

Understanding Child Abuse Numbers

The problem of child abuse is serious and real, but the solutions have been phony. Child savers misstate the nature and extent of child abuse in America in order to gain public support for phony solutions. A first step toward real solutions is understanding what the numbers really mean.

The most commonly-used number concerning child abuse is the number of children investigated as possible abuse victims as a result of "reports" to state child protection hotlines. According to the most recent such survey, about 3.5 million children were the subjects of these investigations.

But more than 2.7 million of those children were subjects of reports that turned out to be false.[1] And of the rest, those labeled "substantiated" or "indicated" by protective workers, relatively few are the kind that leap to mind when we hear the words "child abuse." By far the largest category was "neglect". Often, these are cases in which the primary problem is a family's poverty. (See [Family Preservation Issue Papers](#) 5 and 6).

In fact, out of every 100 children investigated as possible victims of abuse, at least 77 simply weren't - the report was false. 14 were "substantiated" victims of neglect, and 7 were victims of either sexual abuse or any form of physical abuse, from the most minor to the most severe. (Three of those eight may have been victims of both.) 1 was a victim of psychological maltreatment. One more falls into a category listed as "other." [2]

Widely-quoted data from studies also sometimes are taken out of context. For example, Prevent Child Abuse America, formerly the National Committee for Prevention of Child Abuse, declares that a Denver study of sexual abuse allegations "found that only eight percent of reports were false." [3]

But that figure applies only to malicious falsehoods. The researchers found that an additional 17 percent of the reports were made in good faith but also turned out to be false. And in another 24 percent of the cases the researchers could not determine if the report was true or not. [4] Thus, what this study actually found was that at least 23 percent and possibly as many as 47 percent of all sexual abuse allegations are false. Furthermore, to be considered true in this study, a report needed only to meet the standard used by most child protective agencies -- that there be "some credible evidence" of abuse, even if there is more evidence that there was no abuse.

Some numbers are repeated so often that people are surprised to find how little data there are supporting them. Studies attempting to estimate the percentage of people sexually abused during childhood have come up with results ranging from one percent to 62 percent. [5] In addition, these studies use widely varying definitions of abuse, and usually include abuse by anyone, not just cases subject to the jurisdiction of child protective services.

But because large numbers attract more attention than small numbers, the claim appears repeatedly that "one out of three girls and one out of ten boys will be sexually abused" during childhood.

More recently, the figure has evolved into one out of four girls and one out of six boys. The figure turns up in one news story after another -- with no attribution other than the child savers who are pushing the number -- or sometimes no attribution at all.[6]

In fact, were these figures true, it would mean that at least 40 to 60 percent of all the children in America either will be sexually abused or have a sibling who will be sexually abused during their childhoods (since those one in four girls and one in six boys typically are not only children). Since, from a child saver's point of view, all of those siblings are "at risk" for being sexually abused, and since, from a child saver's point of view, the parents are, at a minimum, negligent in "allowing" it to happen, this raises an intriguing question: Where do the child savers propose to put all these children?

It's not just common sense that challenges these numbers.

The best evidence we have concerning the true prevalence of sexual abuse comes from two comprehensive reviews of the scholarly literature.

The first is a review of 20 different studies conducted by seven Canadian researchers. They found that the studies with the best methodology consistently found that between 10 and 12 percent of girls under age 14 are sexually abused by someone (not necessarily a parent or guardian) during their childhoods. The study that produced the "one out of three" claim was singled out for criticism by these researchers.[7]

More recently, another comprehensive review of the literature put the actual figure at 9 to 11 percent for girls and 5 to 6 percent for boys.[8]

Those figures, like all of the best evidence concerning the true extent of child abuse in America, are cause for concern and

action. The real numbers are bad enough. Exaggeration serves only to panic us into seeking "solutions" that hurt the very children they were intended to help.

Or as the authors of the second literature review cited above put it:

We believe ... that valid estimates in this field, even if they are lower than expected by some interested parties, will indeed not minimize this issue's importance, but, rather, will

represent our best hope to steer effective policies and practices to prevent, ameliorate, and solve the problems experienced by people who have been sexually abused.[10]

More examples of the harm of getting the numbers wrong, and other child saver hype can be found in [Issue Paper 5](#) and in [Family Preservation Issue Paper 3](#).

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1. U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, Child Maltreatment 2007. Available online at <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/pubs/cm07/index.htm> And see especially these endnotes: <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/pubs/cm07/chapter3.htm#notefive> The document refers to the largest category of cases as "unsubstantiated" but for reasons discussed in the next issue paper, those cases are almost certainly false reports.
 2. Ibid.
 3. Jon R. Conte, A Look at Child Sexual Abuse (Chicago: Prevent Child Abuse America) p.12.
 4. David P.H. Jones and J. Melbourne McGraw, "Reliable and Fictitious Accounts of Sexual Abuse to Children," Journal of Interpersonal Violence, Vol.2 No. 1, March, 1987, pp.27-45.
 5. These studies are cited in Diana Russell, The Secret Trauma: Incest in the Lives of Girls and Women (New York: Basic Books, 1986), pp.72.
 6. For example, Emily Fox, "Texas program fostering child abuse awareness kicks off in Plano," Dallas Morning News, August 11, 2010.
 7. William Feldman et. al., "Is Childhood Sexual Abuse Really Increasing in Prevalence?" An Analysis of the Evidence, Pediatrics, Vol. 88, No. 1, July, 1991, pp.29-33.
 8. Kevin M. Gorey and Donald R. Leslie, "Working Toward a Valid Prevalence Estimate of Child Sexual Abuse: A Reply to Bolen and Scannapieco" *The Social Service Review* 75:151