NEWS

LA police failed to investigate 4,000 serious child abuse reports in 2018 and 2019. Why?

‘When we are talking about physical and sexual abuse, we are talking about potential crimes,’ says a top county official.

Noah Cuatro, 4, who was known to social workers died earlier this year under suspicious circumstances. His parents, Ursula Juarez and Jose Cuatro have been charged with murder and torture charges. (Image from GoFundMe)
By DANIEL HEIMPEL | dheimpel@fosteringmediaconnections.org |
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The first recorded sign of trouble in the brief life of Noah Cuatro came before he was even born. In August 2014, when his mother was nine months pregnant with Noah, she allegedly threw her baby sister in her crib, fracturing the 10-month-old’s skull in two places.

Shortly after Noah was born, workers with Los Angeles County’s Department of Children and Family Services removed him and another young sibling from their turmoil-filled home. It would be the first of two stints in foster care.

He was returned home in 2014, but reentered care in August 2017 after county workers found his parents — Ursula Juarez and Jose Cuatro — had medically neglected the toddler. Eventually, in November 2018, the juvenile court ordered Noah returned home, over the objections of DCFS.

Social workers last saw Noah this year in late June. Two weeks later, on July 6, the 4-year-old Palmdale boy was dead. Los Angeles County sheriff’s deputies arrested Noah’s parents on Sept. 26, and the District Attorney’s Office charged them with murder and torture four days later.

Law enforcement response

While DCFS social workers figured prominently in the life of Noah and others like him in high-profile abuse cases, his death also raises questions about what role law enforcement plays in protecting vulnerable children.

New data provided by the Los Angeles County District Attorney’s Office shows just how disparate that response is across the county’s 46 law enforcement agencies. For Noah, who spent most of his short life in the jurisdiction of the Los Angeles Police Department, the number of cases of child abuse that are not investigated stands out.
Data from the district attorney shows that, from January 2018 to July 2019, the LAPD did not investigate nearly 4,000 allegations of serious child abuse fielded by its stations or generated through a countywide electronic cross-reporting system dubbed E-SCARS. In 2018, L.A. police did not investigate 10% of the 24,000-plus reports it received from the two sources, while the percentage climbed to 13% in the first half of 2019.

By comparison, Los Angeles County sheriff’s deputies responded to child abuse reports 97% of the time during the same 18-month period, though it fielded only 71% as many calls.

Most of those reports are sent to law enforcement by DCFS, and are limited to “allegations of sexual abuse, physical abuse, severe neglect, emotional abuse, and exploitation,” according to agency policy guidelines.

“When we are talking about physical and sexual abuse, we are talking about potential crimes,” said Michal Nash, executive director of the county’s Office of Child Protection. “Do you only want some of them investigated or do you want them all investigated? The answer is pretty self-apparent. You are talking about crimes on children, after all.”

Asked why the LAPD failed to investigate thousands of child abuse reports, Media Relations Director Josh Rubenstein said in an email statement:

“Our officers and detectives work tirelessly to investigate claims of abuse; however, we cannot make a broad brush comment without looking at each individual case in context to understand the details of the investigations.”

**Interaction with Noah’s family**

On April 17 and May 15, while the Cuatro family was living in the North Hills area of Los Angeles, DCFS’ Child Protection Hotline fielded two separate allegations of sexual abuse against Noah, and domestic violence within the home. Those allegations were transmitted through E-SCARS to the LAPD, according to Nash.
Nash, who is coordinating a countywide effort to improve law enforcement’s response to suspected child abuse, came across these reports while investigating Noah’s death for a report that delivered to the Board of Supervisors earlier this month. Although he requested details from the police, Nash said “no information has been received on what, if any, action was taken by LAPD in response to those reports.”

LAPD officials would not answer questions on Noah’s case, instead directing a reporter to file a public records request. Although that request has been filed, it can take weeks or months to receive a reply.

Sometime after the last report of sexual abuse against Noah in May, his family moved to Palmdale. On July 5, Noah’s parents called 911, claiming the boy had drowned in the pool of their apartment complex.

But Los Angeles County sheriff’s deputies found “what looked like a trauma on the body inconsistent with what the explanation was for the cause of death,” spurring a homicide investigation.

**LAPD, sheriff’s policies the same**

The Los Angeles County District Attorney’s Office acknowledges it can be difficult to compare responses between different law enforcement agencies.

“The discrepancy between law enforcement ‘no investigation’ percentages may be attributed to a number of factors, including differing internal agency response,” said district attorney’s spokeswoman Shlara Davila-Morales in an email.

