

Understanding Risk of Harm Maltreatment in Illinois

Children and Family Research Center

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The Illinois child welfare system currently uses approximately 60 maltreatment allegations to define the different types of moderate to severe harm or the risk of moderate to severe harm of a child.¹ One or more allegations are assigned to screened-in maltreatment reports by child welfare workers when a call comes into the child abuse and neglect hotline. Additional allegations can be added as the investigator collects more information throughout the investigation. Researchers who work with Illinois child welfare data usually combine similar allegations into a smaller number of maltreatment types so that the characteristics of the maltreatment types and their relationships with other child and family characteristics can be examined more easily. Researchers at the Children and Family Research Center (CFRC) combine the allegations into eight mutually exclusive maltreatment types: physical abuse, sexual abuse/human trafficking, neglect, environmental neglect, lack of supervision/lock out, emotional abuse, substance exposure, and risk of harm (see Appendix for a list of the allegations included in each type). A recent analysis of state definitions of child neglect found that although almost all states define certain types of neglect—such as failure to provide necessities (food, shelter, clothing), failure to supervise, and abandonment—far fewer states define maltreatment related to exposure to “harmful environments” (Casey Family Programs, 2023). Since Illinois is one of the few states that defines a type of maltreatment based on the risk from harmful environment, the purpose of this research brief is to gain a better understanding of risk of harm maltreatment and examine its relationship to child safety.²

In Illinois, risk of harm is comprised of two separate allegations. The first, substantial risk of physical injury/environment injurious to health and welfare (allegation 10), is defined as a child who is in *real and significant danger of physical injury* by one or more of their caregivers or someone else over the age of 16 who resides in the home. This allegation is used when the “type or extent of harm is undefined, but the total circumstances lead a reasonable person to believe that the child is in substantial risk of physical injury” (Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, 2022, p. 53).

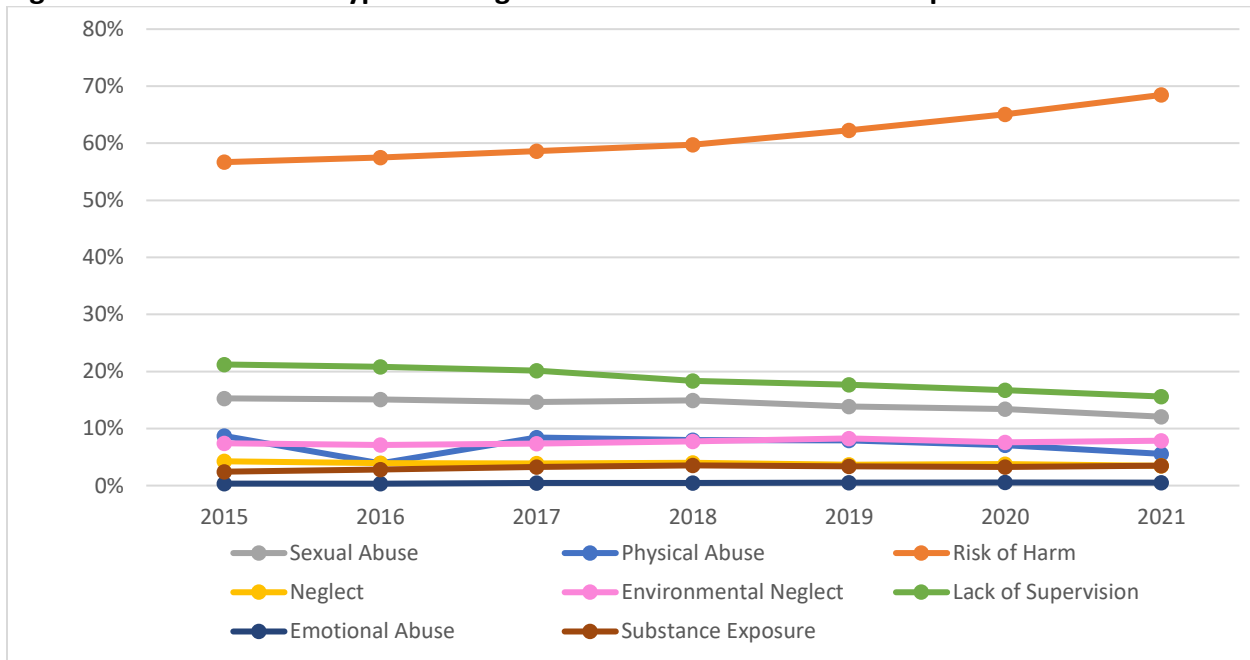
¹ <https://dcfs.illinois.gov/content/dam/soi/en/web/dcfs/documents/about-us/policy-rules-and-forms/documents/procedures/procedures-300-appendix-b.pdf>

