

State sees more neglected children, many left to wander

■ The death of 7-year-old Ashley Ann Carlson opens a window on thousands of children never removed from their parents but whose circumstances still spark real concern

By KATE TAYLOR
of The Oregonian staff

Toddlers wandering alone in busy parking lots. Children living in homes full of garbage, rats and lice. Parents who can't hear their children crying through a fog of drugs or alcohol.

Caseworkers hear such stories more and more in Oregon. But these conditions of child neglect usually aren't cause enough for the state's child protective agency to move children into foster care.

Child neglect is on the rise in Oregon, but the state remains limited in how it can respond and is able to react only to the most severe cases.

The state has a limited number of caseworkers and receives thousands of calls about neglect each year. State law also says the agency can only intervene if there is an immediate threat to the child's safety or when the parents have proved through repeated failure that they will not be able to parent adequately.

The death of Ashley Ann Carlson, found strangled in the home of a 16-year-old neighbor earlier this month, calls attention to the thousands of neglected children in this state, because of reports that the 7-year-old spent time wandering alone.

On the day she disappeared, Ashley's mother had turned herself in to police because she had missed appointments with a parole officer. A boyfriend who was caring for Ashley said he gave the girl \$5 to go to McDonald's with the sister of the teen later arrested as a suspect in the case.

A woman who provided child care said Ashley's mother once took off for a month, leaving Ashley in the care of a boyfriend. Calls to the State Office for Services to Children and Families worried the agency enough to investigate the family and open a case on Ashley.

The agency would not comment on the case because it is under investigation, but Ashley's family said that she was never in foster care.

Most calls of concern yield no response from the agency, and even fewer result in a child being removed from his or her home.

Neglectful parents get many more chances than those who inflict abuse that's more apparent, such as cigarette burns or broken arms.

Families caught letting a toddler wander out into the crowded parking lot of an apartment complex, or living in conditions that are dangerously filthy, often get a few warnings before they lose their child, said Victor Congleton, program manager for

Please turn to
NEGLECT, Page B4

Neglect: 'You have to kindle hope'

■ Continued from Page B1
child protective and family treatment services.

In 1997, the most recent year with complete figures, the state received a record number of 12,128 cases of child abuse and neglect. More and more of those are neglect cases; neglect jumped from 49 percent to 68 percent of all cases in 1997.

Caseworkers and child experts say the rise of child abuse and neglect stems from poor parenting skills, alcohol and drugs, and single parenthood.

Of all children entering foster care, 72 percent come from families where parents were abused or neglected themselves and never learned how to care for children, according to the agency's 1997 annual report on the status of Oregon's children.

"If you've been neglected, you never learn what proper interaction is like," said Karen Callarius, program evaluator at Portland State University's Child Welfare Partnership. "Some of these parents don't even know to look their children in the eyes when they talk, or sit down for a meal."

Parents of about 62 percent of children entering care have drug and alcohol problems. Ashley's mother, Tessa Carlson, had two convictions for possession of illegal drugs and had spent at least a month at one rehabilitation center, according to family members.

About 51 percent of children entering care have single parents who are so overwhelmed with work that they can't meet their children's needs. Many are single mothers, working long hours at low-paying jobs and with poor or no child care.

The state passes thousands of cases of lower-level abuse and neglect to community outreach volunteers and takes no action on thousands of even lower-level cases, said John Richmond of Multnomah County's child abuse hot line.

Growing neglect

Confirmed cases of neglect are increasing in Oregon, fueled in part by drug abuse, domestic violence and criminal activity by parents.

■ Confirmed cases of abuse and neglect rose to a record 12,128 in 1997, an increase of 6.5 percent over 1996.

■ Neglect now accounts for many more cases than abuse. In 1993, neglect accounted for 49 percent of cases, while abuse made up 51 percent, according to the State Office for Services to Children and Families status of children report. But by 1997, neglect made up 68 percent of cases, while abuse accounted for 32 percent.

■ A sampling of roughly 800 cases from 1994 to 1996 found drug abuse among neglectful parents rose from 58 to 75 percent, alcohol abuse rose from 50 to 56 percent, criminal involvement rose from 51 to 59 percent and domestic violence jumped from 36 to 53 percent.

■ In 1997, the Multnomah County child abuse hot line got 25,776 calls — some of them repetitive — and responded to 3,881 of those calls.

■ The state's child protective agency defines child neglect as the failure to provide adequate food, clothing, shelter, supervision or medical care.

■ Individuals, churches and other groups wishing to volunteer to help families struggling with neglect should call Janet Steinger at the Family Empowerment Project: 657-2112, Ext. 206; or call the 24-hour hot line at 503-731-3100.

■ To report child abuse or neglect call the 24-hour hot line at 503-731-3100.

The Oregonian

work at Portland State University. "There's a syndrome of helplessness-hopelessness," she said. "They feel like there's nothing they can do to make a difference."

In the past two years, many families have grown poorer as welfare reform has forced them off assistance and into low-paying jobs, said Tonia Hunt, policy associate at Children First for Oregon, a statewide non-profit children's group.

"They're working more hours and not necessarily getting ahead," Hunt said.

Kirby Crawford, a protective caseworker at the agency's Portland metro branch said: "There's a real fine line between what's neglect and what's poverty." When there's a house full of garbage you have to look at, "is the house full of garbage because of mental health issues or because the garbage bill cannot be paid?"

"The three most important changes to help these families would be to provide adequate low-income housing, to strengthen volunteer networks and to provide adequate drug and alcohol treatment.

"You can't just go into these homes and tell parents who are depressed and distracted that they are lousy parents," she said. "You have to kindle hope, give them some choices, offer supportive services."

Yet there are countless times when caseworkers have to turn away a case because it isn't urgent enough, and simply referring families to community services doesn't feel like enough.

Crawford often leaves a family filled with frustration and anxiety for the children.

"You ask yourself, 'Did I do enough?'" she said. "'Is walking away my only alternative here?' And you keep your fingers crossed and hope for the best."

You can reach Kate Taylor at 294-7692 or by e-mail at kate.taylor@news.oregonian.com.