

REPEAT MALTREATMENT IN ALASKA: ASSESSMENT AND EXPLORATION OF ALTERNATIVE MEASURES

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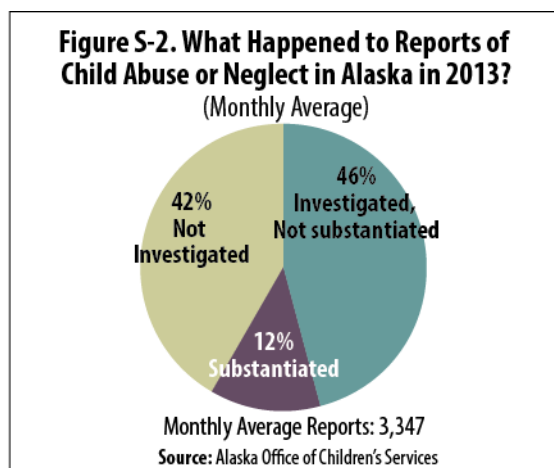
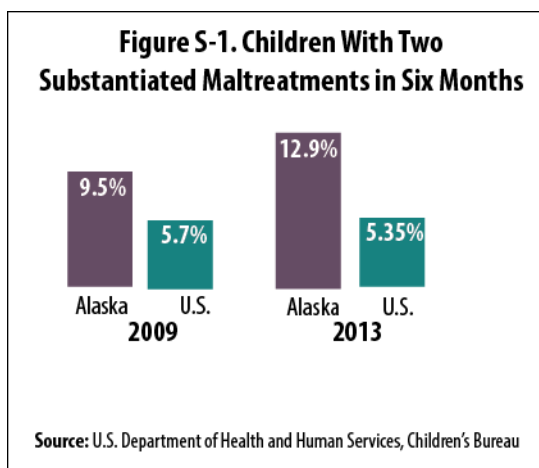
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Executive Summary

Most deaths and serious injuries among children who are abused or neglected are preceded by multiple reported instances of maltreatment. The Office of Children Services (OCS), Alaska’s child protection agency, is very concerned about repeat maltreatment. It’s extremely damaging to children and demoralizing to everyone who tries to help prevent it. Over the last several years, Alaska has consistently had among the highest rates in the country of repeat child maltreatment, as reported by the Children’s Bureau of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Those federal figures measure the percentage of children who were the victims of at least two substantiated reports—that is, confirmed reports—of maltreatment within six months. In 2009, nearly 10% of children who were the subjects of investigation by OCS were reported as suffering repeat maltreatment, compared with less than 6% nationwide. By 2013, the share in Alaska was at nearly 13%, compared with a national rate of less than 5.5% (Figure S-1).

But even those grim federal statistics don’t provide a complete picture of repeat child maltreatment in Alaska. Many analysts believe that not all cases where maltreatment may have occurred are substantiated, and that maltreatment of a child may be reported a number of times, over a longer period, before it is substantiated. Also, for various reasons, many reports of maltreatment are not investigated at all, in Alaska and other states, and only a small share of those that are investigated are substantiated. For example, in Alaska in 2013, 42% of reports in an average month were not investigated, and only 12% of reports were substantiated (Figure S-2).



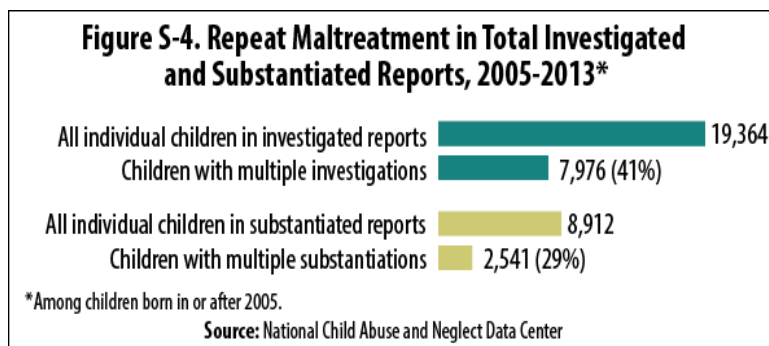
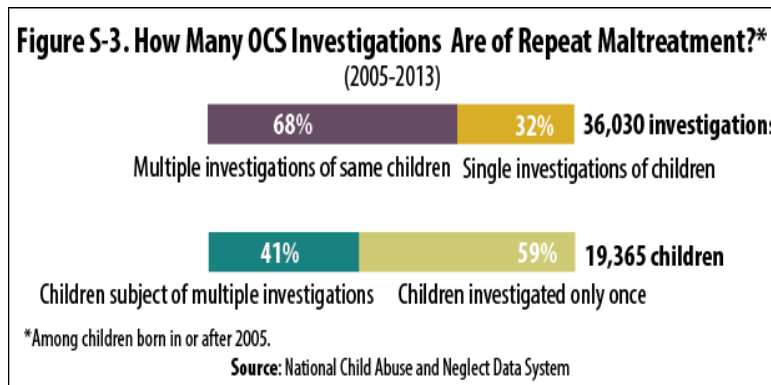
This Report: A Broader Assessment

This report challenges the prevalent definition of repeat maltreatment, assessing it more broadly in Alaska, to provide additional information for policymakers and other Alaskans working to better protect children. We look at repeat maltreatment among Alaska children over the period from 2005 through 2013, examining how the rate of repeat maltreatment differs, when it’s based only on substantiated abuse and when it’s based on all investigated reports, including those not substantiated. In addition we assessed the workload burden on OCS intake and investigating units, as well as chronic maltreatment.

We used case-level data from the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS), a federally-sponsored national data archive to which Alaska and other state report data on investigated and substantiated maltreatment. Data are available only for 2005 through 2013. Since we don't know the number of investigations or substantiations involving children born prior to 2005, we included only those born in or after 2005 and for whom complete data were available.

What Did We Find?

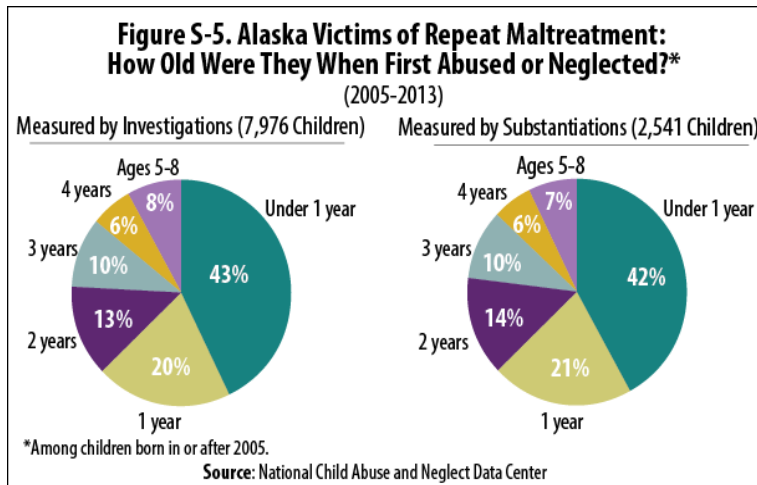
- *The most appropriate period of time to use for assessing repeat maltreatment varies, depending on the purpose of the assessment.* Using a long period—as this study does—is best for showing the prevalence of repeat maltreatment, which often takes place over years. Using a short, fixed period—like 6 or 12 months—can help measure the performance of a child-protection system. Using a short, floating period within a longer period can better identify the most severe cases of repeat maltreatment. That's because research has shown that among children who suffer many instances of abuse, later instances will often happen close together.
- *Children reported more than once as victims of maltreatment account for more than two-thirds of all OCS investigations.* Figure S-3 shows that from 2005 through 2013, OCS investigated 36,030 reports of maltreatment involving 19,364 individual children. About 40% of those children were the subjects of more than one investigation—but they accounted for 68% of the investigations. It's clear that reducing repeat maltreatment would not only better protect children but also could substantially reduce OCS's caseload.



