

# **Child Maltreatment in Foster Care: A Study of Retrospective Reporting**

Gail Tittle, MSW

*Children and Family Research Center  
School of Social Work  
1207 West Oregon  
Urbana, Illinois 61801*

John Poertner, DSW

*Children and Family Research Center  
School of Social Work  
1207 West Oregon  
Urbana, Illinois 61801*

Philip Garnier, Ph.D.

*Children and Family Research Center  
School of Social Work  
1207 West Oregon  
Urbana, Illinois 61801*

This project was supported in part by the Children and Family Research Center, School of Social Work, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign which is funded in part by the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services.



# **CHILD MALTREATMENT IN FOSTER CARE: A STUDY OF RETROSPECTIVE REPORTING**

## **Executive Summary**

Children who are maltreated by their birth families are often removed from these families by the state to protect them from further harm. However, while under the care of the state, some foster children receive further harm. The Adoption and Safe Families Act requires that each state report the percentage of foster children who were maltreated by a foster parent or facility staff. While Illinois has done this using administrative data, there is anecdotal evidence that some of the maltreatment attributed to foster care may, in fact, be retrospective events that occurred before the child entered care.

This study attempts to identify the degree to which retrospective reports might be counted in a safety indicator of abuse and neglect of children in foster care. A stratified random sample of 305 cases was drawn from the total of 761 indicated reports that occurred during FY99 for children placed in relative care, non-related family foster care, and specialized foster care. Four cases were removed from the sample since the indicated reports had been expunged, leaving 301 cases.

The Child Abuse and Neglect Tracking System (CANTS) 1s were then obtained for these 301 child cases. The CANTS computer data files were also accessed for certain cases to clarify information in the CANTS 1, as was placement data from the administrative database for a selection of cases in which the timing of the incident was still unclear.

Overall 16% of indicated reports of abuse and neglect in foster care were retrospective reports that occurred prior to foster care placement. Of the 301 cases in this study, 21% of indicated reports in family foster homes, 9% of indicated reports in relative foster homes, and 23% of indicated reports in specialized foster homes were retrospective

cases, with another two reports actually causing the placement rather than occurring there.

Types of incidents that were reported during foster care placement, the perpetrators of these incidents, and categories of maltreatment were examined for each of the three placement types identified above. In retrospective cases, sexual abuse was overwhelmingly (68%) the most prevalent form of maltreatment. Birth parents were most frequently the perpetrators (48%) with unrelated parent substitute (19%) the next most frequent.

The results from this indicate that for those cases that were not retrospective, adult relatives, whether they were the relative caregiver or another relative of the foster child, were the most likely perpetrators (39%). For abuse or neglect in non-related foster family homes, perpetrators were most often the foster parents (56%). Substantial risk of harm was the most severe incident in 27% of these cases.

It is evident from this study that there is over-reporting of child abuse and neglect incidents for children in out-of-home care. Therefore, recurrence rates need to be adjusted based on these findings. However, one study is not sufficiently precise to determine the required adjustment. This study was designed to produce a confidence interval for the amount of error reported that ranges from 11% to 21%. Replication of this study is needed to more accurately ascertain this number or percentage.

## **Child Maltreatment in Foster Care: A Study of Retrospective Reporting**

Both the popular and professional literature indicating that the maltreatment of foster children does occur while they are placed under state protection in foster care. Together with the belief that foster children should be safe from harm while in care, federal legislation was enacted to attempt to hold the child welfare system accountable. The Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (P.L. 105-89) mandates that the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services develop a common set of child welfare outcome indicators to be the basis of annual reports to Congress. Among the indicators developed is a measure of abuse and neglect in out-of-home care. Child Welfare Outcome 2 asks, “Of all children who were in foster care during the reporting period, what percentage was the subject of substantiated or indicated maltreatment by a foster parent or facility staff?” While this indicator appears to be straightforward, there are many potential difficulties in producing these data and understanding the results. For example, state systems vary widely in their definitions of abuse or neglect, policy regarding reporting, and responses to reports. State data systems also vary widely in what is recorded and maintained. These differences result in varying capabilities to accurately report safety results. This paper examines the maltreatment of foster children while under the guardianship of a state child welfare system to provide insight into these occurrences and to illustrate difficulties that arise from state reporting systems.

