INTRODUCTION

Child abuse and neglect are among the most tragic issues facing society today. Each year, thousands of children are abused or neglected by parents and other caregivers. Many of these children carry lasting physical or emotional scars; some die. For years, government agencies and professionals in a variety of fields have collaborated to establish effective programs to prevent child maltreatment and to protect and treat the abused and neglected children and their families. While great progress has been made, child maltreatment remains a major social problem.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) has supported programs to prevent, identify and treat child abuse and neglect. On the national level, DHHS has conducted three Congressionally mandated national incidence studies of child abuse and neglect (NIS). The first NIS (NIS–1), mandated under Public Law (P.L.) 93–247 (1974), was conducted in 1979 and 1980 and reported in 1981. The second NIS (NIS–2), mandated under P.L. 98–457 (1984), was conducted in 1986 and 1987, and reported in 1988. The third NIS (NIS–3) was mandated under both the Child Abuse Prevention, Adoption, and Family Services Act of 1988 (P.L. 100–294) and the Child Abuse, Domestic Violence, Adoption and Family Services Act of 1992 (P.L. 102–295), conducted between 1993 and 1995, and published in 1996. Figure 1 shows the national estimates of the number of children per 1,000 who were harmed or injured by abuse or neglect in these three previous implementations of the NIS.

DHHS recently began the Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS–4). The NIS–4 will measure the incidence and prevalence of child maltreatment by a wide array of demographic characteristics. Like its predecessors, the NIS–4 is a Congressionally mandated study. It was mandated by the Keeping Children and Families Safe Act of 2003 (P.L. 108–36). DHHS is conducting the NIS–4 through a contract with Westat, a national social sciences research firm that also conducted all three previous NIS cycles.

STUDY OBJECTIVES AND DESIGN

The NIS–4 will estimate the current national incidence and distribution of child maltreatment, based on standardized research definitions and will assess changes since the previous NIS data were collected.

Data collection will occur in a nationally representative sample of 122 counties. These counties were selected using scientific sampling procedures that ensure the necessary mix of geographic regions, urban and rural areas, and other major community characteristics. The NIS–4 will determine the number of children in the sampled counties who are abused and neglected during a 3-month reference period and will use these data to develop annual incidence estimates for the nation.

Earlier research has shown that many more children are abused and neglected in a community than are
observed at any single agency. Figure 2 shows the NIS-3 national estimates for the number of children per 1,000 recognized by different sources as harmed or injured by abuse and neglect (with any overlapping children counted only once, in the first listed source that recognized them).

![Figure 2. Sources Recognizing Children Harmed or Injured by Abuse or Neglect in the NIS-3](image)

To develop a comprehensive picture of the extent of child abuse and neglect, the NIS–4 will follow the standard NIS methodology and gather information on abused and neglected children who are seen by professionals in a number of agencies in each study county, including the local child protective service agency (CPS), the county public health, public housing, and juvenile probation departments, the sheriff and/or state police departments, and scientifically selected samples of municipal police departments, schools, hospitals, day care centers, voluntary social service and mental health agencies, and shelters for runaway youth and battered women. Designated professionals in the selected community agencies will be asked to serve as study “sentinels” by staying on the lookout for children who are abused or neglected during the study period and providing descriptive information on the cases they encounter.

**PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURES**

Study data forms, procedures, and schedules are specifically designed to provide a solid basis for estimating the number of abused and neglected children over the course of the study year, while also minimizing the participation time frame and respecting the privacy of the sentinels, their agencies, and the children and families they serve. At the same time, the study applies consistent methods that allow integrating the data across all the different agency sectors involved—using a common reference period, applying standardized definitions of abuse and neglect, and unduplicating multiple data forms on a given child so each child is counted only once in the study estimates.

Through phone calls and other communications (mail, fax, email) with the selected agencies Westat’s NIS-4 project staff will obtain any necessary authorizations, work out data collection agreements, identify the agency staff who are eligible to be sentinels according to the standard NIS procedures, and select those who will serve as sentinels during the study reference period. To facilitate data collection in agencies with large numbers of eligible sentinels, the study will select a sample of staff to participate.

Sentinels will complete data forms on all children they encounter who they believe are abused or neglected during the study reference period, giving demographic information as well as detailing their observations about the maltreatment circumstances. The data forms will not include information that would uniquely identify a specific child or family.

Each county is assigned to one of two reference periods: September 4 – December 3, 2005 or February 4 – May 3, 2006. Sentinel data collection will begin at the start of the study reference period and conclude after the end, allowing for a few additional weeks to collect outstanding data forms.

Westat will hire and train a Local Coordinator to work in each study county. Before the start of data collection, Westat’s Local Coordinator will visit each agency to orient the sentinels in the study definitions of child abuse and neglect and show them how to complete data forms on the abused/neglected children they observe, detailing their observations. If preferred, agencies can use CDs or video streaming in lieu of an in-person presentation. The Local Coordinator will also visit the sentinels regularly throughout the reference period to provide data forms, answer questions, and gather completed data forms.

**USE OF THE NIS–4 DATA**

After all data forms in a county are complete, Westat data processors will use probabilistic techniques that were successful in earlier NIS cycles to link duplicate reports on a given child. These techniques rely on somewhat less-than-perfect matches on data items that do not uniquely identify the child, such as the child's first name, last initial, and date of birth. Highly trained coders will also evaluate the details of maltreatment events described on all completed data forms, comparing them against the specific definitions of abuse and neglect that are used in the NIS, so that the
study estimates will reflect a common definitional standard across all the different sources. Statisticians will assign weights to the children who fit the study definitions so that their data can be used to represent all children who were abused or neglected in the United States during the study year.

The NIS–4 findings will be given in the mandated Report to Congress. That report will present the incidence estimates and tables showing the severity and distribution of abuse and neglect. As an example, Figure 3 gives some findings from the NIS–3 report, showing the number of children per 1,000 who were seriously or moderately injured or harmed by abuse or neglect across the three previous NIS cycles.

![Figure 3. Changes over 3 NIS Cycles in the Incidence of Children With Different Degrees of Harm or Injury from Abuse or Neglect](image)

The situations included in the NIS do not necessarily correspond to those covered by their state’s abuse and neglect reporting statutes. The study guidelines do not indicate whether an official report is required or appropriate.

All NIS–4 project staff and field employees must sign agreements pledging to keep confidential all information about the identities of agencies and individual respondents. Any Westat employee who violates this agreement is subject to dismissal and to possible civil and criminal penalties.

 Participating agencies and respondents will never be identified in NIS–4 reports or public use data files. No participating states or counties will be identified without their prior authorization.

### RELATION OF THE NIS TO OFFICIAL REPORTING

All states have laws requiring that suspected child abuse and neglect be reported to designated authorities. These state laws vary with regard to who must report, what must be reported, and how, when, and to whom reports must be made. In this connection, NIS sentinels are told that

- The situations included in the NIS do not necessarily correspond to those covered by their state’s abuse and neglect reporting statutes. The study guidelines do not indicate whether an official report is required or appropriate.

- Any data form provided to the study will be used for research purposes only and does not constitute an official report of suspected child abuse or neglect as may be required by their state law. Participation in the NIS does not relieve respondents of any professional or legal responsibility they may have to officially report and will not initiate any official action to protect the child or provide assistance to the family.

The NIS–4 project staff have neither the authority nor the expertise to interpret local reporting statutes and will refer respondents to their appropriate local agencies for such guidance.
STUDY CONTACTS

Visit www.NIS4.org for more information about the study and its progress. If you have any questions or comments on the study, email to nis4@westat.com, call 1-888-529-NIS4 (6474), or write:

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