



# A Shock to the Conscience:

## The Nationwide Epidemic of Child Abuse and Neglect and How We Can Break the Cycle

*FIGHT CRIME: INVEST IN KIDS is a national, nonpartisan anti-crime organization made up of more than 5,000 law enforcement leaders and crime survivors nationwide. These sheriffs, police chiefs, prosecutors and crime victims promote greater public investments in programs proven to direct kids to a better path in life, leading them away from crime and towards success.*

**SUMMARY:** The tragedy of abuse and neglect affects hundreds of thousands of children in the United States every year. The crimes involving child victims are the most difficult and distressing for law enforcement officers. Research has found approaches that can help prevent abuse and neglect. For example, a voluntary home visiting service, the Nurse-Family Partnership, cut abuse and neglect in half among the children it reached.<sup>1</sup> Acting now to support what works can save money, prevent future violent crime and help keep the cycle of abuse and neglect from reaching the next generation.



**The scale of the problem shocks the conscience.** Almost 700,000 U.S. children were abused or neglected in 2010. The true numbers are almost certainly much higher due primarily to underreporting. Children are far more likely to be abused or neglected by a parent than any other person in their lives. In 2010, 1,560 child deaths were reported as a result of abuse or neglect. The youngest children are the most vulnerable: nationally, one third of child abuse and neglect victims are under age 4. Almost half of all children who died from abuse or neglect never reached their first birthday.<sup>2</sup>

The stories our law enforcement leaders recount are a reminder that we can and must do more to protect children and youth from abuse and neglect.

**Abuse and neglect increase future crime.** Crimes involving child victims are the most difficult and distressing for law enforcement officers to respond to. Physical wounds eventually heal, but the long-term emotional and psychological trauma of abuse or extreme neglect have lifelong consequences for the victims.

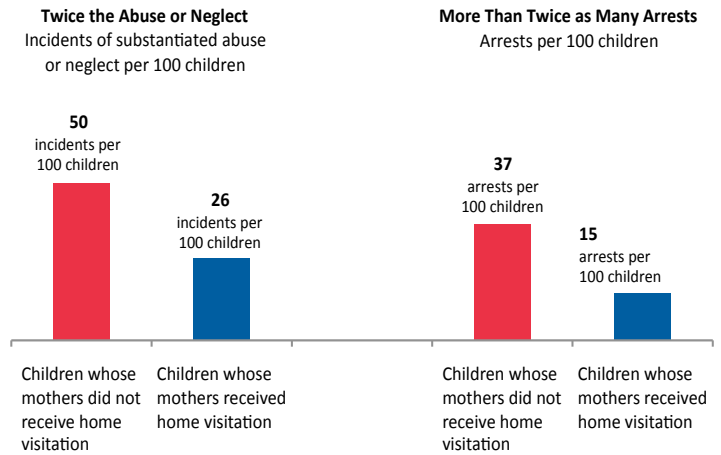
Research has shown that approximately half of youths arrested for delinquency had been abused or neglected earlier in their lives.<sup>3</sup> One researcher who compared abused or neglected children to similar children with no record of abuse or neglect found that the victimized children were twice as likely to have committed a crime by age 19, and they were 29 percent more likely to have been arrested for a violent crime as juveniles or

as adults.<sup>4</sup> That equates, nationwide, to more than 25,000 additional children a year who grow up to become violent criminals who would otherwise have avoided such crimes if not for the abuse and neglect they endured as children.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, abuse can also pass from one generation to the next, with one study showing that a third of children with a history of abuse may maltreat their own children.<sup>6</sup> In addition, children who were abused or neglected are also at greater risk of unemployment, divorce, suicide and a range of health problems from heart disease to depression.<sup>7</sup>

**Americans have shown extraordinary compassion for victims of abuse and neglect. From those who understand the immediate and future impact of child abuse, we are urging policy makers to support proven services that can save children from the tragedy of experiencing abuse or neglect.** Many cases of abuse and neglect are preventable if we act soon enough, often enough, and with services that really work.

**Home visiting can cut abuse and neglect in half.** Providing guidance and support from trusted advisors to pregnant mothers and new parents can help prevent child abuse and neglect. This opportunity to reach families is especially important for the youngest children who are most at-risk.

**By age 15, children not served by the Nurse-Family Partnership were abused or neglected twice as often, and were arrested more than twice as often.**



Parenting is the biggest challenge many people will ever face, but for single and poor teen parents it can be overwhelming. The best example of what can work is the Nurse-Family Partnership (NFP) voluntary home visiting program. The service helps first-time, poor young mothers starting before their child is even born. Up until the child is two, the nurse regularly counsels the young families on a range of crucial parenting skills.

The nurses visit the young women's homes to help them—and the fathers if possible—learn about the early physical and

## Seeing child abuse and neglect up close:

“The image.... has stayed with me for over 18 years”



I vividly remember the day when as a young patrol officer I responded to a complaint of loud music coming from an apartment. My partner and I pushed open the unlatched door, we found a toddler—bruised, dirty and frightened. No adult in sight.

At first, we thought we had found her abandoned in this filthy apartment, littered with drug paraphernalia and empty alcohol bottles, until we discovered her father passed out in the bedroom. We wrapped the toddler in a blanket, and with the help of the Teddy Bear

we always kept in our patrol car, took her to the safety of our station. Social services placed her in a foster home until she could be reunited with her mother, from whom she had been abducted on the East Coast several months before. The police department paid for the mother's flight since she had no financial resources to make the trip.

The image of that little girl has stayed with me for over 18 years. Her physical wounds eventually healed, but what about the consequences of the psychological abuse and extreme neglect she experienced? Did those ever heal?”

