



*2016 Report On*  
**Child Protection**  
**in Vermont**



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## Message from the DCF Commissioner

The opioid crisis continues to have an impact on children and families in Vermont. In almost one third of the over 20,000 reports made to the Child Protection Line in 2016, callers named substance abuse as a contributing factor.

While the number of children coming into DCF custody has been trending slightly downward, the continued impact of the opioid crisis is reflected in the growing number of non-custody cases requiring ongoing social worker involvement.



This includes:

- Cases opened for ongoing services after an investigation or assessment determines there is a high to very high-risk of future maltreatment.
- Cases where a judge has placed a child in the conditional custody of a parent or other family member — under the supervision of Family Services. To keep children with their families, judges are increasingly ordering conditional custody rather than DCF custody. At the same time, they are also ordering DCF to stay involved: assessing the risks, providing services and ensuring children's safety. This illustrates how Vermont's child protection system is using all available options to help keep children safe.

Families Involved With DCF	Jan-14	Jan-15	Jan-16	Jan-17
Families with children in DCF custody	765	873	955	927
Families receiving ongoing services, no court involvement, no children in DCF custody	387	454	491	523
Families with court-involved cases, no children in DCF custody (e.g., juvenile probation & conditional custody)	317	381	396	503
TOTAL	1,469	1,708	1,842	1,953

The 35 new positions DCF received in 2015 helped us to reduce caseloads from 17 families per social worker down to about 16 families per social worker in 2016.

Child protection goes well beyond this department. It is multi-faceted system that relies on many different parties to function, including:

- Community members and mandated reporters who report their concerns
- Staff who take initial reports, conduct investigations and assessments, and provide ongoing services and support as well as the supervisors who oversee their work
- Law enforcement officers who intervene on children's behalf
- Judges who make decisions about custody, placement and supervision
- Foster parents and kin who care for children while they can't safely be at home and the staff who recruit and support them
- Adoptive parents who provide permanence for children when they can't safely go home and the staff and partners who find and support them
- Community agencies and other departments who work with us to help families struggling with substance abuse and other issues

It is essential that we continue to band together to keep children safe. Child protection truly is a community concern!

In closing, I'd like to take this opportunity to welcome Karen Shea to the role of Family Services Deputy Commissioner. She brings many strengths to the position, including incredible leadership, energy, expertise and many years of experience in Vermont's child welfare system. She is dedicated to improving services for children and families and supporting her staff, enabling them to do the important work of keeping children safe. We welcome Karen with open arms and are grateful that she is in this role.



**Ken Schatz, DCF Commissioner**

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## Executive Summary

This report provides child protection data for calendar year 2016. Here are some highlights:

- ➔ Reports rose slightly in 2016 with a record 20,583 calls made to the Child Protection Line.
- ➔ At least 67% of the calls were from mandated reporters.
- ➔ Substance abuse was a factor in 27% of the reports received.
- ➔ Of the 20,583 calls received, we opened 5,509 child safety interventions:<sup>1</sup>
  - 2,835 child abuse investigations
  - 1,421 child abuse assessments
  - 1,253 family assessments
- ➔ Twenty-six interventions that began as child abuse assessments were later changed to investigations, bringing the total investigations conducted in 2016 to 2,861.
- ➔ At the conclusion of the 2,861 child abuse investigations, we substantiated 737 reports.
- ➔ Based on these substantiated reports, there were:
  - 984 unique child victims
  - 812 substantiated incidents of abuse:
    - 117 of physical abuse
    - 295 of sexual abuse
    - 76 of risk of sexual abuse
    - 295 of risk of harm<sup>2</sup>
    - 29 of emotional abuse/neglect

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<sup>1</sup> If we get five calls about the same child/incident, it counts as five calls but only one intervention.

<sup>2</sup> What is called neglect in other states is captured largely in our risk-of-harm categories.

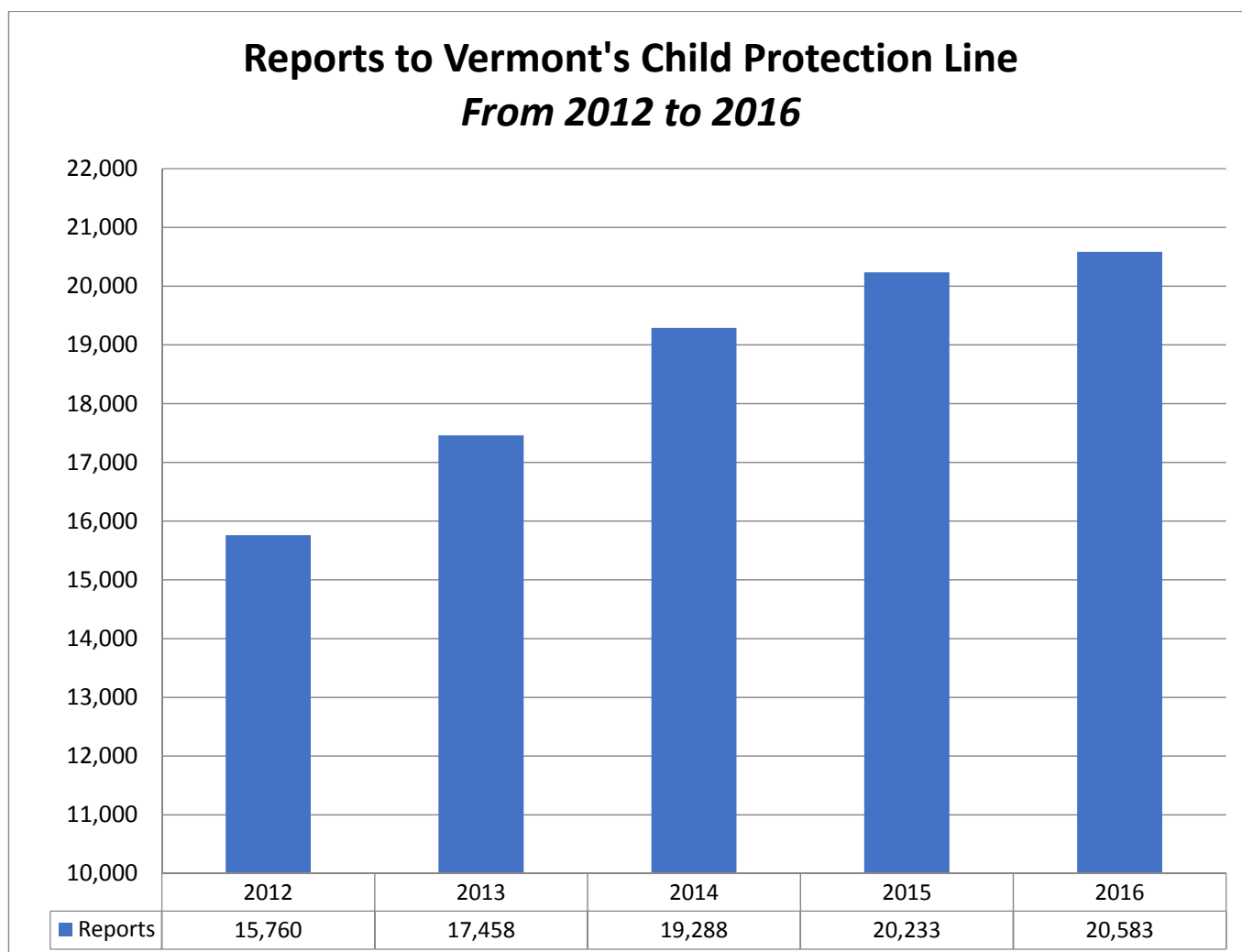
## Reports to Vermont's Child Protection Line