Officials from both LAPD and the Sheriff’s Department said their policies are to send officers out to investigate all suspected reports of child abuse. In the event of duplicate reports, or when officers are unable to make contact with a family, some child abuse reports can be marked “no investigation.”

The two agencies also have different structures to deploy officers. While the LAPD has a centralized 50-member child abuse section, the Sheriff’s Department has about 60 investigator positions broken into six teams across the county.

Importantly, the discrepancies from agency to agency also are apparent from station to station within the LAPD.
Officers at the department’s 77th Division in South L.A. rolled on less than 80% of the calls alleging child abuse in 2018 and 2019. At the same time, the Rampart Division, which ranges across Silver Lake, Echo Park, Koreatown, Pico-Union and Westlake, responded to 98% of its child abuse alerts. Ostensibly, the volume of calls is a contributing factor in the disparity.

In L.A. County’s Service Provision Area 4, which includes Rampart Division, four children already on the radar of child protection workers were killed by family or caregivers from 2015 to 2018. In Service Provision Area 6, which includes South L.A., 20 children known to DCFS were similarly killed during the same time period.

Elected officials respond

Reid Lidow, a deputy press secretary for Mayor Eric Garcetti, said in an email: “The LAPD has a swift, thorough process for investigating allegations of child abuse, and is strongly committed to bringing abusers to justice.”

County Supervisor Kathryn Barger voiced her desire to see law enforcement across the county respond more uniformly to reports of child abuse.

“We are communicating and actually addressing some of the disparities that are taking place,” Barger said. “If it means modifying or restructuring on both sides, there is very much open dialogue to look at that, for the greater good.”

E-SCARS credited with change

In 2013, the LAPD investigated 74% of the suspected child abuse cases it received, while it now responds to nearly 90%. The Long Beach Police Department — which failed to investigate nearly half of the abuse reports it received that year — is now the most responsive in the county. In 2018 and the first half of 2019, Long Beach police investigated every call of abuse it received.

Long Beach police Sgt. Daniel Mendoza credits E-SCARS, which stands for Electronic Suspected Child Abuse Reporting System, for driving the change.

“Now there is a system of checks and balances and we are able to manage and be accountable for every call,” Mendoza said.
Before E-SCARS was launched in 2009, law enforcement and county social workers often lost reports or did not see them for days or weeks, according to officials familiar with the system. E-SCARS was supposed to make cross-reporting instantaneous, so law enforcement and DCFS are alerted immediately.

While E-SCARS was an improvement, it had a tiny budget and small staff, limiting its effectiveness.

That changed when law enforcement’s role in child abuse became front-page news with the horrific 2013 murder of 8-year-old Gabriel Fernandez, also in Palmdale. L.A. County’s Blue Ribbon Commission on Child Protection, impaneled to dig into how the maltreatment of Gabriel and other children was repeatedly missed, zeroed in on the “failure by some law enforcement entities to cross-report Suspected Child Abuse Reports.”

Since then, the L.A. County Board of Supervisors has boosted spending on E-SCARS and its aged technology. “We have gone from AOL dial-up to the iPhone 10 in the course of five years,” said Brad McCartt, who now leads the unit, earlier this year.

Detective Maria Singh, a supervisor with LAPD’s child abuse section, said her unit is vigilant when reports of child abuse show up on E-SCARS.

“When these (suspected child abuse report) are being received in our office, they are being dispatched on,” Singh said. “We have done a lot of justice for these children who have undergone horrific physical or sexual abuse. It just keeps me going.”
Singh said about 50 detectives and investigators in LAPD are solely focused on child abuse, and she is on call 24/7.

Anthony Avalos, 10, died of serious head injuries on June 21, 2018, and reportedly had cigarette burns covering his body. (Image from Facebook)

Next steps

In February, the Sheriff's Department and DCFS launched a pilot project aimed at stopping serious child abuse in Lancaster and Palmdale, wracked by the deaths of Gabriel in 2013, 10-year-old Anthony Avalos in 2018 and Noah this year. There, deputies and child abuse investigators are rolling out together on calls of severe child abuse or neglect.

Through July, these small teams have conducted 261 joint responses. In August, DCFS, the Sheriff's Department and LAPD all sat down to discuss expanding the program out beyond Lancaster and Palmdale, according to a recent report by the Office of Child Protection.
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But a persistent problem identified by the Blue Ribbon Commission in 2014 — and in a report by the OCP issued after the death of Anthony in 2018 — is a lack of consistency in how law enforcement agencies and DCFS interact in child abuse investigations.

