



CHILD MALTREATMENT REPORT | April 2019

Mecklenburg County, North Carolina

14,223 children were reported maltreated in FY 18 — up from 13,968 in FY17. This number represents 4.6% of all children in Mecklenburg County

59% of children reported were identified as Black. Children of color are reported at higher rates despite a lack of evidence that they are abused at higher rates

1,095 reports were substantiated

51% of reports involved children who were reported maltreated a second, third, or more times

808 children were placed into foster care

79% of children were under 12 at the time of first report to Youth and Family Services

21 the maximum age youth can choose to continue receiving foster care supports

Our Community's Response

To protect the youth of our community, reporting abuse or neglect is not only essential, it is **mandatory**. North Carolina law mandates that any person or institution that suspects a child is abused, neglected, or dependent must make a report at **980-31-HELPS** (980.314. 3577).

Youth and Family Services Division of the Department of Social Services

Reports of maltreatment are managed by the local **Youth and Family Services** (YFS) Division. YFS is responsible for intake, investigation, family intervention, permanency planning, adoption, and placement management. YFS strives to provide services and information to protect children by strengthening the capacity for self-sufficiency of families whose children's health, welfare, and safety are at risk.

Community Protocol and multidisciplinary teams

A broad community response to child abuse allegations is coordinated through **Pat's Place***, the local child advocacy center (CAC). CACs were created to ensure that child victims of abuse could access the services they need following abuse in a central, child-friendly, neutral location. Previously, children were expected to recount their history of abuse multiple times to various people. This experience is traumatic for a child and creates a host of problems in the criminal investigation. By streamlining and centralizing services, CACs reduce trauma to child victims and increase rates of prosecution. CACs coordinate multidisciplinary teams that respond to child abuse allegations, assist in the collection of evidence for investigation and prosecution purposes, and provide evidence-based mental health treatment to the child and family.

In 2005, several community and governmental organizations (listed on page 10) adopted a community response protocol that begins with an allegation of abuse and a report to law enforcement or YFS. When an investigation begins, a child is referred to Pat's Place for a forensic interview at the request of detectives or social workers investigating the allegation of child abuse. The interview is performed by a specially trained interviewer and recorded for evidentiary purposes. The investigator and social worker are able to observe from an adjacent room; allowing them to obtain critical information while minimizing the potential retraumatization associated with multiple interviews by different agencies. The interview is also used to assess the safety of a child's living arrangement and the need for medical treatment and psychological care. Since adopting the protocol, conviction rates involving child sexual abuse cases in Mecklenburg County have increased from approximately 5% to over 95%.

*Pat's Place also coordinates the community response to Human Trafficking.

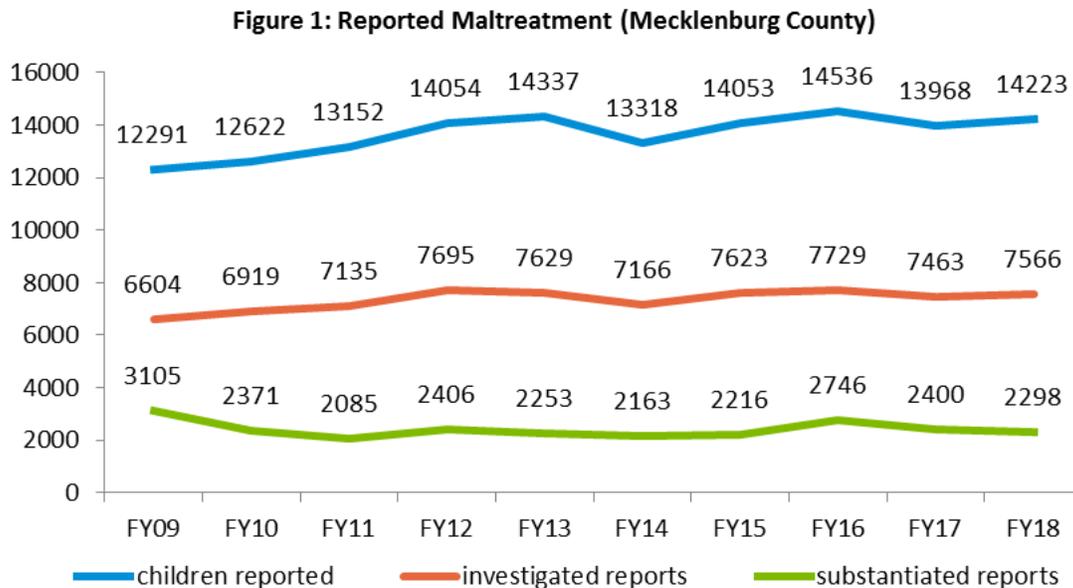


Increase in investigated reports, decrease in substantiations

In FY18, 14,223 children in Mecklenburg County, or 4.6% of all children under 18, were reported maltreated. The number of potential victims reported increased 1.8%, or 255 children, from the previous fiscal year. Of the 14,223 children reported, 7,566 reports were investigated; 61.4% of which involved more than one child. Since FY09, the number of investigated reports increased 14.6%, up from 6,604.

