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Problem-Specific Guides Series
No. 55



Child Abuse and Neglect in the Home

Kelly Dedel

www.cops.usdoj.gov



Center for
Problem-Oriented Policing

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The Internet references cited in this publication were valid as of May 2009. Given that URLs and web sites are in constant flux, neither the author nor the COPS Office can vouch for their current validity.

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About the Problem-Specific Guide Series

The *Problem-Specific Guides* summarize knowledge about how police can reduce the harm caused by specific crime and disorder problems. They are guides to prevention and to improving the overall response to incidents, not to investigating offenses or handling specific incidents. Neither do they cover all of the technical details about how to implement specific responses. The guides are written for police—of whatever rank or assignment—who must address the specific problem the guides cover. The guides will be most useful to officers who:

- **Understand basic problem-oriented policing principles and methods.** The guides are not primers in problem-oriented policing. They deal only briefly with the initial decision to focus on a particular problem, methods to analyze the problem, and means to assess the results of a problem-oriented policing project. They are designed to help police decide how best to analyze and address a problem they have already identified. (A companion series of *Problem-Solving Tools* guides has been produced to aid in various aspects of problem analysis and assessment.)
- **Can look at a problem in depth.** Depending on the complexity of the problem, you should be prepared to spend perhaps weeks, or even months, analyzing and responding to it. Carefully studying a problem before responding helps you design the right strategy, one that is most likely to work in your community. You should not blindly adopt the responses others have used; you must decide whether they are appropriate to your local situation. What is true in one place may not be true elsewhere; what works in one place may not work everywhere.
- **Are willing to consider new ways of doing police business.** The guides describe responses that other police departments have used or that researchers have tested. While not all of these responses will be appropriate to your particular problem, they should help give a broader view of the kinds of things you could do. You may think you cannot implement some of these responses in your jurisdiction, but perhaps you can. In many places, when police have discovered a more effective response,



they have succeeded in having laws and policies changed, improving the response to the problem. (A companion series of *Response Guides* has been produced to help you understand how commonly-used police responses work on a variety of problems.)

- **Understand the value and the limits of research knowledge.** For some types of problems, a lot of useful research is available to the police; for other problems, little is available. Accordingly, some guides in this series summarize existing research whereas other guides illustrate the need for more research on that particular problem. Regardless, research has not provided definitive answers to all the questions you might have about the problem. The research may help get you started in designing your own responses, but it cannot tell you exactly what to do. This will depend greatly on the particular nature of your local problem. In the interest of keeping the guides readable, not every piece of relevant research has been cited, nor has every point been attributed to its sources. To have done so would have overwhelmed and distracted the reader. The references listed at the end of each guide are those drawn on most heavily; they are not a complete bibliography of research on the subject.
- **Are willing to work with others to find effective solutions to the problem.** The police alone cannot implement many of the responses discussed in the guides. They must frequently implement them in partnership with other responsible private and public bodies including other government agencies, non-governmental organizations, private businesses, public utilities, community groups, and individual citizens. An effective problem-solver must know how to forge genuine partnerships with others and be prepared to invest considerable effort in making these partnerships work. Each guide identifies particular individuals or groups in the community with whom police might work to improve the overall response to that problem. Thorough analysis of problems often reveals that individuals and groups other than the police are in a stronger position to address problems and that police ought to shift some greater responsibility to them to do so. Response Guide No. 3, *Shifting and Sharing Responsibility for Public Safety Problems*, provides further discussion of this topic.



The COPS Office defines community policing as “a philosophy that promotes organizational strategies, which support the systematic use of partnerships and problem-solving techniques, to proactively address the immediate conditions that give rise to public safety issues such as crime, social disorder, and fear of crime.” These guides emphasize *problem-solving* and *police-community partnerships* in the context of addressing specific public safety problems. For the most part, the organizational strategies that can facilitate problem-solving and police-community partnerships vary considerably and discussion of them is beyond the scope of these guides.

These guides have drawn on research findings and police practices in the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the Netherlands, and Scandinavia. Even though laws, customs and police practices vary from country to country, it is apparent that the police everywhere experience common problems. In a world that is becoming increasingly interconnected, it is important that police be aware of research and successful practices beyond the borders of their own countries.

Each guide is informed by a thorough review of the research literature and reported police practice, and each guide is anonymously peer-reviewed by a line police officer, a police executive and a researcher prior to publication. The review process is independently managed by the COPS Office, which solicits the reviews.



For more information about problem-oriented policing, visit the Center for Problem-Oriented Policing online at www.popcenter.org. This website offers free online access to:

- The *Problem-Specific Guides* series
- The companion *Response Guides* and *Problem-Solving Tools* series
- Special publications on crime analysis and on policing terrorism
- Instructional information about problem-oriented policing and related topics
- An interactive problem-oriented policing training exercise
- An interactive *Problem Analysis Module*
- Online access to important police research and practices
- Information about problem-oriented policing conferences and award programs.



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Debra Cohen, PhD oversaw the project for the COPS Office. Phyllis Schultze conducted research for the guide at Rutgers University's Criminal Justice Library. Nancy Leach coordinated the Center for Problem-Oriented Policing's production process. Suzanne Fregly edited this guide.



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The Problem of Child Abuse and Neglect in the Home

What This Guide Does and Does Not Cover

This guide begins by describing the problem of child abuse and neglect in the home, and reviewing factors that increase its risks. It then identifies a series of questions to help you analyze your local child maltreatment problem. Finally, it reviews responses to the problem and what is known about them from evaluative research and police practice. This guide is not intended to provide specific guidance on investigative techniques.[§]

Child abuse and neglect in the home is but one aspect of the larger set of problems related to child maltreatment that occurs in a variety of places and by people with varied relationships to the victim.^{§§} This guide is limited to addressing the particular harms created by child abuse and neglect that occurs in the home, typically by the child's caretaker or someone close to the caretaker (e.g., the mother's boyfriend). Related problems not directly addressed in this guide, each of which requires separate analysis, include:

- Child physical and sexual abuse in institutions (e.g., correctional facilities, churches, youth organizations, foster care)
- Commercial sexual exploitation of children and organized child sex rings
- Child pornography on the Internet
- Child fatalities (including shaken-baby deaths and Munchausen syndrome by proxy)
- Child abuse among immigrant populations (e.g., excessive discipline of children or other instances in which cultural norms conflict with child welfare laws)
- Exposure of children to hazardous materials (see also, *Clandestine Methamphetamine Labs* in this series)
- Abandoned children
- Juvenile runaways.

[§]See American Prosecutors Research Institute, National Center for Prosecution of Child Abuse (2004), California Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (1998), and Sahonchik, Colombo, and Boggis (1996) for detailed guidance on investigating allegations of child abuse and neglect.

^{§§}See the National Center for Victims of Crime, www.ncvc.org, for additional guidance on the police-victim relationship.



§Some practitioners recognize a fourth type of abuse—emotional—which entails a pattern of caregiver behavior that negatively impacts a child's cognitive, emotional, and/or behavioral development. Emotional abuse is the most difficult form to identify. However, no one has widely studied emotional abuse, so this guide does not address it extensively.

Some of these related problems are covered in other guides in this series, all of which are listed at the end of this guide. For the most up-to-date listing of current and future guides, see www.popcenter.org.

General Description of the Problem

Child maltreatment is a leading cause of childhood serious injuries and fatalities. As the most widely available helping professionals in communities, police have a natural role in preventing and responding to child abuse and neglect. Not only are police legally mandated to enforce the law and protect residents' safety, but also they are generally committed to children's welfare.

