

Confirmed child abuse in Iowa is skyrocketing. Here's why.

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Confirmed child abuse in Iowa skyrocketed 26 percent from 2016 to 2017, the most dramatic one-year spike in at least a generation.

"We've just never had an increase like this. I don't know how you absorb that," said Stephen Scott, a consultant and former Prevent Child Abuse Iowa director who analyzes state abuse data annually. "These figures are beyond what I expected."

The explosive upturn in abuse findings has widespread implications for Iowa families, social workers, juvenile court workers, drug treatment providers and state leaders wrestling with a major budget shortfall.

In March, Gov. Kim Reynolds signed legislation cutting \$35.5 million from the state budget. That included [slashing \\$4.3 million from the budget of the Department of Human Services, which oversees child protection](#).

"I do not see how DHS can keep up with this demand with such limited resources," Scott said.

Legislators on both sides of the aisle said recently they believe a major cause of the increase was much greater public attention on suspected child abuse after the intense media coverage of the starvation deaths of West Des Moines teen Natalie Finn in October 2016 and [Sabrina Ray](#), also 16, of Perry in May 2017.

Both girls were adopted from state care and home-schooled.

Calls to the state's centralized child abuse hotline increased dramatically after media coverage of their deaths. Human Services workers and supervisors began to review and formally investigate more allegations.

More: [Nicole Finn repeatedly ignored officer, caseworker trying to see her, jurors told](#)

Wilton Republican Bobby Kaufmann, who oversaw oversight hearings on child protection last year, said the higher abuse numbers, released this month, were incredibly disturbing and "indicate a clear need for more resources."

State Sen. Matt McCoy, a Des Moines Democrat who sharply criticized the state's response to alleged abuse before both girls died, said: "I knew it was up. I didn't know it was that much."

DHS plagued by low morale

For child abuse allegations to be accepted as cases by the Department of Human Services, the reported victim must be younger than 18, the alleged perpetrator must be a caretaker and the maltreatment must fit several categories of abuse.

From 2016 to 2017, child protection workers confirmed more sexual abuse, more physical abuse and much more neglect — 2,062 cases. They also found more abuse related to the presence of illegal drugs in infants than in 2016.

Human Services Chief Jerry Foxhoven vowed after the starvation deaths to address low morale among state social workers and other problems.

But Foxhoven has said little publicly about how investigators and case managers are managing with a dramatically increased workload.

Human Services failed to respond to multiple requests last week for interviews about the spike.

A consultant's review of child welfare practices in Iowa released last December found child abuse investigations in Iowa had increased by 43 percent.

The Child Welfare Group report, initiated after the deaths of Finn and Ray, found mandatory reporters of abuse, which include educators, were unhappy with the state's failure to investigate their reports.

They also found poor morale, an antiquated data system that made it difficult to get needed reports, and high turnover of child protective workers in Polk and Linn counties, where social worker caseloads were particularly high.

The consultant's report was critical of state policies and spending priorities: "Child welfare intervention should not be viewed as a substitute for universally available basic health, mental health and supportive community services that can help families, especially those in poverty ... keep their needs from escalating to the point that they result in a report of abuse or neglect," the report said.

Staff also raised concerns about the kinds of homes available for Iowa's foster kids.

"Some of those interviewed expressed the belief that there are many families who are unable or unwilling to provide the quality of care that children require," the report said.

Colin Witt, a Polk County juvenile judge, said as reports have escalated, more cases are requiring formal court intervention. Most of those cases in Polk County involve drug use by parents and caregivers, he said.

But the system is plagued with high turnover among caseworkers who manage those cases, Witt said.

“We need people who are experienced, who understand the complexity and the engagement needed to work with these families,” he said.

More drug-affected kids discovered

Human Services anticipated increases in child abuse investigations last year when legislators expanded the legal definition of what kind of drug-related allegations can trigger formal investigations by social workers.

The legislation required Human Services to investigate more allegations of children exposed to illegal hard drugs. Accusations of any adult in a home who reportedly was using, possessing, making or distributing methamphetamine, cocaine, heroin or opiates in the presence of a child became criteria for accepted abuse reports.

Before that change, the agency only had to accept drug-exposure allegations involving parents and guardians involved with meth.

The legislation mandated that health practitioners report to child protection workers the discovery of prenatal drug exposure or fetal alcohol.

It meant Iowa parents accused of drug-related abuse were at much greater risk of having children placed in foster care or having their parental rights terminated.

Last year, 2,179 parents had their parental rights terminated — a 9 percent increase from the year before, according to Iowa’s judicial branch.

Workers managed more cases of drug-affected children afterward, but most of the increases in the past year still centered on allegations of neglect, physical or sexual abuse.

Abuse findings shot up from 8,892 in 2016 to 11,236 by the end of 2017.

“They are clearly accepting cases they were not accepting before,” Scott said.

The escalation in cases also comes as [record numbers of Iowans are seeking treatment for methamphetamine](#).

Last year, 20 percent of the 46,429 Iowans screened for treatment across the state — about 9,200 people — sought help primarily for meth, more than for any other drug besides and marijuana.

The hike in abuse investigations and confirmed cases in Iowa doesn’t necessarily mean an escalation of abuse against Iowa children, only that more cases are being investigated by the state.

Advocates for children say even more would be discovered if Human Services would accept even more lower-priority cases instead of referring them for voluntary services.

"Particularly in the area of domestic violence in the home," said Mike Sorci, who heads the Youth Law Center in Des Moines. "Right now, if the child isn't harmed, they just do a family assessment. ... But if you look, you find out things by investigating."

Child abuse: By the numbers

Most child abuse allegations are never confirmed. But a kind of neglect called "denial of critical care" is by far the most common allegation, accounting for 65 percent of all claims in Iowa last year.

A law change last year made allegations surrounding drug-affected children that next greatest category of abuse, accounting for 20 percent of confirmed abuse.

The state has seen higher numbers of abused kids in the past; a record 13,445 were recorded in 2006.

But Human Services accepted for investigation almost 10,000 more cases in 2017 than in 2014.

At least 295 more children last year were found to be abused in Polk County alone, a 250 percent increase over 2016.

Other huge leaps occurred in Woodbury, Linn, Black Hawk, Scott, Marshall, Pottawattamie, Johnson, Story and Des Moines counties.

That's when agency leaders decided to refer thousands more families involved in low-priority cases to voluntary services instead of initiating more formal inquiries by child protection workers.

Human Services spends more now on social workers than it did then — \$6.4 million more — and more on subsidies used to assist with costs related to adopting special needs children.