You have been selected to be a sentinel in the Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-4). In this important role, you will contribute to the accuracy of the NIS-4 findings. This Sentinel Guide answers some of the most frequently asked questions about the study, explains what is being asked of you as a sentinel, and provides general guidelines. Please keep this Guide for the next several months so you can refer to it as necessary during NIS-4 data collection. You can find further information about the study on www.NIS4.org.

Part A. STUDY DESIGN

1. What information will the NIS-4 provide?

The NIS-4 will produce reliable national estimates of the current incidence of child abuse and neglect and of its distribution and severity by a wide array of demographic characteristics. Information from the NIS-4 will be compared with data obtained from the three earlier NIS cycles to determine how the incidence and nature of child abuse and neglect has changed. The information will aid in planning effective child abuse and neglect prevention and treatment programs.

2. What authorization and support does this study have?

The NIS-4:

- Was mandated by the United States Congress under the Keeping Children and Families Safe Act of 2003 (P.L. 108-36);

- Is sponsored by the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS);
• Has been approved by the Education, Social Services, and other appropriate departments in this State and county; and

• Has been endorsed by a number of major national professional organizations; the NIS4 website provides the most up-to-date listing of these endorsing agencies.

3. What is the NIS-4 study design?

The NIS-4 is being conducted 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 have been abused or neglected during a 3-month reference 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 is following the standard NIS methodology and gathering 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 are 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.

4. When will the data be collected?

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 on children suspected to have been maltreated during the reference period.

5. Will there be any special preparation or training?

Yes. Westat will hire and train a Local Coordinator to work in each study county. Before the start of data collection, your Local County Coordinator will visit your agency to orient you in the study guidelines and show you how to complete data forms on the abused/neglected children you encounter during the study reference period. This information is also available on CD or via the web. Your Local Coordinator will also visit your agency regularly throughout data collection to provide additional data forms, answer your questions, and gather your completed data forms.

6. How will the data be used?

When all the data have been collected, 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. Applying these methods, the researchers will pool the information received from all study counties and produce an overall unduplicated "count" of the number of children known or suspected to have been abused or neglected during the study period.

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 weighted data on qualifying cases will then be used to produce national estimates of the number of maltreated children overall, and of the numbers of children maltreated in different ways, the numbers abused or neglected in different age groups, and so on. Changes in the incidence of child abuse and neglect since the NIS-1, NIS-2, and the NIS-3 also will be calculated.

The NIS-4 findings will be presented in the mandated Report to Congress and will available to interested policymakers, researchers, and the members of the general public. You can link to the NIS-3 findings report through the study website, www.NIS4.org.

Part B. STUDY PARTICIPATION

7. What is asked of me as a sentinel?

We ask that you become familiar with the study guidelines below. They describe the kinds of maltreatment situations that are included in the NIS-4. We ask that you be on the lookout for such situations throughout the 3-month study period. If you encounter a situation that meets the study guidelines, we ask you to provide information about the case by filling in a study data form. If you encounter a situation that raises your concern and that you believe the NIS-4 should consider, but you are not sure how to classify it in the maltreatment categories listed, we ask you to describe it on a study data form so that our coders can decide how best to treat the case.

8. What about confidentiality?

Confidentiality is an important aspect of the study. To protect the confidentiality of all involved, the data form has been carefully designed so that individual children and families cannot be personally identified. You will not be asked to provide personally identifying information about any of the persons involved in the suspected maltreatment (no last names, addresses, or the like).

You will be asked only to describe the suspected abusive or neglectful acts or events and to provide some non-identifying information about the children and adults involved. Using only the items on the data forms, the researchers will apply the probabilistic methods that were successfully applied in the previous NIS cycles to develop unduplicated counts of cases.

Your identity will remain confidential. We ask that you temporarily provide your name and telephone number on a detachable portion of the data form so we can reach you if there are any immediate legibility problems or items we need to clarify for the coding team to evaluate the information correctly. We will remove and destroy this identifying portion of the data form within 10 days after we receive it and before we pass the form on to the unduplicators and evaluators.
From that point forward, we will **not** be able to link the data form back to the individual person who completed it. No identifying information about respondents will be retained. No identifying information about you will be retained in connection with any data form you submit. All findings will be presented as aggregated statistics only. Even the fact that a certain agency participated in the NIS-4 will always remain confidential and will never be mentioned in any report or public use data files; and participating states or counties will not be identified without their prior authorization.

