Child abuse cases increased in 1988

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Thirty-one children died in Louisiana last year as a result of abuse by adults. Twenty-two of those who died were under 4 years old.

The number of substantiated deaths is a decrease from the 57 reported in 1988 and 110 in 1987. That children — especially very young children — continue to die horrifies Patty Prats East.

“Physical abuse is one of the leading causes of death in the home for children under the age of 4,” said East, public awareness coordinator for the Louisiana Council on Child Abuse. “I find that frightening — horrifying.”

Prevalent among statistics from 1988 are several consistent patterns in child abuse, East said. Most sexual abuse victims continue to be girls age 10 and older, and most abusers, especially sexual abusers, are family or extended family members, family friends or caretakers of the children.

“Other reports involving neighbors or day care workers or people like that now are reported to police and not Child Protection. A change in reporting was made last year and it concerns us as far as tracking statistics and patterns go. We don’t know how the police are going to be reporting cases, if at all, and how well trained police are to handle abuse cases, particularly in smaller towns and rural areas,” East said.

Men between the ages of 30 and 40 still represented the largest number of known child abusers, particularly in sexual abuse cases, the statistics show. White men in that bracket accounted for the largest percentage of reported child abusers.

Sexual and physical abuse reporting increased in Louisiana, while reports of physical neglect appeared to decrease. East said it isn’t clear if the increase in sexual and physical abuse cases reflected an actual increase in the number of offenses or more reporting of incidents.

“We use statistics to decide how to try to prevent these kids from being assaulted,” she said. “And stats show us who the perpetrators are so we can target them, too.”

“The state can’t be expected to do it all: all of the investigating, follow up, educating. That’s why organizations like ours are needed to take up the slack. We are working more closely with the state, trying to be a good resource for them. And we also make referrals to them and report cases when they come to us,” East said.

As part of National Child Abuse Prevention Month observed during April, the Louisiana Council on Child Abuse began a statewide education, awareness and voluntarism campaign, East said. It will continue through the year.

The Louisiana Council is a nonprofit, volunteer-based program with a seven-person staff coordinating activities across the state. East said more than 700 volunteers donate their time to a variety of programs, such as a 24-hour, toll-free “Parent Helpline” and education groups.

The council’s campaign slogan is: “Child Abuse is a Life Sentence.”

“Once child abuse is inflicted on children, they never outgrow it,” East said.

“The social evils that come out of child abuse are so much worse than people think. There can be mental and emotional problems. Look at the number of people in prison who say they were abused as kids, so that reflects in our crime rate. And a lot of teenage prostitutes say they were sexually abused when they were younger.”

“Emotional and sexual abuse are the two which really show extreme results later in life,” she said.

Programs offered through the Louisiana Council on Child Abuse include:

- Programs for new parents to help develop positive parenting skills.
- Parents support programs offered at no cost to parents experiencing problems.
- A children’s program aimed at helping children to build appropriate social skills.
- The Parent Helpline, a 24-hour, toll-free hot line for crisis counseling, information and referrals. The number is 1-800-348-KIDS.
- School-based programs designed to educate teachers, counselors, school administrators and students about child abuse and neglect.
- Chapter councils are organized throughout the state to assist in each community.