

Child deaths from abuse and neglect rise in the US

Naomi Spencer
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Five children died from abuse or neglect every day on average in the United States between 2001 and 2007, according to a new report. Over the period, 10,440 child deaths due to maltreatment were registered by state child service agencies.

The findings, collected before the onset of the economic crisis last year, come as social services are on the chopping block throughout the country and child welfare providers have registered sharp increases in abuse cases.

The report, issued by the advocacy group Every Child Matters (ECM), found that 1,760 children died of maltreatment in 2007, a 35 percent increase over 2001. It cautioned that the actual number of abuse and neglect-related deaths is estimated to be as much as 50 percent higher because of inconsistent recordkeeping across states and widely varying definitions of what constitutes a child abuse and neglect death.

The US child maltreatment death rate is three times higher than that of Canada, and 11 times that of Italy. It is also more than double that of France, Japan, Germany and Britain. Noting far lower teen pregnancy, violent crime, imprisonment, and poverty rates in these countries, the ECM report points to more extensive social programs—child care, state health insurance, paid parental leave, visiting nurses—that help to serve as a safety net against child abuse and neglect.

The federal Department of Health and Human Services has registered an increasing number and rate of child abuse deaths. In thousands of these cases, the ECM report notes, the maltreatment had been reported to authorities at least once.

“For a variety of reasons,” the report states, “especially child protective agency budgets and staff capacity stretched dangerously thin in comparison to the problem—the response to these warnings failed the

child. Now a harsh economy combined with a steadily weakened safety net in many states—including unprecedented slashes in child protection spending in some states—threaten to put even more children at risk.”

The volume of child maltreatment cases reveals something of its social character. Since 2000, agencies have fielded more than 20 million maltreatment reports. In 2007 alone, there were 721,646 confirmed cases of abuse and neglect.

In 60 percent of these cases, the ECM report found, children did not receive proper food, clothing, shelter, sanitary conditions, education, medical care or protection; 11 percent were subject to physical abuse and 8 percent to sexual abuse; 4 percent suffered such mistreatment as abandonment, threats, and drug addiction. In half of the cases, parents of the abused children had alcohol or drug addiction problems.

Most of the children who died of maltreatment were very young—three quarters were under the age of four, and almost half were under one year old—and “very poor.” In 70 percent of the fatalities, a parent was the perpetrator, and often a poor, young adult, without a high school diploma, who had experienced violence firsthand.

Calling poverty “the single best predictor of child abuse and neglect,” the report cites the intense stress that accompanies unemployment, poor housing, low education, imprisonment, mental illness, teen parenthood, and a multitude of other social ills plaguing the poorest layers of the American population. The ECM report cites a 2005 study from the American Humane Association, which found that “a child living in a family with an annual income of \$15,000 or less was 22 times more likely to be abused than one in a family with an income of \$30,000 or more.”

Many states have inadequate and declining resources

for child welfare services. Michael Petit, president of Every Child Matters, in a press statement October 21 commented, “When it comes to the investments we’re talking about, against our great wealth, it’s such small, small sums of money. Three, four, or five billion dollars. Compare that to the bailout of the world’s biggest banks. If the United States is able to bail out America’s banks, it ought to be able to bail out America’s children and families.”

The report called for a number of policy changes in child protection services, including funding for programs that would prevent abuse, such as the expansion of substance abuse and mental health treatment programs, teen pregnancy prevention and prenatal care programs, and other basic social services. Many of these are services that have been deliberately gutted and dismantled by both the federal and state governments over the past decade.

The report found a wide disparity in funding levels across states, with 13 states spending less than \$50 per person to address problems of abuse. In states with little funding, social workers are overburdened by high caseloads, low pay and stressful work environments, resulting in high turnover and poor organization at agencies.

The report found that Rhode Island, highest-ranking in per capita spending for child protection measures, spends \$181 per person.

In comparison, bottom-ranked South Carolina spends only \$14.72 per capita, straining child services. South Carolina advocacy groups have recently reported a 33 percent surge in abuse cases since last year, according to an October 11 report in the *Greenville News*, particularly in the upstate region where job cuts and unemployment have spiked.

Similar news items can be found from virtually every state, with increased incidences of domestic violence providing one reflection of the devastation of living standards and social conditions throughout the country.

Dayton, Ohio’s *Daily News*, for example, reported October 4 that in a region where unemployment has doubled, “Infants and toddlers have become helpless casualties of an economic crisis, suffering physical abuse at levels that rival anything local experts have seen in at least 20 years.” At the same time, regional caseworkers charged with managing hundreds of abuse cases told the paper that “the recession has stripped

social services, leaving parents or caregivers with short fuses without a support system.”

With 228 child deaths, Texas had the highest number of fatal neglect and abuse cases in 2007, according to the ECM report. Underscoring the crisis, the *Houston Chronicle* reported October 22 that nearly 1,220 Texas children have died of abuse since 2004. Half of those children were in families that had been investigated by the state’s Child Protective Services (CPS).

In 2005, the state invested \$248 million in the CPS for modernization and additional staff, but the increase was far short of the agency’s \$1 billion annual investigation costs, and the agency has been crippled by high caseworker turnover. Of 431 special investigators hired in the past four years, 273 have left, and 236 of the positions currently sit vacant, the *Chronicle* reported October 12.

The ECM report found Kentucky had the highest per capita death rate of any state, at 4.09 per 100,000 children. Like Texas, Kentucky has pockets of extremely high poverty levels and shortages in social services. The state’s human services have undergone three deep budget cuts since 2008, amounting to \$28 million.

The Every Child Matters report is available online in PDF here.



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