

How does involvement with law enforcement impact the reporting of child abuse and neglect?

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What can we learn from this study?

Child protection agencies are reactive by design, relying on mandatory reporters and public citizens to report concerns about child maltreatment. In 2015, police made 20% of reports to child protection hotlines (nearly 400,000). Given the relationship between law enforcement and child protection, the inequitable distribution of policing in communities across the country also has important consequences within the child welfare system. This research study seeks to understand the extent of these inequities.

Study details:

- **Population:** reports of child maltreatment screened-in for an investigation or assessment
- **Data source:** National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS); Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) arrests by age, sex, and race
- **Methodology:** descriptive analysis; multilevel regression models
- **Dates:** 2009 to 2015

What are the critical findings?

The extent of police involvement in communities is not randomly or equitably distributed, and exposure to policing plays a role in determining which children come into contact with child protection agencies. More specifically:

- Children involved in a report of maltreatment made by law enforcement are more likely to be confirmed as victims of abuse or neglect (39%) compared to reports from other sources (22%).
- Black children were subject to nearly two times more police-initiated maltreatment investigations compared to white children (9.7 per 1,000 compared to 5.1 per 1,000).
- Between 2002 and 2015, the rate of police reporting of maltreatment increased 60% for Black families, 23% for Latinx families, and 39% for white families.
- Arrest rates are positively and significantly associated with rates of police reporting of maltreatment.
- Both the composition of the population and the nature of policing in a community more powerfully explain the intensity of family surveillance than child poverty.

Although these results suggest that involvement with the child protection system may be a consequence of arrest for any charge, further research is needed to more thoroughly investigate whether there is a causal relationship between police contact with families and the reporting of child abuse and neglect.

Why is this important for our work?

A child protection agency's reliance on other systems to surveil families and report abuse and neglect further exacerbates existing biases present in those systems, including law enforcement, and has resulted in an inefficient and often inaccurate system for identifying when children are at serious risk of harm. These implications must be clearly understood and mitigated.

This summary synthesizes the findings from a single research study. To learn more about alternative ways to support children and families, see [What is a population-based approach to child welfare?](#) and [Why is child welfare system transformation necessary?](#)

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