



Office of Program Policy Analysis And Government Accountability



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Review of the Effect of Child Protective Investigations on Families

Abstract

- We attempted to survey 600 adult family members involved in child abuse cases randomly selected from the Florida Abuse Hotline Information System. We completed surveys for 204 of these individuals.
- Respondents reported that child protective investigations did not have widespread adverse effects on parent's authority to discipline or control their children, or on their children's behavior.
- However, about half the respondents reported that the department is not focusing on appropriate cases, and one-half reported that they did not know whether their case had been closed.

Purpose

Concerns have been raised that child protective investigations are intrusive and disruptive to families. The Joint Legislative Auditing Committee directed the Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability to survey adult family members who had been investigated for child abuse and neglect by the Department of Children and Families to determine the effects of the child protective investigation on their family. To assess the effects of child protective investigations, we attempted to survey 600 adult family members involved in child abuse and neglect investigations (see the inset on page 3 for a more detailed discussion of our study approach). This is the first of two reports and presents the results of our survey of 204 individuals with respect to the child protective investigations' effects on such factors as parents' authority to control and discipline their children and the children's behavior. In the second

report we will provide more detailed analyses of survey data.

Background

The purpose of child protective investigations is to ensure the safety and well being of children. Florida law requires any person who suspects that a child is abused, neglected, or abandoned to report the matter to the Department of Children and Families. In Fiscal Year 1995-96 the department received approximately 243,000 calls alleging child abuse or neglect.

Department counselors staff the 24-hour, toll-free Florida Abuse Hotline to receive and screen calls alleging abuse, neglect or abandonment. When counselors accept a call that meets the statutory definition of abuse or neglect, they assign a report number and refer the report to the local district for investigation. According to the department's most recently published report, for Fiscal Year 1995-96, counselors referred 125,536 reports to districts for investigation.

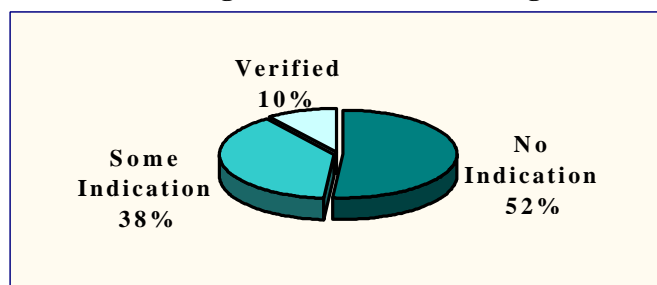
When the district child protective investigator receives an initial report, the investigator must initiate an investigation within 24 hours after the department accepts a report. The investigator determines if the child is in immediate danger or whether there is evidence of the allegation and the identity of the person responsible for the abuse or neglect. Upon conclusion of the investigation, the investigator assigns one of the following findings to each alleged maltreatment:

- **Verified** -- There is a preponderance of credible evidence that the specific injury, harm or threatened harm was the result of abuse or neglect;
- **Some Indication** -- There is credible evidence that provides some indication that the specific injury, harm or threatened harm was the result of abuse or neglect; or

- **No Indication** -- There is no indication of abuse or neglect (i.e., when evidence is insufficient to yield a finding of some indication or verified).

Of the 97,808 reports closed in Fiscal Year 1995-96, the most serious findings by investigators were "no indication" in 51% of these reports, "some indication" in 38%, and "verified" in about 10% (see Exhibit 1).

Exhibit 1
Abuse Findings in Child Abuse Investigations



Source: Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability

For Fiscal Year 1997-98, Child Protective Services, which includes protective investigations, child protection teams, and sexual abuse treatment programs, has a total budget of about \$57.5 million and is authorized 1,276 full-time equivalent (FTE) positions, of which 798 are child protective investigators. The Abuse Hotline is authorized an additional 136.5 FTEs and has a budget of about \$9.7 million.

Survey Results

Adult family members involved in child protective investigations reported that the experience did not have widespread adverse effects on their families. However, about half of the respondents reported that the department is not focusing on appropriate cases, and one-half reported that they did not know whether their case had been closed.

Concerns have been raised that child protective investigations may adversely affect parents' authority to establish and enforce household rules. There has also been concern that child protective investigations may adversely affect children's behavior. Most respondents to our survey reported that the child protective investigation did not adversely affect parental authority to control and discipline their children or their children's behavior. Respondents also generally reported that investigators were courteous, fair and objective, and listened. However, almost half of the respondents expressed concern over two aspects of investigations.

Effects on Parental Authority

Many respondents reported that the child protective investigation did not diminish parental authority or worsen their children's behavior. We asked respondents to identify if and how child protective investigations affect families in terms of parental authority.