Child abuse and neglect are very difficult problems. The injuries sustained often resemble those caused by unintentional or accidental situations, and police must carefully evaluate all reasonable explanations. The stakes are high—if police misdiagnose the cause of injuries, the potential for future victimization exists. Further, the victim is always a child, and some are very young. Police need to understand children's developmental capacities—their language and cognitive abilities—to be able to communicate with the victims of these crimes. Finally, unlike many other crimes that occur in public places, child abuse and neglect usually occurs in private places, and the victims may try to hide evidence of the abuse or deny that it took place. As a result, collecting sufficient evidence to determine whether a crime occurred and to identify effective responses to the problem is very difficult.

Types of Child Abuse and Neglect

No single, universally accepted definition of child maltreatment exists. Each state constructs its own definition, which can be found using a combination of mandatory child-abuse reporting laws, criminal statutes, and juvenile court statutes. There are three main types of child maltreatment, which often co-occur:^{1,§}



- **Physical abuse**, which may range in severity from minor bruising to death.
- **Sexual abuse**, involving varying degrees of coercion and violence.
- **Neglect**, ranging from the failure to provide food, clothing, or shelter to the failure to provide medical care, supervision, or schooling. Exposing a child to dangerous conditions or hazards, including crime, may also be considered neglect.

Prevalence

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services maintains the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System, a voluntary, national database that provides information on the incidence of child abuse and neglect. Each state's child protective agency provides data. During the 1990s, the number of child abuse allegations decreased significantly (sexual abuse allegations decreased by 47 percent and physical abuse decreased by 36 percent). The rate of child neglect has remained relatively stable, likely because neglect is more difficult to identify and influence and has not been subject to the same vigorous prevention efforts as other forms of maltreatment.²

In 2006, child protective agencies received an estimated 3.6 million referrals involving the alleged maltreatment of 6 million children.³ Approximately one-quarter resulted in a substantiated finding of abuse or neglect. In other words, approximately 905,000 children were determined to be victims of abuse or neglect in 2006.

Neglect is the most common form of child maltreatment, comprising approximately 64 percent of all substantiated findings. Approximately 16 percent of the substantiated cases involved physical abuse, 9 percent involved sexual abuse, and 7 percent involved emotional abuse. Child fatalities are the most tragic outcomes of maltreatment. Of the approximately 1,500 children who died from abuse or neglect in 2006, over three-fourths were under four years old. Compounding the problem of the high



incidence of child abuse and neglect, many families who come to the attention of child protective services have subsequent referrals for suspected maltreatment. Thus, it is essential for police and child protective services to identify the situations in which child abuse and neglect are likely to occur so that they can implement appropriate responses.

Reporting Mechanisms

Child abuse is revealed in a variety of ways.⁴ The child may disclose the abuse intentionally or accidentally. Family members who observe caregivers interacting with children may suspect or witness abuse. Professionals involved with the child may suspect abuse based on behavioral, emotional, or verbal clues. Neighbors may see, hear, or suspect maltreatment based on their observations of the family.

Although they may suspect or be aware of abuse, many people are ambivalent about reporting their suspicions. They may not want to get involved, may believe that parents have the right to treat their children however they choose, or may not want to accept the implications of their suspicions about people they know and like. Some professionals may worry about compromising their rapport with their clients if they report suspected abuse.

Beginning in the 1960s, all states established mandatory child abuse reporting laws that were designed to ensure that the agencies tasked with protecting children's welfare (i.e., police and child protective services agencies) were made aware of situations in which child maltreatment is suspected. While laws vary across states, most specify the following:⁵

- Categories of people required to report suspected abuse or neglect. These commonly include medical personnel, teachers, mental health professionals, social workers, law enforcement officers, and other professionals who routinely contact children. Some states require *any* person to report suspected abuse.
- Conditions under which a professional must make a report. Most often, professionals must make a report when they suspect maltreatment has occurred. Certainty is not required.



- Immunity from legal liability for reporters, and penalties for the failure to report suspected abuse.
- Timelines within which people must make a report, often within 24 hours of the event that triggered the suspicion.
- Agencies responsible for receiving and investigating reports. Some states require all reports to be made to child protective services, some require certain reports to be made to the local law enforcement agency, and some give the reporter discretion whether to report to child protective services or to law enforcement. Very few states require all reports to be made to a law enforcement agency.

Most child protective services have a 24-hour, toll-free hotline to receive suspected child abuse reports. Reports to law enforcement agencies are usually made to 911 dispatchers. Many states' reporting laws require child protective services to relay at least a subset of reports to police (e.g., in the case of serious injury or death of the victim). Whether legally mandated to do so or not, most police relay reports of suspected abuse to child protective services.

Police Role

Police play a variety of roles in the identification of and response to child abuse and neglect. Their contact with children in schools, homes, and the community place them in an ideal position to identify situations in which maltreatment may be occurring. Police will also receive reports of suspected abuse, either through calls to the police agency or through their routine contacts with community members. Incidents of child abuse may also lurk behind the scenes of domestic violence calls; thus police should ask about and interview any children at the scene.⁶

Police may also be the first responders to the scene of suspected abuse or neglect. While child protective services may be the intended recipient of a suspected child abuse report, an agency representative may not be available when an immediate response is needed. When police arrive on the scene, typical investigatory protocols (e.g., completing reports, taking photographs, conducting interviews) apply. Police are also involved in securing needed



medical treatment for the child's injuries or in obtaining forensic medical examinations to determine the presence of injuries. Police may also need to brief medical staff on the facts, allegations, and types of evidence to be collected.⁷

In some cases, police may need to protect child protective services staff. Staff members often need to visit homes in isolated or dangerous areas and deal with unstable or violent people. Accused caretakers may refuse entry to the home or access to the possible victim, both of which are essential to determining whether abuse occurred and whether the child is still at risk of harm. Most people more widely accept police authority than they do that of child protective services. If immediate danger exists, police need to temporarily remove the child from the home. Police are needed both for their authority to remove children at risk of immediate harm and to defuse the tensions removals may cause. Police presence can often have a stabilizing effect.

Child abuse is a crime and therefore police have an obvious role in investigating allegations, arresting suspects, and preparing cases for prosecution, if warranted. Whether a case will be prosecuted or not, police are obligated to coordinate with other professionals (child protective services workers, prosecutors, medical professionals, social service providers, victim advocates, etc.) involved with the case.

Harms Caused by Child Abuse and Neglect in the Home

Children who suffer abuse and neglect may sustain a variety of devastating physical, psychological, cognitive, and behavioral problems. The effects vary with the age and personality of the victim and also with the type and duration of the abuse. Physical consequences may range from minor injuries to severe brain damage, while psychological harms range from lack of self-esteem to learning disorders to serious mental illnesses. Many abused and neglected children develop behavioral problems that interfere with their education and lead to their involvement in delinquency. Maltreated children may run away from home, get involved with drugs and alcohol, experience intimacy problems, and self-



harm. Research has shown that significant proportions of adults who were abused as children go on to abuse their own children.⁸ Serious negative outcomes are more likely if the abuse occurs over a long period of time, if it involves violence, or if offender is the victim's father or father figure.⁹ While many maltreated children experience immediate and lifelong problems, many do not. Research on promoting resiliency in children has found that abuse's negative effects can be buffered when children can form trusting relationships with adults, have structure and rules at home, are encouraged to be autonomous, and have access to health, education, welfare, and social services.¹⁰

Not only does child abuse and neglect harm the victims themselves, but also it harms families and communities. Nonoffending parents not only must help their children recover from maltreatment, but also must deal with their own complicity in permitting the maltreatment to occur, or in failing to recognize the signs of abuse in their children. The presence of child abuse and neglect in a community reflects attitudes about child rearing, punishment, and acceptance of violence as a solution to problems.

Finally, because many forms of child maltreatment are crimes, and because the effects of child abuse and neglect include delinquency, substance abuse, and violence, efforts to reduce the incidence of child abuse and neglect are essential to long-term public health and public safety efforts.

