

# Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-4)

Report to Congress  
Executive Summary



**U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS)**  
Administration for Children and Families (ACF)  
Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE)  
and the Children's Bureau

This document reports the findings from the Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS–4), which was conducted by Westat, Inc., with the assistance of its subcontractor Walter R. McDonald and Associates, Inc. (WRMA), under contract number GS23F81144H, Order No. HHSP233200400058U, Requisition No. 04Y004193 from the Department of Health and Human Services. The authors were Andrea J. Sedlak, Jane Mettenburg, Monica Basena, Ian Petta, Karla McPherson, Angela Greene, and Spencer Li.

This document, as well as the NIS–4 technical reports (*NIS–4 Data Collection Report* and *NIS–4 Analysis Report*) and reports on six NIS–4 supplementary studies (*CPS Structure and Practices Mail Survey*, *CPS Screening Policies Study*, *Sentinel Definitions Survey*, *Comparison of NIS–4 and NCANDS*, *Supplementary Analysis of Race Differences in the NIS–4*, and *Incidence Projections in the 2009 Recession Economy*) will be available at the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) website [http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/abuse\\_neglect/natl\\_incid/index.html](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/abuse_neglect/natl_incid/index.html).

The NIS–4 public use data file will be available from the National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect, [www.ndacan.cornell.edu](http://www.ndacan.cornell.edu).

Material contained in this publication is in the public domain and may be reproduced, fully or partially, without permission of the Federal Government. The courtesy of source credit is requested. The recommended citation follows:

Sedlak, A.J., Mettenburg, J., Basena, M., Petta, I., McPherson, K., Greene, A., and Li, S. (2010). *Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS–4): Report to Congress, Executive Summary*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families.

# **Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-4)**

## **Report to Congress**

### **Executive Summary**

**Andrea J. Sedlak  
Jane Mettenburg, Monica Basena  
Ian Petta, Karla McPherson  
Angela Greene, & Spencer Li**

**U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS)  
Administration for Children and Families (ACF)  
Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) and  
the Children's Bureau**

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) contributed funding for the NIS–4 *Sentinel Definitions Survey (SDS)*.

Walter R. McDonald and Associates, Inc. (WRMA) collaborated on several NIS–4 tasks under a subcontract to Westat, Inc. WRMA provided the 2004 data file from the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) to assist in sample design. Several WRMA staff recruited a number of the sampled CPS agencies to participate. The questionnaire for the supplementary study *CPS Structure and Practices Mail Survey (SPM)* was a modified version of the instrument WRMA developed for the 2002 Local Agency Survey in the *CPS Systems and Reforms* project; they helped the NIS–4 team modify that instrument and had a primary role in analyzing the SPM data and writing the SPM report. During NIS–4 weighting, WRMA staff constructed a special NCANDS file and computed the annualization factors. WRMA staff were also key collaborators on the *Comparison of NIS–4 and NCANDS*. Finally, they participated in the NIS–4 Consultant Group meetings, where they provided formative suggestions during the study design and offered feedback on the implications of the findings.

The NIS–4 Consultant Group members provided their expertise and advice at the outset, on the study plans, and during the final stage, on the presentation of findings. Participating members were Mark Applebaum (University of California, San Diego), Steve Christian (Casey Family Programs), John Eckenrode (Cornell University), Diana English (University of Washington School of Social Work), Patrick Fagan (Family Research Council), Richard Heyman (State University of New York at Stony Brook), Brenda Jones-Harden (University of Maryland), Robert Ortega (University of Michigan), and Fred Wulczyn (Chapin Hall Center for Children, University of Chicago).

Authors of this report include Westat staff with responsibilities for NIS–4 tasks: Andrea Sedlak (project director), Jane Mettenburg (team leader for CPS recruitment and evaluative coding and for the *Comparison of NIS–4 and NCANDS*), Spencer Li (manager and analyst of the NIS–4 supplementary study, *CPS Structure and Practices Mail Survey*), Monica Basena (analyst for this report and a leader on *Incidence Projections in the 2009 Recession Economy*), Angela Greene (leader of the NIS–4 supplementary study, *CPS Screening Policies Study*), Karla McPherson (analyst for this report, leader of the NIS–4 supplementary study, *Sentinel Definitions Survey* and a leader on *Supplementary Analysis of Race Differences in the NIS–4*), and Ian Petta (analyst). Other senior Westat staff whose dedication and expertise contributed to the success of this study include John Brown (systems analyst), Janet Ciarico (unduplication team leader), Frances Gragg (sentinel recruitment team leader), John Hartge (field director), Elizabeth Quinn (leader of instrument design), Kristin Madden (lead programmer) and Marianne Winglee (lead statistician).

This study would not have been possible without the support of hundreds of agencies and individual caseworkers, teachers, police officers, social workers, probation officers, nurses, and other professionals in the study counties who contributed their enthusiastic support and much of their time in the effort to accurately assess the incidence, nature, and distribution of child abuse and neglect in the United States.

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This executive summary describes the Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-4). It discusses the NIS-4 background and objectives, reports on the design and methods, and presents the key findings and implications.

### **1. Background and Objectives**

The National Incidence Study (NIS) is a congressionally mandated, periodic effort of the United States Department of Health and Human Services. In 1974, Public Law (P.L.) 93-247 mandated the first NIS (NIS-1), which collected data in 1979 and 1980. The NIS-2 was mandated under P.L. 98-457 (1984) and collected data in 1986. The NIS-3, mandated by the Child Abuse Prevention, Adoption, and Family Services Act of 1988 (P.L. 100-294) and the Child Abuse, Domestic Violence, Adoption and Family Services Act of 1992 (P.L. 102-295), collected data in 1993. The Keeping Children and Families Safe Act of 2003 (P.L. 108-36) mandated the NIS-4, which collected data in 2005 and 2006. The principal objectives of the NIS-4 were to provide updated estimates of the incidence of child abuse and neglect in the United States and measure changes in incidence from the earlier studies.

