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Child Abuse or Neglect Trends in Washington State

The Washington Legislature in 1994 directed the Washington State Institute for Public Policy to study juvenile violence and other at-risk behaviors of youth.¹ The Institute was instructed to analyze trends in these behaviors and evaluate the cost-effectiveness of Washington's efforts to achieve measurable reductions in violence and at-risk behaviors. This research brief is part of the Institute's plan to provide the legislature and other interested persons with up-to-date findings on these topics.

Background: The 1994 Washington Legislature established Community Public Health and Safety Networks and gave them responsibility "to make measurable reductions in the rate of at-risk children and youth."² The Networks were told to assess local conditions, develop comprehensive plans, and be committed to making:

*"reductions in at least three of the following rates of youth: violent criminal acts, substance abuse, pregnancy and male parentage, suicide attempts, dropping out of school, child abuse or neglect, and domestic violence."*³

In January 1996, the Washington State Institute for Public Policy published a report describing long-term trends in six of the seven at-risk behaviors of youth listed above.⁴ This research brief discusses the seventh trend, **child abuse or neglect**, and answers the following questions:

1. What is the rate of child abuse or neglect in Washington?
2. Has the rate increased, decreased, or stayed about the same in recent years?
3. How does Washington's reported rate of abuse or neglect compare to estimated national incidence levels?

This information, along with the Institute's earlier report, helps establish statewide baseline data for evaluating whether the goals in the 1994 Violence Reduction Act are being achieved.

Washington's Child Protective Services

The Department of Social and Health Services administers Washington's Child Protective Services (CPS). CPS provides services which include "24-hour intake, assessment, emergency intervention, and emergency medical services for accepted referrals. If children are found to be at risk of abuse, services could include direct treatment, coordination and development of community services, legal intervention, and case monitoring."⁵

Washington's CPS began in 1965 with a staff of 17 social workers and service was opened for an estimated 4,228 children. Since that time, the Washington legislature has made a

number of modifications to the state's child protective laws. A significant change occurred in 1971 when the legislature adopted mandatory reporting. This law requires those working in a variety of professions—for example, medical practitioners, teachers, and licensed child care providers—to report suspicions of child abuse or neglect to CPS.⁶ All 50 states have mandatory reporting laws. By 1995, CPS staff received a total of 74,638 referrals. After screening these referrals for sufficient information, about 56 percent were **accepted** by CPS and a risk assessment was performed. These CPS-accepted referrals involved 45,206 separate victims of reported child abuse or neglect in 1995.

Historical Child Abuse or Neglect Data in Washington

How has the rate of CPS-accepted child abuse or neglect changed in Washington over time? This seemingly straightforward question cannot be quickly answered because of changes in the way CPS caseloads have been counted by DSHS. Currently, information on referrals to CPS is maintained in DSHS's Case and Management Information System (CAMIS). This relatively new data system began to produce improved estimates of reported and accepted child abuse or neglect in the early 1990s. Prior to the development of CAMIS, the Department used a different system (SSPS) to track the number of referrals screened and accepted for service by CPS. These two data systems use—at least to a degree—different definitions of CPS caseloads. Without making adjustments, it is not possible to compare caseload levels over time.

Table 1
Reported & Estimated Child Abuse and Neglect Data for Washington State

Calendar Year	SSPS-Based CPS Data		CAMIS-Based CPS Data (1991 to 1995)				Rate Calculation	
	"Number for Whom Service Was Opened"	Estimated ^(a) Unduplicated Openings	Total Referrals Received	Accepted Referrals	Accepted Victims, Duplicated Count	Accepted Victims, Unduplicated Count	Under 18-year-old population in Washington	Estimated ^(c) Unduplicated Victim Rate (per 1,000 pop)
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
1965	5,074	4,228					1,095,125	3.9
1966	5,397	4,497					1,108,483	4.1
1967	5,719	4,766					1,121,841	4.2
1968	6,694	5,578					1,135,199	4.9
1969	9,022	7,518					1,148,557	6.5
1970	11,883	9,903					1,161,915	8.5
1971	13,984	11,653					1,151,272	10.1
1972	16,584	13,820					1,130,122	12.2
1973	19,879	16,566					1,107,964	15.0
1974	20,160	16,800					1,101,866	15.2
1975	22,120	18,433					1,093,950	16.9
1976	21,119	17,599					1,087,454	16.2
1977	23,817	19,848					1,087,141	18.3
1978	27,062	22,552					1,097,624	20.5
1979	31,932	26,610					1,116,028	23.8
1980	36,654	30,545	CAMIS Data Not Available Until 1991				1,139,360	26.8
1981	40,504	33,753					1,151,139	29.3
1982	41,565	34,638					1,149,400	30.1
1983	40,398	33,665					1,146,704	29.4
1984	42,076	35,063					1,152,315	30.4
1985	40,100	33,417					1,164,801	28.7
1986	42,498	35,415					1,173,262	30.2
1987	33,020	27,517					1,183,820	23.2
1988	41,804	34,837					1,200,545	29.0
1989	56,982	47,485					1,224,337	38.8
1990							1,267,608	(d)
1991			64,648	40,225	n/a	44,386 (b)	1,315,346	33.7
1992			68,476	41,254	n/a	45,521 (b)	1,358,846	33.5
1993			68,400	40,299	n/a	45,022	1,403,340	32.1
1994			71,257	40,372	54,039	44,727	1,434,431	31.2
1995			74,638	41,633	56,086	45,206	1,463,358	30.9

