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Wendy A. Walsh <sup>a</sup>, Lisa M. Jones <sup>a</sup> & Carole C. Swiecicki <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of New Hampshire, Durham, New Hampshire, USA

<sup>b</sup> Eastern Virginia Medical School, Norfolk, Virginia, USA

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## CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE DATA

# Using Child Advocacy Center Tracking Data to Examine Criminal Disposition Times

WENDY A. WALSH and LISA M. JONES

*University of New Hampshire, Durham, New Hampshire, USA*

CAROLE C. SWIECICKI

*Eastern Virginia Medical School, Norfolk, Virginia, USA*

*Given the difficulty of obtaining criminal justice data on child abuse cases, information from child advocacy centers could be an important resource for answering questions about criminal justice outcomes for child abuse cases. In this exploratory study, we use data from one child advocacy center (N = 632) to examine the feasibility of using NCAtrak, a national computerized, Web-based case tracking system, to examine criminal disposition timeframes in child abuse cases. The system data indicated that the time frame for the cases to be criminally resolved varied widely. About one in four child physical and sexual abuse cases with adult offenders took more than one year to reach a final disposition. About 11% of child sexual abuse cases with juvenile offenders took more than one year to reach a criminal disposition. We encourage child advocacy centers using computer-based data systems to think of additional ways they might use this potentially rich source of data.*

**KEYWORDS** *child abuse, criminal justice, technology*

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Address correspondence to Wendy A. Walsh, Crimes Against Children Research Center, University of New Hampshire, 10 West Edge Drive, Durham, NH 03824. E-mail: wendy.walsh@unh.edu

Understanding criminal justice outcomes for child abuse cases has been hampered in part by the difficulty of obtaining detailed criminal justice case information. Much criminal justice outcome information can be obtained only by reviewing paper files one at a time, or by linking data manually across police and prosecutor offices. These kinds of procedures are resource- and time-intensive, making it difficult to answer important questions about the criminal justice system response to child abuse. The increase in the number of child advocacy centers (CACs) across the United States offers an opportunity to improve this body of research.

CACs are child-focused programs in which representatives from many disciplines, including law enforcement, child protection, prosecution, mental health, medical and victim advocacy work together to conduct interviews and make team decisions about the investigation, treatment, management, and prosecution of child abuse cases (Walsh, Jones, & Cross, 2003). The National Children's Alliance (NCA), the member organization of CACs, has national accreditation standards for CACs in 10 areas: multidisciplinary team, cultural competency and diversity, forensic interviews, victim support and advocacy, medical evaluation, mental health, case review, case tracking, organization capacity, and a child-focused setting (NCA, 2011). Nationwide there are approximately 750 centers and during 2012 CACs served approximately 286,000 child victims (NCA, 2012).

One of the benefits to partnering with CACs for criminal justice research on child abuse cases is that a multidisciplinary investigation team is involved with a case from a first report all the way through criminal case disposition. Furthermore, an increasing number of CACs are adopting computerized case-tracking systems, which provide an opportunity to analyze case-level child abuse data collected across different agencies. However, CAC data systems have not, to our knowledge, been used yet for research, and questions remain about its feasibility for this purpose. The objectives of the current article were to conduct an exploratory study using case tracking data from one CAC to examine how long it takes to criminally resolve three types of child abuse cases: physical abuse cases, sexual abuse cases with adult perpetrators, and sexual abuse cases with juvenile perpetrators. While research has established that child sexual abuse cases typically take longer than a year to reach a criminal disposition (Martone, Jaudes, & Cavins, 1996; Smith & Elstein, 1993; Stroud, Martens, & Barker, 2000; Walsh, Lippert, Cross, Maurice, & Davison, 2008; Walsh & Steelman, 2013), no studies have examined whether different types of child abuse cases take different amounts of time to criminally resolve. Understanding whether case characteristics impact criminal disposition time could help identify types of cases that may lag in the system.