### **2. Design and Methods**

**Main study.** The NIS serves as the nation's needs assessment on child abuse and neglect. It offers a unique perspective on the scope of the problem beyond the children that child protective service (CPS) agencies investigate. While the NIS includes children who were investigated by CPS agencies, it also obtains data on other children who were not reported to CPS or who were screened out by CPS without investigation. These additional children were recognized as maltreated by community professionals. Thus, the NIS estimates include both abused and neglected children who are in the official CPS statistics and those who are not.

The NIS follows a nationally representative design, so the estimates reflect the numbers of abused and neglected children in the United States who come to the

attention of community professionals. The fact that there have been three previous cycles using comparable methods and definitions means that one can compare NIS–4 estimates with those from the earlier studies in order to identify changes over time in the incidence and distribution of abused and neglected children.

The NIS–4 data derive from a nationally representative sample of 122 counties. The 126 CPS agencies serving these counties were key participants, providing basic demographic data on all the children who were reported and accepted for investigation during the 3-month study reference period (either September 4 through December 3, 2005 or February 4 through May 3, 2006). The NIS–4 obtained further details about the child’s maltreatment and the outcome of the CPS investigation for a representative sample of these cases.

Like the earlier NIS cycles, the NIS–4 employed a sentinel survey methodology. In this approach, community professionals who work in certain categories of agencies and who typically encounter children and families in the course of their job duties serve as lookouts for victims of child abuse and neglect. In each county, these professionals, called “sentinels,” represent all staff that have contact with children and families in police and sheriffs’ departments, public schools, day care centers, hospitals, voluntary social service agencies, mental health agencies, the county juvenile probation and public health departments, public housing, and shelters for runaway and homeless youth and for victims of domestic violence. The participating sentinels in the NIS–4 were 10,791 professionals in 1,094 sentinel agencies. They submitted data forms on any children they encountered who were maltreated during the study data period. The NIS–4 collected a total of 6,208 completed data forms from sentinels and 10,667 completed forms on the investigation outcomes and the abuse and neglect involved in cases sampled at participating CPS agencies.

The NIS uses standard definitions of abuse and neglect, so its estimates of the numbers of maltreated children and incidence rates have a calibrated, standard meaning across the various sites (multiple states and agencies), sources (CPS and community professionals), and NIS cycles. As in previous cycles, children submitted by sentinels and those described in the CPS sampled cases were evaluated according to standard study definitions of abuse and neglect, and only children who fit the standards were used in generating the national estimates.

In the NIS classifications, maltreatment encompasses both abuse and neglect. Abuse includes physical abuse, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse. Neglect includes physical neglect, emotional neglect, and educational neglect. Each of these categories comprises more specific forms of abuse or neglect. The standardized NIS definitions describe the acts and omissions for each specific form. The NIS-4 applied a more differentiated system for classifying the specific forms of maltreatment than the earlier NIS cycles used. However, the NIS-4 definitional standards were identical to those used in the NIS-2 and NIS-3. These standards specify the criteria for deciding whether a child's situation "counts" as maltreatment to include in the study estimates. The criteria specify a number of required features, such as the child's relationship to the perpetrator (the abuse or neglect must be within the jurisdiction of CPS, perpetrated or permitted by a parent or caretaker), the severity of the injury or harm that resulted, and the degree of evidence for holding the alleged perpetrator(s) responsible for the maltreatment.

The NIS applies two definitional standards in parallel: the Harm Standard and the Endangerment Standard. The Harm Standard has been in use since the NIS-1. It is relatively stringent in that it generally requires that an act or omission result in demonstrable harm in order to be classified as abuse or neglect. It permits exceptions in only a few specific maltreatment categories, where the nature of the maltreatment itself is so egregious that one can infer that the child was harmed. The chief advantage of the Harm Standard is its strong objectivity. Its principal disadvantage is that it is so stringent that it provides a perspective that is too narrow for many purposes, excluding even many children whom CPS substantiates or indicates as abused or neglected.

The Endangerment Standard has been in use since the NIS-2. It includes all children who meet the Harm Standard but adds others as well. The central feature of the Endangerment Standard is that it counts children who were not yet harmed by abuse or neglect if a sentinel thought that the maltreatment endangered the children or if a CPS investigation substantiated or indicated their maltreatment. In addition, the Endangerment Standard is slightly more lenient than the Harm Standard in allowing a broader array of perpetrators, including adult caretakers other than parents in certain maltreatment categories and teenage caretakers as perpetrators of sexual abuse.

Following procedures that corresponded to those used in earlier NIS cycles, the NIS-4 study team unduplicated the data (so the study estimates represent each maltreated child only once), weighted the records (so the sample data could generate

national estimates of the number of maltreated children), and annualized the final weights (to enable the 3-month reference period to provide estimates reflecting a full year).

**Supplementary studies.** In addition to the main study, the NIS–4 included several supplementary studies, three of which are used in this report to interpret the main study findings. Two were surveys of CPS agencies—one on their overall policies, procedures and practices and the second on their screening standards, to determine how they would treat referrals concerning the uninvestigated cases that sentinels identified. The third supplementary study was a survey of sentinels on their backgrounds and definitions of child abuse and neglect and concerning their standards for reporting suspected maltreatment to CPS or submitting data on maltreated children to the NIS.

The *CPS Structure and Practices Mail Survey (SPM)* was modeled after the Local Agency Survey (LAS) in the 2002 National Study of Child Protective Service and Reform Efforts. The SPM questionnaire included 4 modules, each focused on a specific CPS function: Administration, Screening/Intake, Investigation, and Alternative CPS Response. CPS agencies that participated in the NIS–4 responded to the SPM.

