Introduction

Rates of child abuse and neglect in Alaska have been high for years, compared with national averages and under various measures. To find ways of better protecting children in our state, it’s important for Alaskans to understand more about child maltreatment—which includes neglect, mental injury, physical abuse, and sexual abuse. Neglect is by far the most common type of maltreatment, in Alaska and across the country.

This is the first in a series of papers that will examine child abuse and neglect in Alaska, to focus more attention on this very serious problem and uncover potential reasons why rates are so high. Here we discuss trends in allegations of child abuse and neglect and subsequent investigations, from 2006 through 2012. We use publicly available data from the Office of Children’s Services (OCS), the state agency that deals with most reported child maltreatment in Alaska.

It’s important to keep in mind that allegations are reports of suspected—not proven—maltreatment. OCS does not investigate all allegations, for various reasons we discuss later. And of those it does investigate, not all are proven (substantiated). So why are unproven reports a useful measure of abuse and neglect? The process OCS uses to record allegations and make decisions about which to investigate is the first step in Alaska’s system for dealing with child maltreatment. Trends in allegations can reveal people’s perceptions about maltreatment and how it is being reported and recorded. More allegations may indicate that child maltreatment is increasing—or may reflect growing public awareness about the problem. Faster growth in allegations of one type of maltreatment raises questions about whether patterns of maltreatment are shifting, or whether other factors are at work. Changes in the percentage of allegations OCS investigates also provokes questions about what might be causing the changes.

Overview of Trends

• In 2012, OCS recorded more than 100 allegations of child neglect and abuse every day of the year—or on average 3,331 per month. That was up 69% from the 1,972 allegations it received monthly in 2006. That’s a very big increase in a short time, but part of it—we don’t know how much—can be traced to a 2008 change in OCS’s policy for recording allegations.

Before 2008, as we explain in more detail later, intake workers did not have to record allegations they believed did not meet the criteria for potential child maltreatment—which are defined under state law. Also, if they received more than one allegation about the same incident of suspected abuse, they recorded them all in just one report. But in 2008, to make reporting of suspected maltreatment more consistent, OCS began requiring intake workers to record every allegation they received, regardless of whether they believed it met the criteria for potential maltreatment, and to file separate reports for multiple allegations about the same incident.

The authors thank Diana Molina for compiling data and some of the graphs for this paper, and Travis Erickson and Tim Huffman of the Office of Children’s Services for reviewing drafts.

The Office of Children’s Services is a division of the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services. It has five regional offices and many field offices. Much of the data it collects is confidential, but the state legislature has mandated that it release some (Alaska State Statutes 2011, Monthly reports concerning children, AK.Stat. § 47.05.100).
• Allegations of neglect nearly doubled between 2006 and 2012—jumping 96%—and the 2008 policy change (requiring intake workers to record every allegation) may also account for part of that increase. When recording an allegation, intake workers have to specify one of the four types of maltreatment. It’s possible a big share of the allegations that wouldn’t have been recorded before 2008 were recorded as neglect.

Because of the huge increase in allegations of neglect between 2006 and 2012—from about 1,100 per month to more than 2,200—neglect accounted for nearly 70% of all allegations in 2012, compared with less than 60% in 2006 (as the figure on the front page shows).

• Allegations of abuse—mental injury, physical abuse, and sexual abuse—were up 31% between 2006 and 2012. Such allegations are much less common, totaling in the hundreds rather than thousands.

• Total allegations of child maltreatment that OCS screened in for investigation increased 26% from 2006 to 2012. But the increase was entirely in investigations of alleged neglect, which increased 44%.

• The number of allegations of mental injury, physical abuse, and sexual abuse OCS screened in for investigation was virtually the same in 2012 as in 2006, despite the increase in allegations.

