

**THIRD NATIONAL INCIDENCE STUDY
OF CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT**

FINAL REPORT

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3. INCIDENCE OF CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT

This chapter is divided into three major sections. The first two sections are devoted to the main Harm Standard and Endangerment Standard estimates. Each section addresses the following questions:

- What is the current national incidence of child abuse and neglect as defined by each standard?
- Have there been any statistically significant changes since the NIS-2 (and for the Harm Standard, since the NIS-1) in the annual incidence of children who experience abuse or neglect?
- Among the children who experienced abuse or neglect under each standard, what was their most serious injury or harm?
- How does this distribution of children across levels of severity of injury/harm compare with the severity distribution found in the NIS-2 (and for the Harm Standard with the NIS-1)?

In addition, the Endangerment Standard estimates for different maltreatment types and outcomes are compared with the Harm Standard estimates in order to clarify the distribution of the additional children who are considered to be abused or neglected under the more lenient Endangerment Standard guidelines. The third and final section summarizes the main findings and discusses their implications.

Throughout this and the subsequent chapters, it is important to bear in mind that all maltreatment in the NIS, by whatever standard, was perpetrated by a parent or caretaker (i.e., the maltreatment reflects circumstances that are within the jurisdiction of child protective service agencies). That is, the NIS estimates systematically exclude maltreatment by non-caretaker family members (e.g., siblings who were not in a caretaking role), non-caretaker neighbors, acquaintances, or strangers. Thus, the incidence totals and rates given in this report do *not* reflect the children who were physically assaulted or sexually abused by persons in any of these latter categories.

It is also important to note that the estimates presented in this section and throughout the remainder of this report are based on the unduplicated numbers of maltreated children in the United States who experienced the maltreatment in question. That is, the unit of measurement is the child, and

each estimate counts each child only once. The estimates are given both in terms of the estimated totals and in terms of rates per 1,000 children. Estimated totals reflect the number of children nationwide who are maltreated annually. The incidence rates indicate the numbers of children maltreated annually per 1,000 children in the U.S. population. Readers should also note that this report follows the usage of the congressional mandate and refers to the estimates as "incidence estimates." In the epidemiological literature,¹ however, they would be more appropriately termed "annual prevalence estimates." Technically, they are period prevalence estimates, where the focal period is a year.²

3.1 National Incidence of Child Maltreatment under the Harm Standard

This section presents the estimates of the incidence of children who experienced maltreatment under the Harm Standard in 1993. The Harm Standard is relatively stringent in that it generally requires a child to have already suffered demonstrable harm as a result of maltreatment in order to be "countable" (i.e., in order to be included in the estimated totals).

3.1.1 Overall Incidence of Maltreatment under the Harm Standard

Table 3-1 presents the NIS estimates for maltreatment under the Harm Standard. The NIS-3 estimates are given in the shaded section with bold text. These reflect annual estimates for 1993, the year the NIS-3 data were collected. The right-hand side of the table compares the NIS-3 figures with the estimates for the corresponding categories generated by the earlier studies—the NIS-2 estimates reflect the incidence of maltreatment during 1986, and the NIS-1 estimates index the incidence of maltreatment in 1980. The statistical significance of the comparison in question is indicated by the asterisk or letter, as explained in the table footnotes.

¹ Ahlbom, A., & Norell, S. (1984). *Introduction To Modern Epidemiology*. Chestnut Hill, MA: Epidemiology Resources, Inc.

² In epidemiologic usage, "incidence" refers to the number of new cases that occur in the population during a given period of time. "Prevalence" can mean a number of different things, depending on whether it is used with or without a modifying adjective. When used without a qualifier, it is most often interpreted to mean "point prevalence," which is the total number of cases that exist in the population at a given point in time. Prevalence can also be defined as "lifetime prevalence," which refers to the total number of persons known to have been cases at some time in their lives, or "period prevalence," which denotes the total number of persons known to have been cases at any time during a specified period.