## PROBLEMS IN ACCESSING CRIMINAL JUSTICE DATA ON CHILD ABUSE

Researching questions on criminal justice outcomes for child abuse can be problematic because of the need to gather case data that is typically stored across different agencies. A meta-analysis of research on the prosecution of child abuse identified 21 studies published by 2002 that included criminal justice outcomes, such as charging and conviction (Cross, Walsh, Simone, & Jones, 2003). In about half of the studies, data were collected from prosecutors' offices and in the other half the source of data varied, collected, for example, from child protective service (CPS) or sheriff's offices. Different agencies also typically input different information. For example, CPS office files may document information on family and child characteristics but not on which charges were filed in the case, while data from a prosecutors' office is likely to have information on charges but not family characteristics. In addition to the time and resources needed to link data across agencies, it is not a straightforward process because agencies may index their information differently. For example, one study found that in CPS and the sheriff's office, files were indexed by perpetrator and victim name, while the prosecutor's office used only the perpetrator name (Sedlak et al., 2005). The authors note that tracking this was difficult because children in the same family had different last names, variations in spellings arose, and middle initials were sometimes used, leading to difficulties identifying case matches.

## USING NCATRAK FOR RESEARCH ON CRIMINAL JUSTICE OUTCOMES

The National Children's Alliance (NCA) is the national membership organization for CACs and specifies case tracking as a core standard that CACs must fulfill in order to be accredited. The case tracking standard specifies: "CACs must develop and implement a system for monitoring case progress and tracking case outcomes for all multidisciplinary components" (NCA, 2011). NCAttrak is a popular computer-based case tracking system used by many CACs. It provides a comprehensive system to enter case data, such as referral information, offender and victim characteristics, mental health and medical services, and criminal justice outcomes, making it ideal to consider research questions about a wide range of issues. CACs began using NCAttrak in 2005. As of November 2013, 360 CACs across the country were using NCAttrak, with approximately 887,000 cases in the system and 7,920 individuals using the system. There is a daily average of 500 new cases entered into the system (J. Picklesimer, personal communication, November 13, 2013). This is a 4.5-fold increase in the number of cases in the system since 2008. At that time,

approximately 200 CACs used NCAttrak, with 200,000 cases in the system and 2,550 individuals using the system and a daily average of 350 new cases entered into the system (Jones & Walsh, 2008).

Although the use of a computer-based case tracking system is steadily growing, one of the challenges for CACs is establishing methods and procedures to make full use of the data options available in NCAttrak. NCAttrak provides a place to enter basic case data, such as victim and perpetrator demographic information, as well as a set of fields for each area associated with the different multidisciplinary professionals affiliated with the CAC, such as mental health, medical, law enforcement, and prosecution. Anecdotal reports from professionals using NCAttrak indicate struggles obtaining some of the information, such as the particular type of charge filed and the criminal justice outcome. As such, missing data varies substantially across each field and by each particular CAC (Jones & Walsh, 2008). However, systems like NCAttrak offer an enormous potential for research, particularly criminal justice research because detailed information on a child abuse case and criminal justice outcomes can readily be obtained from a single system. Given so many CACs share a common system, there is even the potential for multisite research as use increases.

## CRIMINAL DISPOSITION TIME

As an initial exploratory study using this data system, we sought to conduct research on a question important to increasing the responsiveness of the criminal justice system to child victims: the length of time it takes to criminally resolve a child abuse case. Research suggests that a prolonged criminal court experience is a stressor for child sexual abuse victims that can be detrimental to a child victim's mental health (Dezwirke-Sas, 1992; Martin, 1992; Prior, Glaser, & Lynch, 1997; Runyan, Everson, Edelson, Hunter, & Coulter, 1988). The American Bar Association (ABA) standards recommend that 99% of felony cases be completed within 180 days (e.g., entry of guilty plea, verdict, or dismissal) and that all felony cases be completed within 1 year of arrest (Dodge & Pankey, 2003). Many states use or adapt the ABA standards to measure the time from filing to final criminal outcome (Dodge & Pankey, 2003, National Center for State Courts, n.d.). The handful of studies on child sexual abuse suggest that it is common for these cases to take 1 year or longer (Martone, Jaudes, & Cavins, 1996; Smith & Elstein, 1993; Stroud et al., 2000; Walsh et al., 2008; Walsh & Steelman, 2013). Previous research in one jurisdiction found that 20% of child sexual abuse cases were resolved within the 180-day target (Walsh et al., 2008), while research in another jurisdiction found that 43% of child sexual abuse cases were resolved within this time frame (Walsh & Steelman, 2013). In contrast, in a study of nine courts, about two-thirds (68%) of general felony cases were resolved within the 180-day

target (Ostrom & Hanson, 2000). Thus, previous research suggests a higher percentage of felony cases are resolved within the target 180-day time frame compared to child sexual abuse cases.

