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URBAN STUDIES CENTER  
UNIVERSITY OF LOUISVILLE

# Child Abuse and Neglect Report: Children and the Agency

## Introduction

Child abuse and neglect is defined by law as harm or potential harm done to a child by the person responsible for the child's care. The number of reported incidences of child abuse and neglect has increased steadily throughout the United States since the mid-1960s when mandatory reporting of child abuse was first required. Whether the increasing numbers reflect an increase in actual abuse or an increase in the proportion of abuse that is reported is not known.

In the fall of 1986, the Kentucky Criminal Justice Statistical Analysis Center (SAC) undertook a study (the second in its series on child abuse and neglect) to analyze existing data about child abuse and neglect reporting and agency and court responses to that reporting.

## The Study

*Child Abuse and Neglect: Reports, Children and the Agency* is the eighth report in the SAC research report series. The first report, *Child Abuse and Neglect in Kentucky: 1978-1984*, analyzed the changes in reporting of child abuse and neglect in Kentucky between fiscal years 1977 and 1984 by addressing the characteristics of the reports, the characteristics of the children being reported, and the characteristics of the alleged perpetrators. The study uses data on Jefferson County, Kentucky, for fiscal year 1983; the data was extracted from existing data files maintained

by the Kentucky Cabinet for Human Resources and the Jefferson County Department for Human Services.

Fiscal year 1983 was used because it was the first year for which data was available that would allow analysis of three key factors: the time required for disposition of the case, the length of time in Child Protective Services, and any court involvement which occurred.

Jefferson County has about a fifth of the population of Kentucky and appears to have about the same levels of child abuse and neglect as the state as a whole.

Principal investigator for the study was Dr. Gordon Scott Bonham, director of the social health studies program at the Urban Studies Center. The study was funded by the Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice, Grant No. 84-BJ-CX-0013.

## Reporting of Child Abuse and Neglect

Jefferson County residents made 5,740 reports of children abused or neglected during the twelve-month period between July 1982 and June 1983. About 3 families out of every 100 with children were reported during the year as possibly abusing or neglecting their children. In the deteriorating residential areas immediately surrounding downtown the rates were four times this level.

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## Message From Attorney General David L. Armstrong

The research being done by the Statistical Analysis Center is proving beneficial to criminal justice system practitioners across this Commonwealth.

As the SAC study revealed, victims of crime are a group highly vulnerable to revictimization, and the Attorney General's Office is applying what was learned in this criminal victimization study by having its representatives emphasize crime prevention techniques with the victims of crime they contact.

The *Victims Bill of Rights* which we steered through the last General Assembly is beginning to have an effect as well. Crime victims are making victim impact statements in Circuit Court at sentencing and are appearing before the Parole Board. The Attorney General's Office has secured a grant to establish ten victims' programs in prosecutors' offices across the state. By relying heavily on volunteers, we hope to develop low-cost victim programs. Another goal is to standardize these programs so that they are be easy to replicate.

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## Child Abuse and Neglect

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Rates of reported abuse and neglect were lowest in the affluent areas outside the city limits. (See Figure 1.) Total reporting amounted to 32 reports for every 1,000 children and involved about 4,900 different children in about 2,850 families.

According to the Kentucky Department for Human Resources, the Kentucky law on reporting child abuse and neglect refers to harm or threat of harm by "parent, guardian, or any other person who has the permanent or temporary care, custody, or responsibility for the supervision of the child." ("Child" is defined as from birth until age 18.)

The legal wording suggests that the alleged perpetrator of abuse or neglect is commonly expected to be a person with whom the child is living. Most reports of abuse or neglect involved children living with one or both their biological parents. About nine out of ten children were living with their biological mother and, in most cases, the mother was reported as the perpetrator of the abuse or neglect. Over half the reports involved children living with no other adult but their mother. (See Figure 2.)