### **Literature Review**

While there has recently been a resurgence of interest in the popular media about the safety of children removed from their families and placed under state custody, there

have been only a limited number of studies in the professional literature that give insight into these issues.

Previous studies have looked at maltreatment in foster care in various ways. Carbino (1992; 1991) focuses on the child welfare system's response to maltreatment reports involving foster families, emphasizing the need for responses specific to these families in contrast to the general population. She points out that foster homes are involved in only 1% of national reports of child maltreatment. Furthermore, she stresses that foster families are held to stricter standards for the treatment of children, are conspicuous and closely scrutinized in the community, are familiar with reporting procedures and are therefore more likely to report, and that community organizations, including the foster care agency, are concerned about legal liability regarding foster children.

Some studies have attempted to give greater insight into the dynamics of foster care that lead to maltreatment. A study by McFadden and Ryan (1991) discusses the nature and incidence of child maltreatment in foster care, factors within the family and the child welfare system that lead to maltreatment, characteristics of foster children at risk for maltreatment, and reasons for false allegations against foster families by giving an overview of the findings of previous studies. In this review, various dynamics, such as agency shortcomings in placing foster children in properly matched foster homes, lack of foster parent training or economic resources, and foster child characteristics, are shown to be factors which contribute to maltreatment. Daly and Dowd (1992) simply acknowledge that abuse in foster care does occur and offer methods to produce a harm-free environment for foster children.

As for studies that were conducted to assess safety of children in foster care, these vary in methodology, populations, and outcomes. Cavara and Ogren (1983) present a discussion of abuse that occurred in foster homes of a large urban agency in the Midwest from May 1980 through November 1981. During this time, 125 investigations were conducted among the total of 570 foster homes in the county. Victims of child

maltreatment were more likely to be male, aged 4–12. Significant factors in abusing foster parents appear to be single marital status, longer term foster parents, and not having children of their own.

Bolton, Laner, and Gai (1981) conducted a study in Arizona that looked at maltreatment incidence reports between January 1, 1976 and December 31, 1978 to learn rates and characteristics of reported maltreatment. In comparing foster homes to the general non-maltreating population of families with their natural children, they found a higher incidence of suspected child maltreatment in families with foster children. Approximately 7% of the total foster child population in this study was at risk for living with families reported for suspected child maltreatment.

A study involving 290 incidents of child maltreatment within Colorado's public social services system from January 1983 through December 1987 examined the characteristics of reports and their seriousness (Rosenthal et al., 1991). Overall, of the 102 incidences of maltreatment in foster family homes, 49% were for physical abuse, 29% were for sexual abuse, and 22% were for neglect. The researchers point out that there is no typical maltreatment incident.

Several reports were based on studies of foster families in Baltimore. In their study using case record narratives and reports of the five-year study period of January 1, 1984 through December 31, 1988, Zuravin, Benedict, and Somerfield (1993) found that of 296 foster homes, there were 62 families in which there was at least one confirmed report of maltreatment. Of these, 39% were for physical abuse, 48% for sexual abuse, and 29% for neglect. The perpetrator in sexual abuse incidents was the foster parent in 64% of cases. Regular foster homes were 2.4 times more likely to have confirmed maltreatment reports than either relative foster homes or specialized foster homes. In looking at CPS investigative records for 285 foster families in Baltimore in the same five-year period as the previous report, Benedict, Zuravin, Brandt, and Abbey (1994) found that 65% were for physical abuse, 10.7% for sexual abuse, and 17.4% for neglect. Foster parents were responsible for sexual abuse in 40% of those cases, with the remaining cases

being perpetrated by foster siblings and others. In examining these foster children more closely, Benedict, Zuravin, Somerfield, and Brandt (1996) found that in 78 cases of substantiated maltreatment reports the children had a multitude of health, developmental, and school problems that increased their risk for abuse. Of the sexual abuse cases in this sample, 20% were perpetrated by other foster children.