Vermonters called the state's Child Protection Line a record 20,583 times in 2016 to report their concerns about children's safety and well-being.

All Vermonters are encouraged to call the Child Protection Line if they have concerns about children's safety – whether they are mandated by law to do so or not.

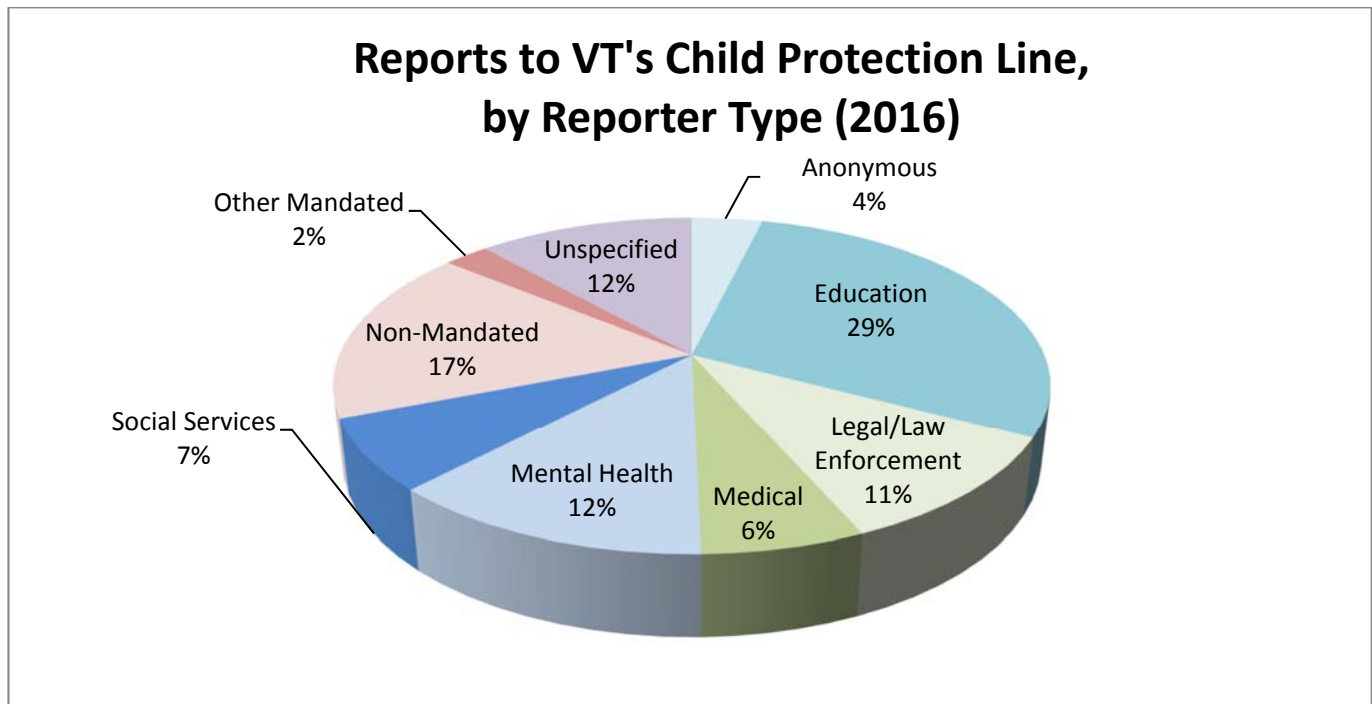
We count all the calls we get, including:

- ➔ Allegations that meet the legal definition of child abuse and neglect
- ➔ Allegations that don't meet the legal definition of child abuse or neglect but do raise concerns about:
  - Youth engaging in risky behaviors
  - Children not receiving proper parental care
- ➔ Multiple calls about the same children/incidents made by different reporters



## Mandated Reporters of Child Abuse and Neglect

At least 67% of the calls to the Child Protection Line were from mandated reporters, 17% from non-mandated reporters, 12% from unspecified callers and 4% from anonymous callers.



### Mandated Reporters in Vermont

Mandated reporters are legally required (Title 33, Chapter 49) to report their suspicions to Family Services *within 24 hours*. A mandated reporter is any:

- Health care provider, including any chiropractor, dentist, emergency medical personnel, hospital administrator, hospital intern, licensed practical nurse, medical examiner, mental health professional, osteopath, pharmacist, physician, physician assistant, psychologist, registered nurse, resident physician, and surgeon
- Individual who is a) employed by a school district or an approved or recognized independent school or b) contracted and paid by a school district or an approved or recognized independent school to provide student services, including any school superintendent, school principal, headmaster of an approved or recognized independent school, school teacher, student teacher, school librarian, and school guidance counselor
- Agency of Human Services employee, contractor, or grantee who has contact with clients
- Camp administrator, counselor, and owner, including any residential and nonresidential camp and recreational program
- Childcare worker, clergy member, police officer, probation officer and social worker



## Family Factors Identified by Reporters

Substance abuse was a factor in 27% of the reports received, financial stress in 15%, domestic violence in 12%, mental health in 11%, and cognitive/physical disabilities in 3%.

