



# Evaluation Snapshots

Research summaries at a glance

April 2009

## A Closer Look at Patterns of Change in Child Abuse in Georgia: Creating the Model

Compiled from research by *The Theory of Change* workgroup

This edition of *Evaluation Snapshots* reports recent key findings on the incidence of substantiated child abuse—an indicator of child well-being targeted by nearly half of Georgia Family Connection collaborative organizations statewide. This snapshot gives you accurate, concise information and the analysis necessary for understanding the story behind the child abuse data. In this study we did not look at the incidence of substantiated child neglect nor child abuse and neglect together.

We looked closely at child abuse rates in all Georgia counties from 1994-2006. Its many peaks illustrate the extreme volatility in year-to-year change reported in child abuse for many counties, which poses a challenge to analyses of abuse data.

### Defining child abuse

The rate of child abuse is defined as the number of substantiated incidents of abuse per 1,000 children under age 18. A report of child abuse is determined to be substantiated when there is ample, credible evidence that physical, emotional, or sexual abuse has occurred.

This study began by looking at child abuse rates across all 159 Georgia counties from 1994-2006 to see if we could find any consistent patterns.

The chart at the right shows how the rates of child abuse reported from year to year in all 159 counties in Georgia changed during this 13-year time period.

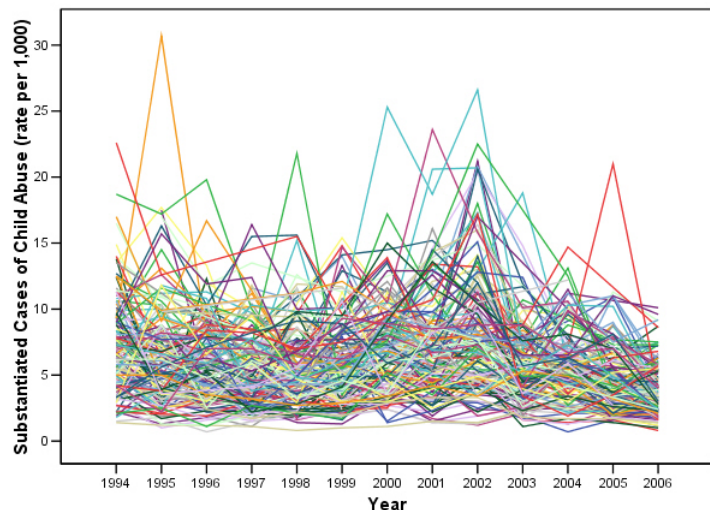
We wanted to understand why there was so much volatility in the child abuse data over time so we inspected the data more closely to locate patterns of change and to explore factors that might contribute to the patterns.

Human services state partners familiar with the data suggested that abuse rates fluctuate over time for reasons other than sheer change in the incidence of child abuse.

Agency leadership, policies, media attention to egregious cases, among other factors, may play a critical role in the practices of reporting, investigating, and substantiating cases of child abuse. And, more challenging, the effect of these factors varies across counties, affecting some counties more than others, earlier than others.

Our closer study of the data and contributing factors led us to the following key findings.

**Child Abuse Rates in All Georgia Counties  
1994-2006**



**Evaluation Snapshots** examine the effect of Georgia Family Connection county collaborative organizations on indicators of well-being in the state.

## Research Model

Latent Growth Curve  
Modeling was used to  
analyze:

1. The pattern of change over time in child abuse rates for the average county.
2. Differences between counties in the pattern of change over time.
3. Effects of community and collaborative characteristics on change in abuse rates.

The pattern (at right) shows it is unlikely that the observed declines are true change in abuse incidence, but are more likely to be arbitrary changes in the way abuse is measured.

Historical factors likely to have influenced this unique pattern of child abuse rates were:

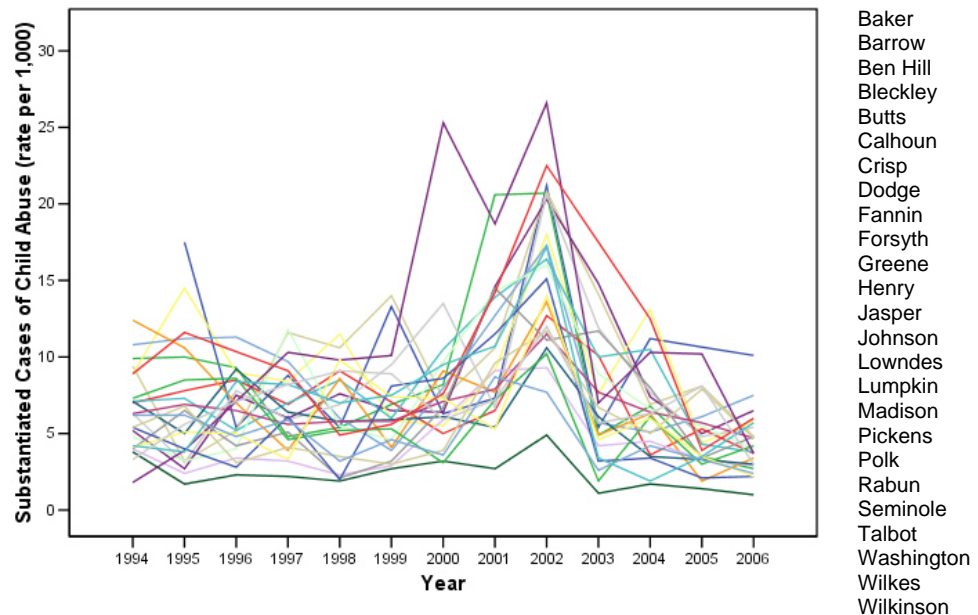
- 2001 federal Child and Family Services Review
- Media attention to specific abuse cases
- DFCS leadership changes in 2004
- 2003 policy requiring investigation of all mandated reports
- 2004 policy change implementing diversion programs

## Key Findings

### 1. A unique pattern of change in abuse rates emerged in 2002-2003

Upon closer inspection of the data, abuse levels appeared to spike for 25 counties in 2002, followed by steep declines in 2003. The consistency and magnitude of this decline in 2003 among those 25 counties—relative to other years and other counties—raises suspicion about underlying causes. When we further examined community and collaborative organization characteristics of the 25 counties with this pattern, we found they tended to have smaller populations and a higher socioeconomic status.

