

Child Abuse in the United States

In 2011, 41 percent of children were physically abused during the past year, and 55 percent had been physically abused during their lifetime.¹⁾ According to Child Protective Services, 681,000 children were abused in 2011.²⁾ The underlying dynamic of child abuse—the [breakdown of marriage](#) and the commitment to love—is spreading like a cancer from [poor](#) to working class communities. As social scientists, community leaders, and legislators consider ways to stop the spread of this cancer, they must focus their attention on the most upsetting byproduct of the disintegration of family and community: the abuse, maiming, and even death of America's infants and young children, about 1,500 of whom—4 per day—die each year.³⁾

1. The Alarming Rate of Child Abuse

The best available estimates of child abuse in the United States are found in studies conducted by the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). These National Incidence Studies of Child Abuse and Neglect, conducted in 1980 (NIS-1), 1986 (NIS-2), 1993 (NIS-3), and 2006 (NIS-4)⁴⁾ focused on reported and recognized cases of abuse (although they did not measure the actual incidence of abuse). According to NIS-4, child abuse and neglect increased by 83 percent between 1986 and 2006 (an average of over 4 percent per year). Some of the biggest increases in recent times were reported in physical neglect (100 percent, or almost 5 percent per year) and emotional neglect (397 percent, or almost 20 percent per year). The most prominent types of maltreatment are general neglect, physical abuse, and caretaker absence.⁵⁾

Obtaining trustworthy estimates of the degree of abuse and neglect in the United States—situations that perpetrators try to keep hidden for as long as possible—is difficult. Scholars utilize various methods to generate estimates of abuse, and their estimates are not always similar. Consequently, serious disagreements about the true level of abuse exist.⁶⁾ The chart below,⁷⁾ derived from data obtained from the 2010 NIS-4 survey report, illustrates state of physical, sexual, and emotional [abuse in the United States](#).

| Harm Standard/ Maltreatment Category | Total No. of Children | Rate per 1,000 Children |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| ALL MALTREATMENT | 1,256,6000 | 17.1 |
| ALL ABUSE | 553,300 | 7.5 |
| <i>Physical Abuse</i> | 323,000 | 4.4 |
| <i>Sexual Abuse</i> | 135,300 | 1.8 |
| <i>Emotional Abuse</i> | 148,500 | 2.0 |
| ALL NEGLECT | 771,700 | 10.5 |
| <i>Physical Neglect</i> | 295,300 | 4.0 |
| <i>Emotional Neglect</i> | 193,400 | 2.6 |
| <i>Educational Neglect</i> | 360,500 | 4.9 |

2. Link Between Family Structure and Child Abuse

Studies confirm that a child is [safest](#) when his or her biological parents are married and least safe when the child's mother is cohabiting with a man other than her husband. Specifically, 15.8 children

out of 1,000 living in homes with both biological parents had an incidence of abuse, while 136.1 per 1,000 children living with one biological parent and their unmarried partner experiences abuse—almost a ninefold difference. This gives important insights into the profound impact that marriage can have in preventing child abuse. Although other facts, such as income, have also been shown to correlate with child abuse, [family structure](#) is most significant.⁸⁾

3. Effects of Abuse on Children

Society views child abuse as one of the most abhorrent of behaviors. Unfortunately, however, it often remains hidden until it is too late for society to save the child's life or repair the [damage](#). Child abuse is also difficult to define. As measured by the National Incidence Studies,⁹⁾ the four major categories of child maltreatment are physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect. Neglect consists of physical neglect, emotional neglect, and educational neglect.

The effects of abuse are more readily observable: broken bones and bruises, scars from cigarette burns, swollen faces, and drastic changes in behavior. School teachers and doctors are often in a position to see these signs of abuse; but few see the signs of neglect in the passive child who is rarely talked to at home, or who may be locked up and left unfed, unclothed, and unwashed for long periods, or who must fend for himself. Changes in the neglected child's body and behavior are slower and more easily mistaken for ill health or shy personality.

Research on the effects of neglect indicates that it has even deeper and longer lasting consequences than physical abuse. Richard Emery, Professor of Psychology at the University of Virginia, has noted that neglected children often are more seriously disturbed than abused children.¹⁰⁾ The neglected child is treated more as if he were not there, or as if his parents wished he were not there, and this insidious and fundamental rejection can inflict deep psychological wounds. By contrast, physically abused children frequently are cared for in other ways by their abusers. They are given food, clothing, playthings, and even enjoy good times with others in the family.

¹⁾ Child Trends, "Children's Exposure to Violence," (2013). Available at <http://www.childtrends.org/?indicators=childrens-exposure-to-violence>.

²⁾ Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau, "Child Maltreatment 2011," U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, available at <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/research-data-technology/statistics-research/child-maltreatment>.

³⁾ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, *Child Maltreatment 2013*, Children's Bureau.

⁴⁾ The results of the 2005-2006 *National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-4)* were released in January 2010.

⁵⁾ Deborah R. Baskin and Ira Sommers, "Child Maltreatment, Placement Strategies, and Delinquency," *American Journal of Criminal Justice* 36, no. 29 (2011).

⁶⁾ For an excellent review of the data available, see Richard Gelles's chapter, "Family Violence," in Michael Tonry, ed., *Criminal Justice Handbook* (National Academy Press, forthcoming).

⁷⁾ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, *Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-4): Report to Congress*, A.J. Sedlak, J. Mettenburg, M. Basena, I. Petta, K. McPherson, A. Greene, and S. Li. (Washington, D.C.: January 2010). Available at http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/nis4_report_congress_full_pdf_jan2010.pdf. Accessed August 24, 2015.

⁸⁾ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, *Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-4): Report to Congress* A.J. Sedlak, J.

Mettenburg, M. Basena, I. Petta, K. McPherson, A. Greene, and S. Li., (Washington, D.C., January 2010). Available at

http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/nis4_report_congress_full_pdf_jan2010.pdf. Accessed August 24, 2015.

⁹⁾ A.J. Sedlak, Ph.D., and D.D. Broadhurst, M.L.A., *The Third National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-3): Final Report, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect* (Washington, D.C., September 1996)

¹⁰⁾ Richard Emery, "Abused and Neglected Children," *The American Psychologist* 44, no. 2 (1989): 321-328.

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