

September 2015

## **A Statewide Study of the Public's Knowledge of Child Abuse Reporting Policies**

**Wendy A. Walsh**

**Lisa M. Jones**

Universal mandated reporting laws on child abuse require all individuals to inform CPS agencies of suspected child abuse and neglect. Nineteen states currently have such laws, yet it is not clear how much knowledge the public has about this policy. To help inform directions for child abuse reporting policy reforms, we conducted telephone interviews with a random sample of adults (N=509) about their knowledge of child abuse reporting policies in a state with a universal reporting policy. The public's understanding of child abuse reporting policies was mixed. Only one in four respondents correctly answered at least five of the six questions correctly, with 5% answering all six questions correctly. A substantial minority (39%) were not aware they were required to report suspected maltreatment, most (71%) were not aware that children are not automatically removed from the home if there is maltreatment, and most (61%) were not aware that they could be charged with a misdemeanor for failing to report a suspicion of child abuse. When asked about barriers, respondents rated worries that reporting would not help the child higher than discomfort intervening in another family's activities. These findings imply a need for improving impressions of child protective service agencies and countering misperceptions about how they work with children and families. More research is needed about what types of messages are effective and what impact they have on the ultimate goal of increasing child safety.

Nearly all U.S. states designate certain groups of professionals, such as counselors, teachers and physicians, as mandated reporters of child abuse and neglect (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2014). In addition to requiring certain professionals to report, some states have universal reporting laws, which specify that all adults are required to report suspected child abuse and neglect. Currently, nineteen states or territories in the U.S. have universal reporting laws (Delaware, Florida, Idaho, Indiana, Kentucky,

Maryland, Mississippi, Nebraska, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Puerto Rico, Rhode Island, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, and Wyoming, Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2014). Universal reporting laws are established with the anticipated goal that more cases of abuse will be identified and more children protected yet this assumes that the public is aware of and influenced by these laws, something that has not been empirically established (Matthews & Bross, 2008; Melton, 2005; Palusic & Vandervort, 2014; Wekerle, 2013).

Although professionals make the majority of reports, nonprofessionals comprise approximately 40% of all sources of reports of child abuse (USDHHS, 2015). This includes parents (7%), other relatives (7%), friends and neighbors (5%), anonymous reporters (9%), other sources (7%) such as religious leaders or camp counselors, and unknown sources (3%). Despite comprising a significant proportion of reporters of child abuse, only a small handful of studies have explored the public's knowledge of child abuse reporting policy (Dhopper, Royse, & Wolfe, 1991; Stop It Now!, 2010).

The purpose of the current study was to explore public knowledge of child abuse reporting policy in a state with a universal reporting policy.

#### **Box A: How the study was conducted**

Telephone interviews were completed with 509 randomly selected adults in New Hampshire, a state with a universal reporting policy. See Box B for sample characteristics. All procedures were approved by the University of New Hampshire's Institutional Review Board. The survey was conducted between February 5 and February 12, 2015. The data have been weighted to account for known biases of telephone surveys (i.e. by the number of adults and telephone lines within households to equalize chances that any one adult would be selected). The data are also weighted by respondent age, sex, and region of the state. Pearson  $\chi^2$  analyses was conducted to examine whether there were differences in knowledge, factors important to reporting and reporting behavior by age, sex, and level of education. Statistically significant differences at the  $p < .05$  are presented.

The goals of this exploratory study were to examine the following questions:

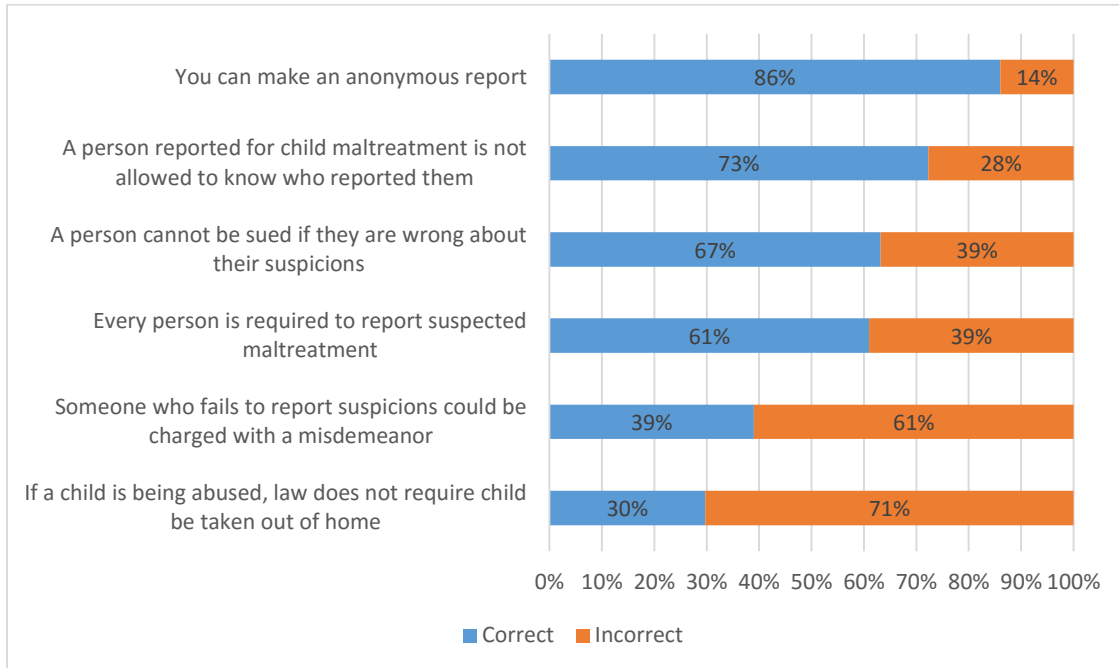
- What is the public's knowledge about child maltreatment reporting policies?
- What factors are important when deciding whether to report suspected child maltreatment?
- What is the public's experience reporting child maltreatment?

#### ***WHAT IS THE PUBLIC'S KNOWLEDGE ABOUT CHILD MALTREATMENT REPORTING POLICIES?***

Participants answered six true/false questions. Most participants answered the following questions correctly (See Figure 1).

- Most participants (86%) knew that if you report child abuse, you can make an anonymous report.
- 73% of participants correctly responded that the person reported for child abuse is not allowed to know who reported them.
- 67% of participants correctly responded that the person who reports possible child abuse cannot be sued if they are wrong about their suspicions.

**Figure 1. Public’s knowledge of child abuse reporting policies**



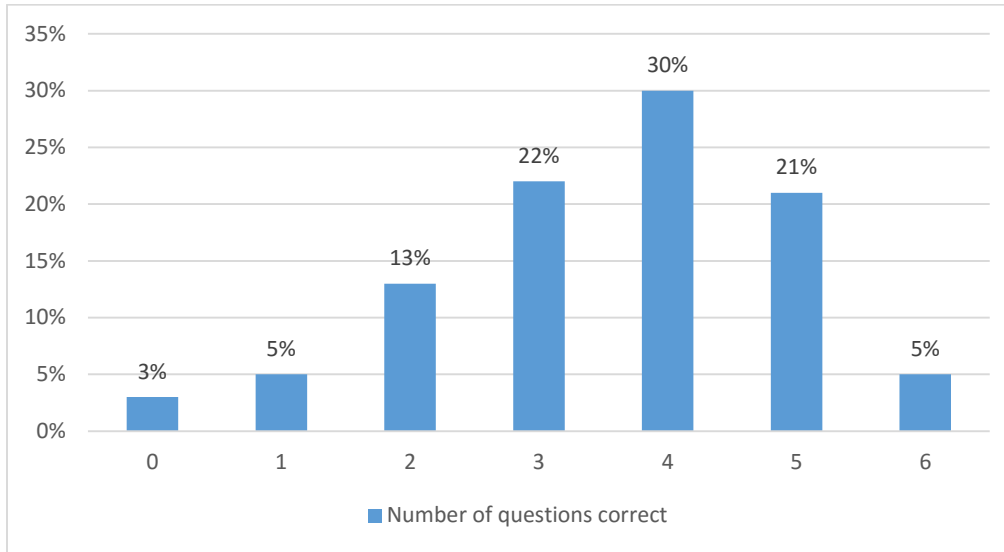
Participants had mixed knowledge on the following three questions.