As shown in Exhibit 2, 48% of respondents reported that child protective investigations had no effect on parents' authority to control and discipline their children. One-third reported a positive effect. Among the more frequent positive effect examples cited were an improved family environment due to counseling services, children understanding that punishment is lawful and can be imposed, and improved child cooperation, respect, and self-control. A smaller number (14%) reported that the investigation had some negative effects. Some of the more frequently cited examples of negative effects were that the child now threatens to call the abuse hotline and use the system against the parents, and the child is generally less respectful and controllable and more manipulative.

Exhibit 2
Effects of Child Protection Investigations on Parental Authority

	Percent of 193 Responses
No Effect	48%
Authority to Discipline and Control Remained the Same	
No Effect on Either Discipline or Control	
Some Positive Effect	30%
Authority to Discipline and Control Got Better	
Either Discipline or Control Got Better	
Some Negative Effect	14%
Authority to Discipline and Control Got Worse	
Either Discipline or Control Got Worse	
Mixed Effect	3%
One (Discipline or Control) Got Better, the Other Got Worse	
Don't Know If Investigation Had An Effect	5%
Don't Know if Authority to Discipline or Control Was Affected	
Total	100%

Source: Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability

Study Approach

To assess the effects of child protective investigations on families, we attempted to survey individuals involved in 600 child abuse cases randomly selected from the Florida Abuse Hotline Information System. The sample was selected from the 26,258 cases closed between April 1 and June 30, 1997. We excluded 4,612 cases (about 18% of those closed during the period) in which the issue of child abuse or neglect was resolved by a circuit court, not the department alone, or in which families were not involved in the abuse or neglect allegation. The excluded cases included:

- judicial dispositions such as foster care placement and termination of parental rights as a result of serious abuse or neglect, in which a circuit court was the decision maker about whether abuse was involved;
- institutional settings such as day care centers where the alleged perpetrator was not a family member and the abuse or neglect was less likely to be associated with family conditions or circumstances.
- special conditions reports, which are not abuse or neglect and no perpetrator is named, in which parents are involuntarily absent due to death, incarceration or hospitalization, or when parents

voluntarily requested department intervention; and

- death of a child.

We confirmed the representativeness of the 600 cases by comparing the sample's characteristics to published department reports. We determined that the sample was representative of the closed cases reported for the Fiscal Year 1995-96.

We attempted to contact these 600 individuals using a combination of telephone and mail surveys from September through December 1997. We first sought to survey the person named in the report as the alleged perpetrator living in the home. If this person was unavailable, we next attempted to interview a parent or other responsible adult residing in the home. For those we could not contact by telephone, we sent certified mail surveys to their last known address. We used certified mail to protect the identity of survey subjects and the confidential nature of their involvement with child protective investigations. We obtained valid phone numbers or a deliverable address for 345 of the 600 subjects, and obtained responses from 204 subjects (an overall reachable response rate of 58%). Table 1-A summarizes our experience with various survey techniques.

We confirmed the representativeness of the 204 responses by comparing the respondents' characteristics to the survey sample's characteristics. We compared the gender of the alleged victims and the alleged perpetrators, family relationships, the type and findings of maltreatment allegations, and case closure results. We determined that the respondents were representative of the sample. We also found that the survey sample was representative of the characteristics of the total population of the department's last published annual statistical report on child protective services. Table 1-B compares our sample and respondents on a variety of key dimensions.

The sampling error for this survey is plus or minus 7% for the sample of 204 respondents. This means that 95 times out of 100, the results for any question will fall within plus or minus 7% of what would have been answered if all individuals from the population of cases closed between April 1 and June 30, 1997, had been interviewed. This sampling error is based on a 50/50% split in responses. The sampling error is less when the responses are more homogenous. For example, the sampling error falls to plus or minus 5% when 85% respond similarly to a question.

Table 1-A
Nearly 60% of the Reachable Population Was Surveyed

n = 600	Number	Percent
Total Reachable Population	345	58%
Survey Phone Completions	159	46%
Survey Mail Completions	45	13%
Delivered With No Response	141	41%
Non-Reachable Population	255	43%

Note: Some figures may add to more than 100% due to rounding.