Spencer and Knudsen (1992), in their study using Indiana Department of Public Welfare data for fiscal years 1984 through 1990, found that child perpetrators were involved in 6% of foster home cases. Overall, physical abuse was found to be the most likely form of maltreatment in foster homes, with a rate of 9.31 indicated reports per one thousand children. Sexual abuse occurred in foster homes at a rate of 5.23 indicated reports per one thousand children in care, and neglect occurred at a rate of 2.38 indicated reports per one thousand children in care. Compared to the general population of full-time caregivers, sexual abuse was seen to be more likely to occur in foster homes, with sexual abuse in foster homes to be over twice as likely to be reported.

In a retrospective study of medical reports of alleged physical and/or sexual abuse assessed and reported by pediatricians in Leeds, England over the six-year period 1990–1995, Hobbs, Hobbs, and Wynne (1999) discovered foster children were 7 to 8 times more likely to be assessed for abuse than a child in the general population. Foster parents were the perpetrators of abuse in 41% of the cases, as were birth parents in 23% of cases, and other children in 20% of cases.

In their study of children in foster care in Illinois, Poertner, Bussey, and Fluke (1999) produced findings that the percent of indicated reports of abuse and neglect for children in out-of-home care range from a low of 1.7% to a high of 2.3% over the five-year period between July 1, 1992 and June 30, 1997, with an average rate of 2.0%. The largest category of abuse was found to be substantial risk of harm for family foster care (52% of cases), relative care (54.3%), and specialized care (52%). For relative care, lack of supervision and sexual abuse are most frequent at approximately 20%. Sexual abuse rates were found to be higher in family foster care (36.9% of cases) and specialized foster



care (45.2%). Neglect was less than 10% of cases in both family and specialized foster care. Poertner et al. reported that the perpetrator of the abuse was most likely to be the foster parent. However, birth parents were the perpetrators in 26.5% of relative care placements, 26.4% of family foster homes, and 19.8% of specialized foster care placements. Relatives were the next most likely perpetrator in relative care (24.2%), while other non-relatives were more likely in family foster care homes (24.5%) and specialized foster care homes (31.2%).

Garnier and Poertner (2000) discuss outcome reporting of child maltreatment for foster children in Illinois using the statewide administrative database maintained by the state child welfare agency. In looking at indicated reports of abuse or neglect of children in out-of-home care for fiscal years 1996-1999, percentages of children with indicated reports ranged from a high of 2.4 to a low of 1.5. To better measure child safety, it was believed that measures should be adjusted to account for the length of time a child is exposed to risk of abuse or neglect. Safety measures were recalculated and reported as rates per person(s) per year. Abuse/neglect rates for children in family foster care ranged from a high of 4.4 to a low of 2.7 per 100 children in care for one year. Rates of child maltreatment for relative foster care ranged from a high of 2.3 to a low of 1.6 per 100 children in care for one year. Specialized foster care abuse/neglect rates ranged from a high of 2.8 to a low of 1.8 per 100 children in care for one year.

While this study gives insight into the level of abuse in foster care, some limitations of the database and resulting data cloud the results. Due to the lack of a single identifier for each child across data systems used in the database, some children may be mismatched with placement history reports. Even if the child is correctly matched with a report, insufficient information is available in the database to determine the actual date of the abuse. In some instances, a child may be revealing past incidents of abuse that occurred prior to placement in foster care. In Garnier and Poertner's study, 25% of perpetrators were found to be birth parents. While some of this may be attributable to incidents that occurred at parental visits, others may be retrospective reporting.

## **Methodology**

This study attempts to identify the degree to which retrospective reports might be counted in a safety indicator of abuse or neglect of children in substitute care. This concern arose because the system under study includes a reporting date and not an abuse or neglect incidence date. Even if a reporting system does include an incidence date there is a strong likelihood that reporters would have great difficulty in recalling when the event took place. This study drew a stratified random sample of indicated reports of abuse or neglect for children in substitute care and examined the investigative reports to determine the incidents that occurred prior to the child's current placement, the perpetrator and the type of abuse or neglect.

### **Study Sample**

The sample for this study was obtained from the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (IDCFS) Integrated Database. This database represents a joining of the child protective services database that contains all reports of abuse and neglect investigations, and the child placement database containing data on all children in state custody (Garnier and Poertner, 2000). The population of interest was all indicated reports for children in the three most common types of out-of-home care during FY 99. There were 761 indicated reports of child abuse or neglect and more than 54,000 children in these three placement types during the fiscal year.