The *CPS Screening Policies Study (SPS)* involved telephone interviews with intake/screening supervisors (or their delegates) in participating NIS–4 CPS agencies to identify the criteria their agency used in deciding whether to investigate a referral. The SPS coders then applied these screening criteria to the uninvestigated children in the NIS–4 main study to infer whether CPS agencies would have screened these children in for an investigation according to their stated policies.

The *Sentinel Definitions Survey (SDS)* asked sentinels who had participated in the NIS–4 about their characteristics and backgrounds—including their demographics, job title and tenure, whether they had received any written information or training on reporting child abuse and neglect while working at their agency, their agency’s policy on reporting to CPS, and whether they had made any reports while working at their agency. The questionnaire also included vignettes that described situations of Harm Standard abuse and neglect. Follow-up questions asked whether the respondent considered the case to be maltreatment, would report it to CPS, would submit it to a national study on child abuse and neglect, or would not respond in any of these ways.



### **3. The National Incidence of Child Abuse and Neglect**

The findings of the Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-4) show an overall decrease in the incidence of maltreatment since the NIS-3, as well as decreases in some specific maltreatment categories and increases in others.

**Incidence of Harm Standard maltreatment.** Using the stringent Harm Standard definition, more than 1.25 million children (an estimated 1,256,600 children) experienced maltreatment during the NIS-4 study year (2005–2006). This corresponds to one child in every 58 in the United States. A large percentage (44%, or an estimated total of 553,300) were abused, while most (61%, or an estimated total of 771,700) were neglected. The NIS classifies children in every category that applies, so the components (here and throughout the NIS findings) sum to more than 100%. Most of the abused children experienced physical abuse (58% of the abused children, an estimated total of 323,000). Slightly less than one-fourth were sexually abused (24%, an estimated 135,300), while slightly more than one-fourth were emotionally abused (27%, an estimated 148,500). Almost one-half of the neglected children experienced educational neglect (47% of neglected children, an estimated 360,500 children), more than one-third were physically neglected (38%, an estimated 295,300 children), and one-fourth were emotionally neglected (25%, an estimated 193,400 children).

Unlike the dramatic increase in the incidence of Harm Standard maltreatment that occurred between the NIS-2 and NIS-3, where the rate increased by 56%, the NIS-4 reveals a smaller change since the NIS-3, in the opposite direction. The NIS-4 estimate of the incidence of overall Harm Standard maltreatment in the 2005–2006 study year reflects a 19% decrease in the total number of maltreated children since the NIS-3 in 1993. Taking into account the increase in the number of children in the United States over the interval, this change is equivalent to a 26% decline in the rate of overall Harm Standard maltreatment per 1,000 children in the population. This decrease is close-to-significant, meaning the probability that it is due to chance factors is less than 10%. This decrease returned the incidence of Harm Standard maltreatment to a level that does not differ from the NIS-2 estimate for 1986.

The number of children who experienced Harm Standard abuse declined significantly, by 26%, from an estimated 743,200 in the NIS-3 to 553,300 in the NIS-4.

This reflects a 32% decrease in the rate of Harm Standard abuse per 1,000 children in the nation. Moreover, the incidence of all specific categories of abuse decreased: The incidence of sexual abuse decreased significantly, while the declines in physical abuse and emotional abuse were both close-to-significant:

- The estimated number of sexually abused children under the Harm Standard decreased from 217,700 in 1993 to 135,300 in 2005–2006 (a 38% decrease in the number of sexually abused children and a 44% decrease in the rate of sexual abuse);
- The number of children who experienced Harm Standard physical abuse decreased from an estimated 381,700 at the time of the NIS–3 to an estimated 323,000 in the NIS–4 (a 15% decrease in number and a 23% decline in the rate);
- The estimated number of emotionally abused children under the Harm Standard was 204,500 at the time of the NIS–3, which decreased to 148,500 during the NIS–4 (a 27% decrease in number; a 33% decline in the rate).

The incidence of Harm Standard neglect showed no statistically reliable changes since the NIS–3, neither overall nor in any of the specific neglect categories (physical, emotional, and educational neglect).

Classifying these abused and neglected children according to the level of injury or harm they suffered from Harm Standard maltreatment revealed only one change: a significant decrease in the incidence of children for whom injury could be inferred due to the severe nature of their maltreatment. This group declined from 165,300 children in the NIS–3 to 71,500 in the NIS–4 (a 57% decrease in number; a 60% decline in the rate in the population).

**Incidence of Endangerment Standard maltreatment.** Defining maltreatment according to the more inclusive Endangerment Standard provides a very different picture of the incidence and distribution of child abuse and neglect. Nearly 3 million children (an estimated 2,905,800) experienced Endangerment Standard maltreatment during the NIS–4 2005–2006 study year. This corresponds to one child in every 25 in the United States. While 29% (an estimated 835,000 children) were abused, more than three-fourths (77%, an estimated 2,251,600 children) were neglected. Most abused children (57%, or 476,600 children) were physically abused, more than one-third

(36%, or 302,600 children) were emotionally abused, and less than one-fourth (22%, or 180,500 children) were sexually abused. Under the Endangerment Standard definitions, more than one-half of the neglected children were physically neglected (53%, or 1,192,200 children) and a similar percentage were emotionally neglected (52%, or 1,173,800), whereas 16% (an estimated 360,500) were educationally neglected.

