

Why GAO Did This Study

With more than 1.2 million school-age military dependents worldwide, per DOD, the department's organizations work to prevent, respond to, and resolve incidents of child abuse. Incidents of child abuse, including child-on-child abuse, can cause a range of emotional and physical trauma for military families, ultimately affecting servicemember performance.

GAO was asked to review how DOD addresses incidents of child abuse and child-on-child abuse occurring on a military installation or involving military dependents. This report examines, among other things, the extent to which DOD has (1) visibility over such reported incidents, and (2) developed and implemented policies and procedures to respond to and resolve these incidents. GAO reviewed relevant policies and guidance; interviewed officials at a nongeneralizable sample of seven military installations; analyzed program data; interviewed parents of children affected by abuse; and interviewed DOD, service, and civilian officials, including at children's advocacy centers.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making 23 recommendations, including that the military services develop a process to monitor how reported incidents are screened at installations, that DOD expand the membership of the IDC to include medical personnel, and that DOD establish processes that help ensure timely access to certified pediatric examiners overseas. DOD concurred with 16, partially concurred with six, and did not concur with one of GAO's recommendations, which GAO continues to believe are valid, as discussed in the report.

View [GAO-20-110](#). For more information, contact Brenda S. Farrell at (202) 512-3604 or farrellb@gao.gov.

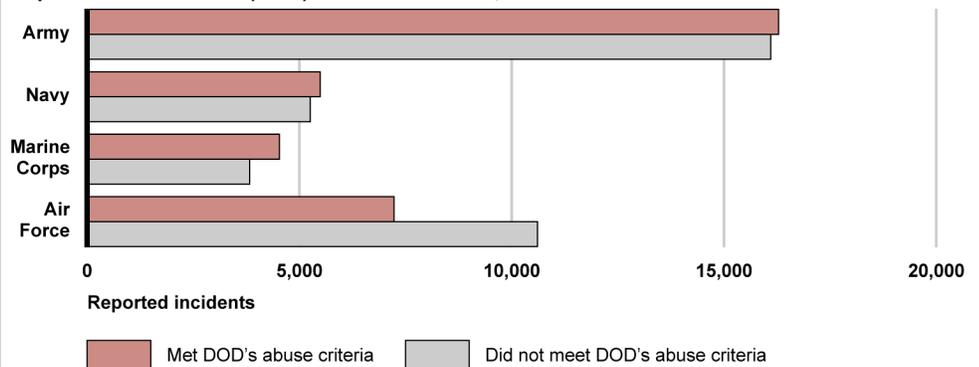
CHILD WELFARE

Increased Guidance and Collaboration Needed to Improve DOD's Tracking and Response to Child Abuse

What GAO Found

The Department of Defense (DOD) has limited visibility over reported incidents of child abuse—physical, sexual, or emotional abuse, or neglect by a caregiver—and child-on-child abuse due to standalone databases, information sharing challenges, and installation discretion. From fiscal years 2014 through 2018, the military services recorded more than 69,000 reported incidents of child abuse (see figure). However, personnel at all seven installations in GAO's review stated that they use discretion to determine which incidents to present to the Incident Determination Committee (IDC)—the installation-based committee responsible for reviewing reports and determining whether they meet DOD's criteria for abuse (an act of abuse and an actual or potential impact, e.g., spanking that left a welt). Per DOD guidance, every reported incident must be presented to the IDC unless there is no possibility that it could meet any of the criteria for abuse. However, personnel described incidents they had screened out that, per DOD guidance, should have been presented to the IDC. Without the services developing a process to monitor how incidents are screened at installations, DOD does not know the total number of reported child abuse incidents across the department.

Reported Incidents of Child Abuse (Physical, Sexual, or Emotional Abuse, or Neglect), by Department of Defense (DOD) Criteria for Abuse, Fiscal Years 2014-2018



Source: GAO analysis of Family Advocacy Program data. | GAO-20-110

While DOD has expanded its child abuse policies and procedures to include child-on-child sexual abuse, gaps exist. For example, DOD standardized the IDC process in 2016, but the new structure does not include medical personnel with expertise, contrary to best practices for substantiating child abuse allegations. Without expanding the IDC membership to include medical personnel, members may not have all of the relevant information needed to make fully informed decisions, potentially affecting confidence in the efficacy of the committee's decisions. GAO also found that the availability of certified pediatric sexual assault forensic examiners across DOD is limited—according to DOD officials, there are only 11 in comparison to 1,448 incidents of child sexual abuse that met DOD's criteria for abuse from fiscal years 2014 through 2018. Without processes that help ensure timely access to certified pediatric examiners, child victims of sexual abuse overseas may not receive exams in time for evidence to be collected for use in prosecution, increasing the stress and trauma of affected victims.