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CENTER

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ATTORNEY GENERAL

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URBAN STUDIES CENTER
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CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT

by Dr. Gordon Scott Bonham

Child abuse and neglect are subjects which can generate feelings of fear, rage, compassion and grief. But for many years, child abuse and neglect were considered a private family matter and the issues were ignored by the general public and the criminal justice system. However, in the middle 1960's, mandatory reporting of child abuse became the law. Since that time, the number of reported incidences of child abuse has steadily increased throughout the United States -- but little is known as to whether the increasing numbers reflect a rise in **actual** abuse or a surge in the proportion of **reported** abuse. Additionally, few past research studies have examined the characteristics surrounding child abuse and neglect.

In late 1985, the Kentucky Criminal Justice Statistical Analysis Center (SAC) undertook a study of this serious problem. Led by Dr. Gordon S. Bonham, the research team collected, tabulated and analyzed data for reported incidences of child abuse in Kentucky between July 1977 and June 1984. The published results of this important study (**Child Abuse and Neglect in Kentucky: 1978-1984, Research Report Series No. 2**) are summarized on the following pages.

Number of reports

The number of reports of child abuse and neglect in Kentucky increased rapidly between 1978 and 1983, then declined slightly in 1984. As you can see on Table 1, approximately half of the reports each year were confirmed by a social worker as being valid. However, this does not mean people were becoming "too" suspicious or "over" reporting every little incident. Reports could not be confirmed if the social worker could not find the family or could not obtain enough evidence or determined that what was reported was not child abuse or neglect.

What is apparent from this table is that during the time the number of reports increased rapidly so too did the number of confirmed cases. What was happening, either singly or in combination? Did the actual amount of child abuse increase between 1978 and 1983? Did the public become better informed and trained to detect and report child abuse during 1978-1983? Or, did child protective agencies change their criteria or become more effective in confirming child abuse and neglect and reporting these confirmed cases to the Commonwealth?

Table 1

Number of Reports of Child Abuse and Neglect and Percent Confirmed, by Year

Fiscal Year	Number	Confirmed
1978	11,404	41%
1979	12,348	42
1980	15,668	45
1981	25,166	50
1983	33,710	45
1984	32,898	44

It seems unlikely that there would be a threefold increase in the actual amount of abuse during a six year period and then a decline. Further, there were no official changes in policy or procedures followed by child protection agency workers, and, in fact, the number of social workers actually declined during that time period. It seems reasonable, then, to speculate that most of the changes reflected in Table 1 occurred in public awareness and reporting. Thus, the next question was, "Who is reporting child abuse and neglect?"

Source of reports

Reports of suspected child abuse and neglect originate from various sources. In 1984, almost a fourth (24%) of suspected cases were reported anonymously or through miscellaneous sources. The largest number of reports, however, originate with relatives, friends and neighbors -- usually people who have informal contacts with the child or family. Only a third of the reports come through people with formal contacts with children (for example, educational and/or medical institutions, social service agencies or law enforcement officers). And, notably, the least likely source of reporting is child care institutions -- suggesting that 1) abused/neglected children are not cared for outside the home, or 2) babysitters/day care workers are not skilled in detecting abuse/neglect, or 3) babysitters/day care workers are reluctant to report their suspicions.

Reliability of different sources

Reports from these different sources have varying probabilities of being confirmed as child abuse or neglect.

Generally, the groups which report the fewest cases are the groups with the highest confirmation rates. This may be affected by the seriousness of the abuse encountered by the different groups -- for example, hospitals are more likely to see the more extreme results of abuse. However, the level of confirmation may also be related to what situations different sources choose to report. Organizations/institutions dependent on the good will of customers/clients/patients may be reluctant to report anything but the most serious or obvious cases.

Type and rate of abuse

The incidences most often reported in the media are physical and sexual abuse. However, the most frequent type of abuse is not direct assault but neglect of the child. In fact, confirmed neglect is three times more frequent than physical abuse and ten times more frequent than sexual abuse. Still, there were 2,410 confirmed cases of sexual abuse in Kentucky during 1984; and **all** types of confirmed abuse increased during that time, with the rate of direct maltreatment rising at a faster rate than neglect. (See figure 1 below.)