- *Using all OCS investigations as a measure of repeat maltreatment shows a higher rate than using just substantiated investigations.* Figure S-4 shows that more than 40% of children in OCS

investigations during the study period were named in more than one investigation, while in substantiated reports, the share was less than 30%.

- *Maltreatment starts very young among children who are repeatedly abused or neglected, with more than 40% of the victims first abused when they are less than a year old.* That’s true whether we measure repeat maltreatment through total investigations or substantiated investigations. As Figure S-5 shows, the picture is virtually the same under both measures. More than three-quarters of the victims of repeat maltreatment during the study period were abused or neglected by the time they were two years old.



- *Victims of repeat maltreatment in Alaska are about equally likely to be girls or boys, whether measured through total investigations or substantiated cases.*
- *Neglect is by far the most common kind of reported maltreatment, accounting for about 75% of all reports OCS gets—and nearly all the children who were investigated for repeated maltreatment during the study period were reported at least once as having been neglected.*

Conclusion

This study is preliminary and is limited by many factors. Still, it provides a lot of useful information about repeat maltreatment in Alaska, over a period of nearly a decade.

Using total investigations as a basis for measuring repeat maltreatment shows that using only substantiated cases may understate the prevalence of repeat abuse or neglect in Alaska. OCS workers launch an investigation when they have some reason to believe a child has in fact been abuse or neglected—and research elsewhere has shown that there are often repeated reports of maltreatment before it is substantiated.

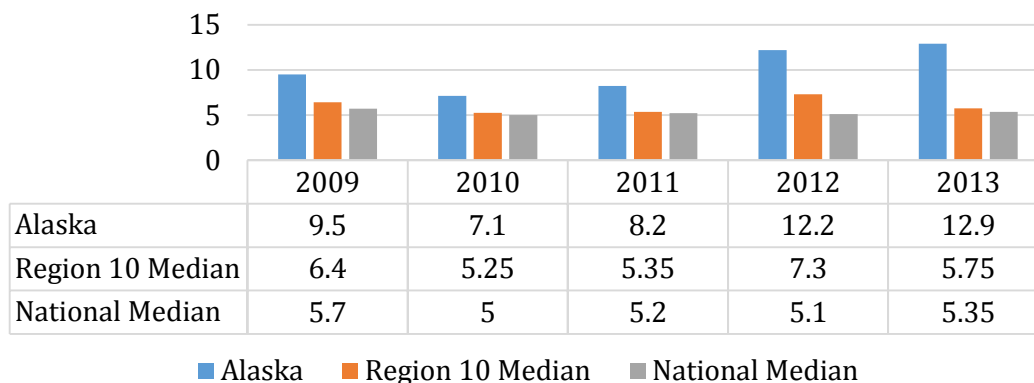
Introduction

While child maltreatment is bad, and society should do everything in its power to prevent it, recurrence of maltreatment is a reminder of our collective failure. Most fatalities and serious injuries to children due to maltreatment are preceded by multiple reported instances of maltreatment. Repeated maltreatment is extremely damaging to the child, is an established indicator of worse conditions, and is very demoralizing to everyone who tried to help prevent it from happening.

A big share of the reports of harm received by Alaska’s Office of Children Services (OCS) are screened out for various reasons; for example, 42% were screened out in 2013. Reports that are screened in are further investigated through an Initial Assessment (IA) process for evidence of harm or risk of harm to the child, either substantiating or not substantiating the initial allegation of maltreatment. A small percentage are substantiated.

Unfortunately, many children are subject to repeated instances of maltreatment, some due to lack of timely intervention, and some others despite intervention. Repeat maltreatment is of high concern in Alaska. Federal Children and Family Services Reviews (CFSR) in 2002 and 2009 found Alaska’s rate of repeat maltreatment among children was higher than the national average, and identified repeat maltreatment as an area needing improvement.¹ Alaska ranked among the top 10 states in percentage of children that suffered repeat maltreatment for each year from 2009 (4th) through 2013 (1st) (The Children’s Bureau, 2015). Through these four years, conditions in Alaska got worse (Figure 1) in comparison with both the national median and the Region 10² median (4 states – Alaska, Idaho, Oregon, and Washington). While the national median improved by 6% over the four years, the situation in Alaska got worse by 36% during the same time period.

Figure 1: Percentage of children that had two substantiations within a 6-month period



¹ CFSR is an extensive review of several components of a state’s child protection system, conducted by the Children’s Bureau. Two rounds of reviews were completed and the third round has just begun. Alaska is scheduled for its third review in 2017. CFSR includes seven different outcome areas, each with multiple indicators. Repeat maltreatment is included as an indicator of safety of children that were victims in a report of harm substantiated by the child protection system.

² Alaska along with Idaho, Washington, and Oregon comprise Region 10. Children’s Bureau administers its services through 10 regions across the country.

As bleak as the numbers above are, we contend that these numbers are limited by the Children's Bureau definition of the indicator, and neither reflect the true extent of repeat maltreatment in Alaska nor provide adequate help in understanding the nature or severity of the challenge. Repeat maltreatment is a complex phenomenon that may result from ineffective or inadequate services (Inkelas & Halfon, 1997), as much as from several complex inter-related social, economic, and institutional factors at an individual, family, and community level (Helie & Bouchard, 2010). Growing research on repeat maltreatment signifies the complexity and importance of the phenomenon.

We find that the current measure of repeat maltreatment as defined for the federal CFSR, while useful to assess the performance of Child Protective Services (CPS) systems, is limited and does not facilitate meaningful policy and practice in addressing repeat maltreatment. We present alternative measures by varying two key elements in the CFSR definition. Before an effective mitigation strategy can be designed, it is important to assess the prevalence of repeat maltreatment and understand its underlying causes. Each of these can be extensive endeavors. We present a preliminary assessment of the prevalence of repeat maltreatment in Alaska.

Definition of repeat maltreatment: some challenges

Repeat maltreatment is also referred to as maltreatment recurrence, chronic maltreatment, and maltreatment recidivism. It is a simple idea – repeated instances of maltreatment – but can be defined and calculated in various ways (Fluke, Yuan, & Edwards, 1999). There has been increased focus on repeat maltreatment in the U.S. since the 1994 amendments to the Social Security Act, requiring the Children's Bureau (part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services) to conduct Children and Family Services Reviews (CFSR) of state CPS systems. Repeat maltreatment is one of the measures included in those reviews. Additionally, in 1997, the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA, PL 105-89) identified repeat maltreatment as one of the primary indicators of child safety.

Repeat maltreatment is usually measured by what is known to CPS, and may refer to any of a broad range of events (Fluke, Yuan, & Edwards, 1999). It has been defined as “any subsequent report of maltreatment; any subsequent founded or verified report of maltreatment; any subsequent maltreatment of the same child, or another child within the family, or by the same perpetrator; or even recurrence of maltreatment without a prior report; and, of course, recurrence may be a combination of these definitions.” (p. 634). Any definition of repeat maltreatment has two elements:

- An indicator of maltreatment, and
- A time period within which that indicator occurs at least twice.

