



## Frequently Asked Questions

### How Many Children Die From Child Abuse and Neglect?

Child fatalities are the most drastic consequence of child abuse and neglect. Whether intended or not, some incidents of child maltreatment result in the death of the child. Several organizations and agencies have attempted to estimate the extent of this tragic occurrence:

According to the 2001 data from the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS):<sup>20</sup>

- Nationally, 903,000 children were victims of child abuse or neglect
- Three million referrals concerning the welfare of approximately five million children were made to Child Protective agencies throughout the United States
- Nationally, an estimated 1,300 children known to child welfare services died of abuse or neglect
- Children younger than one year old accounted for 40.9 percent of fatalities, and 84.5 percent of fatalities were younger than six years of age

### Who Are the Perpetrators of Child Abuse and Neglect?<sup>21</sup>

Although no single profile fits every case, researchers have identified several factors that seem to characterize many abusing parents. They have found that frequently an abusing parent:<sup>22</sup>

- Is a young adult in his mid-twenties
- Lives near or below the poverty level
- Has not finished high school
- Is depressed with limited tolerance for stress
- Has experienced violence first hand

The Federal Bureau of Investigation Uniform Crime Reports, Supplemental Homicide Report, FBI-UCR-SHR estimates homicide by caretakers at about 1000 children per year.

The National Center for Health Statistics notes 702 homicides of children 0-5 years old per year. Most of the 702 children were probably killed by caretakers. Some children from ages six to 17 years old were also killed by caretakers. There is no single data set that captures all cases of fatal child abuse/neglect involving caretakers.

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<sup>20</sup> NCANDS, Child Maltreatment 2001, 30 Sept. 2004 <http://www.ncpc.org/ncpc/ncpc/?pg=2088-8168>.

<sup>21</sup> Refer to SECTION VI, APPENDIX B: Data on Murder Offenders by Age, Sex, and Race (2002) for data information on the sex and race of perpetrators in child abuse and neglect cases.

<sup>22</sup> US Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect, A Nation's Shame: Fatal Child Abuse and Neglect in the United States (Washington DC, 1995) 13.

Women comprised 59.3 percent of all perpetrators, while men comprised 40.7 percent in NCANDS or Social Service data.<sup>23</sup> Social Services data includes neglect deaths that may not be reported as homicides. Team data on deaths from abuse (not neglect) may state that most perpetrators are male. This is particularly impressive since females provide most childcare. Of children known to child welfare, approximately 1.5 percent of child fatalities occurred in foster care.<sup>24</sup>

Research studies' estimates vary, since identification of all child deaths resulting from child maltreatment is difficult and not always documented clearly. However, child death review teams across the country are attempting to identify all maltreatment deaths.<sup>25</sup>

### What Causes Child Fatalities?

- Most infants die of natural causes
- Non-intentional injuries (accidents) account for most deaths of children from one to 17.<sup>26</sup>

### What Causes Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities?

Fatal injuries from maltreatment result from many different acts. Children may die from:<sup>27</sup>

- Severe head trauma (Shaken Baby Syndrome or impact to the head)
- Trauma to the abdomen and/or thorax
- Scalding
- Drowning
- Suffocation
- Poisoning

### What Differentiates Abuse from Neglect Fatalities?

The data have demonstrated that abuse and neglect fatalities are two distinct categories, requiring dramatically different prevention and treatment strategies. Neither category, however, is fully understood. In addition, researchers recently have begun an attempt to distinguish among different types of neglect deaths. For example:

- Supervision Neglect includes deaths that involve critical moments in which the parent or caretaker is absent and the child is killed by a suddenly arising danger (e.g., leaving a child unattended in the bathtub).
- Chronic Neglect includes deaths caused by slowly building problems (e.g., persistent malnutrition).

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<sup>23</sup> NCANDS.

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<sup>25</sup> Refer to SECTION VI, APPENDIX B - Data for data from the 2001 Department of Health and Human Services Child Maltreatment Report.

<sup>26</sup> Refer to SECTION VI, APPENDIX B - Data on The Ten Leading Causes of Injury and The Ten Leading Causes of Non-fatal Injury for more data information on childhood injuries.

<sup>27</sup> US Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect 15.

The cause of violence leading to death has been studied. Teams in States such as Colorado and Oregon have identified specific “triggers” that occur just before many fatal parental assaults on infants and young children, including:<sup>28</sup>

- An infant’s inconsolable crying
- Feeding difficulties
- A toddler’s failed toilet training
- Exaggerated parental expectations or perceptions of acts of “disobedience”

In addition, some rage-based assaults are set off by stimuli other than the child. For example, a father in Chicago became so furious about the outcome of a televised ball game that he beat his five-month old infant to death. Domestic violence is another factor in child deaths resulting from maltreatment. Children in homes where spousal abuse occurs are at a substantially higher risk of being victimized while they are children, or being victimizers when they become adults. A person who batters another within the home may begin with a spouse or partner and move on to abusing the children living there. As the level of violence escalates, the risk of child fatalities probably increases as well.

Substance abuse seems to also play a major role in the neglect and abuse of children. Certain drugs like methamphetamines may be particularly hazardous. Alcohol and marijuana impair judgment and are likely the most common chemicals abused.

### How Can We Prevent Child Fatalities?

In 1995, the US Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect recommended an approach that reaches out to all families as the best fatality prevention strategy. The Board stated that the effort must begin with services such as:<sup>29</sup>

- Universal home visiting by trained professionals or paraprofessionals
- Hospital-linked outreach to parents of infants and toddlers
- Community-based programs designed for specific neighborhoods
- Effective public education campaigns and innovative ways to reach males

The Advisory Board concluded that multi-agency and multidisciplinary Child Death Review Teams have become one of our richest sources for understanding this crisis. Teams review cases of child deaths and facilitate appropriate follow-up, assure that services are provided to surviving family members, provide information to assist in the prosecution of perpetrators, and develop recommendations to improve child protection and community support systems. Teams can assist in identifying weaknesses in the child protection system and in determining avenues for prevention efforts and improved training of front-line workers. Well-designed, properly organized Child Death Review Teams appear to offer the greatest hope of defining the underlying nature and scope of fatalities due to child abuse and neglect.

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<sup>28</sup> US Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect 12.

<sup>29</sup> US Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect 128.