

How Do Policies for Screening Reports of Child Maltreatment Vary Across States?

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Federal law is the foundation of the child welfare system, but states determine much of the structure of their own systems. The Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA), as amended in 2010, identifies certain acts or behaviors as child maltreatment. States must comply with the broader CAPTA definitions (see 42 U.S.C.A. § 5106g), but within those parameters, states have their own legal definitions of child abuse and neglect, and they have various policies for reporting and responding to child maltreatment.

CAPTA (42 U.S.C.A. § 5106g) defines child abuse and neglect as: “Any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation”; or “An act or failure to act which presents an imminent risk of serious harm.”

This fact sheet summarizes states’ screening policies, including use of centralized screening, information required to screen reports, decision processes for screening, and required screening activities.

This fact sheet uses newly available data to describe how policies for screening reports of child maltreatment vary across all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico (referred to throughout as “states”). Screening is the process of determining whether a child maltreatment report meets the state’s definition of child maltreatment. Reports meeting the definition are “screened in” and referred to the child welfare agency for a response. The State Child Abuse and Neglect (SCAN) Policies Database compiles these data on state policies as of 2019. This fact sheet is part of a series that describes key aspects of states’ definitions of child maltreatment and policies for reporting, screening, and investigating child abuse and neglect.

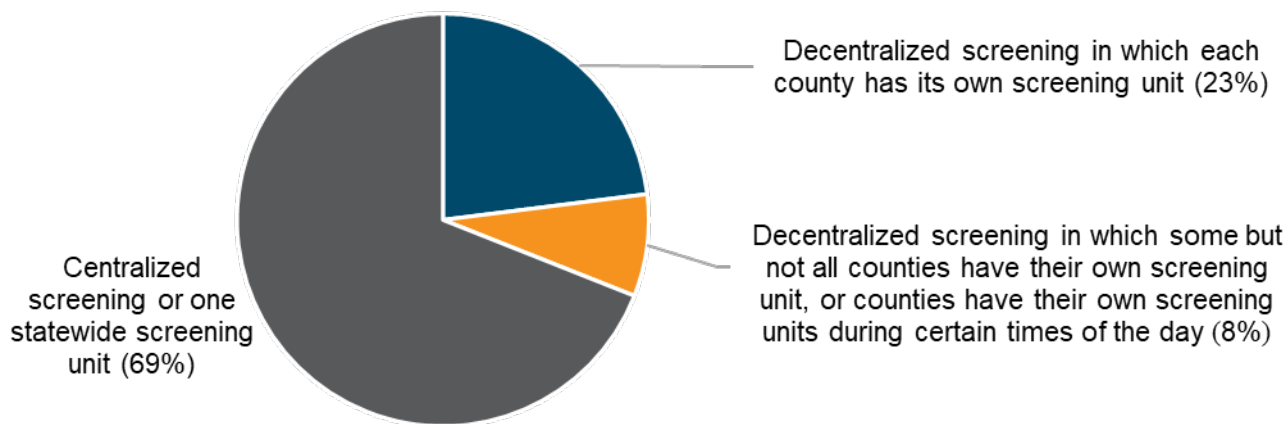
The SCAN Policies Database is funded by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation in collaboration with the Children’s Bureau in the Administration for Children and Families at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The project team is led by Mathematica in partnership with Child Trends. The SCAN Policies Database is available at <https://www.scanpoliciesdatabase.com> or the National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect at <https://www.ndacan.acf.hhs.gov/>. The states contributing to each finding in the fact sheet are listed in the Technical Appendix at <https://www.scanpoliciesdatabase.com/>.

Source: Weigensberg, E., Islam, N., Knab, J., Grider, M., Page, J., & Bardin, S. (2021). State Child Abuse and Neglect (SCAN) Policies Database [Dataset]. National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect. <https://doi.org/10.34681/14t8-8730>.



Most states have centralized screening for all reports of suspected child maltreatment.¹

Percentage of states with different types of centralization and decentralization for screening



The majority of states require adequate information on the type and severity of suspected child maltreatment to screen-in a report for a response from the child welfare agency, but states also require additional information.

States require different information to screen in a report of suspected child maltreatment

90%

- Type and severity of suspected child maltreatment

71%

- Address, contact information, or other information to locate the child

67%

- Other information, such as information to locate the child's parent or caretaker

65%

- Child name, age, race, or other identifying information of the child

56%

- Alleged perpetrator identity, relationship to child, and any information to locate the alleged perpetrator

38%

- Date of suspected maltreatment

¹ Across states, child welfare systems may be administered by the state (79%), by counties (17%), or by a hybrid (partially by the state and partially by one or more counties) (4%). Of states with centralized screening, 97% had state-administered systems and 3% had hybrid systems. Of states without centralized screening, 38% had state-administered systems, 50% had county-administered systems, and 13% had hybrid systems.