However, the number of substantiated reports **decreased** 29.8%, from 1,560 in FY09 to 1,095 in FY18.

The increase in reported maltreatment in Mecklenburg County is contrasted by a 6.4% decrease in reports at the state level over same time period. The total number of reports across the state of North Carolina peaked at 134,545 in 2011-12 before hovering around 130,000 for multiple years and dipping to 118,149 in FY18.



Because the act of filing a report does not constitute a definitive case of abuse or neglect, it is **critical to distinguish between reports of maltreatment that are substantiated and those that are not**. A report is substantiated if a claim of abuse, neglect, or dependency is verified by the Department of Social Services Division of Youth & Family Services (YFS). A report of maltreatment may only be substantiated when it involves a parent, guardian, custodian, caretaker, or child care provider. The statutory definitions do not extend to non-caregivers.

policy opportunity: expand North Carolina definition of caregiver

Under current law, the definition of an abused, neglected, or dependent child is framed within the scope of family-like situations where the perpetrator must be a parent, guardian, or caretaker. While the definition of caretaker includes step-parents, foster parents, and adults living in the home, it notably omits adults outside the “residential setting.” For instance, individuals, like school teachers and coaches, who take temporary responsibility for children are excluded from the caretaker definition. In fact, a babysitter or a girlfriend/boyfriend who does not reside in the child’s home are generally not considered caretakers. The narrow definition of who qualifies as a “caretaker” in North Carolina limits the ability of the state to investigate and substantiate allegations of maltreatment.

Until late 2018, the caregiver requirement also applied to human trafficking victims. Based on the understanding that traffickers are often not caregivers and to account for the complexity of this type of abuse, the statute was revised. A child’s right to receive protection and assistance should not be based on who inflicted the abuse but the fact that abuse occurred. No matter who the perpetrator of abuse is, the victim is still a child and abuse is abuse.

For more information about limitations to the current definition of caretaker, visit this [blog](#) from the University of North Carolina’s School of Government.

Most common finding is consistently ‘Services Recommended’

North Carolina’s differentiated response system involves two assessment tracks: Investigative and Family Assessments, which are selected based on the type of allegations in the report. Investigative Assessments have four possible case findings: abuse, abuse & neglect, neglect, and dependency. Family Assessments have four additional case findings: services needed, services not recommended, services provided-no longer needed, and services recommended. Substantiation refers to findings across six categories: abuse, neglect, abuse & neglect, dependency, services needed, and services provided-no longer needed.

Definitions of terms can be found on page 10 of this report.