Factors Contributing to Child Abuse and Neglect in the Home

Understanding the factors that contribute to your problem will help you frame your own local analysis questions, determine good effectiveness measures, recognize key intervention points, and select appropriate responses.



Victims

In 2005, across all types of maltreatment, newborns to three-year-olds had the highest victimization rates.¹¹ More than half were seven or younger. About half of all victims were boys, and half girls. White and Hispanic children have lower victimization rates than children of other ethnicities. The victim profile is somewhat different depending on the individual type of maltreatment:¹²

- **Physical abuse.** The risk of physical abuse decreases as the child gets older, although adolescents are also victims of it. Boys and girls are equally at risk of minor physical abuse, although boys are slightly more likely to sustain serious injuries. Physical abuse occurs disproportionately among economically disadvantaged families. Income also affects the severity of abuse.
- **Sexual abuse.** Children are at highest risk of sexual abuse from ages seven to 12, although sexual abuse among very young children does occur and is often undetected because of their inability to communicate what is happening to them. Sexual abuse victims tend to be selected because they are vulnerable in some way (e.g., very young, passive, quiet, needy). Girls are significantly more likely to be sexually abused than boys, although it is possible that boys are simply less likely to report their victimization.
- **Neglect.** The risk of neglect generally declines with age. The mean age of victims of neglect is six years old. Boys and girls are equally at risk of neglect.

Children are never responsible for their victimization, but certain characteristics increase their vulnerability. Children's need for attention and affection is their single most exploitable characteristic.¹³ Particularly in the case of sexual abuse, a trusted adult may take advantage of a child's natural curiosity, desire to be included, and need for affection. The relationship between children and their caretakers makes it difficult for children to interpret what is happening to them as "abuse." A victim may also feel a sense of loyalty to the abuser, and while the victim may want the abuse to stop, he or she may not want the perpetrator to be punished.



Children with disabilities are extremely dependent on adults, and this dependence limits their ability to protect themselves and, in some situations, their ability to disclose what is happening to them.

Repeat Victimization

For many children who have experienced maltreatment, the efforts of police, child protective services, and other social services have been insufficient to prevent repeat victimization. In 2005, approximately 6 percent of victims experienced another incident of abuse or neglect within six months of a substantiated finding of maltreatment.¹⁴ One study found that the highest risk of subsequent abuse was within 30 to 60 days after the initial report. Situations that increased the risk of subsequent victimization included caretaker substance abuse and criminal behavior, and the lack of police involvement in the initial investigation.¹⁵

Perpetrators

Child abuse occurs in all cultural, ethnic, occupational, and socioeconomic groups. A parent's likelihood of mistreating his or her children is rarely the result of any single factor, but rather results from a combination of circumstances and personality types. While certain factors may be prevalent among perpetrators, the mere presence of a situation or particular trait does not mean that maltreatment will always occur.¹⁶

- **Physical abuse.**¹⁷ Caretakers who physically abuse their children tend to experience high stress (e.g., from single-parenting, health problems, unemployment, poverty) and may have poorly developed coping skills. They may also struggle with personality factors such as low self-esteem, poor impulse control, depression, anxiety, and low frustration tolerance. Their expectations for their child may exceed the child's developmental capacity. As a result, they may not interact well with their child and tend to use more punitive discipline. Perhaps because mothers spend more time with their children, perpetrators are slightly more likely to be female than male. Further, normal adolescent defiance and rebellion increases



family tension and may frustrate parents, who respond with excessive punishment. When confronted, physically abusive caretakers tend to offer illogical, unconvincing, or contradictory explanations for the child's injury.

- **Sexual abuse.** Sexual abusers are usually in a position of authority or trust over their victims. They are usually male and typically in their early 30s, although a significant proportion are adolescents (e.g., siblings or babysitters).¹⁸ Offenders who victimize family members tend to have only one or two victims (usually female), while non-relative offenders tend to have a much larger number of victims (usually male).¹⁹ Their feelings of inadequacy, depression, isolation, rigid values, and deviant arousal patterns contribute to their offending. Once they have selected a vulnerable victim, perpetrators generally “groom” the victim by progressing from nonsexual touching to sexual activity. They may use their authority to force their victims to participate, or may use various forms of enticements and coercion. Using bribes, threats, isolation, or physical aggression, perpetrators also persuade their victims to remain silent about the abuse so that other adults cannot intervene. Sexual abusers tend to rationalize and minimize their behavior, deny the sexual intent, or project blame onto the victim.²⁰ That said, most sexual abusers are not attracted exclusively to children (that is, they are also sexually attracted to adults), and they have relatively low recidivism rates, particularly as they get older.²¹
- **Neglect.** Single female caretakers are mostly likely to be reported for neglecting their children. Younger mothers, those with large families, and those who experienced neglect themselves are also more likely to neglect their children's needs. Economic hardship and isolation from social activities and peers are also contributing factors. They may also have a substance abuse problem that limits their ability to care for themselves and creates a chaotic lifestyle that compromises their parenting abilities.



*Family Factors*²²

Children in single-parent families may be at higher risk of physical abuse and neglect, although the effects of poverty, stress, social isolation, and lack of support are all contributing factors. Risk is reduced for the children of single mothers when the children have a relationship with their fathers. In two-parent families, the risk of maltreatment is greater if marital conflict or domestic violence is also present. Neglectful parents tend to have more children and more people living in the household. Neglected children's homes are characterized by chaos and an ever-changing constellation of adult and child residents.

*Environmental Factors*²³

Families living in areas challenged by poverty and unemployment, particularly when coupled with the individual and family factors described above, are at higher risk of child abuse and neglect. The degree of social support available to parents, along with community attitudes about raising children and using punishment, can also contribute to the risk of child maltreatment.



Understanding Your Local Problem

The information provided above is only a generalized description of child abuse and neglect in the home. You must combine the basic facts with a more specific understanding of your local problem. Carefully analyzing your local problem will help you develop a more effective response strategy.

Stakeholders

Anyone addressing this problem should be aware of the many resources available, particularly in fields other than law enforcement. In addition to criminal justice agencies, the following groups have an interest in the child maltreatment problem, and you should consider them for the contribution they might make to gathering information about the problem and responding to it:

Child protective services

- Local child protective services often share the statutory responsibility for responding to child abuse with police agencies.
- Child protective services workers have significant expertise in victimology, interviews with young children, and typical reactions of abusing and nonabusing parents.

Schools

- Teachers, guidance counselors, and administrators have daily contact with children and are likely to note behavioral changes that could indicate abuse at home.
- Schools may implement responses targeting potential abuse victims.

Health care providers

- Some health care providers are injury experts and may be able to offer an opinion on whether injuries are consistent with parents' explanations for them.



Mental health providers

- Abuse allegations may first be disclosed to counselors or psychologists, who will then contact child protective services or police for an immediate response.
- Mental health professionals will implement responses designed to reduce individual risk factors present for abusive caretakers.

Social services agencies

- Families who neglect children's basic needs may need access to a range of social services to support the family structure. Representatives of these agencies can contribute concrete resources to family safety plans.

Foster-care licensing agencies

- When children are in immediate danger, you may need to remove them from the home and temporarily place them in foster care. Representatives of licensing agencies can ensure that sufficient emergency resources are available locally.

Faith-based organizations

- Churches, synagogues, and other faith-based institutions may work with parents to reduce individual risk factors.
- These groups may implement responses targeting potential abuse victims.

Employers and business associations

- Family stress related to employment demands can increase the risk of abuse and neglect. Local employers may be able to develop a range of support services designed to reduce these risks.

Daycare providers and babysitters

- These people often have unique access to and insight about family dynamics.



Asking the Right Questions

The following are some critical questions you should ask in analyzing your particular problem of child abuse and neglect in the home, even if the answers are not always readily available. Your answers to these and other questions will help you choose the most appropriate set of responses later on.

