

# Children of Migrant Farm Work Families Are at High Risk for Maltreatment: New York State Study

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**Abstract:** Utilizing a crosstabulation between data collected by the Migrant Student Records Transfer System and the New York State Central Register, it was determined that 298 of the 7,408 migrant children, age 18 years or younger, censused in 1982 were on

file as having been maltreated in 1982. This rate, 40.2 per 1,000, is substantially higher than the rate found for upstate New York children (5.5). Maltreatment rates also varied by migrant status and household composition. (*Am J Public Health* 1988; 78:934-936.)

## Introduction

Despite the existence of child maltreatment in all segments of our society, it has been argued that family stress associated with various socioeconomic factors is a major determinant of its incidence.<sup>1-3</sup> Thus migrant farm work families, whose stressful conditions of life have been documented,<sup>4-6</sup> might exhibit elevated incidence rates of child maltreatment. The Texas Migrant Council<sup>7</sup> attempted to address child maltreatment in migrant families utilizing a case study approach but did not determine whether migrant families were at greater risk than the population at large. A more recent effort,<sup>8</sup> utilizing a survey of migrant educators throughout 14 states of the Eastern Migrant Stream, found a substantially higher rate of child maltreatment among migrant farm work families as compared to the rate observed for the general population; however, these data reflected the perceptions of migrant educators.

The existence of a computerized New York State (NYS) Central Register for Child Abuse and an annual census by the NYS Education Department of the children of migrant farm work families made a determination of documented cases of migrant maltreatment readily feasible. Furthermore, the federal categorization of migrant workers into interstate, intrastate, and resettled migrants, as well as various demographic information on the families available in both data sources, permitted an examination of various subcategories of migrant families for differential levels of risk.

## Method

### New York State Central Register (SCR)

The New York State Central Register (SCR) is a computerized information management system<sup>9</sup> for receiving reports, monitoring investigations, and maintaining data on all verified cases of child maltreatment in New York State since 1974. Data on unverified cases are expunged from the records. For those cases in which maltreatment is indicated, the SCR maintains information on: the name, birthday, relation (sibling vs parent), sex, ethnicity and role in the maltreatment incident for all household members, the source, date and nature of allegations, and the status of the case along with any cross-references to other cases involving any of the subjects or perpetrators.

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### Migrant School Records Transfer System (MSRTS)

The New York State Bureau of Migrant Education annually compiles a census of all migrant children within the state. Personnel familiar with the local migrant community, often former migrants themselves, go into the community to identify children of migrant families. The names, birth dates, sex, primary language, address, and migrant status of each family member is collected on a census sheet for each family. The census information from each state is incorporated into the Migrant Student Record Transfer System (MSRTS), a national centralized computerized tracking system which forwards health and educational information to the local education agency. An independent evaluation of MSRTS indicates that it successfully identifies the majority of migrant children.<sup>9</sup>

To be included in the MSRTS census, a child must be less than 21 years of age and have moved from one school district to another during the past five years so that the child, or a member in the child's family, could seek or acquire temporary or seasonal employment in agricultural, fishing, or related food processing activities. A further classification is made based on the family's rate and type of mobility. The three major classifications are:

- *Interstate*—having moved across state boundaries within the year;
- *Intrastate*—having moved within the state in the current year;
- *Resettled*—having ceased to migrate within the past five years but still involved in agricultural labor.

### Subject Sample

The New York State migrant population censused in 1982 consisted of 7,869 children from 2,939 families. The median age of the children was 8 years; 52 per cent were male. A majority of the children (78 per cent) were members of dual adult-headed households.\* The largest population (56 per cent) of the families were classified as resettled migrants. The majority (54 per cent) of all study families were involved in some aspect of dairy farming, although the interstate migrants were predominantly (77 per cent) involved in the fruit or vegetable harvest.

### Procedure

The migrant census forms were coded and computer sorted by name and birthday to check for duplicate counts. SCR personnel were then provided with coded census forms. The names, birth dates, and other family information were then cross-tabulated with the child maltreatment files. Per-

\*The census forms did not clearly indicate whether the adults listed were the biological parents, nor did they indicate the marital status of the adults.

**TABLE 1—Incidence of Maltreatment in New York State and the Migrant Community, 1982**

	Children Maltreated	All Children under 18 years	Incidence Rate per 1,000
Migrants	298	7,408	40.2
New York State	29,609	4,687,863*	6.3
Upstate New York	16,107	2,922,396*	5.5

\*From 1980 Census. Allowance for the projected population decline from 1980 to 1982 would result in corrected incidence rate of 6.6 per 1,000 for the State, an increase that is probably more than offset by the fact that the SCR figures on maltreated children include a small percentage of duplicate counts.

tinent case history data from the SCR were recorded for children whose identifying information confirmed appearance in both the SCR and census files. Names and birthdays of indicated cases were again checked for duplicate counts.

### Results

In New York State law, the definition of a maltreated child includes an upper age limit of 18 years. We therefore limited our first analysis to migrant children less than 18 years of age. Of the 7,408 such migrant children in New York State, 298 of them were listed in the SCR as verified instances of child maltreatment during the year 1982 (Table 1), an incidence rate of 40.2 per 1,000 per person years. Migrant children were at six times greater risk for maltreatment than other children in the state. The incidence rates for all NYS and for upstate NYS children<sup>9</sup> are slightly inflated because of the way SCR compiles its counts; a child who was involved in more than one case of maltreatment is counted each time, resulting in duplication. In contrast, in the migrant data, each child was counted only once regardless of the number of cases in which s/he might appear. If corrected, this would increase the disparity between the incidence rate for migrants and other NYS children.