Source: Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability

Table 1-B
Respondents Were Representative of the Sample in Key Characteristics

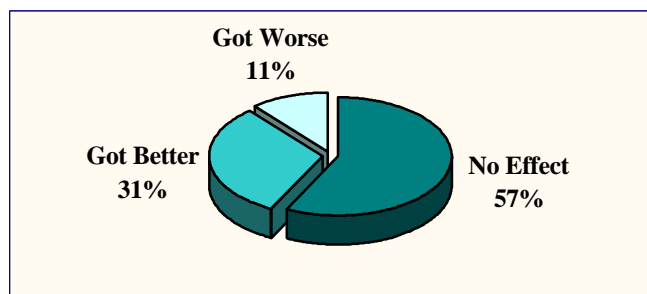
	% of 204 Respondents	% of 600 Sample
Type of Reporter		
Institutional/Agency	54.0%	45.2%
Family/Neighbor	28.2%	31.2%
Anonymous	14.4%	18.3%
Other	3.5%	5.3%
Family Characteristics		
Initial relationship to victim - alleged perpetrator	79.4%	83.8%
Final relationship to victim - parent in Home	84.0%	85.7%
Female family member	68.0%	74.5%
Case Finding		
Verified	9.8%	6.9%
Some indication	31.9%	34.7%
No indication	58.3%	58.3%
Disposition		
No services needed/closed	49.5%	50.9%
Referred	29.9%	30.2%
Other	20.6%	18.9%

To determine whether responses reflected the sample as a whole or were indicative of a particular group, we compared responses for such factors as who reported the abuse, respondent's role in the report, and the ultimate findings of the investigator. We determined that there were no significant differences between such factors as type of reporter, role of respondent, or investigator's findings, and that the responses reflected the sample as a whole.

Effects on Children's Behavior

Over half of the respondents surveyed reported that their children's behavior did not change as a result of the investigation (see Exhibit 3). When respondents reported that their children's behavior had changed, three times as many reported a positive change than a negative change.

Exhibit 3
Effect of Child Protective Investigations on Children's Behavior



Source: Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability

Parents noted positive effects on their children's day-to-day behavior and general attitude. Respondents also cited the effect of receiving services such as counseling and drug rehabilitation as improving the child's behavior. However, some of the more frequently cited negative effects included children threatening to call the abuse hotline when they face punishment, general misbehavior at school and home, and overall disrespect.

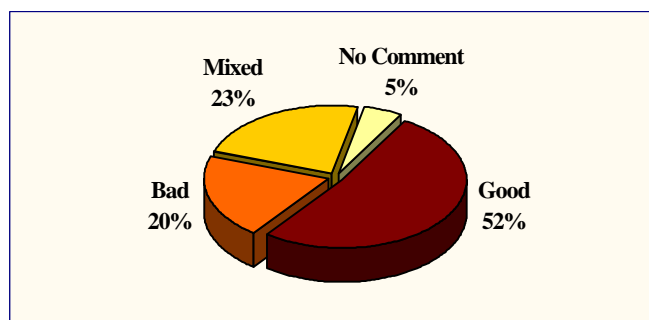
We also sought to determine whether responses reflected the sample as a whole or were indicative of a particular group. We compared responses for such factors as who reported the abuse, respondent's role in the report, and the ultimate findings of the investigator and determined that there were no significant differences between groups, and that the responses reflected the sample as a whole.

Other Effects of Investigations on Families

Respondents were divided as to whether the investigation had other effects on their family. Almost half (45%) reported that the investigation had no effect on their family. About 25% reported that the investigation had a negative emotional effect either on themselves or their family and/or strained the family's relationships. A smaller number (9%) reported a positive effect on their family. Some respondents reporting a beneficial effect stated that the investigation brought the family closer together, allowed them to work through their problems, and improved family communication. The remaining 20% reported mixed results, citing a variety of both positive and negative investigation effects.

When asked to characterize the family's overall investigation experience, 52% perceived the experience as "good," 20% characterized the experience as "bad," and 23% reported a "mixed" (good and bad) experience (see Exhibit 4). The primary reason cited for characterizing the investigation experience as "good" was the conduct of the investigator. Respondents frequently reported that the investigator was nice, thorough, and professional. Among other reasons given for a "good" experience was that helpful family services were received, family relationships were improved, and individuals were exonerated of the abuse or neglect allegations.

Exhibit 4
Families' Characterizations of Child Protective Investigation Experience



Source: Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability

Respondents characterizing the experience as "bad" frequently cited family trauma as the reason for this characterization and said the investigation frightened, embarrassed, and upset them. Another reason given for a "bad" experience was that the department was investigating false allegations of abuse or neglect. Respondents also cited investigation techniques such as interviewing children at school or outside the presence

of a parent as reason to characterize the experience as "bad." Those characterizing the investigation experience as "mixed" generally expressed satisfaction with the investigator and case outcome, but found the investigation to be harsh and disruptive.

About one-half the respondents reported that the department is not focusing on appropriate cases, and one-half reported that they did not know whether their case had been closed.