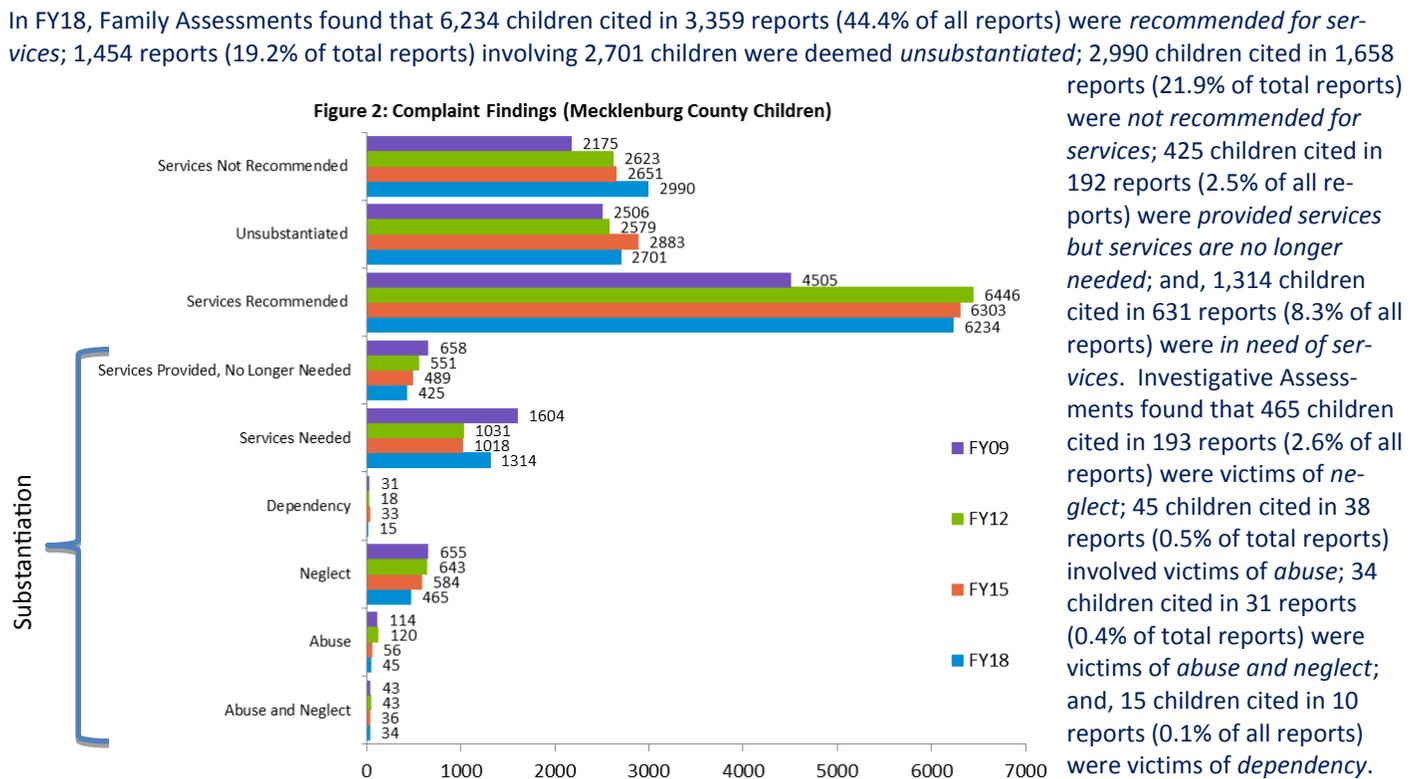
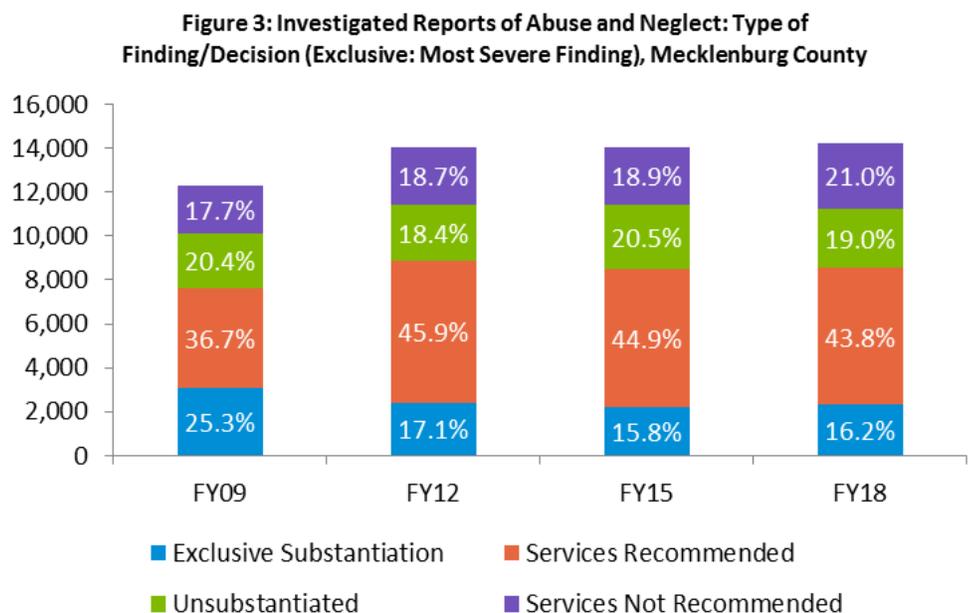


Figure 2 graphs the complaint findings trends for individual children. The sharp increase in “services recommended” findings reflect the Federal [Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008](#) which requires YFS to prioritize placement with relatives and to increase supports for families. It is unclear why substantiations decreased while reports increased. Experience of our advocates indicates that it may reflect a practice of placing children with kin and providing services prior to substantiation but there are limitations on the availability of data in this area.

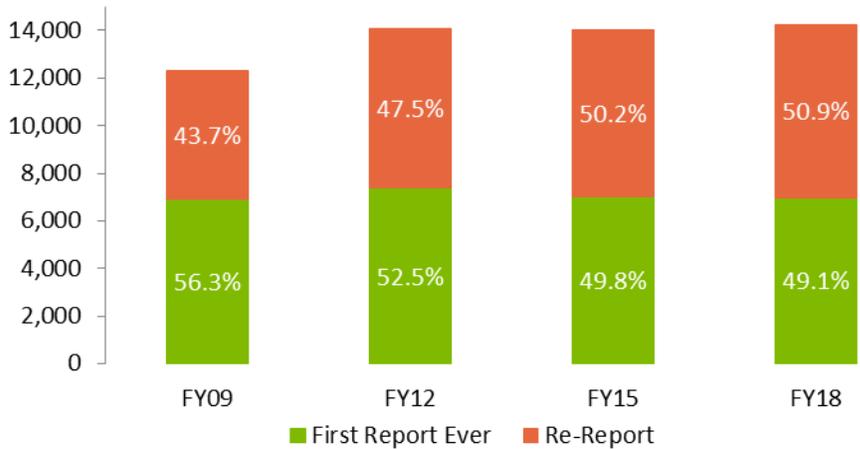
Figure 3 graphs the complaint finding distribution over the past ten years. Because a report may involve multiple children, each with their own finding, complaint analysis reflects the most severe finding for each report where a report is counted only once.



Increase in children reported multiple times

Over the past decade, the proportion of re-reports increased to exceed the number of initial reports. This means children are being investigated more often as a result of a second, third, or fourth report to YFS. Over the past decade, re-reports increased 34.7% (1,866 reports), while initial reports increased only 1.0% (66 reports). Prior to 2013-14, initial reports outpaced re-reports. By FY18, more than half (51.0%) of investigations resulted from re-reports, a difference of 1.8% or 255 more re-reports. In FY09, the difference was 12.6% or 1,545 more initial reports.

