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## County's child abuse reports up, incidents down

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Of the Baker City Herald

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Child abuse and neglect statistics compiled by a statewide children's advocacy group have good news and bad news for Baker County children and families.

The bad news is that 77 children were abused or neglected in Baker County during 2001, according to Children First for Oregon. That statistic was included in the nonprofit organizations' "Status of Oregon's Children County Data Book 2002" released this week.

While this year's rate of 19.7 victims per 1,000 children is an improvement over last year's rate of 26.2 and the previous five-year average of 25.2, it is still significantly higher than the statewide rate of 9.6.

While most would agree that any statistic that points to abuse and neglect of children is too high, the good news is that Baker County rates among the top in the state in its response to reports of child abuse.

Eighty-two percent of the 159 reports of child abuse and neglect in Baker County in 2001 were assessed and 36 percent were determined to be founded reports, the data book said.

Just 46 percent of the reported cases statewide are assessed by children's protective service workers, according to the statistics.

This demonstrates that "smaller counties are more aggressive about getting reports in and investigating reports," said Toni Hunt, Children First research analyst.

Washington County, for example, has a child abuse and neglect rate of just 4.4 per 1,000 children. And of those reported cases, only 20 percent are assessed by child protective service workers, she noted.

This year's more in-depth analysis of how each county responds to reports of child abuse provides a different perspective of what the lower child-abuse rate could mean from county to county.

"We probably have not known about the number of kids being hurt," Hunt said.

"It's much sadder to look at counties with low victim rates and very low assessment rates," she said.

Each year Children First picks a specific topical area to investigate

further. This year's area was children's health and safety.

Baker County's high assessment rate is one of 12 in the state that tops 80 percent.

Washington County is not alone, however, in its lower abuse and neglect numbers accompanied by low assessment numbers, Hunt said.

The county's large population could be part of the problem.

There were 4,303 reports of child abuse and neglect in Washington County in 2001, compared with 159 in Baker County.

"That's how kids fall through the cracks," she said.

"Anytime a child is hurt that's bad," she said, referring to the Baker County statistics. "Other counties have kids being hurt and they are not finding out about it."

District Attorney Matt Shircliff is cautious about claiming success in the county's work to eliminate child abuse. Still, he sees the high assessment rate and declining rate of founded cases as progress.

"The fact that the number of cases assessed is one of the