- A substantial portion (39%) of participants were not aware they are required to report possible child abuse or neglect to the authorities.
- More than half of participants (61%) were not aware that someone who fails to make a report when they suspect a child is being abused or neglected could be charged with a misdemeanor.
- The majority of participants (71%) were not aware that the law does not require the child be taken out of the home immediately if the child is being abused.

***What percentage of respondents answered all six questions correctly?***

Extremely few participants (5%) answered all six items correctly (See Figure 2). Approximately one in five participants (21%) answered five items correctly, 30% answered four items correctly, 22% answered three items correctly, 13% answered two items correctly, 5% answered one item correctly, and 3% did not answer any correctly.

**Figure 2. Percentage of respondents answering questions correctly**



**Older participants were significantly less likely to answer the questions correctly.**

Specifically, older participants were significantly less likely to know that:

- A person has an option of making an anonymous report (95% of 18 to 34 year olds, 85% of 35 to 49 year olds, 84% of 50 to 64 year olds, and 76% of participants 65 and older correctly answered this).
- The person reported for child abuse is not allowed to know who reported them (80% of 18 to 34 year olds, 86% of 35 to 49 year olds, 65% of 50 to 64 year olds, and 57% of participants 65 and older correctly answered this).
- A person who reports possible child abuse cannot be sued if they are wrong about their suspicions (69% of 18 to 34 year olds, 73% of 35 to 49 year olds, 65% of 50 to 64 year olds, and 60% of participants 65 and older correctly answered this).
- They are required to report possible child abuse or neglect to the authorities (75% of 18 to 34 year olds, 63% of 35 to 49 year olds, 50% of 50 to 64 year olds, and 47% of participants 65 and older correctly answered this).
- Anyone who fails to make a report when they suspect that a child is being abused or neglect can be charged with a misdemeanor (49% of 18 to 34 year olds, 42% of 35 to 49 year olds, 31% of 50 to 64 year olds, and 30% of participants 65 and older correctly answered this).
- The law does not require the child be taken out of the home immediately if the child is being abused (24% of 18 to 34 year olds, 39% of 35 to 49 year olds, 25% of 50 to 64 year olds, and 29% of participants 65 and older correctly answered this).

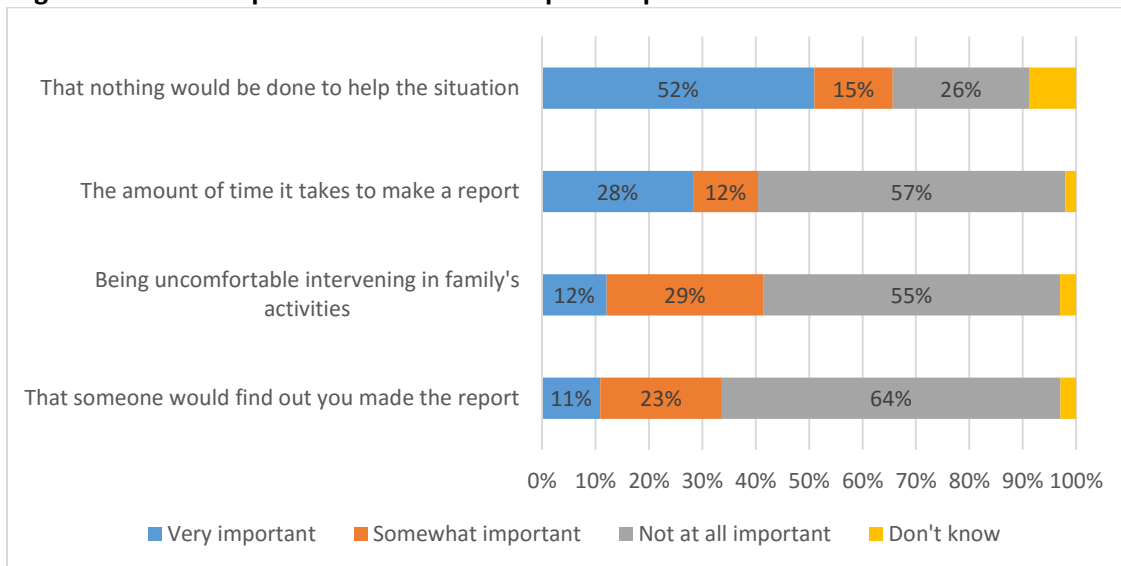
**Level of education was associated with two of the true/false questions.**