Incidents

- How many suspected child abuse and neglect reports do police receive? How many do child protective services receive? To what extent do the agencies cross-report?
- How often do police encounter and identify suspected child abuse or neglect during the course of their routine duties? On what types of calls or during what types of activities do suspicions arise?
- How often does a single suspected child abuse and neglect report involve multiple children? How many total children are involved across all cases reported?
- What proportion are reports of physical abuse? Sexual abuse? Neglect? To what extent do these types of maltreatment co-occur?
- Among physical abuse cases, what types of injuries do victims sustain? How many incidents involve bruises, lacerations, burns, broken bones, head trauma, death, etc.?
- Among sexual abuse cases, what types of injuries do victims sustain? How many involve physical injuries, sexually transmitted disease, pregnancy, etc.?
- Among neglect cases, what basic needs do caretakers neglect? How many involve food, clothing, shelter, supervision, education, medical treatment, etc.?
- Who reports incidents to police? To child protective services? Does the reporting source vary across the types of maltreatment?



- What groups of mandated reporters appear to be underrepresented? What reasons do they give for failing to report suspected abuse?
- What proportion of reports do child protective services accept for assessment or investigation? What proportion do police investigate? Do they conduct any of these investigations jointly?
- What proportion of reported families has previous referrals to police or child protective services? What actions were taken in the original cases?
- How many referrals to child protective services are substantiated? For what types of maltreatment?

Victims

- What is the average age of physical abuse victims? At what victims' ages do referrals for physical abuse tend to cluster?
- What is the proportion of boys versus girls among physical abuse victims? What is the racial and ethnic composition of these victims?
- What is the average age of sexual abuse victims? At what victims' ages do referrals for sexual abuse tend to cluster?
- What is the proportion of boys versus girls among sexual abuse victims? What is the racial and ethnic composition of these victims?
- What is the average age of neglect victims? At what victims' ages do referrals for neglect tend to cluster?
- What is the proportion of boys versus girls among neglect victims? What is the racial and ethnic composition of these victims?
- What proportion of maltreatment victims is developmentally, cognitively, or physically disabled?



Offenders

- What is the average age of physical abusers? What is their racial and ethnic composition? What proportion is male versus female?
- What is the relationship of the physical abuser to the victim?
- For how long does the physical abuse occur? What types of instruments do abusers use to inflict injury? In what situations does the abuse occur?
- What proportion of perpetrators has substance abuse problems? What proportion has diagnosed mental health conditions? What proportion has chronic health problems?
- What are the key sources of stress among physical abusers? Unemployment? Single parenting? Poverty? Domestic violence?
- What is the average age of sexual abusers? What is their racial and ethnic composition? What proportion is male versus female?
- What is the relationship of the sexual abuser to the victim?
- How does the sexual abuse begin? How does the perpetrator “groom” the victim? When and why does the sexual abuse stop?
- If a nonoffending caretaker is present, is he or she aware that abuse is occurring?
- What is the average age of those alleged to have neglected their children? What is the perpetrators’ racial and ethnic composition? What proportion is male versus female?
- What are the key sources of stress among those alleged to have neglected their children? What proportion is unemployed? Single parents? Living in poverty?
- Does the neglectful caretaker have a substance abuse problem? Is he or she involved in crime?
- How many people live in the households in which children are being neglected? Of what ages? How stable is the occupancy?



Locations/Times

- Do reports of suspected child abuse and neglect cluster in a specific geographic area? What are this area's characteristics?
- Are there any seasonal patterns identified in the reports of suspected child abuse and neglect?
- On what days of the week and at what times of the day do referrals requiring an immediate police response tend to occur?
- What proportion of referrals identifies a location outside of the family's home?

Current Responses

- Is there an organized partnership among stakeholders in your jurisdiction? What professions are included? Are any key agencies missing?
- Is there any written agreement about how the group will operate? Do they follow it?
- What problems has this partnership experienced in adequately responding to child abuse and neglect?
- How often must police respond to the scene of reported child abuse or neglect without support from a child protective services worker? Under what conditions does this occur?
- Why do police accompany child protective services workers (e.g., to ensure access to the location or possible victims, to act as a stabilizing presence, or to protect workers in a dangerous neighborhood)?
- How many officers have special expertise in child abuse and neglect? What sort of training does the average line officer receive? What sort of training do specialists receive?
- How often do police remove children from the home? What is the basis for this decision?
- What services are provided to victims of physical abuse? Sexual abuse? Neglect?
- What services are provided to perpetrators of physical abuse? Sexual abuse? Neglect?



- How often do police arrest suspected perpetrators? How often do prosecutors prosecute suspected perpetrators? In what situations do prosecutors decide not to go forward with prosecution?
- What sorts of penalties do courts impose on those convicted of child abuse and neglect?
- What other responses have been implemented to address the problem of child abuse and neglect? Which have been effective? Which have not, and why?

Measuring Your Effectiveness

Measurement allows you to determine to what degree your efforts have succeeded, and suggests how you might modify your responses if they are not producing the intended results. You should take measures of your problem *before* you implement responses, to determine how serious the problem is, and *after* you implement them, to determine whether they have been effective. You should take all measures in both the target area and the surrounding area. For more detailed guidance on measuring effectiveness, see the Problem-Solving Tools guide, *Assessing Responses to Problems: An Introductory Guide for Police Problem-Solvers*.

The following are potentially useful measures of the effectiveness of responses to child abuse and neglect in the home:

- Reduced number of suspected child abuse and neglect reports (however, if reporting protocols are not fully intact, you may initially experience an increase in the number of reported cases)
- Reduced number of children who are revictimized, even after contact with police and child protective services
- Shorter durations of abuse (in other words, police and child protective services become aware of and intervene in suspected abuse cases sooner)
- Reduced number of child fatalities caused by child abuse and neglect



- Reduced number and severity of injuries caretakers inflict on children
- Reduced number of children whose caretakers are not fulfilling their basic needs
- Reduced number of children for whom removal from the home is required to protect their safety
- Increased number of caregivers who proactively seek parenting support and other services to alleviate family stress.



Responses to the Problem of Child Abuse and Neglect in the Home

Your analysis of your local problem of child abuse and neglect in the home should give you a better understanding of the factors contributing to it. Once you have analyzed your local problem and established a baseline for measuring effectiveness, you should consider possible responses to address the problem.

The following response strategies provide a foundation of ideas for addressing your particular problem. These strategies are drawn from a variety of research studies and police reports. Several of these strategies may apply to your community's problem. It is critical that you tailor responses to local circumstances, and that you can justify each response based on reliable analysis. In most cases, an effective strategy will involve implementing several different responses. Law enforcement responses alone are seldom effective in reducing or solving the problem. Do not limit yourself to considering what police can do: carefully consider whether others in your community share responsibility for the problem and can help police better respond to it. The responsibility of responding, in some cases, may need to be shifted toward those who have the capacity to implement more effective responses. (For more detailed information on shifting and sharing responsibility, see Response Guide No. 3, *Shifting and Sharing Responsibility for Public Safety Problems*).



General Considerations for an Effective Response Strategy

§One local Area Child Protection Committee in the United Kingdom developed a public awareness campaign using the slogan “The difference between child abuse and child protection could be you.” Posters created by local art students were placed in supermarkets, shopping centers, and public health centers. They provided the contact numbers for police and local child protective teams. An information kit titled “Knowing the Basics” also provided the public with information on the characteristics of child abuse and how community members could report it (Davies 2004).

