INTRODUCTION

Federal, State and local human services officials, together with professionals from a variety of fields, have collaborated for many years to establish effective programs to protect and treat abused and neglected children and their families. While great progress has been made over the last three decades, child maltreatment remains a major social problem.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) has supported State and local agencies in developing 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 aims to estimate the current national incidence, severity and demographic distribution of child maltreatment, based on standardized research definitions, and to 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. To develop a comprehensive picture of the extent of child abuse and neglect, the NIS–4 will pull together data from a number of agency sources in each study county. The NIS estimates will begin with data from the local child protective service agency (CPS) concerning the reports they receive and accept for investigation during the study reference period. Building on this foundation, the NIS estimates will also incorporate data on abused and neglected children who are seen by professionals in a number of other community agencies, including the county public health, public housing, and juvenile probation departments, the sheriff and/or state police, and scientifically selected samples of other agencies, including voluntary social service and mental health agencies, municipal police departments, schools, hospitals, day care centers, 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 respect the inherent differences between CPS agencies and sentinel agencies. At the same time, the study applies consistent methods that allow integrating the data. Both CPS and sentinel sources use a common reference period and provide comparable data items about observed children; the researchers unduplicate multiple data forms on the same child and apply standardized definitions of abuse and neglect.

**CPS Agencies.** Through phone calls and other communications (mail, fax, email) with the local CPS agencies serving the selected counties, senior project staff at Westat and WRMA will work out any necessary authorizations and agreements and develop specific arrangements for data collection. To guide the data collection plans, and to enhance the interpretation of the study data, they will also ask the local CPS agencies about their recent caseloads and current structure, policies, and screening standards.

CPS data forms will gather details about maltreatment events and outcomes in cases opened for investigation during the main reference period and very abbreviated information on cases accepted for investigation during the month following the reference period. In larger CPS agencies, cases accepted for investigation during the reference period may be sampled for detailed data collection, with only the abbreviated information needed on the other (nonsampled) cases. As described below, the abbreviated information is used for unduplication. Data forms will not obtain information that would uniquely identify a specific child or family. Arrangements will be made for CPS agencies to provide the needed unduplication data electronically, if they can do so.

Each county is assigned to one of two reference periods: September 4 – December 3, 2005 or February 4 – May 3, 2006. In general, CPS data will be collected from late September 2005 (or late February 2006 for the spring data collection) to the end of January 2006 (or end of June 2006 for the spring). However, the exact start and end dates in a particular CPS agency will depend on how soon the agency can provide the first list of reports accepted for investigation during the full period of interest (September 4 through January 3, 2006 or February 4 – June 3, 2006) as well as on other conditions that can affect timing—such as when the investigation findings would be available and, if applicable, when data would be purged on reports classified as unfounded or unsubstantiated.

Westat will hire and train a Local Coordinator to work in each study county. Before data collection begins, the Local Coordinator will review the CPS data form with the CPS caseworkers (and/or other staff) who will complete the forms about cases that are accepted for investigation during the study period. The Local Coordinator will visit the local CPS agency regularly throughout data collection, helping to manage the exchange of case listings, providing data forms, answering questions, and gathering the finished forms for transmittal to Westat’s home office.

**Sentinel Agencies.** Westat will sample and recruit the other agencies in each study county, identifying professionals in each to serve as NIS–4 sentinels. 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.

Sentinel data collection will begin at the start of the designated study reference period and conclude after end of the study reference period, allowing a few additional weeks to collect any outstanding sentinel data forms.
Before the start of sentinel data collection, Westat’s Local Coordinator will train 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. 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 CPS and sentinel 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 standard. 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, provide tables showing the severity and distribution of abuse and neglect, and discuss the implications of the findings for policy and practice.

**CONFIDENTIALITY**

The NIS–4 will include stringent safeguards at every step of the research to protect the confidentiality of all children, family members, and others involved in suspected maltreatment, and of all agencies and individuals who provide data to the study.

- The NIS data forms do not gather personally identifying information about children or families suspected to be involved in child maltreatment situations;
- 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; and
- Participating agencies and respondents will not be identified in NIS–4 reports or public use data files. Participating states and counties will not be identified without their prior authorization.

**THE NIS, NCANDS, AND OFFICIAL REPORTING**

The majority of states provide extensive child-level data to the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS), which WRMA operates for DHHS. The NCANDS data have been valuable in refining the NIS–4 sample design and they will also contribute during analysis when statisticians need to adjust the 3-months of NIS data to provide year-long estimates. However, the NIS cannot use the NCANDS child-level data in other ways at the present time, because the NCANDS data do not provide the details needed for evaluating cases against the NIS standardized definitions or the data items needed to unduplicate the children in CPS cases against the children on sentinel data forms.

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 cautioned that

- The kinds of abusive and neglectful situations included in the NIS do not necessarily correspond to those covered by their state’s child abuse and neglect reporting statutes. The study guidelines should not be interpreted as indicating 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 make an official 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](http://www.NIS4.org) for more information about the study and its progress. If you have any questions or comments on the study, e-mail to [nis4@westat.com](mailto:nis4@westat.com), call 1-888-529-NIS4 (6474), or write:

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