In the current study, we used NCAtrak data from one CAC to explore the length of time it takes to criminally resolve three types of cases: physical child abuse cases with adult offenders, sexual child abuse cases with adult offenders, and sexual child abuse cases with juvenile offenders. Because no study we are aware of has compared criminal disposition time for different types of child abuse cases, we were interested in exploring whether disposition time varied by type of child abuse case. Furthermore, for comparison purposes we wanted to examine the length of time for child sexual abuse cases with adult offenders in the current study to the handful of studies that have examined the length of disposition time for this type of abuse. Because no studies have examined this issue for different types of child abuse cases, we also conducted an exploratory analysis to examine basic case characteristics (child age, child sex, offender relationship, and case outcome) that might be associated with criminal disposition time. Using NCAtrak data to explore this question, we also offer an initial exploration of the potential for computer-based case tracking systems to enhance research about criminal justice involvement in child maltreatment.

## METHOD

### Location

The Child Abuse Program at the Children's Hospital of the King's Daughters (CHKD) in Norfolk, Virginia, participated in this study. The Child Abuse Program at CHKD is an accredited CAC with National Children's Alliance. The program is a regional CAC that serves a large service region encompassing multiple jurisdictions and approximately 1.5 million people. The program has formalized memorandums of understanding (MOUs) and meets for multidisciplinary team meetings with six jurisdictions as well as with the Army, Air Force, and Navy. Each year, the program serves approximately 1,000 traumatized youth, providing case management, forensic interviews, medical and mental health services, and expert testimony. Youth served identify as African American (46%), Caucasian (44%), mixed race (6%), and Hispanic/Latino (4%). Most families (more than 95%) speak English or Spanish. In 2008, the majority of child abuse referrals were related to allegations of sexual abuse (80%) and physical abuse (18%). This CAC has been using the computer-based data tracking system NCAtrak to enter case characteristics including criminal justice outcomes since 2005.

Referrals to the program are accepted from multidisciplinary partners as well as from community physicians. The majority of referrals are made by the department of social services (41%) or law enforcement (42%; C. Swiecicki,

personal communication, December 9, 2011). The CAC serves an area with a relatively large military population (about 9% of the area is active duty military).

### Sample

The NCA developed a query for the NCAtrak system that permitted the relevant deidentified data to be extracted from the CHKD case records as an Excel file. All procedures were approved by the University of New Hampshire's Institutional Review Board. Cases were selected if there was (a) a report of sexual or physical abuse, (b) the victim was a child (less than 18 years old), and (c) there was a criminal disposition outcome over a 3-year time frame, from 2008 to 2010. The sample of 632 cases included (a) 134 child physical abuse cases with adult offenders, (b) 377 child sexual abuse cases with adult offenders, and (c) 121 child sexual abuse cases with juvenile offenders (12 to 17 years old).

The sample characteristics are presented in Table 1. The average age of children for the physical abuse cases was 2.5 years, 39% were female, and 41% were White. The average age of children for sexual abuse cases with adult offenders was 9.9 years, 86% were female, and 47% were White. The average age of children for sexual abuse cases with juvenile offenders was 7.7 years, 69% were female, and 32% were White.

**TABLE 1** Sample Characteristics (N = 632)

Case characteristic	Physical abuse cases child victim and adult offender ( <i>n</i> = 134)	Sexual abuse cases child victim and adult offender ( <i>n</i> = 377)	Sexual abuse cases child victim and juvenile offender ( <i>n</i> = 121)
Victim age ( <i>SD</i> )	2.5 (3.7)	9.9 (3.9)	7.7 (3.2)
Female victim	39%	86%	69%
Victim race			
White	41%	47%	32%
Black	56%	50%	67%
Hispanic	3%	3%	2%
Offender age ( <i>SD</i> )	26.4 (7.0)	35.5 (12.1)	14.5 (1.3)
Male offender	44%	94%	96%
Offender race			
White	43%	43%	34%
Black	53%	49%	64%
Hispanic	4%	8%	2%
Family offender	77%	57%	62%
Outcome			
Drop	21%	31%	24%
Convicted at trial	43%	34%	30%
Acquitted at trial	7%	6%	7%
Plea	29%	28%	39%

## Variables

### DEPENDENT VARIABLES

Criminal justice timeframes were computed for three time points:

1. Time between child abuse report and prosecution review—the number of days between the report to the CAC<sup>1</sup> to the review for prosecution. This time frame is important because it represents the length of time between initial report and consideration for prosecution.
2. Time between prosecution review and criminal disposition outcome (criminal disposition time)—the number of days between the date the case was reviewed for prosecution and a criminal justice outcome (drop, guilty plea, or trial outcome). This is a key measurement of efficient case-flow management in the court system (Steelman, 2008). The ABA time frame for this begins with the date of arrest and ends with the final criminal disposition. Like Ostrom and Hanson (2000) we use a modification of the time frame and begin with the prosecution review (instead of date of arrest). This is also fairly consistent with how many states track this (National Center for State Courts, n.d.; Steelman, Goerd, & McMillan, 2004).
3. Time between child abuse report and criminal disposition outcome—the number of days between the day the report was made to the CAC and the criminal justice outcome. We also chose to measure this timeframe because this is potentially important from a family's perspective and represents how long it takes from a report of abuse to the final criminal justice outcome.

We examined the average number of days as well as defined categorical groups of time (up to 3 months, more than 3 months to 6 months, more than 6 months to 1 year, more than 1 year) to examine criminal justice time frames in different ways. Missing data on the three date variables were extremely rare; no cases were missing the date the report was made to the CAC or the date of the criminal justice outcome, and 4.4% of cases ( $n = 28$ ) were missing the date reviewed for prosecution.

### INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

Available case characteristics included child age, child sex, child race, offender age, offender sex, and offender race. Offender relationship to child was coded to capture whether the offender was a family member (parent, stepparent, or other relative) or not a family member (parent's boyfriend or girlfriend, other known person, or unknown person<sup>2</sup>). Case outcomes included charges dropped, guilty plea, or resolved by trial (convicted at trial or acquitted). Missing data was less than 1% on all of these variables.



## RESULTS

### Time Between Child Abuse Report and Prosecution Review

Overall, there was wide variation in how quickly cases were sent to prosecution for review (see Table 2). Just over a quarter of cases (27%) were sent within 1 week of initial report of child abuse to the CAC, 23% of cases took more than 1 week to 1 month, 32% of cases took more than 1 month to 3 months, and 18% of cases took more than 3 months. There was no significant difference in time between child abuse report and prosecution review by the type of child abuse case.

Looking at the average amount of time from CAC report to prosecution review (instead of grouping time in categories), we found that it took about 2 months for a case to be sent to prosecution for review ( $M = 59$  days,  $SD = 87$ ). There was no significant difference in the average length of time,  $F(2, 601) = 1.60, p = .203$ ; child physical abuse,  $M = 57, SD = 78$ ; child sexual abuse cases with adult offenders,  $M = 55, SD = 86$ ; and child sexual abuse cases with juvenile offenders,  $M = 72, SD = 101$ . For child physical abuse cases, the oldest 10% of cases (those at the 90th percentile and above) were 147 days and older. For child sexual abuse cases with adult offenders, the oldest 10% were 139 days and older. For child sexual abuse cases with juvenile offenders, the oldest 10% were 205 days and older.

### Time Between Prosecution Review and Criminal Disposition Outcome

There was a wide variation in how quickly cases were resolved at this CAC. Overall, 44% of cases were resolved within the target time frame of 6 months, while 23% of cases took more than 1 year. There was a significant difference in how quickly cases were resolved depending on the type of case. Child physical and sexual abuse cases with adult offenders took longer to resolve than child sexual abuse cases with juvenile offenders (see Table 2 and Figure 1). Nearly a quarter of child physical and sexual abuse cases with adult offenders took more than 1 year to reach a disposition. About 11% of child sexual abuse cases with juvenile offenders took more than 1 year.

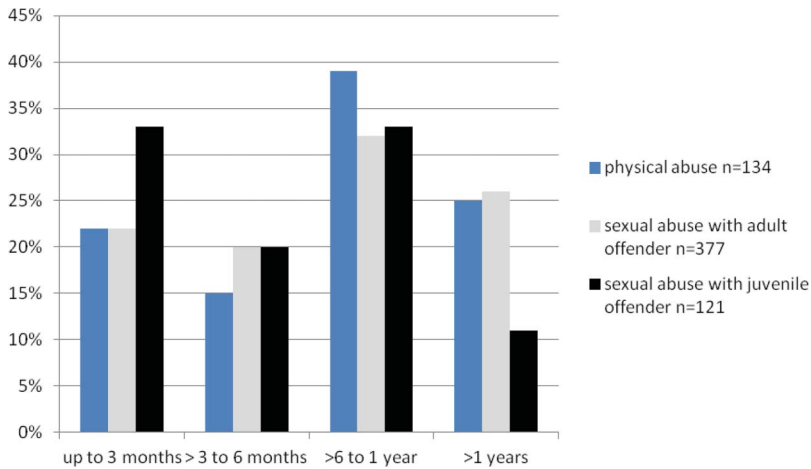
Overall, on average it took about 8 months for a case to reach resolution ( $M = 253$  days,  $SD = 247$ ). Child physical abuse ( $M = 269, SD = 214$ ) and child sexual abuse cases with adult offenders ( $M = 271, SD = 277$ ) took significantly longer, about 9 months, compared to child sexual abuse cases with juvenile offenders, which took about 5.5 months ( $M = 175, SD = 145$ ),  $F(2,601) = 7.11, p = .001$ .