More recent definitions of repeat maltreatment use substantiation of maltreatment as the indicator, and define it as “a substantiated report following a prior substantiated report involving the same family or child, within a set time period” (Fluke & Hollinshead, 2003). CFSRs have used a slightly restricted version of this definition. The first two rounds of CFSRs measured repeat maltreatment as two substantiated instances of maltreatment within a period of six months. The item included under Safety Outcome 1 of the CFSR Round 2 review is:

Of all children who were victims of a substantiated or indicated maltreatment allegation during the first 6 months of [the reporting period], what percent were not victims of another

substantiated or indicated maltreatment allegation within the 6-months following that maltreatment incident? (Children's Bureau, 2007)

It was calculated from a sample of cases. This definition was modified in CFSR Round 3 to expand the time period between subsequent substantiations from 6 months to 12 months. Specifically:

Of all children who were victims of a substantiated or indicated report of maltreatment during a 12-month reporting period, what percent were victims of another substantiated or indicated maltreatment allegation within 12 months of their initial report? (United States Federal Register, 2014)

Unlike in the past two rounds, repeat maltreatment for Round 3 will be calculated using data already archived at the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS). It is the ratio of the number of children who had a second substantiated or indicated report of maltreatment within 12 months of the initial report to the total children that suffered at least one such instance. The date of the initial substantiated report is used in determining the 12-month period for each child. Subsequent reports of maltreatment within 14 days of the initial report or reports that the state agency identifies as referring to the same incident reported in the initial report will not be counted. Children 18 years or older are not included in this calculation.

The above two definitions differ in two significant ways:

- The time period between subsequent substantiated reports of maltreatment is expanded from 6 months to 12.
- The indicator in Round 3 is calculated from 100% of data submitted to NCANDS, instead of from a sample of cases, as was done during previous rounds.

Both definitions have some common limitations:

- Substantiation of maltreatment is the defining indicator.
 - While substantiation is clear evidence of child maltreatment, the decision to substantiate also depends on several other factors such as workload, screening criteria, risk assessment criteria, and availability of evidence (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2003). A reported instance of maltreatment may not be investigated or substantiated for many reasons beyond the facts of the case. Repeated reports of maltreatment are approximately three times more common than repeated substantiations (Connell, Bergerson, Katz, Saunders, & Tebes, 2007), partially indicating the limitations of child protection systems in responding to reports. Some analysts believe that reports to CPS, and the frequency of such reports on unique children and families, may be better decision points for understanding repeat maltreatment (English, Marshall, Brummel, & Orme, 1999).
 - This also means that only those children with a substantiated report are considered. If no prior or later report of harm was substantiated, some children that may have suffered repeat maltreatment will not even be counted in this measure.
- The time period within which the second substantiation occurs is limited. While 6 months or 12 months is meaningful in the context of CPS performance, repeat victimization happens

over years. Such short periods of measurements do not capture the true impact of repeat maltreatment.

- Only two instances of substantiation are included. Many of the victims of repeat maltreatment suffer more than two instances of maltreatment in their life time. Counting only two instances ignores this chronic maltreatment and offers no opportunity to devise any intervention.

These limitations may be necessary to fit this measure into the larger context of a CFSR³ focused on reviewing CPS performance. Beyond institutional performance, repeat maltreatment is a strong indicator of the severity of suffering that may lead to avoidable death or severe injury (Putnam-Hornstein, 2011). Limited capacity of CPS systems often mean that only the most egregious situations of child maltreatment get the deserved attention. Many reports of harm any CPS system receives are not investigated, and only a small percentage of those that are investigated are substantiated. Screening and substantiation decisions depend on available evidence and many other factors beyond the facts of the case. This means there is always a possibility that maltreatment may have occurred, even if a report wasn't investigated or substantiated. Therefore, computing repeat maltreatment rates based on reports of harm received, or those investigated, is not only likely to capture higher rates of repeat maltreatment than using just substantiated reports, but also may be closer to the true rates in the general population.

As an illustration, data reported by OCS as of September 2014 shows that of the 1,806 investigations (referred to as Initial Assessments – IAs) that were underway at that time, children identified in just 35% were new to the system. The remaining 1,108 (65%) concerned children who had been reported as potential victims of maltreatment at least once between 2006 and September 2014. More than 100 of these IAs involved children who had been the subject of 10 or more prior reports, and one involved 19 prior reports (Erickson, 2014). These numbers are much higher than those reported in either of the two federal CFSRs that only considered substantiated reports. Prior reports counted by OCS include those that were investigated and those that were not.

In this paper, we examined rates of repeat maltreatment by varying the indicator of maltreatment and the period of review. We examined repeat maltreatment rates using both investigated reports and substantiated reports over a period of nine years. We did not have access to data on reports of harm that were screened out (not investigated). Using a longer period of time covering the life of a case provides a clear assessment of repeat maltreatment suffered by children over that period. We then isolated just those children that suffered at least two instances of maltreatment (investigations or substantiations) to examine the proportions of children with different numbers of instances of maltreatment. Further, we used 6-month and 12-month floating windows of time within the nine-year period to capture chronic repeat maltreatment.

Data

Data for this study were compiled from the annual Child File datasets of the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS), a federally-sponsored national data archive of all child abuse and

³ The original measure proposed for Round 3 CFSR by the Children's Bureau for repeat maltreatment used screened-in reports instead of substantiated reports. Several reviewers, especially state child welfare agencies, expressed concerns over this definition. For a discussion of these limitations, see the Final Notice of Statewide Data Indicators and National Standards for Child and Family Services Reviews (2014).

neglect case-level data. NCANDS was created to track the volume and nature of reports of child maltreatment in the country. Alaska and all other states contribute data on all investigated reports annually, and all data is archived to allow comparability across states and over time. The Child File dataset series consists of all “investigations or assessments of alleged child maltreatment that received a disposition in the reporting year” (National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect, 2015). Reporting year for NCANDS purposes is the federal fiscal year, which starts October 1 and ends September 30 of the following year.

Table 1: Data elimination criteria used in this study

Elimination criteria	Dataset 1: Investigations (unique Children)	Dataset 2: Substantiations (unique children)
Total before elimination <i>Number of reports and unique children included in the database for the years 2005-2013 before eliminating any cases.</i>	91,375 (49,286)	31,924 (22,152)
Children born in or after 2005, with complete information <i>Since there may be unknown number of investigations/substantiations on children born prior to 2005, we retained only those children born in or after 2005. There were many reports where the age of the child was reported as “missing”, “unknown”, or “unborn”. Definitions of these codes were not always available or consistent. We retained only those children with clear age mentioned in all reports.</i>	36,030 (19,365)	12,818 (8,912)
Children with two or more investigations/substantiations <i>Since this report explores repeated instances, we retained only those children with 2 or more reports of harm.</i>	24,642 (7,976)	6,447 (2,541)

Each record in the dataset includes a report ID, child ID, and several demographic details about the child, types of maltreatment alleged, disposition on each allegation, details of the perpetrators, risk factors, and services provided. Since more than one child can be reported as maltreated as part of the same report, there can be multiple children with the same report ID. Similarly, since each child can be reported as maltreated multiple times, there can be more than one report ID associated with each child. The combination of report ID and child ID are unique for each record in the database.