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### Percentage Change in Allegations and Investigations of Child Abuse and Neglect, 2006 - 2012

- **Total Allegations**: Up 69%
- **Total Investigations**: Up 26%
- **Neglect Allegations**: Up 96%
- **Neglect Investigations**: Up 44%

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*Allegations screened-in for investigation. *

**Abuse**

- **Abuse Allegations**: Up 31%
- **Abuse Investigations**: No increase

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*Includes allegations and investigations of mental injury, physical abuse, and sexual abuse.

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• The percentage of allegations OCS screened in for investigation dropped from two-thirds to about half between 2006 and 2012. In part that decline can also be traced to the 2008 policy change—because since 2008, OCS intake workers have recorded all allegations. OCS does not investigate allegations it determines don’t meet the state definitions of child abuse or neglect. A 2011 report from the Children’s Bureau of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services says that the number of allegations Alaska’s OCS screened out because they did not meet maltreatment criteria increased 40% between 2010 and 2011.3

### Organization of Paper

Before discussing in more detail the trends in allegations of child maltreatment—and in the share OCS screened in for investigation—we report state definitions of child abuse and neglect, and then describe the process OCS uses when it receives allegations and determines which to investigate. Next we present the data, and end the paper with questions the data raise and suggestions for research that could help provide answers to those questions.

Definitions of Maltreatment

What constitutes child maltreatment? Alaska state law defines “child abuse and neglect” as:

. . . physical injury or neglect, mental injury, sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, or maltreatment of a child under the age of 18 by a person under circumstances that indicate that the child’s health or welfare is harmed or threatened thereby; in this paragraph, “mental injury” means an injury to the emotional well-being, or intellectual or psychological capacity of a child, as evidenced by an observable and substantial impairment in the child’s ability to function. (AS 47.17.290)

The law also specifies actions that constitute abuse and neglect:

- **Physical injury** that harms or threatens a child’s health or welfare
- **Failure to care for a child**, including neglect of the necessary physical (food, shelter, clothing, and medical attention), emotional, mental, and social needs
- **Sexual abuse**, including molestation or incest
- **Sexual exploitation**, including permitting or encouraging prostitution
- **Mental injury**—an injury to the emotional well-being, or intellectual or psychological capacity of a child, as evidenced by an observable and substantial impairment in the child’s ability to function in a developmentally appropriate manner
- **Maltreatment**—a child has suffered substantial harm as a result of child abuse or neglect due to an act or omission not necessarily committed by the child’s parent, custodian or guardian

Notice that the statute identifies six forms of abuse or neglect, but in practice data are available for the four we discuss here—physical abuse, neglect, sexual abuse, and mental injury.

OCS Intake Process

Anyone who believes a child or teenager (younger than 18) in Alaska is being abused or neglected can call the Office of Children’s Services (OCS) and make a report (Figure 1). When an intake worker receives an allegation of child abuse or neglect, the worker initiates a protective service report, asking the person reporting the abuse for as much detail as possible about the alleged victim, the victim’s family, and the alleged perpetrator. In cases where someone reporting abuse doesn’t have all the information, the intake worker may collect additional information from other sources—for example, school teachers or medical personnel. The worker also checks the Online Resource for the Children of Alaska (ORCA) system to see whether there are any past reports involving the same family.

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Next, every protective service report goes through a screening process. The intake worker makes an initial recommendation about whether a report will be screened in—that is, whether it will be investigated—or whether it will be screened out and therefore not investigated. Intake supervisors make the final determination about which reports are investigated.

OCS workers screen out reports for several reasons. Some don’t meet the state definitions of abuse or neglect, or intake workers couldn’t get sufficient information on people mentioned in the allegations. In some circumstances, allegations of abuse fall outside OCS’s jurisdiction; OCS forwards those to the appropriate entities—for example, police or other law enforcement agencies or tribal child protection offices.

**Protective Service Reports (PSRs)**

Every allegation of child maltreatment, whether screened in for further investigation or screened out, has a corresponding protective service report (PSR). A PSR may include one or more allegations of child maltreatment, so there may be fewer PSRs than there are allegations. Each PSR may also include more than one alleged victim, and more than one alleged perpetrator. An alleged victim may be reported as suffering more than one type of maltreatment, and an alleged perpetrator may be accused of more than one type of maltreatment.