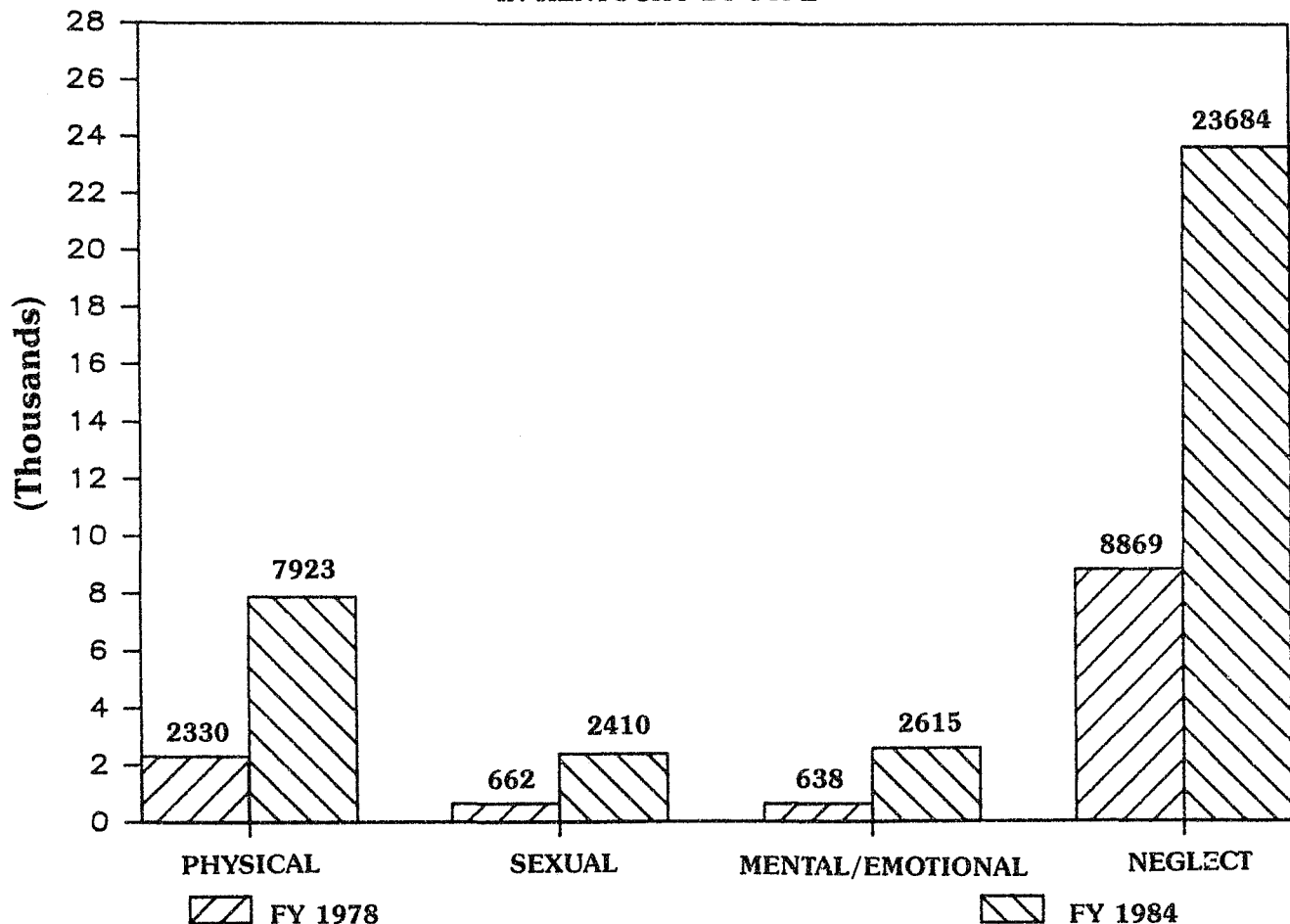
Characteristics of abused/neglected children

Children at different ages are at different risks of child abuse -- with children the least able to defend themselves or tell others about abuse being the most frequent victims. (See figure 2.) As you can see, the **types** of abuse children suffer seems to be related to their age. Neglect is highly related to age -- peaking at its highest rate for two year olds and gradually declining with older children being the least likely to suffer from neglect. Likewise, two year olds

Figure 1

REPORTS OF CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT

IN KENTUCKY BY TYPE



were the most frequent target of physical abuse. Sexual abuse is highest during the early teen years, but is not much lower during earlier childhood. A three year old child is only a third less likely to be a victim of sexual abuse than is a thirteen year old. The rate of confirmed mental and emotional abuse is relatively constant across all ages.