For child physical abuse cases, the oldest 10% of cases (those at the 90th percentile and above) were 611 days and older. For child sexual abuse cases with adult offenders, the oldest 10% were 585 days and older. For child sexual abuse cases with juvenile offenders, the oldest 10% were 387 days and older.

**TABLE 2** Length of Criminal Justice Process

	All cases (N = 604)	Physical abuse cases child victim and adult offender (n = 130)	Sexual abuse cases child victim and adult offender (n = 359)	Sexual abuse cases child victim and juvenile offender (n = 115)	$\chi^2$
Time between child abuse report and prosecution review					
Up to 1 week	27%	21%	30%	24%	12.53
> 1 week to 1 month	23%	25%	24%	19%	
> 1 month to 3 months	32%	41%	28%	37%	
> 3 months	18%	14%	19%	21%	
Time between prosecution review and criminal disposition	(N = 604)	(n = 130)	(n = 359)	(n = 115)	
Up to 3 month	25%	22%	22%	36%	18.43**
> 3 to 6 months	19%	15%	20%	20%	
> 6 to 1 year	34%	39%	32%	33%	
> 1 to 2 years	23%	25%	26%	11%	
Time between child abuse report and criminal disposition	(N = 632)	(n = 134)	(n = 377)	(n = 121)	
Up to half year	32%	26%	32%	36%	12.44
> half to 1 year	38%	40%	35%	46%	
> 1 to 2 years	27%	30%	29%	16%	
> 2 to 3 years	4%	5%	3%	3%	

\*\* $p < .01$ .



**FIGURE 1** Time between prosecution review and final criminal disposition outcome (N = 632) (color figure available online).

### Time Between Child Abuse Report and Criminal Disposition Outcome

Next, we examined the length of time from the report to the CAC to the final criminal justice disposition outcome (total disposition time). There was a wide variation in this time: about one-third of cases had a total disposition within 6 months, 38% had a total disposition time of more than 6 months to 1 year, 27% had a total disposition time between 1 and 2 years, and 4% had a total disposition time of more than 2 years. Child physical and sexual abuse cases with adult offenders took longer to resolve than child sexual abuse cases with juvenile offenders, but this was not a statistically significant difference (see Table 2). About one-third of child physical and sexual abuse cases with adult offenders took more than 1 year, while 19% of child sexual abuse cases with juvenile offenders took this long.

Overall, on average it took about 10 months for a case to reach resolution ( $M = 304$  days,  $SD = 203$ ). Child physical abuse ( $M = 336$ ,  $SD = 235$ ) and child sexual abuse cases with adult offenders ( $M = 307$ ,  $SD = 205$ ) took significantly longer, about 10 months, compared to child sexual abuse cases with juvenile offenders, which took about 8 months ( $M = 259$ ,  $SD = 164$ ),  $F(2,629) = 4.70$ ,  $p = .009$ .

For child physical abuse cases, the oldest 10% (those at the 90th percentile and above) were 643 days and older. For child sexual abuse cases with adult offenders, the oldest 10% were 596 days and older. For child sexual abuse cases with juvenile offenders, the oldest 10% were 459 days and older.

## Criminal Resolution Within a 1-Year Time Frame

Because criminally disposing of cases within a 1-year time frame is a key measurement of efficient case-flow management (National Center for State Courts, n.d.; Steelman, Goerdt & McMillan, 2004), we next examined case characteristics (child age, child sex, offender relationship, case outcome) associated with a criminal disposition time of more than 1 year.

### CHILD PHYSICAL ABUSE CASES

Cases with younger victims ( $M = 1.25$ ,  $SD = 2.98$ ) were significantly more likely to take more than 1 year to be criminally resolved compared to those with older victims ( $M = 3.00$ ,  $SD = 3.86$ ,  $t(128) = 2.31$ ,  $p < .05$ ). There was no difference in disposition time by child sex, offender relationship, or case outcome (charges dropped, resolved by trial, or plea).

### CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE CASES WITH ADULT OFFENDERS

There was no difference in disposition time by child age, child sex, offender relationship, or case outcome (charges dropped, resolved by trial, or plea).

### CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE CASES WITH JUVENILE OFFENDERS

There was no difference in disposition time by child age or sex. One in 5 cases with nonfamily offenders (21%) took more than 1 year to be criminally resolved compared to 7% of those with family offenders,  $\chi^2(1, N = 115) = 5.95$ ,  $p < .05$ . There was no difference in disposition time by case outcome (charges dropped, resolved by trial, or plea).

It is important to note that for all types of cases there were a high percentage of cases resolved by trial (see Table 1). For child physical abuse cases, 50% were resolved by trial, 29% by plea, and 21% were dropped. For child sexual abuse cases with adult offenders, 40% were resolved by trial, 28% by plea, and 31% were dropped. For child sexual abuse cases with juvenile offenders, 37% of these cases were resolved by trial, 39% by plea, and 24% were dropped.

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the utility of using CAC data from a computer-based case tracking system to enhance research about criminal justice involvement in child maltreatment. We specifically examined the length of time it takes to criminally resolve child abuse cases (time from prosecution review to final criminal disposition), which is a key court outcome

measure but has received limited attention in the child abuse field (Walsh et al., 2008; Walsh & Steelman, 2013). Successfully drawing from NCAtrak system data at one CAC, we found wide variation in the criminal justice time frames for child maltreatment cases. The ABA time frames and many state standards recommend that 99% of felony cases be disposed within 6 months and that all felony cases be disposed within 1 year (Dodge & Pankey, 2003; National Center for State Courts, n.d.). Yet we found only a minority of child abuse cases resolved within the 6-month time frame. About one-third (37%) of child physical abuse cases, 42% of child sexual abuse cases, and 56% of child sexual abuse cases with juvenile offenders were resolved within this time frame. Furthermore, a significant minority of cases did not achieve the goal of resolution within 1 year. A quarter of child physical and sexual abuse cases with adult offenders took more than 1 year to reach a disposition, while 1 in 10 child sexual abuse cases with juvenile offenders took more than 1 year. These percentages fall in between those found in two studies on child sexual abuse cases with adult offenders. One study found that 11% took more than 1 year (Stelman & Walsh, 2010) and another study found that 39% of cases took more than 1 year to reach a criminal resolution (Walsh et al., 2012).

The average number of days for the criminal processing of child sexual abuse cases with adult offenders in the current study was 271 days. This is shorter than the handful of studies that have included the average number of days (329 days in Walsh et al., 2008; 321 days in Martone et al., 1996; 378 days in Stroud et al., 2000) and longer than one study (190 days in Walsh & Steelman, 2013). The current study found 26% of child sexual abuse cases with adult offenders took between 1 and 2 years to be resolved, which is exactly what was found in one previous study (Walsh et al., 2008) and significantly more than another study (8% in Walsh & Steelman, 2013). Clearly, more research is needed in order to better understand the variation that occurs across studies and the factors that impact the length of time needed to criminally resolve these cases.

In the current study, case characteristics were not associated with disposition time for child sexual abuse cases with adult offenders. This finding is similar to two previous studies on disposition time for child sexual abuse cases with adult offenders (Smith & Elstein, 1993; Walsh et al., 2008). For child physical abuse cases, those with younger victims took significantly longer to reach a disposition. For child sexual abuse cases with juvenile offenders, those with nonfamily offenders took significantly longer to reach a disposition. Given the paucity of research on this topic, future research should consider how a wider range of case characteristics and other factors may influence criminal disposition time.

For example, in order to understand why excessive delays occur in some courts, organizational theories have helped to improve our understanding of the influence of institutional characteristics, local legal culture, and the

existence of specialized management tools and disposition time (Church, Carlson, Lee, & Tan, 1978; Eisenstein & Jacob, 1997; Nardulli, 1978; Ostrom, Ostrom, Hanson, & Kleiman, 2007). Ostrom and colleagues (2007) found that court culture was associated with how expeditiously courts criminally resolved cases. Generally, courts higher on the solidarity dimension (or the extent to which individuals pursue shared goals, common tasks, and agreed-on procedures) and lower on the sociability dimension (or the extent to which individuals emphasized the importance of social relations) were more likely to resolve cases within the 180 day and 1-year benchmarks.

