



Rise in Child Abuse Called National 'Epidemic'

States in Crisis as Abuse Cases Increase in Middle Class

Apr. 25, 2005 - Every year, hundreds of thousands of children are abused and neglected in the United States. Child welfare specialists say it's an epidemic caused by mental illness, drug addiction and poverty.

A new report by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services found an estimated 1,500 children in the United States died from abuse or neglect in 2003. The majority of them were under the age of 4.

"It is truly an epidemic," said Shay Bilchik, president and chief executive of Child Welfare League of America. "And we've seen the tremendous increase over the last 20 years."

States have the primary responsibility for dealing with abused children. Many have been unable to keep pace with the number of cases, despite increases in funding from the federal government.

Indiana in Crisis

Indiana is an example of a state in crisis.

"There are approximately 61,000 phone calls of abuse and neglect every year that come into our department," said Jim Payne, director of the Indiana Department of Child Services. Payne was appointed to overhaul the state's child protective services.

Indiana's child welfare system is in such disarray that the federal government says it is withholding millions of dollars in funding until the state makes significant improvements in its services.

Last year alone in Indiana, 19 children, who were already known to social workers, died of abuse and neglect.

Susan Swain is an Indiana social worker who routinely carries more than 50 cases at a time -- nearly three times the recommended number.

"I mean, I just feel like I can never get ahead," Swain said.

Increase in Middle Class Cases

Many social workers say they are stunned by an increase in abuse in the middle class, putting additional strain on a system already under pressure.

"It covers across the socioeconomic spectrum," Bilchik said. "So this isn't about just impoverished families."

Swain was recently sent to a suburban Indianapolis neighborhood to remove two pregnant teenage girls from their parents, who were suspected of neglect.

"One of the pregnant children is on bed rest and she doesn't even have a bed in the home and she hasn't been going to school for four months," said Swain. "And the other child hasn't been going to school at all this year."

The two girls are now staying with grandparents under state supervision. They are part of a sea of children thought to be at risk around the country.

ABC News' Pierre Thomas filed this report for "World News Tonight."

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Trying a Team Approach to Stop Child Abuse

Pittsburgh's Child Welfare System Overhaul Considered Model for Country

Apr. 26, 2005 - In light of the rising number of child abuse cases in the United States, some cities and states are overhauling their child welfare systems to better protect children. Pittsburgh, for instance, turned its once-troubled system into what child advocates point to as a model for the rest of the country.

ABC News was granted extraordinary access as social workers in that city intervened to help the family of Latrice Smith, a 36-year-old battered wife and grandmother with a history of depression.

Smith and her two boys, ages 8 and 9, were destitute, and four of her children are already wards of the state. Social workers were concerned Smith was at risk of losing the remaining two due to neglect. She has had eight children in total -- one of her children died as an infant, and one is an adult.

Over the years, local authorities received nearly a dozen referrals about the Smith family, said social worker Juanita Bryant, including claims of "domestic violence, sexual abuse, drugs and alcohol, [and] neglect."

Social Workers Try Team Approach

Conventional means of dealing with child abuse have not worked in Pittsburgh, so the city is trying a new team approach.

More social workers have been hired, reducing case loads to a manageable 15 per caseworker. In order to remove the cause of abuse and neglect, families are provided with financial help, as well as mental health and drug abuse specialists.

"If you can provide support, that's what really tends to make a difference in keeping kids safe," said Marc Cherna, director of the Allegheny County Department of Human Services.

A decade ago, eight children in Allegheny County died each year as a result of neglect or abuse. Today that number is zero.

But despite recent success, Pittsburgh officials admit keeping some families together is a risky proposition.

"A child's gonna die," said Cherna. "I mean there is no way to prevent child deaths forever."

Removing Children as Final Option

Officials say sometimes they have no alternative but to take children from their parents. Several social workers made that point painfully clear to Latrice Smith.

"The non-negotiable is the children must be safe at all times," social worker Helen Holloway told Smith in a meeting with other case workers. "These are goals that we expect you to follow so your children can remain in your care."

Smith admitted she needs help.

"I've tried to do it on my own, and I end up back at the same place again because, you know, I need help," she told the social workers.

Smith said she realizes how much her two remaining boys -- who haven't seen their siblings in two years -- are suffering.

"It has affected their very being. Everything about them is just a result of what they've been through with me and their dad," she told ABC News.

If the Smith family succeeds, it may be due to Pittsburgh's innovative approach to a national epidemic of child abuse.

ABC News' Pierre Thomas filed this report for "World News Tonight."

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