² The data used for this brief came from the Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS), using a download that included data through December 31, 2022. The sample for the analyses included children with substantiated reports with report dates during FY2015 – FY2021. To be included in the analyses, the reports had to be completed by June 30, 2021.

The other allegation included in risk of harm is substantial risk of physical injury/environment injurious to health and welfare *by neglect* (allegation 60), defined as “conditions that create a real, significant, and imminent likelihood of harm to a child’s health, physical wellbeing, or welfare and that the likelihood of harm is the result of the parent/caregiver’s *blatant disregard* of his/her responsibility to exercise reasonable precautionary measures to prevent or mitigate the imminent risk of moderate to severe harm” (Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, 2022, p. 61). Blatant disregard is considered when the caregiver knowingly puts their child at risk. Some examples of this type of neglect include exposing a child to an environment that puts the child in danger such as selling or manufacturing illegal drugs, witnessing domestic violence, allowing an abusive parent access to the child despite a court order, and risk to child’s health, physical wellbeing, or welfare due to caregiver substance use and/or mental health (Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, 2022).

Figure 1 shows the frequencies of each substantiated maltreatment type in investigations that occurred in FY2015–FY2021. Risk of harm was the most frequently occurring type of substantiated maltreatment in Illinois each year, and the percentage of children in investigations with substantiated risk of harm increased from 57% in FY2015 to 68% in FY2021. The frequencies of all other maltreatment types remained level or decreased during this time.

Figure 1. Maltreatment Types Among Children with Substantiated Reports in Illinois



Note. If the report had more than one substantiated allegation included in the same maltreatment type, it was counted once in that group. However, a report can include multiple substantiated maltreatment types, so the percentages of the eight maltreatment types will not add to 100 percent.

Among the children with substantiated allegations of risk of harm, a large majority had substantiated allegations of risk of harm by neglect (allegation 60) as opposed to risk of harm by abuse (allegation 10) (see Table 1).

Table 1. Substantiated Risk of Harm by Abuse (Allegation 10) and Neglect (Allegation 60)

