

At least 786 US children died while being monitored by child protection authorities

Tom Hall

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A report released last week by the Associated Press found that at least 786 children died of abuse or neglect from 2008 to 2013 while being monitored by child protective authorities. The report cautions that the real figure is “undoubtedly much higher.”

The most scandalous of the report's revelations is the ramshackle, patchwork character of official government statistics on child protective services. This mirrors the uncoordinated character of child protective services throughout the country, which vary wildly from state to state and even from county to county. There is not even a common definition of what constitutes child abuse or neglect.

There is no accurate count of the total number of deaths from child abuse or neglect every year. The federal government estimates around 1,650 deaths per year, but the AP notes that “many believe the actual number is twice as high.”

The Associated Press obtained its count through an eight-month investigation which involved canvassing all fifty states, the District of Columbia, and the military. The report notes that its figures are the “most comprehensive statistics publicly available” because “no single, complete set of data exists” on the subject.

Even still, the report was significantly hampered by poor government record-keeping. 230 deaths from seven states were not included in the final tally because they could not make a distinction between investigations that started before and after the instance deadly abuse. Some states did not provide data for all six years, and reporters were unable to obtain any statistics at all from Indian reservations.

The federal Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) provides grants to local child services programs. All recipients are required to “allow the public to access information when child abuse or

neglect results in a child fatality.” Despite the terrible quality of such record-keeping nationwide, no local agency has ever been found to be in violation of this requirement by HHS.

The AP report highlights several shocking deaths in which child protection authorities failed to intervene. A father in Montana killed 2 month-old Mattisyn Blaz last summer by spiking her “like a football,” according to a prosecutor, despite being known to authorities for months for a previous abuse incident less than two months prior. Child services did not follow up with the case until the day of Mattisyn's funeral.

In Maine, a 10-week-old child died from a traumatic brain injury after his father threw him into a recliner. The local child services hotline had received at least 13 calls from the residence, and a caseworker who inspected the trailer found no evidence of abuse despite numerous children with bruises and evidence that an older sister had been sexually abused.

These deaths are in large part a consequence of severely inadequate staffing and funding for child protective services. The AP cites a representative incident involving the death of a two-year-old where the caseworker investigating the home was dealing with 37 other cases. Lack of funding, adequate training and federal oversight have limited the ability of child services to investigate complaints. Indeed, a staggering 40 percent of all child abuse complaints are “screened out,” according to the AP, and never even investigated.

The crisis in child services has been brewing for decades. As far back as 1995, a government report carrying the provocative title “A Nation's Shame: Fatal Child Abuse and Neglect in the United States,” pointed to the lack of government statistics in particular. “Until we develop more comprehensive and sophisticated data, our efforts to understand and prevent child

maltreatment-related deaths will be severely handicapped,” the report declared.

President Obama has made recent pro-forma moves on the issue of child abuse, supporting the passage of the Protect Our Kids Act in early 2013. The six-page law provides for a toothless 12-member commission tasked with presenting a report on child abuse to congress within two years. Its recommendations will not be legally binding.

The relationship between child abuse and poverty are well-documented, and the policies of the Obama administration have aided and abetted the burgeoning social crisis unleashed after the 2008 recession. This summer, the Democratic-controlled House of Representatives voted yet again to slash \$8.7 billion dollars from food stamps, at a time when food stamp recipients have swelled to 48 million. A study released last month revealed that over 100,000 fewer families are receiving housing assistance since the so-called sequester cuts last year.



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