Figure 4: Reports and Re-reports (Mecklenburg County)



Statewide, the number of initial reports consistently exceed re-reports. In FY09, 50.6% of statewide investigations resulted from first time reports and 49.4% resulted from re-reports, a difference of 1.2%. In FY18, the difference doubled (2.4%) with 51.2% of investigations resulting from initial reports and 48.8% from re-reports.

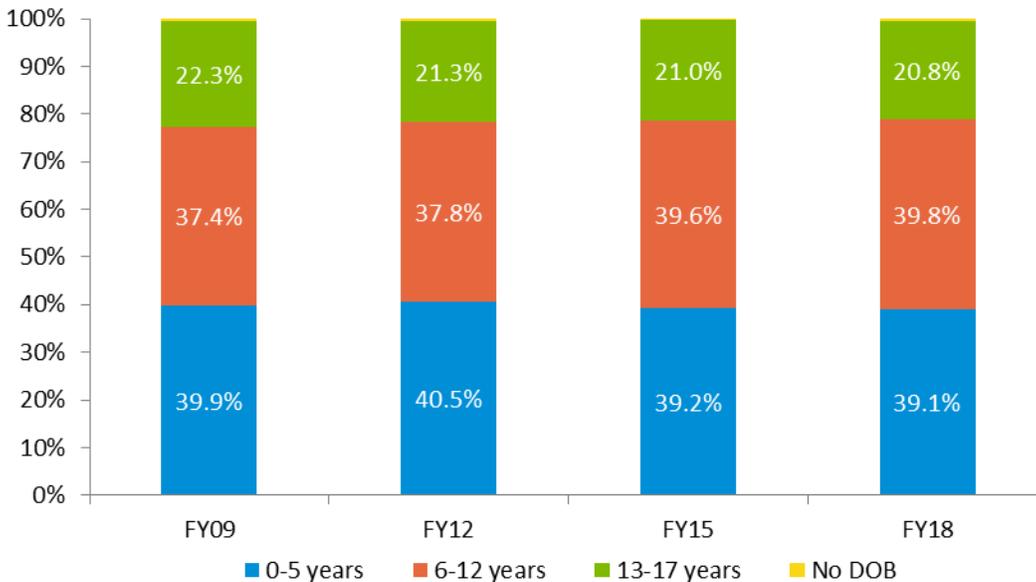
policy consideration: screen out data availability

Publicly available data do not include information about reports that were screened out. Because the number of children reported to YFS multiple times in a single year continues to increase, we need to examine whether that is a result of screening out reports with merit, returning children to the home without appropriate service, or other factors.

Our youngest are most vulnerable

Consistently, the largest age group of children reported abused or neglected have been under age 13. In FY18, 39.1% (5,557) of children reported abused or neglected in Mecklenburg County were under age 6, 39.8% (5,657) of children were 6 to 12 years old, and 20.8% (2,960) of children were 13- to 17-years-old at the time of their first report.

Figure 5: Reported Victims by Age of First Report (Mecklenburg County)



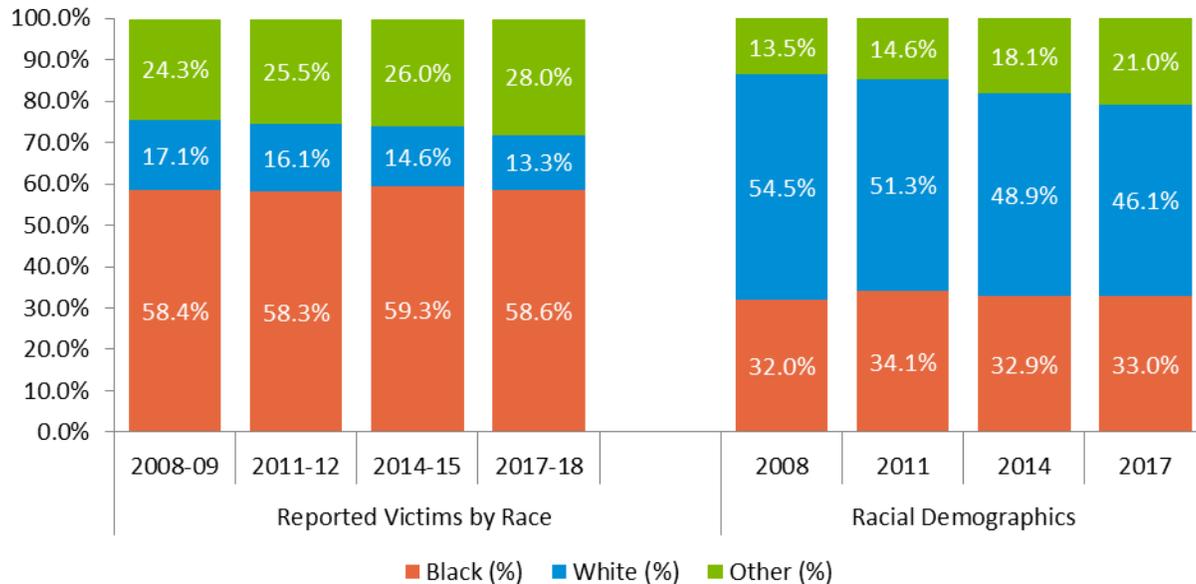
These percentages are similar to those found at the state level, where 39.2% (46,320) of children reported abused or neglected were under age 6, 39.9% (47,122) were 6 to 12 years old, and 20.6% (24,324) were 13- to 17-years-old at the time of their first report. In a small number of cases (383), no date of birth was available.

