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Child Abuse Prevention: A Job Half Done

By Deborah Daro

The recently released Fourth Federal National Incidence Study on Child Maltreatment (NIS 4)¹ contains some good news. The authors report a 19 percent reduction in the overall rate of child maltreatment since the 1993 NIS. This reflects substantial and significant drops in the rates of sexual abuse, physical abuse, and emotional abuse. Unfortunately, no significant changes were documented in the rate of child neglect, the more chronic and pervasive form of child maltreatment, and the form most often documented among children in the child welfare system.

Moreover, although rates of child maltreatment have dropped since 1993, they remain substantially higher than those documented in the first NIS report in 1980 and the second in 1986.

The current study does highlight an important and potentially meaningful drop in the rate of violence toward children. The trend overall suggests that comprehensive prevention strategies, high-quality clinical interventions, and holding those who harm

children accountable for their actions have the capacity to keep children safe.

The NIS 4 is the fourth in a series of incidence studies commissioned by Congress to document levels of child abuse and neglect across the country. Using a set of key informants residing in a representative number of communities, respondents identify all children they observed during the study period who experienced a range of abusive and neglectful behaviors. The three earlier NIS reports were released in 1980, 1986, and 1993. Over the years, these studies have been used to create a more comprehensive picture of the scope of child maltreatment than can be gleaned from child maltreatment reports made to public child welfare agencies.

Despite the recent decreases, the job is not yet done. Advocates, program managers, and policymakers would benefit from seeing these findings within a broader historical context. Child abuse may be less prevalent today, but it remains a substantial threat to child wellbeing, particularly for those children at

¹ Sedlak, A.J., Mettenburg, J., Basena, M., Petta, I., McPherson, K., Greene, A., and Li, S. (2010). *Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-4): Report to Congress, Executive Summary*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families.

highest risk for chronic mistreatment, and those who experience the greatest harm. And sustaining and building on these gains will be particularly difficult in light of troubling economic trends, strained public budgets, and a more-restricted prevention agenda and vision.

What does NIS 4 show?

The table below shows the trends since the first NIS report in the rates of various types of maltreatment.

Harm Category Rate per 1,000 children	NIS 1 1980	NIS 2 1986	NIS 3 1993	NIS 4 2006
All Maltreatment	9.8	14.8	23.1	17.1
All Abuse	5.3	8.1	11.1	7.5
Physical Abuse	3.1	4.3	5.7	4.4
Sexual Abuse	0.7	1.9	3.2	1.8
Emotional Abuse	2.1	2.5	3.0	2.0
All Neglect	4.9	7.5	13.1	No change
Physical Neglect	1.6	2.7	5.0	No change
Emotional Neglect	0.9	0.8	3.2	No change
Educational Neglect	2.7	4.5	5.9	No change

Among the key findings from NIS 4:

- Although the decline in overall maltreatment rates reported in the most recent study is impressive and mirrors recent declines in the number of children being reported to child protective services, the rate of children harmed by maltreatment today is 75 percent higher than the rate observed in the 1980 national incidence study and 16 percent above the rate documented in the 1986 study.
- If one considers the rate of children both harmed as well as those judged to be in danger of harm as a result of abuse or neglect, the overall rate of children exposed to abusive or neglectful behaviors has not changed since 1993.
- Rates of emotional neglect, which include children witnessing chronic or extreme spousal abuse, and

situations in which the parents demonstrate marked inattention to the child’s development or behaviors, actually *increased* 83 percent during this period.

- The incidence of cases in which a child was killed or suffered severe or moderate injury did not decline significantly. The types of cases that demonstrate the greatest declines are those in which the harm to the child was inferred based on the egregious nature of their treatment—behaviors such as abandonment, sexual penetration, or confining, tying, or binding a child.
- This absence of change in the rates of cases in which children died as result of abuse or neglect across the two most recent NIS studies mirrors the recent increase in child abuse fatalities documented by state child protection service administrators. In 2007, almost 1,600 children—or over four children a day—were identified by child welfare officials as fatal victims of maltreatment, a 15 percent increase from the number of such cases documented in 2006. As in the past, the majority of these children were under the age of five.

Rather than point to the general success in preventing child abuse, the findings released in NIS 4 are a sober reminder that whatever gains have been made are modest and limited to a measurable reduction in sexual abuse and some types of physical abuse. In other words, only minimal gains have been made in our collective ability to protect vulnerable children from fatal and severe physical abuse and most forms of child neglect.

How can we account for these trends?

It is difficult to discern with any certainty the specific reasons for decreasing child maltreatment rates. Over the past 30 years, myriad changes have occurred in the policy, economic, and social landscapes. However, most of the improvement reported in NIS 4 represents declines in child sexual abuse, and the prevention of child sexual abuse was not limited to high-risk

populations. School districts across the country now educate all their students about personal safety and encourage them to tell a trusted adult if they are being harmed. This suggests that prevention efforts are most effective when they embrace diverse strategies that include both targeted interventions, and broad universal strategies designed to reach all potential victims and to alter the social context.

In addition, basic safety messages have been incorporated into children’s television programming and publications. All youth-serving organizations have established procedures to educate their young members about potential sexual abuse, and these agencies screen, educate, and carefully supervise their staff and volunteers. Religious organizations have adopted “safe church” policies and instituted major reforms to monitor clergy behavior and more effectively respond to identified transgressions. In order to reduce the odds of victims experiencing subsequent abuse and minimize the negative consequence of abuse, including young victims victimizing others, high-quality evidence-based clinical interventions have been established, tested, and refined.

