

Fatal child abuse

Compiled by Mel Irenyi, Katie Kovacs, and Nick Richardson

What is fatal child abuse?

Fatal child abuse is defined as the death of a child resulting from acts of physical violence or neglect of a child, perpetrated by a family member or caregiver.

What international statistics are available?

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that, worldwide, 57,000 children were victims of homicide in 2000, but states that many child deaths are routinely not investigated (WHO, 2002).

In the United States, there was an estimated 1,300 child deaths due to child abuse or neglect in 2001. This equates to 1.81 child deaths due to abuse or neglect per 100,000 children in the population. It was also found that younger children (under five years) were most likely to be victims of fatal child abuse. United States' child maltreatment data suggested that 41% of children who died due to abuse or neglect were under one year of age, with 85% of fatalities involving children under six years of age.

The United States Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect reported that a more realistic estimate of child deaths in the United States as a result of abuse and neglect, both known and unknown to statutory child protection services, is about 2,000 per year. This is approximately five children each day (US Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect, 1995).

What information is available in Australia?

It is difficult to obtain accurate statistics about the numbers of children who die from child abuse or neglect in Australia because comprehensive information is not currently collected in every jurisdiction.

According to the most recent national data, in 2003, the leading cause of death among children aged 0–14

years was injury, which is broken down into five subcategories: transport accident, drowning, assault, falls and suicide. In 2003, assault was the third most common type of injury causing death for Australian children aged 0–14 years. It resulted in the deaths of 73 children in 2001–03, compared to 327 deaths of children from transport accidents and 139 drowning deaths. A total of 815 Australian children aged 0–14 died from injuries in 2001–03 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2005).

On average, 25 Australian children are killed by their parents each year (Mouzos & Rushforth, 2003).

With regard to child deaths specifically due to child abuse, UNICEF (2003) estimates suggested that of the 30 most economically developed nations, Australia had the 9th lowest rate of child death resulting from child abuse and neglect.

Which states carry out child death reviews?

Detailed information on deaths resulting from child abuse is not available from all Australian jurisdictions; however, information from jurisdictions that carry out official inquiries into child deaths (also referred to as child death reviews) provides some guidance.

Child Death Review Teams aim to identify weaknesses in justice system responses for the benefit of future prevention and action. They do not aim to determine the culpability of alleged offenders or comment on the individual performance of workers, nor do they investigate the causes of child deaths; that role is left to the police and coroner. Child Death Review Teams do not conduct interviews or meet with staff or families of the deceased, but rather rely on document and case note analysis.

The Australian Capital Territory, New South Wales, South Australia, Queensland, Victoria and Western Australia have Child Death Review Teams. Legislation

to create the Northern Territory Child Death Review and Prevention Team was passed in late November 2007. The team is expected to be established by mid-2008. Tasmania is in the process of establishing a Child Death Review Team and, in November 2007, an interim review team issued a report on the deaths of children known to child protection services.

For those states that do collect official statistics, there is a general consensus that such figures under-represent the size of the problem because some child deaths, labelled as “accidental deaths”, might actually be attributable to child abuse and neglect.

Australian Capital Territory

A Child Death Review Committee was established in the Australian Capital Territory in April 2004, as an outcome of *The Territory as Parent: Review of the Safety of Children in Care in the ACT and of ACT Child Protection Management* (Vardon, 2004). The major purpose of the Child Death Review Committee is to review all child deaths, and to consider and make recommendations to address systemic social and environmental issues that are associated with children and young people.

In 2006, the Committee presented a review of all deaths of children and young people aged 0–17 years in the ACT between 1992 and 2003. The report showed that no child or young person known to the child protection department had died as a result of non-accidental injury inflicted by another person during that period (Office of the Chief Health Officer, 2006).

New South Wales

The New South Wales Child Death Review Team was established in 1996 and provides comprehensive information on the deaths of children and young people from birth to 17 years. The purpose of the Child Death Review Team is to prevent or reduce the number of deaths of children and young people in NSW.

The 2006 report of the Child Death Review Team provided data on all deaths of children and young people in NSW from January to December 2006. The deaths were reported against various categories—the figures in this paper relate to deaths categorised as fatal assault (NSW Child Death Review Team, 2006). (In previous years, the NSW team has reported on deaths of children through fatal assault and neglect; however, no data is provided on neglect in the current report).

There were 628 deaths of children and young people aged 0–17 years registered in NSW in 2006, 10 of which were caused by fatal assault and all of which involved boys. These figures can be compared to those recorded in 2005, when 12 young people died, 5 of whom were

male and 7 of whom were female. The overall death rate for fatal assault in young people aged 0–17 years from 1996–2006 was 0.6 deaths per 100,000. Assault was the third most common external cause of death after transport accidents and drowning (NSW Child Death Review Team, 2006).

Children who died as a result of assault ranged in age from less than 1 year to 17 years. Three of the 10 deaths were children aged between birth and 3 years. The report details methods of assault and concludes the most common form of fatal assault was blunt force battery, which included forceful shaking (NSW Child Death Review Team, 2006).

Queensland

Since August 2004, the Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian has been responsible for the centralised collection and coding of mortality information for deaths of children and young people in Queensland (Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian, 2006).

The Commission’s 2007 annual report of deaths of children and young people reported that from July 2006 to June 2007, 10 children and young people were fatally assaulted (Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian, 2007). This is almost 2% of the total of 509 children and young people who died in Queensland in that period. More than half (6) of the children fatally assaulted were under 5 years of age. A study of fatal assault and neglect of children and young people in Queensland is expected to be finalised and a report released by late 2008.