Figure 2 shows the average number of protective service reports (PSRs) per month for the years 2006 through 2012. The number of PSRs averaged 884 per month in 2006, but by 2012 that number was 1,344 per month—an increase of more than 65%.
The figure shows smaller increases in PSRs between 2006 and 2008, and then a much steeper climb from 2008 to 2011. That increase is in part a result of the 2008 policy change we summarized in the overview.

- Before 2008, only allegations intake workers identified as constituting potential child maltreatment had to be recorded in PSRs. For example, if a child was reported to have run away from home, or if a parent was reported for yelling at a child, intake workers had the discretion to decide that such allegations didn’t meet the criteria for potential maltreatment and might not record them in PSRs. But in 2008 intake workers were instructed to record every allegation in a PSR.

- Before 2008, additional calls reporting an allegation already recorded in a PSR were added as notes in the same PSR. Since 2008, intake workers have been required to record every call, including those reporting the same incident, in separate PSRs.

Clearly that change would have increased the number of PSRs, but we don’t know by how much. Also complicating the picture is that not all intake workers immediately adopted the new system, which called for them to record data directly into PSRs as they took calls. The common practice among intake workers was to record information on note pads during calls and later make decisions about creating PSRs, sometimes after reviewing the information with a supervisor. It is currently much more common for intake workers to record data directly into PSRs, but even now some still prefer the old method. Thus, it’s possible that some of the calls intake workers receive are still not recorded in PSRs.5

Another factor that may be influencing the number of calls OCS receives about child maltreatment is the 2-1-1 system introduced in 2007—a statewide service United Way of Anchorage operates and describes as “a free, confidential, and multilingual health and human services information and referral system.”6 That system—which anyone can use by dialing 211—may have increased awareness about child abuse and neglect and made it easier for people to report it.

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5 Personal communication, Tim Huffman, Office of Children’s Services, July 30, 2013.
6 Personal communication, Sue Brogan, United Way of Anchorage, August 27, 2013.
**Trends in Allegations Received and Investigated**

When intake workers record an allegation in a protective service report (PSR), they have to specify what kind of maltreatment is being alleged—mental injury, neglect, physical abuse, or sexual abuse. Each instance of maltreatment is recorded as a separate allegation. Figure 3 shows changes from 2006 to 2012 in the monthly averages of total allegations and allegations screened in for investigation; neglect allegations and investigations; and allegations and investigations of abuse—combined mental injury, physical abuse, and sexual abuse. Figures 4a, 4b, and 4c break out changes in each type of abuse.

The sharp jump in the number of allegations of neglect stands out, up from about 1,100 per month to more than 2,200—an increase of 96%. The overall increase of 69% in total allegations received during the study period was driven largely by additional allegations of neglect. But although there are far fewer allegations of abuse, numbers of those allegations also increased—overall abuse allegations were up 31%, and as Figures 4a, 4b, and 4c show allegations of mental injury and sexual abuse were each up 25% and allegations of physical abuse up 43%.

The total number of allegations screened in for investigation increased 26% during that period—but all the growth was in investigations of neglect, which were up nearly 45%. Despite the growth in allegations of abuse, there was minimal change in the number of allegations screened in for mental injury (1.7%), physical abuse (0.5%), and sexual abuse (down 5.8%). Table 1 details the year-to-year changes in monthly averages of allegations and investigations.
Figure 4a. Allegations and Investigations* of Mental Injury, Monthly Average, 2006-2012

Allegations: 381, Up 26%
Investigations: 288, Up 26%

2006 2007 2008 2009 2010 2011 2012

Figure 4b. Allegations and Investigations* of Physical Abuse, Monthly Average, 2006-2012

Allegations: 277, Up 43%
Investigations: 187, No change

2006 2007 2008 2009 2010 2011 2012

Figure 4c. Allegations and Investigations* of Sexual Abuse, Monthly Average, 2006-2012

