

Listening to Mandated Reporters:

Using online focus groups to understand and improve
child neglect reporting in New Jersey

October 7, 2024

June Simon & Tim Ross

Action Research

www.actionresearch.io



We are Action Research

Founded in 2010, Action Research conducts **research, program evaluation, and policy analysis to improve human services for children, youth, and families.**

Our areas of work include strategic consulting, supporting monitors of child welfare litigation settlements, and evaluating innovations in child welfare.



*NJTFCAN's Subcommittee on Race, Poverty, and Neglect tasked us with **conducting and analyzing focus groups** with mandated reporters.*

Introduction

1. Mandated reporting in context
2. Project overview
3. Next steps and call to action
 - a. Brief Q&A
 - b. Survey

What is mandated reporting?

Mandated reporting (MR) is the legally-imposed duty on specific persons/groups to report suspected cases of designated types of child maltreatment to child welfare agencies.

- Required groups, standards, and trainings vary by jurisdiction.
- New Jersey is one of four states that does not designate specific professional groups as mandated reporters. Every person is a mandated reporter. (1)(2)

At its best, MR serves to protect children's rights and safety by helping to identify possible abuse or neglect: mandated reporters contribute the **largest share of referrals to CPS** (69% in 2019). (3)

Referrals of known and suspected child abuse and neglect function as the "front-door" to the child welfare system.

Mandated reporting in context

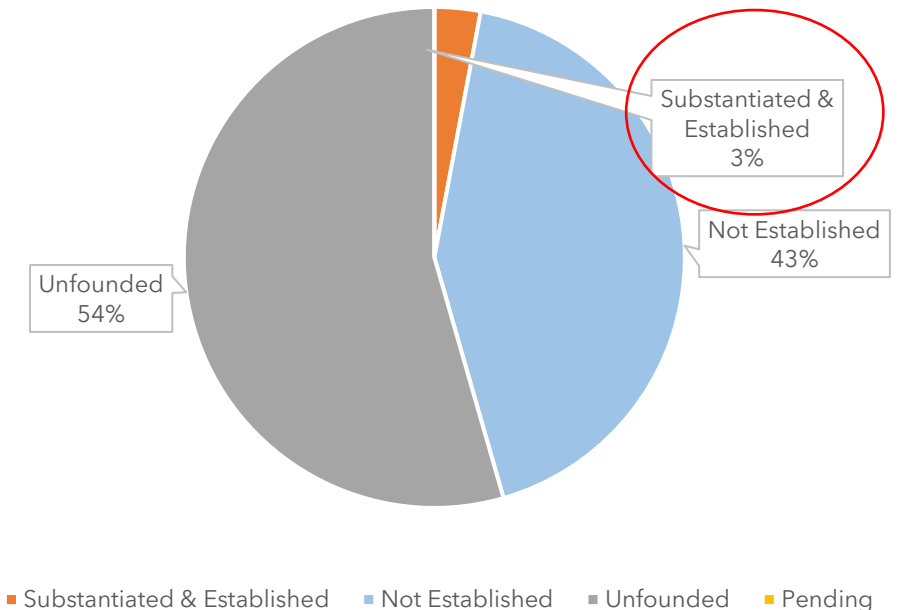
Child welfare system involvement in widespread. Nationally, 37% of children experience a CPS investigation by age 18. (1)

- There is concern that reports conflate neglect with poverty. (2)
- Racial disparities persist in reports and investigations. (3)(4)

Imprecision in reporting is a concern.

- Possible over-reporting: In New Jersey, 71% of all calls to a CPS hotline concern suspected neglect (vs. abuse). Of these, only 3% are substantiated or established. (3)
- Possible under-reporting: Studies have found that many instances of maltreatment are never reported to CPS. (5)

Investigation findings of CPS reports for neglect (2023). N= 67,341
Source: NJ Child Welfare Data Portal



Note: "Substantiated or established" here means a preponderance of the evidence establishes that a child has been neglected as defined by state statute.

Sources: (1) Kim, H., Wildeman, C., Jonson-Reid, M., & Drake, B. (2017). Lifetime prevalence of investigating child maltreatment among US children. *American journal of public health*, 107(2), 274-280.; (2) Palmer, L., Font, S., Eastman, A. L., Guo, L., & Putnam-Hornstein, E. (2024). What does child protective services investigate as neglect? A population-based study. *Child maltreatment*, 29(1), 96-105.; (3) NJ Child Welfare Data Portal (2023); (4) Putnam-Hornstein, E., Needell, B., King, B., & Johnson-Motoyama, M. (2013). Racial and ethnic disparities: A population-based examination of risk factors for involvement with child protective services. *Child abuse & neglect*, 37(1), 33-46.; (5) Negriff, S., Schneiderman, J. U., & Trickett, P. K. (2017). Concordance between self-reported childhood maltreatment versus case record reviews for child welfare-affiliated adolescents: Prevalence rates and associations with outcomes. *Child maltreatment*, 22(1), 34-44.

