



Child abuse experts calls for U.S. campaign

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By Frederik Joelving

NEW YORK (Reuters Health) - Nearly 4,600 U.S. children were hospitalized with broken bones, traumatic brain injury and other serious damage caused by physical abuse in 2006, according to a new report.

Babies younger than one were the most common victims, with 58 cases per 100,000 infants. That makes serious abuse a bigger threat to infant safety than SIDS, or sudden infant death syndrome, researchers say in the report.

"There is a national campaign to prevent SIDS," said Dr. John Leventhal of Yale University, who led the new study. "We need a national campaign related to child abuse where every parent is reminded that kids can get injured."

The new study, published Monday in the journal *Pediatrics*, is the first broad U.S. estimate of serious injuries due to child abuse.

Based on data from the 2006 Kids' Inpatient Database, the last such numbers available, Leventhal's team found that six out of every 100,000 children under 18 were hospitalized with injuries ranging from burns to wounds to brain injuries and bone fractures.

The children spent an average of one week in the hospital; 300 of them died.

The rate of abuse was highest among children under one, particularly if they were covered by Medicaid, the government's health insurance for the poor. One out of every 752 of those infants landed in the hospital due to maltreatment.

"Medicaid is just a marker of poverty, and poverty leads to stress," said Leventhal, who is the medical director of the Yale-New Haven Children's Hospital Child Abuse Program.

Last year, a study from four U.S. states showed a clear spike in abusive brain injuries following the financial crash in late 2007, a finding researchers chalked up to the added pressure on parents.

In that study, too, toddlers appeared to be at higher risk. That led researchers to suggest the maltreatment might have been triggered by crying.

If a caretaker shakes a baby violently to make him or her stop crying, they can cause "shaken baby syndrome," in which the brain bumps up against the skull and starts bleeding.

Leventhal said babies may also be more vulnerable than older kids.

"The most serious injuries tend to be in the younger kids," he told Reuters Health.

The researchers estimate that the hospitalizations cost about \$73.8 million in 2006, although that's only a fraction of the overall cost of abuse to society.

"This is a serious problem that affects young children," said Leventhal, whose team is now examining more recent data to refine the findings. "We need to figure out a way to help parents do better."

SOURCE: bit.ly/cxXOG Pediatrics, online February 6, 2012.