

PREVENTING CHILD DEATHS IN MISSOURI



**The Missouri Child Fatality Review Program
Annual Report for 2003**





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Preventing Child Deaths in Missouri

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Table of Contents

MISSOURI CHILD FATALITY REVIEW PROGRAM	1
State Statutes	2
The Practical Application of Child Death Review Prevention of Child Fatalities	3
SECTION ONE: MISSOURI INCIDENT FATALITIES	6
Summary of Findings: Missouri Incident Fatalities, 2003	8
Prevention Findings: The Final Report	10
SECTION TWO: ILLNESS/NATURAL CAUSE DEATHS	13
All Illness/Natural Cause Fatalities	13
Fetal and Infant Mortality Review in Missouri	16
SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome)	18
SECTION THREE: UNINTENTIONAL INJURY DEATHS	25
Motor Vehicle Fatalities	25
Driver and Passenger Fatalities	27
Pedestrian Fatalities	28
Bicycle-related Fatalities and All-Terrain Vehicle Fatalities	29
Keeping Children Safe In and Around Motor Vehicles	31
Unintentional Suffocation/Strangulation	32
Fire/Burn Fatalities	36
Drownings	41
Unintentional Firearm Fatalities	45
SECTION FOUR: INTENTIONAL INJURY DEATHS	48
Homicides	48
Fatal Child Abuse and Neglect	50
Other Homicides	60
Suicides	63
SECTION FIVE: APPENDICES	67
Appendix One: Autopsies	67
Appendix Two: Mandated Activities for Child Fatalities	68
Appendix Three: Review Process	69
Appendix Four: Missouri Incident Child Fatalities by County 2001-2003	70
Appendix Five: Missouri Incident Child Fatalities by Age, Sex and Race 2001-2003	73
Appendix Six: Definitions of Important Terms and Variables	74
Appendix Seven: Death Certificate Manner of Death	77

Dedication

This report reflects the work of many dedicated professionals throughout the state of Missouri. Through better understanding of how and why children die, we strive to improve and protect the lives of Missouri's youngest citizens. We will always remember that each number represents a precious life lost. We dedicate this report to these children and their families.

MISSOURI CHILD FATALITY REVIEW PROGRAM

Child Fatality Review in Missouri

Death rates for infants, children, and teens are widely recognized as valuable measures of child well-being, particularly when viewed within the context of a decade of demographic changes in our state. However, it is the accuracy of key factors associated with child deaths that provides the basis for identifying vulnerable children and responding in ways that will protect and improve their lives. In 1995, the U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect concluded that child abuse and neglect fatalities, and other serious and fatal injuries to children could not be significantly reduced or prevented without more complete information about why these deaths occur and how such tragedies might be avoided. It was widely acknowledged that many child abuse and neglect deaths were underreported and/or misclassified. Scholars, professionals, and officials around the nation had agreed that a system of comprehensive Child Death Review Teams could make a major difference. In 1991, Missouri had initiated the most comprehensive child fatality review system in the nation, designed to produce an accurate picture of each child death, as well as a database providing ongoing surveillance of all childhood fatalities. The Missouri Child Fatality Review Program (CFRP) was presented in the Advisory Board's report as a state of the art model. While the program has evolved and adapted to meet new challenges, the objectives have remained the same-identifying potentially fatal risks to infants and children, and responding with multi-level prevention strategies.

In Missouri, all fatality data is collected by means of standardized forms and entered into a database. What is learned can be used immediately by the community where the death occurred. The sum of statewide data is used to identify trends and patterns requiring systemic solutions. The Missouri Child Fatality Review Program has succeeded in remaining effective, relevant and sustainable over 10 years. The success of the program is due in large part to the support of panel members, administrators and other professionals who do this difficult work voluntarily, because they understand its importance. This work is a true expression of advocacy for children and families in our state.

Missouri legislation requires that every county in our state (including the City of St. Louis) establish a multidisciplinary panel to examine the deaths of all children under the age of 18. If the death meets specific criteria, or if requested by the coroner/medical examiner, it is referred to the county's multidisciplinary CFRP panel. The minimum core panel for each county includes: Coroner/Medical Examiner, Law Enforcement, Family Court, Emergency Medical Services, Prosecutor, Public Health and Children's Division. Optional members may be added at the discretion of the panel. The panels do **not** act as investigative bodies. Their purpose is to enhance the knowledge base of the mandated investigators and to evaluate the potential service and prevention interventions for the family and community.

