

Social Work & Child Abuse and Neglect

General Background

The social work profession has a long tradition of involvement with the child welfare system, working to support thousands of children and their families who are victims of child abuse and neglect every year. In 2001, more than 903,000 children suffered from abuse or neglect, representing a rate of 12.4 maltreated children for every 1,000 children in the general population and nearly one-third of these children were younger than three (NCCANI, 2003).¹ Research indicates that poor and racial and ethnic minority children and their families are disproportionately reported, labeled, and mandated into the child welfare system. The nation's protective services system has long been stretched beyond capacity and child protection agencies do not serve all of the abused and neglected children in their caseloads.

According to recent Health and Human Services data, almost 40 percent of the 900,000 child victims known to child protective services received no services following a substantiated report of maltreatment.² More federal investments are needed to ensure that children receive these services.

Social workers know that working with the child means working with the whole family and with other environmental factors in a culturally competent way. In fact, social workers have battled child maltreatment for more than 100 years, and to the battle we bring a unique body of knowledge. Social workers and other professionals help families by identifying and addressing the individual, familial, and community challenges they encounter.³ Further, social workers are taught that prevention should be at the front end of all interventions and we applaud the commitment of President Obama to promote the prevention of child maltreatment, to support parents with young children, and to expand Early Head Start. Social workers are on the front lines protecting children and assisting them in finding safe living situations. However, many social workers in child welfare are overburdened with high caseloads and mounting administrative details, while receiving low pay relative to other professions.

Recommendations

- Allocate increased resources to support community-based child abuse prevention activities through the full funding and quick reauthorization of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA). CAPTA programs support innovations in state child protective services as well as research, training, data collection, technical assistance, and program evaluation.
- Promote professional involvement in child protection through incentives for BSW and MSW students to pursue child welfare work through loan forgiveness, educational leave for current child welfare workers and stipends for students. For the system to be improved, social workers and those who care for children and families must receive adequate salaries, appropriate training, and manageable caseloads if the system is to be truly reformed.
- Provide greater family support resources by fully funding the Promoting Safe

and Stable Families (PSSF) program at its authorized level. Investments in family support programs are an important strategy in reducing incidents of child abuse and neglect.

- Expand school health education programs to include mental health education and a curriculum that focuses on parenting and child development to prevent child abuse and neglect.
- Build on programs serving children and families (such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, Maternal and Child Health Block Grant, Indian Health Service, and Early Head Start) to offer a variety of child maltreatment prevention services. Integrate program services and blend funding streams to achieve the maximum collaboration among various systems including, child welfare, domestic violence, substance abuse, mental health, and public health.
- Support efforts to address the importance of culturally competent and linguistically appropriate services for children and families and support analysis and evaluation of research- and evidence-based practices that are effective across populations and well-suited to specific populations.
- Strengthen the capacity of the Children’s Bureau and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention to address child protection issues including the overrepresentation of children of color in the child welfare system, cultural competency, advocacy for children and data collection and coordination by courts.

References

- ¹ National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information. (2003). *Child Maltreatment 2001: Summary of Key Findings*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- ² U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth and Families. *Child Maltreatment 2006*. Washington, DC, U.S. Government Printing Office, 2008.
- ³ National Association of Social Workers. (2004). *If you’re right for the job, it’s the best job in the world*. The National Association of Social Workers’ Child Welfare Specialty Practice Section members describe their experiences in child welfare. Washington, DC: Author.

Additional Resources

- National Association of Social Workers. (2005). *NASW Standards for Social Work Practice in Child Welfare*. Washington, DC: NASW Press.
- National Association of Social Workers. (2005). *NASW Standards for the Practice of Social Work with Adolescents*. Washington, DC: NASW Press.
- National Association of Social Workers. (2009). *Child Abuse and Neglect. Social work speaks: National Association of Social Workers policy statement, 2009-2012* (8th ed., pp. 42-48). Washington, DC: NASW Press.
- National Association of Social Workers. (2009). *Foster Care and Adoption. Social work speaks: National Association of Social Workers policy statement, 2009-2012* (8th ed., pp. 146-153). Washington, DC: NASW Press
- National Association of Social Workers. (2009). *Public Child Welfare. Social work speaks: National Association of Social Workers policy statement, 2009-2012* (8th ed., pp. 277-280). Washington, DC: NASW Press.