Children of color are reported at higher rates

Racial disparities exist in the rates maltreatment reports are made. Children of color are consistently reported at higher rates. However, this finding does not indicate that children of color are abused more frequently than White children but likely indicates reports involving families of color are made at disproportionately.

Black children consistently account for more than half of all children reported abused or neglected in Mecklenburg County. In FY18, 58.6% (8,334) of children reported maltreated in Mecklenburg County were identified as Black, 28.0% (3,981) were identified as an “other” race, and 13.3% (1,891) were identified as White. The percentage of children reported maltreated who were

Figure 6: Reported Victims by Race and Racial Demographics (Mecklenburg)



identified as White decreased by 10.1% (213) over the past ten years. The percentage of reported victims who were identified as Black increased by 16.0% (1,152) and the percentage of reported victims who were identified as an “other” race increased by 33.1% (989).

These findings are particularly noteworthy considering the racial makeup of Mecklenburg County as a whole. While Black children comprised 58.6% of maltreatment reports, they represented only 33.0% of the county population. White children, on the other hand, accounted for only 13.3% of reports but represented 46.1% of the population.

In terms of ethnicity, which is collected separately, 18.0% of children reported maltreated were identified as Hispanic in FY18.

Racial/ethnic disparities begin at the reporting stage and persist through placement in foster care. In FY18, of the 808 children in YFS custody in Mecklenburg County, 61.8% (499) were identified as Black, 16.3% (132) were identified as White, and 21.9% (177) were identified as an “other” race. In terms of ethnicity, 11.9% (96) of children in custody were identified as Hispanic and 88.1% (712) were identified as non-Hispanic. It is also worth noting that multiracial children show a somewhat similar sustaining pattern as Black children.

policy consideration: racial disproportionality

There is a complex relationship between race, income, and caseworkers’ assessment of risk. To reduce disparities in the child welfare system, training should focus on this relationship and include strategies for assessing strengths of families in addition to risks. Evaluation should also be utilized to reduce disparities by assessing whether family risk is determined differently based on family race or income.

In collaboration with the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Mecklenburg County Youth and Family Services (YFS) has engaged in a Race, Equity, and Inclusion (REI) initiative to explore racial disparity around and within the child welfare system. Racial disparities are sustained throughout children’s and families’ contact with the local child welfare system. YFS did not significantly relieve nor exacerbate this disparity, which highlights the powerful downstream effects that disparate initial child welfare contact (at the reporting stage) can have.

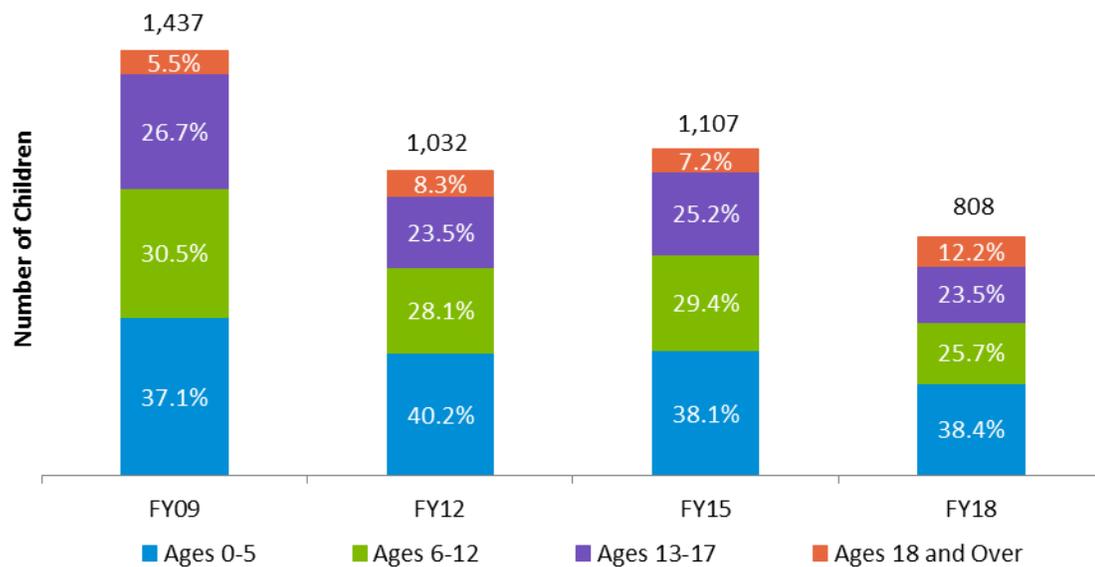
policy opportunity: explore local relationship between poverty and maltreatment

Research has shown, when accounting for income, poverty drives disparities within the child welfare system at higher rates than race. Unfortunately, complaint findings are not reported by race, gender, or socioeconomic status. However, neighborhood-level poverty data is a predictor for child maltreatment reporting. As YFS advances its understanding of racial disparities, collecting and reporting data disaggregated by both race and socioeconomic status are critical to understanding potential biases in the system and where disparities exist.