Between 1993 and 2005–2006, the overall incidence of children who experienced Endangerment Standard maltreatment showed no statistically reliable change. However, within Endangerment Standard maltreatment, counterbalancing changes occurred in the incidence of abuse and neglect. Significant decreases in the incidence of abuse and all specific categories of abuse contrast with a significant increase in the incidence of emotional neglect:

- The estimated number of children who experienced Endangerment Standard abuse decreased from 1,221,800 to 835,000 (a 32% decrease in number, a 38% decline in the rate);
- The estimated number of physically abused children decreased from an estimated 614,100 children to 476,600 (a 22% decrease in number, a 29% decline in the rate);
- The incidence of children with Endangerment Standard sexual abuse decreased from 300,200 in 1993 to 180,500 in 2005–2006 (reflecting a 40% decrease in number and a 47% decline in the rate);
- The incidence of emotionally abused children decreased from 532,200 to 302,600 (a 43% decrease in number, a 48% decline in the rate); and
- The estimated number of emotionally neglected children more than doubled in the interval between the studies, rising from 584,100 in 1993 to 1,173,800 in 2005–2006 (a 101% increase in number, an 83% increase in the rate).

Classifying these children according to the severity of harm they suffered as a result of their Endangerment Standard maltreatment revealed no significant changes in the incidence of children with any specific level of injury or harm.

#### **4. Distribution of Child Abuse and Neglect by the Child's Characteristics**

The child's sex, age, race, disability status, and school enrollment were all related to rates of maltreatment.

**Child's sex.** Girls were sexually abused much more often than boys, under both the Harm Standard and the Endangerment Standard. This finding is consistent with earlier NIS results, so females' disproportionately greater risk of sexual abuse has been stable over time. This sex difference in incidence rates of sexual abuse leads to higher rates of abuse in general among girls. Also, because the definitional guidelines permit the inference that injury or harm occurred in connection with the more extreme forms of sexual abuse, girls' greater risk of sexual abuse also accounts for their higher incidence rates for inferred injury.

Boys' rates of Harm Standard physical neglect and of serious harm under both standards decreased more since the NIS-3 than the corresponding rates for girls. The incidence of boys who experienced Endangerment Standard emotional neglect increased less since the NIS-3 than that of girls. Moreover, trends in the incidence of inferred harm from Endangerment Standard maltreatment moved in opposite directions for girls and boys—the incidence of girls with inferred harm declined slightly since the NIS-3, while the incidence of boys with inferred harm rose.

**Child's age.** A consistent feature of the age differences in NIS-4 incidence rates is the lower incidence of maltreatment among the youngest children in the Harm Standard abuse and neglect rates and in the rates of Endangerment Standard abuse. In most cases, the 0- to 2-year-olds had significantly lower maltreatment rates than older children. It is possible that the lower rates at these younger ages reflect some undercoverage of these age groups. That is, prior to attaining school age, children are less observable to community professionals.

In contrast, the age differences in Endangerment Standard neglect (overall, as well as in the specific categories of physical neglect and emotional neglect) revealed a distinctly different pattern. In these categories, the oldest children (15- to 17-year-olds) have the lowest rates and 6- to 8-year-olds have the highest rates. This curvilinear age pattern may reflect the combination of opposing age distributions for different

maltreatment outcomes—rates of children with serious and moderate harm from maltreatment generally increase with increasing age, whereas rates of children who were endangered, but not demonstrably harmed, by their maltreatment experiences sharply decrease across the age continuum. Because the endangered children are more prevalent among those who experienced Endangerment Standard physical and emotional neglect, this opposing age trend primarily affected the age distribution in these categories, shaping the curvilinear pattern.

Another recurring theme in connection with age was that of disproportionate increases since the NIS–3 in the incidence of maltreatment among the youngest children (ages 0 to 2). This occurred for rates of Harm Standard sexual abuse and, in the Endangerment Standard, for overall maltreatment, neglect, emotional neglect, and the endangerment outcome. All of these are categories where the NIS–4 maltreatment rates for the youngest children are not lower than those for the older children. The changes since the NIS–3 have essentially flattened the age differences in incidence rates, evidencing broad vulnerability across the age spectrum. These changes may reflect true increases in maltreatment of the youngest children or could instead represent improvement in the NIS coverage of these maltreatment events among 0- to 2-year-olds.

**Race/ethnicity.** Unlike previous NIS cycles, the NIS–4 found strong and pervasive race differences in the incidence of maltreatment. In nearly all cases, the rates of maltreatment for Black children were significantly higher than those for White and Hispanic children. These differences occurred under both definitional standards in rates of overall maltreatment, overall abuse, overall neglect, and physical abuse and for children with serious or moderate harm from their maltreatment. They also occurred in the incidence of Harm Standard sexual abuse, in the incidence of children who were inferred to be harmed by Harm Standard maltreatment, and in Endangerment Standard rates for physical neglect, emotional maltreatment, and children who were endangered but not demonstrably harmed by their maltreatment.

In part, the emergence of race/ethnicity differences in the NIS–4 may stem from the greater precision of the NIS–4 estimates. Statistical tests are able to detect more of the underlying differences when estimates are more precise. However, the recently identified race/ethnicity differences are also consistent with changes in maltreatment rates since the NIS–3. While general declines in rates of maltreatment were noted since the NIS–3, these declines did not occur equally for all races and ethnicities. Rather, under

both definitional standards, rates of maltreatment for White children declined more than the rates for Black and Hispanic children in the incidence of abuse, physical abuse, and children seriously harmed by maltreatment. For Harm Standard emotional neglect, maltreatment rates for White children declined while rates for Black and Hispanic children increased. For Endangerment Standard emotional neglect, rates for White children increased less than the rates for Black and Hispanic children.

