

## Child maltreatment exacts huge cost

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By Karen Worthington

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recently released a report quantifying the costs of child maltreatment in the United States. That report underscores that child maltreatment is a serious public health issue with financial impacts comparable to a stroke and Type 2 diabetes.



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What the report does not quantify is the loss of a child's innocence. What is the price of the smile on a baby's face when he takes his first steps, or on the 8-year-old who scores her first goal, or on the 12-year-old who wins his class spelling bee? What about the joy and love brought into the lives of family and friends by that child? And what about the loss to all who might have been helped because the abused toddler may have grown up to cure cancer or end child abuse?

Actuarial calculations are useful for placing child maltreatment in the context of other public health and public safety concerns. They serve as a proxy for the lives of children in policy and budget decisions. When the final budget is passed at the end of this legislative session, how will child maltreatment compare with other priorities?

The CDC study examined confirmed new cases of child abuse and neglect in 2008 and estimated that the total lifetime cost for fatal and nonfatal abuse that occurred in 2008 was at least \$124 billion. In addition to medical expenses for the life of the child victim, the calculated costs included expenses of the child welfare, criminal justice and special education systems, as well as productivity losses during the lives of victims. The study's many limitations caused the estimated costs to be quite conservative.

Knowing that the incidence of child maltreatment is much greater than the number of confirmed cases, the study says that the actual cost is closer to \$585 billion instead of \$124 billion.

In 2008, approximately 1,800 Hawaii children were confirmed victims of child maltreatment. Using the CDC calculations, if all these victims lived, the lifetime cost of this abuse will be at least \$378,021,600. Hawaii has already had one child die of abuse this year; the CDC estimates the lifetime cost of that death to be around \$1.3 million.

Our community cannot afford the emotional or financial costs of child abuse. Preventing child abuse is our collective responsibility. The Hawaii Children Trust Fund's One Strong Ohana campaign, launched in January, provides information about how every one of us can help prevent child abuse by increasing the presence of five protective factors in our communities and families. These protective factors act as buffers against child maltreatment: social connections, knowledge of parenting and child development, parental resilience, nurturing and attachment, concrete supports for parents.

Elected officials play a particularly important role in preventing child abuse because the laws they pass define child maltreatment and determine how much the state will spend on prevention and intervention. This session, legislators considered several bills discussing child abuse and neglect, including SB 2404, which would define excessive discipline of a minor.

The Senate Judiciary Committee recently passed SB 2062, which, among other things, prohibits parents from biting, burning, or cutting their children under most circumstances. Last Tuesday alone, the Senate Committee on Human Services discussed more than a dozen bills related to child well-being.

While the role of lawmakers is higher profile than the neighbor who helps an overwhelmed mother with her energetic twins, or the Healthy Start worker who teaches a father how to comfort his crying newborn, each of these people, and you and I, play a critical role in reducing the financial and emotional burdens of child abuse and neglect.