



OJJDP FACT SHEET

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The National Center for Prosecution of Child Abuse

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Since 1986, the number of children who are abused, neglected, and endangered every year has nearly doubled—to almost 1 million today. Emotional and behavior disorders, teen pregnancy, prostitution, substance abuse, and delinquency and criminality are some of the immediate and long-term consequences a child may face because of maltreatment. Each year, nearly 1,200 children and youth are killed by caretakers; most of the victims are 5 years old or younger.

OJJDP funds the National Center for Prosecution of Child Abuse (the Center) to enhance investigators' and prosecutors' skills and help them handle child and adolescent abuse cases. In 1985, the National District Attorneys Association established the Center as a program of its American Prosecutors Research Institute. Created to respond to the increasing number of reported child abuse cases, the Center serves as the Nation's main resource for training, expert legal assistance, court reform, and state-of-the-art information on criminal child abuse investigations and prosecutions. Center staff work to improve the juvenile justice system's ability to hold offenders accountable for their crimes.

Addressing the Problem

The growing number and complexity of child abuse cases and abusers' increasing sophistication (e.g., use of the Internet to seduce children) severely challenge those who work to address these crimes. Small, rural communities, in particular, face serious difficulties in responding to abuse cases because these communities often possess limited resources and their prosecutors and investigators cannot specialize in child abuse. Even in communities with greater resources, the task of protecting children can be daunting: in many cases there is little, if any, physical evidence of abuse and the primary witness is usually a child, who the defendant's lawyers may claim has been easily manipulated by the prosecution. The rate of burnout and staff turnover among investigators and prosecutors working on these cases is high. Often, the most difficult cases are given to new or ill-prepared prosecutors.

Center Resources

Each year, Center staff respond to about 4,000 calls from investigators, prosecutors, and other child abuse professionals. Staff assistance includes conducting research, deciphering complex medical and forensic evidence, and brainstorming with law enforcement and prosecutors to develop investigative and trial strategies.

Experienced prosecutors and medical, mental health, and law enforcement professionals teach the Center's training classes, which include the following:

- ◆ “Equal Justice: Investigation and Prosecution of Child Abuse” is the core course.
- ◆ “Investigation and Prosecution of Child Fatalities and Physical Abuse” focuses on recognizing and prosecuting child homicides that have been mistakenly classified as “accidents” or the result of “natural causes.”
- ◆ “SAFETY NET” offers cutting edge, advanced training to multidisciplinary teams in investigating and prosecuting computer-facilitated sexual exploitation of children.
- ◆ “Investigation and Prosecution of Child Abduction” addresses the unique challenges prosecutors, investigators, and allied criminal justice professionals confront in cases of child abduction. Topical areas include online luring and abduction, abductions by strangers, international abductions, parental abductions, and out-of-State recovery of abducted children.
- ◆ “Finding Words” explores the mechanics of speaking with children about abuse and examines how to defend those interviews in court. Developed in collaboration with Cornerhouse, a Minneapolis children’s advocacy center, “Finding Words” is offered to professionals who apply as part of a multidisciplinary investigative team. Course participants are taught interviewing skills to better develop and corroborate admissible offender confessions and testimonies by young or problematic subjects. Participants also learn alternative methods of

questioning to draw out critical information from young child abuse victims and witnesses.

Because the need for prosecutors and investigators to develop good forensic interviewing skills is so large, the Center has embarked on “Half a Nation by 2010,” a partnership between the Center and States to develop “Finding Words” into high-quality, State-specific training institutes. Using a “train-the-trainer” model, Center staff work with partner States to educate a cadre of highly skilled instructors, who then teach forensic interviewing skills to professionals in that State.

The Center’s training courses and consultations prepare participants in all aspects of abuse investigation and prosecution, including advanced trial advocacy, case preparation, child sexual exploitation, juvenile sex offenders, jury selection, preparation of child witnesses, victim assistance, family dynamics, use of expert witnesses, medical evidence, and collection and preservation of forensic evidence.

To help justice and child protection system employees, the Center offers a full range of technical support, consultation services, and information, including the following:

- ◆ A comprehensive clearinghouse on child abuse case law, statutory initiatives, court reforms, and trial strategies.
- ◆ Various publications, including the two-volume *Investigation and Prosecution of Child Abuse* manual, the monthly *Update* newsletter, a monograph series, annual statutory summaries, and special reports, such as a Federal supplement to the *Investigation and Prosecution* manual and a handbook on parental abduction prosecutions.

- ◆ Expert training and technical assistance provided by experienced attorneys through conferences, site visits, State-specific training programs, and thousands of technical assistance phone consultations each year.
- ◆ Research conducted in cooperation with academic centers, Federal and State prosecutors, and specialists on State and Federal developments, best practices, and prosecutorial innovations.

The demand for expertise in the area of juvenile and criminal justice has grown rapidly in the past 15 years. The National Center for Prosecution of Child Abuse fills a critical need by providing professional development and guidance to investigators and prosecutors.

For Further Information

For more information or assistance contact

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