

FACT SHEET

CHILDHOOD ABUSE AND NEGLECT: THE LINK TO DELINQUENCY AND CRIMINAL BEHAVIOR November 2005

The incidence of child maltreatment in North Carolina is so high that if it were an illness, it would be classified as an epidemic. Last year there were 130,000 reports of suspected abuse and neglect. Of those, only 30,000 allegations were considered appropriate for Child Protective Services intervention (substantiated). North Carolina cannot afford to ignore the needs of these 100,000 children. However, that is what is happening as more and more abused and neglected children are without needed services.

Child abuse in North Carolina has reached epidemic levels. Too many children, especially young children, are experiencing dangerous and damaging childhoods instead of safe and nurturing ones. In state fiscal year 2003-04, over 113,500 children were assessed for child abuse and neglect, an increase of 6,400 from 2002-03. This represents a 5 percent increase in the number of cases investigated.¹

Abused and neglected children are 58% more likely to be arrested while a juvenile. Research repeatedly demonstrates that juvenile delinquency is associated with abuse and neglect.² In 2001, the United States Advisory Board on Child Abuse determined that young victims of abuse and neglect are 58% more likely to be arrested while juveniles, than children who were not exposed to abuse and neglect.³

Violence threatens the healthy development of children. Youth who have been traumatically abused and neglected as children, will likely face more difficulties in life. Abused or neglected children are significantly more likely to become pregnant during adolescence, use drugs, have lower grade point averages, and/or experience mental health problems.⁴

Today's abused children become tomorrow's violent offenders. A 2001 study found that victims of child maltreatment were 38% more likely to be arrested as an adult and 38% more likely to commit violent crimes than adults who were not abused and neglected as children.³ Research shows that the more frequent and severe the maltreatment, the more likely the child was to commit more frequent and more violent acts of delinquency (i.e., rape or sexual assault, robbery, aggravated or simple assault).⁵ This may lead these children to become both more serious and chronic offenders, committing more crimes over their lifetimes.⁶ In numerous studies, delinquent and criminal populations have strikingly higher rates of child abuse and neglect than do members of the general population.⁷ A study of adult offenders found that 16% of males and 57% of females in State prisons had experienced childhood physical or sexual abuse compared to 5-8% of the general adult male population and 12-17% of the adult female population.⁴ Many of these individuals, however, also had other risk factors in their lives, including poverty, parental use of alcohol and drugs, parents with criminal records, domestic violence, poor supervision and growing up in high-crime neighborhoods.⁷

If we don't pay now we will pay later. Nationally, of the 900,000 children who had confirmed cases of abuse or neglect in one year (2001), an additional 35,000 violent criminals and more than 250 murderers will emerge as adults who would never have become violent criminals if not for the abuse and neglect they endured as children.⁵ Professor Mark A. Cohen of Vanderbilt University estimated that for each high-risk youth prevented from adopting a life of crime, the country would save \$1.7 million.⁸ Incarceration has not only a human cost, but the financial investment of the state is significant. Prevention and intervention are not only less expensive, but will save lives, reduce crime and save taxpayers money in the long term.

Not all victimized children will commit violent acts. Just because a child has been maltreated does not mean s/he will become a career criminal. Indeed, most children who are abused or neglected during childhood do not later engage in delinquent or criminal behavior.⁹ We must ensure that all abused or neglected children receive the services and help they need to grow up to lead productive lives.

¹ North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services *DHHS Employee Update* is published monthly by the Office of Public Affairs. February 2005 Available <http://www.dhhs.state.nc.us/newsletter/2005/feb.pdf>

² U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. *Child Neglect: A Guide for Intervention*. 1993. Available <http://nccanch.acf.hhs.gov/pubs/usermanuals/neglect/neglectd.cfm>

³ Sandy Wilber. *Can Prevention Programs Stem the Tide Of Delinquency? Are we penny wise and pound foolish?* 2003. Available <http://www.juvenilejustice.com/prevention.html>

⁴ Christopher Baird, Raelene Freitag and Richard Wiebush. *Preventing Delinquency through Improved Child Protection Services*. Juvenile Justice Bulletin. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. July 2001.

⁵ Fight Crime: Invest In Kids. *New Hope for Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect*. Available <http://www.fightcrime.org/reports/CANreport.pdf>

⁶ Cathy S. Widom & Michael G. Maxfield, *An Update on the "Cycle of Violence,"* RESEARCH IN BRIEF, National Institute of Justice. February 2001

⁷ The National Child Traumatic Stress Network. Juvenile Justice Working Group. *Victimization and Juvenile Offending*. 2004

⁸ Cohen, M. A. (1998). The monetary value of saving a high-risk youth. *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, 14 (1), 5-33.

⁹ Shepard, R. E. (1997). *Child Maltreatment and Delinquency*. American Bar Association. Available <http://www.abanet.org/crimjust/juvjus/cjmchildmaltreat.html>