We compiled all available Alaska data from the NCANDS data archive. The earliest data was from 2005, and the latest from 2013. Since we do not know the number of investigations or substantiations conducted prior to 2005 involving children born before 2005, we considered only those born in or

after 2005. We constructed two datasets. Table 1 shows the steps in defining the final datasets. Dataset 1 included all investigated reports on children born in or after 2005 and were subjects of at least two investigations between 2005 and 2013. Dataset 2 included all substantiated reports of children born in or after 2005 who were subjects of least two substantiated investigations between 2005 and 2013.

OCS investigated 91,375 reports from 2005 through 2013, involving 49,286 individual children. Of these, 31,924 reports involving 22,154 individual children were substantiated. After eliminating all reports on children born prior to 2005 and reports with missing or unclear information on birth dates, we identified 36,030 investigated reports involving 19,365 individual children, resulting in 12,818 substantiations involving 8,912 individual children. Of these 19,365 children, 11,389 were investigated only once. Investigated reports on the remaining 7,976 children, including the first investigated report, comprised 24,642 reports – Dataset 1. Similarly, of the 8,912 children, 6,371 were victims in only one substantiated report. Substantiated reports on the remaining 2,541 children, including the first substantiated report, comprised 6,447 reports – Dataset 2.

Findings

Findings are organized by the variations in measurement we examined. We first present the differences in rates of repeat maltreatment we found, using investigations (IAs) and substantiations over the nine-year period. We then examine the impacts of varying time periods on the changes in proportions of children with one, two, three, four, or five or more investigations and substantiations. Finally, we present the demographics of children that suffered repeat maltreatment during this nine year period.

Varying the indicator

During the study period, OCS investigated 36,030 reports of maltreatment of children born in or after 2005, involving 19,364 potential victims of maltreatment. Of these investigations, 12,818 were substantiated—a ratio of 1 in 3. That is, OCS investigators found enough evidence of risk or harm in every third investigation. However, 11,389 (58.9%) of the 19,365 children were only investigated once. That is, considering IAs as the indicator of repeat maltreatment, about 4 in 10 children (a total of 7,976 children) suffered repeated maltreatment, with approximately three investigations per child within the nine-year study period. These children were subjects of 24,642 investigated reports, a staggering 68% of the total 36,030 reports investigated by OCS during that period. That is, 40% of the children investigated by OCS were subjects in 68% of the investigations.

Of the 12,818 substantiated reports involving 8,912 children born in or after 2005, 6,371 (50%) children were substantiated as victims only once. That is, considering substantiation as the indicator of repeat maltreatment, about 3 in 10 children (a total of 2,541 children) suffered repeated maltreatment with approximately 2.5 substantiations per child within the nine-year period. These children were subjects of 6,447 substantiated reports, 50% of 12,818 reports substantiated by OCS. That is, 30% of the children substantiated were subjects in 50% of the substantiated reports. Circumstances of these children were evidently most challenging, and they were determined to have suffered multiple instances of maltreatment.

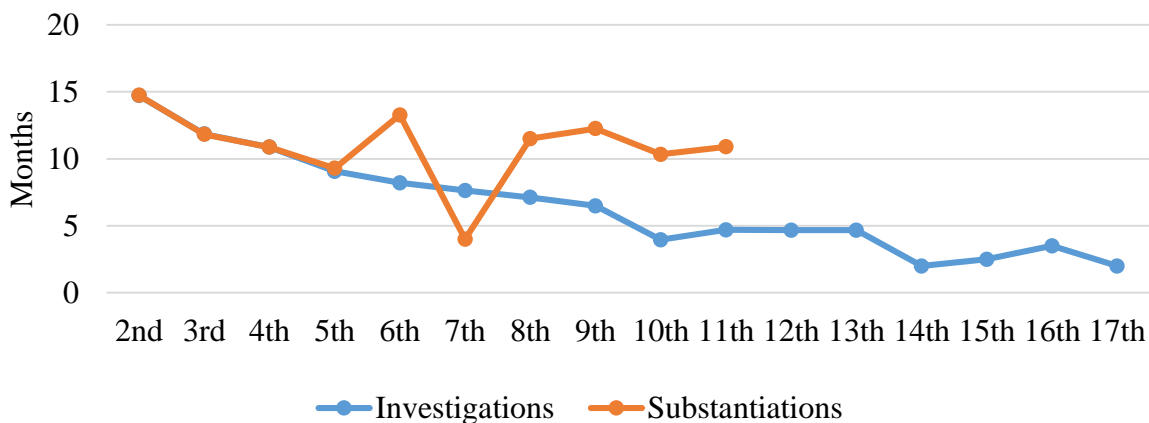
Varying time periods

It is important to note here that all children included in this analysis were identified as potential victims in at least two investigations over the nine years.

The rate of repeat maltreatment, by definition, depends on how we define the time period within which subsequent instances of maltreatment are identified. The time between subsequent investigations or substantiations varies as the number of such instances increase. Generally, the time between subsequent investigations involving the same child decreases as the total number of investigations increase. Among the 7,976 children (Dataset 1), average time between the 1st and 2nd investigation was 15 months (Figure 2). The third investigation was 12 months after the second. Each subsequent investigation was sooner than the prior one. Subsequent substantiations follow a similar pattern until the fifth substantiation. The time between subsequent substantiations of fifth through eighth investigations was inconsistent. The time between subsequent substantiations from the 8th through 11th substantiations was at least 10 months. Occurrence of subsequent instances of maltreatment relative to the time period used to measure rates of repeat maltreatment has an impact on the rates. We defined the time period in three different ways and examined variation in proportions of children with multiple instances of repeat maltreatment using both investigations and substantiations.

Federal CFSR reviews establish a period of review and consider all cases with at least one substantiation within that period. CFSR review periods begin either on April 1 or October 1. They vary by indicator and can be 6 or 12 months. Repeat maltreatment review period is 12 months, meaning the first instance of substantiation in a case that occurred within the review period of 12 months will be considered the index instance, and the subsequent instance must have occurred within 12 months of the index instance for the child to be identified as repeatedly maltreated. Thus, the time period to identify second substantiation is pegged to this period of review. The period of review is determined based on various factors that do not have any theoretical connection to the phenomenon of repeat maltreatment. Given the variation in time between subsequent substantiations as shown in Figure 2, if a child was identified as a victim for the first time in the child's

Figure 2: Average number of months between subsequent reports or substantiations ($n = 7,976$, 2005-2013)



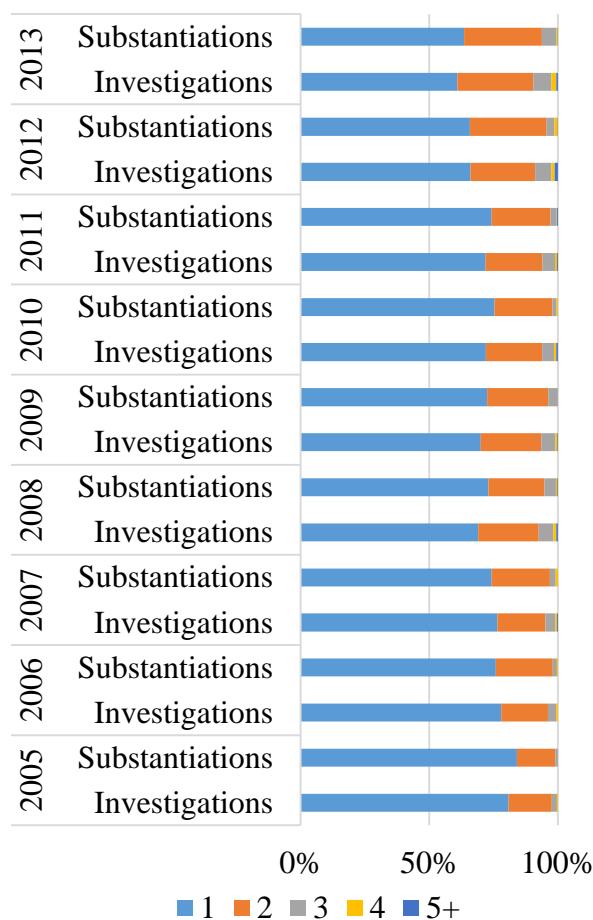
life and that instance happened during the CFSR period of review, the child is unlikely to be a victim of repeat maltreatment for the purposes of the review. In contrast, if the child was identified as a victim for the fourth time during the life of the child and that instance happened during the CFSR period of review, the child is likely to be identified as a victim of repeat maltreatment.