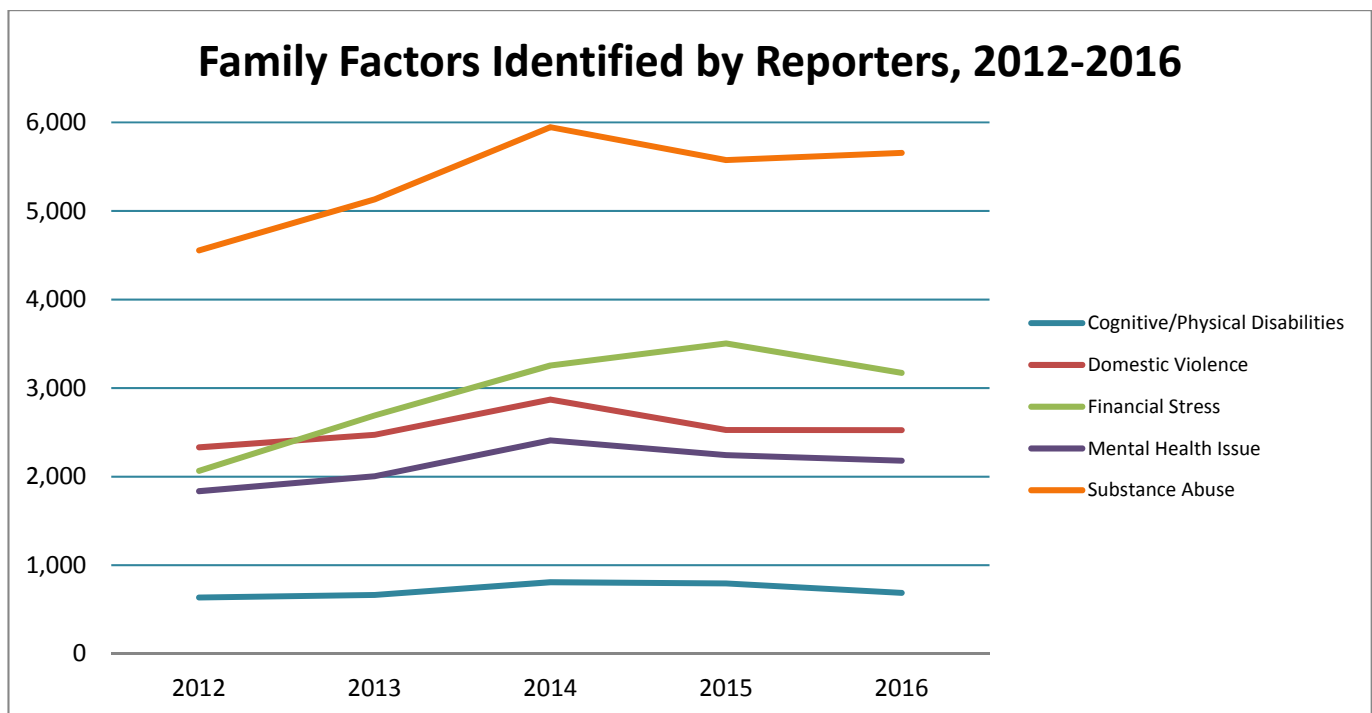
We know there is a strong correlation between child maltreatment and factors such as substance abuse, domestic violence, mental health and financial insecurity.

Research has found that:

- The presence of any one of these factors increases the risk of child abuse and neglect
- The presence of multiple risk factors has an exponential impact on a child's likelihood of experiencing abuse and neglect

The following table identifies family factors that were identified by reporters when they called the Child Protection Line. While some factors may not have been validated during ensuing interventions, this list helps us better understand the difficult challenges families face and helps supervisors and social workers plan effective intervention strategies.

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
<b>Cognitive/Physical Disabilities</b>	636 (4%)	664 (4%)	808 (4%)	795 (4%)	688 (3%)
<b>Domestic Violence</b>	2,331 (15%)	2,473 (14%)	2,871 (15%)	2,527 (13%)	2,525 (12%)
<b>Financial Stress</b>	2,066 (13%)	2,692 (15%)	3,256 (17%)	3,504 (17%)	3,172 (15%)
<b>Mental Health Issue</b>	1,836 (12%)	2,005 (11%)	2,410 (12%)	2,243 (11%)	2,180 (11%)
<b>Substance Abuse</b>	4,555 (29%)	5,130 (29%)	5,946 (31%)	5,575 (28%)	5,657 (27%)



# What happens to reports received

## 1. A supervisor screens each report.

The supervisor decides whether the report can be accepted for a child safety intervention according to Vermont law and departmental policy. Several factors are considered, including:

- The age of the alleged victim
- The alleged abuser's relationship to the child
- The nature of the allegation

Each non-accepted report gets a second review by another supervisor who may decide to accept it. If it is still *not accepted*, the family may be referred to services in the community, but no further action is taken by the Family Services Division.

## 2. If a report is *accepted*, the supervisor determines the appropriate intervention.

In 2008, the Vermont legislature amended State law (Title 33, Chapter 49) to allow child abuse assessment as an alternative to child abuse investigation in response to accepted reports of child abuse and neglect. This allows us to respond differently to reports based on factors such as the type and severity of the alleged maltreatment, the number of previous reports, and the family's willingness to engage in services to reduce risk.

An investigation is mandatory in certain situations. This includes when a report alleges that:

- A child was sexually abused by an adult (18+).
- A child is at risk of harm for sexual abuse by an adult (18+).
- The actions or inactions of a *person responsible for a child's welfare* (see definition on page 22) resulted in a child's death or serious injury to a child.
- A person responsible for a child's welfare abandoned a child, maliciously punished a child, physically abused a child under three or a child of any age who is non-verbal or non-ambulatory or allowed a child to be exposed to methamphetamine production.

### Another Child Safety Intervention: Family Assessments

In addition to child abuse investigations and assessments authorized by Chapter 49 of Vermont law, Chapter 51 authorizes the use of family assessments. They may be used for allegations that don't meet the legal definition of child abuse or neglect but still raise concerns about whether children are receiving proper parental care necessary for their well-being. This could include, for example, allegations that a parent is neglecting a child's education, a woman who has a substantial history with DCF is pregnant, a newborn has a positive toxicology screen for illegal substances, and a child faces a serious threat to his or her health because of the mother's substance use during pregnancy.

### 3. FSD opens an investigation or an assessment.

A social worker is assigned to the case and the selected intervention begins, usually within 72 hours but sooner if a child is in imminent danger.