1. **Reducing community risk factors for child abuse and neglect.** Some of the risk factors for child abuse and neglect are related to the overall characteristics of the communities where families live. For example, families living in poverty or challenged by unemployment experience higher stress levels that can undermine healthy parenting. Responses that address communities’ economic well-being can have individual-level impacts that may reduce the incidence of maltreatment. Similarly, efforts to stabilize housing opportunities and to restrict the availability of drugs and alcohol within the community may enhance individual protective factors.²⁴
2. **Educating the public about the problem of child abuse and neglect.** The key to addressing child abuse and neglect is to ensure that police and other agencies responsible for responding to it are informed of families in need of intervention. Professionals and community residents are the main conduits of this information and thus must be aware of the problem and how to report their suspicions that a child is being abused or neglected.[§] This information can be conveyed through public service announcements, press releases, posters and billboards, or television documentaries, all of which raise community awareness of maltreatment as a public issue and of the various resources available.²⁵

In addition to informing the general public, targeted efforts can be made to ensure that children learn basic concepts of safety, appropriate contact with parents, and how to ask for help if they feel they have been mistreated. Particularly in the prevention of child sexual abuse, children must learn appropriate behavioral limits. Although increased knowledge does not necessarily result in safer behavior among potential victims, better outcomes have been found when parents participate in the program and when teachers integrate safety concepts into everyday teaching.²⁶



3. Clarifying mandatory child-abuse reporting laws.

Subjectivity and ambiguity in mandatory child-abuse reporting laws contribute to the failure to report suspected abuse.²⁷ Not only do these laws need to be clear, but also they should be streamlined to ensure response efficiency. Some states require residents to report *all* allegations of child abuse and neglect—regardless of their severity—to the police. Such overly broad requirements can be counterproductive.²⁸ Without guidelines to filter the most serious allegations, reporting laws risk overwhelming police, who must review numerous cases only to decide which ones to investigate.

Conversely, some reporting laws are overly narrow, requiring only a small subset of allegations to be reported to police (e.g., only those involving sexual abuse or fatalities). Such a restricted focus creates the risk that cases involving imminent danger or chronic patterns of less serious injuries will not benefit from police involvement. Reporting laws should require people to notify the police of serious injuries and cases in which imminent danger exists, along with cases that child protective services deem appropriate for police involvement.²⁹ Reporting laws must also clearly specify the point at which police must be notified.³⁰

4. Increasing line officers' awareness of suspicious injuries.

Incidents of child abuse and neglect often go undetected because police or other first responders coming into contact with children do not identify injuries, conditions, or behaviors as suspicious. Children sustain many accidental injuries, but caretakers may also inflict them. During their normal course of duty, responding to calls for service or functioning as school resource officers, police must take proactive steps to assess the condition of all children present.[§] When a child has an injury, police must ask caretakers to explain how the injury occurred, being attuned to implausible, illogical, or conflicting statements. From there, asking the child how he or she was injured may produce inconsistencies that suggest the injury was not accidental. There are many high-quality resources for police to develop skill in identifying suspicious injuries.^{§§}

[§]The LaCrosse (Wisconsin) Police Department noted that children in families where domestic violence occurred were 15 times more likely to experience child abuse. In response, the department's Domestic Abuse Reduction Team revised its standard report to note the children's presence at domestic violence incidents, even those who were not directly involved. Detectives follow up on the children's condition after the initial visit and also notify the prosecutor of the children's presence so that their needs can be included in diversion agreements (LaCrosse Police Department, 1999).

^{§§}Resources for identifying suspicious injuries include Farley and Reece (2002); California Attorney General's Office, Crime and Violence Prevention Center (2006); and U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (1997).



§This guide offers only general guidance—one resource for more specific interview protocols and guidelines is the American Prosecutors Research Institute (2004).

5. **Creating police agency policy regarding child abuse and neglect.** Written policies help to establish professional standards and can elevate the quality of police investigations. Policy statements should include clear direction on the steps police must take when a suspected child abuse or neglect report comes to their attention.³¹ They should also provide police with specific guidelines for making crucial decisions such as removing a child from the home or arresting a suspect.³²

6. **Increasing the reliability of statements made by victims of child abuse and neglect.**

Interviewing skills. Poorly conducted interviews can alienate and upset child victims. Failing to adapt interview techniques to the special needs of child victims can lead to an inaccurate understanding of the facts and can create opportunities for inconsistencies and errors that may be challenged in court.[§] Common errors in interviewing children include reinforcing certain answers, relaying what others believe about the allegation, and asking complicated questions.³³ The reliability of victims' statements is enhanced when police do the following:³⁴

- Make the interview setting child-friendly.
- Recognize the developmental capabilities of children of different ages.
- Exercise patience when asking the child to explain what happened.
- Avoid “why” questions and focus instead on clear, open-ended questions about salient events.
- Make efforts to offset any guilt the victim may experience for “causing trouble.”

Training. Numerous training programs to enhance interviewers' skills are available. They should be grounded in child development and best-practice research. Not only should courses present information on legal issues, child-abuse dynamics, child development, evidence-gathering, and interviewing skills, but also they should provide many opportunities for attendees to practice the skills they have



learned and to receive specific feedback from trained observers.³⁵ Holding a single, intensive training session is certainly efficient, but breaking the course down into phases allows attendees to apply the new skills in the field and then return to training to work through any difficulties they experienced.

Several studies have found that training programs can increase knowledge while having only a limited effect on practice. For example, a study of one such program found that interview training did not impact key interviewing skills such as the types of questions that should be asked or the length of the interview, nor did the training substantially improve interviewers' ability to gather useful information.³⁶ Outcomes can be improved with highly structured protocols, competency-based assessments, and regular supervision and feedback.

*Videotaping.*³⁷ You should use videotapes of a child victim's statements selectively. Advocates hold that videotape yields a more accurate and credible rendering of what happened and can discourage victims from recanting as the trial date approaches. Further, videotaping holds interviewers accountable for how they conduct the interview and can later be used as a training aid. Opponents of videotaping victims' statements hold that court proceedings tend to focus on inconsistencies and interviewers' mistakes, rather than focusing on the substance of what the child reports. Not only does the interviewer need to be trained to use the technology effectively, but also the viewer must be trained in how to interpret young children's language and nonverbal cues. In practice, professionals generally indicate that videotaped statements are superior to handwritten notes, but that the technical quality is extremely important. Videotaped statements' effect on prosecutorial outcomes is unknown.



Specific Responses to Child Abuse and Neglect in the Home

§The Reno (Nevada) Police Department created a “Knock and Talk” program that pairs a police officer with a public health nurse to check on the welfare of families living in local motels. These families sometimes fail to provide for their children’s medical needs or engage in harmful parenting practices. Being alert to the signs of mistreatment, the police-nurse team can identify families who need help (Crane and Dedel Johnson, 2000).

7. **Creating multidisciplinary teams to respond to child maltreatment allegations.** No single agency can fully respond to child mistreatment allegations. Many jurisdictions have involved a wide array of professionals in the team tasked with responding to child maltreatment. Medical and dental professionals, coroners and medical examiners, mental health workers, victim advocates, prosecutors, and teachers and guidance counselors all have a unique skill set to apply to the problem of child maltreatment.^{38,§} Not surprisingly, complex child abuse investigations are difficult to coordinate, and some agencies may overstep the boundaries of others, creating tension in an already difficult situation.

In the initial team discussions, you should identify failings of the current process for investigating and responding to child maltreatment. Protocols for remedying these problems should be sufficiently broad to cover a variety of situations, yet specific enough to offer clear direction for team members by answering the questions of who, what, when, where, and how each member should respond.³⁹ Teams need to develop strategies for promoting teamwork, preventing burnout, and resolving conflict. Teams should also consult local counsel to address any confidentiality issues that may prevent full communication among team members.

Multidisciplinary teams serve two key purposes.⁴⁰ First, their primary function can be investigative, meaning that they identify new cases and review those under investigation and pending court. Team input ensures that key issues do not fall through the cracks. Team interviews, led by a single team member and conducted in front of a one-way mirror or on CCTV, can reduce the number of separate interviews needed to gather information from victims, suspects, and witnesses.⁴¹ Second, using information gained from the interviews, the team can also engage in service planning, committing a variety of therapeutic and other support services to meet the family’s needs.