Allegations: 163, Up 25%
Investigations: 69, Down 6%

2006 2007 2008 2009 2010 2011 2012

*Allegations screened in for investigation.
Table 1. Allegations Received and Screened In Monthly During the Year, 2006-2012, by Type of Maltreatment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Mental Injury Received</th>
<th>Mental Injury Scrnd-in</th>
<th>Neglect Received</th>
<th>Neglect Scrnd-in</th>
<th>Physical Abuse Received</th>
<th>Physical Abuse Scrnd-in</th>
<th>Sexual Abuse Received</th>
<th>Sexual Abuse Scrnd-in</th>
<th>Total Received</th>
<th>Total Scrnd-in</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>381</td>
<td>288 (76%)</td>
<td>1151</td>
<td>758 (66%)</td>
<td>277</td>
<td>187 (68%)</td>
<td>163</td>
<td>69 (42%)</td>
<td>1972</td>
<td>1302</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>362</td>
<td>263 (73%)</td>
<td>1378</td>
<td>855 (62%)</td>
<td>298</td>
<td>193 (65%)</td>
<td>174</td>
<td>73 (42%)</td>
<td>2203</td>
<td>1400</td>
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<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>270</td>
<td>191 (71%)</td>
<td>1455</td>
<td>854 (59%)</td>
<td>311</td>
<td>182 (59%)</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>61 (33%)</td>
<td>2221</td>
<td>1288</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>361</td>
<td>237 (66%)</td>
<td>1767</td>
<td>937 (53%)</td>
<td>358</td>
<td>184 (51%)</td>
<td>177</td>
<td>57 (32%)</td>
<td>2663</td>
<td>1415</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>425</td>
<td>246 (58%)</td>
<td>1864</td>
<td>888 (48%)</td>
<td>386</td>
<td>174 (45%)</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>60 (30%)</td>
<td>2877</td>
<td>1368</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>483</td>
<td>287 (59%)</td>
<td>2120</td>
<td>998 (47%)</td>
<td>408</td>
<td>187 (46%)</td>
<td>211</td>
<td>67 (32%)</td>
<td>3241</td>
<td>1526</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>479</td>
<td>293 (61%)</td>
<td>2253</td>
<td>1094 (49%)</td>
<td>396</td>
<td>188 (47%)</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>65 (32%)</td>
<td>3331</td>
<td>1641</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Percentage Change (2006-2012) 25.72% 1.74% 95.74% 44.33% 42.96% 0.53% 24.54% -5.80% 68.91% 26.04%
Figure 5 compares OCS data on allegations of different types of maltreatment received and screened in, per 1,000 resident Alaska children under 18, from 2006 through 2012.

Approximately 6 children per 1,000 were reported as being neglected in 2006. That number reached nearly 12 in 1,000 by 2012, and about half that number were subjects of investigations to determine if they were in fact neglected. Growth in allegations of abuse were much smaller; in 2012, about 2 in 1,000 children were alleged to have been physically abused or mentally injured and fewer than 1 per 1,000 were alleged to have been sexually abused.

To put those numbers in perspective, Alaska had the fourth highest number of maltreatment allegations per 1,000 resident children across the country from 2008 through 2011; national comparison data for 2012 are not yet available.7

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Discussion and Questions

Why are there more investigations of neglect but not of abuse?
As we’ve just seen, the number of allegations of maltreatment of Alaska’s children was up sharply in the past six years—nearly 70%. A part of that increase is undoubtedly due to the 2008 OCS policy change that required intake workers to record some allegations they likely wouldn’t have recorded in earlier years—allegations that didn’t meet the criteria for potential child maltreatment. But existing data aren’t adequate to tell us just how much of the growth consisted of those kinds of allegations.

We do know that the overall growth in allegations was driven by a huge increase in allegations of neglect. While allegations of abuse were also up, they didn’t increase nearly as much. It is possible that neglect has become a “catch-all” category for allegations that in earlier years would not have been recorded.

