

# Are Universal Mandatory Reporting policies effective in identifying child physical abuse?

HO, G. W., GROSS, D. A., & BETTENCOURT, A. (2017). UNIVERSAL MANDATORY REPORTING POLICIES AND THE ODDS OF IDENTIFYING CHILD PHYSICAL ABUSE. *AMERICAN JOURNAL OF PUBLIC HEALTH*, 107(5), 709-716.

## What can we learn from this study?

Keeping children safe and preventing maltreatment is a critical public health issue. In 2018, child protection agencies received approximately [4.3 million referrals alleging maltreatment involving 7.8 million children](#). Eighteen states and Puerto Rico have Universal Mandatory Reporting (UMR) policies, requiring all citizens to report suspected maltreatment. This study examined the efficacy of UMR policies in identifying victims of physical abuse.

### Study details:

- **Population:** 204,414 children reported for physical abuse (as the sole allegation), from 43 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico
- **Data source:** National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) child file
- **Methodology:** descriptive statistics, bivariate analyses, and hierarchical logistic regression
- **Dates:** 2013 fiscal year

## What are the critical findings?

Rates of reported and confirmed physical abuse did not differ between states with and without UMR. However, states with UMR had higher rates of unconfirmed physical abuse.

- Overall, the **percentage of confirmed physical abuse reports was lower in UMR states** (11.9%) than in states without UMR policies (13.9%).
- Although UMR policies may result in a higher number of reports overall, there was **no difference in the rate of confirmed physical abuse reports in states with UMR policies** compared to those without UMR policies.
- In states with UMR policies, a **higher percentage of nonprofessionals were more likely to make reports** (19.5% compared to 14.0%). However, controlling for child and caregiver characteristics, **the probability of confirming reports of physical abuse by nonprofessionals was lower in states with UMR policies** compared to those without (6.6% compared to 12.0%).

## Why is this important for our work?

Given the lower rates of confirmed physical abuse victimization among reports made in UMR states, the researchers conclude UMR is not achieving their intended goal of improving the identification of physical abuse in children, and in fact may be diverting resources from children and families and causing them unnecessary additional trauma. Educating the public and providing training around abuse identification, along with [investing in prevention](#), may be a more effective strategy to protect children from physical abuse than legally mandated reporting.

This summary synthesizes the findings of a single research study. To learn more, please review additional resources on cross-team collaboration and child welfare, including: [Why do medical providers and child protection agencies need to improve communication?](#) and [How can helplines serve as a better pathway for families to access support?](#)

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