



U.S. Department of Health  
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# Responsible Fatherhood Spotlight

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## Fathers and Child Maltreatment

In 2005, approximately 1 million children were victims of maltreatment, and an estimated 1,490 children died from their resulting injuries. Approximately 58 percent of the perpetrators were women, most of them mothers, while 42.2 percent were men.<sup>i</sup> Children who were victims of sexual abuse were more likely to be maltreated by a father acting alone than were children who were victims of neglect or physical abuse.<sup>ii</sup>

### Definitions

*Child Maltreatment* is defined by the federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act as the “physical and mental injury, sexual abuse, negligent treatment, or maltreatment of a child under the age of 18 by a person who is responsible for the child’s welfare under circumstances which indicate that the child’s health or welfare is harmed or threatened.”<sup>iii</sup> Each state provides its own definition of child abuse and neglect.<sup>iv</sup>

The *Child Welfare System* encompasses services and agencies that promote the well-being of children by ensuring their safety, achieving their permanent placement, and strengthening families to successfully care for their children.<sup>v</sup> A report of suspected child abuse or neglect is the most common reason that families become involved with the child welfare system.<sup>vi</sup>

*Perpetrators* of child maltreatment are parents or caregivers (i.e., other relatives, foster parents, or residential facility staff) who have been found by a child welfare agency to be responsible for the maltreatment of a child by either committing an act of maltreatment, allowing an act of maltreatment to occur, or contributing to the risk of maltreatment.

Child maltreatment may take one of several forms.

- *Physical Abuse* occurs when a caretaker deliberately injures a child physically. Examples of physical abuse include shaking, slapping, punching, beating, kicking, biting, and burning a child.<sup>vii</sup>
- *Sexual Abuse* is the involvement of dependent, developmentally immature children and adolescents in sexual activities that they do not fully comprehend and to which they are unable to give informed consent. Sexual abuse includes touching, fondling, and penetration.<sup>viii</sup>
- *Neglect* is the failure of caretakers to provide for a child’s fundamental needs. Although neglect can include ignoring children’s emotional needs, neglect typically is used to describe not providing children with adequate food, housing, clothing, medical care, and education.<sup>ix</sup>
- *Emotional/Psychological Abuse* is marked by behavior that threatens or intimidates a child. It can include habitual verbal harassment of a child by disparagement, threat, ridicule, name-calling, and shaming.<sup>x</sup>

*Child Protective Services (CPS)* agencies respond to the needs of children who are alleged to have been maltreated and try to ensure that they remain safe. CPS generally is a division within a child welfare agency that administers a more narrow set of services, such as receiving and responding to child abuse and neglect allegations and providing initial help to stabilize a family.<sup>xi</sup>

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## Importance and Implications of Child Maltreatment

Studies show that mothers are more likely to abuse or neglect their children than are fathers, perhaps because a large proportion of families today are headed by single mothers.<sup>xii</sup> In contrast, relatively little research has examined how fathers either directly contribute to the risk of child abuse in a family or play a protective role.

### Implications for Fathers

- Non-custodial fathers often do not gain custody of their children once they enter the child welfare system due to a number of barriers including but not limited to: 1) Case worker bias against father involvement; 2) characteristics of non-custodial fathers because a significant number of non-custodial fathers are incarcerated, homeless, significantly impaired by substance abuse, or otherwise unable to provide emotional or financial support to the mother and children;<sup>xiii</sup> and 3) Failure to establish paternity.<sup>xiv</sup> Mothers may affect the level of involvement of non-custodial fathers by failing to identify fathers initially or by downplaying the father's importance in the child's life.<sup>xv</sup>
- Higher levels of father involvement are associated with lower levels of child neglect. Fathers who nurture and take significant responsibility for basic child care are much less likely to sexually abuse their children.<sup>xvi</sup> These fathers typically develop such a strong connection with their children that the likelihood of any maltreatment is low.<sup>xvii</sup>
- Certain characteristics of fathers, such as underemployment or unemployment, can increase a father's stress level, which may make him more likely to abuse his children physically.<sup>xviii</sup>