Nash’s goal is to create a protocol that clearly delineates the roles of each.

“OK, they both mutually reported to E-SCARS. The question is then what?” Nash said. “It is the ‘then what’ that I am concerned about.”

This story was published in partnership with The Chronicle of Social Change, a national news site focused on children, youth and families. Contact Daniel Heimpel at dheimpel@fosteringmediaconnections.org.
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LAPD vows to audit 4,000 cases of serious child abuse not investigated since 2018

County commissioners alarmed by SCNG report; 'There's something very troubling going on there,' one says

Noah Cuatro, 4, who was known to social workers, died earlier this year under suspicious circumstances. His parents have been charged with murder and torture charges. (Image from GoFundMe)

By JOSH CAIN | jcain@scng.com | Los Angeles Daily News
PUBLISHED: October 21, 2019 at 5:03 pm | UPDATED: October 21, 2019 at 5:10 pm
The top commander of the Los Angeles Police Department’s juvenile
detectives faced tough questioning from L.A. County commissioners Monday,
a day after revelations that thousands of cases of serious child abuse in the
city were not investigated over roughly the past year-and-a-half.

Capt. Paul Espinosa, chief of the LAPD’s Juvenile Division, said his staff would
conduct an audit of the reports his detectives apparently did not follow up to
determine what happened in each case.

An investigation by The Chronicle for Social Change, in partnership with the
Southern California News Group, found the LAPD did not investigate at least
4,000 cases of serious child abuse from January 2018 to July 2019, according
to data from the L.A. County District Attorney’s Office.

The cases all came to LAPD detectives from a countywide electronic cross-
reporting system or were reported to city police stations.

Commissioners alarmed

Members of the L.A. County Commission for Children and Families — still
reeling from the deaths of two children at the hands of their parents this year
and last, even after multiple interventions by the Department of Children and
Family Services in both cases — said they were alarmed at the number of
cases that were not investigated over nearly the same time span.

Of about 24,000 cases of child abuse reported to LAPD in 2018, about 10
percent were not investigated, according to the analysis. In some divisions,
however, the rate was lower — in LAPD’s 77th Division in South L.A., for
example, fewer than 80 percent of cases were investigated over the 18-month
period.

“Some of these cases are quite serious,” Commissioner Wendy Garen said.
“What I’m most troubled by is that in some of the jurisdictions, the non-
response rate is even higher than 10 percent. … There’s something very
troubling going on there.”

Sometimes, these cases end in death. In L.A.’s County’s Service Protection
Area covering South L.A., 20 children were killed in homes previously
investigated by DCFS from 2015 to 2018.
Most cases referred to LAPD and the L.A. County Sheriff’s Department come through DCFS. Those cases include “allegations of sexual abuse, physical abuse, severe neglect, emotional abuse, and exploitation,” according to the agency’s guidelines. Agencies countywide share reports of child abuse through the E-SCARS cross-reporting system, which was developed for DCFS, the Sheriff’s Department and the D.A.’s Office.

‘Nothing has gone untouched’

Espinosa declined to answer questions about the discrepancy between different LAPD divisions until after the audit is finished. He also said some of the 4,000 cases could be duplicates.

He told commissioners that detectives often defer investigations on child abuse cases if the behavior reported doesn’t rise to the level of a crime. Both LAPD and the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department require officers to investigate all suspected reports of child abuse.

“Everything is looked at,” Espinosa said. “Nothing has gone untouched or unlooked at.”

Questions about what happened in some of the county’s most egregious examples of child neglect that ended in death remain unanswered.

In July, 4-year-old Noah Cuatro was found dead at his Palmdale home. His parents, who told sheriff’s deputies their son drowned in their pool, were arrested in September and eventually charged with murder and torture in the boy’s death.

Before the family moved to Palmdale, Cuatro was living with his parents in North Hills, within LAPD jurisdiction. District Attorney’s Office records show the LAPD was informed twice of allegations that Cuatro was being sexually abused inside the home. Those calls came on April 17 and May 15. DCFS also investigated Cuatro’s mother numerous times since 2014.

The L.A. County Office of Child Protection requested information from LAPD investigators about what action the department took in Noah’s case, but has received no information. Multiple LAPD officials have declined to comment about the particulars of the case.

Jeremy Loudenback of The Chronicle for Social Change contributed to this report.
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