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The Child Abuse Central Index

The Unreliability of This Database Puts Children at Risk and May Violate Individuals' Rights

Background

State law requires the California Department of Justice (DOJ) to maintain the Child Abuse Central Index (CACI) as a statewide repository for reports of child abuse and severe neglect. County Child Welfare Services (CWS) agencies submit substantiated reports to DOJ after determining through their investigations that it is more likely than not that an individual has intentionally caused a child physical harm or death, has committed sexual assault or exploitation of a child, or has intentionally failed to provide food, clothing, shelter, or medical care to a child. As of August 2021, CACI contained references to more than 700,000 reports of child abuse. This information enables authorized users conducting background checks to determine whether an individual has been named as a suspect of substantiated allegations of child abuse, and, if so, to obtain and consider investigative reports before placing children in someone's care.

Key Findings

- Although CACI is meant to be a comprehensive database of substantiated cases of child abuse identified by county CWS agencies throughout the State, we found that it does not contain records for as many as 22,000 individuals with histories of substantiated child abuse during a recent four-year period.
 - » Users of this database cannot depend on it to help protect children from being placed in the care of individuals with a history of abusing children.
 - » DOJ provided at least 224 letters to authorized users indicating that individuals did not have histories of substantiated child abuse when county records indicated otherwise.
- Conversely, but on a smaller scale, CACI incorrectly identifies some individuals as having a substantiated history of child abuse.
 - » We found 298 reports of child abuse in CACI that were not supported by county records.
- The State relies on an error-prone manual process for managing CACI data.

Key Recommendations

- The Legislature should amend state law to reduce errors and inefficiencies in the child abuse background check process.
- Until the Legislature amends state law, DOJ, the California Department of Social Services, and county CWS agencies should collaborate to identify and enter into CACI all missing reports of substantiated child abuse. DOJ should then send revised letters to authorized users as necessary.
- DOJ should address inaccurate data in CACI and develop policies and procedures related to managing child abuse report information.
- To ensure confidentiality, fairness, and CACI's accuracy and completeness, the counties we reviewed—Calaveras, Contra Costa, Kern, Orange, Shasta, and Stanislaus—should adopt or develop various policies and procedures for reporting incidents of child abuse to DOJ or hearing grievances.

CACI Does Not Contain 22,000 Suspects Because It Is Missing Substantiated Reports of Child Abuse for the Period of July 2017 Through June 2021