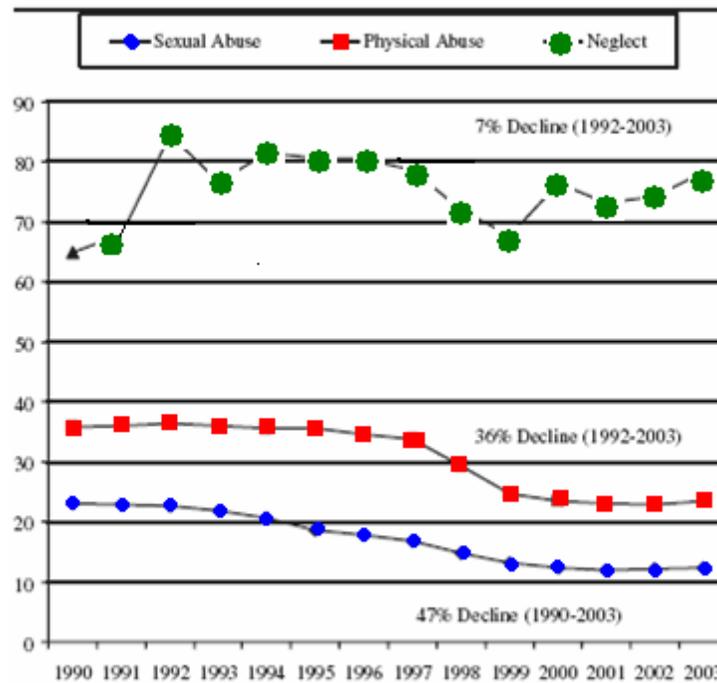
### Implications for Children

- Children who live in fatherless households often face higher risks of physical abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect than do children who live in households with a father present..<sup>xix</sup>
- Child maltreatment during infancy and early childhood has been shown to negatively affect child development, including brain and cognitive development, attachment, and academic achievement. Child abuse and neglect can have enduring physical, intellectual, and psychological effects that can carry over into adolescence and adulthood.<sup>xx</sup>
- The immediate effects of *physical child abuse* can include bruises, burns, lacerations, and broken bones, whereas the longer-term effects can include brain damage, hemorrhages, and permanent disabilities. Physical trauma and abuse can also hurt children's physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development.<sup>xxi</sup>
- The effects of *child sexual abuse* may include fear, anxiety, depression, anger, hostility, inappropriate sexual behavior, poor self-esteem, substance abuse, and difficulty forming close relationships.<sup>xxii</sup>
- *Child neglect* can have devastating effects on children's intellectual, physical, social, and psychological development, as shown by studies that have documented a high risk of significant developmental problems in children who have been neglected by their caregivers.<sup>xxiii</sup>
- *Psychological maltreatment* can seriously interfere with a child's cognitive, emotional, psychological, and social development. The effects of emotional abuse may include insecurity, poor self-esteem, destructive behavior, withdrawal, poor development of basic skills, alcohol or drug abuse, suicide, difficulty forming relationships, and unstable job histories.<sup>xxiv</sup>

## Trends in Child Maltreatment Over Time

Child maltreatment rates declined roughly 23 percent between 1992 and 2003. **Figure 1** shows the national victimization trends for three basic types of child maltreatment. Rates of sexual abuse declined steadily throughout the 1990s, with a total decline of 47 percent between 1990 and 2003. Physical abuse rates showed a considerable 36 percent decline between 1992 and 2003. Rates of neglect fluctuated in this period, showing only a small overall net decline of 7 percent between 1990 and 2003.<sup>xxv</sup>

Figure 1. U.S. Child Maltreatment Trends, 1990-2003



Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services-Children's Bureau, 1992 – 2005 (Jones et al., 2006)<sup>xxvi</sup>

### Differences in Child Maltreatment by Subgroups

More children suffer from neglect in the United States than they do from physical and sexual abuse combined. Research shows that perpetrators' patterns differ by type of maltreatment. Although mothers are almost twice as likely to be directly involved in child maltreatment as fathers, when it comes to sexual abuse, fathers are more likely to be reported for this crime.<sup>xxvii</sup>

#### Differences by Gender of Perpetrator

**Table 1** shows that between 2001 and 2005, mothers were twice as likely as were fathers to be perpetrators of child maltreatment.

