



APPROXIMATION TO FAMILY PROFILE AND AREA OF ORIGIN OF CHILDREN PRESUMED TO BE VICTIMS OF PHYSICAL ABUSE: THE BLUE LINE

By Emma Baráibar

*Deputy Director General for Technical Assistance
National Institute for Minors*

The present study is an effort to systematize the working team of the Blue Line.

This Program formally began operations on February 26 of this year, after more than twenty years of professional accumulation and positioning at the Study and Referral Division as an institutional reference in the community for handling reports of Child Abuse.

We define PHYSICAL ABUSE as “all non-accidental acts by an adult that cause a child physical harm or illness, or that place the child in a situation of vulnerability as the result of intentional negligence.”

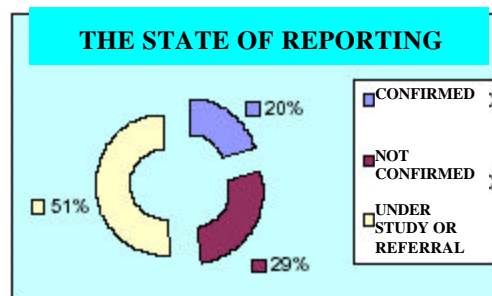
This study is based on a sample of 40% of reports of PHYSICAL ABUSE received, which in turn constitute 25% of all abuse reports received.

Of all reports received, 80% are from Montevideo and 20% from the Interior of the country.

The present study includes only reports from Montevideo, and thus we can say that this sample is 50% of reports of PHYSICAL ABUSE received in the capital.

Of these reports, 29 % are not confirmed; 21 % are confirmed. 50% of the reports

where abuse is suspected are still being studied by the Blue Line, or have been referred to other services.



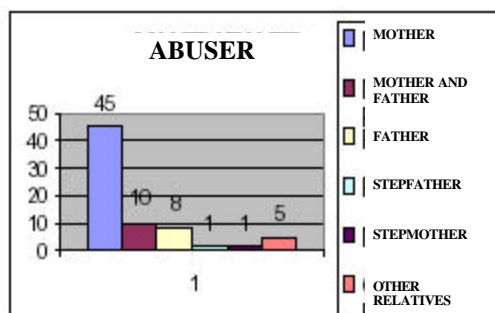
We understand a situation to be confirmed when there are physical and behavioral injuries on the child, resulting from the impact of a violent act. A situation is not confirmed when this impact does not exist.

Abuse is suspected when there are no injuries on the child that point to abuse, but there are indicators of excessive, recurring corporal punishment.

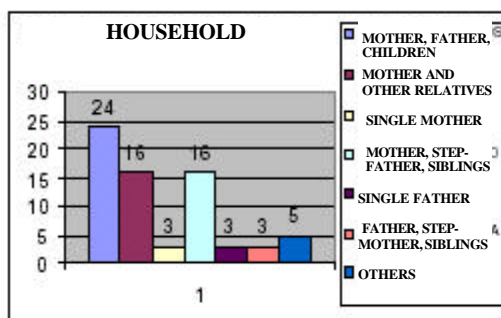
These indicators emerge from the statements of the child and/or referring adults, as well as the child's social, family and institutional context.

It should be noted that children are often subjected to more than one kind of abuse.

In 64% of cases, the mother is reported as the central player in the violent scenario (see graphs on abuser and household). The mother is present in 84 % of households. There are very few cases in which the mother is absent.



The father, who is present in 39 % of households, is reported as an abuser in only 26% of cases.



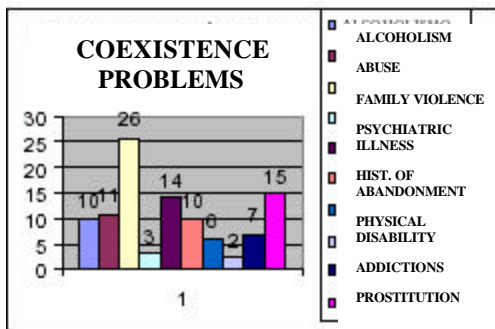
Here, we face one of the many dilemmas in the complex issue of abuse: the paradox of someone who biologically and socially engages in abusive behavior, against the expectations of protection and care that pertain to someone who is responsible for a human being that is dependent during the early stages of life.

The fact that women are more widely reported could be a response to social values, such as the association of the use of force with masculinity.

