

**2008 Contemporary Social Issues Seminar Series**  
**Sponsored by the Universities at Shady Grove and the Rockville Institute**

**Abused and Neglected Children in the United States: How Do We Know How Many There Are and Whether Child Protective Services Reaches Them?**

**Tuesday, May 20, 2008**

**The Issue**

How do we go beyond children seen by child protective services (CPS) to gather information on abused and neglected children?

**What We Know**

Nearly 900,000 children in the United States and Puerto Rico were victims of abuse and neglect during fiscal year 2005.\* Child abuse and neglect are continuing concerns in U.S. communities. Local governments have CPS agencies that investigate reports of abuse or neglect and bring needed services to the affected children and families. States gather data from local (county) agencies and provide these data to the Federal Government's National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS).

**NCANDS**

NCANDS statistics are published annually, indicating the numbers of abused and neglected children and changes in these numbers year to year. While NCANDS has the advantage of providing an annual measure of child abuse and neglect, it has two serious limitations:

- NCANDS excludes abused and neglected children who are not reported to CPS or who were screened out without an investigation.
- NCANDS relies on individual states' definitions of child maltreatment, which are not standardized.

There is another Federal data collection effort, however, that overcomes these limitations: the National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS).

**NIS**

The NIS is a periodic, congressionally mandated study. It goes beyond children seen by CPS to gather information from professionals in a wide range of agencies, including:

- Law enforcement,
- Health,
- Social services,
- School,
- Daycare centers, and
- Shelters.

These professionals, called “sentinels,” are selected from qualifying staff in their agencies and are asked to remain on the lookout for children they believe are maltreated during the study period.

Children identified by sentinels and those whose alleged maltreatment is investigated by CPS during the same period are evaluated against standardized definitions. Only children who meet the study standards are used to develop the study estimates. The data are also unduplicated so a given child is counted only once.

The NIS produces reliable national estimates of the following:

- The number and characteristics of abused and neglected children,
- The nature and severity of their maltreatment, and
- The percentage of these children who received CPS attention and the community professionals encountered by them.

### **Goals for the Presentation**

This presentation will describe the rationale, overall design, and key findings to date of the NIS. It will also describe real-life constraints and other issues related to selecting referrals for investigation. The session will end with a brief summary of how the current NIS design (the NIS-4) will provide information that can guide CPS policy and services.

\*U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2007). *National Data System on Child Abuse and Neglect*.

### **Presenters**

- **Andrea J. Sedlak, PhD, Vice President, Westat.** Dr. Sedlak is a social psychologist who specializes in the study of troubled, vulnerable, and victimized children. She directs the fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-4) and a national survey of youth in juvenile justice custody. Previously, she directed the NIS-2, NIS-3, and incidence studies on missing children.
- **Agnes Farkas Leshner, MA, Director, Child Welfare Services, Montgomery County, Maryland.** In Montgomery County Child Welfare is part of the larger Department of Health and Human Services where Ms. Leshner has overseen child protection for more than 16 years. The agency includes investigations of child abuse and neglect, monitoring of in-home placements, foster care and adoption.