(a) Column (2) calculated by dividing column (1) by 1.2 (i.e., an estimated 20% rate of duplication in the SSPS data, based on CAMIS current duplication rates).

(b) Values for 1991 and 1992 estimated by multiplying column (4) data for 1991 and 1992 by the average ratio of column (6) to column (4) for 1993 to 1995.

(c) Column (8) calculated by dividing column (2) or column (6) by column (7).

(d) Because the transition between SSPS and CAMIS took place in 1990, there are no consistent caseload data available for that year.

Sources: Department of Social and Health Services, EMIS; personal communications with DSHS staff; and the Office of Financial Management.

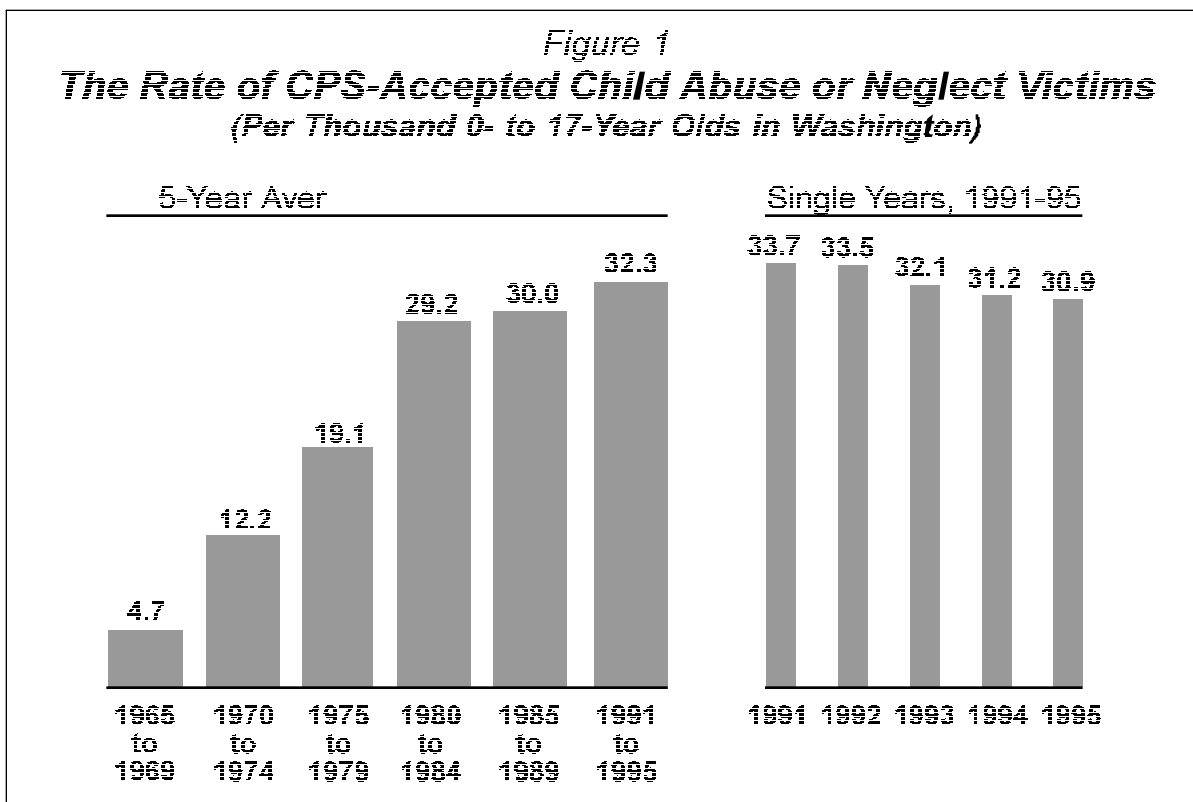
To provide a long-term analysis of CPS-accepted child abuse or neglect rates, the Institute adjusted the historical caseload information to make the earlier data comparable to the current CAMIS-based definition of *accepted, unduplicated counts of child abuse or neglect victims*. Table 1 provides a complete history of CPS caseload numbers, along with the adjustments made by the Institute to make the data more consistent over time.⁷

