Tracking Child Abuse and Neglect: The Role of Multiple Data Sources in Improving Child Safety

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This Evidence to Action brief provides an overview of data collection systems and identifies strategies to improve tracking of child abuse and neglect cases.

Nearly one out of every 100 children in the United States were identified by state child protective service (CPS) agencies as victims of abuse and neglect in 2010.1 This is the lowest rate of reported maltreatment in 20 years, leading to speculation that child maltreatment is on the decline. Unfortunately, it is unclear if declines in CPS-reported cases can be interpreted as decreases in the actual incidence of maltreatment. CPS agencies can only report data based on cases they are aware of, and many children suffer from abuse and neglect without coming to the attention of CPS. The National Incidence Studies of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS), a periodic research effort mandated by Congress, has confirmed undercounting of child maltreatment by reporting a higher number of maltreated children using both CPS and non-CPS data sources.2-5 This can be an unsettling and unexpected finding for child welfare administrators attempting to use data to better understand prevalence of maltreatment in their jurisdiction, and more importantly improve outcomes for children.

National trends in child abuse and neglect are often based exclusively on CPS data. This practice hinders comprehensive tracking of child maltreatment in communities and detection of trends that are captured by agencies outside of child welfare. Studies relying on alternative data sources from public health have reported different trends in some forms of child maltreatment.6,7 The variation in reported prevalence from different sources highlights the importance of using multiple sources of information to better track child maltreatment at the population level.

The goal of child abuse and neglect data tracking or "surveillance" is to systematically collect, analyze, and interpret data in order to inform an effective response to child maltreatment at the population level. Surveillance systems are used routinely for population health issues such as seasonal influenza, in which multiple agencies contribute data to inform emergency preparedness and response initiatives. Developing surveillance systems that reliably and accurately capture population-level trends in child maltreatment can increase public awareness of the issue, maximize the impact of limited resources, and improve practices in child protection. Similar to other major population health issues, ongoing surveillance of child maltreatment can inform the development of policies that respond to the needs of children and families.

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