years, multiple states offered commentary explaining why their data may not be suitable for trend analysis. Four states (CT, PA, PR, OR) identified reasons that almost certainly impacted the consistency of their data with prior years data, while 15 others (AL, AK, AZ, CA, DE, FL, GA, HI, IN, MA, NE, RI, TN, UT, VA, WV) indicated issues that could have potentially affected comparison. Concerns ranged from new procedures for data collection, lack of technical staff, changes in hardware and software, changes in definitions, and in Puerto Rico, the hurricanes' dramatically affecting daily life and computer systems.

General Observations

Comparing Between Years

Child Maltreatment 2018 (USDHHS, p. 19) provides an estimate of 678,000 (rounded) victims of child abuse and neglect known to CPS agencies throughout the United States. Neglect continues to be the most prevalent type of maltreatment. In prior *Child Maltreatment* publications, children were counted once for each type of abuse noted in their file; starting in *Child Maltreatment 2018*, cases are reported only once, either for the specific type of abuse or for multiple types of abuse. Therefore, data on proportions of the caseload by type as reported in the *Child Maltreatment* reports of abuse are not comparable; the 60.8% of the caseload reported for neglect in *CM 2018* is not comparable to the 75% the caseload reported for neglect in *CM 2017*. In *CM 2018*, more than 100,000 are noted to have victims with multiple types of abuse, many of which are neglect. NCANDS will make the detailed data available to researchers upon request. Non-researchers who use these *CM* reports as their primary data source should be mindful of this change.

Comparing Between States

The lack of a uniform definition of child maltreatment is a weakness in using this report as an indicator of anything beyond state-level Child Protective Services activity. This is particularly true for child sexual abuse, where the age of, or relationship to an alleged perpetrator is a factor in being classified as a CPS case; policies and practices vary among states.

There are also variations in how states handle and count differential or alternative response across all types of maltreatment.

A Tool for Education and Advocacy

Data in this report can be used as descriptive data for advocacy or public education efforts, but it is recommended that a state's data representative, as identified in the State Commentary section of *Child Maltreatment 2018*, be contacted before using this data for research or technical analyses.

Policy Considerations

Data from *Child Maltreatment 2018* have important implications for advocates:

The field needs a current National Incidence Study (NIS-5)

The Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-4), a project that uses multiple sources of data, estimated a decrease in the number of maltreated children between NIS-3 in 1996 and NIS-4 in 2006, with a significant decline in abuse, but not neglect[1]. When considering both the long-term trends reported in the series of *Child Maltreatment* reports and the NIS-4, an argument can be made for a decline in abuse, but not neglect, over the past two decades.

[1] NIS-3 1996 harm standard estimate 1,553,000; NIS-4 2005 harm standard estimate 1,256,600. The number of children who experienced harm standard *abuse* declined significantly, by 26%, from an estimated 743,200 (*11.1 abused children per 1,000*) in the NIS–3 to 553,300 (*7.5 abused children per 1,000 children*) in the NIS–4. The incidence of harm standard *neglect* showed no statistically reliable changes since the NIS–3, neither overall nor in any of the specific neglect categories (physical, emotional, and educational neglect).

However, without a NIS-5, we lack valid and reliable trend data to properly assess changes over time, including cases not known to CPS.

Variability in mandatory reporting laws render even the number of reports unreliable for national aggregation and trend analysis

State-to-state differences in mandatory reporting laws confound the reliability of the very basis of the data reported by NCANDS. Issues such as the definitions of mandated reporters, public and professional education and outreach to mandated reporters in each state, and immunity from liability for reporters can impact how many children become known to CPS. A digest of state reporting laws can be found at the APSAC Center for Child Policy website.

Prevention is undervalued

Pairing the 699,826 substantiated child maltreatment victims reported in *Child Maltreatment 2018* with the $830,928 cost estimate calculated by senior CDC staff yields the astonishing conclusion that the victims from one year's reports will cost society more than $500 billion over their lifetime in diminished quality of life, health, productivity, social success, and other factors. By failing to invest in prevention, we add to this number each year as additional victims are identified.