**Disability.** The NIS-4 is the first NIS cycle to examine the relationship between the incidence of maltreatment and children's disability status. Under the Harm Standard, children with confirmed disabilities had significantly lower rates of physical abuse and of moderate harm from maltreatment, but they had significantly higher rates of emotional neglect and of serious injury or harm. Using the Endangerment Standard to define maltreatment revealed more extensive differences, some similar to the Harm Standard findings, but also some quite different results. Children with disabilities had a significantly lower rate of Endangerment Standard abuse overall, consistent with their lower rate of physical abuse under both standards. Children with disabilities also had significantly lower rates of Endangerment Standard sexual abuse, neglect, physical neglect, and emotional neglect; and they were significantly less likely to be moderately harmed or endangered but not demonstrably harmed by the maltreatment. Similar to the Harm Standard finding, the children with disabilities were significantly more likely to be seriously injured or harmed when they experienced maltreatment. The findings on the incidence of emotional neglect are exactly opposite under the two standards. This indicates that, although children with confirmed disabilities were less likely to be emotionally neglected, they more often suffered harm from that maltreatment (in fact, serious harm) and so were more often countable under the Harm Standard in this category.

**School enrollment.** For the first time in the NIS, the NIS-4 gathered information about children's enrollment in school. Across both definitional standards, school-aged children who were not enrolled in school were sexually abused more often than enrolled children and more often qualified for inferred harm, an outcome frequently associated with sexual abuse. Enrolled children had significantly higher rates of moderate harm as a result of maltreatment and they were at marginally higher risk of educational neglect. This latter finding warrants explanation. On the one hand, simply knowing that a school-age child is not enrolled in school is not sufficient to classify the child as educationally neglected in NIS. Data on most nonenrolled children lacked

details that would exclude legitimate reasons for their circumstance, such as the child being seriously ill, suspended, expelled, or recently moved and not yet enrolled at a new location. On the other hand, since schools regularly track absences of enrolled children, NIS sentinels are likely to describe these to the study.

Enrolled children had higher rates of Harm Standard physical abuse and of overall Harm Standard maltreatment. In contrast, nonenrolled school-age children had higher rates of Endangerment Standard maltreatment, overall and in the categories of neglect, physical neglect, and emotional neglect. The nonenrolled children were also more likely to be classified as endangered, but not demonstrably harmed, by their Endangerment Standard maltreatment.

## **5. Distribution of Child Abuse and Neglect by Family Characteristics**

The incidence of child maltreatment varied as a function of several characteristics of children's families, including their parents' employment, family socioeconomic status, family structure and living arrangement, grandparent caregivers, family size, and the metropolitan status of the county.

**Parents' employment.** Unemployed parents were those described as unemployed or laid off but looking for work either currently (at the time of maltreatment) or at any time during the past year. Employed parents were those who had steady full- or part-time work, with no reported unemployment currently or in the previous year. Parents who were not in the labor force were not employed or actively looking for work. These included parents who were retired, disabled, homemakers, receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), on maternity leave, in the hospital, or in jail. Under both definitional standards, the incidence of maltreatment and of all severities of injury or harm was higher for children with no parent in the labor force and those with an unemployed parent and lowest for those with employed parents. Compared to children with employed parents, those with no parent in the labor force had 2 to 3 times the rate of maltreatment overall, about 2 times the rate of abuse, and 3 or more times the rate of neglect. Children with unemployed parents had 2 to 3 times higher rates of neglect than those with employed parents.

**Socioeconomic status.** To contend with missing data on individual items, the NIS–4 analyses combined three indicators into a general measure of socioeconomic status: household income, household participation in any poverty program, and parents’ education. Low socioeconomic status households were those in the bottom tier on any indicator: household income below \$15,000 a year, parents’ highest education level less than high school, or any member of the household a participant in a poverty program, such as TANF, food stamps, public housing, energy assistance, or subsidized school meals. Children in low socioeconomic status households had significantly higher rates of maltreatment in all categories and across both definitional standards. They experienced some type of maltreatment at more than 5 times the rate of other children; they were more than 3 times as likely to be abused and about 7 times as likely to be neglected.

**Family structure and living arrangement.** Family structure reflects the number of parents in the household and their relationship to the child; living arrangement reflects their marital or cohabitation status. Considering both factors, the NIS–4 classified children into six categories: living with two married biological parents, living with other married parents (e.g., step-parent, adoptive parent), living with two unmarried parents, living with one parent who had an unmarried partner in the household, living with one parent who had no partner in the household, and living with no parent. The groups differed in rates of every maltreatment category and across both definitional standards. Children living with their married biological parents universally had the lowest rate, whereas those living with a single parent who had a cohabiting partner in the household had the highest rate in all maltreatment categories. Compared to children living with married biological parents, those whose single parent had a live-in partner had more than 8 times the rate of maltreatment overall, over 10 times the rate of abuse, and nearly 8 times the rate of neglect.

Comparable data were available to assess changes since the NIS–3 in maltreatment rates for two groups of children: those living with two parents and those living with one parent. In nearly all categories, the incidence of maltreatment and levels of harm increased since the NIS–3 for children living with one parent but decreased for those living with two parents. The largest rate increase for children with one parent was in Endangerment Standard neglect (58% higher in NIS–4 than in NIS–3), especially the specific category of emotional neglect (a 194% increase). The largest decrease for children living with two parents occurred in the rate of Harm Standard sexual abuse, which declined by 61% from its level at the time of the NIS–3.



**Grandparents as caregivers.** The NIS–4 could identify a grandparent as a child’s caregiver under three conditions: when the grandparent was the child’s primary caregiver, when the primary caregiver did not have a spouse or partner and the grandparent was the secondary caregiver, and when the grandparent was a caregiver and maltreated the child. Children whose grandparent cared for them had lower rates of physical abuse compared to those with no identified grandparent caregiver: they had two-thirds the rate of Harm Standard physical abuse and less than four-fifths the rate of Endangerment Standard physical abuse.

**Family size.** The incidence of maltreatment was related to the number of dependent children in the family, in Harm Standard categories of overall maltreatment and all neglect and in Endangerment Standard maltreatment, abuse, neglect, and in physical and emotional maltreatment, both abuse and neglect. The general pattern was nonlinear: the incidence rates were highest for children in the largest families (those with 4 or more children), intermediate for “only” children and those in households with 3 children, and lowest for children in families with two children. The largest differences occurred in the Endangerment Standard maltreatment rates, especially for the neglect categories, where the incidence rates for children in the largest households were more than twice the rates for children in households with 2 children.

