

INNOCENT VICTIMS

Rising child-abuse deaths draw national scrutiny

By ERIC PRIDEAUX

Staff writer

It is a routine feature on television news: Another child has been strangled, starved, beaten or otherwise fatally abused-- at the hands of the parents.

Equally routine but no less tragic is the fact that Japanese authorities in many cases knew the child was at risk but failed to intervene.

The relentless string of abuse-related deaths has exposed gaping flaws in the way Japan attends to its young. So much so that children's rights advocates are questioning whether the government is sincerely searching for a solution.



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"Child abuse is one of the fastest-growing and most serious problems facing mental health practitioners in contemporary Japan," said psychologist Junichi Shoji, a leading expert on the problem. And the government is moving way too slow, he said. "We sense very little progress in policy."

Child-guidance centers, the public agencies charged with overseeing the welfare of children, received 34,472 reports of abuse in fiscal 2005, the latest year for which data were available. That was 3 percent more than the previous year, and 30 times the reports received in 1990, when the then Health and Welfare Ministry began conducting nationwide surveys of child abuse cases.

About 60 children die from abuse every year, but judging from the most recent statistics, rarely are these fatalities bolts from the blue.

A study by the Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry of 202 child-abuse deaths between 2000 and 2004 revealed that authorities had at least some foreknowledge of victims being at risk in 164, or 81 percent, of the cases.

In about a third of the cases, authorities suspected abuse but failed to contact child-guidance centers.

In a fifth of the cases, authorities deemed that no intervention was necessary.

The situation has prompted Japan to take a hard look at how it attends to its young. In a stinging 2005 report, the health ministry said authorities all too often failed to recognize early signs of abuse, including suspicious facial and head injuries, ignored problematic relationships between mentally ill parents and their children, and overlooked other factors often linked to abuse, such as a social alienation of the parent or single parenthood. The list went on.



A young resident at the Kibo no Ie (House of Hope) children's home in Tokyo receives a caress.

"A review of decision-making, response and supervision mechanisms is required," the report concluded.

To that end, the ministry in late January announced a broad initiative to speed up the state response to abuse reports and to improve communication

the among the agencies involved in child welfare.

Fulfilling that mandate will be a tall order, partly because the trend of abuse is outpacing the government's best efforts. Although the number of social workers has increased about 64 percent nationwide in the past six years, abuse reports nearly doubled over the same period.

"Social workers are swamped," said Satoru Momose, an official at the health ministry's Equal Employment, Children and

Families Bureau.

The fiscal 2008 budget sets aside 2.31 billion yen for preventing child abuse and other domestic violence, an almost one-third increase from last year.

But child advocates say there are imbalances in social welfare spending, noting that while allocations for the elderly usually account for around 70 percent of total social-security expenditures, that for children and family services is consistently below 4 percent.

"Old people vote, and the people who provide elder-care services vote. So politicians favor them," said Jun Saimura, head of research on social work at the Japan Child and Family Research Institute.

To be sure, the scale of Japan's problem appears small compared with the amount of child abuse reported in other advanced economies. In the United States, for example, some 872,000 children were found to be victims of child abuse or neglect in 2004, according to the U.S. Department of Health's Administration for Children and Families. An estimated 1,490 kids died.

But smaller reporting levels are cold comfort in Japan, where problems are expected to worsen as the protective mechanisms of the past fail to keep up with the present.

In his book, "Children of the Japanese State," Roger Goodman, a lecturer in Japanese social anthropology at Oxford University, lists several practices the Japanese have long credited for keeping abuse rates down.

The longtime custom of raising children within extended families, including grandparents, for example, "meant not only extra hands to help but extra eyes to detect abuse," Goodman writes. High marriage rates and low rates of single parenthood, he noted, have also been seen as bulwarks against maltreatment.

But with urbanization eroding family bonds and even hollowing out entire communities, the outlook for Japan is bleak, psychologist Shoji said.

"Abuse often occurs within families that find themselves separated from the social fabric, and the number of mothers

who describe feeling alienated is increasing," he said.

"The environment in which children are being raised is worsening," he added. "Abuse is set to grow apace."

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