Finally, cases of sexual abuse and serious physical abuse are aggressively prosecuted. Depending on the circumstances, offenders are subject to mandatory treatment, ongoing surveillance, and, in the most extreme cases, extended incarceration.

Unfortunately, our approach to protecting children from physical abuse and neglect has been far less comprehensive and, in recent years, far less robust. In the 1980s, combating child abuse was a central theme among philanthropic and community service efforts being promoted by the National Basketball Association, Master Card, the Ad Council, corporations such as Freddy Mac and Target, and a number of social fraternities and sororities. Several national nonprofit organizations, including the

Prevent Child Abuse America and the Kempe Center for the Prevention and Treatment of Child Abuse and Neglect, focused exclusively on maltreatment, coordinating child abuse intervention and prevention efforts across the country, and disseminating promising practices. Almost every state established a Children’s Trust and Prevention Fund, which raised revenues to support a diverse array of emerging prevention strategies and provided a strong voice within state governments for the prevention message. Collectively, these and similar efforts created a climate that fostered new ideas, ignited public interest, generated greater public and private resources, and inspired a generation of young professionals who focused on child maltreatment.

What do these findings mean for prevention, practice, and policy?

Since the early 1990s, child abuse prevention advocates have placed primary emphasis on initiating support to parents at the time a woman becomes pregnant or at birth. Strong empirical and practical evidence exists for focusing on the first few years of a child’s life. Infants are particularly vulnerable, and their safety and healthy development rests almost exclusively with their parents and primary caretakers. Fostering a strong parent-child relationship during this period is foundational to a child’s healthy physical and emotional development. It makes solid clinical sense and financial sense to invest in prevention efforts that begin early in the parenting process, particularly if the objective is to reduce the likelihood of maltreatment.

The latest national incidence data would suggest that despite the growing emphasis on early intervention and high-quality prevention programs, we are not yet seeing the benefits that had been anticipated for these targeted efforts. Successfully preventing serious

physical abuse and neglect of young children has proven the more difficult challenge, in part because the prevention response has been more tentative. Efforts at supporting new parents, though widespread, still have the capacity to serve only a fraction of new parents. While in the past, public awareness messages explicitly talked about the consequences of child abuse and the responsibility of the public to actively engage in efforts to prevent its occurrence, today these messages have been discontinued or have been “reframed” to emphasize positive parenting and healthy child development. As a result, the public today has less exposure to the concept of child physical abuse and neglect, and potentially less knowledge about its related behaviors and consequences.

Expanding the availability of intensive home-based interventions is an important step in addressing these most troubling aspects of the child maltreatment dilemma. It is, however, only one part of the solution. If the child maltreatment prevention field hopes to match its success in reducing the incidence of sexual abuse with cases involving serious physical abuse and chronic neglect, it must do more than replicate a small number of evidence-based targeted interventions. Equally important are:

- Identification of specific parental behaviors or actions toward children that need to change, and then communicating that message to the general population through a diverse array of media outlets and social networking vehicles.
- Universal education efforts to all new parents regarding these behaviors, similar to what is currently being done in many communities around the consequences of violently shaking a child.
- Universal assessments of all new parents that carry the dual mission of assessing parental capacity to provide for a child’s safety, and linking families with services commensurate with their needs. For some, this will be enrollment in intensive home-based interventions. For most, this process will serve as a

way to raise awareness of those local resources that are available in a community to help parents effectively meet the needs of their children and find assistance in times of stress.

- Creating child welfare systems that have the capacity to work with parents who require mandatory intervention to insure their child’s safety and the willingness to remove children in those cases in which parents are either unwilling or unable to change.

The latest National Incidence Study shows that child maltreatment can be prevented. The dramatic reduction in the number of identified cases of sexual abuse and some physical abuse demonstrate that child abuse is neither inevitable nor intractable. These findings also demonstrate that such gains require a holistic approach to prevention in which change is sought at the individual, institutional, and normative levels.

Recent research and public policy investments underscoring the importance of the first years of life provide a promising foundation on which to build the institutional infrastructure needed to produce sustained reductions of all forms of maltreatment. However, enlightened public policy and the replication of high-quality publicly supported interventions are only part of what is needed to successfully combat child abuse. It remains important to remind the public that child abuse and neglect are serious threats to a child’s healthy development, and that overt violence toward children and a persistent lack of attention to their care and supervision is unacceptable. Parents, as well as the general public, need to accept personal responsibility for reducing these behaviors by providing support to each other and offering protection to all children within their family and community. Until the problem is owned by all individuals and all communities, progress will be stymied and children will remain at risk.

ChapinHall at the University of Chicago

Established in 1985, Chapin Hall is an independent policy research center whose mission is to build knowledge that improves policies and programs for children and youth, families, and their communities.

Chapin Hall's areas of research include child maltreatment prevention, child welfare systems and foster care, youth justice, schools and their connections with social services and community organizations, early childhood initiatives, community change initiatives, workforce development, out-of-school time initiatives, economic supports for families, and child well-being indicators.

Recommended Citation

Daro, D. (2010). *Child Abuse Prevention: A Job Half Done*. Chicago: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

Related Publications

Daro, D. (2009). *Embedding Home Visitation Services within a System of Early Childhood Services*. Chicago: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

Daro, D., Budde, S., Baker, S., Nesmith, A., & Harden, A. (2005). *Creating Community Responsibility for Child Protection: Findings and Implications from the Evaluation of the Community Partnerships for Protecting Children Initiative*. Chicago: Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago.

Daro, D., & Dodge, K. (2009). Creating Community Responsibility for Child Protection: Possibilities and Challenges. *The Future of Children*. 19 (2), 68–93.

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