Decline in children in foster care

Foster care is a temporary living arrangement for abused, neglected, or dependent children in need of a safe place to reside while their parents or relatives are unable to care or provide for them. When YFS believes a child is not safe and a judge has agreed, YFS takes custody of the child and places him or her in a temporary foster home. Figures 7 and 8, graph the age distribution of children in foster care at the local- and state-level respectively. Other than a spike in youth over 18, the age distribution of Mecklenburg youth in custody has remained relatively stable. As children age, finding a stable placement often becomes more difficult.

Figure 7: Children in Foster Care by Age (Mecklenburg County)



policy consideration: extended foster care without representation

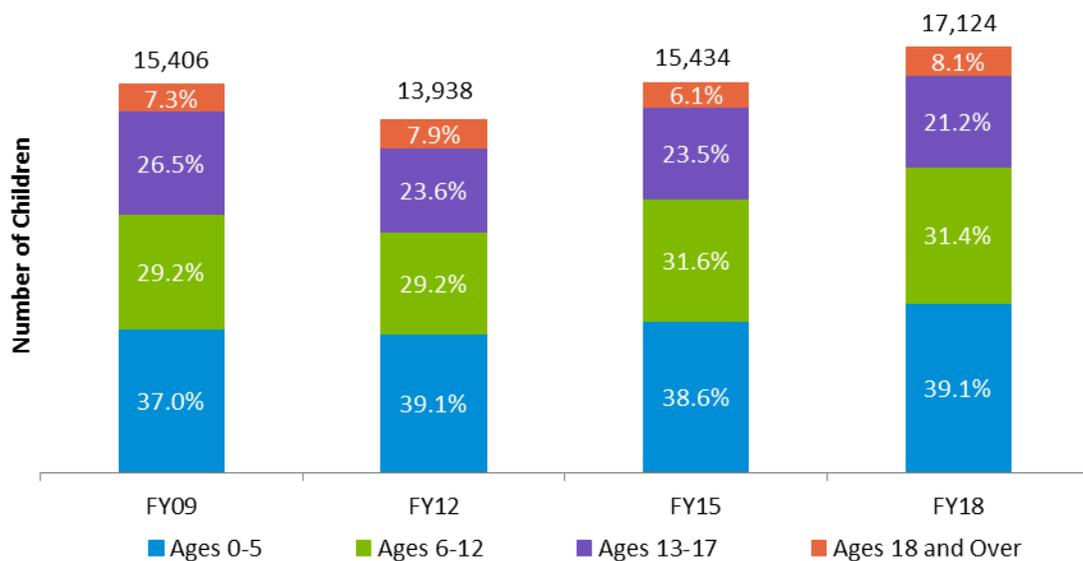
Beginning January 2017, foster care supports were extended to age 21, which means that youth who would have previously aged out of foster care upon their 18th birthday were given the opportunity to enter into a voluntary agreement with county departments to continue receiving benefits. However, they are no longer entitled to a Guardian ad Litem to help ensure those benefits are received.



In FY18, 808 children were placed into foster care, the lowest number in the past 10 years. Despite a slight increase between FY12 and FY15, the number of children taken into YFS custody has decreased 43.8% since FY09. This decline reflects a 2008 federal law requiring YFS to invest in families in two main ways to address abuse, neglect, and dependency: a) utilize community-based services and interventions prior to removal and b) make efforts to place children into kinship care, guardianship, or adoption as opposed to foster care. In the past year, there was a decrease of 9.6% or 86 children in YFS custody.

At the state level, the age distribution of youth in YFS custody is relatively similar but utilization of foster care is quite different. From 2007-08 to 2012-13, the number of children in custody decreased 17.4% (2,902 children), before a steady increase resulted in 24.4% (3,362) more children in care between 2012-13 and FY18.

Figure 8: Children in Foster Care (North Carolina)