Table 3-1. National Incidence of Maltreatment under the Harm Standard in the NIS-3 (1993), and Comparison with the NIS-2 (1986) and the NIS-1 (1980) Harm Standard Estimates.

| Harm Standard Maltreatment Category | NIS-3 Estimates | | Comparisons With Earlier Studies | | | |
|--|--------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------|
| | 1993 | | NIS-2: 1986 | | NIS-1: 1980 | |
| | Total No. of Children | Rate per 1,000 Children | Total No. of Children | Rate per 1,000 Children | Total No. of Children | Rate per 1,000 Children |
| ALL MALTREATMENT | 1,553,800 | 23.1 | 931,000 | 14.8 * | 625,100 | 9.8 * |
| <i>ABUSE:</i> | | | | | | |
| ALL ABUSE | 743,200 | 11.1 | 507,700 | 8.1 m | 336,600 | 5.3 * |
| Physical Abuse | 301,700 | 4.7 | 269,700 | 4.3 m | 199,100 | 3.1 * |
| Sexual Abuse | 217,700 | 3.2 | 119,200 | 1.9 * | 42,900 | 0.7 * |
| Emotional Abuse | 204,500 | 3.0 | 155,200 | 2.5 ns | 132,700 | 2.1 m |
| <i>NEGLECT:</i> | | | | | | |
| ALL NEGLECT | 879,000 | 13.1 | 474,800 | 7.5 * | 315,400 | 4.9 * |
| Physical Neglect | 336,900 | 5.0 | 167,800 | 2.7 * | 103,600 | 1.6 * |
| Emotional Neglect | 212,500 | 3.2 | 49,200 | 0.8 * | 56,900 | 0.9 * |
| Educational Neglect | 397,300 | 5.9 | 284,800 | 4.5 ns | 174,000 | 2.7 * |

* The difference between this and the NIS-3 estimate is significant at or below the $p < .05$ level.

m The difference between this and the NIS-3 estimate is statistically marginal (i.e., $.10 > p > .05$).

ns The difference between this and the NIS-3 estimate is neither significant nor marginal ($p > .10$).

Note: Estimated totals are rounded to the nearest 100.

As Table 3-1 shows, an estimated 1,553,800 children experienced some form of maltreatment under the Harm Standard during 1993. This total reflected an annual incidence rate of 23.1 children per 1,000 children in the general population nationwide.³ This is equivalent to 2.31 children per

³ In this and subsequent chapters, all estimates concerning total numbers of children are rounded to the nearest hundred in order to avoid conveying a false sense of precision. That is, all the estimates have associated standard errors that reflect their degree of precision. For simplification, all the estimates together with their standard errors and their upper and lower 95-percent confidence bounds are given in Appendices A and B.

100, or to 1 child in every 43 in the United States. The comparisons in the right-hand sections of the table indicate that the 1993 incidence of all maltreatment under the Harm Standard is significantly higher than the corresponding estimates for 1986 and 1980.⁴ Specifically, there was a two-thirds increase (67%) in the total number of maltreated children since the 1986 NIS-2 and a 149-percent increase since the 1980 NIS-1. Note that this latter increase means that the total number of children who experienced maltreatment under the Harm Standard at the time of the NIS-3 was nearly two and one-half times the number with similar experiences during the NIS-1.⁵

These increases correspond to a 56-percent rise in the rate per 1,000 of overall maltreatment since the NIS-2 in 1986 and a 136-percent increase in the overall maltreatment rate since the NIS-1 in 1980. The rate measure can be interpreted as reflecting a child's degree of risk of experiencing the maltreatment. This means one can say that a child's risk of suffering maltreatment identified in the NIS under the Harm Standard was more than two and one-third times higher in 1993 than it was in 1980.

3.1.2 Incidence of Abuse and Neglect under the Harm Standard

In addition to the overall incidence estimates, Table 3-1 provides estimates for different categories of maltreatment. Two main categories are presented: abuse and neglect. Each of these is, in turn, divided into specific types. The main categories and the specific types are discussed individually.

In order to be countable under the Harm Standard, an abused child had to have experienced the abuse at the hands of a parent (birth or adoptive), parent-substitute (e.g., foster parent, step-parent), or adult caretaker; a neglected child had to have experienced the neglect at the hands of a parent or parent-substitute. Also, as detailed further below, the Harm Standard generally required a child to have been *moderately* harmed by abuse in order to be included in the abuse total, whereas it generally required a child to have been *seriously* harmed by neglect before permitting the child to be included in the neglect estimates.

⁴ Comparisons across studies should be made with the rate measures (i.e., comparing the number of children maltreated per 1,000) in order to take account of any changes in the size of the U.S. child population across the time intervals. Accordingly, statistical differences between the 1993 study and the 1986 and 1980 studies generally have been assessed by the use of the *t*-statistic on the rate measures. The details of these tests and of other significance tests used are given in Appendix D.

