



What Happens When a Child is Reported to Child Protective Services?

A Brief Review of Outcomes of Child Maltreatment Reporting

Theodore P. Cross, Betsy Goulet, Jesse J. Helton, Emily Lux, Tamara Fuller, and Michael T. Braun



All 50 states have systems for reporting suspected abuse and neglect to child protective services (CPS), and reports are made on thousands of children every year. Outcomes of reporting vary widely, ranging from screening out with no further action at one end to out-of-home placement at the other. Someone making a report to CPS might naturally wonder: What are the chances the child will be visited by child protective services workers, offered services, or even removed from his or her home? Surprisingly, we found no prior published work that examines the proportion of cases for each possible outcome following reporting of child abuse and neglect. This brief, adapted from the authors' chapter in a book on child maltreatment reporting (Cross, Goulet, Helton, Lux, & Fuller, 2014), helps to fill this gap using published results and new data analysis from two national data sets on children involved in reports to CPS.

The two datasets used to conduct the analysis were the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) and the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW). NCANDS is compiled from client data submitted to the federal government by state child welfare agencies in every state (see U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). NSCAW is a study of a sample of children involved in child welfare investigations, scientifically sampled from 36 states to be representative of all such children in the United States (Dolan, Smith, Casanueva, & Ringeisen, 2011). We relied on results already published from NCANDS (see U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012) and conducted our own analysis of NSCAW data.

Possible Outcomes of Reporting

What happens after a call is made to a CPS hotline? There are five key decisions that CPS workers make. First is screening, in which a caseworker taking the initial report judges whether any CPS response is warranted. If the decision is

made that a CPS response is needed, the case is screened in, and CPS will take further action. Cases that are screened out receive no further CPS response. Nationally, 60.8% of referrals to child protective services were screened in (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012); individual state rates vary widely from 24.4% (Vermont) to 98.6% (Alabama). Counties within states also show wide variation.

Once cases are screened in, the second decision in many states is whether to conduct a child protection investigation of the alleged maltreatment or assign families to an alternative response pathway. A child protection investigation involves collecting information to make a formal determination of whether maltreatment actually occurred, though caseworkers conducting an investigation also assess current child safety and risk, and may arrange for services for the family during the investigation. In the alternative response option, available in a number of states for families at lower risk, caseworkers aim to assess and respond to families' needs with support and services without conducting an investigation and without making a decision about the truth of the allegation of child maltreatment.

Screened-in reports that receive an investigation involve a third decision: whether to substantiate the allegation of maltreatment. Substantiation is a determination of the truth about the suspicion of maltreatment based on what is found in the investigation; this determination can inform further child protective or court actions. The average substantiation rate nationally for cases that were investigated was 18.5% (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012), though states vary widely in their substantiation rates, from 5.83% (Kansas) to 55.96% (Georgia).

A fourth key decision comes after the investigation or assessment: whether to provide a family ongoing child protective services to deal with the problems that contributed to the maltreatment. Depending on the state, these services could

be provided by public CPS workers or private child welfare or human service agencies. If post-investigation services are provided, a public or private agency caseworker visits the family periodically to provide support and monitoring, and the agency may also pay for a range of services such as homemaking, respite care, and mental health treatment. Families may decline services in many cases, but child protective agencies may also seek court orders requiring families to participate. States range considerably in the percentage of families receiving post-investigation services, from 21.5% (District of Columbia) to 100% (three states) (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012).

The final key decision is child placement, in which CPS removes children from their homes and places them in substitute care to protect their safety. State rates of child removal vary from 2% (Delaware and New Hampshire) to 14% (California); one state (Hawaii) was an outlier at 28% (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012).

Estimating the Likelihood of Outcomes of Reporting

In this section, we use results from NCANDS and NSCAW to develop nationwide estimates of the frequency of different outcomes resulting from the five decisions described above. One caveat is that our analysis of national data may not be representative of a given community, since rates for the five

key decisions can vary greatly by state and county. The five key decisions result in four different possible outcomes related to investigation, and four different outcomes related to service delivery. Table 1 presents estimates of the percentages of cases with each investigation outcome, and Table 2 estimates of the percentages of cases with each service outcome.

Nationally, 39% of the calls that are made to CPS are screened out, meaning that no further action is taken by CPS. Cases that are screened out are not investigated, do not receive an alternative response, and, with some rare exceptions, do not receive any child protective services. Another 42% of cases are investigated but unsubstantiated; that is, though the report was specific and concerning enough to warrant investigation, there was not sufficient harm and evidence of maltreatment to conclude that abuse or neglect had taken place. Smaller percentages of cases lead to substantiation of maltreatment or are assessed through an alternative response.

Most cases do not receive ongoing child protective services, for several reasons: They are screened out, services are not offered after an investigation or assessment, or families decline offered services. About 14% of families reported receive in-home services from CPS. In 4% of cases, the child is removed from the home and placed elsewhere.

Table 1. Frequency of Different CPS Investigation Outcomes Following Reporting

INVESTIGATION OUTCOME	%
Screened out	39%
Investigated-unsubstantiated	42%
Investigated-substantiated	11%
Differential response-assessment track	8%

Table 2. Frequency of Different CPS Service Outcomes Following Reporting

SERVICE OUTCOME	%
Screened out	39%
No services	43%
In-home services	14%
Out-of-home placement	4%

Discussion

What can a person who makes a child maltreatment report expect to happen to the child? Most cases receive a modest response. Over half the reports do not result in an investigation, either because they are screened out initially or because they are diverted to an alternative response track. Substantiation of child maltreatment occurs in about one-quarter of reports that are investigated. Further, over half of reports to CPS do not result in families receiving services, even in cases that are investigated and substantiated. Often, participation is voluntary, and some families decline services. The modest response is not a reflection of modest *need* among families involved with CPS, as voluminous data point to substantial need in the entire child welfare population; this need persists whether allegations are substantiated or unsubstantiated, and whether children are placed outside the home or remain at home (for examples, see Casanueva, Ringeisen, Wilson, Smith, & Dolan, 2011; Ringeisen, Casanueva, Smith, & Dolan, 2011; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005, 2007).

The modest level of response is consistent with the finding in a number of studies that professionals often fail to report child abuse and neglect because they feel that child protective services does not do enough to respond (see, e.g., Flaherty & Sege, 2005; Jones et al., 2008; Nayda, 2002; Scott, 2013; Vulliamy & Sullivan, 2000). On the other hand, these results could help reduce fears that reporting child maltreatment will lead to children being removed from their homes (see, e.g., Nayda, 2002) or to professionals being required to appear in court (Badger, 1989; Flaherty & Sege, 2005; Vulliamy & Sullivan, 2000).

An understanding of the profile of outcomes presented here is important contextual information in any effort to improve child abuse reporting. It would be useful to do similar outcome analyses for reporting different types of cases (e.g., cases with different types of abuse or different age groups) and for different types of reporters (e.g., health care professionals, school personnel and police), to see what patterns of outcomes are likely in different situations.

The pattern of outcomes here is likely to reflect the limited resources available for CPS agencies across the country. For example, studies of practice (see Depanfilis & Girvin, 2005, and English, Marshall, Coghlan, Brummel, & Orme, 2002, for reviews) and a survey of CPS administrators (Walter R. McDonald and Associates, 2003) suggest that availability of resources affects substantiation rate. Results on outcomes of reporting child maltreatment may help inform efforts to obtain resources for CPS agencies so that they are better able to meet the needs of children and families.

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