A stratified random sample of 305 cases of the indicated reports was drawn with the strata being the three placement types. The sample size was determined by estimating the number needed to be 95% certain that the sample mean would be within 5% of the true mean of the population. Four cases were removed from the sample since the indicated reports had been expunged, leaving 301 cases.

The state child protective services' reports were obtained for the resulting sample of 301 child cases. The child protective services' computer data files were also accessed

for some cases to clarify information in the original report. Placement data from the administrative database was also obtained for a few cases in which the timing of the incident was still unclear.

### **Findings**

Determining culpability in many cases of children abused or neglected in foster care is difficult. The actual circumstances of an incident of maltreatment are often ambiguous and confusing. In this state, a phone call is placed to the state central register otherwise known as the child abuse and neglect hotline. Information provided by the reported is entered into the computer system by staff of the central registry. If the call meets the criteria for a report, a local office is sent an initial investigation form and the intake worker begins an investigation. As the report is investigated a second form is completed. The computer system is then updated with data from the investigation.

Oftentimes, the initial form is not complete. For example, names may be missing or unknown. It may later be determined that other children reside in the home that were not identified in the initial report. In the present study, the names of twenty-nine children who were subjects of this study were not listed on the initial form. Only by using the computer database was it possible to determine they were, in fact, somehow involved in the report. In addition, twenty-four children did not have allegations linked to them. These allegations involved another child in the same home or were present at the time of the incident.

### ***Types of Incidents***

In this study, the majority of incidents attributed to the foster care placement did, in fact, occur while the child was officially placed in a family foster home, a relative foster home, or a specialized foster home. However, 47 of the 301 indicated reports or 16% were retrospective (Table 1). These incidents were circumstances where the hotline

**Table 1 Types of Incidents**

When and where the incident occurred	Placement Type			Total
	Family Foster Home	Relative Foster Home	Specialized Foster Home	
Current (family foster home)	74 (63%)	1 (0.7%)	0	75
Current (relative foster home)	0	125 (84%)	0	125
Current (specialized foster home)	0	0	20 (57%)	20
Retrospective	25 (21%)	14 (9%)	8 (23%)	47
Retrospective (family foster home)	0	1 (0.7%)	1 (3%)	2
Retrospective (relative foster home)	6 (5%)	0	3 (9%)	9
Visit	12 (10%)	5 (3%)	2 (6%)	19
Parent threat	0	2 (1%)	0	2
Caused placement	0	1 (0.7%)	1 (3%)	2
Total	117	149	35	301

was called by a foster parent, caseworker, or therapist to report an incident of child maltreatment that occurred prior to the child being placed in foster care. This supports a common observation of investigators and workers that as the child becomes comfortable with his/her foster family or caseworker or participates in counseling he/she may reveal incidents from the past that occurred while the child was living with a birth parent.

However, some of the other incidents may in fact be maltreated in situations beyond the control of the caregiver. In this study there were two instances where children were harmed while at school, one by other students and the other by a teacher. In two instances, a relative foster parent called the hotline to report that a birth parent had threatened unauthorized contact with the children under the foster parent's care. In two other cases, the report actually brought about the placement. In one of these, the mother was incarcerated when she gave birth, and the baby was immediately placed with a relative foster caregiver. In nineteen cases, children were abused at a visit with their birth parents, either unsupervised or supervised. In these cases it appeared that the visits were approved by the agency.

There are many ways to interpret this information and make judgements about culpability. However, one breakdown is evident: incidents that occurred while the child was in foster care placement and those that did not (retrospective incidents). For the purposes of this study, all incidents that occurred during a foster care placement are attributed to the foster care system. Only the 47 retrospective cases are considered not the responsibility of the foster care system and are not attributed to it (Table 2).

There is wide variation in the percentage of retrospective reports by type of placement. In non-related family foster homes, 22% of indicated reports were retrospective while prior incidents accounted for 23% of indicated reports in specialized foster homes. Only 9% of indicated reports in relative foster homes were retrospective.

