

Hope Shining Bystanders and Child Abuse Survey



**Research initiated and supported by Safe Horizon,
the nation's leading victim assistance organization,
and Capital One, Hope Shining National Sponsor.**

SUMMARY

A new unprecedented survey on bystanders and child abuse reveals that child abuse is rampant in America, and many Americans simply lack the knowledge to stop it.

One out of every five Americans say they have been a victim of child abuse (21%), and 59% say that they know someone who has personally been affected by child abuse. Although nearly all Americans (95%) say they are concerned about child abuse, the numbers demonstrate that people do not get involved.

The survey reveals that a significant **lack of knowledge about the signs of abuse, fear of consequences** and **uncertainty about reporting** are chief among the reasons why the majority of people do not report suspected child abuse or get involved.

FINDINGS

Child abuse is a very personal issue for Americans, who express grave concern about the problem.

- 59% personally know someone who has been a child abuse victim.
- 21% admit that they were abused as a child.
- 19% have a relative who has been a child abuse victim.
- 95% say they are concerned about child abuse, and 97% believe that everyone has a responsibility to protect children and prevent child abuse.

Despite their personal experiences and overwhelming concern, many Americans simply do not get involved or contact authorities.

- When actually confronted with suspected child abuse, only 6% of Americans said they contacted authorities, 6% contacted the police, and 19% contacted child protection services.
- When asked what actions a person can take to help stop child abuse, 48% say they would not go to the authorities, contact the police, or contact child protection services.
- More than one in four Americans (26%) say they have been in situations where they suspected a child has been a victim of child abuse but didn't know what to do.
- One-third (33%) say people are reluctant to report suspected cases because they do not want to get involved.

Many Americans cannot identify the warning signs of child abuse.

- 72% say it is difficult to identify child abuse. In fact, a majority (52%) say it is extremely difficult.
- 42% say they suspected child abuse has occurred but just weren't sure.
- Fewer than 10% can identify the following important signs of child abuse:

- deteriorating school performance
- child looks dirty/unkempt or has bad hygiene
- child has fear of going home or being alone with certain adults
- return to earlier behaviors (e.g. thumb sucking, bed-wetting; fear of dark)
- changes in eating and weight gain or loss
- Americans narrowly define child abuse as either physical abuse (75%) or mental/emotional abuse (64%). Less than 20% cite sexual abuse (18%), neglect (14%), harming/mistreating a child (10%) or withholding food (6%).
- Half of Americans (50%) incorrectly believe that physical evidence of abuse can be found in the majority of child abuse cases.

Fear of consequences is a key reason why Americans do not get involved.

- 38% of Americans cite fear as a reason why people might be reluctant to report suspected cases of child abuse: fear of reprisals/or being sued (16%); fear they could be wrong and/or labeled as an abuser (16%); and a simple general fear of what would happen if they did get involved (6%).

Uncertainty about the process of reporting also stops people from getting involved.

- 46% incorrectly believe that children reported to the state child protection authorities are automatically taken away from their family.
- 38% do not know that people can report suspected child abuse anonymously. However, 80% would be more likely to report abuse knowing they could report anonymously.

THE “BYSTANDER ACTION GAP”

- 78% say that suspected abuse is enough of a reason to contact the authorities, but only 12% of Americans said they contacted authorities or the police, and only 19% contacted child protection services.
- 97% of Americans say that everyone has a responsibility to prevent child abuse and protect children, but 33% say people are reluctant to report suspected cases because they do not want to get involved.
- 77% of Americans say they are knowledgeable about the warning signs of child Abuse, but actually fewer than 10% can identify these signs known to be associated with child abuse:
 - affect on school performance
 - child is not properly cared for (looks dirty/unkempt or bad hygiene)
 - fear of going home or being alone with certain adults
 - return/regress to earlier behaviors (e.g. thumb sucking, bed-wetting, fear of dark)
 - changes in eating/weight gain or loss; and changes in sleeping

METHODOLOGY

These survey results are based on a nationally representative and Census balanced telephone poll conducted in March 2008 among 511 adults 18 years of age or older. The study was commissioned by Safe Horizon and was conducted by Penn, Schoen and Berland Associates. The margin of error for the study is +/- 4.3 percentage points. All results are from a Census-balanced, nationally representative RDD telephone sample of 500 American adults 18 years of age and older. Poll results match U.S. demographics on gender, geography, age, income and race.