

# SUFFER THE CHILDREN

## Child MALTREATMENT in the Western Cape

Child neglect and abuse is often related to family circumstances, especially the social and economic situation of child carers, according to a study by MOKHANTŠO MAKOAE , CATHERINE WARD and ANDREW DAWES. The study, commissioned by the Provincial Department of Social Development in the Western Cape, investigated factors related to the statutory removal of children in four magisterial districts in the province.

The study reviewed children's court inquiries records and conducted interviews with professionals involved in childcare and protection services in five children's courts: Atlantis, Cape Town, Malmesbury, Mitchell's Plain and Wellington.

Only substantiated inquiries which were finalised in 2006 were included in the analysis, which explored the risks children face before being removed into statutory care in the selected children's courts. The findings are based on 102 substantiated inquiries into alleged abuse and neglect (Table 1), and on the perspectives of service providers in the sector.

### AGE AND SEX OF CHILDREN REMOVED BECAUSE OF NEGLECT AND ABUSE

In Mitchell's Plain and Malmesbury, where a greater number of children were removed from their homes into statutory care, the majority of were under the age of four (Figure 1).

Children who were cared for at home were at risk of neglect and abuse and this had implications for their early learning and development. Also, most of

the children were removed into statutory care before the age of ten, and thus deprived of parental care at an early age. There were more boys than girls who were subject to statutory removals, with the highest number of cases in Cape Town.

### SOCIAL AND DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF PRIMARY CARERS

The primary carers of the children, who constituted more than 60% of carers in Mitchell's Plain and Malmesbury, were their biological mothers; and the mothers were also the main perpetrators of child neglect and physical abuse. Except for the Cape Town children's court, where the marital status of primary carers was captured inadequately in the records, the majority of the mothers were single.

Age, education, occupation and incomes were not captured consistently to permit meaningful analysis. In cases where an occupation was mentioned, it was low-paying and in some cases social grants were identified as the main source of household income.

### NEGLECT

The most common form of child maltreatment that led to statutory removals was neglect. Neglect manifested in child abandonment, failure to provide for the basic needs of the child (food and medical care), and leaving children for long periods without adequate arrangements for supervision.

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### RISK FACTORS

Children were removed from parental care because of the following risk factors at home: parents' failure to provide for children, abandonment, quality of relationships within the home, and substance abuse.

The following extracts from the social workers' files illustrate the interplay of risks which affected children:

*A mother constantly abandoned children and went to stay with the drug warlord that she had an affair with. Both parents were abusing substances; when mother abandoned children, father followed suit and did the same, thus children left alone. Children were constantly exposed to*

Table 1: Number of child cases brought to and appearing before children's court, 2006

Children's court	Reported for suspected maltreatment	Appeared before children's court and substantiated	Number of cases analysed
Cape Town	297	230	30
Atlantis	83	17	9
Malmesbury	48	27	27
Wellington	51	7	7
Mitchell's Plain	227	200	29



Mothers left children without making adequate supervision arrangements or took their young children to shebeens where they could not attend to their nutritional and hygienic needs. Substance abuse, including the use of 'tik', was identified as being primarily responsible for the neglect of children's medical needs, including failing to adhere to treatment in instances where mothers had infectious diseases.

Children also suffered emotional distress through domestic violence. Some mothers encouraged their children to beg from strangers, and part of the money was used to purchase alcohol and drugs. Other children did not attend school regularly.

These circumstances led to social workers removing children from parental care and recommending out-of-home placement to children's courts.

### INSUFFICIENT PREVENTION AND EARLY INTERVENTION

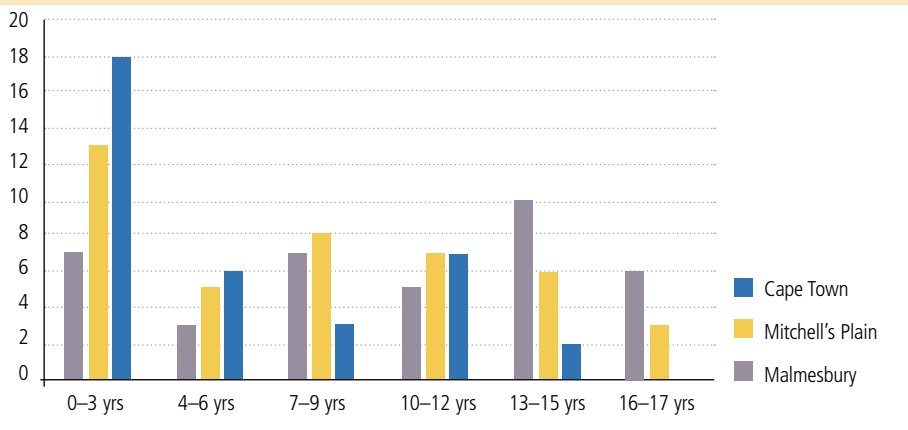
Children who were reported to childcare services because of suspected maltreatment would in most cases be removed into statutory care (foster care and residential care). Different childcare professionals reported that most removals were implemented without providing the affected families with early intervention services. In fact, emergency placement was the most commonly used intervention, while interim family-support services were poorly rendered during investigation, mainly due to the high case loads of childcare services.

Other factors included parents who could not be traced and an unsupportive home environment, especially due to extreme poverty, unavailability of alternative caregivers and alcohol abuse.

The inability of childcare services to keep children under protective and nurturing parental care through programmes such as parenting education is a concern. In the long run, the country's policy goal to strengthen families is inadvertently undermined by the lack of child maltreatment prevention and effective early intervention strategies. To protect children, statutory care becomes the only practical option.

This article is based on the findings from a recent study, *The situation analysis of children affected by violence and maltreatment in the Western Cape* (Dawes, Long, Alexander & Ward, 2006). The study is available for free download on [www.hsrc.ac.za](http://www.hsrc.ac.za).

Figure 1: Age distribution of children brought before children's courts – Cape Town, Mitchell's Plain and Malmesbury (%)



domestic violence between parents and physical neglect, verbal and emotional abuse by parents was reported. Parents were employed part-time but chose to spend money on substances. (Child 1, Mitchell's Plain)

Mother abuses alcohol and tik [crystal methamphetamine]...Live with friends in a house where they abuse and sell alcohol and tik. Children neglected and exposed to danger. (Child 4, Malmesbury)

### LACK OF SUPPORT TO SINGLE MOTHERS, AND POVERTY

Most mothers were single and did not receive economic support from fathers. For example, of the 29 records reviewed in Mitchell's Plain, 18 (68%) of the mothers were single; and in Malmesbury, this was so in 50% of the cases. Lack of co-parenting support due to the absent father and poverty could be an important factor for child maltreatment.

In cases where the mother's socio-economic information was provided, data showed that the mothers were mostly young, below 20 years; had little

education; were not economically independent (they received social grants), and were in low-paying jobs.

There were also cases of children who were abandoned by their mothers regularly, or permanently. Most incidents of this form of neglect occurred due to the mothers' inability to access alternative childcare when they went to work, or for other social activities.

### ALCOHOL AND DRUG ABUSE

Qualitative analysis of social workers' investigation reports identified alcohol abuse and illicit drug use as key factors in child abuse and neglect. Persistent abuse of alcohol exposed children to neglect, sexual, physical and emotional abuse. As a consequence, many children in the statutory care system were exposed to negative circumstances, leading to child maltreatment.

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