Safety is the first priority in both types of intervention, which include similar steps:

- a) Assessing a child's immediate safety
- b) Assessing the risk of future maltreatment
- c) Determining the outcome of the intervention
- d) Opening a case for ongoing services if needed

The same assessment tools are used in both types of intervention: the *SDM® Assessment of Danger and Safety Tool* and the *SDM® Risk Assessment Tool*. The results inform our recommendations to Family Court about the need for children to come into DCF custody and be placed out of their homes to ensure safety.

The main difference between the two types of intervention is that an investigation requires a formal determination of whether the reported abuse or neglect happened and should be substantiated, while an assessment does not.

#### Assessment to Investigation Track

A supervisor may approve changing a child abuse assessment to a child abuse investigation at any time if it appears necessary to ensure a child's safety. In 2016, 26 interventions that began as child abuse assessments were later changed to the investigation track.

### 4. At the conclusion of the intervention, the supervisor determines the outcome based on the information gathered.

#### a. Need for services:

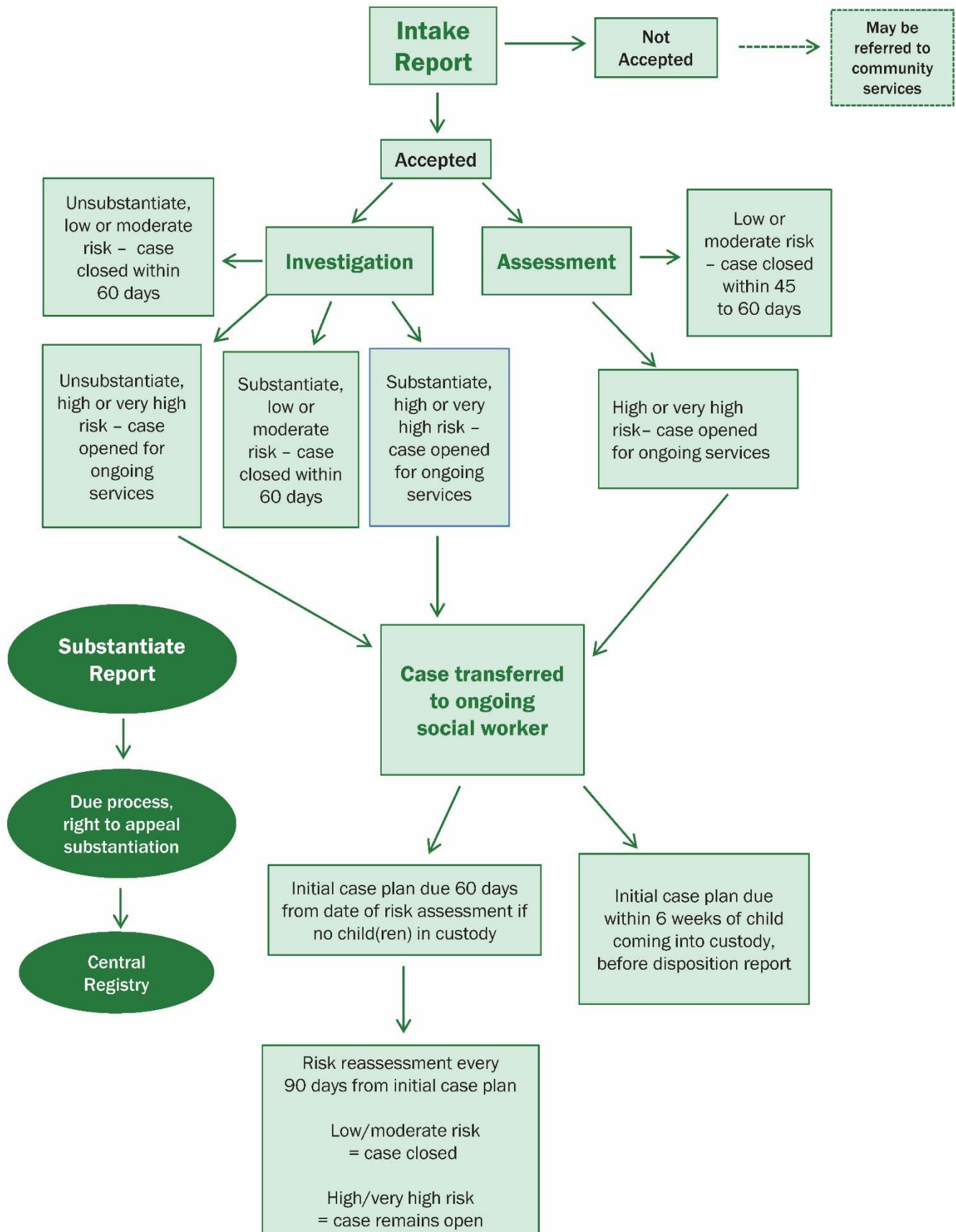
Both investigations and assessments result in a determination of the family's need for ongoing services based on the assessed risk of future maltreatment.

#### b. Formal Determination:

Investigations also result in a formal determination of whether the reported abuse or neglect occurred. If the evidence would lead a reasonable person to believe the child was abused or neglected, the report is *substantiated* and information about the person substantiated is entered into Vermont's Child Protection Registry – a database of all substantiated reports of child abuse and neglect dating back to January 1, 1992.

If a report is *unsubstantiated*, a case could still be opened for services based on the assessed risk of future maltreatment.