**County metropolitan status.** Except for educational neglect, the incidence of all categories of Endangerment Standard maltreatment was higher in rural counties than in urban counties and similar patterns also emerged in rates of most categories of Harm Standard maltreatment. Rural children had a nearly 2 times higher rate of overall Harm Standard maltreatment and nearly 2 times higher rate of overall Endangerment Standard maltreatment. Whether this reflects better coverage of maltreated children in the rural counties or higher rates of actual maltreatment in rural communities is not clear. Nor is it clear how differential distribution of other factors, such as socioeconomic status and family size differences, may contribute to these metropolitan status differences.

## 6. **Distribution of Child Abuse and Neglect by Perpetrator Characteristics**

The NIS–4 classified children who experienced Harm Standard maltreatment according to their perpetrator’s relationship to them. Analyses examined associated differences in the distributions of the perpetrator’s sex and age, type of maltreatment, severity of harm to the child, the child’s race, and the extent to which the perpetrators’ problems with alcohol use, drug use, or mental illness played a role in the maltreatment.

**Perpetrator’s relationship to the child.** The majority of all children countable under the Harm Standard (81%) were maltreated by their biological parents. This held true both for the abused children (64% were abused by biological parents) and for those neglected (92% were neglected by biological parents).

Biological parents were the most closely related perpetrators for 71% of physically abused children and for 73% of emotionally abused children. The pattern was distinctly different for sexual abuse. More than two-fifths (42%) of the sexually abused children were sexually abused by someone other than a parent (whether biological or nonbiological) or a parent’s partner, whereas just over one-third (36%) were sexually abused by a biological parent. In addition, severity of harm from physical abuse varied by the perpetrator’s relationship to the child. A physically abused child was more likely to sustain a serious injury when the abuser was not a parent.

**Perpetrator’s sex.** Children were somewhat more likely to be maltreated by female perpetrators than by males: 68% of the maltreated children were maltreated by a female, whereas 48% were maltreated by a male. (Some children were maltreated by both.) Of children maltreated by biological parents, mothers maltreated the majority (75%) whereas fathers maltreated a sizable minority (43%). In contrast, male perpetrators were more common for children maltreated by nonbiological parents or parents’ partners (64%) or by other persons (75%).

The predominant sex of perpetrators of abuse was different from that of neglect. Female perpetrators were more often responsible for neglect (86% of children neglected by females versus 38% by males). This finding is congruent with the fact that mothers (biological or other) tend to be the primary caretakers and are the primary persons held accountable for any omissions and/or failings in caretaking. In contrast,

males more often were abusers (62% of children were abused by males versus 41% by females). The prevalence of male perpetrators was strongest in the category of sexual abuse, where 87% of children were abused by a male compared to only 11% by a female.

Among all abused children, those abused by their biological parents were about equally likely to have been abused by mothers as by fathers (51% and 54%, respectively), but those abused by nonbiological parents or parents' partners, or by other, perpetrators were much more likely to be abused by males (74% or more by males versus 26% or less by females).

**Perpetrator's age.** Among all maltreated children, only a small percentage (11%) was maltreated by a perpetrator in the youngest age bracket (under 26 years of age). However, younger perpetrators were much more predominant among children who were maltreated by someone who was not a parent (34%).

**Child's race and relationship to the perpetrator.** The NIS-4 explored whether the children's race was systematically related to the perpetrator's relationship to them, either overall or in specific maltreatment categories. Overall, and across most maltreatment categories, the racial distribution of maltreated children did not vary with their perpetrator's relationship. The exceptions were in overall neglect and in the specific category of physical neglect, which displayed the same pattern. The majority of children physically neglected by a biological parent were White (58%), whereas children neglected by a nonbiological parent or parent's partner were predominantly Black (53%).

**Perpetrator's alcohol use, drug use, and mental illness.** CPS investigators and NIS-4 sentinels indicated whether they considered these issues to be factors in the child's maltreatment. Perpetrator's alcohol use and drug use were approximately equivalent factors in Harm Standard maltreatment, each applying to 11% of the countable children, while mental illness was a factor in the maltreatment of 7% of the children. Perpetrator's alcohol use was slightly more often implicated in abuse situations than drug use (13% versus 10%), largely because alcohol was more frequently involved in physical abuse and emotional abuse. Alcohol use was most involved in emotional abuse (22% of the children), while drug use was most involved in emotional neglect (21% of the children). The perpetrator's mental illness was most often cited as a factor in emotional abuse (17% of the children). All three factors were more often involved in maltreatment when the perpetrator was a biological parent.

## **7. Sources of Recognition for Maltreated Children**

School staff predominated as a source of recognition for maltreated children. School sentinels recognized 52% of the children who suffered Harm Standard maltreatment and 39% of the Endangerment Standard total. Other important sources of abused and neglected children were hospitals (11% and 13%), police and sheriff departments (12% and 19%), and the general public (6% and 10%). For maltreatment defined under the Endangerment Standard, day care centers and mental health agencies also joined the group of agency categories that recognized more than an estimated 100,000 abused and neglected children nationwide.

Since the NIS-3, recognition rates of Harm Standard maltreatment decreased at three sources. They dropped by 70% at social service agencies (including runaway/homeless youth and domestic violence shelters), by 36% at schools, and by 41% among the general public. Recognition rates of Endangerment Standard maltreatment increased by 86% in police and sheriff departments, by 55% in juvenile probation departments, and by 81% in professional agencies not represented by NIS sentinels. Endangerment Standard recognition rates decreased by 53% at social service agencies (including runaway/homeless youth and domestic violence shelters) and by 33% at schools. To the extent that these changes represent real changes in the rates at which agency staff encounter and identify maltreated children, they may reflect changes in the incidence of maltreatment itself or derive from changes in maltreated children's contacts with the agencies. To an unknown degree, these changes could also reflect shifts in agencies' standards for submitting data on maltreated children to the NIS.