Imprecision in reporting: considerations

Over-reporting considerations:

- **For children and families:** Even when reports are unsubstantiated, they can lead families to experience [trauma and distress](#) (1), stigmatization, and [selective engagement with services](#). (2)
- **For child welfare agencies:** Screening and investigating large numbers of reports that are unsubstantiated [strains limited resources](#), increases workers' caseloads, and diverts attention from families who require more intensive support.

Under-reporting considerations:

- **For children and families:** Failure to identify neglectful situations [risks escalation and related harm](#) and may lead to [missed opportunities for support](#) or intervention.
- **For child welfare agencies:** When neglect goes unreported, it [hinders agencies from identifying patterns of risk](#) and implementing strategies to mitigate harm before situations worsen.

Relevance to professionals and mandated reporters:

- Without [clear guidance or knowledge](#) about when and what to report, reporters may over- or under- report neglect. (3)
- Reporters may experience [stress and anxiety](#) (e.g., related to challenges identifying less overt neglect, or to perceived impact of an unsubstantiated report on the child or family). (3)
- In New Jersey, there is no specific training or education required related to mandated reporting. (4)



Mandated reporting in context: training

23 states require that mandated reporters receive training to inform them of their responsibility to report and the process for making reports

Trainings can be offered by: State social services agencies, departments of education, or other entities that license/certify professionals required to report

22 states do not specifically require training, but State child welfare agencies provide information and training resources on their websites

Topics typically covered in mandated reporter trainings include:

- The legal obligations of a mandatory reporter
- Definitions of child abuse and neglect
- The signs of child abuse and neglect
- Groups of children who may be at a higher risk for abuse or neglect
- How to respond to a child who discloses abuse or neglect
- When child abuse and neglect must be reported
- The process for making a report
- The information that needs to be included in a report
- What happens after a report is made

Project overview: background

This project focuses on reports of alleged child *neglect* made by key groups of mandated reporters.

Objective: Use online focus groups to **describe, or create a baseline, of neglect reporting behaviors and training experiences** related to neglect reporting among professionals in law enforcement, education, and healthcare.

- What if any training do reporters receive in recognizing and/or reporting child neglect? In implicit bias?
- What policies and procedures do reporters' workplaces have concerning neglect reporting?
- What common scenarios prompt reports of child neglect to the hotline? What influences the decision to report?
 - Do people struggle in making the decision to report? In what scenarios is the need to report unclear?
- How would reporters respond if they find out a family is experiencing, for example, that their electricity has been shut off, or they are doubled up in housing with another family, or they don't appear to have enough food?

Project overview: where to, and why?

Output:

- Written summary of and presentation of focus group findings for NJTFCAN Subcommittee.
- Identification of possible areas for change in policy, practice, and/or training related to neglect reporting in New Jersey.

Rationale: A ground-up approach: **hearing from mandated reporters is essential** to improving mandated reporting practices and policies. Accurately “diagnosing the issue(s)” will enable a more **informed response** and more **targeted solutions**.



Project overview: target group compositions

Group	Medical	Law Enforcement	Education
1	Outpatient: "Mixed roles"	Municipal-level: Patrol	Pre-K - Elementary: Teachers
2	Outpatient: Physicians	Municipal-level: Leadership	Pre-K - Elementary: Admin/Leadership
3	Outpatient: Labor, delivery, postpartum	State-level: Patrol	Pre-K - Elementary: Supportive staff
4	Inpatient: "Mixed roles"	State-level: Leadership	Middle - High School: Teachers
5	Inpatient: Physicians	County-level: "Mixed roles"	Middle - High School: Admin/Leadership
6	Inpatient: Labor, delivery, postpartum	Unspecified-level: "Mixed roles"	Middle - High School: Supportive staff

We designed groups for **depth and openness of conversation** among reporters in like roles/settings.

This enables us to **analyze similarities and differences** in experiences within and across groups.



Next steps and call to action

Fall: ongoing focus groups with education and law enforcement professionals.

Winter: data analysis and report preparation.

Spring 2025: share findings with NJTFCAN Subcommittee and the public.

- Possibility to inform changes to policy, training, or practices in the state.

Have your voice heard! Complete the supplemental survey.



QUESTIONS?



SURVEY: Please share your training and reporting experiences



THANK YOU!

