



Child Abuse and Neglect

After spiking in fiscal year (FY) 2009, substantiated cases of child abuse and neglect in the District returned to more historic levels in FY 2010. Data show that child abuse and neglect have been declining across the country, but there is no evidence of that trend in D.C.

The number of substantiated cases of child abuse and neglect in the District rose by 27 percent in FY 2009, as seen in Figure 1. This dramatic spike came after two consecutive years of decline in the number of substantiated cases reported the D.C. Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA). In FY 2010, the number of closed, substantiated cases dropped back down to 1,691, more in line with the levels from FY 2005–2008, but still slightly higher than in FY 2008.

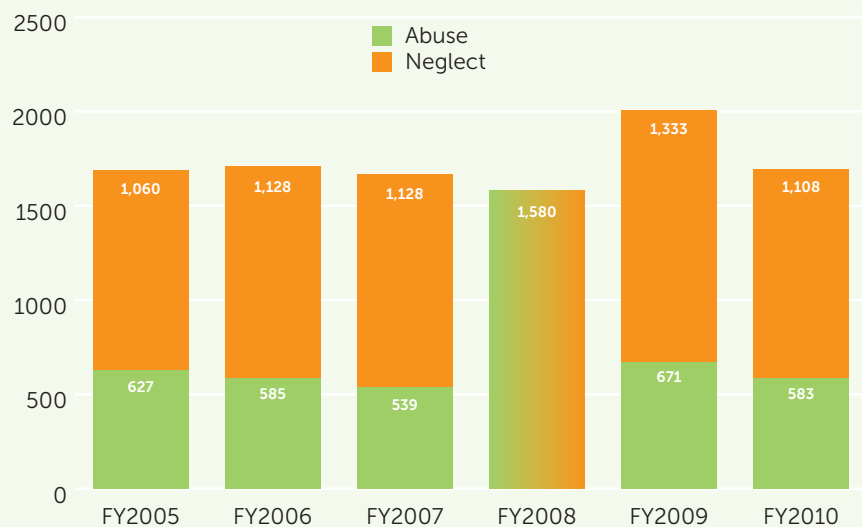
What factors contribute to the high rate of abuse and neglect in D.C.?

The rate of child abuse and neglect in D.C.—16.8 per 1,000 children in 2010¹—was higher than the rate of much larger metropolitan areas. In

2009, Cook County, Ill. (Chicago), had a rate of 5.8,² Dallas County, Texas, had a rate of 8.9,³ and 2010 Los Angeles County and Riverside County, California, had rates of 10.9 and 11.8, respectively.⁴ Rates in D.C. are likely higher due to a combination of risk factors, including high levels of poverty, unemployment, single parent households and substance abuse.⁵ The District's child poverty rate was at 29 percent in 2009, compared to the 20 percent national child poverty rate.⁶ D.C. families were also hit hard by the recession, and unemployment remains in the double-digits in many parts of the city.

In 2008, 41 percent of children in the District were in households without secure parental employment. By 2009, that figure had risen to

Figure 1: Substantiated Cases of Child Abuse and Neglect in D.C. (FY 2005–2010)



Source: District of Columbia Child and Family Services Agency.
Note: Only aggregate data are available for FY 2008.

We would like to thank the D.C. Child and Family Services Agency for providing information and data, and Children's Law Center and the Healthy Families/Thriving Communities Collaborative Council for their input. For more information, please contact Aparna Kumar, director of communications, at akumar@dckids.org.

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Box 1: Is child maltreatment declining nationally?

Annual national reporting on child maltreatment began in 1990 and in the two decades since, national data have shown a sharp decline in rates of child abuse. In particular, physical and sexual abuse rates have declined by more than half — 55 and 61 percent, respectively, from 1992 to 2009.¹ However, rates of neglect declined by only 10 percent during that time, with spikes following the recessions in 1990–91 and 2001,² though a recent study by the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia casts some doubt on the national decline, citing concerns about data quality, varying interpretation of terms by agencies and jurisdictions across the country, as well as an overall increase in reporting by agencies and hospitals.³ Other research suggests that the declining abuse rates reflected the economic expansion of the 1990s, and that neglect may be more sensitive to changing economic conditions.⁴

1. Finkelhor, D., Jones, L., & Shattuck, A. (2009). *Updated trends in child maltreatment, 2009*. Crimes Against Children Research Center, University of New Hampshire.

2. Ibid.

3. Sell, K., Zlotnik, S., Noonan, K., & Rubin, D. (2010). *The effect of the recession on child well-being: A synthesis of the evidence by PolicyLab, The Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia*.

4. Ibid.

44 percent.⁷ In 2010, 15 percent of children in D.C. had at least one unemployed parent, compared to 11 percent of all children nationally.⁸

Research has shown that recessions have a lag effect on child well-being.⁹ The most recent recession officially ended in June 2009, but it may take the most vulnerable families longer to recover. The effects of hardships on children may last for years or a lifetime.

What impact did the Banita Jacks case have on the District’s child welfare system?

In January 2008, the public learned about the horrific Banita Jacks case, in which four girls were murdered by their abusive mother. The case is likely a major factor in accounting for the sharp increase in substantiated cases of abuse and neglect in FY 2009. The Jacks tragedy focused a bright light on the District’s child welfare system, which failed in its obligation to protect the Jacks children. In the wake of the Jacks case, the public made more reports to the CFSA hotline. New reports of abuse and neglect to the hotline increased by nearly 31 percent from 2007 to 2009.¹⁰ A report by D.C.’s inspector general in April 2011 found that CFSA had failed to undertake necessary reforms following the Jacks case. In particular, the report recommended that the agency reduce time on less-critical cases received through the hotline and give social workers more time to close cases.