States use a variety of decision processes to screen reports of child maltreatment.

- 94% of states have screening decision processes that are consistent statewide and 6% have processes that vary locally.
- 92% of states use supervisory review for screening reports, with 63% of states requiring this for all cases and 29% of states only requiring this for some cases.²
- 13% of states use a team-based decision process for screening, in which 4% of states require this for all cases and 10% of states require this for only some cases.²
- 29% of states use individual staff, such as screeners, to make screening decisions independently or with the use of criteria or a tool for screening decision support. 21% of states require this for all cases, and 8% only require this for some cases.



Nearly all states (98%) have required activities as part of their screening process.

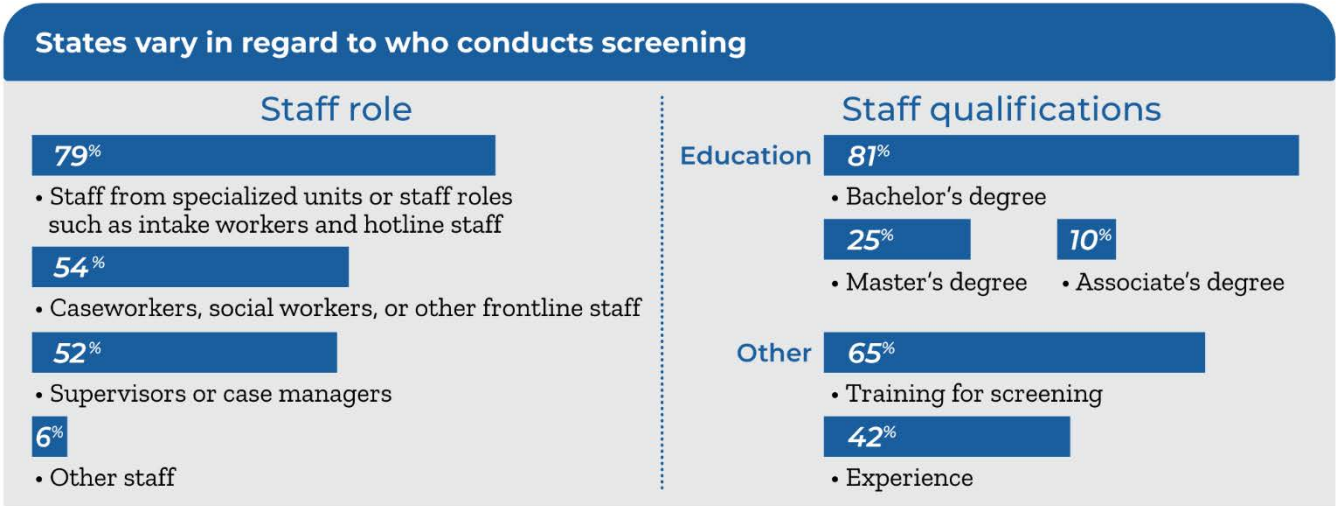
- 92% of states have required activities for screening reports of child maltreatment that are consistent statewide. 6% of states have required screening activities that vary locally.
- 87% of states require a review of agency records to identify prior involvement with child protective services. 81% of states require this for all cases, and 6% require this for some cases.³
- 73% of states require a safety or risk assessment as part of the screening process. 69% of states require this for all cases, and 6% require this for some cases.³
- 50% of states require another activity or other information as part of screening reports of child maltreatment, such as a review of criminal history.

² States using each decision process indicated whether the decision process was used for all cases or some cases. The percentages of states indicating all cases or some cases for each decision process do not add up to the overall percentage of states using that decision process due to rounding.

³ The percentages of states indicating whether activities were required for all cases or some cases do not add up to the overall percentage of states with that requirement because a small number of states did not indicate all or some cases.



States’ laws and policies specified different roles and qualifications for staff who could conduct screening.



Few states involve tribes in screening reports of cases involving American Indian or Alaska Native children.

- In 15% of states, tribes conduct screening for reports that involve American Indian or Alaska Native children.
- In 19% of states, tribes collaborate with public child welfare agencies when screening reports that involve American Indian or Alaska Native children.

The SCAN Policies Database and this fact sheet were funded under Contract #HHSP233201500035I/HHSP23337023T by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation in collaboration with the Children’s Bureau in the Administration for Children and Families at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The project officers are Christine Fortunato and Mary Mueggenborg. The project director is Elizabeth Weigensberg of Mathematica, 600 Alexander Park, Suite 100, Princeton, NJ 08543-2393.

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