Trends in CPS-Accepted Child Abuse or Neglect in Washington

In 1995, according to DSHS, 45,206 children were referred, screened, and accepted into CPS as victims of child abuse or neglect. When divided by the total number of youth in Washington, ***the rate of CPS-accepted child abuse or neglect in 1995 was 30.9 victims per thousand youth***. Figure 1 plots the annual child abuse or neglect rates for 1991 to 1995, along with average rates for each 5-year period from 1965 to 1995.

CPS in Washington grew rapidly from 1965 through the 1970s. Some of the growth was due to more widespread reporting, and some may have been due to an increase in the actual incidence of child abuse or neglect.⁸ The rate of CPS-accepted child abuse or neglect then grew more slowly in the 1980s. The average annual rate since 1980 is 30.8 child abuse or neglect victims per thousand youth, almost exactly equal to the rate for 1995.

FINDING: The rate of CPS-accepted child abuse or neglect in Washington has, essentially, been steady for the last 15 years at about 31 victims per thousand youth.



Washington's Total CPS Referral Rate Compared to National Estimates of Child Abuse or Neglect

In the literature on child abuse and neglect, a distinction is made between the number of cases reported to CPS and the estimated incidence of the problem in the general population. Despite Washington's mandatory reporting law, all incidents of abuse may not be reported to CPS.

Studies have been undertaken at the national level to estimate the incidence of child abuse or neglect—including the just-released 1993 National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect. That comprehensive analysis extends the data from official state reports to include information from community professionals who are likely to come into contact with maltreated children. The report concludes that **in 1993 the national rate of child abuse or neglect was 43.2 incidents per thousand children under the age of 18.**⁹

How does this estimated national incidence level compare to Washington's CPS-reported rates of child abuse or neglect victims?

In 1995, as discussed earlier, CPS received a total of 74,638 referrals. The Institute estimates that these total referrals involved 65,322 children.¹⁰ When divided by the population under the age of 18, the rate of **CPS-reported** abuse or neglect was 44.6 per thousand youth in Washington in 1995. This rate is nearly the same as the estimated national incidence rate.¹¹

FINDING: Washington's current CPS-reported rate of child abuse or neglect is very close to the estimated national incidence rate.

For further information, contact Steve Aos or Roxanne Lieb at (360) 866-6000, ext. 6380.

ENDNOTES

¹ RCW 70.190.050.

² RCW 70.190.130 (h).

³ RCW 70.190.130 (h).

⁴ Washington State Institute for Public Policy, *Trends in At-Risk Behaviors of Youth in Washington*, January 1996.

⁵ See, for example, Department of Social and Health Services Home Page, www.wa.gov/dshs/.

⁶ RCW 26.44.030.

⁷ Some users of CPS data erroneously combine columns (1) and (3) on Table 1 when making statements about the growth in CPS caseloads; this overstates CPS caseload growth considerably. The numbers in column (1) are from the earlier SSPS data system and measure the "number for whom service was opened" after screening by CPS staff. The numbers in column (3), from the CAMIS system, measure the referrals (not necessarily the children) before screening by CPS staff. For historical comparisons, either column (1) should be compared to column (5) or, as the Institute did, column (2) should be compared to column (6).

⁸ See, Child Welfare League of America (1996), *Child Abuse and Neglect: A Look at the States*, Washington, DC: (1996), p 5.

⁹ *Press Release*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, April 1, 1996. The study estimates 2.9 million abuse or neglect victims in the nation in 1993. When divided by the nation's 1993 0- to 17-year-old youth population of 67,110,000, the rate is 43.2 per thousand.

¹⁰ The number of children is different from the number of referrals for two off-setting reasons: there is, on average, more than one child per referral, but there is also some rate of duplication in the total number of referrals received by CPS. From the numbers shown on Table 1, the Institute estimated these factors by multiplying the total number of referrals in 1995 by the ratio of the unduplicated victims per accepted referral and then dividing by the ratio of duplicated-to-unduplicated victims. That is, $(74,638 * (45,206 / 41,633)) / (56,086 / 45,206) = 65,322$ total children referred. Dividing this number by the state's youth population produces the total reporting rate per thousand. That is, $65,322 / 1,463.358 = 44.6$.

¹¹ As noted on page 2, in 1995, 56 percent of these total reported cases were accepted by CPS staff after screening for sufficient information.