Although there are many benefits to working collaboratively, multidisciplinary teams are not without challenges.⁴² From the police perspective, child protective services workers are not focused on collecting evidence, may unwittingly overlook important cues, or may permit the suspect to obstruct the investigation. Most child protective services use a team approach and require multiple consultations before acting, which may frustrate police who are often used to working independently and making decisions at the scene. These same dynamics can frustrate child protective services workers. Perhaps most seriously, applying more-rigorous criminal justice standards of evidence may improperly influence child protective services workers, who then fail to substantiate cases in which children are at risk of future maltreatment.⁴³

Research has shown that multidisciplinary team intervention leads to a reduced number of cases in which victims, suspects, and witnesses undergo multiple interviews; increased numbers of sexual abuse victims receiving therapeutic services; shorter caseworker response times; more-thorough investigations (e.g., longer ones with more contacts and more face-to-face interviews); improved criminal justice outcomes (e.g., confessions, guilty pleas, and prosecutions); and increased numbers of substantiated child protective services cases.⁴⁴

Joint investigations by police and child protective services workers.

At the most basic level, these teams should identify the dual responsibilities of police and child protective services workers when initially responding. In the United States, both law enforcement and child protective services are legally mandated to intervene in cases of suspected child abuse. One problem parallel mandates creates is the need for multiple people to interview the victim. Not only is repeating the same basic questions inefficient, but also repeated interviewing can distress the victim. Police and child protective services are alike in some ways, but different in others: both are dedicated to protecting children and both seek to learn the truth about the allegations made. But child protective services are primarily concerned



with assessing the child's environment and planning to ensure future safety, while police are looking for evidence of a specific crime that could lead to an arrest.⁴⁵

While the potential for duplication and interference certainly exists, the shared responsibility also creates an opportunity for collaboration that improves outcomes for both agencies. Each agency brings its own style and skill set to the problem of responding to child maltreatment. These approaches can be complementary and supportive, once each agency gains understanding and respect for the other's approach. Some police assume that child protective services workers fundamentally oppose pursuing criminal charges because of their unyielding commitment to maintaining the family unit. They also fear that child protective services workers may inadvertently interfere with evidence collection and hinder police efforts to file criminal charges. On the other hand, child protective services workers often believe that police always want to file charges, even when criminal action would not be in the family's best interest. Child protective services workers may also fear that police may take a heavy-handed approach that will ultimately antagonize the family and reduce opportunities for meaningful intervention. In reality, neither agency is one-dimensional and, with practice, each agency can learn to respect and support the mission of the other.⁴⁶

The law requires some police agencies to collaborate with child protective services, while others choose to do so because of the many benefits these collaborations provide, such as easier information-sharing, more thorough investigations, additional opportunities for mutual support, a special focus on the developmental needs of child victims, and greater accountability.⁴⁷

A written interagency agreement should precisely articulate the specifics of conducting joint investigations. The agreement should present the reporting procedures as defined by law and should create a specific protocol for how the agencies, together, will approach each case (e.g., what roles they will play, how they



will notify each other, which cases they will jointly investigate, what steps they will take at each stage of the investigation, what time frames they will use, how they will keep records, who will be responsible for what, what conflict resolution procedures they will use).⁴⁸

Situations in Which Police Presence at Initial Contact is Strongly Recommended

- The case is serious enough to warrant arrest.
- Police cannot reach child protective services and they need an immediate response.
- A child is endangered and the child protective services worker is not permitted to enter the home.
- A child must be placed in protective custody against the parents' wishes.
- The suspect may flee.
- Evidence must be preserved.
- The child protective services worker needs protection or order must otherwise be maintained.

Adapted from Besharov (1990), p. 10.

Most agencies with strong interagency agreements create formal teams of police and child protective services workers.[§] The permanent assignments and high-level contact breed familiarity and trust. These teams should have access to high-quality training programs that allow all personnel to become familiar with the language, techniques, processes, and objectives of the other agency.^{§§}

You must conduct joint investigations within a larger context of interagency collaborations. Case review meetings including representatives of all agencies are needed to sustain momentum, make decisions that meet each agency's needs, and troubleshoot obstacles that arise. You should hold strategy meetings before interviewing victims, suspects, and witnesses and subsequently review the information obtained.⁴⁹ Studies of effective police

[§]In 1998, New York City's child welfare agency, police department, and district attorney's office launched the Instant Response Team (IRT). Within two hours of an allegation of serious mistreatment (e.g., fatality, sexual abuse, or severe injury), child welfare, police, and often a prosecutor responded to the location to conduct joint interviews of the possible victim in a child-friendly setting. In most of the IRT's cases, the police removed the suspect, rather than the child, from the home (Ross, Levy, and Hope, 2004).

The Vancouver (British Columbia) Police and the Ministry of Children and Families created "Car 86," which dispatched a police officer and social workers team to the scene of all domestic disputes, family violence calls, and child welfare matters that involved violence. For both team members, "Car 86" formed an information conduit for normally confidential information about previous child welfare and police involvement with people at the location. Those assigned to "Car 86" also shared their newfound expertise with other members of each agency during routine consultation (Ennis, 2000; Edmonton Police Service, 1998).

^{§§}The Los Angeles County (California) Sheriff's Department created an investigation academy for nonpolice members of its multidisciplinary team. A 40-hour course provided training in investigation skills, report writing, courtroom demeanor, interview skills, substance abuse recognition, detection of deception and lying, evidence collection, and collaborative investigation strategies. This course is now a required component for all new child protective services workers (Baca, Jendrucko, and Scott, 2001).



[§]The Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department created an "831 Notification System" for field personnel who respond to child abuse allegations. The information system provides the responding officer with the history of activity at the location, describing prior events. Armed with this information, the responding officer has more current and accurate data about the residence's occupants and may be better able to anticipate events (Baca, Jendrucko, and Scott, 2001).

and child protective services collaborations have found that cooperation is maximized when police do not dominate the interviews, allowing child protective services workers sufficient time to gather needed information.⁵⁰ Similarly, police should be trained in child development so that they structure developmentally appropriate interview questions.

Police specialists. Even if police departments cannot or will not create formal partnerships with child protective services and other agencies, they can still enhance the quality of their response to maltreatment allegations by dispatching specially trained officers to the scene of a child abuse or neglect incident. In addition, providing responding officers with specific child maltreatment-related information regarding the location can improve response.[§] When officers have core training in the areas discussed above, they can better respond to and investigate allegations on their own. Depending on your department's size, you may train individual officers or create a specialized unit. Given the stress of these types of cases, child maltreatment specialists should have access to support groups and the department's psychologist.⁵¹ Although specialists do bring a unique skill set and may enhance the quality of the department's response, using specialists can also create a gulf between them and regular uniformed officers who would benefit from having many of the same skills.⁵²

8. **Conducting child fatality reviews.** A child's death is the most tragic outcome of child abuse and neglect. When it occurs, a team composed of police, child protective services representatives, prosecutors, coroner(s), and other medical experts should review the case's circumstances to detect any discrepancies between policy and practice and any gaps in communication that may have prevented the child's death. Improvements flowing from these reviews can prevent future deaths. Once formed, child fatality review teams must identify the types of cases they will review. Some teams meet regularly; others meet only after a death occurs. In most jurisdictions,



members are not paid for their service. Perhaps as a result, high turnover rates and unstable membership pose a challenge to many teams.⁵³

9. **Enhancing cultural competence.** Ignorance of the dynamics within local immigrant cultures can hamper the investigation of possible maltreatment. Being culturally competent requires far more than learning how to greet or talk to people from various cultures.[§] Investigating officers must also do the following:⁵⁴

- Recognize that immigrants may create stories and dates to comply with the law and to provide information often lost or destroyed in war-torn countries. Officers should ask for the truth about things particularly relevant to the case, but should not press for the truth about inconsequential details.
- Understand what information they must report to immigration agencies and inform the family accordingly.
- Ask for the family's language preference and use it by contracting with an interpreter, if necessary. People's true personalities are much more apparent when they can speak in their native language. Further, you should provide all documents in the family's native language so they have adequate time to read, digest, and consult others regarding the information.