If investigations are considered as the measurement indicator, children experiencing their 2nd or subsequent instance are more likely to be identified as repeatedly maltreated than a child experiencing the first instance of maltreatment during the CFSR period of review.

As an illustration, we used calendar years beginning January 1 of each year. Since this sample of children were all victims (in substantiations) or potential victims (in investigations), of repeat maltreatment, we considered a 6 month review period instead of a 12 month review period.⁴ Figure 3 shows the percentage of children by number of instances of investigations or substantiations within each calendar year. Each child may have just one investigation/substantiation in a calendar year with subsequent or prior investigation/substantiation in a previous calendar year. Thus, even within a sample of children known to have been victims of repeat maltreatment, the percentage of children with two or more instances (investigations or substantiations) made up only 20% in 2005 and approximately 40% in 2013. The percentage increased during the later years because this dataset only includes children born in or after 2005. There are simply more children in later years, and thus more chronically maltreated children in those years.

Thus, if a child was identified as potential victim in June 2006 for the first time in the child’s life, and the second investigation occurred more than 6 months later, this child would not be identified as repeatedly maltreated. But since CFSR review is focused on safety of children with prior substantiated reports, this fixed time

Figure 3: Percentage of children with one to five or more investigations or substantiations within each calendar year (2005-2013)



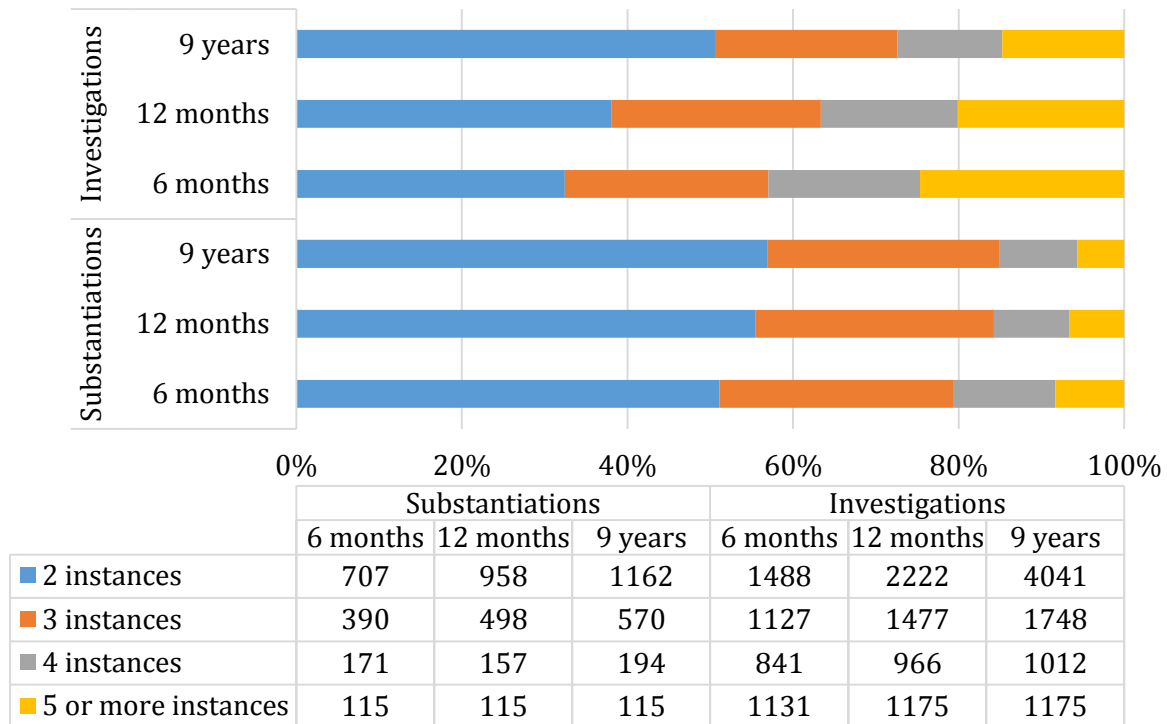
⁴ Since all children in this sample are victims of repeat maltreatment in their lifetime, a 12 month review period would have been more stringent and yielded a higher proportion of children with more than one instance of repeat maltreatment compared to a six month review period. Data presented in Figure 3 serves the purpose of illustrating our point about the limitations of CFSR measure.

period pegged to a calendar date is useful for that purpose. However, limiting the time period and pegging it to a calendar year ignores the potential of the child suffering repeated maltreatment over the life of the child, and does not differentiate children suffering two instances of maltreatment from children suffering chronic maltreatment (three or more instances).

To overcome these limitations of the CFSR measure, we varied the time period for measurement in two ways. First, we used a nine-year time period (the maximum length of the case that the data allowed) and a floating 6- or 12-month period within a longer review period (nine years). We counted the number of children that were subjects of two, three, four, and five or more investigations or substantiations within the nine years, within any 6 month period, and within any 12 month period. Both 6-month and 12-month periods were allowed to float within the longer nine-year period.

Figure 4 shows a comparison of proportion of children with multiple instances of maltreatment between the three time periods for both investigations and substantiations. Total number of instances captured by each time period are different. Approximately half (80.66%, 4,041 of the 7,976) the children had two investigations in the nine years. This percentage decreased to 38.05% (2,222 of 5,840), if we consider children that had two reports in any 12-month period within the nine years, and 32.44% (1,488 of 4,587) if we consider any 6-month period. This pattern is also true for substantiation decisions, but to a lesser degree. In the nine years, 65.41% had two substantiations. This share decreased to 54.49% for any 12-month period, and 51.12% for any 6-month period.

Figure 4: Percentage of children by number of reports or substantiations within a floating 6-month period, floating 12-month period, and within the 9-year period from 2005 to 2013.



What does this mean? All children in this sample have at least two instances of investigations (top half of the graph) or substantiations (bottom half of the graph). The blue portion of the bars show children with just two instances. In the nine years, approximately 50% of the children identified as potential victims of maltreatment had three or more investigations. In comparison, floating windows captured higher proportions of children that had two, three, four, and five or more investigations within the period of the window. Since the time between subsequent instances decreases as the number of instances increase, a shorter floating window is likely to capture a higher proportion of children at the later instances of investigations than at the earlier instances. Therefore, from the top half of Figure 4, 77.66% of potential victims of repeat maltreatment suffered chronic maltreatment (three or more investigations). The same number if we consider substantiations is 48.88%.

