Child maltreatment is a pervasive problem in the United States. In 2007, officials investigated approximately 1.9 million reports of alleged child maltreatment. Child maltreatment generally refers to an act or failure to act by a parent, caregiver, or other person that involves physical or emotional harm, neglect, sexual abuse, and exploitation or imminent harm to a child. Encouragingly, from 1990 to 2007, the number of substantiated cases of child sexual abuse and physical abuse declined by 52 percent. The number of child neglect cases, however, declined by only 6 percent. Most studies have found about equal rates of child maltreatment in rural and urban America. Our own analyses show that child maltreatment in rural families tends to mirror that in urban families. (We use the term rural to refer to all locations outside metropolitan areas. This includes both places adjacent and not adjacent to metropolitan places. Urban refers to metropolitan places.) The types of abuse are similar, as are many family stressors, such as mental health problems, alcohol dependency, and a history of family violence. However, rural families that have been reported to Child Protective Services (CPS) are more likely than those in urban areas to be experiencing high family stress and financial difficulties.

**Key findings:**

The types of child maltreatment in rural families tend to mirror child abuse in urban places, as there are many family stressors, such as mental health problems, alcohol dependency, and a history of family violence. However, those rural families who have been reported to Child Protective Services are more likely than those reported in urban areas to experience high family stress and financial difficulties.

**Distribution of Child Maltreatment in Rural and Urban Areas**

Child neglect, or the failure by the caregiver to provide needed age-appropriate care, is the most common type of reported child maltreatment in rural America (see Table 1). Approximately one-half of reports are for neglect. In contrast, a little more than one-fourth of the reports are for physical abuse. Over a quarter of the children are reported for more than one type of child maltreatment no matter where they live. Experiencing multiple forms of maltreatment has more pronounced negative effects on children than experiencing a single type of abuse.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Most severe abuse</th>
<th>Percent of cases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical abuse</td>
<td>28.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual abuse</td>
<td>13.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neglect</td>
<td>46.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other abuse type1</td>
<td>11.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experienced multiple abuse types</td>
<td>25.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample size</td>
<td>910</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Includes emotional, abandonment, moral/legal maltreatment, educational maltreatment, exploitation, and other
Both the distribution of child maltreatment and the profile of families reported to CPS are remarkably similar in rural and metropolitan America, excepting some striking differences. First, given the larger populations, there are far more cases reported in urban than rural America (our data include 4,138 cases in metropolitan places and 910 cases in rural places). Rural children who are reported for abuse or neglect are more likely to grow up in single-parent homes (39 percent versus 31 percent), and urban children are more often living in unsafe neighborhoods. The distribution of race/ethnicity also varies by place. Most rural children reported to CPS are white (nearly 80 percent), whereas metropolitan children are more diverse (41 percent white, 31 percent black, 21 percent Hispanic, and 7 percent other). There are no significant gender or poverty differences among those reported in both areas. Poverty is particularly prevalent in reports of maltreatment. Nearly 40 percent of children in both urban and rural areas who are reported to CPS live in poverty.

Similarities in Risk Factors for Child Maltreatment

Figure 1 reveals remarkable similarities by locale in the risk factors associated with reports to CPS:

- About one-half of the families had a prior report to CPS
- Nearly one-half of the caregivers have mental health impairments
- Most caregivers (more than 60 percent) report low social support
- Nearly one-third of caregivers were arrested during the past year
- More than one in ten caregivers have problems with alcohol
- One in five caregivers has a history of domestic violence
- More than one in five caregivers were themselves maltreated as children

The high prevalence of prior reports to CPS suggests we could do more to help families avoid future problems. In addition, caregiver difficulties suggest that parenting supports and interventions may be an important step in preventing child maltreatment.

Differences in Risk Factors by Locale

Despite the similarities between rural and urban America, we also find some important statistically significant differences (p<0.05), as shown in Figure 2.

- More than 60 percent of caregivers in rural America with a report of child maltreatment experience high family stress compared with 50 percent in urban areas
- Nearly one in three rural families reported to CPS have trouble meeting basic financial needs compared with just over one in five urban families reported to CPS
- Drug use is less common in the homes of rural children reported to CPS (8 percent versus 13 percent)
Chronic Stressors in Rural Families

It appears that rural families face chronic stressors and may have been struggling for a long time. Child maltreatment is only one of the problems they confront and perhaps one of the consequences of those problems. For rural families, isolation and lack of adequate services to help cope may present formidable obstacles to healthy family life.

The risk factors for child maltreatment highlight the importance of intervention and prevention programs. If interventions were designed to identify and assist struggling families sooner, we would likely see rates of child abuse decline. Because of the many similarities in risk factors between families in urban and rural areas, universal prevention programs that offer parents a wide range of assistance tailored to their needs would be beneficial. These services include social support, mental health services, and general parenting help. This analysis suggests that families reported to CPS are dealing with multiple stressors in their lives, regardless of where they live. It would therefore be beneficial if prevention services, such as home visitation programs, were more accessible to all families.

Data

The data from this project come from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSC Aw), a nationally representative sample of children who had a maltreatment report that resulted in a child welfare investigation. Baseline investigations were conducted between October 1999 and December 2000 for 5,501 children aged 0 to 16 years. NSC Aw used a stratified two-stage cluster sampling strategy that included ninety-two child protection agencies in thirty-six states. The data include cases that were both unfounded and substantiated at baseline. Additional information on the NSC Aw study design and sampling procedure has been previously published.

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with children, current caregivers, caseworkers, and teachers at baseline (about four months following completion of the index investigation). We used county-level USDA classification categories to determine metropolitan status. Codes one to three are considered metropolitan, or urban; codes four to eight are considered nonmetropolitan, or rural. For confidentiality reasons, respondents in the most rural places (USDA continuum code nine) were not included in the NSC Aw sampling frame. Thus, our rural sample is not representative of those in the most remote places. Because there are no national guidelines for substantiating cases of child abuse and jurisdictions have their own criteria, this analysis included all cases reported to CPS, regardless of whether cases were substantiated by the caseworker.

Statistics were computed using survey weights to produce national estimates.

ENDNOTES

1. Caseworkers answered the following question: “At the time of the investigation, was there high stress on the family? This may have resulted from things like unemployment, drug use, poverty, or neighbor violence? Yes or no.” When caseworkers responded affirmatively, families are coded as having high stress.

2. Caseworkers answered the following question: “At the time of the investigation, did the family have trouble paying for basic necessities such as food, shelter, clothing, electricity, or heat? Yes or no.” When caseworkers responded affirmatively, families are coded as having financial difficulty.


4. Ibid.


9. To determine neighborhood safety, caregivers completed nine questions from the Abridged Community Environment Scale.


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The Carsey Institute conducts policy research on vulnerable children, youth, and families and on sustainable community development. We give policy makers and practitioners timely, independent resources to effect change in their communities.

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