There have **never** been breaches of confidentiality in any past NIS cycle, or any threats to the confidentiality of participants. The two levels of legal protections that have been used in the previous studies will also be applied in the NIS-4. First, all NIS–4 project staff and field employees must sign confidentiality agreements pledging to keep confidential all information about the identities of agencies and individual respondents. Any Westat employee who violates the confidentiality agreement would be subject to dismissal and to possible civil and criminal penalties. Second, in preparing for the NIS-4 data collection, Westat received a Confidentiality Certificate from the National Institutes of Health in the Department of Health and Human Services. The Certificate of Confidentiality further protects the privacy of NIS-4 participants by even shielding study records that might identify them from having to be submitted to legal proceedings in response to court orders or subpoenas.

**9. What if I’m not sure about a case?**

It may be helpful to review the study guidelines to clarify whether the situation should be included. As mentioned above, if you have doubts about whether or not a case meets the study guidelines, we suggest that you fill in a data form and let us evaluate whether or not it fits the standardized study definitions.

**10. Does providing information to the NIS-4 constitute an official report of suspected child abuse or neglect?**

No. Any data form provided to the study will be used for research only and does not constitute an official report of suspected child abuse or neglect as may be required by State law. Submitting a data form to the NIS-4 will **not** initiate official action to protect the child or assist the family.

Further, participating in the NIS-4 does not relieve you of any professional or legal responsibility you may have to make an official report. The kinds of abusive and neglectful situations that are included in the NIS-4 standardized study definitions do not necessarily correspond to those covered by any specific State child abuse and neglect reporting statute, and the study guidelines **should not** be interpreted as indicating whether an official report is required or appropriate in your State. To learn whether an official report is required, or to make such a report, contact the appropriate supervisory personnel in your agency, the Child Protective Service (CPS) division of the local department of social services, or the local police.
Part C. GUIDELINES

11. What kinds of situations are included in the NIS-4?

In order to be included in the study analyses, situations must fit the following requirements:

**Time of Occurrence:** The study is limited to maltreatment events that occur during your county’s study period (September 4 through December 3, 2005 or February 4 through May 3, 2006).

**Age and Residence of Child:** The study estimates will count only those children who live in (or are homeless in) a study county and who were under 18 years of age at the time of the maltreatment.

**Person(s) responsible for Maltreatment:** The NIS covers child abuse and neglect by family members and acquaintances. If other persons committed the maltreatment, then the child’s caregiver must have knowingly “permitted” that maltreatment to occur. “Permitted” means that the caregiver was present, or had good reason to know of the problem or danger, or should have known of the problem or danger, but made no reasonable attempt to protect the child from the maltreatment.

**Maltreatment:** The NIS counts children who were harmed or endangered by abuse or neglect. The study includes situations where a caregiver’s behavior (either purposive acts, extreme inattention to the child's needs, or failure to protect the child from maltreatment by others) caused (or clearly had a potential to cause) foreseeable and avoidable injury or impairment to the child or a worsening of an existing injury or impairment. Any of the following occurrences during the study period would meet this general definition:

- **Physical abuse** (including excessive corporal punishment);
- **Sexual abuse or exploitation** such as forcible or consensual rape, incest, intercourse, sexual molestation with or without genital contact, exposure to pornography, promoting of prostitution, etc.;
- **Close confinement** such as tying or binding of arms or legs, locking in a closet, or similarly severe confinement;
- **Any other pattern of assaultive, exploitative, or abusive treatment**, such as threatened or attempted physical or sexual assault, threatened abandonment or suicide, habitual or extreme verbal abuse or other overtly hostile, rejecting, or punitive treatment;
- **Abandonment or other refusal to maintain custody**, such as desertion, expulsion from home, refusal to accept custody of a returned runaway, etc.;
- **Permitting or encouraging chronic maladaptive behavior**, such as truancy, delinquency, prostitution, serious drug/alcohol abuse, or the like. "Permitted" means that the caregiver had reason to be aware of the existence and seriousness of the problem (such as by having been informed of previous incidents), but made no reasonable attempt to prevent further occurrences;
- **Refusal to allow needed treatment** for a professionally diagnosed physical, educational, emotional, or behavioral problem, or failure to follow the advice of a competent professional who recommended that the caregiver obtain or
provide the child with such treatment, if the child’s primary caregiver was physically and financially able to do so;

- **Failure to seek or unwarranted delay in seeking competent professional treatment** (medical or psychological) for a serious injury, illness, or impairment, if the need for professional care should have been apparent to a responsible caregiver without special training;

- **Consistent or extreme inattention to the child's physical or emotional needs**, including needs for food, clothing, supervision, safety, affection, and reasonably hygienic living conditions, if the child’s primary caregivers were physically and financially able to provide the needed care; or

- **Failure to register or enroll the child in school**, as required by State law.