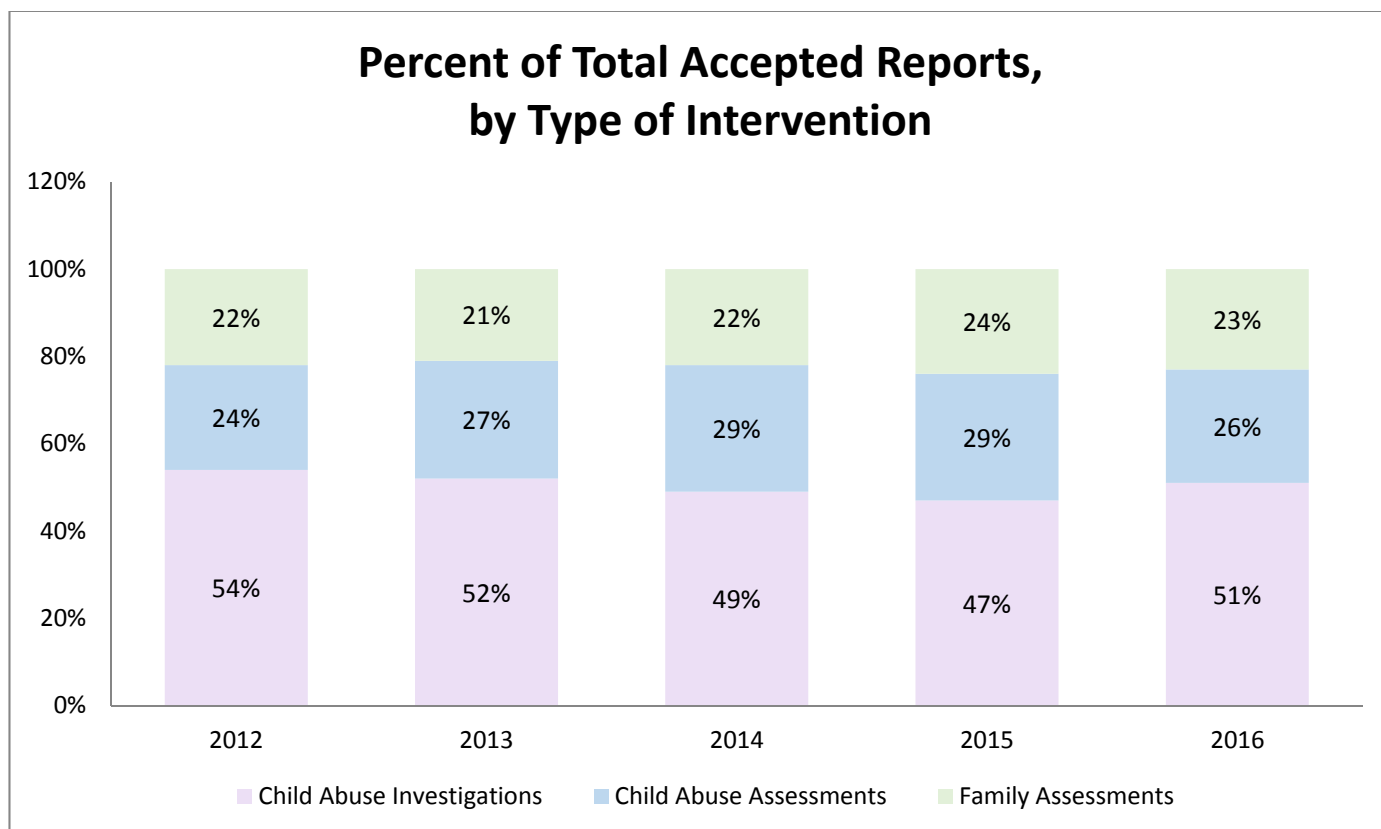
# FSD Case Flowchart



## Response to Reports, from 2012 to 2016

In 2016, we opened 5,509 child safety interventions: 2,835 child abuse investigations, 1,421 child abuse assessments and 1,253 family assessments.

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
<b>Total calls to Vermont's Child Protection Line</b>	15,760	17,458	19,288	20,233	20,583
<b>Reports Accepted For:</b>					
1.Child Abuse Investigation	2,536	2,657	2,877	2,634	2,835
2.Child Abuse Assessment	1,119	1,409	1,688	1,618	1,421
3.Family Assessment	1,044	1,069	1,281	1,378	1,253
<b>Total reports accepted for intervention</b>	<b>4,699</b> 30%	<b>5,135</b> 30%	<b>5,846</b> 30%	<b>5,630</b> 28%	<b>5,509</b> 27%



## Reports Accepted in 2015 & 2016 – by Intervention & District<sup>3</sup>

District	Child Abuse Investigations		Child Abuse Assessments		Family Assessments		Reports Accepted for Intervention	
	2015	2016	2015	2016	2015	2016	2015	2016
Barre	269	339	207	153	158	140	634	632
Bennington	203	199	129	117	107	72	439	388
Brattleboro	154	160	98	84	116	144	368	388
Burlington	419	484	298	280	240	187	957	951
Hartford	153	167	87	80	91	76	331	323
Middlebury	124	118	59	52	74	65	257	235
Morrisville	117	110	86	51	39	51	242	212
Newport	135	183	90	90	50	64	275	337
Rutland	288	292	202	160	135	130	625	582
Springfield	195	171	107	103	111	90	413	364
St. Albans	308	381	156	160	192	160	656	701
St. Johnsbury	163	148	76	78	59	71	298	297
Out of State	106	83	23	13	6	3	135	99
<b>Statewide</b>	<b>2,634</b>	<b>2,835</b>	<b>1,618</b>	<b>1,421</b>	<b>1,378</b>	<b>1,253</b>	<b>5,630</b>	<b>5,509</b>

<sup>3</sup> District refers to the Agency of Human Services district where the child's caregiver lives.

## Outcomes of Investigations & Assessments – by District<sup>4</sup>

- ➔ At the conclusion of the 2,861 investigations (2,835 that began as investigations plus 26 that began as assessments but were later changed to investigations), 737 were substantiated<sup>5</sup>.
- ➔ At the conclusion of the 5,509 investigations and assessments, 1,068 cases were opened for ongoing services based on a high or very high risk of future maltreatment.