Another characteristic related to types of abuse suffered is the child's sex. Boys are more likely to be neglected but girls are more likely to be sexually, mentally or emotionally abused than are boys. There is, however, practically no difference in the rate of confirmed physical abuse of boys or girls.

Implications of the findings

- While the number of reports of suspected child abuse has tripled, the investigative and intervention resources have not kept pace. In fact, the Kentucky Department for Social Services experienced a 21% **reduction** in staff between 1980-84. Unless the investigative resources grow to match the rise in reports of suspected child abuse and neglect, it will be impossible to adequately protect the children of Kentucky.
- Increased awareness has **not** caused people to inappropriately report suspicions; and, in fact, there is probably a large amount of child abuse and neglect still going unreported. Therefore, efforts should continue to educate citizens regarding the importance and **legal responsibility** of reporting suspected abuse.
- The children most subject to maltreatment are preschoolers; yet the people most likely to spend extended periods of time with this age group outside the home are **least likely** to report child abuse. If the scarcity of reports from babysitters and day care

workers is due to high risk children not having contacts outside the home, then perhaps increasing the availability of day care centers could reduce the risk of abuse. However, if the low incidence of reporting is due to reluctance or a lack of knowledge of child care workers, then educational programs should be targeted to this group.

- The rise in the number of child abuse and neglect reports in Kentucky between 1978-1983 may be viewed as a positive finding **if** it indeed reflects a greater proportion of maltreated children being identified and helped. But, if this increase was due to better reporting, then the decline in 1984 may be cause for concern as it may indicate a decline in public awareness or resolve. Or, Kentucky may be in the midst of a child abuse crisis if the rise in the number of reported cases reflects **actual** increases in child abuse and neglect. If such a crisis exists, then the decline in 1984 offers hope that child abuse is waning. Further study will be necessary to better understand these results.

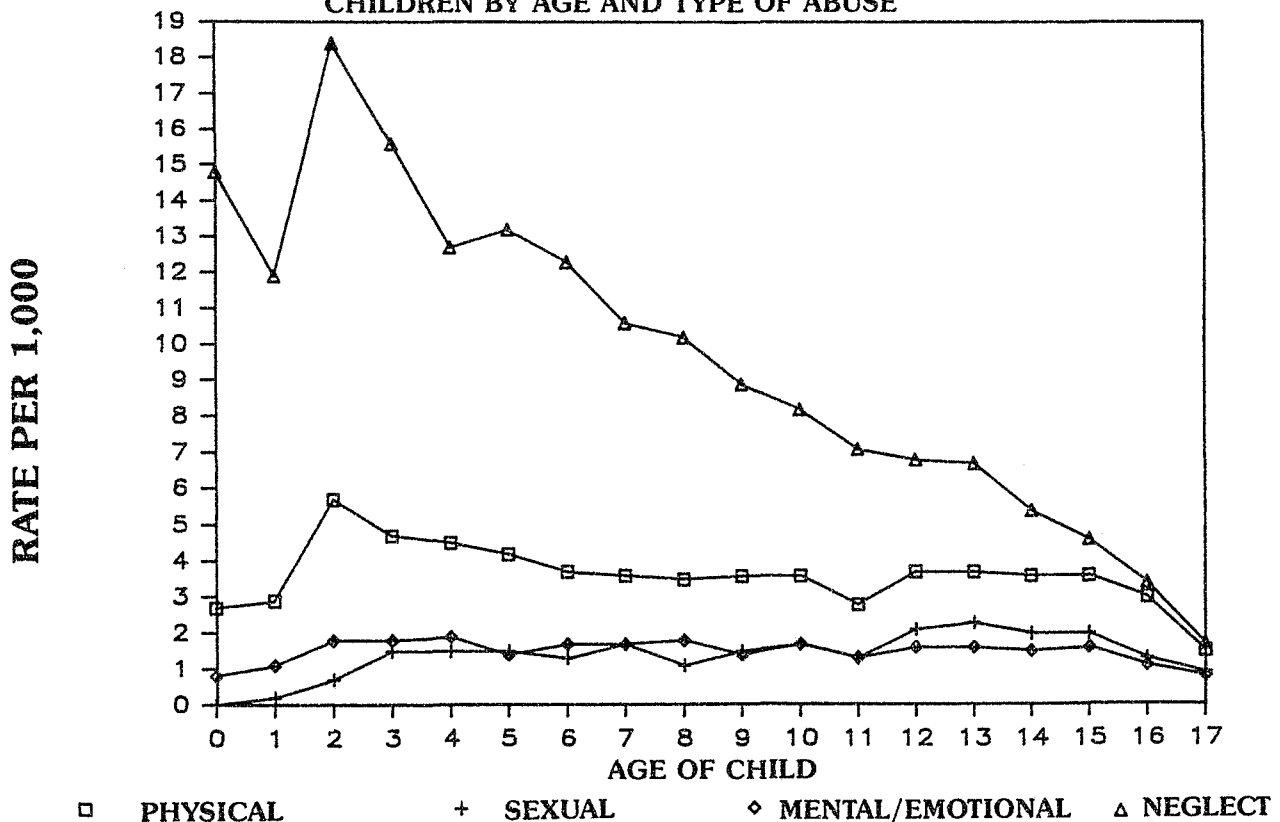
What next?