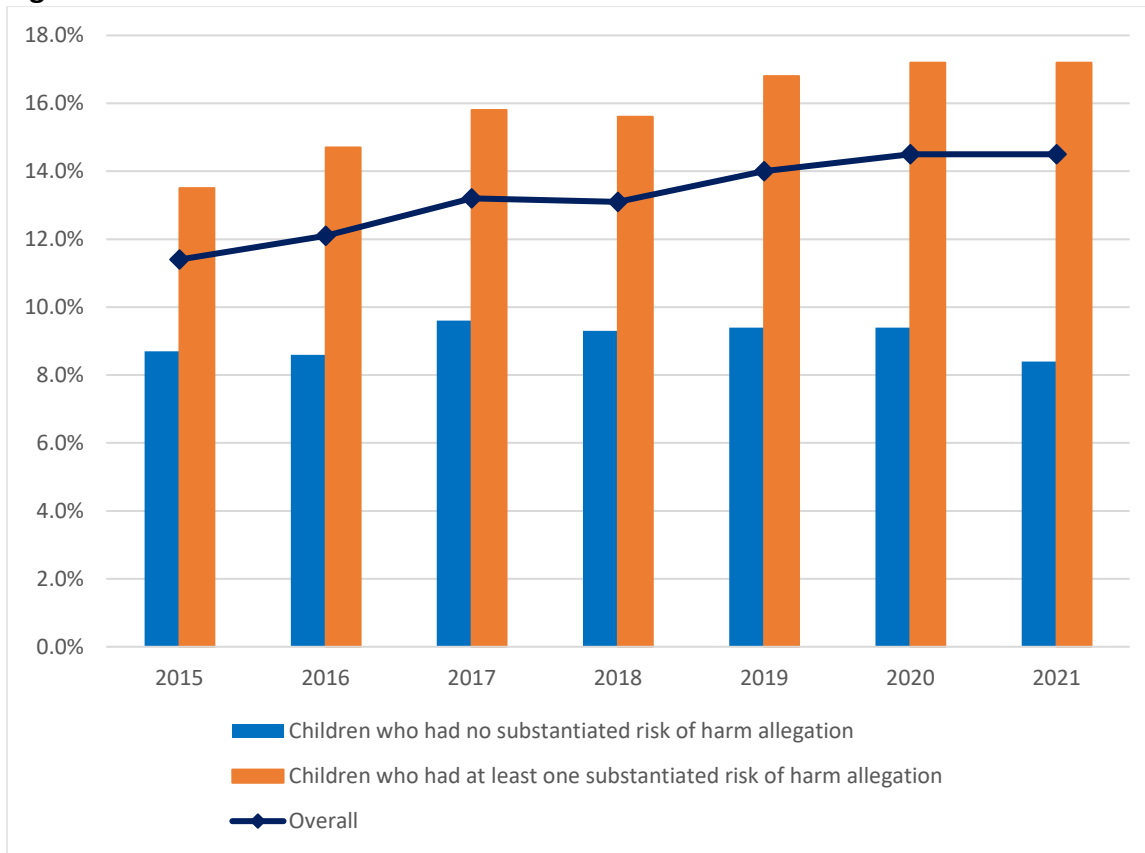
FY	Children with Substantiated Risk of Harm Report	Children with Substantiated Allegation 10 ^a	Children with Substantiated Allegation 60	Children with Substantiated Allegation 10 (%) ^b	Children with Substantiated Allegation 60 (%) ^b
2015	17,421	3,996	14,332	22.9%	82.3%
2016	17,078	4,259	13,867	24.9%	81.2%
2017	16,934	3,419	14,520	20.2%	85.7%
2018	19,118	3,518	16,748	18.4%	87.6%
2019	20,772	3,548	18,449	17.1%	88.8%
2020	23,143	3,829	20,723	16.5%	89.5%
2021	25,778	3,926	23,365	15.2%	90.6%

Note. Percentages do not add to 100% because a child can have more than one substantiated allegation.

Given the high prevalence of substantiated maltreatment reports involving risk of harm in Illinois, we were interested in exploring the relationship between substantiated risk of harm and child safety. Maltreatment recurrence is an important indicator of child safety, which is defined in this brief as a substantiated maltreatment report within 12 months of a prior substantiated report involving the same child or family. For this analysis, children with substantiated reports during FY2015–FY2021 were divided into two groups: those who had at least one substantiated risk of harm allegation and those with no substantiated risk of harm allegations. The 12-month maltreatment recurrence rates were computed for children in each of the two groups.

Figure 2 displays the 12-month maltreatment recurrence rate for all children with a substantiated maltreatment report over the past seven years. The overall recurrence rate has steadily increased over time to a high of 14.5% in FY2020 and FY2021. Maltreatment recurrence rates were higher among children with substantiated risk of harm allegations compared to those without substantiated risk of harm allegations. For example, 17.2% of children with substantiated risk of harm maltreatment in FY2021 experienced a second substantiated maltreatment report within 12 months, compared to 8.4% of children who had substantiated maltreatment that did not include risk of harm. This suggests that there is an important, yet currently not understood, association between substantiated risk of harm and the likelihood that a child will experience additional substantiated maltreatment in the future.