An incidence rate of 14.1 per 1,000 was obtained for interstate migrants. This is markedly below that of the re-settled (43.5) and intrastate (60.2) migrants. However, when the incidence rate for interstate migrants is adjusted by a factor of three to account for their short stay in the state (four out of 12 months), their rate increases to 42.3. This incidence rate more closely approximates the incidence rate obtained for resettled migrants. Such a correction also increases the estimated incidence rate for the overall group of migrants from 40 to 46 per 1,000.

A comparison of allegations for migrant children and children of upstate NY is presented in Table 2. The patterns of allegations for the two groups are strikingly similar. A further summing of allegations by categorization of abuse and neglect reflects a similar breakdown between migrant cases (31 per cent abuse, 69 per cent neglect) and upstate cases (33 per cent abuse, 67 per cent neglect) of maltreatment. The SCR does not supply allegation data on only verified cases. However, it is reasonable to assume that the pattern of allegations for upstate NYS reported cases would not be markedly different from the pattern of allegations for upstate verified cases.

We also examined the source of reports, e.g., mandated (required by law to report: teachers, health and child care service providers, etc.) vs nonmandated (relatives, friends, etc.). There was an identical ratio of 59 per cent (mandated) vs 41 per cent (nonmandated) for both migrant and total SCR cases.

**TABLE 2—Maltreatment Allegations Reported to the New York State Central Register in 1982**

Type of Allegation	Migrant Children <sup>a</sup>		Upstate Children <sup>b</sup>	
	Number	Per Cent	Number	Per Cent
DOA/Fatality	0	0.0	56	0.1
Fractures	2	0.4	305	0.4
Subdural Hematoma	3	0.6	93	0.1
Lacerations, bruises, welts	37	7.6	7,370	9.9
Burns, scalding	8	1.6	773	1.0
Sexual abuse	20	4.0	2,394	3.2
Excessive corporal punishment	78	15.7	12,694	17.1
Child's drug/alcohol use	4	0.8	933	1.3
Drug withdrawal	0	0.0	52	0.1
Lack of medical care	16	3.2	2,280	3.1
Malnutrition, failure to thrive	0	0.0	207	0.3
Inadequate guardianship, other	175	35.2	28,625	38.5
Educational neglect	19	3.8	2,038	2.7
Emotional neglect	6	1.2	1,428	1.9
Lack of food, clothing, shelter	62	12.5	5,604	7.5
Lack of supervision	67	13.5	9,408	12.7
Abandonment	0	0.0	88	0.1
Totals	497 <sup>c</sup>	100.0	74,348 <sup>c</sup>	100.0

a) This includes allegations received on only verified cases of maltreatment opened in 1982 that involve migrant subject children.

b) The source of this information is a set of special tabulations prepared for the ESCAPE Project by SCR personnel and is based on all reports i.e., indicated and unfounded.

c) The total number of allegations is greater than the number of children involved because there can be multiple allegations for each child.

Further analyses examined the role of migrant status and family structure in relation to the incidence of maltreatment. To maximize sample size, all migrant families involved in an indicated case of child maltreatment at any time from 1974 through 1982, the years the SCR was in operation, were utilized.

This resulted in 465 families with 1,197 children involved in indicated cases of child maltreatment in the period 1974–82. Of these 465 families, 437 had complete data and are categorized by family structure and migrant status in Table 3. While there was an overall greater incidence rate among single parents, there was an almost doubled rate of maltreatment (34.5 per cent) among single parent intrastate migrant families as compared to those with two adults (18.1 per cent).

### Discussion

The results of this study clearly support the hypothesis of a higher incidence of child abuse and neglect among

**TABLE 3—Families with Children Maltreated between 1974 and 1982 by Migrant Status and Family Structure**

Migrant Status	Single Parent Families		Two Parent Families	
	Number <sup>a</sup>	Per Cent	Number <sup>a</sup>	Per Cent
Interstate	6 (172)	3.5	20 (494)	4.0
Intrastate	20 (58)	34.5	102 (564)	18.1
Resettled	83 (315)	26.3	206 (1213)	17.0
Total	109 (545)	19.8	328 (2271)	14.4

a) This is the number of migrant families in a category with at least one maltreated child, while the figure in parentheses is the total number of families in the category.

migrant farm work families in New York State than in the state's population as a whole. There were no differences found in the nature of allegations made (abuse vs neglect) and the source of the report (legally mandated vs nonmandated). This suggests that differential reporting does not account for the increased incidence rate found among the migrant community.

Although the nature of the current data did not lend itself to a determination of risk factors, the results suggest that the migrant lifestyle, with its fewer social resources,<sup>11</sup> places children at higher risk. The rate among intrastate migrants is highest (60.2). In New York State, interstate migrant families with children tend to travel in groups comprised of extended family members. Oftentimes, an older male in the family functions as the crew boss. Resettled migrants tend to settle into closely knit communities of related families or long-time friends. In contrast to those groups, intrastate migrants, who are predominantly dairy-farm workers in upstate New York, tend to travel in isolated nuclear families. This suggests that these migrants have fewer social resources upon which to draw. This presumed lack of resources associated with being an intrastate migrant would appear to be compounded among single parent families. The highest rate of maltreatment was found among single parent intrastate migrant families.

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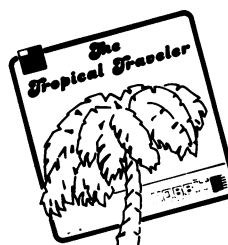
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