Chief of Police Eric Olsen  
Kirkland Police Department  
Kirkland, Washington

emotional development of the child. They also provide them with tools to manage stress and anxiety, resources for ensuring the child's safety and techniques to effectively guide a toddler away from unacceptable behavior.

In a long-term randomized controlled trial conducted over the course of nearly two decades, the Nurse-Family Partnership showed that parent coaching can cut abuse and neglect in half among the families it served.<sup>8</sup>

**Preventing abuse and neglect prevents future crime.** The Nurse-Family Partnership tracked health and social outcomes through age 19 for the children it served and a group of children randomly assigned to *not* receive the services. Researchers found that by age 15, children in families *not* in the program had twice as many arrests, and by age 19, they had more than twice as many convictions. The age 19 results were concentrated among the young women in the program – those not receiving NFP services averaged nine times more convictions than the young women who received NFP.<sup>9</sup>

The program also achieved:

- improved prenatal health
- increased maternal employment, and
- increased school readiness.<sup>10</sup>

Two studies even indicate that home visiting can reduce hospital admissions and deaths.<sup>11</sup>

Two other nationwide home visiting programs, Healthy Families America and Parents as Teachers, also have reported

that – under the right conditions – they are seeing less abuse and neglect and other impressive benefits in their trials.<sup>12</sup>

**The savings add up.** A well-designed analysis of benefits minus costs show that NFP can achieve average net savings of almost \$21,000 for each family served.<sup>13</sup> American

taxpayers spend \$25 billion alone per year on foster care placements for victims of abuse or neglect.<sup>14</sup> An analysis

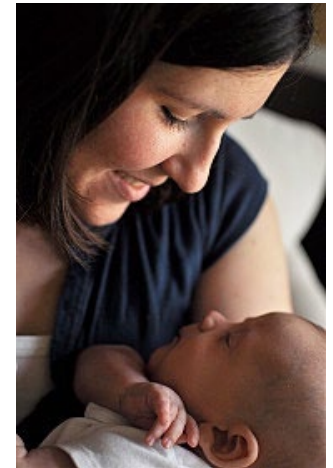
recently published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that, “The total lifetime economic burden resulting from new cases of fatal and nonfatal child maltreatment in the United States in 2008 is approximately \$124 billion.”<sup>15</sup>

**Fighting crime by investing in kids.** By entering the law enforcement profession, we swore an oath to protect our communities. Our nation cannot turn a blind eye to the fiscal, public safety and human costs of child abuse and neglect.

We urge state, local and national policymakers to do much more than count the almost 700,000 victims of abuse or neglect nationwide each year and care compassionately for the victims or investigate the over 1,500 deaths.<sup>16</sup> State and federal policymakers must act decisively to dramatically reduce the number of children abused or neglected in the first place.

Federal investments are supporting the development and expansion of state evidence-based home visiting services through the Maternal and Infant Early Childhood Home Visiting grant program. Federal policy makers must protect this funding as Congress makes budget and appropriations decisions in the coming months. On the state level, policymakers must maintain state funding for existing services in order to remain eligible for the additional federal funding. Together, policy makers at the national, state and local levels need to take advantage of any opportunities to bring effective home visiting services to all at-risk families. If we do this, we can help stop the cycle of child abuse and neglect, reduce crime and violence and save money.

The critical message is, we don't have to wait for more victims. **We can effectively prevent abuse and neglect now, but only if we act.**



## Child abuse and neglect costs Americans \$124 billion a year.

– Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

### The Victims of Abuse or Neglect in 2010

State	Victims	Deaths	Estimated Future Violent Criminals**
Alabama	9,367	13	370
Alaska	2,825	0	110
Arizona	6,023	20	240
Arkansas	11,729	19	470
California	76,758	120	3,070
Colorado	11,166	27	450
Connecticut	10,021	4	400
Delaware	2,125	2	90
District of Columbia	2,672	2	110
Florida	50,239	180	2,010
Georgia	19,976	77	800
Hawaii	1,744	2	70
Idaho	1,609	2	60
Illinois	26,442	73	1,060
Indiana	21,362	17	850
Iowa	12,005	8	480
Kansas	1,504	6	60
Kentucky	17,029	30	680
Louisiana	8,344	30	330
Maine	3,269	1	130
Maryland	13,059	24	520
Massachusetts	24,428		980
Michigan	32,412	71	1,300
Minnesota	4,462	14	180
Mississippi	7,403	17	300
Missouri	5,313	31	210
Montana	1,383	0	60
Nebraska	4,572	7	180
Nevada	4,654	15	190
New Hampshire	851	1	30
New Jersey	8,981	18	360
New Mexico	5,440	19	220
New York	77,011	114	3,080
North Carolina	21,895	17	880
North Dakota	1,128	1	50
Ohio	31,295	83	1,250
Oklahoma	7,207	27	290
Oregon		22	
Pennsylvania	3,555	29	140
Rhode Island	3,295	2	130
South Carolina	11,802	25	470
South Dakota	1,360	2	50
Tennessee	8,760	38	350
Texas	64,937	222	2,600
Utah	12,854	13	510
Vermont	658	4	30
Virginia	6,449	38	260
Washington	6,593	12	260
West Virginia	3,961	8	160
Wisconsin	4,569	21	180
Wyoming	725	1	30
Total	695,000*	1,560*	27,800

\* Estimated to adjust for missing data.  
 \*\* The additional children each year who grow up to become violent criminals who would otherwise have avoided such crimes if not for the abuse and neglect they endured as children. [See endnote 5 for a further explanation and the citation].

Source: State data provided to US Department of Health and Human Services; Maxfield & Widom, 1996

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