Biological fathers were much less likely than biological mothers to live with the child, and thus less likely to

be reported as perpetrator of the abuse or neglect. However, there is little difference between the likelihood of mothers and the likelihood of fathers being listed as a perpetrator of abuse or neglect if they live in the same household as the children.

Statistically, fewer than one in ten children is abused by someone who is not a member of his/her household, and it is a rare occurrence for a biological parent not living in the household with the child to be reported as a perpetrator of abuse or neglect.

Reports of suspected child abuse and neglect were highest for children under 3 years of age and declined steadily as the age of the child increased.

The rate of reporting for nonwhite children was higher than for white children, but there was no difference between the rates of reporting for boys and girls.

More than half the reports came from people who had informal contacts with children—relatives, friends, neighbors, and anonymous sources—while the rest came from professional sources such as physicians, teachers, police, and social workers. (See Figure 3.)

Neglect, although it is not as immediately damaging as physical abuse, was the most frequent type of

mistreatment reported. Physical abuse was indicated in about a third of the reports. Sexual abuse was rarely reported, indicated in only 6 percent of the reports.

## Agency and Court Response to Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting

About half the reported incidences of child abuse and neglect were confirmed by Child Protective Services after investigation. ("Confirmed" is the term used here to include cases with either established abuse or neglect, or with some indication of abuse or neglect.) About a third of the confirmed cases were definitely "established" while others gave some indication of abuse or neglect. Most of the unconfirmed reports were listed as "unestablished," meaning that the evidence was insufficient to meet the legal and administrative definition of abuse and neglect.

The percent of reports with either some indication of or confirmation of child abuse and neglect is about the same for reported physical abuse, for mental or emotional abuse, and for neglect. It is much higher, however, for sexual abuse, where seven out of ten reports are confirmed. (Type of abuse is recorded by the worker after investigating, and the worker may not record sexual abuse unless there is fairly good evidence that it is present.)

Reports from friends, neighbors, and anonymous sources were less likely to be confirmed than reports from professional sources, but these sources were still responsible for identifying one fourth of the children confirmed to be abused or neglected.

## Length of Time in the System

Unconfirmed cases of child abuse and neglect were open for fewer days than were confirmed cases. Although a few children reported as abused and neglected were in the Child Protective Service system for as long as three years, half were in the system for less than two months. When the investigation did not confirm the suspicion of abuse or neglect, the case was active in the Child Protective Services an average of 72 days. If the investigation confirmed abuse or neglect, the case remained active an average of 204 days.

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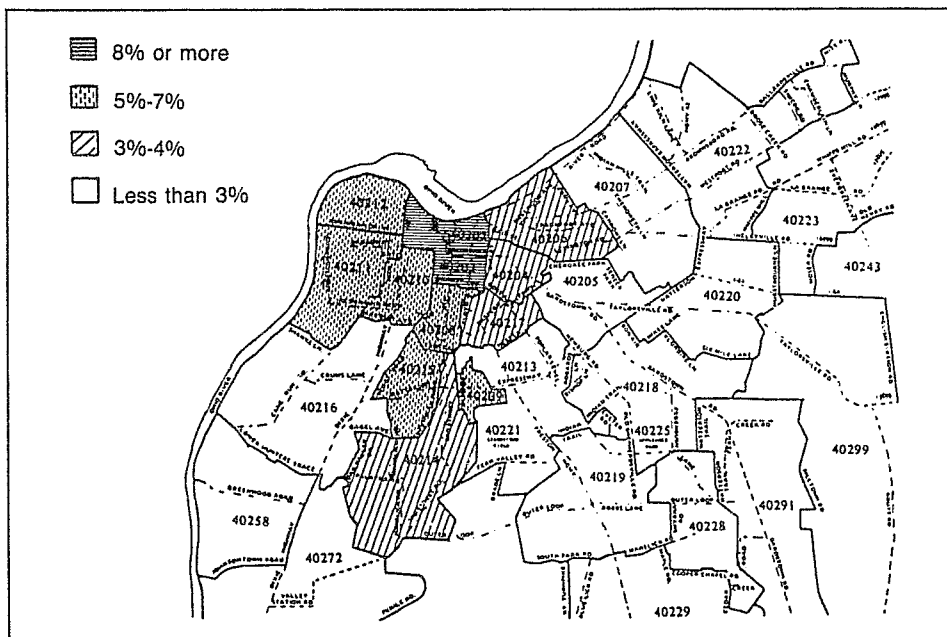


Figure 1: Percent of families, by zip code, reported as abusing or neglecting their children Jefferson County, Kentucky, Fiscal Year 1983.