10. **Creating child advocacy centers.** Aiming to reduce the trauma that often accompanies a child maltreatment investigation, many jurisdictions have created child advocacy centers (CACs). These stand-alone programs usually involve police, child protective services workers, prosecutors, mental health professionals, medical professionals, and victim advocates. A team specially trained to interview child abuse victims works within a child-friendly environment, assessing needs and providing services.^{§§} CACs do not have uniform models, but rather play roles unique to the community's needs; however, they incorporate many practices with a solid research base and thus favorable case outcomes are likely.⁵⁵

§For tips on developing cultural competency in the Asian American community, see Hwang and Vang, 2009.

§§The Baltimore (Maryland) Police Department's Child Advocacy Network (CAN) is a neutral multidisciplinary setting where a licensed social worker or psychologist interviews victims of child sexual abuse and a forensic pediatrician examines them. The CAN minimizes both trauma and waiting time for victims and also allows patrol officers to return to service more quickly (Baltimore Police Department, 1997).



[§]The “Stop It Now!” helpline focuses on preventing child sexual abuse and offers free telephone support to those who are concerned about their own or others’ behavior (see www.stopitnow.org/help.html).

11. **Implementing home visitation programs.** Although police are rarely directly involved in them, home visitation programs are an essential component of a coordinated response to child abuse and neglect. Usually operated by public health agencies, home visitation programs provide services to pregnant mothers and families with newborns to reduce the risk of maltreatment. They may include information regarding parenting techniques and nonviolent discipline, child development, health, home safety, and access to local services. Jurisdictions implementing this response should attend closely to research identifying the essential elements of effective home visitation programs.⁵⁶ Families receiving high-quality home visitation services generate lower numbers of maltreatment reports than similarly situated families who do not receive such services.⁵⁷
12. **Improving family support systems to reduce family stressors.** Marital and family stressors are a major contributing factor to child abuse and neglect. Programs to alleviate these stressors and to provide family support can therefore reduce the incidence of child maltreatment. Again, although police will have a very limited, if any, role in these programs, they are an important part of a comprehensive response to child abuse and neglect. Social services, faith-based groups, and family services may provide parent support groups and parenting classes; child care, parent aid, and parent respite care; and programs to meet families’ basic needs for food, shelter, and clothing. Employers whose policies can help to ease the stress working parents experience can also support these efforts. Policies such as flexible schedules, parental leave, and employer-supported child care can remove a key stressor that contributes to child maltreatment.⁵⁸
13. **Offering confidential helpline assistance to those who see themselves at risk of abusing a child.** Parents and other caregivers may recognize their own vulnerabilities and inability to cope in certain situations. Offering a free, confidential telephone helpline where these individuals may seek advice, guidance and support may prevent their offending.[§] While rigorous research on the effectiveness of helplines has not



been conducted, some evidence has shown that at least some potential offenders will call to ask for assistance.⁵⁹ Helplines should be widely advertised and should offer callers follow-up services such as information and confidential counseling.

14. **Removing children from the home.** For many families, police contact and the crafting of a safety plan by child protective services workers may be sufficient to protect possible victims from future harm. For others, however, the children remain at risk of immediate harm. In these cases, police have the authority to remove children from the home and to place them in protective custody. All officers need to know the law in their state. Without this information, they risk leaving a child in a dangerous situation or removing a child illegally, both of which could result in civil liability for the officer and the department.⁶⁰

Police should not leave the scene until they are certain children remaining in the home will be safe from continued abuse, intimidation, or retaliation and will receive needed medical care.

Police should decide to remove a child from the home in concert with child protective services. If police remove the child, child protective services will usually identify a proper placement. Placements with friends or relatives are preferred over emergency foster or shelter care. Police should involve caretakers in the decision regarding emergency placement and should advise them of their legal rights. However, police should not try to rationalize the removal. Extensive explanations will not lessen the pain, fear, and hostility parents experience and can raise the child's anxiety.⁶¹ Police should also consult children and address their feelings of guilt or responsibility. Police can reduce the stress of removal by keeping siblings together and letting the children take a few favorite possessions.⁶²



For a number of reasons, removing a child from the home may be more traumatic than the abuse or neglect.⁶³ Many communities do not have sufficient facilities for emergency placements and child victims are improperly placed in detention facilities or hospitals. Other jurisdictions' service networks require transfer among multiple foster homes. Taken as a whole, removal severely stresses families already experiencing problems.

15. **Arresting and prosecuting child abusers.** If the facts warrant doing so, arresting the suspect may be a viable alternative to removing the child from the home. Arrest causes an immediate change in the environment and creates an opportunity to plan and implement a long-term rehabilitative program for the family.⁶⁴ However, arresting the suspected abuser is by no means the rule—child protective services rather than the criminal justice system handle the majority of cases of alleged maltreatment. That said, if the suspect is likely to flee, removing the suspect from the home is the only way to ensure the child's safety or preserve the peace. If the child's injuries are severe, or criminal prosecution is likely, arrest may be the most prudent police action.⁶⁵

Prosecution is the most consequential response to child abuse and neglect; unfortunately, these cases are also arguably the most difficult to prosecute. The cases are complex because prosecutors receive referrals from two different agencies (i.e., police and child protective services), both of which are involved with the investigation. Further, child abuse is often difficult to detect, and evidence is hard to get. As a result, it is difficult to determine whether a crime has occurred, and who is culpable. Child abuse and neglect prosecutions rely heavily on the victims' testimony, which is notoriously unpredictable. Although most substantiated cases of child abuse and neglect are not prosecuted, most of those that are result in a conviction.⁶⁶



Responses with Limited Effectiveness

16. **Transferring jurisdiction for all child abuse cases to law enforcement.** A few states have granted police agencies the sole responsibility for investigating allegations of child abuse and neglect, believing that delegation to a single agency will result in more timely and efficient investigations. However, research conducted on Florida's experience with this model found no improvements in the efficiency of investigations or the promptness of service delivery.⁶⁷ Further, the model had no impact on the rate of maltreatment or the severity of criminal justice sanctions.
17. **Containing sex offenders using offender restrictions and community awareness.** Federal law compels all states to pass legislation requiring sex offenders to register their addresses with local law enforcement agencies so that police can track and apprehend potential suspects. Federal law also allows states to distribute information to community residents about registered sex offenders who live nearby. These laws were designed to increase community awareness and to help residents avoid contact with potential offenders. Some states have also created exclusionary zones that prevent sex offenders from living near playgrounds, day care centers, schools, parks, and other areas where children congregate. These laws were intended to increase the distance between potential offenders and potential victims.

Research on the effectiveness of these policies in reducing recidivism is generally unresponsive, in part because the policies are generally not evidence-based nor do they reflect the actual risk to community safety posed by offenders of different risk levels. Rather, these policies are often based on false perceptions of the nature of sex offending.⁶⁸ For example, the laws themselves often rely on beliefs about "stranger danger," when in reality, most victims know their abusers.⁶⁹ Contrary to public expectations, some research has shown that recidivism



rates among sex offenders are relatively low compared with those of other violent offenders. Further, the research shows that these restrictions do little to address the root causes of sexual reoffending. Particularly when evaluating potential responses to sexual abuse by a caretaker in the home, registry and notification laws have a major disconnect with the likely victim pool of these perpetrators.⁷⁰

Registry and notification laws also have many consequences policymakers have not anticipated. Notification can increase anxiety among community residents because the notice is not usually accompanied by practical information on how to reduce one's risk of harm.⁷¹ Residency restrictions have dire consequences for offenders, including the loss of employment, housing, and supportive family networks, which, paradoxically, increases the risk of reoffending. As more sex offenders cannot find a permanent residence, which may result in registries' including obsolete or falsified address information, police find it harder to keep track of them.