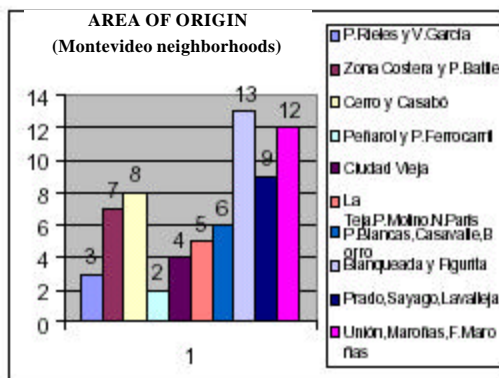
The social reaction is not the same when it is a woman engaging in violent acts; the questioning would thus be greater, as she is not responding to the expectations that are held for the role of mother.

Relating this graph to that of "Coexistence Problems", "domestic violence" appears as one of the greatest incidence which makes us presume the existence of family contexts of dominance and of discrimination against the child and also against the abusive mother.

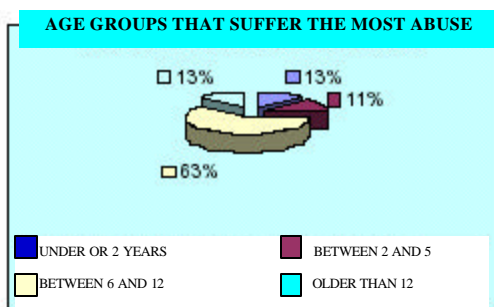
Also appearing in the family are other contexts that promote or advance violence, such as "a history of abandonment" – mothers and fathers who were themselves abused as children. Other causes associated with child abuse are alcoholism, other addictions, and physical or mental disabilities in the child's referring adults or a member of his or her household.



As we can see on the graph, the highest percentages of reported children come from underprivileged areas; however, the corresponding graph also shows that there is a significant number of reports in middle- and upper-class areas of Montevideo as well. This tendency would seem to ratify the idea that abuse crosses all social strata.



From the very beginning of the Blue Line's implementation, and in the present study as well, it has been found that the age group most vulnerable to abuse is that of children between the ages of 6 and 12.



This age group coincides with school age. From the psychological point of view, this is a stage where the child goes from a state of total dependence to one of progressive independence, where the norms and values taught by parents are questioned, as well as the behavior resulting from that belief system. Reports are frequently made in a quest to obtain support from the people with whom they interact.

This is the stage of the life cycle in which children begin to voluntarily form wider groups at the school level, as well as among their relatives and neighbors.

Witnesses and those who report situations of abuse are, as we have seen above, usually neighbors, or family friends. Paradoxically, there is a very small amount of information coming from professional teachers who interact with the children.

As explained above, the greatest amount of information on abuse comes from ordinary citizens. This leads us to presume that there is a growing sensitization about child abuse situations, with civil society taking the responsibility for informing the competent bodies about these situations.

Neighbors and acquaintances are witnesses of this violence, and take up a position that could lead to a change in the child's situation of vulnerability, while also committing to this change.

We are facing a change of paradigms; ordinary people are venturing to report situations that have to do with "family privacy" according to the **best interests**. The Blue Line is an easily-accessible these situations, and could also operate as

an element to control and impede violence in the private family sphere.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Violence is a cultural constant in our history with a marked domination of the authoritarian patriarchal model, which from the earliest age we receive unconsciously as members of this society.

Inadequate child-rearing techniques, passed from generation to generation, along with the perception of children as objects, instead of subjects that hold rights.

Family violence is one of the most present problems, and the mother is the one who is most often reported as the abuser. In her children, she finds a way to channel the violence that she commits.

1.- We understand education to be the instrument for prevention *par excellence*, which will contribute to decreasing violence against children and adolescents.

This is a task that must be carried out by Centers and Institutions in which children participate, as well as Day Care centers, elementary and secondary education institutions, neighborhood centers, sports centers, etc.

This task must be focused on the family, in accordance with the stage of the vital cycle being experienced by the child-family.

Instruments must be developed and multiplied, including Parenting Schools, Training Workshops, Environments for Reflection, etc. carried out in a systematic manner on the basis of working plans.

The contents would be aimed at dissemination of the rights and responsibilities of children and adolescents, information on the importance of satisfying their need for affection, the importance of health care, the importance of play, their right to be heard and respected, the importance of sharing, etc.

2.- Once abuse has been established, the promotion, creation and support of existing specialized child and family treatment institutions are extremely important, as a valid alternative to the separation of the child from his or her family.

The creation of networks in the field of children and adolescents, and their linking with existing network will contribute to maximizing resources, and will work as regulators for the situations in which abuse has been suspected or confirmed.