In addition, national research on the pace of criminal and civil litigation in general, and not specific to child abuse cases, has identified a number of caseflow management factors related to shorter felony case processing times (Mahoney et al., 1988; Solomon & Somerlot, 1987; Steelman, 2008; Steelman, Goerd, & McMillan, 2004). These include court management tools such as differentiated case management, which assigns different levels of priority to different types of cases, close management of plea negotiations to ensure they occur early in the disposition process, and having early decisions on motions and realistic trial scheduling.

Two studies on child sexual abuse have examined limited aspects of some of these case-flow management tools. One study found that prosecutors' filing fewer motions were associated with quicker processing time (Smith & Elstein, 1993). Another study found that cases without a hearing or motion continuance or trial continuance took nearly 3 months shorter to resolve than cases with such continuances, controlling for some case characteristics (Walsh & Steelman, 2013). Clearly, much more research is needed on the impact of both legal culture and organizational practices, such as case-flow management tools and criminal disposition time.

Unexpectedly, we found at this site that cases resolved with a guilty plea were not resolved any quicker than those resolved by trial or dropped. Previous research has found a quicker disposition time when resolved by a guilty plea (Walsh et al., 2008; Walsh & Steelman, 2013). Informal conversations with staff at the CAC indicate that defense attorneys are often reluctant to accept a plea bargain early in the process in part because of defendants' concern about appearing on a sex offender registry. In addition, sometimes defense attorneys ask for multiple continuances, which pushes back the trial date only to then accept a plea bargain close to the scheduled trial date. This might help explain the finding that disposition time by trial was no different from time resolved via a guilty plea.

The relationship of plea dates and scheduled trial dates is very significant for successful case-flow management (Stelman, Goerd, & McMillan, 2004). Steelman and his colleagues (2004) at the National Center for State Courts note that in order to preserve the credibility of trial dates, it is important to achieve nontrial dispositions far enough in advance of the first dates set for trial. Plea agreements that come on or after the initial trial date are

problematic because it means that the trial calendar has to be adjusted at the last minute, which results in inefficient use of time and resources.

Another unexpected finding was the high percentage of cases resolved by trial (42%). This rate is much higher than the 18% of cases resolved by trial that was found by a meta-analysis of criminal justice outcomes (Cross, Walsh, Jones, & Simone, 2003). It is important to keep in mind that this rate is based on data collected from studies conducted mostly in the 1980s. It could be that since then there has been an increase in the percentage of child sexual abuse cases going to trial because of the strict sentences and required sex offender registration that could result from a conviction. These strict consequences of conviction could result in difficulties obtaining pleas. It could also be that the data reported here have a different type of screening and acceptance process. Informal conversations suggest that the screening process is somewhat stringent and cases that are considered "less severe" are not accepted for prosecution. This type of filtering would inflate the percentage of cases resolved by trial because only those cases that are considered more severe are included. Another possible explanation for the high trial rate could be related to the relatively large military population in the service area. Those cases with active-duty offenders essentially have two justice systems. Taking a plea, even to a misdemeanor offense, also can have a very negative impact on a service member's career. Last, the relatively high trial rates could be related to the fact that prosecutors are elected, as opposed to appointed. Elections could lead prosecutors to focus on having high trial rates because they think this is what the public wants. Prosecutor election campaigns tend to lead prosecutors to apply the criminal law according to public priorities and values, to focus on outcomes in a few high visibility cases, and tend to be very closely tied to politics (for reviews see Ellis, 2012, and Wright, 2009).

Finally, in looking at total disposition time, in the current study we found 27% of child physical and sexual abuse cases with adult offenders took between 1 and 2 years from the first report of child abuse to the final criminal disposition. This was somewhat similar to that found in a previous study (40%; Walsh et al., 2008). In the current study, we found 4% of cases took more than 2 years to reach a final disposition, which is similar to a previous study that found 10% of cases took more than 2 years (Walsh et al., 2012). Few studies have examined this time frame, however, from a family's perspective this is an important benchmark. CACs could use this type of information from their own CAC to let parents know what to expect and how long it generally takes from the first report of abuse to the final criminal disposition.

