

## Child neglect and abuse cases soar

*Dallas Morning News, The (TX) - November 29, 2011*

• Author/Byline: SARAH KRAMER

• Edition: 1

• Section: METRO

• Page: B01

The boy, like many other 7-year-olds, loves going to Chuck E. Cheese's, drawing and playing ball. But this boy has lived in four foster homes after persistent neglect by his mother.

"He is a super little kid, very smart ... but his life is a roller coaster," said Jessica Loughran, a volunteer with Dallas Court Appointed Special Advocates, which helps most of the 1,500 children a year that are taken into the foster care system because of abuse or neglect.

The boy, whose name is being withheld, is among a growing number of reported victims of child abuse in Dallas County.

According to an 88-page report released by Children's Medical Center Dallas, child abuse and neglect cases in the county have increased nearly 40 percent over the past decade. The report was prepared by the Institute for Urban Policy Research at the University of Texas at Dallas.

The tie that binds many of the cases is a failure by the adults in the children's lives to report what they see, said Dr. Amy Barton, a clinical physician at the hospital's Referral and Evaluation of At Risk Children, or REACH, program.

"Unfortunately, we see many kids like this - children who come in who have injuries of multiple ages," she said. "This means that this child has been injured several times over a period of time, and people may have seen, but because they didn't intervene, they [the children] are now in the ICU."

"The severity in Dallas is worse, honestly," Barton said.

Last year, 33,000 cases were reported in Dallas County, and 6,000 of them were confirmed. Each week, Barton sees between 20 and 35 abused children, with injuries ranging from bruises to broken rib cages and skull fractures.

Thirty-seven percent of deaths at Children's are attributed to abuse or neglect. Texas was responsible for nearly 1 in 10 child homicide cases in the U.S. last year.

### Abuse numbers jump

The Dallas Children's Advocacy Center assisted 2,000 children in 2010. This year, the center had already exceeded that number by the end of October.

"The numbers are up significantly," said Ellen Magnis, the center's chief of external affairs.

Last month, the center saw 170 children. Of those cases, 82.4 percent involved sexual abuse, and 9.3 percent involved physical abuse.

The average client is a 10-year-old girl, Magnis said.

"She has been abused by someone she knows, whether it be a family member, soccer coach, teacher, clergy, anybody," she said.

It's unclear what's behind the uptick in local cases. Some experts say the recession has affected the numbers, and the Children's study notes that 8,000 more Dallas County children slipped into poverty last year, a 4 percent increase from 2009.

After volunteering for about a year, Loughran believes the economy has taken a toll on many families.

"Child neglect and abuse can be something people misunderstand," she said. "Parents have had to get a second or third job, which forces them to leave their child at home. Sadly, the kids pay the price."

Other experts attribute the rise in the number of cases to an increase in awareness and to Texas' "mandatory reporter" law, requiring adults who witness child abuse to speak up or face up to a year in jail.

"It's hard to know if the actual number has increased or if we are just reporting more," Magnis said. "There has been a huge educational push - talking to teachers, parents, child-serving organizations."

### Cautious optimism

There are some reasons for cautious optimism for these children. CPS spokeswoman Marissa Gonzales said her agency emphasizes keeping families together, and CPS and CASA have seen success in doing so.

"We are putting a lot of focus on working with families and trying to keep families together, making sure children are safe," she said. "This may have an impact on the number of children coming into the system."

Beverly Levy, executive director of Dallas CASA, said her organization's goal is to keep children with their families.

"Fewer than 5 percent of allegations actually lead to removals," she said. "It really is a last resort."

Also, Gonzales said, abuse cases reported to CPS have decreased in Dallas County from about 5,900 in 2009 to about 5,600 in 2010. So far this year, CPS has handled about 5,000 cases.

'An everyday thing'

While CPS cases are decreasing, overall abuse and neglect cases are still on the rise, as some cases are reported directly to police.

During one week this month, the Dallas Police Department's child abuse squad handled 33 cases, not including CPS reports, according to Detective Glen Slade.

"We see everything. Everything from bruises to belt marks to head injuries to child deaths" involving family members, Slade said.

The Police Department has several child operation units, some that work with family-related cases and others that deal with cases in which the victim and suspect are not related.

Magnis worries that most people take note only of cases that hit national news, such as the Penn State child sex abuse scandal. Yet, she regularly sees "absolutely horrible" cases.

"With 2,000 kids coming through our doors last year, it's an everyday thing," she said.

"It's what we see all day long."

## BY THE NUMBERS

Local kids at risk

From the Children's Medical Center report "Beyond ABC: Assessing Children's Health in Dallas County":

29 percent

Proportion who live in poverty

28 percent

Proportion malnourished

18 percent

Proportion uninsured

1,160

Number of children reported as homeless in 2011

21 percent

Proportion of those homeless kids who are 1 to 3 years old

How to help:

Volunteer at Dallas Children's Advocacy Center by calling 214-515-9045 or visiting [www.dcac.org](http://www.dcac.org). Volunteer at Dallas CASA by calling 214-827-9603 or visiting [www.dallascasa.org](http://www.dallascasa.org). Anyone who suspects a case of child abuse or neglect can call Child Protective Services at 1-800-252-5400.

• Caption: CHART(S): BY THE NUMBERS Local kids at risk.

• Index terms: DALLAS COUNTY