## **8. Child Protective Services (CPS) Investigation of Maltreated Children**

Throughout its history, the NIS has consistently found that child protective services agencies (CPS) investigate maltreatment of only a minority of the children the NIS identifies. The NIS-4 again verified that result, finding that CPS investigated the maltreatment of only 32% of children who experienced Harm Standard maltreatment and of 43% of those whose maltreatment fit the Endangerment Standard. Moreover, this was not an artifact of the relatively short (3-month) NIS reference period. The NIS-4 examined an additional full month of CPS data to increase the opportunity for more

maltreated children to enter CPS investigations. This additional time made essentially no difference to the percentages of children investigated.

Overall, the percentages of maltreated children who received CPS investigation represented more than one-half of the children in only a few maltreatment categories except fatalities. Under both definitional standards, the highest investigation rates (50% or higher) occurred for physically abused (52% or more) and sexually abused children (55% or more), and for those with maltreatment so severe that their harm could be inferred (53% or more). Also, among children with Endangerment Standard maltreatment, those who were deemed to be endangered, but not demonstrably harmed, also had a high rate of CPS investigation (60%). Considering the sentinel sources that recognized the children as maltreated, investigation rates were above 50% only among children with Harm Standard maltreatment recognized in police or sheriff departments (53%) or at public housing agencies (68%) and among children with Endangerment Standard maltreatment recognized at juvenile probation departments (63%), police or sheriff departments (64%), mental health agencies (53%), social services agencies (94%), and public housing agencies (67%). The lowest rates of investigation occurred for children recognized at schools (20% or less across the definitional standards), day care (12% or less), or shelters (19% or less).

The overall percentage of children with Harm Standard maltreatment who received CPS investigation did not statistically change since the NIS-3, but investigation rates did increase since the NIS-3 for Harm Standard abuse (from 40% to 50%), sexual abuse (from 42% to 55%), emotional abuse (from 21% to 36%), emotional neglect (from 18% to 30%), and in children recognized as maltreated by juvenile probation (from 17% to 42%), public health (from 3% to 26%) or social services (from 25% to 91%). The investigation rate for Endangerment Standard maltreatment increased significantly, from 33% in the NIS-3 to 43% in the NIS-4. Increased investigation rates were evident in all abuse (from 39% to 49%), sexual abuse (from 44% to 56%), emotional abuse (from 28% to 40%), all neglect (from 28% to 41%), emotional neglect (from 22% to 50%), and in children recognized as maltreated at juvenile probation departments (from 23% to 63%), public health departments (from 4% to 33%), day care centers (from 3% to 12%), or social services (from 33% to 94%).

The NIS methodology generates information that speaks only to the end result of several processes, indicating whether or not a given maltreated child was among

those children investigated by CPS. Children who do not receive a CPS investigation represent an enigma to the study, in that it is not possible to say whether sentinels who recognized their maltreatment did not report it to CPS or whether they did report it but CPS screened their reports out without an investigation. These alternatives have quite different implications for policy. The NIS–4 included several supplementary studies to help understand the countable children who do not receive CPS investigation.

The *CPS Screening Policies Study (SPS)* obtained detailed information about CPS screening criteria to determine what role they might play in screening out countable children from CPS investigations. The NIS–4 reviewed the children identified in the main study as maltreated but not investigated at CPS to determine whether CPS probably would have investigated them, based on the screening criteria described in the SPS interviews. This exercise indicated that CPS probably would have investigated nearly three-fourths (72%) of the uninvestigated children who experienced Harm Standard maltreatment and two-thirds (66%) of the uninvestigated children with Endangerment Standard maltreatment. Therefore, if CPS agencies consistently apply the criteria they described, and if sentinels had reported the uninvestigated children to CPS, then CPS would have investigated the majority. The “presumptive investigation rates,” reflecting the percentages of maltreated children CPS would have investigated if sentinels had reported them to CPS, were 81% of all children with Harm Standard maltreatment and 80% of those with Endangerment Standard maltreatment.

Another NIS–4 supplementary study, the *CPS Structures and Practices Mail Survey (SPM)*, collected information about various agency characteristics, examining whether these related to CPS investigation rates. Investigation rates were significantly lower when a state or regional hotline screened incoming referrals for children with Harm Standard physical abuse (48% versus 65%) or emotional neglect (25% versus 37%). When CPS had no assistance in investigating certain categories of maltreatment, investigation rates were lower: if the agency had sole responsibility for investigating non-severe physical neglect, then the rate of CPS investigation was significantly lower for children with Harm Standard physical neglect (26% versus 43%); sole responsibility for investigating abandonment correlated with lower investigation rates for Endangerment Standard physical neglect (37% versus 50%). When CPS could provide a response other than an investigation (commonly termed an “alternative response”), then investigation rates were lower across a range of maltreatment categories under both definitional standards. Agencies with alternative responses investigated only 23% of the children

with Harm Standard maltreatment and 29% of those with Endangerment Standard maltreatment, whereas agencies without any alternative response offering investigated 38% and 52% of these groups, respectively. CPS agencies that did not prioritize recommended responses to referrals investigated more children who experienced Harm Standard physical abuse than did agencies that did (75% versus 55%) as well as more educationally neglected children (23% versus 8%).