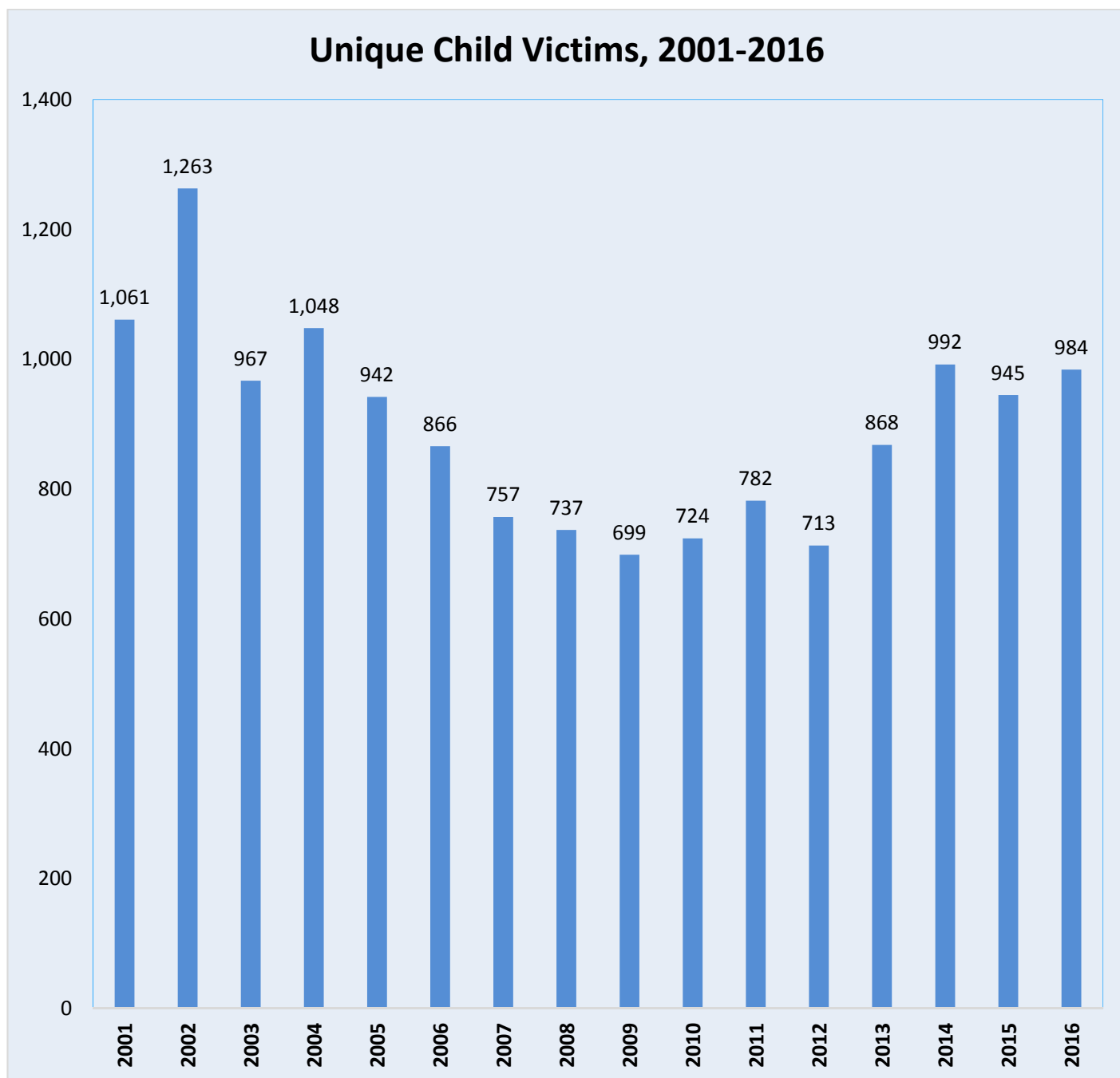
	<b>Investigations Substantiated</b>		<b>Cases Opened for Services</b>	
<b>District</b>	<b>2015</b>	<b>2016</b>	<b>2015</b>	<b>2016</b>
Barre	79	64	125	122
Bennington	62	67	108	108
Brattleboro	41	59	83	79
Burlington	88	96	189	218
Hartford	41	46	50	42
Middlebury	45	56	70	94
Morrisville	35	32	30	32
Newport	33	37	19	27
Rutland	67	56	81	83
Springfield	71	50	82	83
St. Albans	110	112	166	141
St. Johnsbury	61	42	42	37
Out of State	40	20	5	2
<b>Statewide</b>	<b>773</b>	<b>737</b>	<b>1,050</b>	<b>1,068</b>

<sup>4</sup> District refers to the Agency of Human Services district where the child's caregiver lives.

<sup>5</sup> Substantiated means the evidence would lead a reasonable person to believe the child was abused or neglected.

## Data from Substantiated Reports

The data in the tables that follow are based on the 737 reports that were substantiated.



**Note:** the numbers in the graph above are an unduplicated count of victims of substantiated child abuse and neglect.



## Reports Substantiated in 2016 – by Type of Abuse

Since a report can be substantiated for more than one type of abuse, the numbers below reflect a total greater than the 737 reports substantiated in 2016.

District <sup>6</sup>	Physical Abuse	Sexual <sup>7</sup> Abuse	Risk of Sexual Abuse	Risk of <sup>8</sup> Harm	Emotional/ Neglect
Barre	9	23	6	19	3
Bennington	9	29	4	25	0
Brattleboro	15	19	9	28	5
Burlington	16	42	8	43	7
Hartford	2	14	3	4	0
Middlebury	10	14	4	26	1
Morrisville	7	11	1	10	0
Newport	2	7	2	6	0
Rutland	11	19	3	21	0
Springfield	4	12	2	16	4
St. Albans	11	34	11	29	3
St. Johnsbury	4	18	3	13	0
Out of State	17	53	20	55	6
<b>Total Statewide</b>	<b>117 (14.4%)</b>	<b>295 (36.3%)</b>	<b>76 (9.4%)</b>	<b>295 (36.3%)</b>	<b>29 (3.6%)</b>

<sup>6</sup> District refers to the Agency of Human Services district where the child's caregiver lives.

<sup>7</sup> The department investigates all valid allegations of sexual abuse and risk of sexual abuse regardless of the relationship between the alleged abuser and child. Most other state child welfare agencies do not investigate allegations of child sexual abuse by non-caregivers.

<sup>8</sup> What is called neglect in other states is captured largely in our risk-of-harm categories.

## Reports Substantiated in 2016 – by Age & Gender of Victim

The data below represents the age and gender of the victims of substantiated abuse or neglect.

*Note: a child is represented more than once if he or she suffered more than one type of abuse or was involved in more than one substantiated report during the year.*

Age	Percent	Physical	Sexual	Risk of Sexual Abuse	Risk of Harm	Neglect/Emotional
< 1	6.1%	6	4	1	48	3
1	6.1%	4	0	6	48	4
2	5.4%	6	0	5	42	2
3	5.9%	2	4	3	49	2
4	4.9%	3	7	7	32	1
5	6.0%	12	12	5	30	2
6	6.1%	10	14	10	26	2
7	6.1%	15	12	5	27	3
8	6.0%	10	8	12	28	3
9	4.5%	10	6	11	16	3
10	4.5%	7	10	11	16	2
11	4.2%	10	12	5	14	2
12	4.3%	5	18	9	11	1
13	5.3%	10	28	3	11	2
14	7.7%	7	52	9	10	1
15	9.2%	10	66	7	10	1
16	5.1%	3	37	5	4	3
17	3.0%	3	21	1	6	0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>133</b>	<b>311</b>	<b>115</b>	<b>428</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>Gender</b>						
Male	39.8%	76	52	47	212	17
Female	60.2%	57	259	68	216	20
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>133</b>	<b>311</b>	<b>115</b>	<b>428</b>	<b>37</b>

## Reports Substantiated in 2016 – by Age & Gender of Abuser

The data below represents the age and gender of substantiated abusers. An abuser may be represented more than once if more than one type of abuse was substantiated.

