



Child Welfare Case Worker Safety: 2012 Incidents, Ten-Year Trends, and Recommendations

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While attempting to protect children and support families, child welfare case workers may face threats to their safety. Interactions with angry and sometimes violent clients can and often will happen during investigation, assessment and placement. Children services employees, both on-site and in the field, are vulnerable and at-risk of having their personal safety compromised. Several factors that contribute to increased concerns for worker safety are a collapse of family structure, mental health, substance abuse, poor housing conditions/neighborhood, and general discontent with the agency/system.

On October 16, 2001, Nancy Fitzgivens, a case worker with Franklin County Children Services, was murdered in the line of duty during a home visit. In response to this tragedy, statewide intervention was implemented. Public Children Services Association of Ohio drafted Safety Standards that were linked to the Council on Accreditation and Ohio Administrative Code. PCSAO's Human Resources Committee was also expanded to include safety issues. Staff safety training has been continually provided to county children services employees. In addition, Critical Safety Incidents have been reported to PCSAO quarterly and summarized. This report presents the trend in critical safety incidents by county public children services agencies in 2012 and recommendations to enhance safety for child welfare workers.

Safety Incident Trend in 2012

Incidents Occurred in All Regions of the State

In total, 254 safety incidents occurred in Ohio. There are more safety incidents in larger counties. Larger populations in metro counties may contribute to higher caseload and more complex situations caseworkers need to face. However, despite the higher percentage of safety incidents reported in urban areas, the unique challenges workers face in rural areas cannot be underestimated. Increasing rural poverty, substance abuse and mental health rates give rise to workers' safety concerns in smaller counties.

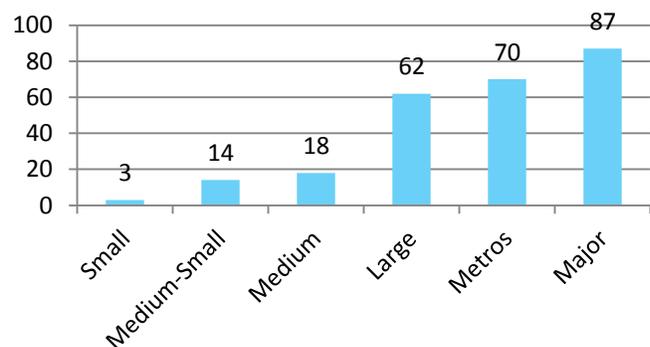
Facebook as an Emerging Means of Threat

Verbal/Written Threats of Harm and Verbal Aggression are the two most prevalent modes of striking out. However, the popularity of social media has led to a new type of threat to case workers' safety. This new trend calls for raising workers' awareness of safety and updating safety training.

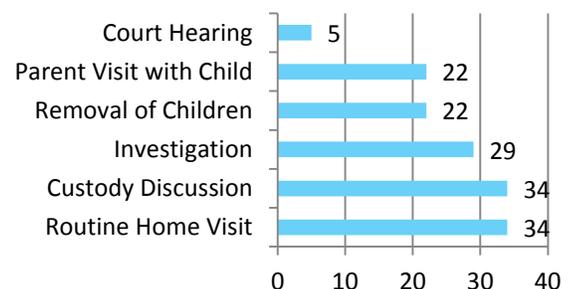
Client (Adult) Predominantly as the Aggressor

Client (Adult) has been reported as the alleged offender in 151 out of 254 incidents. Incidents do not necessarily occur in clients' homes, but also in agencies, providers' agencies or via phone/e-mail. There is no predominant incident trigger. They can happen in the process of routine home visits, custody discussion, removal of children, parent visit with children, or court hearing.

Number of Safety Incidents by CPOE Size in 2012



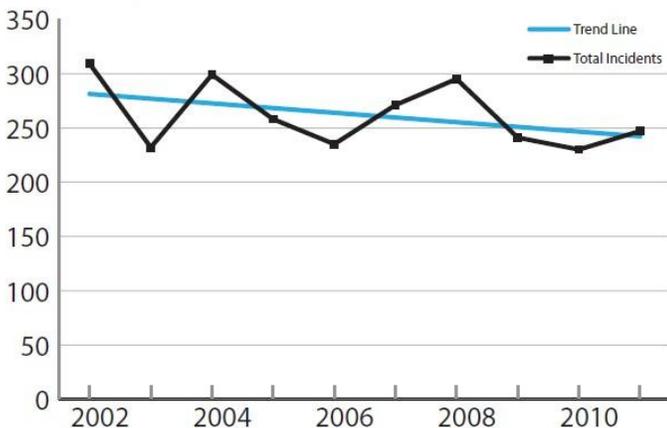
Incident Trigger in 2012



Law Enforcement Involvement as a Major Response Strategy

In 71 out of 254 incidents, law enforcement of local jurisdiction was contacted or law enforcement intervention was called for. There were 9 charges filed against alleged offenders.

Total Safety Incidents Reported



Ten-Year Trend

From 2002 to 2011, the number of annual safety incidents reported decreased, ranging from 309 in 2002 to 230 in 2010. On average, approximately 255 safety incidents have been annually reported over the past ten years. The number of safety incidents reported in 2012 (254) is not significantly different from the average number (255).

The ten-year trend also shows that verbal/written threats and verbal aggression are two predominant types of safety incidents. But threats on Facebook or via e-mail account for an emerging incident type in 2012. (Analysis and graphs courtesy of Matt Bird, PCSAO Special Projects Manager.)

Recommendations

- 1) **Worker safety trainings that address the mode of threat via social media like Facebook:** Workers need to be aware of the tools and skills to assess, cope with and appropriately respond to threats via social media.
- 2) **More integrated collaboration between children services and law enforcement to ensure workers' safety:** Child welfare agencies and law enforcement may have written agreements that describe in detail how and when workers should call for emergency assistance.
- 3) **Supervision as the safety net for frontline child welfare workers:** Supervisors serve as an important source of support for workers in the field, so ensuring quality supervision concerning safety issues helps enhance workers' coping strategies for safety incidents.
- 4) **Increase case workers' awareness of dangers in the workplace:** Be aware of indicators of various danger and all types of weapons. Weapons range from bomb threats and knives to chairs and bow and arrows. The alleged offender is not necessarily clients. Dog bites have been a frequently reported incident.

Safety Incidents by type - percentages

