

REPORTING TEXAS

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Serious Child Abuse Injuries Rising in Texas and Elsewhere, Experts Say

By Margaret Nicklas
For Reporting Texas

Even though fewer physical child abuse cases are being reported in Texas and in the country, researchers and medical professionals say that the number of serious abuse-related injuries is actually increasing. The reasons for the increase in serious injuries are not clear, though some experts point to poverty and trying economic conditions.

Dr. James Lukefahr, medical director of the Children’s Hospital of San Antonio Center for Miracles, which treats child abuse victims, said anecdotal evidence indicates he and his colleagues have seen a definite increase in seriously injured children needing admittance to the hospital and, in some cases, the intensive care unit in the past three years or so.

“We feel like our experience is mirroring what we think is happening in Texas and in the U.S. as a whole,” Lukefahr said. “And that is, that our number of severe cases is definitely on the rise. And we’re seeing more hospital admissions and we’re seeing more intensive care unit admissions for serious abuse.”

Even as state figures for confirmed child abuse cases have declined, researchers in Austin have reported an increase in one kind of internal injury viewed as a “marker” for child abuse.

Karla Lawson, a research scientist at the Trauma Services Department at Dell Children’s Medical Center in Austin, studied injuries to the small intestine, or duodenum, in children under the age of 4. She focused on these injuries in particular because they are rare and virtually always a result of abuse. The study, which is scheduled to appear in January in the Journal of Trauma and Acute Care Surgery, looked at data from regional trauma centers in Austin and Dallas, and four other centers in nearby states, Lawson said. Infants and children under age 2 are the primary victims of this injury, Lawson said, which can be inflicted by kicking, punching or squeezing.

“Over the time of the study in the last 10 years, the incidence of duodenal injuries has been increasing, and that increase is directly related to child abuse,” she said. The injury can be fatal.

[Researchers at the Yale School of Medicine](#), looking at hospital data about different kinds of physical abuse across the country, found that serious injuries increased about 5 percent overall and nearly 11 percent for infants over a 12-year period.

Most common were fractures, skin wounds and traumatic brain injuries. As researchers pointed out in the study, which appeared in the October issue of the journal Pediatrics, national statistics show a downward trend of physical abuse confirmed by child protective services agencies during the same time frame.

Statistics for Texas, like national trends, show that confirmed cases of physical abuse have fallen in recent years, although child abuse fatalities have not shown a clear trend.

In 2011, the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services [reported 12,547 confirmed cases of physical abuse of children](#). Down from 15,206 cases in 2006, the state’s figures reflect a 17 percent decrease over five years. Deaths from child abuse have typically ranged over the same period between 213 and 231, with a spike in 2009 of 280 fatalities, according to the department’s annual reports.

But what statistics included and what researchers studied were not always the same, nor were their sources. For instance, Texas figures for physical abuse can include “the genuine threat of substantial harm from physical abuse,” which would not have shown up in hospital data. And reported state and national figures come from caseworkers, while researchers used hospital coding and patient records to assess the presence of abuse.

The department doesn’t routinely analyze case types within the category of physical abuse, said public information officer Patrick Crimmins, and doesn’t analyze trends across years.

And while the lack of such analysis may lead researchers and others to speculate about why the overall abuse numbers are going down, Lawson is confident that serious injuries are not.

“I think what [the Yale study] is pointing to is what we’re seeing both nationally and here in Texas, which is, reporting might be down but the serious injuries were seeing at the hospital are rising,” Lawson said.

Why it’s happening is much less certain. Some research has suggested that child abuse increases with economic strain on families, but it’s not conclusive. For example, [one recent clinical study](#) in Ohio found a doubling of abusive head trauma in infants from 2007 to mid-2010, a period researchers defined as the recession.