South Australia

In South Australia, between January and December 2006, six children died in five incidents of fatal assault (note that one death of a child who was usually a resident of South Australia was not included in the report because the death occurred outside of South Australia.) The six deaths accounted for 5% of the total 119 deaths of children aged from 0–17 years in South Australia in 2006. The children’s ages ranged from 7 months to 7 years, and four children were under 4 years of age. The South Australian report offers limited comment on deaths by fatal assault, but the Committee noted it may review the cases in more detail after investigations by the coroner and police are completed. In 2006, the deaths of three children aged between 0–17 years were suspected to be the result of fatal neglect. However, the classification of the deaths cannot be finalised until the completion of police and coronial investigations (Child Death and Serious Injury Review Committee, 2007).

Tasmania

In Tasmania, 10 child deaths in 2005 and 2006 involved children known to the child protection system (Department of Health and Human Services, 2005).

Of the 10 deaths of children known to the child protection system:

- in two cases, the child protection system was only alerted to the child after his or her death;
- in three cases, child deaths were classified as resulting from suspected abuse or neglect;
- in two cases, child deaths resulted from Sudden Infant Death Syndrome; and
- in three cases, child deaths were attributed to natural causes or as a consequence of disability that was unrelated to the child protection system.

In November 2005, the Office of the Commissioner for Children reported to the Minister for Health and Human Services on a potential child death review process for the state. Progress in relation to the report's recommendations is reported on the Department's website (Department of Health and Human Services, 2005).

Victoria

In Victoria, external inquiries into child deaths are conducted by the Victorian Child Death Review Committee (2003).

The committee is a multidisciplinary independent review body. While the coroner and police deal with matters of criminality and culpability, the committee focuses on cases of child deaths where the child has been involved with the Victorian child protection system at the time of their death, or up to 3 months before their death.

The aims of the Victorian Child Death Review Committee are to:

- advise the Minister of the implications of findings in given cases;
- describe trends and patterns of child deaths, and analyse and comment on themes that arise;
- identify risk factors and make recommendations for the prevention of child deaths;
- evaluate service and system responses to children and families considered "at risk", and offer recommendations for improvement; and
- produce an annual report and provide advice to the Minister for Community Services on the Child Death Inquiry process.

Between April 2006 and March 2007, the Victorian Child Death Review Committee reviewed 13 child deaths. Of this number, two children were found to

have died from non-accidental trauma. (In two cases, the State Coroner was unable to ascertain the cause of death. At the time of the report's publication, coronial findings were pending in another case (Victorian Child Death Review Committee, 2007).)

In the 10 years from 1996 to 2006, the deaths of 16 children and young people were categorised as non-accidental trauma. This categorisation includes deaths due to physical abuse, homicide and cases where a child or young person is missing, presumed dead (Victorian Child Death Review Committee, 2007).

The report shows that younger children are historically more vulnerable to death by non-accidental trauma than older children (see Figure 1). This is consistent with international data on the greater vulnerability of younger children (Finkelhor & Dzuiba-Leatherman, 1994).

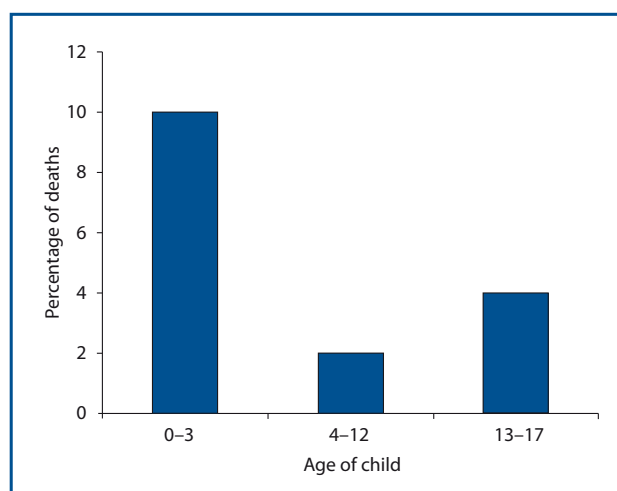


Figure 1: Child deaths in Victoria as a result of non-accidental trauma, by age

Western Australia

In Western Australia, the Child Death Review Committee commenced operation in January 2003. Its role is to analyse the ways in which the Department of Child Protection has engaged with families where the death of a child has occurred and where there has been contact with the Department in the previous two years.

The aims of the Western Australian Child Death Review Committee are to:

- review the policies and procedures of the Department in circumstances where a child has died;
- make recommendations for the improvement of the above; and
- provide a report on these matters to the Minister.

The committee also functions to identify particular classes of child deaths or related issues that may benefit from further investigation or research. Similar to New South Wales and Victoria, the Committee does not aim to determine the culpability of alleged offenders or comment on the individual performance of workers, nor does it investigate the cause of deaths.

Between 2003 and 2006, the committee reviewed the deaths of 44 children in Western Australia who were known to child protection authorities:

- 80% of the deaths reviewed were of children under five years of age;
- 48% involved children identified as Aboriginal;
- the cause of death in 16% of the cases was homicide; and
- 58% of the children involved were the subject of child concern or child maltreatment allegations at the time of their death (Western Australian Government, 2007).

For further information on fatal child neglect see: Child Abuse Prevention Issues paper no. 21, *Redefining Fatal Child Neglect* (Lawrence & Irvine, 2004).

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