**Table 2 Types of Incidents**

Responsibility	Placement Type			Total
	Family Foster Home	Relative Foster Home	Specialized Foster Home	
Foster Care	91 (78%)	134 (90.5%)	27 (77%)	252 (84%)
Retrospective	25 (22%)	14 (9.5%)	8 (23%)	47 (16%)
Total	116	148	35	299

### ***The Perpetrator***

For those cases that were not retrospective, adult relatives, whether they were the relative caregiver or another relative of the foster child, were the most likely perpetrators (39% of cases) (Table 3). The next most frequent perpetrator was a foster parent (27% of cases). Birth parents were the perpetrators of abuse and/or neglect in 13% of cases. Other children were noted as the perpetrator in 8% of cases.

For abuse or neglect in non-related foster family homes, perpetrators were most often the foster parents (56%). Birth parents were the perpetrators in 13% of reports, and other children were perpetrators in 10% of reports. In specialized foster care homes, 52% of perpetrators were foster parents, while 15% were adult relatives of the child, and 11% were other children. For children placed in relative foster care homes, 67% of the perpetrators were adult relatives, 13% were birth parents, and 7% were other children.

For retrospective cases birth parents were the perpetrators in 47% of incidents (Table 4). Unrelated parent substitutes accounted for 19% of incidents, and stepparents were the perpetrators in 11% of cases. For retrospective reports in non-related family foster care, 36% of the perpetrators were birth parents. The next most frequent perpetrators were unrelated parent substitutes (24%) and step parents (20%). For those children in specialized foster care 38% of perpetrators were birth parents followed by adult relative (25%). In relative foster care 71% of the perpetrators were birth parents.

### ***Categories of Maltreatment***

It is not unusual for a child abuse or neglect report to contain several types of allegations and for more than one of them to be substantiated. Therefore when the type of abuse or neglect for a particular indicated report is of interest, it is necessary to develop decision rules for selecting the one to identify with the report. This report uses the most severe type of abuse or neglect by using the Testa-Bilavar Severity Index

**Table 3 Perpetrator's Relationship to the Child – Foster Care Cases**

Perpetrator's Relationship to the Child	Placement Type			Total
	Family Foster Home	Relative Foster Home	Specialized Foster Home	
Foster Parent	51 (56%)	4 (3%)	14 (52%)	69 (27%)
Birth Parent	12 (13%)	18 (13%)	2 (7%)	32 (13%)
Step Parent	0	0	0	0
Adult Relative	4 (4%)	90 (67%)	4 (15%)	98 (39%)
Sibling	1 (1%)	4 (3%)	2 (7%)	7 (3%)
Unrelated Parent Substitute	3 (3%)	3 (2%)	1 (4%)	7 (3%)
Other Child	9 (10%)	9 (7%)	3 (11%)	21 (8%)
Other Person	5 (5.5%)	5 (4%)	1 (4%)	11 (4%)
Babysitter	6 (7%)	1 (.7%)	0	7 (3%)
Total	91	134	27	252



**Table 4 Perpetrator's Relationship to the Child – Retrospective Cases**

Perpetrator's Relationship to the Child	Placement Type			Total
	Family Foster Home	Relative Foster Home	Specialized Foster Home	
Foster Parent	0	0	0	0
Birth Parent	9 (36%)	10 (71%)	3 (37.5%)	22 (47%)
Step Parent	5 (20%)	0	0	5 (11%)
Adult Relative	1 (4%)	1 (7%)	2 (25%)	4 (8.5%)
Sibling	3 (12%)	0	1 (12.5%)	4 (8.5%)
Unrelated Parent Substitute	6 (24%)	2 (14%)	1 (12.5%)	9 (19%)
Other Child	0	0	1 (12.5%)	1 (2%)
Other Person	1 (4%)	1 (7%)	0	2 (4%)
Babysitter	0	0	0	0
Total	25	14	8	47

(reference). This index ranks categories of maltreatment into the following categories, listed in order of severity:

- ?? sexual abuse,
- ?? physical abuse
- ?? substance-exposed infants,
- ?? emotional abuse,
- ?? lack of supervision,
- ?? environmental neglect,
- ?? other neglect,
- ?? substantial risk of harm.

For those indicated reports that were not retrospective, substantial risk of harm was the most severe incident in 27% of cases (Table 5). This was followed by sexual abuse, which was the most severe allegation for 20% of cases, physical abuse for 19%, lack of supervision for 18%. One incident of death from neglect was indicated in this study.