**Severity of Harm or Endangerment**: As indicated above, the NIS-4 is particularly concerned with situations where maltreatment acts or omissions during the study period caused or had the potential to cause (or worsen) harm or impairment to the child. When you are aware of any actual injury or harm that resulted (including significant loss of schooling, which is assumed to impair the child's intellectual development), be certain to describe it on the data form. The coders need the details about the harm or injury that results from the maltreatment in order to correctly evaluate whether the case fits the study requirements. Injury or harm may be easiest to identify when there are concrete physical or behavioral results from the abuse or neglect, such as burns; bruises; fractures; symptoms of emotional problems (including unusual withdrawal or aggressiveness, psychosomatic problems, etc.); an illness or physical impairment; delinquency; a behavior problem; and so on. Information about any specific observable symptoms will be useful in helping to establish the severity of the harm to the child. The guidelines given on the data form suggest the following standards for classifying the severity of harm:

- **Fatal**—the abuse or neglect caused (or is suspected to have caused or been a major contributor to) the child's death;

- **Serious Injury/Condition**—injury or impairment serious enough to significantly impair the child's physical, mental, or emotional capacities, or reasonably assumed to require professional treatment to prevent long-term impairment; or

- **Moderate Injury/Condition**—a physical, mental, emotional condition or behavior problem with observable symptoms lasting at least 48 hours.

In addition to information about maltreatment that caused actual harm to a child, the NIS-4 recognizes that some situations are so traumatic that it is very likely that they will have some long-term impact on the child, even if symptoms or harmful effects are not immediately obvious. For these situations, the NIS-4 provides the category:

- **Probable Impairment**—maltreatment that is so extreme or inherently traumatic in nature that significant emotional injury or impairment may reasonably be assumed to have occurred, even though the child may show no obvious physical or behavioral signs of injury.
Situations that might be categorized here include cases where the child has not (yet) shown any obvious effects of sexual abuse, close confinement, or abandonment or other refusal to maintain custody.

Also, the NIS-4 welcomes any information you can provide about abuse or neglect that, while not yet resulting in observable symptoms or injuries, did in your professional judgment: (a) seriously endanger the child's physical, mental or emotional health or well-being, and (b) should be included in a comprehensive national study of child maltreatment. For these situations, you may use the category:

- **Endangered**—child's health or safety was or is seriously endangered, but child does not appear to have been harmed.

Situations you might consider categorizing as *Endangered* are attempted, threatened, or potential physical assault; extreme lack of supervision of an infant or young child; dangerous or unhygienic living conditions due to extreme caregiver inattention (rather than to poverty) or other situations where extreme inattention or purposive acts (actual or threatened) conspicuously endangered a child's health or safety but where there has not (yet) been any evident harm or injury to the child.

Finally, the effects of the abuse or neglect in a situation do not fit into any the above categories because there is no evidence of harm to the child and you do not believe the child was endangered, then you should apply the harm/injury code:

- **None**—There was no evidence of any harm to the child and neither the “probable” code nor the “endangered” code apply.

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12. **Which situations are not encompassed by the NIS?**

Some situations must be excluded from the NIS for technical reasons, because they do not fit the study design guidelines (see above) concerning the child's age or residence or the date of the maltreatment. In addition, the NIS excludes the following:

- Accidents, health conditions or other problems the child's caregivers could not reasonably have been expected to anticipate and prevent or to recognize and effectively treat. For example:
  - A behavior problem that occurred outside the home and had not been brought to the caregiver’s attention or that persisted despite conscientious efforts to modify the child's behavior;
  - An illness or other medical problem that might well escape early detection by a caregiver without medical training;
  - A problem or hazard which the caregiver lacked the financial means to prevent or alleviate and for which appropriate assistance was not available through public agencies.

- Lack of preventive health care, such as inoculations, vaccinations, or routine medical or dental examinations.

- Lack of care resulting from the caregiver’s death, hospitalization, incarceration, or other circumstances where the caregiver could not provide, or arrange for, adequate care;

- **None**—There was no evidence of any harm to the child and neither the “probable” code nor the “endangered” code apply.
13. What if I know of a household with two or more maltreated children?

If you suspect that more than one child in a family has been maltreated during the study period, please fill in a separate data form for each child. Fill in one form completely, and include in Part B the numbers of all other data forms for children in the household. For each additional maltreated child, enter the first child's data form number (given at the top of the first page of the form) in Part B of a new data form and answer Parts A and D. You may leave the other items blank if the information is the same as for the first child, but be sure to make a note about this on the data form. *Keep in mind that the additional child(ren)'s relationship(s) to the significant person(s) may be different, so you may need to complete that item in Part C.* When you are done, please staple or paper clip the forms together for return to Westat.

_The NIS findings depend entirely on the data you provide about the maltreated children you encounter. Please help to ensure that the study accurately estimates the numbers and types of maltreated children in the United States by submitting a data form for each maltreated child you encounter while on the job in your participating agency._

**THANK YOU!**

**WESTAT, 2004**

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