⁵ Note that an increase of 100 percent reflects a *doubling* of the original figure.

As shown in Table 3-1, an estimated 743,200 children were abused under the Harm Standard definitions in 1993, while an estimated 879,000 children were neglected during the course of that year. These totals represent incidence rates of 11.1 abused children per 1,000 and of 13.1 neglected children per 1,000 in the U.S. population. This means that the majority of Harm Standard children (57%) were neglected, and slightly less than one-half (48%) were abused. Note that the separate "all abuse" and "all neglect" estimates sum to more than the total number of maltreated children given in the first row. This is because children who were both abused and neglected (an estimated 68,400, or 1.1 per 1,000) are included in both of these estimates.

In comparison to the NIS-2 estimates, the increase in neglect under the Harm Standard was statistically significant, but the increase in abuse, although substantial, was marginal (i.e., approached statistical significance but did not meet the traditional standard). There was a 46-percent increase in the total number of abused children since the NIS-2, and an 85-percent increase in the total number of children who were neglected. Alternatively, considering the changes in incidence rates in order to take into account the increase in child population size since the earlier studies, there was a 37-percent increase in the abuse rate since the NIS-2 and a 75-percent increase in the neglect rate. This means that children in 1993 had a more than one-third higher risk of being abused and a three-fourths greater risk of being neglected compared to the corresponding risks for children in 1986.

Statistical analyses revealed that the 1993 NIS-3 incidence estimates were significantly above the 1980 figures for both abuse and neglect. More than twice as many children experienced Harm Standard abuse in 1993 compared to 1980, whether one indexes this by the estimated totals (which show a 121% increase) or by the incidence rates (which show a 109% increase). The increase in the incidence of neglect was even greater, with a 179-percent increase in the total number of neglected children since 1980, and a 167-percent increase in the neglect rate per 1,000 children nationwide over the 13-year time interval. These findings mean that a child's risk of abuse under the Harm Standard in 1993 was more than two times greater than in 1980, and his or her risk of neglect was two and two-thirds times the 1980 risk level.

3.1.3 Incidence of Types of Abuse under the Harm Standard

Under the main category of abuse under the Harm Standard, Table 3-1 provides the incidence statistics for three specific types of abuse—physical, sexual, and emotional abuse. Children

who experienced more than one type of abuse are reflected in the estimates for each applicable type. As a result, the estimates for the different abuse types sum to more than the total number of abused children.

Physical Abuse. In order to be classified as physically abused under the Harm Standard, a child had to have suffered at least a moderate injury from physical abuse. Moderate injuries were defined as physical, mental, or emotional injuries or conditions (or behavior problems) resulting from physical abuse that were serious enough to persist in observable form for at least 48 hours. Examples include bruises, nightmares, depression, and fearfulness.

Table 3-1 indicates that 5.7 children per 1,000 (or an estimated 381,700 children) experienced physical abuse as defined by the Harm Standard in 1993. These children reflected just over one-half (51%) of all abused children under the Harm Standard.

Sexual Abuse. Sexual abuse subsumed a range of behaviors, including intrusion, genital molestation, exposure, inappropriate fondling, and unspecified sexual molestation. For intrusion and genital molestation, the Harm Standard guidelines permit the assumption that serious emotional injury occurred even if explicit symptoms are not yet observable. However, for the remaining abusive actions, at least moderate injury or harm (physical, emotional, or behavioral) is required before the child is permitted to count as sexually abused under the Harm Standard.

An estimated 3.2 children per 1,000 (or a total of 217,700) were sexually abused under the Harm Standard in 1993. Sexually abused children accounted for 29 percent of the total who suffered abuse.

Emotional Abuse. In the NIS definitions, this type of abuse includes close confinement, verbal or emotional assaults, and other or nonspecific abuse. Close confinement refers to tying, binding, and other inappropriate confinement or physical restriction. Verbal or emotional assault involves systematic patterns of belittling, denigrating, scapegoating, or other nonphysical forms of overtly rejecting treatment, as well as threats of other forms of maltreatment, such as threats of abandonment, beatings, or sexual assault. Emotional abuse also subsumes all varieties of abusive, exploitative, or overtly punitive behaviors where actual physical contact did not occur (such as intentional withholding of food, shelter, sleep, or other necessities, or excessive responsibilities or excessive demands for income-producing work by a child). For the more extreme forms of tying and binding, the Harm Standard guidelines permit the assumption that serious emotional injury occurred (that is, explicit

symptoms are not required for the child to qualify as emotionally abused under the Harm Standard). However, for all other forms of emotional maltreatment, the Harm Standard requires direct or circumstantial evidence of injury or impairment of at least moderate severity.