Floating time periods are useful in identifying those children who suffered chronic maltreatment and help differentiate them from children who suffered two instances of maltreatment. In addition, since floating periods are not pegged to a calendar date, and are allowed to float within the life time of a child, they provide a truer picture of chronic maltreatment.

Demographics of repeatedly maltreated children

We present data on age, gender, and maltreatment type as meaningful variables to understand this sample. Data limitations did not allow exploration of race and geographic region. We also did not explore many other variables, such as family characteristics, perpetrator characteristics, and contextual factors, because of time and resource constraints.

We explored two primary questions:

- At what age was a child first identified as a potential victim (investigations) or a victim (substantiation) of maltreatment?
- How many times during each year of a child's age was the child identified as a potential victim (investigations) or a victim (substantiation) of maltreatment?

It is important to note here that numbers presented in figures 2 through 5 represent unique children within each age cohort but are not unique across age cohorts.

Among all 7,976 children in Dataset 1, approximately 43% (3,424) were identified as potential victims in an investigation for the first time before they were one year old, and another 20% (1,606) when they were one year old. More than 92% of the children were identified as potential victims in an investigation for the first time before they were five years old. These numbers are shown in the blue bars in Figure 5. They may have been involved in more than one investigation during the same year. For example, the second bar in Figure 5 shows a total of 3,049 children identified as potential victims at least once when they were 1 year old. Approximately 53% (1,606) of these were identified as potential victims for the first time. The remaining 47% (1,443) were already identified at least once before they were one year old. In other words, there was a 50% chance that a one-year-old had been investigated at least once before, and a 94% chance of a prior investigation for an eight-year-old.

Figure 5: Number of children that were subjects of first investigation vs. subsequent investigations in each single year age cohort during the years 2005 to 2013 (n= 7,976)

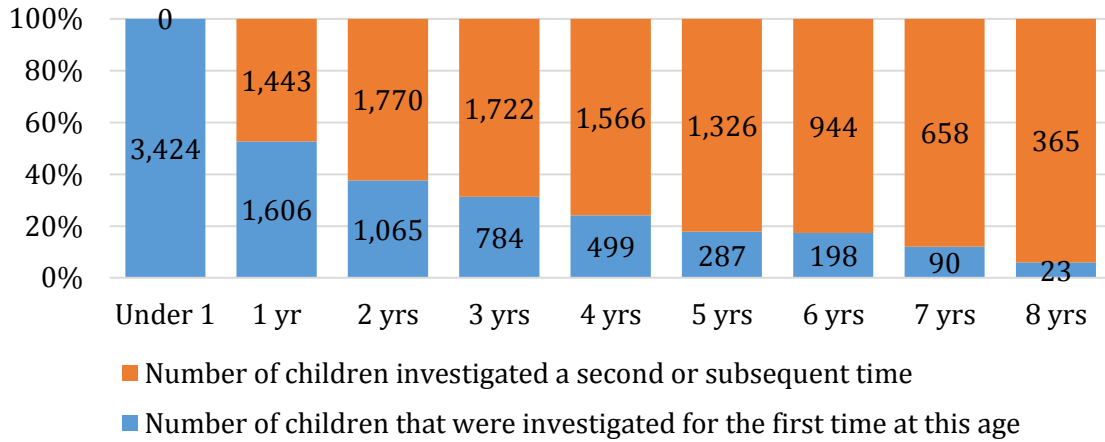


Figure 6: Number of children with one to five or more investigations by age at the time of their report

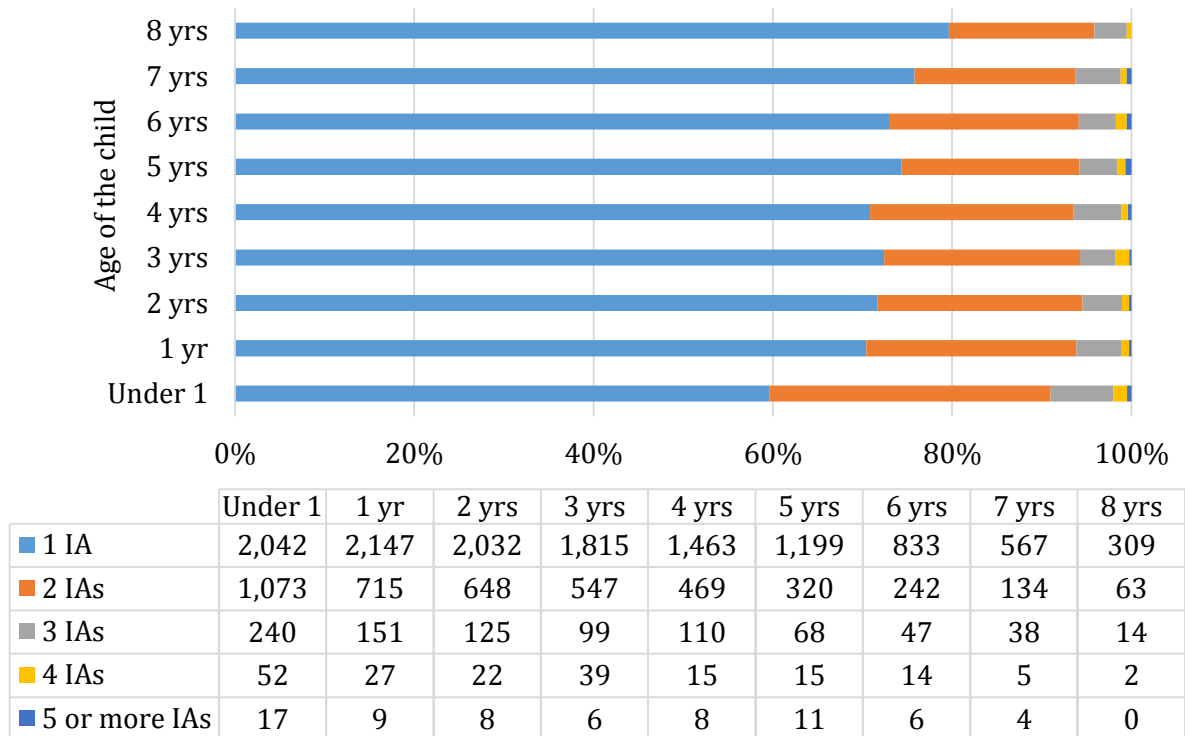


Figure 7. Number of children that were subjects of first vs. subsequent substantiations in each single year age cohort during the years 2005 to 2013 (n= 2,541)