Substantial risk of harm accounted for the highest percentage of reports in foster family homes (26%) and relative foster homes (30%). In specialized foster homes, sexual abuse was the most frequent type of abuse (41%). In non-related foster homes, the second most prevalent form of maltreatment was physical abuse (22%), followed by sexual abuse (20%), and lack of supervision (12%). For specialized foster homes, the second most frequent type of maltreatment was substantial risk of harm. Physical abuse and lack of supervision each comprise 15% of cases. Lack of supervision was the second most frequent allegation (22%) for relative foster homes, followed by physical abuse (17%), sexual abuse (16%).

**Table 5 Categories of Severity of Maltreatment – Foster Care Cases**

Allegation	Placement Type			Total
	Family Foster Home	Relative Foster Home	Specialized Foster Home	
Death (Neglect)	1 (1%)	0	0	–
Sexual Abuse	18 (20%)	21 (16%)	11 (41%)	50 (20%)
Physical Abuse	20 (22%)	23 (17%)	4 (15%)	47 (19%)
Substance-exposed infants	0	0	0	0
Emotional Abuse	0	0	0	0
Lack of Supervision	11 (12%)	30 (22%)	4 (15%)	45 (18%)
Environmental Neglect	0	5 (4%)	0	5 (2%)
Other Neglect	4 (4%)	8 (6%)	2 (7%)	14 (5.5%)
Substantial Risk of Harm	24 (26%)	40 (30%)	5 (18%)	69 (27%)
None	13 (14%)	7 (5%)	1 (4%)	21 (8%)
Total	91	134	27	252

In retrospective cases, sexual abuse was overwhelmingly (68%) the most prevalent form of maltreatment (Table 6). Substantial risk of harm was indicated in 15% of cases. The child who was the subject in this study was not the direct victim in 6% of retrospective cases.

For children in specialized foster care 88% of the retrospective reports were sexual abuse. For children in relative foster care sexual abuse accounted for 57% of retrospective reports. For children in family foster care, substantial risk of harm was the second most frequent type of abuse (16%) after sexual abuse (68%). This was also the pattern for children in relative placements where substantial risk of harm accounted for 21% of retrospective reports.

## **Discussion**

This study was undertaken because the state data system includes the report date but not an incident date. Results of this study demonstrate a type of error and its magnitude that is contained in recurrence rates resulting from this characteristic of the state reporting system. However, the inclusion of an incident date is unlike to totally correct for this type of error. Any report that is taken for an event in the past will contain a degree of error related to the ability of the reporter to accurately identify the date of the incident.

This study also found that different interpretations of the data exist. In this study the reports were categorized into retrospective and non-retrospective incidents, omitting only two cases in which it was determined that the incident caused the placement. Therefore, foster care outcome reporting continues to include situations that one might deem outside the purview of the foster care system, such as in school, an assault of a foster child by a birth parent, threats by birth parents, or babysitters who victimized foster children. These types of incidents are deserving of additional study and consideration. It

**Table 6 Categories of Severity of Maltreatment – Retrospective Cases**

Allegation	Placement Type			Total
	Family Foster Home	Relative Foster Home	Specialized Foster Home	
Death (Neglect)	0	0	0	0
Sexual Abuse	17 (68%)	8 (57%)	7 (87.5%)	32 (68%)
Physical Abuse	1 (4%)	0	1 (12.5%)	2 (4%)
Substance-exposed infants	0	0	0	0
Emotional Abuse	0	0	0	0
Lack of Supervision	2 (8%)	1 (7%)	0	3 (6%)
Environmental Neglect	0	0	0	0
Other Neglect	0	0	0	0
Substantial Risk of Harm	4 (16%)	3 (21%)	0	7 (15%)
None	1 (4%)	2 (14%)	0	3 (6%)
Total	25	14	8	47

is likely that state child welfare systems interpret these incident report findings in a variety of ways. This makes comparisons across states difficult.

Another characteristic of state reporting systems that makes comparisons across states difficult is confusion between reports at the household level and those at the child level. It was often difficult to determine the specifics of the incident reported and therefore to determine the perpetrator's relationship to the child. In twenty-four cases, the child selected for this study was not named on the abuse and neglect report. It appears that the report was for the household and not the child. Only later when it was found that the child was part of the household was the indicated report linked to the child. Reporting systems where the focus of reporting is on the household and then linked to the child will produce very different results than those focused on the child.