Figure 2. Substantiated Risk of Harm and 12-Month Maltreatment Recurrence Rates



Conclusions

In Illinois, risk of harm is the most frequently substantiated maltreatment type and its occurrence has been increasing over the past several years. In FY2021, almost 70% of the children with substantiated maltreatment reports had at least one substantiated allegation of risk of harm. Among children with substantiated risk of harm, over 80% had substantiated allegations of substantial risk of physical injury/environment injurious to health and welfare by neglect. Although children with substantiated risk of harm are at increased risk of maltreatment recurrence compared to children without this type of maltreatment, little is known about the specific situations that are putting children at increased risk. Additional research is needed to understand both the increased use of this allegation as well as the increased risk of maltreatment recurrence.

References

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Related Publications

Children and Family Research Center. (2023). *Conditions of children in or at risk of foster care in Illinois: FY2023 monitoring report of the B.H. Consent Decree*. https://cfrc.illinois.edu/pubs/rp_20231016_FY2023MonitoringReportOfTheBHConsentDecree.pdf

Appendix – Maltreatment Type Definitions

Maltreatment Type	Allegation Number	Allegation Code and Description
Risk of Harm	8	#10 Substantial Risk of Physical Injury/Environment Injurious to Health and Welfare
	31	#60 Substantial Risk of Physical Injury/Environment Injurious to Health and Welfare by Neglect
Neglect	24	#51 Death by Neglect
	25	#52 Head Injuries by Neglect
	26	#54 Internal Injuries by Neglect
	27	#55 Burns by Neglect
	28	#56 Poison - Noxious Substances by Neglect
	29	#57 Wounds by Neglect
	30	#59 Bone Fractures by Neglect
	32	#61 Cuts Bruises Welts Abrasions and Oral Injuries by Neglect
	33	#62 Human Bites by Neglect
	34	#63 Sprains/Dislocations by Neglect
	42	#79 Medical Neglect
	43	#81 Failure to Thrive
	45	#83 Malnutrition
	47	#85 Medical Neglect of Disabled Infants
96	#86 Neglect by Agency	
Environmental Neglect	39	#76 Inadequate Food
	40	#77 Inadequate Shelter
	41	#78 Inadequate Clothing
	44	#82 Environmental Neglect
Lack of supervision/ Lock out	37	#74 Inadequate Supervision
	38	#75 Abandonment/Desertion
	46	#84 Lock Out
	78	#74a Inadequate Supervision - Left Alone at Home, Outside or in the Community
	79	#74b Inadequate Supervision - Left Alone in Vehicle
	80	#74c Inadequate Supervision - Left in the Care of an Inadequate Caregiver
	81	#74d Inadequate Supervision - General Category
	93	#84a Lock Out – Community Location
	94	#84b Lock Out – Psychiatrically Hospitalized
	95	#84c Lock Out – Correctional Facility
Physical Abuse	1	#1 Death
	2	#2 Head Injuries

	3	#4 Internal Injuries
	4	#5 Burns
	5	#6 Poison Noxious Substances
	6	#7 Wounds
	7	#9 Bone Fractures
	10	#11 Cuts Bruises Welts Abrasions and Oral Injuries
	11	#12 Human Bites
	12	#13 Sprains/Dislocations
Sexual Abuse/ Human Trafficking	17	#18 Sexually Transmitted Diseases
	18	#19 Sexual Penetration
	19	#20 Sexual Exploitation
	20	#21 Sexual Molestation
	21	#22a Substantial Risk of Sexual Abuse - Sex offender has access
	22	#22b Substantial Risk of Sexual Abuse - Sibling of sex abuse victim
	23	#22c Substantial Risk of Sexual Abuse - Sexualized behavior of young child
	75	#22d Substantial Risk of Sexual Abuse - Child Pornography
	76	#40 Human Trafficking of Children
	77	#90 Human Trafficking of Children by Neglect
92	#22e Substantial Risk of Sexual Abuse - Suggestive Behavior	
Emotional Abuse	13	#14 Tying/Close Confinement
	15	#16 Torture
	16	#17 Mental Injury
	36	#67 Mental Injury by Neglect
Substance Exposure	14	#15 Substance Misuse
	35	#65 Substance Misuse by Neglect