

Press Release: We Can Do Better

Report: Five children die each day from abuse and neglect in the U.S; experts ask Congress for funding, consistent standards

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Celebrities from ‘Law & Order: Special Victims Unit’ join child advocates on Capitol Hill

to discuss what’s most needed to prevent abuse and neglect

Washington, DC – A report released today shows that 10,440 children in the U.S. are known to have died from abuse and neglect between 2001 and 2007, but experts say the real number may be as much as 50 percent higher. The difference is due to varying definitions of abuse and neglect in the states, as well as inconsistent record-keeping and data collection methodologies. Child protection leaders say the situation makes it impossible to provide an accurate assessment of abuse and neglect of children in America.

The report from the Every Child Matters Education Fund shows that more than 1,760 U.S. children are documented to have died from abuse or neglect in 2007 – a 35 percent increase since 2001. It says that the combination of millions of vulnerable children and inadequate resources leaves states stretched too thin to protect all children who need it.

‘It’s heart-wrenching that each day in America, five children will die from abuse and neglect, but what’s worse is that the real number is even larger,’ said Michael Petit, president of Every Child Matters Education Fund. ‘Child abuse and neglect are national problems that require national solutions. That means federal lawmakers must work with states to address what causes it, be more consistent in how data about it are shared, and increase support for the agencies that work to stop it.’

Today's report serves as a wake-up call for federal lawmakers. National leaders in child protection, law enforcement, educators, policy makers and others are gathering in Washington, DC, today to kick off two days of intensive discussions among diverse organizations to identify the policies and resources needed to reduce deaths from child abuse and neglect. Congress must soon take up work to reauthorize the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act, or CAPTA, which provides federal funding to states to address child abuse and neglect.

The report looks at the most recent state data made available by the federal government. It includes information collected through the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System, which is supported by the Children's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families. It also includes data collected by the U.S. Census Bureau. Highlights show:

Child deaths attributed to abuse or neglect vary significantly by state.

Kentucky had the highest rate of death due to child abuse and neglect in 2007 — 41 deaths, or a rate of 4.09 per 100,000 children in the state. Other states topping the list include South Dakota (4.08), Florida (3.79), Nebraska (3.59) and Missouri (3.51). States with the lowest rate of child death from abuse or neglect in 2007 are Delaware Rhode Island, Idaho, Maine and Montana.

"About half of all children who die from abuse and neglect were previously brought to the attention of authorities — either by another family member, a teacher, physician, neighbor or someone else who cared about their safety and well-being," said Teresa Huizar, executive director, National Children's Alliance. "But case workers are routinely stretched too thin, and funding levels are too low. The result is often too little action that is taken too late, and kids die as a result."

There is nearly a 13-fold difference in the amount that states spend per person to address abuse and neglect.

While there is no funding level or formula that guarantees a reduction in child deaths, states that invest in a strong social safety net for children — including health, social services, education, plus child protection — experience fewer child abuse/neglect deaths, on average. Experts suggest that this is because fewer families experience difficulties in the first place, and that if child abuse does occur, case workers can investigate more cases more thoroughly, thus protecting more children from potential harm.

"We need a bigger investment in case workers, whether it is number of staff or additional training," said Rebecca Myers, L.S.W., director, external relations at the National Association of Social Workers. "Child protection workers are often the first line of defense in protecting children living in high-risk situations, but caseloads in some jurisdictions are as high as 60 or more, even though national standards recommend 12 or fewer cases per worker."

Poverty is closely associated with child abuse and neglect.

Experts say stopping deaths due to child abuse and neglect requires addressing poverty, particularly during challenging economic times. While no level of household income or educational level makes a family immune to this issue, a child living in poverty is 22 times more likely to be abused than children living in families with an annual income of \$30,000 or more.

Recent Census figures show that states with the highest levels of children living in poverty are Arizona (26%), New Mexico (26%), Kentucky (24%), Alabama (24%) and Mississippi (24%). States with the lowest levels of child poverty are New Hampshire (9%), Utah (9%), Alaska (10%), Vermont (10%), Maryland (10%) and Connecticut (10%).

Celebrities and others join in support.

Stars from Law & Order: Special Victims Unit, took to Capitol Hill today to help raise awareness. The popular television show chronicles the New York Police Department team that investigates sexually based crimes, including those committed against children. Actors Tamara Tunie (medical examiner Melinda Warner) and B.D. Wong (psychiatrist George Huang) joined in speaking out on the importance of investing in the protection of children.

Organizations supporting the summit this week include the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children, Association of Maternal and Child Health Programs, Every Child Matters Education Fund, National Association of Social Workers, National Center on Child Death Review and National Children's Alliance.

The discussion of children's issues in Washington this week comes exactly 100 years after President Theodore Roosevelt held the first-ever White House summit on children's issues.

"A century after the first White House summit on children's issues in America, we are faced with more children dying from abuse and neglect in the United States than in any other industrialized nation," said Michael Fraser, Ph.D., chief executive officer, Association of Maternal and Child Health Programs. "The U.S. child abuse death rate is among the highest in the world — three times higher than that of Canada, and 11 times higher than that of Italy. We need leaders who will step up for children and make concerted efforts to turn these numbers around with our nation's state and local maternal and child health professionals."

Read the full report, learn more about the issue or send an email to elected officials here

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The Every Child Matters Education Fund is a 501(c)(3) non-profit, non-partisan organization working to make children, youth and families a national political priority. We promote the adoption of smart policies for children and youth, including: ensuring that children have access to affordable, comprehensive health care services; expanding early-care and learning opportunities and after-school programs; preventing violence against children in their homes and communities; alleviating child poverty; and addressing the special needs of children with parents in prison.