Age	Physical	Sexual	Risk of Sexual Abuse	Risk of Harm	Neglect/Emotional
<20	0	99	1	8	1
20 - 29	38	63	31	176	16
30 - 39	58	49	46	223	19
40 - 49	32	56	31	68	7
50 - 59	5	24	15	13	5
60+	4	15	14	1	1
Unknown	2	14	0	4	0
Gender					
Female	55	25	45	246	30
Male	83	289	93	247	19
Unspecified	1	6	0	0	0

## Reports Substantiated in 2016 – Relationship of Abuser to Child

Relationship	Physical	Sexual	Risk of Sexual Abuse	Risk of Harm	Neglect/Emotional
Parent	99	39	47	393	39
Stepparent/ Parent's Partner	24	17	16	68	7
Foster Parent	0	0	0	0	0
Sibling	0	18	2	0	0
Other Relative	4	31	26	2	0
Neighbor/Friend	1	127	28	2	0
Other Known	2	36	12	14	0
Stranger	0	28	2	0	0
Unspecified	9	24 <sup>9</sup>	5	14	1

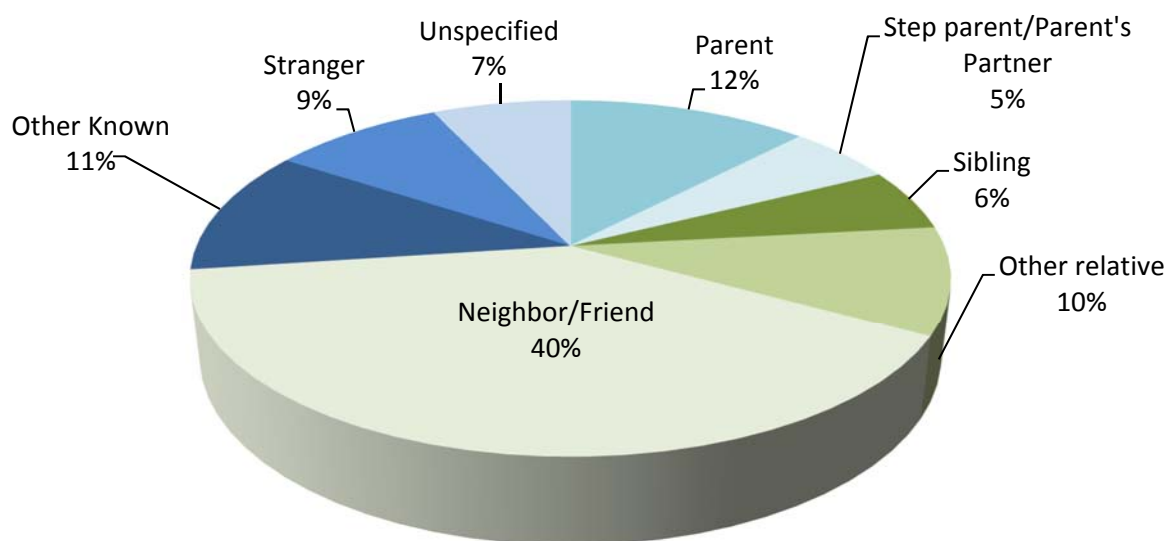
<sup>9</sup> Includes people found to have possession of online child pornography

## Reports Substantiated for Child Sexual Abuse in 2016

Unlike other types of child abuse, the department investigates all valid allegations of sexual abuse and risk of sexual abuse — regardless of the relationship between the alleged abuser and child. Other state agencies only get involved when the alleged abuser is a caregiver. For this reason, our rate of intervention in sexual abuse cases is not comparable to other states.

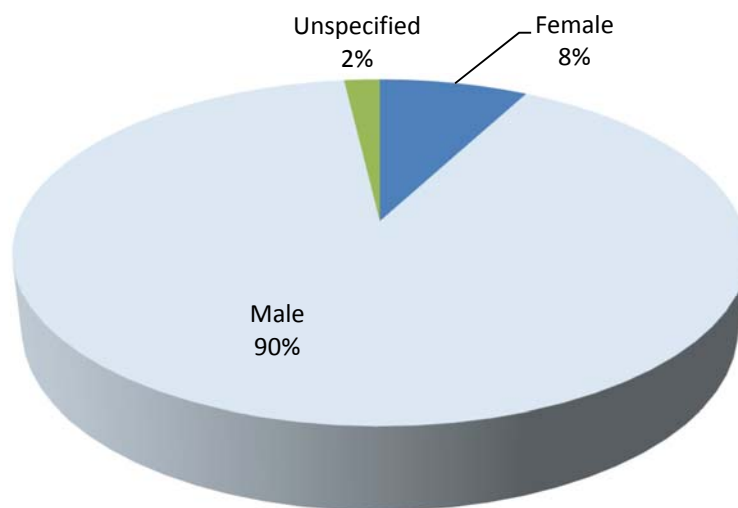
**At least 84% of child sexual abuse was committed by people the children know.**

### Relationship of Abusers to Victims



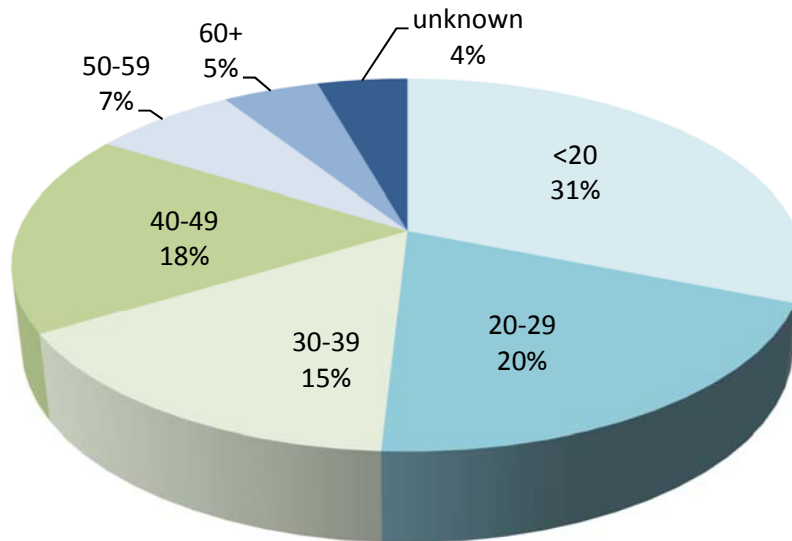
**At least 90% of the known abusers were male.**