**Table 1: Percentage of Mothers and Fathers Who Maltreated Children, 2001-2004**<sup>xxviii</sup>

Year	Mothers (%)	Fathers (%)	Other (%)
2001	40.5	17.7	11.9
2002	40.3	19.1	13.0
2003	40.8	18.8	13.4
2004	38.8	18.3	10.1
2005	40.4	18.3	10.3

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services-Children's Bureau, *Child Maltreatment 2001 – 2005*

#### Difference by Age of Perpetrator

**Table 2** shows that in each of the years between 1999 and 2004, men and women between the ages of 30 and 39 were more likely to be perpetrators of child maltreatment than people in any other age group.

**Table 2: Percentage of Male and Female Perpetrators by Age, 1999-2004**

	1999	2001	2004	1999	2001	2004
<20	6.4	6.7	6.3	4.7	4.6	4.2
20-29	24.8	25.2	27.8	36.8	37.7	40.2
30-39	40.7	39.4	37	42.3	40.9	38.1
40-49	20.8	21.3	21.6	12.4	13.1	13.8
>49	7.3	7.4	7.2	3.8	3.7	3.8
Total	211,921	327,516	303,604	342,126	476,870	415,344

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services-Children's Bureau, Child Maltreatment 1999, 2001, 2004

*Differences by Relationship to Child*

**Table 3** shows that in 2002, more than one-half of all male perpetrators were biological fathers of the maltreated children. Men who were not parents of the maltreated child ("nonparents") constituted the second largest group of perpetrators (25 percent). Boyfriends, stepfathers, adoptive fathers, and "combination fathers" accounted for the remaining 25 percent of male perpetrators. This latter term refers to men with more than one relationship type of which at least one relationship was that of a parent.

**Table 3: Male Perpetrators by Relationship to Child, 2002 (N= 89,028)**

Father Type	
Biological Father	51
Adoptive Father	1
Stepfather	8
Mother's Boyfriend	10
Combination Father	5
Nonparent	25

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services-Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, (Shusterman and Fluke, 2005)

*Differences by Type of Maltreatment*

**Table 4** shows that in 2002, physical abuse was the most frequent type of child maltreatment perpetrated by both adoptive fathers and stepfathers.

Stepfathers were primarily associated with physical abuse cases. Children were primarily neglected by combination fathers (56 percent). Nonparental perpetrators were primarily associated with sexual abuse (68 percent). Among children who were victims of emotional abuse, the main perpetrator was the biological father.

**Table 4: Percentage of Perpetrators by Type of Maltreatment, 2002 (N = 89,028)**

Abuse	Biological Father	Adoptive Father	Stepfather	Mother's Boyfriend	Combination Father	Non-parent
Physical	26	33	34	30	8	11
Neglect	50	23	20	31	56	12
Sexual	7	24	30	20	7	68
Emotional	7	3	4	6	3	2
Multiple	11	17	12	13	25	7

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services-Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, (Shusterman and Fluke, 2005)

*Differences in Child Neglect by Gender of Parent*

**Table 5** shows that children are more than three times as likely to be neglected by the female parent (mother) than by the male parent (father).

**Table 5. Percentage Children Neglected by the mother and by the father, 1998-2000**

1998	52.3	12.5	17.1	307,078
1999	51.7	12.4	18.5	307,078
2000	46.9	12.1	21.9	399,747

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services-Children's Bureau, *Child Maltreatment* 1998-2000

*Difference in Physical Abuse by Gender of Parent*

Physical maltreatment is one of the most common reasons that a child is referred to child protective services.<sup>xxix, xxx</sup>

**Table 6** shows that children are more likely to be physically abused by a female parent than by a male parent. Children are twice as likely to be physically harmed by the female parent acting alone rather than by both parents together.