- Participants with **postgraduate work** were significantly less likely to know that **all individuals** who suspect a child may be abused or neglected are required to report it to the authorities (49%) compared to those with a high school education or less (66%), some college (65%), and college graduates (61%).
- Participants with **postgraduate work** were significantly more likely to know that the **law does not require** an abused child being taken out of the home (47%) compared to those with a high school education or less (18%), some college (27%), and college graduates (29%).

**WHAT ARE IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS WHEN DECIDING WHETHER TO MAKE AN OFFICIAL REPORT?**

More than half of participants (53%) said that concerns that nothing would be done to help the situation would be a key consideration to deciding to make a report of suspected child abuse. Other factors were rated as less important: 28% of participants said that the amount of time to make a report is a very important consideration, only about one in ten participants said that being uncomfortable intervening in another family’s activities or that someone would find out you made the report are very important considerations.

**Figure 3. Factors important in decision to report suspected child abuse**



**Age was associated with the importance of two factors**

- **Older participants** were significantly more likely to find the **amount of time** it takes to make a report to be very important (21% of 18 to 34 year olds, 31% of 35 to 49 year olds, 29% of 50 to 64 year olds, and 35% of participants 65 and older rated this as very important).

- **Older participants** were more likely to say being **uncomfortable intervening** in another family’s activities is a very important consideration in deciding whether to make a report (9% of 18 to 34 year olds, 9% of 35 to 49 year olds, 11% of 50 to 64 year olds, and 24% of participants 65 and older rated this as very important).

**Level of education was associated with the importance of two factors**

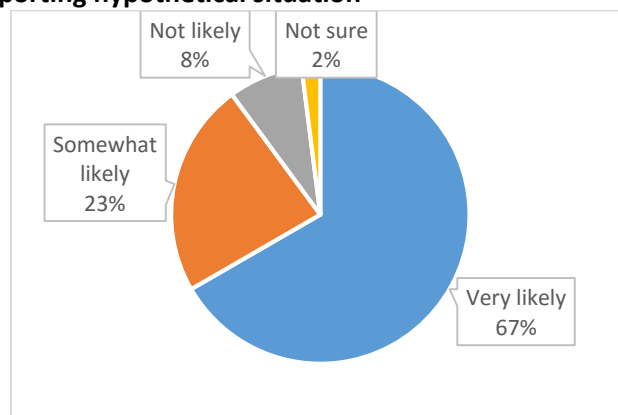
- Participants with a **high school education or less** were more likely to find the **amount of time** it takes to make a report to be very important (41% of those with a high education or less, 26% of those with some college, 29% of college graduates, and 20% of those with graduate work rated this as very important).
- Participants with **lower levels of education** were more likely to say a very important consideration in making an official report is **believing that nothing would be done** to help the situation (69% of those with a high education or less, 65% of those with some college, 55% of those with college degrees, and 35% of those with graduate work rated this factor as very important).

**WHAT IS THE PUBLIC’S EXPERIENCE REPORTING CHILD MALTREATMENT?**

**Given a hypothetical situation, would you report suspected abuse?**

When given the following hypothetical situation: “a neighbor’s 10 year old child has a red mark on his cheek and a black eye, and he tells you that his dad did it, but that it is no big deal”, 67% said they would be very likely to report it, 23% said somewhat likely, 8% said not likely, and 2% were not sure.

**Figure 2. Likelihood of reporting hypothetical situation**



**Box B: Sample characteristics (N=509)**

Age

18 to 34	25%
35 to 49	27%
50 to 64	26%
65 and older	17%
Missing	3%

Sex

Male	49%
Female	51%

Household income

Less than \$30,000	8%
\$30,000 to \$59,999	19%
\$60,000 to \$74,999	9%
\$75,000 to \$99,999	11%
\$100,000 or more	26%
Missing	28%

Next we asked:

***If you were going to report a suspicion of child abuse or neglect, where would you start?***

More than half of participants (57%) would start by calling the police or 911, 49% would find the number for CPS, 23% would search online about how to make a child abuse report, 14% would do something else, such as confronting the person, talking to a friend, or talking to the school, and 1% were unsure. (Participants were given the option of selecting more than one option).