## Child Abuse and Neglect

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Children who were reported as physically or sexually abused were in the system longer than those who were not directly assaulted.

Confirmed cases of abuse reported by professional sources were in the system longer than were those reported by anonymous sources; sexual and physical abuse cases were in the system longer than were cases with mental/emotional abuse or neglect. The children who remain in protective services for the longest period of time are those who live with their biological mothers and an adult male who is not the biological father. The child living with neither biological parent is in the system for the shortest length of time, independent of the type of reported abuse or neglect, whether or not the mistreatment is confirmed, or regardless of the source of the report.

Approximately 25 percent of the children reported during the year had been reported previously. However, previous reporting had no effect on whether the fiscal year 1983 report was confirmed.

About 4,000 children were brought to the attention of the Child Protective Services for the first time in fiscal year 1983. About an eighth will be reported once more before the situation is fully resolved, and about an eighth will be reported in two or more subsequent years.

### Court Action

Does reporting abuse or neglect mean the child will be taken out of the home? A case is taken to court only after investigation by the Child Protective Services has confirmed that the child was abused or neglected and that it is in the best interest of the child to remove him/her from the abusive or neglectful environment.

During fiscal year 1983 court action within the juvenile justice system was taken to protect almost half of the children when abuse or neglect was definitely established and for nearly a fourth of the children when there was some indication of abuse or neglect.

The probability of court action was slightly higher if the report originated with professional sources or with relatives and if the reported child was a teenager.

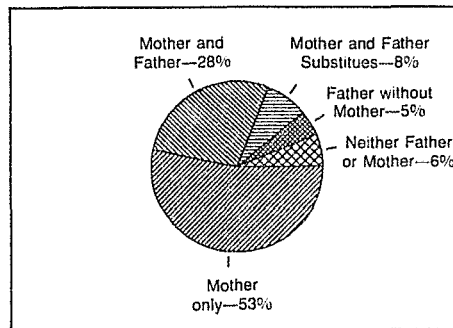


Figure 2: Living arrangements of children reported as abused or neglected. Jefferson County, Kentucky. Fiscal Year 1983.

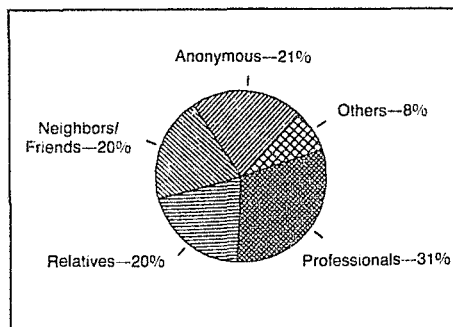


Figure 3: Sources of reports of child abuse and neglect. Jefferson County, Kentucky. Fiscal Year 1983.

### Summary and Conclusions

Child abuse and neglect represents a significant problem today. About three families out of every hundred in Jefferson County were reported as possibly abusing or neglecting their children during fiscal year 1983. Levels of reported and confirmed child abuse and neglect in Jefferson County are similar to those in Kentucky as a whole, and the findings here are likely applicable to the state.

The most pervasive problem is neglect. Physical and sexual abuse affects fewer children than does neglect. While neglect generally affects all the children in the family, physical and sexual abuse occurs more selectively. When sexual abuse is indicated, the report is more likely to be confirmed than when other types of abuse or neglect are indicated; and confirmed sexual abuse is more likely to result in court action for the child than are confirmed reports of types of abuse or neglect.

