Child Abuse and Neglect in California

What It Is
Kidsdata.org provides the number and rate of children ages 0-17 with one or more reports of abuse or neglect, along with the number and rate of children with maltreatment allegations verified as substantiated cases of abuse or neglect. Data on both allegations and substantiations of child maltreatment also are available by age group, by race/ethnicity, and by type of maltreatment.

Why This Topic Is Important
An estimated one in four children experience abuse or neglect in the U.S. Child maltreatment can cause serious physical injury and even death. It also can cause lifelong physical, emotional, and behavioral problems, which can lead to multigenerational impacts. Children who are abused or neglected are at increased risk for anxiety, depression, delinquency, difficulty in school, and early sexual activity. Child maltreatment (along with other adverse childhood experiences) can cause toxic stress that disrupts brain and physical development, increasing the risk for numerous health problems in adulthood, such as heart disease, cancer, substance abuse, and mental illness. While most survivors do not repeat the cycle of abuse later in life, they are more likely to mistreat their own children. The harmful effects of child maltreatment can be interrupted by stable and nurturing relationships and environments, and trauma-informed support services.

Beyond the impact on individuals and families, child abuse and neglect have a significant impact on society. A 2020 study estimated the lifetime economic burden of substantiated nonfatal child maltreatment cases in 2018 at $563 billion in the U.S. and $53 billion in California.

While abuse and neglect occur in all types of families, certain factors place children at increased risk. For example, young children (especially infants) and those with special needs are at particularly high risk for maltreatment. Examples of family and community risk factors include poverty, substance abuse or mental illness in the family, parental stress, social isolation, unintended pregnancy, and domestic or neighborhood violence. Children of color, particularly American Indian/Alaska Native and African American children, are overrepresented in the child welfare system. Increasingly, leaders are focused on prevention strategies that build on family strengths and promote protective factors at the individual, family, community, and system levels, which help parents provide safe,
Children with Substantiated Cases of Abuse or Neglect

**Definition:** Number of children ages 0-17 with substantiated cases of abuse or neglect per 1,000 children (e.g., in 2020, 6.8 per 1,000 California children were found to have been abused or neglected).

**Data Source:** California Child Welfare Indicators Project, CCWIP Reports, University of California at Berkeley & California Dept. of Social Services (Oct. 2021).

**How Children Are Faring**

In 2020, the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, 391,546 California children ages 0-17 were reported to have been neglected or abused. For around half of these children (49%), the maltreatment alleged was general neglect, which occurs when a parent, guardian, or caregiver fails to provide adequate food, clothing, shelter, medical care, or supervision for the child but no physical injury occurs. Other common types of reported maltreatment included physical abuse (16%), emotional abuse (12%), and sexual abuse (10%).

After 20 years of relatively stable rates between 50 and 55 children per 1,000, the statewide rate of children with allegations of maltreatment fell to 43.5 per 1,000 in 2020, a drop of more than 17% compared with 2019 (52.6 children per 1,000).

Among California children reported to have been neglected or abused in 2020, fewer than 1 in 6 (61,419) had one or more allegation substantiated by the state child welfare system. Overall, the statewide rate of substantiated maltreatment declined from 12.3 children per 1,000 in 2000 to 6.8 per 1,000 in 2020. Nearly half of California children with substantiated cases of maltreatment are ages 5 and younger—46% in 2020, up from 39% in 2000.

Child maltreatment allegations and substantiations disproportionately involve African American/black and American Indian/Alaska Native children. Statewide, more than 87 per 1,000 children in these groups had a report of neglect or abuse in 2020 and more than 16 per 1,000 had a substantiated case of maltreatment. These rates are more than double the rates for Hispanic/Latino children, more than 2.5 times the rates for white children, and more than 5 times the rates for Asian children.

**View references for this text and additional research on this topic:**