



American Humane Fact Sheet

Fatalities Due to Child Abuse and Neglect

The tragedy of child abuse- and neglect-related fatalities has been brought into our homes with increasing frequency by recent media reports. There was two-month-old Tanner Dowler, who died of physical abuse at the hands of his young parents despite efforts by his grandparents to alert and prompt authorities to intervene even before he was born. And there was 14-month-old Demitri Robledo, who was tortured and starved by his male babysitter. Equally disturbing was the story of five-year-old Zachary Bennett who was fatally beaten after being returned to his father despite the fact that his father had a criminal record of domestic violence and drug abuse. And there was six-year-old Elisa Izquierdo who died at the hands of her mother in New York. Born addicted to crack cocaine, Elisa suffered a lifetime of her mother's abuse.

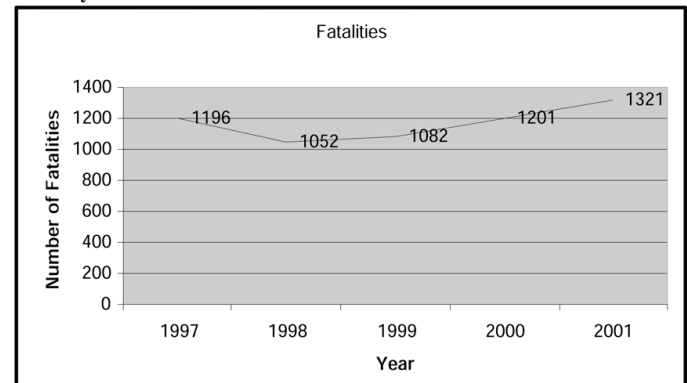
At times it may seem that these tragedies are happening elsewhere and not in our own neighborhoods. However, child abuse- and neglect-related fatalities are not isolated incidents. Individuals across the country have become increasingly aware that children are dying because of abuse and neglect right in their own communities and at the hands of the people responsible for their care.

How big is the problem?

Figures available for 2001 from the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS, 2003), which collects data from states on incidents of child maltreatment, indicate that in 2001 alone approximately 903,000 children were confirmed victims of maltreatment and an estimated 1,321 children died as a result of abuse and/or neglect. This figure may be conservative due to the potential for misdiagnosis of death as either a result of sudden infant death syndrome, homicide, or accident. Many states have difficulty acquiring enough information from coroners' offices and the judicial system about the particular circumstances surrounding children's deaths to determine whether abuse or neglect could have been a factor.

Figure 1 shows that the number of childhood fatalities is on the rise from 1997 to 2001, according to NCANDS.

Figure 1
Fatality statistics



Fatality statistics

In its 2001 report, NCANDS indicated that in 2001 1.81 children per 100,000 in the population died as a result of abuse or neglect. The report also showed that:

- children under the age of one were most vulnerable and accounted for 40.9% of all fatalities;
- 84.5% of maltreatment-related fatality victims were age six and under.
- 35.6% of child fatalities resulted from neglect alone, 26.3% from physical abuse alone, and 21.9% from both neglect and physical abuse.
- Most child fatalities (82.8%) were the result of maltreatment by one or both parents
- Mothers acting alone were the perpetrators in 32.4% of child abuse- and neglect-related fatalities.

In 1999, the National Center on Child Abuse Prevention Research (NCCAPR), a program of Prevent Child Abuse America, surveyed all 50 states and reported that an estimated 1,396 children died as a result of maltreatment – that means nearly four children every day. (The data collection method used in the survey results in statistics that are slightly different from those recorded by NCANDS.)

According to sources of NCCAPR, children under five years of age accounted for an average 76% of fatalities reported between 1997 and 1999, with children under one accounting for 40% of the deaths. For each of those



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Fatalities (*continued*)

three years, an average 39% of children who died had previously been involved with or were known to child protective services (CPS) (NCCAPR, 2001).

State resources

States have set up different avenues for responding to child fatalities. The iCAN National Center on Child Fatality Review (www.ican-ncfr.org) was established to develop and promote a nationwide system of child fatality review teams in all 50 states. While teams differ from state to state, they typically comprise representatives from law enforcement, the courts, the coroner's office, child protective services, and public health agencies. These teams provide a coordinated examination and investigation of child fatalities due to abuse and neglect and strive to identify why child protection avenues failed and how future deaths can be prevented.

Searching for answers

Realizing that child maltreatment fatalities are preventable, communities around the country have begun to look for ways to assist families with young children before circumstances become so overwhelming that child maltreatment results.

Many states have searched for links as to the cause of child abuse deaths. Many believe that substance abuse by the parent or caregiver has been a leading contributor to the increase in the number of child fatalities. In fact, 29% of fatalities occurring between 1991 and 1993 involved parental substance abuse (NCPA, 1994). Other factors that contribute to fatalities are those that are typically associated with child maltreatment, including

- a crisis in the home,
- economic stress due to unemployment,
- unrealistic expectations of the child,
- social isolation,
- history of substance abuse, or
- history of the parents having been abused as children.

What you can do

If you suspect that a child is a victim of abuse and you are unsure whether the child's situation has been reported, you should report your suspicions to your local CPS agency. Refer to the Fact Sheet *Reporting Child Abuse and Neglect* to learn about reporting suspected child abuse or neglect.

Professional information for teams and agencies is available by writing iCAN-NCFR, 4024 N. Durfee Avenue, El Monte, CA 91732, calling (626) 455-4585, or visiting their website at www.ican-ncfr.org.

What is NCANDS?

NCANDS is the primary source of national information on abused and neglected children known to public child protective services agencies. American Humane has provided technical assistance to this project since its beginning in 1990. For a copy of this report, contact the National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information at (800) 394-3366 or <http://www.calib.com/nccanch>. The publication is also available at <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb>.

Resources

National Center on Child Abuse Prevention Research/ Prevent Child Abuse America. (2001). *Current trends in child abuse prevention, reporting and fatalities: The 1999 fifty state survey*. Chicago, IL: Peddle, N. and Wang, C.

National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse. (1994). *Current trends in child abuse reporting and fatalities: The results of the 1993 annual fifty state survey*. Chicago, IL: Author.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect, National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System. (2003). *Child maltreatment 2001: Reports from the states to the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect*. Washington, DC: U. S. Government Printing Office.

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American Humane is a nonprofit organization dedicated to the mission of protecting children and animals from abuse, neglect, and exploitation. For more information or to lend your support, please visit www.americanhumane.org or call (866) 242-1877.