**Table 6. Percentage of Children Physically Abused by the mother and by the father, 1998-2000**

1998	34.6	26.8	14.0
1999	35.6	26.6	14.2
2000	32.1	28.2	13.5

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services-Children's Bureau, *Child Maltreatment* 1998-2000.  
(Total sample size not available)

*Differences in Sexual Abuse by Gender of Parent*

Research shows that fathers or father surrogates (cohabiting husbands or boyfriends who are not biologically related to the child) are responsible for far more cases of severe sexual abuse and fatalities than are women perpetrators.<sup>xxxii</sup> **Table 7** shows that the percentage of children who are sexually abused by the male parent is more than six times greater than the percentage of children who are sexually abused by the female parent.

**Table 7. Percentage of Children Sexually Abused by the mother and by the father, 1998-2000**

1998	3.8	22.0	12.0
1999	3.9	20.8	12.3

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services-Children's Bureau, *Child Maltreatment* 1998-2000

*Differences in Medical Maltreatment by Gender of Parent*

**Table 8** shows that children are ten times more likely to be medically neglected by the female parent than by the male parent.

**Table 8. Percentage of Children Medically Neglected by the mother and by the father, 1998-1999**

1998	58.7	5.9	21.2
1999	61.3	6.6	19.1

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services-Children's Bureau, *Child Maltreatment* 1998-1999

## Resources

- **NCANDS Data** are published in The *Child Maltreatment* reports: [http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats\\_research/index.htm#can](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/index.htm#can)
- **The Child Welfare Information Gateway** (formerly the National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information and the National Adoption Information Clearinghouse, Child Welfare Information Gateway) provides access to information and resources to help protect children and strengthen families. This resource is a service of the [Children's Bureau, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services](http://www.childwelfare.gov/): <http://www.childwelfare.gov/>
- **The Children's Bureau** provides state and national data on adoption and foster care, child abuse and neglect, and child welfare. The bureau also funds research in collaboration with other organizations: [http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats\\_research/index.htm](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/index.htm)

## Definitions of Measures, and Data Sources

Information on trends in child maltreatment was reported by Jones and colleagues in *Child Maltreatment Trends in the 1990s: Why Does Neglect Differ From Sexual and Physical Abuse?* The National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System or NCANDS (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Children's Bureau, 1992 – 2005) was the primary data source used to calculate the maltreatment trends.<sup>xxxii</sup>

NCANDS is a federally sponsored project that collects and analyzes annual data on child abuse and neglect. The 1988 amendments to the Child Abuse and Prevention and Treatment Act directed the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) to establish a national data collection and analysis program. The Children's Bureau in the Administration on Children, Youth and Families within the DHHS collects and analyzes these data, which are used for the annual report, *Child Maltreatment*.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Aggregate data from the NCANDS, published in *Child Maltreatment Reports* 1999-2004, were used to calculate child perpetrator percentages by age and gender, national child maltreatment trends, relationship status of perpetrator to victims, and relationships of perpetrators to child victims by type of maltreatment. In addition, the differences in characteristics of male perpetrators of child maltreatment and differences in male perpetrators by type of maltreatment were reported by Shusterman and Fluke (2005) in *Male Perpetrators of Child Maltreatment: Findings from NCANDS*.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

## Data Limitations

Due to the limited research on fathers and child maltreatment, the percentages presented here are taken from two primary sources: the NCANDS and the volume by Shusterman and Fluke (2005). These sources do not constitute a statistically representative sample of maltreated children in the United States. For example, because states are not required to submit data to the NCANDS, some states do not participate. Between 1998 and 2004, the average number of states participating was 33. In addition, when conducting analyses with NCANDS data, it is important to keep in mind that state-to-state variation in child maltreatment laws and information systems may affect the interpretation of the data.<sup>xxxv</sup> The final data set from Shusterman and Fluke (2005) included 192,321 unduplicated perpetrators, perpetrators who were counted only once, based on data from only 18 states. The designation of the individuals of this data set as perpetrators was made by Child Protective Services' representatives during the disposition of a report or reports of child maltreatment.

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