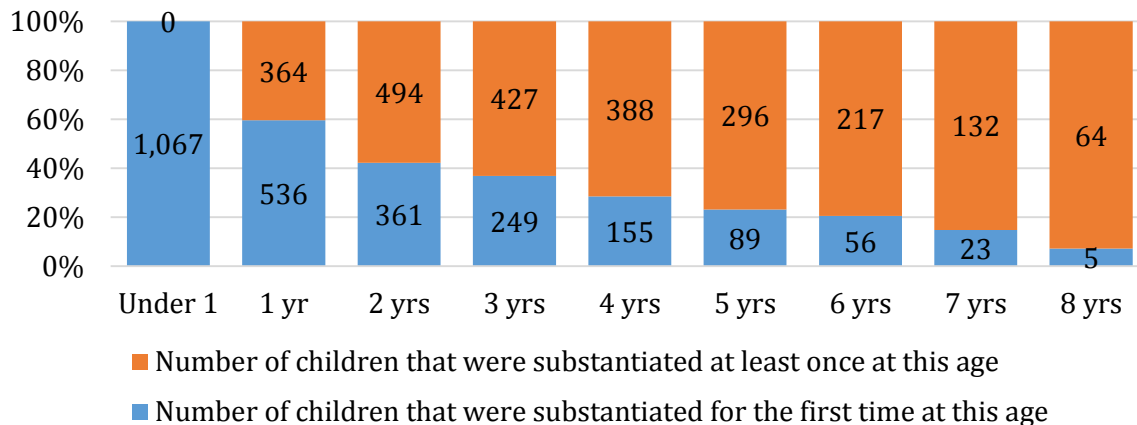
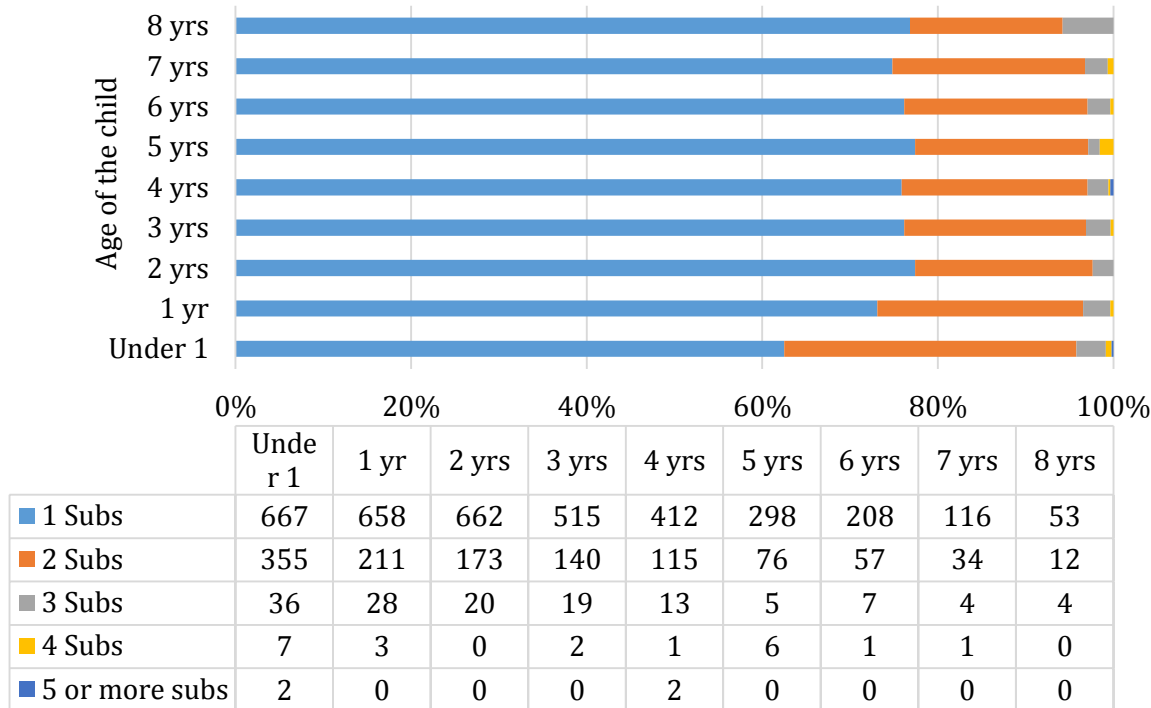


Figure 8: Number of children with one to five or more substantiations by age at the time of their report



The table in the bottom half of Figure 6 shows a breakdown of the same numbers of children in each age cohort by number of investigations when the child was that age. During the nine years, 2,042 children were investigated once when they were younger than a year, 1,073 were investigated twice when they were younger than a year, and so on. Therefore, about 40% of the children that were involved in an investigation before they were one year old had two or more investigations. This percentage decreases with the age of the child. Approximately 20% among the eight-year olds had been investigated twice before.

Data on substantiations follow similar trends. Among all 2,541 children in Dataset 2, approximately 42% (1,067) were identified as victims for the first time when they were younger than a year. Another 21% when they were one year old. More than 93% of the children were identified as victims for the first time before they were five years old. These numbers are shown in the blue bars in Figure 7. Each child may have been identified as a victim in more than one substantiation during the same year. For example, the second bar shows that a total of 900 children were identified as victims at least once when they were 1 year old. Approximately 60% (536) of these were victims in substantiations for the first time. The remaining 40% (364) were already identified as victims at least once before they were one year old. In other words, there was a 60% chance that a one-year-old had been substantiated at least once before, and a 93% chance of a prior substantiation for an eight-year-old.

During the nine years, 667 (Figure 8) children were identified as victims once when they were younger than a year, 355 were identified twice when they were younger than a year, and so on. Therefore, about 38% of the children that were identified as victims twice or more before they were one year old. This percentage decreases with the age of the child until the 2nd year age cohort and stayed constant at approximately 23% for all other age cohorts.

Boys and girls are equally represented among children with repeated investigations and repeated substantiations. Neglect is the most commonly alleged form of child maltreatment by a large margin. Approximately 76% of all reports included neglect allegations. And 94% (7,492) of the children that had at least two investigations during the period from 2005-2013 were reported to have been neglected by their caregivers at least once in that period.

Discussion

Maltreatment of children is bad and is preventable. Repeated maltreatment is a reminder of our collective failure in preventing further instances of maltreatment.

We examined data on all investigations conducted during nine years from 2005 to 2013 involving children born in or after 2005 and before 2014. A majority of the children reported to OCS were potential victims in investigations or victims in substantiations only once in their lives. But these investigations comprise a minority of all investigations. Children who were repeatedly (at least twice) identified as victims appear in a majority of the reports investigated or substantiated by OCS. Victims of repeated maltreatment represent the bulk of the OCS work burden, in the intake and IA units. Similar to the results established using all children referred to OCS (Vadapalli & Hanna, 2013), younger children were found to be most vulnerable to repeated maltreatment. A vast majority of the victims of repeat maltreatment suffered their earliest instances of maltreatment before they were four years of age. A small proportion of these victims suffered chronic maltreatment (three or more

instances). Boys and girls are equally likely to suffer repeat maltreatment, and neglect is the most common form of maltreatment reported among this population.

Current measure of repeat maltreatment, as defined for the purposes of federal CFSR, is designed to assess system performance. It considers safety of children that were identified as victims (substantiated) at least once during the review period. This measure neither adequately captures the suffering endured by victims of repeated maltreatment over their life time nor the work burden of OCS. Results presented here demonstrate the need for a more tailored definition of the measure to inform the policy and practice in serving repeatedly maltreated children. From the results above, three broad conclusions can be drawn:

1. Computing repeat maltreatment using 'investigations' allows for a more realistic assessment. Using PSRs would be ideal.

Many reports of harm (recorded as PSRs) are screened out for various reasons, and only a small percentage of those that are investigated are substantiated or receive services. OCS spends considerable resources screening and investigating many more cases than are substantiated. Reasons for screening out a report of harm or not substantiating an investigated report include many factors beyond the facts of the case. Thus, using repeat substantiations as a measure of repeat maltreatment ignores many instances of maltreatment that were considered serious enough to be reported or investigated. When considering substantiations, 3 out of every 10 children reported to OCS were substantiated victims more than once between 2005 and 2013. In comparison, when considering investigations, 4 out of every 10 children reported to OCS were repeatedly maltreated in the state during the nine years. This rate is likely much higher if we consider reports of harm.