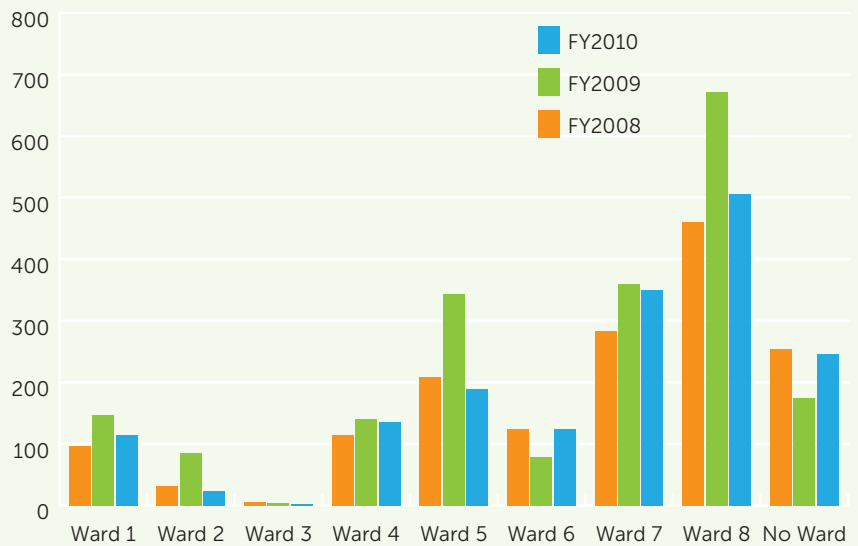
How does poverty affect child maltreatment rates?

Two of the strongest predictors of abuse and neglect are neighborhood and familial poverty.^{11,12} It is important to note that poverty in and of itself does not directly lead to child maltreatment. However, research reveals a strong link between a parent or caregiver’s ability to provide the basic necessities for his or her family — including, food, health care and housing — and a child’s current and future welfare.¹³ Parents and caregivers living in poverty are much more likely to be struggling with substance abuse or mental health issues, which increase the risk of child maltreatment. There may not be a direct link between employment status, but research has shown a link between the distress of the parent or caregiver and maltreatment.¹⁴

Unemployment increased in every ward in the District between December 2007 and December 2009, reaching nearly 30 percent in Ward 8. Ward 8 also had the highest number of substantiated cases of child abuse and neglect in the city in fiscal year 2009, at 671 cases, nearly twice as many compared with the next-highest ward, Ward 7. In contrast, wealthy Ward 3, where the unemployment rate hit only 3.2 percent at its high point in 2009, saw only four substantiated cases that year.



Figure 2: Substantiated Cases of Child Abuse and Neglect, by Ward (FY 2008–2010)



Source: D.C. Child and Family Services Administration.

How is CFSA addressing the challenges in D.C.?

CFSA is overseen by a federally appointed court monitor and must meet stringent operating requirements and report regularly on key performance measures. Federal oversight is the product of the long-running class action lawsuit *LaShawn A. v. Gray*. In the spring of 2011, the court monitor reported that CFSA had failed to meet the benchmarks and expressed concern about proposed budget cuts that would jeopardize child welfare.

While the agency has made strides in reducing social worker caseloads and streamlining the process for adoptions, advocates stress that CFSA needs to improve transparency and implement reforms aimed at preventing child abuse and keeping families together. In particular, the District has yet to effectively implement the Families Together Amendment Act of 2010, which would allow CFSA to triage hotline calls based on the apparent severity of each

case, a practice known as “differential response.” This best practice would improve the lives of children and families by allowing more children to remain safely at home while receiving services and supports. It would also save money in the long run as more children are kept together with their families and the agency is able to focus its resources on more critical cases.

In partnership with CFSA, a network of six independent nonprofits known as the Healthy Families/Thriving Communities Collaboratives provide support to vulnerable families to prevent child maltreatment and reduce the risk that children are removed from their homes. Despite budget cuts that have led to staff and program reductions at the Collaboratives, the number and rate of children placed in out-of-home care have been improving. In FY 2010, 2,092 D.C. children were in out-of-home foster care (a rate of 20.8), compared to 2,874 children in FY 2004 (a rate of 24.8).¹⁵



1. Rate calculated by the number of substantiated cases of child abuse and neglect divided by the child population for the given year and geography, multiplied by 1,000.

2. Voices for Illinois Children. (2011). Kids Count Data Center, Annie E. Casey Foundation

3. Center for Policy Priorities, (2011). Kids Count Data Center. Source data from the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services

4. Children Now. (2011). Kids Count Data Center. Source data from the California Department of Social Services & University of California at Berkeley, Child Welfare Dynamic Report System.

5. Goldman, J., Salus, M.K., Wolcott, D., Kennedy, K.Y. (2003). What factors contribute to child abuse and neglect? Chapter 5 in *A coordinated response to child abuse and neglect: The foundation for practice*. Chapter five: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Office on Child Abuse and Neglect.

6. Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2011). Factbook (forthcoming)

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. Personal communication with CFSA. (2011). *FACES report INT001 and INV011*.

11. See endnote 3.

12. Sedlak, A.J., McPherson, K., & Das, B. (2010). *Supplementary Analysis of Race Differences in Child Maltreatment Rates in the NIS-4*.

13. See endnote 3.

14. See endnotes 3 and 10.

15. D.C. Child and Family Services Agency. (2011). Annual public report, FY 2010. Rates (number of children per 1,000 population) were calculated using the Census Bureau population estimates.