**Pattern of Change in Child Abuse Rates in 25 Georgia Counties  
1994-2006**



Our study of historical factors that could explain this pattern involved:

- Interviews with past and present administrative heads of the Department of Human Resources, Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS), Prevent Child Abuse Georgia, and local collaboratives; and
- Reviews of *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* articles on abuse cases from 1994 to 2006.

No clear explanation for the pattern emerged. However, our investigations did reveal possible related events, including specific abuse cases making headlines, the 2001 federal Child and Family Services Review, a 2004 policy change from requiring case managers to investigate all reports by mandated reporters and those involving children younger than age 6, to implementing diversion programs where families could receive preventive services even when a reported incident of maltreatment was not substantiated.

### 2. The statistical model creates two separate periods of change in abuse

A base model emerged representing the best summary of the pattern of change in abuse from 1994-2006 for all 159 counties in the data set. The statistical evidence indicates that this model is an accurate summary of the pattern of change in abuse rates for all Georgia counties during those 13 years.

## Pattern of Change in Child Abuse Rates in 159 Georgia Counties 1994-2006

### “Base Model”

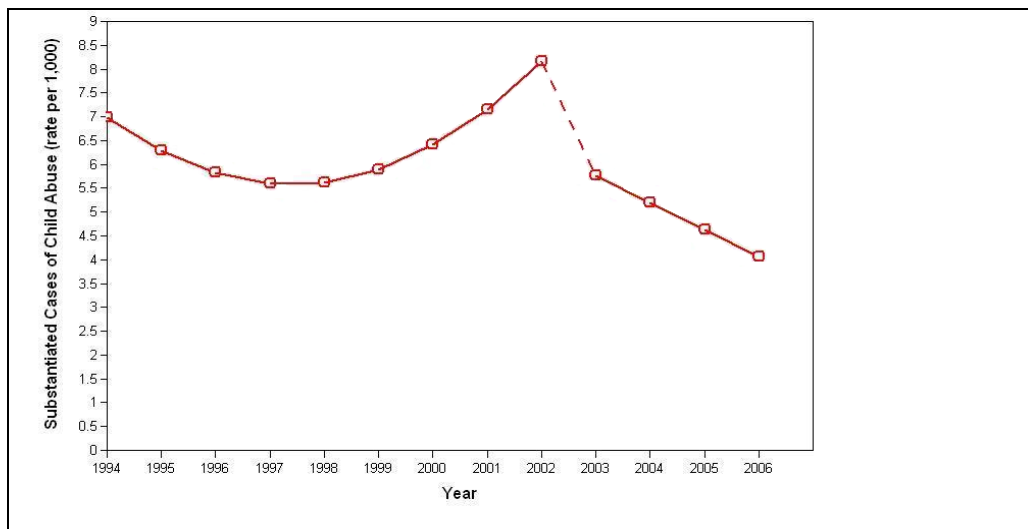
A unique feature of the research model is that it minimizes the influence of the questionable pattern of change observed from 2002 – 2003.

Each Georgia Family Connection collaborative organization develops a three-year strategic plan with strategies to improve the well-being of children and families living in the community.

The Georgia Family Connection works with more than 3,000 partners in 159 counties statewide.

This edition of *Evaluation Snapshots* is based on reports from the Georgia Family Connection Partnership *Theory of Change* Workgroup:

- EMSTAR Research
- Georgia State University faculty and staff
  - Scott Weaver
  - Gabe Kuperminc
  - Jack Barile
- Juanita Blount-Clark, Adjunct Faculty, University of Georgia



The base model shows the period from 1994 to 2002 is one of increasing abuse rates, while 2003 to 2006 is a distinct period of decline. The dotted line indicates a period when the decline in abuse was dramatic for some counties and not others.

### Next Step—Testing Effects of Community Collaboration

This analysis provided us with an adequate base model of change in abuse. Our next task is to examine effects of community collaboration and any beneficial change in abuse associated with targeting. Family Connection county collaboratives can target abuse in their strategic plans by making it the focus of one or more collaborative strategies. Targeting is measured annually in the Collaborative Self-Assessment. Our analyses will examine the timing of targeting to determine if abuse subsequently declines once a county implements the strategy. Results of these analyses will be reported in an upcoming edition.

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Georgia Family Connection Partnership (GaFCP) is a public/private nonprofit created and funded by the state of Georgia and funders from the private sector. We support Georgia Family Connection, a statewide network of 159 county collaborative organizations committed to improving the quality of life for children, families, and communities across the state.

GaFCP measures progress in child and family well-being by tracking indicators in five result areas—Healthy Children; Children Ready to Start School; Children Succeeding in School; Stable, Self-Sufficient Families; and Strong Communities. GaFCP is the designated KIDS COUNT grantee for the state of Georgia and receives support and funding from the Annie E Casey Foundation, which funds KIDS COUNT, a national and state effort to report the status of children in the United States.