

NATIONAL COALITION FOR CHILD PROTECTION REFORM

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SERIAL STATISTICS ABUSERS AT EVERY CHILD MATTERS ARE AT IT AGAIN.

**After 45 minutes of phony comparisons of child abuse death rates, ECM's director
admits there is no validity to such comparisons**

By Richard Wexler, NCCPR Executive Director

The group calling itself Every Child Matters held a telephone news conference Tuesday, largely to rehash and repackage the hype and hysteria about child abuse deaths that it [failed to sell last year](#).

Today's news conference is one more attempt by ECM to substitute that hype and hysteria for the kinds of real solutions that really make children safe. (And make no mistake, this is ECM Director Michael Petit's show, though he now has a few other groups with him. Notably absent, as noted below, are some of the biggest mainstream groups in the field.)

It is one more attempt to stampede states into tearing apart more families. That only overloads child welfare systems making it even less likely that children in real danger will be found. That's why over and over again these [foster-care panics](#) are followed by increases in deaths of children previously known to child welfare systems.

Thus, one of the greatest dangers to children is the hype and hysteria fomented by groups like ECM. Though they mean well, their ends-justify-the-means mentality and serial statistics abuse make all children less safe.

Any reporter considering taking their data at face value also should consider ECM's track record. ECM was forced to retract an entire section of the report they issued last year, concerning child welfare spending, after NCCPR pointed out that their data were out of date, incomplete and misleading. Details are in [these posts to the NCCPR Child Welfare Blog](#) (best read from the bottom up).

Reporters also might want to contact the *Kennebec Journal* in Augusta Maine. That newspaper was badly burned when they ran a huge story based on ECM's inaccurate numbers – requiring them to run another huge story setting the record straight after ECM's error

became apparent. (The stories do not appear to be available online, but NCCPR can provide them on request.)

ECM's LATEST DISTORTIONS

Now ECM again is trying to compare rates of child abuse deaths among the states even though that is impossible – and ECM has essentially admitted as much.

Last year, in explaining why they claim child abuse deaths are underestimated, ECM itself cited:

"differing definitions of child abuse and neglect among the states, varying data collection methodologies and inconsistent record-keeping across the country due to a lack of enforceable standards."

For precisely those reasons, it is impossible to compare rates of child abuse deaths across the country. Yet, as can be seen in the press release, ECM continues to do just that. In the process, ECM actually encourages states to avoid counting such deaths or risk being misrepresented.

And, incredibly, at the very end of the news conference today, when NCCPR read that quote back to Petit, he admitted that it is not possible to compare child abuse death rates among the states – after spending 45 minutes purporting to do just that. Said Petit:

"We emphasize all over the place that it is impossible to compare states because of the different definitions, and we've been encouraging congress and HHS to establish measurable and comparable standards between the states."

Unfortunately, "all over the place" did not include his news conference – until pressed by NCCPR.

Consider three of the states ECM singles out as supposedly having above average rates of child abuse deaths:

Texas: [As we've noted often on our Blog](#), the Center for Public Policy Priorities, a liberal think tank that strongly supports more government spending on child welfare, nevertheless concluded that the supposed high rate of fatalities in Texas is due in part to the simple fact that Texas has a broader definition of a child abuse fatality than most states and a more thorough process of child abuse death review than most states. Their brief report [is available here](#).

That report also concludes that none of the traditional investigative and "police" functions of child protective services contribute anything to raising or lowering the rate of child abuse fatalities. Getting more people to report their suspicions doesn't help, screening in more reports doesn't help, and taking away more children doesn't help.

What *does* work? Prevention programs, reducing child poverty and reducing teen pregnancy.

Oklahoma: Expert after expert says Oklahoma's supposedly above average rate of fatalities is due to the fact that they are more rigorous about reporting such fatalities. According to [a story in the Oklahoma Gazette](#):

"The better the job you do in getting your data, the worse you look," said Mark Chaffin, professor of pediatrics at the University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center.

In a 2002 report, Chaffin and others argued that the state's reporting raises its numbers in such a way that it appears worse than other states. [Referring to an earlier report by Every Child Matters] Chaffin said that information reported by a national study indicating Oklahoma's child abuse death rate is far higher than other states is flawed.

"Oklahoma is recognized as having a strong child death review and tracking system," the 2002 report said. "It is likely that Oklahoma's numbers are actually more accurate than those of other states, and the bias involved in these state-to-state numbers may be due more to under-ascertainment by a large number of other states rather than due to over-ascertainment in Oklahoma or due to an actual extreme prevalence of maltreatment fatalities in Oklahoma."

"We could cut our rates by half in an hour by just not counting them," Chaffin said.

Florida: Most egregious was the attack on Florida, which ECM falsely claims has the worst child abuse death rate in the nation when, in fact, it is impossible to know which state holds that distinction.

But it is possible to know why Florida's rate looks artificially high:

In 2006 Florida dramatically changed how it counts child abuse deaths when the chair of the state's child fatality review team pressed local authorities to [count every drowning death](#) as maltreatment instead of an accident.

And of course, ECM says nothing about the fact that, using far better measures of safety than fatalities, independent evaluations have found that, in the years since Florida enacted a comprehensive reform of its child welfare system, child safety has improved. That's why [The New York Times singled out Florida's transformation](#) last year.

So even as ECM demands that the media pay more attention to child abuse deaths, ECM attacks states that are doing just that. Indeed, any state that makes its reporting more rigorous risks being attacked by ECM for supposedly having an above average rate of child abuse deaths, while states that are sloppy about reporting such deaths are rewarded by being portrayed as safer for children.

BIZARRE COMPARISONS

ECM argues that the media are not paying enough attention to child abuse deaths because, it is alleged, they paid more attention to things like the H1N1 virus and mining disasters, which killed fewer people.

But H1N1 got so much coverage when no one knew how many deaths it would cause but people feared it could be in the millions. When that turned out not to be the case, the coverage disappeared – aside from stories about whether the government and the media overhyped the whole thing, which is something anyone listening to ECM now might want to think about.

Most of the other examples are newsworthy because they involve deaths or near deaths of large numbers of people at the same time. It's the same reason airplane crashes get vastly more attention than auto accidents, even though auto accidents kill far more people. Auto accidents also kill far more people than child abuse by the way, but that doesn't strike me as a reason to pay less attention to child abuse.

The problem of child abuse is serious and real, but the solutions have been phony. Hyped numbers lead to phony solutions. And that's why ...

...EVERY FACT MATTERS

Confront ECM on its chronic misuse of data and they're likely to offer up a classic bait-and-switch: They'll feign high dudgeon and say something like: "How *dare* anyone *quibble* about numbers when children are dying. Even *one* child abuse death is one too many." But these aren't just numbers, these are facts. And you can't come up with life-saving answers if you don't get your facts right. Every child won't matter until every *fact* matters.

It's true, even one child abuse death is one too many. Why then, does ECM feel the need to misrepresent the actual numbers. Why does ECM promote an agenda of hype and hysteria that is likely to prompt a wave of needless removals of children, which overloads child welfare systems and actually makes it more likely that more children will be missed, and more children will die?

Perhaps that's why even large mainstream groups that support more coercive intervention into families, like Prevent Child Abuse America, the American Humane Association and even the Child Welfare League of America are not part of ECM's coalition and are not taking part in the news conference.

As we said last year, given ECM's track record of misrepresenting data on child welfare spending and child abuse deaths, it's clear that now *three* things are certain in life: death, taxes, and the fact that Every Child Matters will misrepresent both to advance its ideological agenda.

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