

# More kids hospitalized from serious abuse than previously reported

The rate of children hospitalized with serious injuries due to physical child abuse has risen 4.9 percent between 1997 and 2009

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A study in the current issue of [Pediatrics](#), the official journal of the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#), demonstrates that the rate of children hospitalized with serious injuries due to physical child abuse has risen 4.9 percent between 1997 and 2009, contradicting years of reports from our nation's child protective services that such child abuse has fallen by 55 percent since 1992.

The further we drill into the numbers, the more alarming the information becomes. The rate of children who died in the hospital "because of their abusive injuries" also rose. Although the incidence of death was low to begin with, it rose from 0.25 per 100 000 children in 1997 to 0.36 per 100 000 children in 2009.

Infant abuse (children under one year of age) increased significantly, over 8 percent in the three years between 2006 and 2009, and almost 11 percent over the 22 year range of the study. Over half (54 percent) of the hospitalized children were infants, under one year of age.

Poverty, and possibly the recession, played a role in the rise in child abuse injuries. According to the study, the percentage of abused children whose bills were paid by Medicaid rose 25 percent (from 59 percent in 1997 to 74.1 percent in 2009). The study disclosed that three-quarters of the injured children were on Medicaid at a time when the total percent of U.S. children enrolled in Medicaid was about one-third. The authors also noted that poverty is a known "stressor for families" and cited two other studies that "have shown an increase in the occurrence of abusive head trauma due to the national US recession, which officially occurred from December 1, 2007 to June 30, 2009."

The study, titled "[Incidence of Serious Injuries Due to Physical Abuse in the United States: 1997 to 2009](#)", was co-authored by John M. Leventhal, MD, a professor of pediatrics and medical director of the Child Abuse Program at Yale University School of Medicine and Julie R. Gaither, RN, MPH, MPhil, a nurse/epidemiologist, also from the Yale School of Medicine in New Haven, Connecticut. Using the [Kids' Inpatient Databases](#) (KIDs), a database tool supplied once every three years by the [Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality](#) (a program of the Department of Health & Human Services), they identified victims of child abuse by finding discharged cases of children under the age of 18 who had both a diagnosis code for acute injury and a code for child abuse.

Until this study was published, the two major sources of data on child abuse were the annual report from the [National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System](#) (NCANDS) and the once-in-a-blue-moon [National Incidence Studies](#) (NIS), both programs of the Administration for Children & Families (ACF), which is a division of the Department of Health & Human Services. The NCANDS report, titled "[Child Maltreatment 2010](#)", tracks four major types of maltreatment: neglect, physical abuse, psychological maltreatment, and sexual abuse, based on child protective services (CPS) agency reports from all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico. The reports are screened and substantiated by the CPS agencies. Only the substantiated accounts of abuse are included in the final numbers. The authors of "Child Maltreatment 2010", David Finkelhor, Lisa Jones, and Anne Shattuck, were so convinced the data proved a "long-term decline in sexual and physical abuse", they suggested it "may have important implications for public policy."

Perhaps the most important implication for public policy lies in the answer to why different programs of the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services reported such dissimilar data. We wonder if public policy in other areas is based on incomplete data.