La. child abuse investigations up, but confirmed cases down

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State officials investigated 10 percent more cases of child abuse or neglect in 1991 than in 1990, marking the first significant increase in such investigations in five years, a state Department of Social Services official said Monday.

The rise in the number of investigations has left state officials puzzled because it was accompanied by a small decrease in the number of confirmed cases of child abuse or neglect, said Walter Fahr, program manager in the DSS Office of Community Services.

DSS officials investigated 25,597 cases of alleged child abuse or neglect in 1991, a 10 percent increase over the 23,279 alleged cases probed in 1990.

At the same time, the number of confirmed cases of child abuse or neglect dropped by 3 percent, from 15,383 in 1990 to 14,997 in 1991, Fahr said.

Normally, the increase in investigations, which begin after teachers, police officers or other citizens report suspected abuse to the DSS, would be expected to result in an increase in the number of confirmed cases, Fahr said. The decrease in confirmed cases has left officials searching for the cause.

Heightened public attention to child abuse could have caused increased reporting of suspected cases to the agency, Fahr said.

"It may just reflect a greater level of concern out there about things that are going on in the community," he said.

However, Maggie Tidwell, director of child abuse prevention for Agenda for Children, a children's advocacy group, said the decrease in the number of confirmed cases may actually have been caused by the increased workload of investigators.

"There are professionals in the child abuse prevention community in New Orleans who have great concern about the quality of the investigations. We believe that if the staff is overburdened, there is a tendency to close a case that otherwise would not be closed," Tidwell said.

"The intensity of the investigation and thoroughness of the investigation is suffering," she said.

The number of investigations statewide rose dramatically in the early 1980s, from roughly 11,100 in 1981 to a peak of 28,500 investigations in 1985, before dropping to about 23,200 in 1987 and remaining at that level until last year, Fahr said.

DSS came under scrutiny in 1985 when 3-year-old boy Joshua Gagnier was beaten to death by his mother's former boyfriend, and it was revealed that a DSS investigator...