

One in three children investigated for abuse/neglect by 18

21 December 2016, by Neil Schoenherr

The first academic study to estimate the cumulative lifetime risk of a child maltreatment investigation, completed by researchers at the Brown School at Washington University in St. Louis, reveals that 37 percent of U.S. children prior to their 18th birthday are the subject of an investigated child neglect and abuse report—and 53 percent of black children.

"This study provides the first definitive answer to a question that has been asked by researchers for decades," said Hyunil Kim, PhD student in [social work](#) and lead author of the study, Lifetime Prevalence of Investigating Child Maltreatment Among US Children, to be published in the January issue of the *American Journal of Public Health*. It was released online Dec. 20.

"That question is, 'Why do retrospective reports of [child maltreatment](#) yield far higher [estimates](#) than official count of [maltreatment](#) reports?' The answer is that they don't," Kim said. "The estimates from these different sources are actually very close—if you look at investigations across the entire lifespan."

The research team examined reports of abuse and neglect that were investigated. The study includes all Child Protective Services maltreatment investigations, rather than only substantiated investigations, and provides the first type-specific estimates: neglect, physical, sexual and emotional abuse.

In addition to Kim, the co-authors include: Brett Drake, professor at the Brown School; Melissa Jonson-Reid, the Ralph and Muriel Pumphrey Professor in Social Work and director of Center for Violence and Injury Prevention at the Brown School; and Christopher Wildeman of Cornell University.

"We found the cumulative rate for experiencing a maltreatment investigation is three times the rate

previously established for substantiated investigations," Kim said. "Our investigation-based estimates (compared to prior substantiated investigation-based estimates) are far closer to estimates based on retrospective data from nationally representative samples, which are generally in the 30- to 40-percent range."

In the past, Kim said, researchers and policy makers have often looked only at officially substantiated cases in counting children who are maltreated or are at risk for maltreatment.

"We now know from a number of studies that unsubstantiated and substantiated reports are actually more similar than different in terms of risks to the children," Kim said. "These recent findings may explain our finding that official investigation rates are very close to self-reported maltreatment rates."

Maltreatment data were obtained from the 2003-2014 National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System child files, which includes reports from all 50 states and the District of Columbia.

More information: Hyunil Kim et al. Lifetime Prevalence of Investigating Child Maltreatment Among US Children, *American Journal of Public Health* (2016). [DOI: 10.2105/AJPH.2016.303545](https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2016.303545)

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