2. Workload burden on OCS due to repeat maltreatment is staggering.

Using investigations as a base, 40% of the children investigated were alleged victims in 70% of the investigations. Similarly, 30% of the children substantiated to have been maltreated during the 9-year study period were victims in 50% of the substantiations. This workload burden is not captured in a measure of repeat maltreatment. These workload numbers of intake and IA units are of high concern, especially when combined with the high turnover rates of workers in the frontline positions. Given the high turnover rates of frontline workers at OCS, children suffering chronic maltreatment can suffer if workers change frequently on any case. Such change in personnel does not allow developing meaningful relationships with the child or the family.

3. The purpose of measuring repeat maltreatment should dictate the definition of the measure.

While CFSR definition seems appropriate for assessing CPS performance, it is inadequate to assess the magnitude of repeat maltreatment among children, and fails to differentiate between victims of two instances and those that suffer chronic maltreatment.

- a. Shorter time periods pegged to a calendar are useful in assessing CPS' performance. We found that the number of children with at least two investigations or substantiations within a calendar year are dramatically lower, even among all the children with at least two such instances over the nine year period. This is a clear illustration of the underestimation of repeat maltreatment if it is calculated using a fixed time period pegged to a calendar.

- b. Expanding the time period to 9 years to include all investigations or substantiations for each child, we found that the rates of repeat maltreatment are much higher. Shorter periods fixed to a calendar date to measure repeat maltreatment do not provide a complete picture of the severity of repeat maltreatment. In particular, since the time between earlier investigations or substantiations is likely to be longer than 6 or 12 months, restricted time periods do not capture the history of any particular case.
- c. A floating time period of 6 or 12 months within the life of a child could be used to assess chronic maltreatment. Therefore floating time periods are useful to more accurately capture repeat maltreatment among children with more instances of either investigations or substantiations—that is, cases of chronic maltreatment. However, their utility is low in the earlier phases of a case, when investigations or substantiations are further apart.

Thus, consideration of longer periods vs. shorter periods or fixed period vs. floating periods depends on the purpose of calculating repeat maltreatment. Longer periods capture the severity of maltreatment endured by children when it is repeated. Fixed shorter time periods are more useful in assessing the services provided by the CPS system. Shorter floating time periods capture chronic maltreatment most evident in the later phases of cases with three or more repeated instances. An accurate assessment of repeat maltreatment should consider all the ways of assessing it, whether based on investigations or substantiations.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

This study is limited by several factors.

OCS changed its documentation requirements for screening decisions in 2008 and organizational structure of intake (screening units) in 2011. These changes increased the rate of screened-in reports over a four-year period between 2008 and 2012. This trend may have impacted the repeat maltreatment rate as calculated using investigations.

The data is limited to case records between 2005 and 2013. Release of data through NCANDS is two years behind the calendar year due to extensive processing and cleaning involved to standardize data across states. Data from 2014 is not yet available from NCANDS. In addition, we suspect that data from initial years are likely to be incomplete, as Alaska's new data system was still in its initial stages of implementation. Further, changes to OCS' intake policy in 2008 and 2011 may have affected the number of cases screened-in for investigation.

This sample of cases is limited to those children that were identified as victims in substantiated reports. OCS procedures allow protective actions such as removal of children or provision of services to a child and/or family irrespective of the substantiation decision. Protective actions are in response to the identified risk of harm or actual harm to the child. Substantiation is one of three decisions that results from an investigation of a report of harm. While they highly correlate, they may not always co-occur. From the available data, we do not know if a child with a substantiated report of harm was in custody at any point. Thus this study is not addressing repeat maltreatment specifically among children in state custody, nor is it addressing repeat maltreatment specifically among children not in state custody.

We did not report on child's race due to inconsistencies in the data. For example, reported race for a significant number (around 1,400 of the 7,976) unique children varied across subsequent reports involving the same child. The race of one child with six different IAs was reported as Alaska Native in 2, Asian in 2, White in 1, and Undetermined in 1. Since all children are assigned a new Report ID for each report of child maltreatment the CPS office receives, the child's race is recorded at the time of each new report, with no reference to earlier reports.

This work can be extended in multiple ways to benefit policy and practice in Alaska:

- Figure 2 calculated a crude average number of months between subsequent investigations and substantiations. While this informative, more useful would be information on the probability of a subsequent investigation or substantiation, and the likelihood of such an instance at different points in time during the life of a child. Both probability and likelihood are influenced by many family, community, social, and cultural factors. This information would allow design of meaningful interventions to curb repeat maltreatment.
- Given the workload burden repeat maltreatment represents, it is important we understand the factors leading repeated reports and investigations, and their impact on the probability of a subsequent instance and the likelihood of it happening at any particular age of the child. It would be most beneficial to compute these using data on protective service reports (PSR). As cursory data from OCS indicated, many cases have multiple reports of harm before they are screened in for investigation. NCANDS data does not include data on PSRs. OCS is the only source for individual case level PSR data.
- The interplay between high turnover of frontline workers and high rates of repeat maltreatment is an area to be explored and understood. It will be instructive to know if frequent changes in social workers serving a child or family leads to repeated investigations among children in care.
- We did not explore variations in repeat maltreatment in relation to various important factors like alcohol or substance abuse, mental illness, child characteristics, perpetrator characteristics, type of maltreatment, presence of domestic violence, etc. All these variables are known correlates of maltreatment, and likely have a pronounced impact on repeat maltreatment.
- It will be useful to identify factors that define children and families that suffer repeat maltreatment as opposed to those that don't. This information will be useful for frontline workers to assist them in providing appropriate services.
- Following a single cohort over multiple years would provide a deeper understanding of the family, community, and other contextual factors affecting repeat maltreatment.
- Using the floating window we identified in this paper, examining the conditions of children that suffered chronic maltreatment could enhance our understanding of its causal factors, thus leading to effective policy and practice to prevent it.
- This paper provided a basic assessment of repeat maltreatment. OCS is currently implementing multiple policy and practice initiatives to address it. Periodic assessment using the modified measures suggested in this paper, even if preliminary, would provide a meaningful evaluation of the current initiatives.

Conclusion

Alaska's children suffer most from repeat maltreatment. Therefore, assessing and understanding repeat maltreatment in the state is important. Existing measures of repeat maltreatment used by the federal Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSR) aren't adequate to provide a clear and true picture of the extent of repeat maltreatment.

Using initial assessment as the indicator, and counting all instances of initial assessments for each child, we find that 4 of 10 children born in or after 2005 and investigated as potential victims of maltreatment in Alaska were repeatedly maltreated in the period between 2005 and 2013.

Using just substantiations of maltreatment as the primary indicator of repeat maltreatment significantly underestimates its prevalence. Since a decision to investigate a report indicates that maltreatment may have occurred, and since a decision to substantiate maltreatment doesn't entirely depend on the actual occurrence or risk of occurrence of maltreatment, initial assessment is likely a better indicator of repeat maltreatment. Extending the same logic, one might even argue that reports of harm are reason enough to believe that maltreatment may have occurred.

While fixed, shorter time periods are sufficient for the purposes of federal CFSRs, taking into account all investigations, beginning with the first for any given child, would provide a more realistic assessment of the incidence of repeat maltreatment. Fixed shorter periods are useful for the purpose of assessing the service quality, and floating time periods are useful in assessing chronic maltreatment (three or more repeated instances).

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