Defining the Issue
The term child abuse refers to the act of physically, psychologically or sexually harming a child under the age of 18. Neglect refers to inadequately meeting a child’s needs. This includes a failure to provide needed, age-appropriate care although financially able to do so or offered the financial means to do so.1

The Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) of 1974 set forth the federal definition for child abuse and neglect. It is “any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker, which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation, or an act or failure to act which presents an imminent risk of serious harm” to a child under age 18.2 State statutes, though, take the federal definition and expand upon it creating variations across the states. An example of such a difference is found in the text box below.

Differing State Statutes: Neglect
Alabama Citation: § 26-14-1(1)-(3)
Neglect means negligent treatment or maltreatment of a child, including the failure to provide adequate food, clothing, shelter, medical treatment, or supervision.

Virginia Citation: § 63.2-100
Abused or neglected child means any child less than 18 years of age:

- Whose parents or other person responsible for his or her care neglects or refuses to provide care necessary for his or her health
- Who is without parental care or guardianship caused by the unreasonable absence or the mental or physical incapacity of the child’s parent, guardian, legal custodian or other person standing in loco parentis

For more information about your state’s respective statutes please visit The National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect’s State Statutes Search at http://nccanch.acf.hhs.gov/general/legal/statutes/search/index.cfm

Differences in state statutes, such as those in the text box above, can make comparison of the data difficult. For further information on what considerations should be taken, please consult the issue brief Can States Be Compared Based on Child Welfare Data? (http://ndas.cwla.org/include/pdf/ComparStates_Final_IB.pdf)

According to the language of Child Maltreatment 2003, a victim of child abuse or neglect is a child who has been involved in an investigation where the report of abuse or neglect has been verified (substantiated) or there is strong reason to suspect that the child has been maltreated or is at risk of being maltreated (indicated); in several states victims may also be identified through an alternative response system. A referral of child abuse or neglect is notification of alleged abuse or neglect received by the state or county child welfare agency. Some referrals may be forwarded to other agencies and yet others may not have sufficient information to allow for investigation. Therefore, not all referrals are screened-in as reports. Of these reports only a portion will have the finding of substantiated or indicated which is why of the 1,390,330 referrals received in 2003 only 787,156 victims were identified.3

Overview
In 2003 about 12.4 per 1,000 children in the population were found to be victims (Table 1). These children were most frequently the victims of neglect, but also of physical abuse, sexual abuse, psychological maltreatment, multiple maltreatment types or maltreatment types that do not easily fit into any of these categories.

Table 1 Abuse and Neglect at a Glance, 20034

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Maltreatment</th>
<th>Number of Child Victims</th>
<th>Rate of Maltreatment (per 1,000)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical Abuse</td>
<td>148,877</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neglect</td>
<td>479,567</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical Neglect</td>
<td>17,945</td>
<td>.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Abuse</td>
<td>78,188</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological Maltreatment</td>
<td>38,603</td>
<td>.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>132,993</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Victims</td>
<td>787,156</td>
<td>12.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Between 1995 and 2003, the rate of child abuse has fluctuated between 12.4 in 1990, 15.1 in 1995 and 12.4 in 2003 (Figure 1). During the same time period, the fewest number of victims were reported in 2003, marking the continuation of an 8 year decline.

Figure 1 Number and Rate of Child Victims Over Time5 6 7 8

Disproportionality
Children of color are disproportionately represented in the child welfare system. These children, specifically African American children, have been found to be referred to child protective services (CPS) and subsequently investigated by CPS to a disproportionately higher degree than white children.9 10 This may be one contributing factor in children of color having a higher rate of victimization. In 2003, American Indian-Alaska Native children had the highest rate of victimization; 21.3 children per 1,000. This racial group was closely followed by African American children who were victims at a rate of 20.4 children per 1,000. This can be seen in comparison to white children who were victims at a rate of 10.99 per 1,000.11

Certain research findings, though, conflict with these high rates of victimization. African American children have been found to have a lower risk than white children of certain child maltreatment types including sexual abuse, physical neglect and physical abuse, when particular demographics were controlled for.2 The National Incidence Studies, which collect data on victims of child abuse and neglect, identified not just by CPS agencies, but a wider range of professionals, examine the incidence and characteristics of those who are abused. These studies have found no significant or only marginal racial differences in the incidence of maltreatment and physical abuse,
when particular demographics were controlled for.\textsuperscript{13}

\textbf{Poverty and Child Maltreatment}

Income level has been linked to child maltreatment. Children from families with incomes less than $15,000/year, compared to children from families with incomes greater than $30,000/year are 22 times more likely to experience some form of maltreatment and 44 times more likely to be victims of neglect.\textsuperscript{14}

\textbf{Consequences}

Abuse and neglect have devastating effects upon the child victims, their families and their communities. Such consequences include:

- Child victims have an increased risk for adverse health effects such as smoking, alcoholism, drug abuse, eating disorders, severe obesity, depression, suicide, and sexual promiscuity\textsuperscript{15}
- Maltreatment in early infancy can cause regions of the brain to form improperly\textsuperscript{16}
- Direct financial costs are estimated at $24 billion each year and indirect costs are estimated to exceed $69 billion a year.\textsuperscript{17}

The most severe consequence, though, is the death of a child.

- 1,169 children died as a result of abuse or neglect in 2003\textsuperscript{18}
- 35.6% of child fatalities were a result of neglect\textsuperscript{19}
- 28.4% of child fatalities were a result of physical abuse alone\textsuperscript{20}
- 41% of child fatality victims were younger than 1 year old\textsuperscript{21}
- 35% of child fatality victims were age 1-3\textsuperscript{22}
- Perpetrators are frequently young adults in their mid-20s, with no high school diploma, living at or below the poverty level\textsuperscript{23}

\textbf{Intervention}

When child protective services become involved in a case of child abuse or neglect a number of steps may be taken. For example, the child may remain at home and the family may receive family preservation services as well as therapeutic, support, and/or concrete services, as was the case for 22.8% of child victims in 2003. Another option is to remove the child from his/her home and place him/her in out-of-home care (15.1%).\textsuperscript{24}

The determination as to whether a child receives family preservation services instead of being placed in out-of-home care is based on many factors. Case-specific determinants include, but are not limited to, the child’s age, race/ethnicity, perpetrator’s relationship, type of maltreatment, whether the child was a prior victim or whether the child was disabled.\textsuperscript{25}

These interventions in child abuse and neglect have been successful in selected families (80%) who have received preservation services and have remained together for a period of at least one year. Families have also reported outcomes such as “improved communication, appropriate discipline, and better care of children.”\textsuperscript{26} Even so, “children who have been identified as victims in the past are 60% more likely to be determined to be maltreated”.\textsuperscript{27} Therefore, great strides still need to be made in identifying children who are at risk of harm, implementing preventive services and providing therapeutic and concrete services to help child victims and their families overcome the devastating effects of abuse and neglect.

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\textsuperscript{4} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