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The [Yale study](#) also found a possible link to poverty. Seventy-four percent of the seriously injured children were on Medicaid in 2009 versus 59 percent in 1997, the time period the study spanned. But [another study](#) published in the Children and Youth Services Review looked at data in seven states last year and did not find a conclusive relationship between current economic pressures, such as unemployment, and child maltreatment.

What is known is that most child abuse deaths occur when children are very young, and most abusers are parents. The [most recent federal report](#) on child maltreatment showed that 79 percent of all reported child abuse fatalities were 4 years old or younger. One or both parents caused 79 percent of child abuse deaths. Infancy, when crying can be prolonged, and the potty training stage are the two times in a child's life when they are most likely to suffer child abuse injuries, Lawson said, because they are frustrating periods for parents or caretakers. Public health agencies, like the CDC, provide information to educate parents that such crying is normal, and that shaking or other violent responses can seriously injure or kill a child.

Helping Victims and Working on Prevention

One local group, already busy with efforts to help child abuse victims, is finding ways to do more. The Center for Child Protection, a Travis County nonprofit, provides services to victims of abuse and their family members, including parent coaching and protective parenting family violence group sessions. The center [reported](#) doubling and nearly doubling these two services in 2011 as compared to the prior year, citing "overwhelming need and severe cuts by Child Protective Services."

Despite the demand for existing services, the group has begun to reach beyond the needs of current victims to help promote prevention in the community.

"We have actually started actively attacking prevention this year and going after things before they happen." said Amanda Van Hoozer, the center's director of program services.

Van Hoozer said the center, in collaboration with other groups, is reaching out to child care providers, educators and "anyone that works with kids" to make sure they know how to spot abuse and how to report it. And they recently began parenting classes at some Austin-area childcare centers, she said.

Van Hoozer said the center is very good at intervention and providing help after victimization has occurred.

But, she added, "ideally, if we could get them never to come here that would be fabulous."

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[linda](#) says:

[November 18, 2012 at 3:50 pm](#)

cps is doing alot of abuse to our children in TEXAS this needs to stop



[nancy Sanders](#) says:

[November 18, 2012 at 11:20 pm](#)

The reason your numbers do not match is correct in saying reporting is down. Most people don't want to get involved, because to become involved means you will certainly be punished in some way. CPS is instructed to keep the child in the home at all possible costs and in doing this they totally ignore that the child might have another parent outside the abusive home that could take the child and prevent further abuse. It is not their agenda to protect the child at all cost but to protect the abusive parent's right to their children at all cost. If the out of the house parent should report the abuse, it is classified as a custody dispute, if a sibling under ten molest another sibling regardless of age, it is instructed that it will not be investigated and the child's name will be cleared with a "ruled Out" finding. So where does that leave your 3 yr old victim who has to endure the molestation from her 9 yr old brother. The daily torment of having "the Boys" pull her clothes off her and "Flush Her" The repeated nights she can't sleep because "The Boys were pulling her Hair and touching her" The many bruises on the soft of her back or her abdomen that can't be explained. Her crying because Momma squeezed her. And you can't go to the police to get help for her, because they call the momma and tell her, ie:...We need you to bring your daughter to CASA or CAC tomorrow so we can have a counselor talk to her. Do you think MOM doesn't know what is going on? Of Course she does, and she knows her nine yr old has been attempting sex since he was 4 yrs old. Do you really think that she is not going to tell the little girl to go in there and tell the counselor everything, Of course not. If Grandma or Dad report what is going on, they become the bad people. You can't get a private counselor to go into court and testify unless you thousands of dollars and they think many times that all it takes is thirty min. to determine if a child has been messed with. No one cares about the first response rule for young children, it is automatically assumed the child is not credible, has been coached into making up these stories. I can go on about why you numbers do not match and Why the reporting is down, but as a grandmother who is trying desperately to get help for her granddaughter, I realize no one wants to hear from me, and most people will say this is none of my business, and it flat boils down to everyone likes to talk and look all important, but no one really cares about seriously Preventing child abuse and neglect...

sincerely

Nancy Sanders

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