policy consideration: Raise the Age and foster care

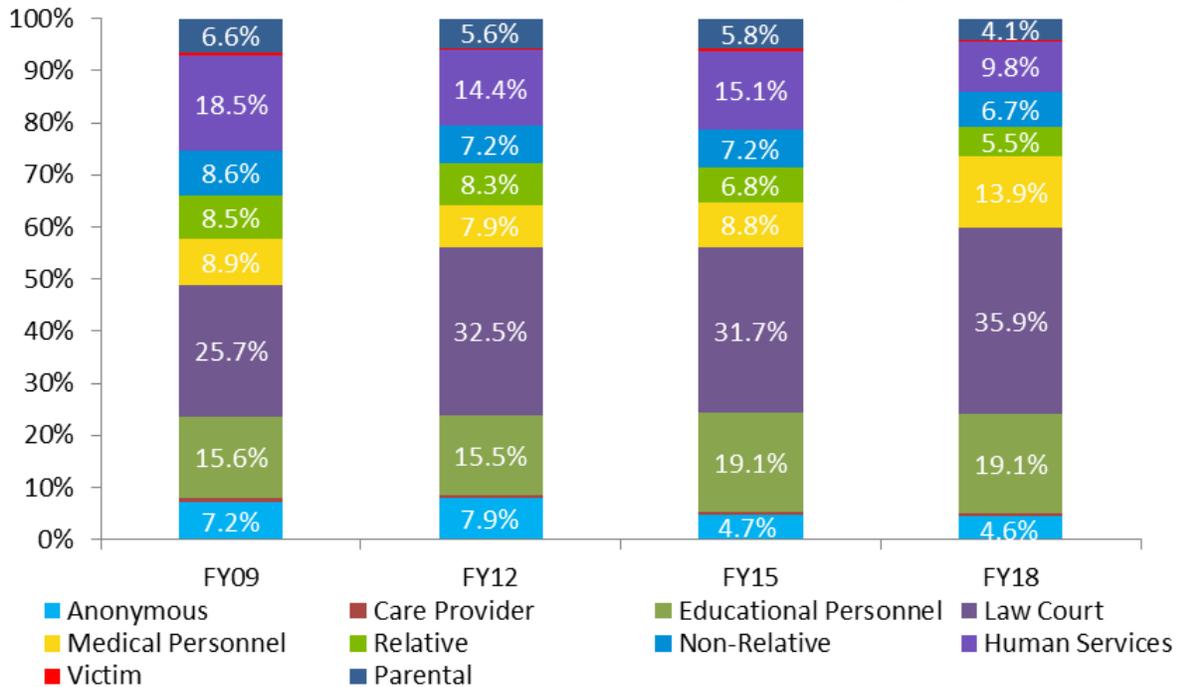
In December 2019, North Carolina will implement Raise the Age legislation, which absorbs 16- and 17-year-olds in the juvenile justice system where they can engage in rehabilitative services with family involvement. Judges in North Carolina have the option to utilize a dispositional alternative to place youth involved in the juvenile justice system in the custody of YFS. Because 16- and 17-year-olds will remain in the juvenile justice system, it is possible judges will place these youth into YFS custody more frequently thereby increasing the number of youth in foster care.

In contrast, in the coming years we anticipate declines in foster care placements due to federal [Family First Prevention Services Act of 2018](#), which calls for funding prevention services that keep children in their homes. Further, legislation encourages the use of kinship care and cuts federal funding for congregate care (e.g., group homes).

Professionals are most likely to report maltreatment

In Mecklenburg County, reports of maltreatment primarily come from the court system and educational personnel, followed by medical personnel and human services. Over the past ten years, reports referred by the court system have increased 60.1% (1,018 reports), medical personnel reports have increased 79.4% (466 reports), and reports by educational personnel increased 40.9% (420 reports). Reports referred anonymously have decreased 27.4% (131 reports), care provider referrals have decreased 37.1% (23 reports), and reports by human services have decreased 39.2% (478 reports). In the past year, care providers and victims themselves accounted for less than 1% of all reports.

Figure 9: Report Referral Sources (Mecklenburg County)



What keeps people from reporting their concern?

Several factors deter people from making a report to YFS, including

- ◆ lack of understanding about the signs and symptoms of abuse or neglect,
- ◆ apprehension about how to report abuse,
- ◆ fear about what will happen once the report is made (e.g., parental reaction, children de-enrolling from programs), and
- ◆ people do not know they can report anonymously.

policy opportunity: explore electronic reporting options

Electronic reporting of child maltreatment through an online portal has been suggested as a way to reduce the burden of reporting on both the reporter and system. In the US, there are 14 states with electronic reporting systems, including Florida, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee in the southeast. In order to successfully implement an electronic reporting system, there must be thoughtful consideration of how reports will be organized and managed. In a pilot of an electronic reporting mechanism in Australia, reporters said the system was easy to use and saved time compared to phone or fax reports; however, electronic reports were not as detailed as those received via fax and were similar to reports received via phone.

Preventing child maltreatment

Strategies	Approaches
Strengthen economic supports to families	<ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ Strengthening household financial security (e.g., affordable housing)◆ Family friendly workplaces
Change social norms to support parents and positive parenting	<ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ Public engagement and education campaigns◆ Legislation to reduce corporal punishment
Quality childcare and early child education	<ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ Preschool with family engagement
Enhance parenting skills to promote health child development	<ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ Early childhood home visitation◆ Parenting skill and family relationship approaches
Intervene to lessen harms and prevent future risk	<ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ Enhanced primary care◆ Behavioral parent training programs◆ Treatment to lessen harms of abuse and neglect exposure◆ Treatment to prevent problem behavior and later involvement in violence

The absence of a maltreatment report or the lack of a substantiated report does not reflect whether a child has a history of trauma or need for services. Some household, parent, and child-level factors increase the likelihood that a maltreatment report will be made, including:

- ◆ Child's low performance on a standardized developmental assessment
- ◆ Maternal education at or less than high school
- ◆ Maternal drug use
- ◆ Maternal depressive symptoms
- ◆ Four or more children in the home

Risk Prevention Services

Universal prevention policies and programs can be put in place to reduce the risk of involvement with the child welfare system, such as anti-poverty programs and family support services. In addition, families who are at an elevated risk for child maltreatment should receive services tailored to their specific needs.