But at the same time, allegations of neglect screened in for investigation were up substantially during the study period—nearly 45%. That means OCS workers saw grounds to investigate many of the growing number of allegations of neglect: is that a sign that neglect of children is in fact becoming more common?

And while allegations of physical and sexual abuse and mental injury abuse also increased during the study period, the number screened in for investigation did not—meaning many more allegations were not investigated. Table 1 shows a pattern of declining percentages of abuse allegations being investigated. Does that mean more allegations of abuse don’t meet the criteria for investigation? Or are there other reasons? Only a closer examination of the cases OCS does not investigate can uncover reasons for this trend.

Are we paying enough attention to child neglect?
It seems likely a significant share of the growing number of allegations of neglect can be traced, as we discussed above, to the fact that OCS workers now have to record all allegations they receive, whether or not they meet the criteria for maltreatment, and that many may by default being classified as neglect.

Still, neglect is by far the most common form of alleged and substantiated type of maltreatment, in Alaska and across the country. Other forms of maltreatment capture much more attention than neglect—but research has shown that neglect has a lasting and debilitating effect on victims, as severe as from other forms of maltreatment. Several reasons why neglect isn’t given the weight it deserves are often cited. Some that may be relevant for Alaska are:

1. The definition of neglect is inconclusive and vague. While the Alaska statutes do define neglect, the definition is vague and tends to include everything that cannot be classified as one of the other forms of abuse.
2. While other forms of maltreatment are acts of commission, neglect is an act of omission. Given Alaska’s growing cultural diversity, it is very challenging to identify neglectful acts. Moreover, consequences of neglect are rarely felt immediately. Difficulties in identifying and documenting evidence over a longer period make it very challenging to substantiate neglect.
3. Numerous studies over the years have shown the association between the incidence of neglect and several socio-economic characteristics, primarily poverty. But little is known about the actual mechanisms of that association. Such an understanding is necessary as a basis for developing an effective response to identify and substantiate neglect. Without such understanding, it is even harder to devise a preventive strategy that might require several key players to take active roles.

4. A consistent lack of focus on issues of neglect has characterized much of child protection service work in the U.S. for several decades. While other forms of maltreatment are better understood now than ever before, child neglect often remains neglected.

It is imperative that Alaska takes a closer look at these trends and examines the policies and procedures in identifying, reporting, documenting, and responding to neglect.

Suggestions for Further Research

Even if we assume part of the huge increase in allegations of neglect is due to the 2008 OCS policy change—which resulted in more allegations being recorded—the upward trend is still very sharp. More than one of the four possible reasons discussed above may be affecting the growth in reports of suspected neglect. Alaska’s increasing cultural diversity and the economically difficult living conditions in much of rural Alaska—lack of jobs and high living costs—can pose serious challenges to identifying and documenting evidence of neglect that may occur over several years. It would be instructive to examine both screened-in and screened-out cases of alleged neglect and build a base of evidence on factors leading to such allegations in Alaska's unique circumstances. And because Alaska is so big, challenges vary across the state. It is important to identify differences in trends in allegations among regions of the state.

It is equally important to understand the nature of allegations that are screened out—not investigated. In 2006, three of ten allegations of all types of maltreatment were screened out, while by 2012 five in ten allegations were screened out. Even if we assume the 2008 policy change meant more allegations were screened out because they didn’t meet the definitions of maltreatment, the broad trend of fewer allegations being investigated raises concerns. And numbers of allegations screened in for three types of maltreatment (mental injury, physical abuse, and sexual abuse) were virtually unchanged from 2006 to 2012. Understanding the reasons why allegations increased but investigations did not would help Alaskans better understand child abuse and identify more effective ways to protect children.

Limitations

Data reported here are exclusively from the website of the Office of Children’s Services, which has jurisdiction over most but not all reported cases of child maltreatment in Alaska. For example, individual local child protection offices of the federally recognized tribal entities handle some allegations. Also, we know some instances of maltreatment go unreported. Thus, the true number of allegations of child maltreatment is unknown.

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