We also asked respondents specific questions about problems that have been previously identified with child protective investigators' conduct and the investigation process.¹ These responses are summarized in Exhibit 5. About 80% of the respondents believed that the investigator was courteous, fair and objective, listened, and explained the investigation process. However, respondents were less positive when we asked them about two other aspects of the investigative process: focusing investigations on appropriate cases and whether they knew if their case had been closed.

¹ These problems were reported earlier by Hernandez, M., Barrett, B. A., Armstrong, M.I., Brown, C.E., Economos, T.G., Gomez, A., Greenbaum, P.E., Joseph, R.A., Lyon, K.M., and Rudo, Z.H. (1996). Evaluation of Florida's Family Services Response System (Tampa, Florida: University of South Florida, Florida Mental Health Institute, Department of Child and Family Studies.)

One-half of the respondents stated they did not know whether their case had been closed. Lack of case closure knowledge may result in fears that the investigation may be resumed at any time and unnecessarily extend perceptions of family intrusion. Notifying families when an investigation is complete brings a sense of closure to the allegation. Of those who reported knowledge of case closure, 26% were notified in writing, while 66% were verbally notified.

Furthermore, when we asked respondents' opinions about whether the department focuses on appropriate cases, over 40% reported that the department does not focus its investigations on appropriate cases and about 13% had no opinion or did not respond to the question. Of the 67 telephone respondents who believed that the department does not focus on appropriate cases, 58 (87%) were of the opinion that either the department investigates cases that should not be investigated at all or investigated too many cases. Almost half of the respondents who thought the department investigates cases that should not be investigated at all believed the department did not spend enough time on cases that really needed it, or spent too much time on those cases that were false. About 62% of the telephone respondents who were of the opinion that the department investigates too many cases believed that the department should have more evidence before it initiates an investigation or that reports of abuse and neglect should be better screened to determine if they are vindictive.

Exhibit 5
Investigator's Conduct and the Investigation Process

	Yes	No	Don't Know	Responses
Respondents reported fewer problems with the investigator's conduct:				
Did the investigator listen to you?	87%	11%	2%	194
Did the investigator treat you and your family with courtesy?	87%	12%	1%	192
Was the investigator fair and objective?	85%	11%	4%	189
Did the investigator explain the investigation process so you knew what to expect?	76%	21%	3%	192
But identified some problems with the investigation process:				
Do you think child protective investigations focus on appropriate cases?	46%	41%	13%	203
Do you know if your case was closed?	48%	48%	4%	203

Note: Some figures may add to more than 100% due to rounding.

Source: Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability

Conclusions

About one-half of the respondents reported that child protective investigations had no effect on parents' authority or children's behavior. Of those who reported a change, twice as many were likely to have reported a positive than a negative effect on parents' authority. Investigations were also three times more likely to have a positive rather than negative effect on children's behavior. However, many respondents reported that the department is not focusing on appropriate cases, and about one-half did not know whether their case had been closed.

Agency Response From the Department of Children and Families

Thank you for your March 13 letter enclosing the preliminary and tentative findings of your *Review of the Effect of Child Protective Investigations on Families*. Overall, we are pleased with the findings but believe the following clarifications would help the reader understand the investigation process:

The report states some individuals involved in child abuse cases ". . . believed that the department spends too much time investigating cases with little or no evidence of abuse and too little time on cases with evidence of serious abuse." The department investigates all reports of child abuse referred by the Hotline to the districts. Until an investigation is completed, the amount of evidence or lack of evidence is unknown. Adequate time must be spent investigating each case to determine the degree of evidence and seriousness of the case.

There is no current statutory or policy requirement to notify families of the findings in a child protective investigation. We agree, however, that families should be notified of the outcome and are amending our operating procedures to require this notification, as well as documentation of the notification in the case file.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this report. If I may be of further assistance, please let me know.

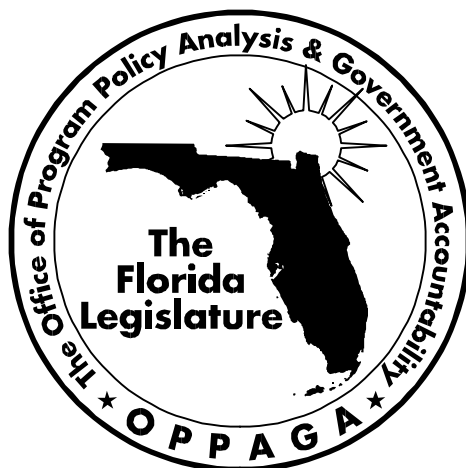
Sincerely,

/s/ Samara H. Navarro for
Edward A. Feaver
Secretary

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The Florida Legislature

Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability



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