- **Older** participants were **more likely to call the police or 911** (43% of 18 to 34 year olds, 64% of 35 to 49 year olds, 59% of 50 to 64 year olds, and 59% of participants 65 and older said they would call the police).

- **Younger** participants were **more likely to call CPS** (59% of 18 to 34 year olds, 46% of 35 to 49 year olds, 43% of 50 to 64 year olds, and 43% of participants 65 and older said they would call CPS).

- **Males** were **more likely to call the police or 911** (63% of males and 51% of females said they would call the police).

- **Females** were **more likely to call CPS** (55% of females and 42% of males said they would call CPS).

- Participants with a **college degree or greater** were more likely to **search online** compared to those with less education (16% of those with a high education or less, 19% of those with some college, 27% of those with college degrees, and 31% of those with graduate work said they would search online).

Next we asked:

***Have you ever reported a suspicion of child abuse or neglect to child protective services or to the police?***

One in five participants (19%) had reported a suspicion of child abuse or neglect to CPS or the police at some time point.

- **Females** were significantly more likely than males to have ever made a report (25% of females compared to 13% of males had ever made a report).

- Those with a **postgraduate** education were more likely to have ever made a report (35%) compared to participants with less education (11% of those with high school education or less, 17% of those with some college, 15% of those with a college degree had ever made a report).

## IMPLICATIONS

Our survey results show that while the general public seems to understand some aspects of the reporting process there were other aspects of reporting policy and procedures that suggested areas of confusion. Recommendations to improve the reporting process are described below.

1. Increase public awareness about universal reporting responsibilities. A substantial proportion (39%) of participants did not know that all individuals are required to report suspected child abuse. The additional question of whether universal reporting improves the identification of abused and neglected children is still in need of substantial additional research.
2. Increase education about the process of child abuse investigations. Most participants (71%) were not aware that children are not automatically removed from the home if there is maltreatment, a misperception that could affect someone's decision to report. More public education is needed about the typical process and outcomes of child abuse investigations.
3. CPS agencies may need to embark on education campaigns to change their public image. Survey findings on barriers to reporting suggest that fears that reporting would not help the child are one of the most salient. These findings suggest that efforts to increase the general public's comfort with reporting may require strategies to increase their confidence that the benefits will outweigh the risks for the child.
4. May need to target public awareness campaigns by demographics. Generally elderly individuals and those with less education had the least accurate perception of child abuse reporting policies, and these groups also rated several barriers as potentially more important such as the time involved in reporting, not wanting to intervene in family affairs, and not believing it will help. Potential public awareness campaigns should be piloted and researched to understand their impact on the ultimate goal of increasing child safety.

## CONCLUSIONS

While efforts to encourage the public to report suspected child abuse have focused on legal policies such as universal reporting laws, or procedural simplifications such as establishing 1-800 numbers, our survey findings suggest that more success may be found in targeting educational campaigns toward improving public impressions of CPS agencies, and countering misperceptions about how they work with children and families.

## References

Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2014). Mandatory reporters of child abuse and neglect. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau.



Stop it Now! (2010). *What do U.S. adults think about child sexual abuse? Measures of knowledge and attitudes among six states*. Northampton, MA: Stop it Now! Available at [http://www.stopitnow.org/sites/default/files/documents/files/rdd\\_survey\\_report.pdf](http://www.stopitnow.org/sites/default/files/documents/files/rdd_survey_report.pdf)

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau. (2015). *Child maltreatment 2013*. Available from <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/research-data-technology/statistics-research/child-maltreatment>

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research depended on the assistance of hundreds of adults who participated in the telephone survey. This project was funded by the National Children's Alliance. Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the National Children's Alliance.



For more information about this project, please contact [wendy.walsh@unh.edu](mailto:wendy.walsh@unh.edu)

### CRIMES AGAINST CHILDREN RESEARCH CENTER

126 Horton Social Science Center  
Durham, NH 03824

(603) 862-1888  
(603) 862-1122 FAX

[www.unh.edu/ccrc](http://www.unh.edu/ccrc)