It is important to keep in mind a few limitations to this study. We did not include cases that were pending a disposition outcome because we were primarily interested in looking at the length of time until a disposition outcome was reached. For the time frame of the study, there were 57 pending cases

(8%). This percentage is much lower than two previous studies that found that approximately 30% of cases were pending a disposition (Walsh et al., 2008; Walsh & Steelman, 2013). In addition, at the time of data collection, cases that were nolle prossed (cases that do not proceed with prosecution at that time) were not tracked in the data system. Nolle prossed cases are different from the prosecution actually dropping the charges because charges can be brought back and pursued at a later time. When a case is nolle prossed, it is “on hold” and most often happens when a child is believed to be too young or distressed to testify and prosecutors consider proceeding with prosecution when the child is older. Thus, including cases that are nolle prossed could have increased the overall criminal justice time frames.

We successfully conducted exploratory research using NCAtrak data from a CAC to study an important criminal justice research question, and we believe the system holds great potential for child abuse research. There is an opportunity to use computer case tracking programs at CACs to expand criminal justice research on child abuse in needed ways such as those that we suggest below. Such systems consolidate a lot of details about individual child abuse cases over time, including case characteristics, investigation procedures and dates, and criminal justice outcomes. The NCAtrak system also permits modifications that could allow a site to collect data on additional variables in order to answer a specific research question. It would be fairly straightforward, for example, to add fields to track the type and level of evidence available during prosecution. Also, given the breadth of data in CAC case tracking systems, there is an opportunity to pursue additional areas of child abuse research, such as questions on forensic interviewing, medical service, and mental health access.

There are issues that need to be resolved, however, before this system can be used for large-scale research purposes. Missing data can be a significant challenge of using NCAtrak for research. Some of the variables that we originally planned on using as part of the analysis had extensive amounts of missing data, and we were unable to include them in our analysis. We had hoped to be able to conduct a multivariate regression predicting length of the criminal disposition time. However, because we were limited in the number of variables that had complete data and then limited in the number of variables that had a significant bivariate relationship to criminal disposition time, our analyses were limited.

In addition to use in answering long-standing research questions, data from NCAtrak and other computer-based data systems could be used for community-level quality improvement goals. For example, the CAC providing the data for the current study will be able to use the information that we helped them obtain to set benchmarks around criminal justice processing and track progress. Interested CACs could in the future examine predictors of prosecution, such as whether a medical exam was conducted or whether particular types of evidence contributed to prosecution. We think it would



be enormously beneficial to expand research to multiple sites in order to examine agency or community level predictors of criminal justice processing of child abuse cases. Such a process would provide the potential to answer important questions as whether vertical prosecution (the same prosecutor handles the case from the beginning to end, thus streamlining interactions with victims and families) or policies limiting the use of continuances makes a difference in improving processing times. This would be an easily accessible goal as demonstrated by the type of data provided by the participating CAC system. But more CACs will need to commit to entering these data. Although the capability is there, we found few CACs were entering regular and complete data on criminal justice outcomes into their systems. We hope that this paper serves not only to contribute to our increasing understanding of criminal justice involvement in child abuse cases but also serves as a demonstration of the potential of systematic data systems like NCAtrak for advancing our knowledge on how to improve the response to child abuse.

## NOTES

1. There is some variability in how quickly a CAC receives the initial report from other jurisdictions—it could be the next day to a couple of months, although usually it is within a few weeks, or the CAC itself receives the initial report. We had access to the date the CAC received the report and choose to focus on this time frame because it generally refers to the time when the family would become engaged with the investigation.

2. The perpetrator was an unknown person in four cases (0.6%).

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#### AUTHOR NOTES

Wendy A. Walsh, PhD, is a research associate professor of sociology at the Crimes Against Children Research Center and the Carsey Institute at the University of New Hampshire in Durham, New Hampshire. She has been conducting research on evaluating child abuse prevention and intervention programs, including child advocacy centers, for more than 10 years. She also studies the criminal justice response to child abuse, Internet crimes against children, and resilience after maltreatment.

Lisa M. Jones, PhD, is a research associate professor of psychology at the Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire in Durham, New Hampshire. She has been conducting research on issues of child victimization intervention and prevention for more than 10 years. She has published extensively on child advocacy centers, child maltreatment trends, Internet crimes against children, and peer victimization. She serves on the editorial boards of *Child Maltreatment* and *Child Abuse and Neglect*

and presents across the country on the topics of child abuse and child victimization.

Carole C. Swiecicki, PhD, is the mental health director at the Child Abuse Program at Children's Hospital of the King's Daughters as well as an assistant professor of child abuse pediatrics at Eastern Virginia Medical School in Norfolk, Virginia. Her clinical and research interests focus on improving access to and fidelity in evidence-based assessments and treatments for children who have experienced maltreatment.