Identifying abused and neglected children is only the first step in protecting them. In an effort to measure the response/non-response of strained social service agencies, SAC is currently tracing the progress from initial reports of child abuse/neglect to resolution -- for children residing in Jefferson County, Kentucky in 1983. We'll be looking at: When was a social service case opened and closed for this child? How frequently was court action initiated? What was the cost in agency personnel to handle the case? Was the child removed from the home? If so, at what cost to the Commonwealth? The results of this study will be available in the fall of 1986.

Figure 2

RATE OF ABUSE PER 1000

CHILDREN BY AGE AND TYPE OF ABUSE



A MESSAGE FROM THE ATTORNEY GENERAL

SAC will be hosting the **Second Kentucky Conference on Criminal Justice Research and Statistics September 4 and 5**. This year's conference will be held again in the Seelbach Hotel in Louisville.

An exciting program is beginning to take shape as we prepare to unveil this year's research projects. In addition, we will be introducing you to several new persons who will have something significant to say about the development and use of data in reaching policy decisions. We hope that we can make this year's conference very practical and useful to you in your everyday surroundings.

Finally, we want to use this year's conference as a springboard to starting a Statistical Users Association in Kentucky. I am firmly convinced that the strength of the criminal justice system is the keen intellects and curiosity found in persons within all agencies. By bringing these persons together to share ideas, explore new issues and grapple with today's knotty problems, Kentucky's criminal justice system can only be enhanced. It has always been my philosophy that by sharing we grow and that our system is improved.

Come to the SAC Conference prepared to learn and to share. I'll see you there.

DAVID L. ARMSTRONG



SAC reports include:

A Data Inventory of Kentucky's Criminal Justice Agencies by Jack Ellis

Persistent Felony Offenders in Kentucky: A Profile of the Institutional Population, by Deborah G. Wilson.

Child Abuse and Neglect in Kentucky: 1978-1984, by Dr. Gordon Bonham.

The Aftermath of Criminal Victimization: A Statewide Survey, by Dr. Knowlton Johnson, Dr. Gary Sykes and Ned Snow.

An Offender-based Tracking System Study of Three Judicial Districts in the Commonwealth of Kentucky, by Dr. Gennaro Vito and Jack Ellis.

Strengthening Kentucky's Capacity to Produce Criminal Justice Statistical Information: A Needs-Use Assessment, by Dr. Knowlton Johnson, Linda Burgess, and Sherry Hutchinson.

Kentucky Inmate Population: Profile and Projections, by Dr. Knowlton Johnson, Dr. Michael Price, Jack Ellis and Barbara Meredith.

Executive summaries or complete copies of these reports are available by writing:

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