- ◆ High quality early education programs, early intervention programs, and services that identify and address psychosocial needs for families with children who perform low on standardized developmental assessments.
- ◆ Maternal education programs may also help reduce the risk of child maltreatment by providing mothers with greater access to financial and community resources.
- ◆ Adequate and appropriate mental health services are needed to address issues related to both maternal drug use and depression. In addition, low education, drug use, and depression often co-occur and, therefore, services should overlap and be tailored to individual family needs.
- ◆ Education and family planning services are can reduce risk as family issues can be compounded with more children in a home.

A child's low performance on a standardized developmental assessment puts them at a higher risk for experiencing maltreatment. Research has found that low performance is not necessarily related to a developmental disability; therefore, access to high quality early childhood education can reduce this risk. In addition, students with a history of maltreatment are more likely to have academic difficulties (i.e., lower math and reading test scores, being held back a grade). To help address this issue, universal trauma services should be implemented in schools where maltreatment investigations are common.

Definitions and Data Notes:

- ◆ Data contained in this report reflects July 2017 to June 2018 —the most recent publically available information
- ◆ Reports are “investigated reports” and do not include reports that are screened out
- ◆ Reports vs. Children: a report may contain multiple children
- ◆ Caregiver: Parent (biological or adoptive), guardian (appointed by the court), custodian (legal custody granted by court order), caretaker (foster parent/cottage parent, step-parent, adult relative or other adult living in the home)
- ◆ Abused: inflicting physical harm on a child; allowing someone else to inflict physical harm on a child; creating an environment with substantial risk of physical injury; creating or allowing serious emotional damage on a child; encouraging/directing child to commit delinquent acts; commits or allows to be committed an offense against the child related to human trafficking, sexual servitude, or involuntary servitude
- ◆ Neglected: guardian has failed to provide proper care, discipline, supervision, medical attention, or is abandoned
- ◆ Dependent: child needs placement because s/he either has no guardian or the current guardian is unable to provide adequate care/supervision
- ◆ Services needed: similar to what used to be called substantiation; requires involuntary child protective services
- ◆ Services provided-no longer needed: indicates that risk was high enough, at one time, to require involuntary services
- ◆ Substantiation refers to six categories: abuse, neglect, abuse & neglect, dependency, services needed, and services provided-no longer needed
- ◆ Services recommended: when the future risk of harm to the child is found to be low and the recommendations are voluntary
- ◆ Age is measured as the age of a child when first report is received during the year
- ◆ Community Protocol and Multidisciplinary Team participants: Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department and other local law enforcement agencies, Mecklenburg County Youth and Family Services, Safe Alliance, the District Attorney's Office, Guardian Ad Litem program, Levine Children's Hospital Pediatric Resource Center, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, Alexander Youth Network, Thompson Child and Family Focus, and Child Development- Community Policing.

Authors:

Emily R. Tamilin, M.A., *Director of Research & Policy; Council for Children's Rights*

Jaimelee Behrendt-Mihalski, M.A., *Policy Advocate; Council for Children's Rights*

Heather Johnson, JD, MSW, *Director of Operations; Pat's Place Child Advocacy Center*

about this report

The purpose of this document is to compile publicly-available data on child maltreatment to inform concerned stakeholders. It is produced annually for Child Abuse Prevention Month. Council for Children's Rights will continue its endeavor to include additional data points, to diversify data sources, and to interrogate the data more critically. Further, we are committed to using the information to leverage policy considerations and action in our community.

Beginning in 1983, April was nationally designated as Child Abuse Prevention Month. Council for Children's Rights participates on the Mecklenburg County Child Abuse Prevention Team. This collaborative committee spearheads a public awareness campaign to educate the community about mandatory reporting and implements. Part of this campaign involves planting “Pinwheels for Prevention” gardens around the community to ensure that people notice and stand-up for children. As the numbers throughout the report indicate, the majority of child abuse reports come from individuals working directly with children. However, those numbers fail to reflect the true prevalence of abuse and neglect, as they are largely underreported. To ensure every child's safety, the community must be educated on the definitions of child abuse, the signs exhibited by a child who is abused, and the ways in which individuals can intervene to potentially save the life of an abused child.

Protecting children is the responsibility of every adult.

If there is a concern, it needs to be reported to Youth & Family Services at 980-31-HELPS (980.314. 3577).

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Data Source Information

Child maltreatment and foster care data used in this report is from **UNC Chapel Hill Jordan Institute for Families, part of the UNC School of Social Work**. Data is found through the Management Assistance for Child Welfare, Work First, and Food and Nutrition Services in North Carolina and is available for all counties in North Carolina: <http://ssw.unc.edu/ma/>

Population data found in this report is from the US Census Bureau's American Community Survey Office: United States Census Bureau / American FactFinder. 2017 American Community Survey: <http://factfinder.census.gov>.



<https://www.patsplacecac.org/>



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