

Why are Michigan's child abuse/neglect rates so high?

By Ron French/Bridge Magazine

The number of abused and neglected Michigan children rose in recent years, during a period when state spending on abuse and neglect prevention plummeted.

The state's rate of abuse and neglect, below the national average as recently as 2006, is now more than 50 percent higher than the national rate. Michigan now ranks 41st, [according to an analysis by the Annie E. Casey Foundation](#).

While state rankings are an iffy proposition because states define abuse and neglect differently, Michigan's ballooning rate of abuse and neglect has caused concern among child advocates.

"Child abuse/neglect prevention programs in Michigan have been decimated over the years," said Mina Hong, policy senior policy associate at Michigan's Children. There has been "increased funding for foster care and child protective services, but funding for child abuse prevention hasn't kept pace.

"Unfortunately in Michigan, this has led to the unacceptable rise in child maltreatment that you're looking at."



ALL TOO COMMON: Michigan has one of the nation's highest rates for child abuse and neglect, according to the most recent state figures. Child welfare officials and advocates have theories as to why, but there's no consensus explanation. (courtesy photo/used under Creative Commons license)

Abuse and neglect rates ran as high as one in every 25 children in some Michigan counties in 2011, the most recent year for which data is available from the Michigan Department of Human Services. Roscommon County had the highest rate, with 41.5 of every 1,000 children being the victims of confirmed abuse or neglect, followed by Branch County at 40.5 victims per 1,000 children.

Ottawa County had the lowest rate, with 5.4 victims of abuse and neglect per 1,000 children.

MORE COVERAGE: [See your county's abuse and neglect rate.](#)

“We’ve wondered ourselves for years why our rates are so staggeringly high for Branch County,” said Lisa Aviza, former interim director of the Child Abuse and Neglect Council of Branch County. “The neglect is much higher than the abuse. What’s happening is children are not getting their daily needs met. Maybe they’re only getting a meal at school; maybe they’re going to school in the winter without hats and gloves and coats.”

Between 2000 and 2011, the rate of confirmed abuse and neglect cases in Michigan rose 39 percent. Yet state programs aimed at preventing child mistreatment have been cut. The Families First program received \$21 million in state funds in 2000. In the 2014 budget, the program will receive \$16.2 million – an inflation-adjusted cut of 42 percent.

The Zero to Three Secondary Prevention Program, which received \$7.75 million in 2001, was eliminated in 2012.

The federally-funded Strong Families, Safe Children program, which received \$16.9 million in 2000, is set to get \$12.4 million in the 2014 budget year – an inflation-adjusted cut of 45 percent.

Some of those cuts are a result of funding shifts in the state’s child welfare system [prompted by a 2008 settlement.](#)

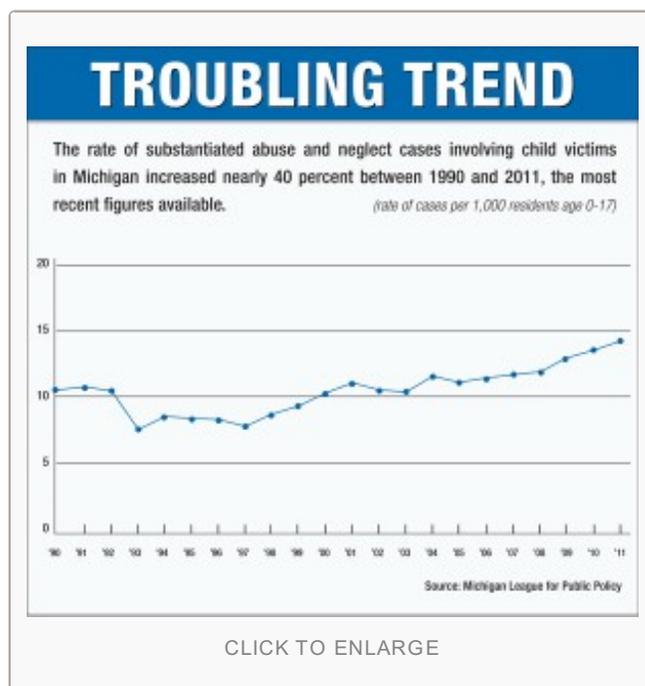
Money needed to improve the state’s foster care and child protective services programs, as required by the settlement, left less money for abuse and neglect prevention programs, Hong said.

Some of the increase also may be attributed to a 2009 change [in the number of professions](#) that are required to report suspicions of child abuse and neglect, adding jobs such as nurses, first responders and dental hygienists.

Rates have increased every year since then — but they also rose in the three years prior to the policy change. And Michigan’s list of professions mandated to report abuse and neglect is not unusually long [compared to other states](#), some of which have lower abuse and neglect rates.

Washington, for example has a longer list of people mandated to report child mistreatment (including any adult who lives with a child), but has a confirmed rate less than a third of Michigan’s.

Indiana requires all citizens to report suspicions of abuse and neglect, yet it’s confirmed rate (11 children per 1,000) is lower than Michigan’s (14 per 1,000 children).



U.S. BETTER, MICHIGAN WORSE

Michigan's rate of abuse and neglect was below the national average as recently as 2006. Since then, confirmed abuse and neglect has gone down nationally while shooting up in Michigan. Michigan's rate is now

“To attribute (the increase in confirmed abuse and neglect) to one factor is dangerous,” said Colin Parks, manager of Child Protective Services and Family Preservation for DHS.

“We’ve increased the number of social workers, and they’re better at identifying issues. In addition to that, public awareness of abuse and neglect has been raised, and adds to the reporting.”

Jane Zehnder-Merrell of the Michigan League for Public Policy reports that about 80 percent of abuse and neglect cases involve neglect — not physical or sexual abuse. Being homeless or not being able to provide adequate food or clothing for children could be labeled as neglect, with cases referred to community services for assistance.

“Twelve percent of kids in Michigan live in homes below half the federal poverty line,” Zehnder-Merrell said. “I don’t know how you have shelter with that.”

Senior Writer Ron French joined Bridge in 2011 after having won more than 40 national and state journalism awards since he joined the Detroit News in 1995. French has a long track record of uncovering emerging issues and changing the public policy debate through his work. In 2006, he foretold the coming crisis in the auto industry in a special report detailing how worker health-care costs threatened to bankrupt General Motors.

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ing up in Michigan. Michigan's rate is now 41st in the nation – it was 20th in 2005.

Victims of maltreatment (abuse and neglect) per 1,000 children

YEAR	U.S.	MICHIGAN	RANK
2005	11	9	20
2006	11	10	24
2007	10	NA	NA
2008	10	11	30
2009	9	13	38
2010	9	14	41
2011	9	14	41

SOURCE: The Annie E. Casey Foundation