### Abuser Gender

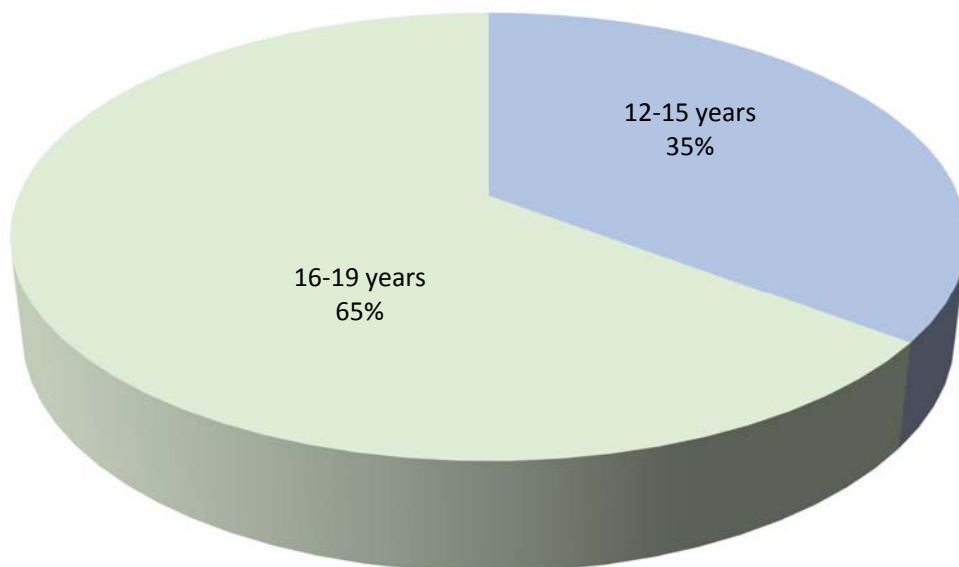


At least 31% of the abusers were under the age of 20. Of these, 65% were aged 16 to 19.

**Age of Abusers**



**Abusers Under 20 by Age Group**



# Appendix One: Child Abuse and Neglect Definitions

For more detailed definitions go to <http://dcf.vermont.gov/fsd/policies> and read *Policy 50: Child Abuse and Neglect Definitions*.

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Vermont law (33.V.S.A. 49, § 4912) defines an “abused or neglected child” as: a child whose physical health, psychological growth and development or welfare is harmed or is at substantial risk of harm by the acts or omissions of his or her parent or other person responsible for the child’s welfare. Also, a child who is sexually abused or at substantial risk of sexual abuse by any person and a child who has died as a result of abuse or neglect.

**Harm** can occur by:

- Abandonment
- Emotional maltreatment
- Neglect
- Physical injury
- Sexual abuse

**Risk of harm** means a significant danger a child will suffer serious harm other than by accidental means, which would be likely to cause physical injury or sexual abuse including as the result of:

- A single, egregious act that caused the child to be at significant risk of serious physical injury
  - The production or preproduction of methamphetamines when a child is present
  - Failing to provide supervision or care appropriate for the child's age or development and, as a result, the child is at significant risk of serious physical injury
  - Failing to provide supervision or care appropriate for the child's age or development due to use of illegal substances, or misuse of prescription drugs or alcohol
  - Failing to supervise appropriately a child in a situation in which drugs, alcohol, or drug paraphernalia are accessible to the child
  - A registered sex offender or person substantiated for sexually abusing a child residing with or spending unsupervised time with a child
- 

**Child:** An individual under the age of 18.

**Person Responsible for a Child's Welfare:** Includes the child's parent, guardian, foster parent, and any other adult residing in the child’s home who serves in a parental role; an employee of a public or private residential home, institution or agency; or other person responsible for the child's welfare while in a residential, educational or child care setting, including any staff person.

**Emotional Maltreatment:** A pattern of malicious behavior, which results in impaired psychological growth and development.

**Neglect:** The failure to supply a child with adequate food, clothing, shelter or health care, including medical or non-medical remedial health care permitted or authorized under state law (33 VSA § 4912(6)(B)).

**Physical Injury:** Death, permanent or temporary disfigurement, or impairment of any bodily organ or function other than by accidental means.

**Serious Physical Injury:** By other than accidental means:

- Physical injury that creates any of the following:
  - A substantial risk of death
  - A substantial loss or impairment of the function of any bodily member or organ
  - A substantial impairment of health
  - Substantial disfigurement
- Strangulation by intentionally impeding normal breathing or circulation of the blood by applying pressure on the throat or neck or blocking the nose or mouth of another person.

**Sexual Abuse:**

Consists of any act or acts by any person involving sexual molestation or exploitation of a child, including:

- Incest
- Prostitution
- Rape
- Sodomy
- Lewd and lascivious conduct involving a child
- Aiding, abetting, counseling, hiring, or procuring of a child to perform or participate in any photograph, motion picture, exhibition, show, representation, or other presentation which, in whole or in part, depicts sexual conduct, sexual excitement, or sadomasochistic abuse involving a child
- Viewing, possessing, or transmitting child pornography, with the exclusion of the exchange of images between mutually consenting minors, including the minor whose image is exchanged
- Human trafficking
- Sexual assault
- Voyeurism
- Luring a child
- Obscenity

## **HELP PREVENT CHILD ABUSE**

If you suspect that a child is being abused or neglected,  
call Vermont's Child Protection Line to  
report it — 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

**1-800-649-5285**

<http://dcf.vermont.gov/protection/reporting>

### **Online Mandated Reporter Training**

This training will help you understand the dynamics of child abuse and neglect and your responsibility as a mandated reporter.

It should take you about two hours to finish. Once you've successfully completed the final exam, we will email you a certificate of completion.

<https://goto.webcasts.com/starthere.jsp?ei=1087433>