Of all child deaths in Missouri, about 1200 deaths annually, approximately one-third merit review. To come under review, the cause of the child's death must be unclear, unexplained, or of a suspicious circumstance. All sudden, unexplained deaths of infants one week to one year of age, are required to be reviewed by the CFRP panel. (This is the only age group for which an autopsy is mandatory.)

STATE TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE TEAM AND CHILD FATALITY REVIEW PROGRAM

Missouri State Statutes

- Section 210.150 and 210.152 (Confidentiality and Reporting of Child Fatalities)
- Section 210.192 and 210.194 (Child Fatality Review Panels)
- Section 210.195 (State Technical Assistance Team - duties)
- Section 210.196 (Child Death Pathologists)
- Section 211.321; 219.061 (Accessibility of juvenile records for child fatality review)
- Section 194.117 (Sudden Infant Death); infant autopsies
- Section 58.452 and 58.722 (Coroner/Medical Examiners responsibilities regarding child fatality review)

Confidentiality Issues (RSMo 210.192 to 210.196)

A proper Child Fatality Review Program (CFRP) review of a child death requires a thorough examination of all relevant data, including historical information concerning the deceased child and his/her family. Much of this information is protected from disclosure by law, especially medical and child abuse/neglect information. Therefore, CFRP panel meetings are always closed to the public and cannot be lawfully conducted unless the public is excluded. Each CFRP panel member should confine his or her public statements only to the fact that the panel met and that each panel member was charged to implement their own statutory mandates.

In no case, should any other information about the case or CFRP panel discussions be disclosed. All CFRP panel members who are asked to make a public statement should refer such inquiries to the panel spokesperson. Failure to observe this procedure may violate Children's Division regulations, as well as state and federal confidentiality statutes that contain penalties.

Individual disciplines (coroner/medical examiners, sheriff departments, prosecuting attorneys, etc.) can still make public statements consistent with their individual agency's participation in the investigation, as long as they do not refer to the specific details discussed at the CFRP panel meeting.

No CFRP panel member is prohibited from making public statements about the general purpose, nature or effects of the CFRP process. Panel members should also be aware that the legislation which established the CFRP panels provides official immunity to all panel participants.

The Practical Application of Child Death Review: Prevention of Child Fatalities

Overview

Injuries continue to be the leading cause of death among children in the United States and the majority of fatal and near-fatal injuries are unintentional or “accidents.” In the past, most people believed that serious and fatal injuries were random or unavoidable events, or simply the result of individual carelessness. Fortunately, the science of injury prevention has moved away from this fatalistic approach to one that focuses on the environment and products used by the public, as well as individual behavior. Unintentional injuries are now widely recognized as understandable, predictable and preventable. It is also generally agreed that intentional injuries, including youth violence, suicide and child abuse and neglect, are also becoming more understandable and preventable because of an increased understanding of risk and protective factors. While these deaths are fewer than other causes, they have life-altering consequences for surviving children and families.

Despite an increasing awareness of severe violence against children, very little was known in the past about fatal child abuse and neglect. In the mid-1980’s, Missouri researchers discovered that many fatal child injury cases were inadequately investigated and that many children were dying from common household hazards, as a result of inadequate supervision. Many cases of fatal abuse and neglect went undetected, misclassified as natural deaths, accidents or suicides. A number of states responded by implementing child death review programs, but not all proved to be effective or sustainable.

By the mid-1990’s, the U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect recommended the creation of multi-agency state and local child death review teams as a critically important component in an effective strategy for responding to our “nation’s shame.” In the decade that followed, every state and a number of foreign countries implemented child death review systems. Design and implementation of CDR programs vary because of the wide range of options from which to choose in terms of structure, process, membership, review criteria and the collection and use of data. Nevertheless, the vision that drives all child death review systems is to understand and prevent child deaths and serious injuries.

Applying the data

Child fatalities represent the extreme of all issues that have a negative impact on children. Most of what we learn from reviews of deaths can also be applied to the millions of abused and neglected children who survive. The death of a child is a sentinel event that captures the attention of the public and creates a sense of urgency that deserves a well-planned and coordinated prevention response. Generally, successful prevention initiatives are realistic in scope and approach, clear and simple in their message, and based on evidence that they work!

Local and regional teams are remarkably dedicated and enthusiastic in initiating timely prevention activities that serve to raise awareness, educate parents and caretakers, influence public policy and involve the community in prevention initiatives. In Missouri, local CDR team members organized a coalition focused on child fatality prevention after two residential fires killed three children in less than a month. The coalition collaborated with two area fire departments to canvass the neighborhoods where the deaths occurred, installed smoke detectors and batteries where they were needed and raised public awareness through the media. A decade later, the Annual Neighborhood Fire Prevention Awareness Day continues in multiple locations throughout the region.