Child abuse and neglect is higher for younger children and in areas where economic circumstances are extremely poor. Prior reporting does not appear to be related either to confirmation of mistreatment or to type of action taken.

Most of the reports of suspected child abuse and neglect are first time reports. About half of these are not confirmed and are closed within a couple of months. The other half are confirmed upon investigation, and each case remains active for an average of about seven months.

About a third of the confirmed cases require court action, a process which often requires removal of the child from the home for at least a short period of time. Once the problem appears resolved, however, three fourths of the children are not reported for abuse or neglect again. About half the remainder will be reported once more before the situation is fully resolved and the rest will be in and out of Child Protective Services a number of times over the next few years.

### Recommendations

Friends, neighbors, relatives, and other people who have informal contact with children should be encouraged to report suspected abuse and neglect. Their responsibility is to report the problem, not to investigate it.

No report of suspected child abuse and neglect can be discounted. First reports are as likely to be confirmed as are second and third reports.

Additional research should be focused at least in part on the relationship between child neglect and low socioeconomic status of the family. Any analysis of child abuse and neglect should focus on children and families (in addition to abuse reports) since different results may occur when different units of analysis are used. Both family and child identifying information should be included in the data files.

Much remains to be learned about the environment surrounding child abuse and neglect and about how to determine which children and families represent high risks of mistreatment. Further, there is much to learn about effective ways to intervene when mistreatment does occur.

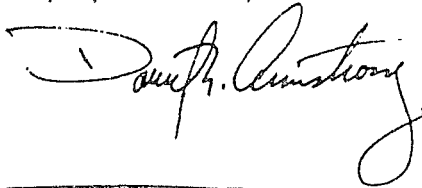
Additional resources need to be made available for continued study of these child abuse and neglect issues.

**Attorney General's Message**

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Finally, I want to call your attention to a new program in my office "The Law in Plain Language for Older Kentuckians." This senior citizens' advocacy program is a pet project of mine. Through it I hope to create a better life for this special group by focusing on abuse and victimization, consumer crime, insurance matters, and related topics. If you know of a senior citizens group that would like a program on these topics, contact my staff at 502/564-4002.

Concern for the well-being of our citizenry has always been one of my primary concerns. I am proud that our SAC research goes beyond mere abstractions and deals with the human problems confronting crime victims, children, policymakers, prison officials and others. We should never forget that the numbers represent real people with real problems.



**SAC Publications**

*Persistent Felony Offenders in Kentucky: A Profile of the Institutional Population,*  
by Dr. Deborah Wilson

*Child Abuse and Neglect in Kentucky: 1978-1984,*  
by Dr. Gordon Bonham

*The Aftermath of Criminal Victimization: A Statewide Survey.*  
by Dr. Knowlton Johnson, Dr. Gary Sykes, and Ned Snow

*An Offender Based Tracking System Study of Three Judicial Districts in the Commonwealth of Kentucky,*  
by Dr. Gennaro Vito and Jack Ellis

*A Data Inventory of Kentucky's Criminal Justice Agencies,*  
by Jack Ellis

*Strengthening Kentucky's Capacity to Produce Criminal Justice Statistical Information: A Needs-Use Assessment,*  
by Dr. Knowlton Johnson, Dr. Michael Price, Jack Ellis, and Barbara Meredith

*Persistent Felony Offenders in Kentucky: A Comparison of Incarcerated Felons,*  
by Dr. Deborah Wilson and Dr. Gennaro Vito

*Child Abuse and Neglect: Reports, Children and the Agency,*  
by Dr. Gordon Bonham

*Criminal Victimization in Kentucky: A Longitudinal Study,*  
by Dr. Knowlton Johnson, Dr. Fran Norris, and Linda Burgess

*Back From the Dead: Tracking the Progress of Kentucky's Furman-Commuted Death Row Population,*  
by Dr. Gennaro Vito and Dr. Deborah Wilson

Executive summaries and/or complete copies of these reports are available at cost by contacting:

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