Appendix: Summary of Responses to Child Abuse and Neglect in the Home

The table below summarizes the responses to child abuse and neglect in the home, the mechanism by which they are intended to work, the conditions under which they ought to work best, and some factors you should consider before implementing a particular response. It is critical that you tailor responses to local circumstances, and that you can justify each response based on reliable analysis. In most cases, an effective strategy will involve implementing several different responses. Law enforcement responses alone are seldom effective in reducing or solving the problem.

Response No.	Page No.	Response	How It Works	Works Best If...	Considerations
<i>General Considerations for an Effective Response Strategy</i>					
1	22	Reducing community risk factors for child abuse and neglect	It reduces individual risk factors and enhances individual protective factors	...strategies target known risk factors for abuse, such as poverty and the availability of drugs and alcohol	Changes in child maltreatment rates may not be readily apparent, and other factors may hinder the interventions' effectiveness
2	22	Educating the public about the problem of child abuse and neglect	It increases professionals' and residents' willingness to report suspected abuse so that police and other agencies can intervene; it increases children's ability to set appropriate boundaries and to ask for help when needed	...police provide professionals and residents with specific information about how to make a report; agencies responsible for receiving reports are available 24 hours a day; teachers work safety concepts into everyday teaching; parents are involved	Some people may continue to neglect their reporting responsibilities; some children may not perceive what is happening to them as "abuse" and will not ask for help



Response No.	Page No.	Response	How It Works	Works Best If...	Considerations
3	23	Clarifying mandatory child-abuse reporting laws	It increases the likelihood that mandated reporters will alert police and child protective services of suspected abuse, as appropriate	...laws clearly state which types of suspected abuse must be reported to which agency; police receive reports about only the subset of serious cases	If laws are overly broad, police can be overwhelmed; if laws are overly narrow, cases suffer from a lack of useful police expertise; some individuals may continue to neglect their reporting responsibilities; it does not prevent maltreatment from occurring
4	23	Increasing line officers' awareness of suspicious injuries	It increases the likelihood that police will detect intentional injuries	...line officers are provided with real-world scenarios and concrete examples	Officers must have opportunities to apply the information they learned in training sessions; it does not prevent maltreatment from occurring
5	24	Creating police agency policy regarding child abuse and neglect	It establishes professional standards and elevates the quality of police investigations	...the policy provides clear guidance for key tasks and decision points; managers, investigators, and line officers are involved in its development	Officers must be equipped with the skills to carry out high-quality investigations; there must be sufficient personnel to respond to reports of suspected maltreatment; it does not address other agencies' responsibilities; it does not prevent maltreatment from occurring
6	24	Increasing the reliability of statements made by victims of child abuse and neglect	It results in better information on which to base decisions about services and criminal justice responses; it holds interviewers responsible for the skill with which they conduct interviews	...interviewers have opportunities to apply the skills they learn in training; interviewers receive quality supervision; the course is broken down into several phases; specific protocols are used; those viewing videotaped statements receive training on how to interpret what they see and hear	It may increase knowledge without affecting practice; those viewing videotaped statements may focus on less important details rather than the statement's substance



Response No.	Page No.	Response	How It Works	Works Best If...	Considerations
<i>Specific Responses to Child Abuse and Neglect in the Home</i>					
7	26	Creating multidisciplinary teams to respond to child maltreatment allegations	It focuses various professionals' unique skill sets on the problem; it reduces the number of interviews to which victims are subjected	...written protocols are sufficiently broad to cover a range of situations, yet specific enough to offer clear direction; strategies are developed to share information, promote teamwork, prevent burnout, and resolve conflict	Team members may unwittingly interfere in others' efforts; focusing training on a set of police specialists may dilute the expertise available department wide
8	30	Conducting child fatality reviews	It provides an opportunity to correct procedural problems or gaps in service delivery that could prevent future deaths	...multidisciplinary teams conduct the reviews; the types of cases to be reviewed are clearly delineated	High turnover among members makes it difficult for the team to develop effective protocols; it does not prevent the original fatality
9	31	Enhancing cultural competence	It allows police to develop improved rapport with families and leads to better-quality information on which to base decisions	...officers are willing to focus on the information needed for the investigation and to let inconsequential details pass; officers are honest about what information they must share with immigration agencies; officers accommodate the family's language preference; all documents are available in the family's native language	It may be difficult to accommodate everyone in areas with diverse immigrant populations; it takes time to develop expertise; officers must commit extra time to developing rapport
10	31	Creating child advocacy centers	It reduces the trauma victims suffer during the investigation	...a multidisciplinary team works in a child-friendly setting; waiting time for interviews and medical examinations is reduced; services are grounded in research on effective practices	It requires resources to establish and maintain; professionals assigned to the centers may feel isolated from their peers; it does not undo the original incidence of maltreatment



Response No.	Page No.	Response	How It Works	Works Best If...	Considerations
11	32	Implementing home visitation programs	Targets high-risk families to reduce the risks associated with child maltreatment	...services are initiated prenatally or at birth; families are identified using a standardized risk assessment; services are intensive and long-term; services support parent-child interactions; families are linked to other needed services; caseloads are limited	High-intensity services are resource-intensive; caretakers may not apply the skills they have learned or take advantage of the services offered
12	32	Improving family support systems to reduce family stressors	It targets the risk factors associated with child maltreatment	...the choice among services is customized to each family's constellation of risk factors	Many communities do not have an abundance of parent-focused services; caretakers may not apply the skills they have learned or take advantage of the services offered
13	32	Offering confidential telephone helpline assistance to those who see themselves at risk of abusing a child	It targets the risk factors associated with child maltreatment	...callers may remain anonymous; callers are offered follow-up counseling services	Limitations on confidentiality must be carefully considered
14	33	Removing children from the home	It eliminates the immediate risk of harm	...officers know the legal limits of their authority and make decisions in consultation with child protective services; parents are informed about what will occur; efforts are made to reduce victims' anxiety	Removal from home may be traumatic to the victim; some jurisdictions do not have adequate facilities for emergency placement; some children will be transferred among multiple placements, which increases the trauma; it adds additional stress to a family already experiencing problems
15	34	Arresting and prosecuting child abusers	It causes an immediate change in the environment; it creates an opportunity to plan a long-term rehabilitation program for the family; it provides specific deterrence to child abusers	...it is used as a last resort	It does not address underlying risk factors; prosecution is difficult because maltreatment is hard to detect and little evidence is available; relying on the testimony of child victims is notoriously difficult



Response No.	Page No.	Response	How It Works	Works Best If...	Considerations
<i>Responses with Limited Effectiveness</i>					
16	35	Transferring jurisdiction for all child abuse cases to law enforcement	It works on the assumption that police will provide higher-quality investigations than child protective services can		Some research has shown no improvements in the efficiency of investigations or the promptness of service delivery; it does not reduce maltreatment rates; it does not increase the severity of criminal justice sanctions
17	35	Containing sex offenders using offender restrictions and community awareness	It works on the assumption that knowledge of perpetrators' whereabouts will prevent future incidents, and that victims do not know their offenders		Research on the impact on recidivism rates is largely unresponsive; unforeseen consequences of these laws may actually increase risk factors for recidivism and make it more difficult for police to identify perpetrators' whereabouts



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