Neglect continues to dominate the CPS caseload

Neglect continues to comprise the largest proportion of CPS caseloads, accounting for more than two thirds of all victims (USDHHS, 2020, p. 40) and 72.8% of child fatalities (USDHHS, 2020, p. 48). Both NCANDS data and the National Incidence Studies (NIS) show a stable rate of child neglect. While abuse has shown decreases in prior years, neglect has not. Advocates and practitioners can focus on policies and programs shown to impact neglect. The Technical Package published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in 2016 is a valuable resource.

Who is serving the screened-out children and families?

There continues to be an increase in the number of children and families being screened out of receiving services from CPS systems. *Child Maltreatment 2018* provides information for each state on the number of initial calls, called referrals. Referrals are either screened out or accepted into the system as reports. States then respond to those reports with investigations or services. CM 2018 estimates that for 2018 there were 4.3 million referrals representing an estimated 7.8 million children. 44% of the initial referrals to CPS agencies representing an estimated 3.4 million children were screened out and never considered reports. The proportion of all referrals screened out increased slightly from approximately 42% in 2015, 2016, and 2017; the number of initial referrals is increasing, meaning more potentially at-risk children are not receiving any interventions from the CPS system.

Conclusion

Advocates for child maltreatment prevention may find that federal data based on uniform reporting requirements a better indicator of certain trends. Unlike requirements for NCANDS data, the federal requirements for reporting employment, economic, crime, and health data are generally consistent among states; many of these indicators can be used to assess child well-being.

Data from the *Child Maltreatment* series of reports is best used by advocates and planners interested in the role, workload, and activities of the state's child protection system and should consider the individual State Commentary carefully.

References

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2006). *Technical package.* Retrieved from https://www.cdc.gov/features/child-abuse-neglect/index.html.

Peterson, C. Florence, C., & Klevens, J. (2018, December). The economic burden of *child maltreatment in the United States, 2015. Child Abuse & Neglect, 86*, 178–183.

National Incidence Studies (NIC). (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/statistics/nis/

U.S Department of Health and Human Services (USDHHS), Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau. (2020, January). *Child Maltreatment 2018*. Washington, DC: Author.

Find Digital Spaces for Collegial Connection with APSAC's Online Training Opportunities

Introducing the APSAC & Foundling Online Course

APSAC and the Vincent J. Fontana Center for Child Protection of the New York Foundling are proud to present the APSAC & Foundling Online Course. Access our comprehensive Online Course featuring national experts sharing their expertise on child maltreatment. Questions? Please contact onlinetraining@apsac.org. A special introductory rate of $25 is available to APSAC members!

Become a Member and Save or Register Now!

Take Part in Webinars from APSAC and the Foundling

APSAC and the Vincent J. Fontana Center for Child Protection of the New York Foundling are proud to offer the APSAC & Foundling Educational Webinar Series. Join us for in-depth conversations with leading experts in the field of child maltreatment.

View Our Full List of Webinars and Register Here

Support APSAC's Ongoing Work by Becoming a Member or Renewing Your Membership

Learn more about member benefits and pricing options here. Questions? Contact apsac@apsac.org

About the Author

Janet Rosenzweig has been working with child maltreatment for more than forty years with roles including direct service, program design and management, research and evaluation, teaching, and cabinet level public service. She holds a PhD in social work and master's degrees in both health education and public administration. She currently teaches at The Fels Institute of Government at the University pf Pennsylvania and serves as the Executive Director of APSAC.

Rosenzweig has been monitoring, analyzing and writing about the *Child Maltreatment* annual reports since 2012.

The American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children®

In partnership with The New York Foundling

Strengthening Practice Through Knowledge

The American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children is the leading national organization supporting professionals who serve children and families affected by child maltreatment and violence. As a multi-disciplinary group of professionals, APSAC achieves its mission in a number of ways, most notably through expert training and education activities, policy leadership and collaboration, and consultation that emphasizes theoretically sound, evidence-based principles. If you found this article valuable and would like access to all of APSAC's publications, resources, and training discounts, please consider becoming a member. Learn more about becoming a member at apsac.org/membership.

1706 E. Broad St. | Columbus, OH 43203
(p) 847-402-7722 | (f) 614.251.6005
info@apsac.org | apsac.org

APSAC Alert © American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children, Inc. Opinions expressed in the APSAC Alert do not reflect APSAC's official position unless otherwise stated.