At the state and national level, the sum of collected data is used to identify trends and patterns that require systemic solutions. Researchers in St. Louis utilized Missouri CDR data to gain new insights into sudden, unexpected infant deaths and concluded that certain unsafe sleep arrangements occurred in the large majority of cases of sudden infant deaths diagnosed as SIDS, unintentional suffocation and cause undetermined. Research had demonstrated what CDR team members had suspected: Infant deaths caused by unsafe sleep conditions were preventable. In Missouri, Iowa, Wisconsin, Minnesota and other states, safe sleep campaigns, developed and implemented by a variety of public and private entities, include parent education and provide a safe crib to families in need. The Consumer Product Safety Commission and the American Academy of Pediatrics revised their safe sleep recommendations to reflect this new information.

Basic principles

It is widely accepted among professionals in the field of injury prevention that the public health tools and methods used effectively against infectious and other diseases and occupational hazards can also be applied to injury prevention. As a result, attention is given to the environment and to products used by the public, as well as individual behavior. An epidemiologic approach to child fatalities and near-fatalities offers tools that can effectively organize prevention interventions and draws on expertise in surveillance, data analysis, research, public education and intervention. There are four steps that are interrelated:

- *An ongoing surveillance of child fatalities provides comparable data, documentation and monitoring over time. (What's the problem?)* Current efforts to create a standardized case report tool and data system on the national level are keys to improving and protecting the lives of all children and adolescents. Even a small subset of uniform data would give us the opportunity to identify valuable national trends and patterns. The National Maternal Child Health Center for Child Death Review provides technical assistance and training, support resources and tools to states with the goal of expanding reviews to all preventable deaths and using the information from CDR to improve and protect the lives of children.
- *Risk factor research identifies or confirms what is known about risk and protective factors that may have relevance for public policies and prevention programs. (What's the cause?)* In Western New York, a hospital-based program was developed to educate all new parents about the dangers of shaking an infant. This initiative has effectively reduced the incidence of Shaken Baby Syndrome in that region every year since it was implemented. This program has been replicated throughout the country and proven equally successful. Several states have passed legislation requiring this program in all hospitals. Other states have included SBS education as part of the licensing process for child care providers. In this way, prevention of Shaken Baby Syndrome is being integrated in state and community systems that provide services and support to children and families.

- *Identification of evidence-based strategies that have proven effective or have high potential to be effective. (What works?)* Assessing effectiveness of a prevention strategy as it is implemented is difficult because of limited resources and limited reliability of existing assessment tools. However, resources are available to assist in evaluating various strategies during the early stages of planning. The benefits in terms of funding and long-term cost are obvious. The safe sleep and SBS initiative described above were based on research. University-based research groups, such as Harborview Injury Prevention and Research Center and the Childhood Injury Research Group at the University of Missouri provide evaluations of various injury prevention strategies. National organizations and governmental agencies, such as the National Safe Kids campaign and the National Center for Injury Prevention at CDC and the American Academy of Pediatrics provide research and prevention information.
- *Implementation of strategies where they currently do not exist. (How do you do it?)* Outcomes for prevention initiatives are generally functions of structure and duration. Short-term, emergency and educational programs are effective in the short-term; unfortunately, such programs are usually based on the effort and enthusiasm of a few individuals and a limited funding source. Prevention initiatives that are integrated into community and state systems are sustainable and effective in the long term. Examples include state laws that require proper restraint for child passengers in motor vehicles and helmets for children riding bicycles. In many areas, schools include safety education for children and health care providers, who are in a unique position to assist in the prevention of child maltreatment, actively promote health and safety for children. Many state and local entities responsible for licensing child care providers are mandating education on safe sleep for infants and toddlers and prevention of child abuse, including Shaken Baby Syndrome, as part of their curricula.

Resources:

American Academy of Pediatrics	www.aap.org
Children's Safety Network	http://research.marshfieldclinic.org
Consumer Product Safety Commission	www.cpsc.gov
Harborview Injury Prevention and Research Center	http://depts.washington.edu/hiprc
Missouri Child Fatality Review Program	http://dss.missouri.gov/stat/mcfrp.htm
Missouri Child Death Pathologists' Network	http://dss.missouri.gov/stat/cpn/htm
Missouri Children's Trust Fund.	www.ctf4kids.org
National Center for Injury Prevention and Control.	www.cdc.gov/ncipc
National Center on Shaken Baby Syndrome.	www.dontshake.com
National MCH Center for Child Death Review	www.childdeathreview.org
National Safe Kids Campaign.	www.safekids.org