Another complexity arose from expunged reports. In four other cases, the incident report was in the database but had actually been expunged from the child welfare system, likely due to a successful appeal of the report. States vary widely in their laws and procedures for expunging child abuse and neglect reports. This may result in one state counting an indicated or substantiated report as occurring in foster care while the same report may be expunged in another state and not be counted.

This study indicates that there is over-reporting of child abuse and neglect incidents for children in out-of-home care. Therefore, recurrence rates need to be adjusted based on these findings. However, one study is not sufficiently precise to determine the required adjustment. This study was designed to produce a confidence interval for the amount of error reported that ranges from 11% to 21%. Replication of this study is needed to more accurately ascertain this number or percentage.

## CONCLUSION

The results from this study indicate that overall 16% of indicated reports of abuse and neglect in foster care are retrospective reports that occurred prior to foster care placement. Of the 301 cases in this study, 21% of indicated reports in family foster homes, 9% of indicated reports in relative foster homes, and 23% of indicated reports in specialized foster homes were retrospective cases, with another 2 reports (one in a relative home and one in a specialized home) actually causing the placement rather than occurring there. It seems clear from this preliminary study that, true to anecdotal information, there is over-reporting of abuse and neglect within foster care. With the evidence from this study, it would seem appropriate that child abuse and neglect incidents attributed to foster care in outcome reporting be adjusted to more accurately reflect and account for retrospective reporting.

## REFERENCES

- Benedict, M. I., Zuravin, S., Brandt, D., and Abbey, H. (1994). Types and frequency of child maltreatment by family foster care providers in an urban population. Child Abuse & Neglect, 18 (7), 577–585.
- Benedict, M. I., Zuravin, S., Somerfield, M. and Brandt, D. (1996). The reported health and functioning of children maltreated while in family foster care. Child Abuse & Neglect, 20 (7), 561–571.
- Bolton, F. G., Laner, R. H., and Gai, D. S. (1981). For better or worse?: Foster parents and foster children in an officially reported child maltreatment population. Children and Youth Services Review, 3, 37–53.
- Carbino, R. (1991). Advocacy for foster families in the United States facing child abuse allegations: How social agencies and foster parents are responding to the problem. Child Welfare, 70 (2), 131–149.
- Carbino, R. (1992). Policy and practice for response to foster families when child abuse or neglect is reported. Child Welfare, 71 (6), 497–509.
- Cavara, M., and Ogren, C. (1983). Protocol to investigate child abuse in foster care. Child Abuse & Neglect, 7, 287–295.
- Daly, D. L., and Dowd, T. P. (1992). Characteristics of effective, harm-free environments for children in out-of-home care. Child Welfare, 71 (6), 487–496.
- Garnier, P. C., and Poertner, J. (2000). Using administrative data to assess child safety in out-of-home care. Child Welfare, 79 (5), 597-613.



- Hobbs, G. F., Hobbs, C. J., and Wynne, J. M. (1999). Abuse in foster and residential care. Child Abuse & Neglect, *23* (12), 1239–1252.
- McFadden, E. J., and Ryan, P. (1991). Maltreatment in family foster homes: Dynamics and dimensions. Child & Youth Services, *15* (2), 209–231.
- Notice of Final List of Child Welfare Measures, 64 (161) Fed. Reg. 45552 (1999).
- Poertner, J., Bussey, M., and Fluke, J. (1999). How safe are out-of-home placements? Children and Youth Services Review, *21* (7), 549–563.
- Rosenthal, J. A., Motz, J. K., Edmonson, D. A., and Groze, V. (1991). A descriptive study of abuse and neglect in out-of-home placement. Child Abuse & Neglect, *15*, 249–260.
- Spencer, J. W., and Knudsen, D. D. (1992). Out-of-home maltreatment: An analysis of risk in various settings for children. Children and Youth Services Review, *14*, 485–492.
- Zuravin, S. J., Benedict, M., and Somerfield, M. (1993). Child maltreatment in family foster care. American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, *63* (4), 589–596.