

9. Child Abuse/Neglect

Ranked AL's Ninth Health Indicator

Child abuse and neglect (also referred to as child maltreatment) are important health issues for AL and were identified as the ninth health indicator. Unfortunately, instances of child abuse and neglect are often underreported. In AL, healthcare professionals, schoolteachers, law enforcement offices, social workers, daycare employees, and clergy are required by law to report suspected or known instances of child abuse or neglect.

Physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect are the four most common types of child abuse. Chronic abuse may result in increasing inflammatory stress markers. Adverse childhood experiences can lead to a higher risk for mental health disorders, chronic diseases, and a poorer socioeconomic status in adulthood.¹ All forms of abuse could lead to impaired psychosocial relationships and heightened anxiety.²

Vulnerable Populations

A combination of individual, familial, community, and societal factors contribute to child abuse and neglect outcomes. According to CDC, “rates of child abuse and neglect are five times higher for children in families with low socioeconomic status compared to children in families with higher socioeconomic status.”¹ Communities that experience high rates of violence and crime, communities with high unemployment rates, and caregivers with unstable housing are also risk factors for child abuse and neglect.¹

Geographic Variation

To protect children’s identities, data regarding geographic variation has not been reported. On the state level, child abuse cases have been steadily increasing throughout the years. There were 8,466 child maltreatment victims in 2015, and the number increased to 12,158 new victims in 2018. Also, there were 23.3 child abuse calls per 1,000 children under age 18 years old in 2019.⁴

Topics Addressed for This Indicator are:

- Child abuse calls.
- Maltreatment types of child victims.

Highlights

In AL, the Office of Child Protective Services (OCPS) within the Family Services Division of the AL DHR is responsible for collecting child abuse and neglect reports. Data are retrieved from the AL DHR and the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System:

- Child abuse calls have increased between 2015-2017, with the highest call rate in 2017 (25.1 calls per 1,000 children).
- Most maltreatment calls were made by adults concerned for children under 12 years old, with 16.7 percent of the calls being children under one year old in 2018.

Risk Factors:

- Domestic violence.
- Parents are going or have gone through a divorce.
- Multiple caretakers.
- Long, unsupervised hours.

Child Abuse Calls

Child abuse and negligent death calls include those which result from apparent lack of care, abusive head injury/trauma, and other forms of physical violence. Child abuse education and training for parents, educators, and caregivers are aimed at decreasing the number of deaths attributable to abuse and neglect.

In 2019, there were 1,088,306 children less than 18 years old in AL.⁵ According to the AL DHR, these call rates were calculated by using the number of unique reported victims, not confirmed. A child may have been the victim of more than one type of maltreatment or reported the same type of maltreatment more than once:

- Child abuse calls increased between 2015-2017, with the highest call rate in 2017 (25.1 calls per 1,000 children).
- In 2019, the child abuse call rate was 23.3 calls per 1,000 children.

Data by demographic groups were not available.

Figure 9.1 – Child Abuse Calls Per Year, 2015–2019. The figure displays the rates per 1,000 children. Source: AL DHR.

2015	21.8
2016	24.4
2017	25.1
2018	22.9
2019	23.3

Maltreatment Types of Child Victims

Maltreatment encompasses emotional abuse, medical neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and general neglect. A child maltreatment victim is a child who is the subject of a substantiated or indicated maltreatment report. In 2018, there were 11.1 maltreatment victims per 1,000 children:

- Physical abuse was the most prevalent maltreatment type (53.3 percent), followed by neglect (42.9 percent) and sexual abuse (16.6 percent) in 2018.
- In 2018, there were 5,055 unique incidents of confirmed maltreatment. The calls came from 2.4 percent of children having repeated occurrences.⁴
- Most maltreatment calls were made by adults concerned for children under 12, with 16.7 percent of the calls being children under one year old in 2018.

Some columns may be greater than 100 percent, as an individual victim may be counted twice.

Table 9.1 – Percentage of Child Victims, 2017-2018		
	2017	2018
AL	10,847	12,158
U.S.	-	-
Type of Maltreatment		
Emotional abuse	0.4	0.3
Medical neglect	0.9	0.6
Neglect	43.9	42.9
Physical abuse	53.6	53.3
Sexual abuse	14.9	16.6
Ethnicity of Victim		
White	64.3	62.8
AA/black	26.6	28.6
Hispanic	4.5	3.8
Other	4.6	4.8
Age (in years)		
0-12	79.2	79.7
13-19	20.6	19.9
Unknown	0.3	0.5

Data Sources

Figure 9.1 - Child Abuse Calls per Year, 2015-2019.

AL DHR, Division of Child Protective Services, 2019. Data requested July 2020.

Table 9.1 – Percentage of Child Victims, 2017-2018.

National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System, 2017-2018. Data requested January 2021.

Written Sources

- CDC, Child Abuse and Neglect, 2020.
- ADPH, Injury Prevention Child Abuse and Neglect, 2021.
- USDHHS Child Welfare Information Gateway, Cultural Responsiveness: Child Abuse and Neglect, 2020.
- National Child Abuse and Neglect, Child Maltreatment, 2019.
- U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 1 Year Estimate, 2019.

Community Resources

ADPH Maternal Child Health Services (MCH) Program

Location: Montgomery County, AL
Type: State Government Organization

AL DHR

Location: Montgomery County, AL
Type: State Government Organization

Child Protect

Location: Montgomery County, AL
Type: Advocacy Program

Child Safety Learning Collaborative

Location: Atlanta, GA
Type: Federal Funded Program

Children's Advocacy Center

Location: Shelby County, AL
Type: Non-profit Organization

Family Guidance Center – AL

Location: Jefferson County, AL
Type: Non-Profit Organization

Heart Gallery AL

Location: Jefferson County, AL
Type: Nonprofit Organization

National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System

Location: Washington, DC Metro
Type: Federal Government Organization