



Department of Health and Social Services
Karleen Jackson, Commissioner

Division of Public Health
Richard Mandsager, MD, Director

Section of Epidemiology
Jay C. Butler, MD, Editor

3601 C Street, Suite 540, PO Box 240249, Anchorage, Alaska 99524-0249 (907) 269-8000
24-Hour Emergency Number 1-800-478-0084

<http://www.epi.Alaska.gov>

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Summary Report: Reproductive Health Claims and Risk of Abuse among Medicaid-enrolled Adolescent Females

Purpose/Methods

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between criminal behavior or ongoing abuse by a caretaker and presentation for reproductive health care services among Alaskan females 10 through 15 years of age who were enrolled in Medicaid from 1999-2003. Reproductive healthcare included pregnancy, live birth, pregnancy termination, contraceptive management, or a sexually transmitted disease. Caretaker abuse was identified in the Office of Children's Services (OCS) Child Protective Services (CPS) database; criminal activity was identified in the Juvenile Justice database at OCS.

Results

Of 21,350 female adolescent Medicaid enrollees 10 through 15 years of age, 841 (3.9%) presented for reproductive health care, 2,930 (14%) were referred to CPS for suspected abuse or neglect by a caretaker, and 1,858 (8.7%) were referred to Juvenile Justice for criminal activity. Among the subjects with a reproductive health-related claim, 39% were referred to CPS while 31% were referred to Juvenile Justice at some point during the study period. Reproductive health care was strongly associated with referral to CPS (adjusted odds ratio [aOR], 2.9; 95% confidence interval [CI], 2.5 to 3.4), substantiated sexual abuse (OR, 2.3; 95% CI, 1.7 to 3.2), and referral to Juvenile Justice (OR, 2.9; 95% CI, 2.5 to 3.4). These associations did not differ substantially by the type of reproductive health care, including contraceptive management.

A subject's age was not related to the likelihood of CPS referral. Among subjects 10 to 11, 12 to 13, and 14 to 15 years of age at their first reproductive health related visit, 16% (4 of 25), 52% (85 of 165), and 36% (237 of 651), respectively, received a CPS referral and 4% (1 of 25), 16% (27 of 165), and 10% (68 of 651) had substantiation of abuse. The youngest subjects were least likely to have a Juvenile Justice referral. Among subjects 10 to 11, 12 to 13, and 14 to 15 years of age when they experienced their first reproductive health-related claim, 4% (1 of 25), 33% (55 of 165), and 31% (202 of 651), respectively, received a referral and 0% (0 of 25), 15% (25 of 165), and 12% (77 of 651) received a referral for a violent offense.

Discussion

Among female adolescents 10 through 15 years of age who were enrolled in Medicaid from 1999-2003, presenting for reproductive health care was a marker of elevated risk for abuse by a caretaker and for criminal behavior. The increase in risk occurred with all evaluated categories of sexual activity. The current study had two large limitations. First, results may not apply to the non-Medicaid population. Second, the experience of abuse was limited to that perpetrated by a caretaker since OCS has jurisdiction only over these cases. Previous studies indicate that adolescent females also commonly experience abuse perpetrated by non-caretakers.

Recommendations

1. Healthcare providers who deliver reproductive services to Medicaid-eligible adolescent females should consider screening all of these patients for initiation of sexual activity.
2. Adolescent females 10 through 15 years of age who report having initiated sexual activity or present for reproductive health care should be screened for abuse. A three-question screening tool is available at: http://www.acog.org/departments/dept_notice.cfm?rncno=17&bulletin=585
3. Healthcare providers should familiarize themselves with recommendations from the American Academy of Pediatrics on addressing domestic violence among pediatric patients, which are available at: <http://aappolicy.aappublications.org/cgi/content/full/pediatrics%3b101/6/1091>
4. When abuse of a minor is suspected or identified, the first step should be to contact the local Office of Children's Services or call the statewide office at 1-800-478-4444.
5. Additional resources for abuse occurring outside the home are the state's seven Child Advocacy Centers (CAC):
 - Anchorage: Alaska CARES 561-8301
 - Dillingham: Bristol Bay Area Health Corporation 842-1230
 - Juneau: Catholic Community Services/SAFE CAC 790-4342
 - Wasilla: The Children's Place CAC 357-5157
 - Fairbanks: Resource Center for Parents and Children/ Stevie's Place 374-2850
 - Nome: Kawerak Inc. CAC 443-4376
 - Bethel: Tundra Women's Coalition/The Children's Center 543-3144

The full report from this analysis is available online at http://www.epi.alaska.gov/bulletins/docs/rr2006_01.pdf