Table 3-1 indicates that, in 1993, an estimated 3.0 children per 1,000 (a total of 204,500 children) suffered emotional abuse that fit the Harm Standard definitions. The emotionally abused children represented 28 percent of all abused children counted under the Harm Standard.

Changes since Earlier NISs in the Incidence of Abuse under the Harm Standard. Among the different types of Harm Standard abuse, the only statistically significant increase since the NIS-2 was in the incidence of sexual abuse, which rose in incidence from 1.9 children per 1,000 in 1986 to 3.2 children per 1,000 in 1993 (a 68% increase in the rate of occurrence). Because of the simultaneous increases in the size of the general child population during that time interval, the percentage increase in the total number of sexually abused children was even greater. (The NIS-3 total of 217,700 children reflects an 83% increase over the 1986 total of 119,200 children.) The number of children who suffered physical abuse also rose during the NIS-2/NIS-3 interval, but as Table 3-1 indicates, that gain did not match the sexual abuse increase, either in size or in statistical strength. The total number of children who experienced physical abuse grew 42 percent since the NIS-2, while the incidence rate rose from 4.3 to 5.7 children per 1,000, constituting a 33-percent increase in rate. This increase approached, but did not quite reach, the level traditionally required for statistical significance.

The NIS-3 Harm Standard estimates for both physical and sexual abuse are significantly higher than the corresponding NIS-1 estimates. The total number of physically abused children nearly doubled in the interval between 1980 and 1993 (rising by 92%). The increased incidence rate for physical abuse under the Harm Standard meant that a child in the United States faced an 84-percent higher risk of being harmed from physical abuse in 1993 than in 1980. At the same time, more than five times the number of children were victims of sexual abuse under the Harm Standard in 1993 compared with 1980 (that is, the NIS-3 estimated total is 407% higher than the NIS-1 estimate). Taking into account the changes in the child population size over that time period does little to ameliorate the magnitude of this gain: the incidence rate increased by 357 percent during that interval. In 1993, a child's risk of sexual abuse was more than four and one-half times greater than in 1980. Emotional abuse showed a marginal increase of 43 percent in incidence rate during the 1980 to 1993 interval (affecting 54% more children in the NIS-3 than in the NIS-1.)

The incidence rates in the three incidence studies for the specific types of abuse under the Harm Standard are graphed in Figure 3-1. Several features are noteworthy. First, emotional abuse as defined by the Harm Standard is the one type of abuse with a relatively stable incidence throughout the 1980 to 1993 time period, showing only a statistically marginal increase across the studies. Second, the chart conveys the predominance of physical abuse among the three Harm Standard abuse categories in all three studies. Third, the incidence rate for sexual abuse in the NIS-3 (3.2 children per 1,000) is slightly above the current incidence rate for emotional abuse (3.0 children per 1,000), and this reverses the pattern of both earlier studies, where emotional abuse was more prevalent than sexual abuse. Fourth, note that the current (NIS-3) rate for sexual abuse is on a par with the NIS-1 incidence rate for physical abuse. Fifth, the patterns illustrate that the increments in the incidence of physical abuse and sexual abuse have been of comparable absolute magnitudes across these incidence studies—the incidence rates for physical and sexual abuse have risen consistently by 1.2 to 1.4 children per 1,000 from one study to the next.

3.1.4 Incidence of Types of Neglect under the Harm Standard

Under the main category of neglect in Table 3-1 are the incidence estimates for three specific types of neglect under the Harm Standard—physical, emotional, and educational neglect. Again, children are included in each type that applied to them, so the sum of the rows for these types is greater than the total of all neglected children.

Physical Neglect. This type of neglect includes inadequate supervision; inadequate attention to needs for food, clothing, or personal hygiene; disregard for safety; medical neglect; abandonment; and other custody-related maltreatment. In all categories, except the last three, the maltreatment must have resulted in demonstrable injury or impairment that was serious or fatal for the child to be countable under the Harm Standard. Serious harm was defined as life-threatening or requiring professional treatment in order to prevent significant long-term impairment. The Harm Standard criteria for the last three categories of physical neglect were somewhat less demanding,