NIS sentinels also participated in the *Sentinel Definitions Survey (SDS)*, which asked them about their training on mandated reporting, their specific agency's policies governing CPS reporting, their personal experiences in reporting to CPS, and whether they would report a variety of maltreatment situations to CPS. One-fourth of the sentinels (24%) had neither received written instructions nor attended a workshop about their state's reporting requirements while working in their current agencies. Training mattered, since more sentinels who received some form of training said they had reported suspected child maltreatment to CPS (67% versus 53%). More sentinels from health and law enforcement (96% or more) said their agencies allowed them to report directly to CPS (versus having to go through an agency representative or committee) than did sentinels in schools (80%) or other agencies (83%). Moreover, when allowed to do so, fewer sentinels in schools and other agencies said they had ever reported a case (54% and 50%, respectively) compared to 87% of law enforcement sentinels and 77% of sentinels in health agencies. An average of nearly one-fourth (23%) of sentinels predicted they would not report described situations of Harm Standard maltreatment to CPS, verifying that sentinels recognize a substantial number of maltreated children whom they do not report to CPS. Nevertheless, whereas the NIS-4 found that majorities of countable children were not investigated, only minorities of sentinels said they would not report the countable cases presented in the SDS. The contrast was strong across all maltreatment categories. Thus, the SDS results cannot explain the large percentages of uninvestigated children in the NIS-4.

## **9. Conclusions and Implications**

The NIS-4 revealed several important changes in the incidence of maltreatment since the time of the NIS-3. These observed changes may reflect real changes in the scope of the problem, or they may reflect changes in how sentinels and other reporters respond to the maltreated children they encounter. The current

information suggests that both of these dynamics contributed to the observed changes, each dynamic affecting a different sector of the abused and neglected population.

The NIS–4 documented declines in rates of all categories of abuse across both definitional standards. The declines in sexual abuse and physical abuse are consistent with trends in CPS data gathered by the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, 2007) and they also parallel declines in victim self-reports. However, since no independent information is currently available that bears on the incidence of emotional abuse, it is not clear whether the NIS decline in this category reflects a real decrease in its occurrence.

The increase in the rate of emotional neglect since 1993 could, in part, signify a real increase in the occurrence of maltreatment, but it is fairly clear that it also reflects some change in policy and focus. Since the NIS–3, a number of CPS systems have undertaken initiatives to increase collaboration between CPS and agencies that serve domestic violence and alcohol and drug problems (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families/Children's Bureau and Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, 2001, 2003). The increased emotional neglect incidence may predominantly reflect the heightened CPS attention to these problems, which are involved in certain types of emotional neglect. Further analyses will clarify whether the increases in emotional neglect primarily occurred in specific types of emotional neglect or for children recognized at specific types of agencies.

Another area where further analyses can illuminate the implications of the NIS–4 findings is in the interrelationships among the different factors associated with the incidence of maltreatment. Factors such as parents' labor force participation, household socioeconomic status, family size, and family structure and living arrangement are not only associated with the incidence of maltreatment but are also correlated with each other. Further analyses could determine their independent relationships to maltreatment, such as whether households with more children have higher incidence rates even when household socioeconomic status is taken into account. Moreover, for the first time in NIS, the NIS–4 found race differences in the incidence of maltreatment, with higher incidence rates for Black children. Future analyses should examine whether these race



differences in maltreatment rates remain when the disadvantaging effects of these family circumstances are taken into account.

The NIS–4 findings on the strong correlations between socioeconomic status and all categories of maltreatment are consistent with earlier NIS findings on household income. As with the previous results, the recent observations cannot be plausibly explained by the claim that lower socioeconomic families are simply more visible to the community professionals who provide most of the data. The NIS sentinels observe substantial numbers of children and families at the middle- and upper-income levels. Sentinels in schools alone recognized the majority of the maltreated children.

Despite some increases in CPS investigation of maltreated children, the NIS–4 shows that investigation rates still remain fairly low. Similar to previous NIS findings, the NIS–4 again determined that the majority of maltreated children do not receive CPS investigation. The NIS–4 obtained information that shed additional light on this issue:

- The NIS–4 determined that the finding is not an artifact of the relatively short (3-month) NIS reference period, since adding a full month of CPS data to increase the opportunity for more maltreated children to enter CPS investigations made essentially no difference to the percentages of children investigated.
- Certain features of CPS structure and practice were associated with percentages of maltreated children who received investigation. Children were less likely to receive CPS investigation if they were in the jurisdiction of CPS agencies that received their referrals about suspected maltreatment through a centralized regional or state hotline, that combined a new report into an ongoing open investigation on the child or family, or that could offer an alternative response (other than an investigation) to the children and families referred to them for suspected maltreatment. Also, children who experienced physical neglect were less likely to receive investigation if their CPS agency had sole responsibility for investigating non-severe physical neglect.
- The *CPS Screening Policies Study* found that if all maltreated children were reported to CPS and CPS agencies followed their current screening policies, then a large majority of the maltreated children (80% or more) would receive CPS investigation. Assuming that agencies follow their stated screening policies, the implication is that mandated reporters do not report most of the uninvestigated children (two-thirds or more).

- In the *Sentinel Definitions Survey*, sentinels responded to descriptions of maltreated children, indicating that they would not report some of these to CPS. More sentinels who had received information or training on their state's reporting requirement while working in their current agency had reported suspected child maltreatment.

Although schools predominated as a source of recognition for maltreated children, 20% or less of the maltreated children recognized at schools received CPS investigation. One factor that may contribute to the low investigation rate for school-recognized children is school policy barring staff from making direct reports to CPS. In the *Sentinel Definitions Survey*, 20% of school sentinels indicated that their schools do not permit them to report directly to CPS. However, other factors also contribute to low investigation rates for the school-recognized children, because even when agencies permitted direct reports, fewer sentinels in schools said they had reported a case (54%) compared to staff in health agencies (77%) or law enforcement (87%). Similar patterns emerged in the previous NIS cycles. To repeat the earlier recommendation: better working relationships should be forged between CPS agencies and schools, capitalizing on the unique role of school professionals as front-line observers.