

Study: Local cases rose nearly 40% over decade

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- Edition: 1
- Page: 5

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."

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.

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.

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.

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.

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How to help

Volunteer at the Dallas Children's Advocacy Center by calling 214-515-9045 or visiting www.dcac.org. Volunteer at Dallas CASA by calling 214-827-9603 or visiting 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): How to help.

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