As Mother Killed Her Son, Protectors Observed Privacy

By CELIA W. DUGGER

In 1986, Shulamis Riegler beat her 8-year-old son Israel so badly that he was hospitalized in a coma. Doctors noticed human bite marks on his shoulder.

When the boy recovered, he and his two little brothers spent several years in foster care before going home in 1988 and 1989.

Then, barely a year later, Mrs. Riegler beat another son, Yaakov. She twisted his leg so viciously that she heard his thigh bone crack. The retarded boy, 8 years old, 3-feet-8 and 48 pounds, was taken to the hospital in a coma and never woke up.

Known as Abusive

Yaakov was one of seven children who died in 1990 after repeated beatings and whose families were known to New York City's child welfare system as abusive or neglectful, a recent city report found.

In the report, the only public accounting of how the city's Human Resources Administration handled such cases, Yaakov was an anonymous statistic, unnamed because of strict state confidentiality laws that protect the privacy of informants and families, even, as in Yaakov's case, when the mother has pleaded guilty to killing her child. Mrs. Riegler is to be sentenced today to 7½ to 15 years in prison.

Yaakov's story, pieced together through interviews and medical, school and court records, is about an affectionate if sometimes demanding boy, who could speak only in monosyllables, but whose bruises and broken bones would later tell of his pain. It is about a mother who married at 19, had children quickly and was overwhelmed by the unending tasks of homemaking.

Agency's Scattered Work

And it is about a child welfare system that was unable, despite repeated warnings, to help the child. The work the agency did was so scattered and uncoordinated that at one point a city worker was ending the supervision of Mrs. Riegler — because she had supposedly learned to be a nonviolent parent — on the same day that another worker was investigating a new report that Yaakov was being abused. And confidentiality laws also played a part, preventing Mrs. Riegler's probation officer from finding out about new reports of abuse in her home.

Lastly, it is a story about a pediatrician who, though he knew of Mrs. Riegler's abusive history and was called on several times to treat Yaakov's wounds, said he recognized in the Riegler household only a harried mother, not a battered child.

When Mrs. Riegler pleaded guilty in State Supreme Court in Brooklyn last month, Judge Francis X. Egitto condemned the city's child protection system — a system whose goal is to reunite children with their natural parents whenever possible — and the boy's doctor for not saving Yaakov's life.

"It's not just Mrs. Riegler who is guilty of the death of Yaakov," the judge said.

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Abuse Turns Fatal

How the System Failed

A special report.

Birth

'Confidentiality' For the Mother

Yaakov Riegler was born on July 1, 1982, the third son of Moses and Shulamis Reigler. The family lived in the insular Orthodox Jewish world of Borough Park, Brooklyn.

Mrs. Riegler had trouble coping with the demands of raising and disciplining her boys, she later told a psychiatrist. Sometimes she lost her temper and struck them.

Yaakov was almost 4 when she beat her el[illegible] at Maimonides Medical Center unconscious. Medical records show that his body was covered with bruises and that he had burns in various stages of healing on his face, back and arms.

"The child is not so good on his feet and he falls a lot and could have hit his head," Mrs. Reigler told the hospital social worker at the time.

But later that year, Mrs. Reigler pleaded guilty to attempted assault and was placed on five years probation, with a requirement that she receive psychiatric treatment. Her children were sent into foster care. The two oldest, Israel and Zelig, 6, were sent to live with an uncle by the Ohel Children's Home and Family Services, a private foster care agency under contract with the city. Yaakov was sent to a home that cared for retarded children.

Mrs. Riegler regularly attended appointments with a Manhattan psychiatrist, Arthur Cronen, and began visiting her children in late 1987.

Dr. Cronen said Mrs. Riegler had very little self-confidence and a troubled marriage. "She had no pressure valve, no place to ventilate," he said. She told the doctor she felt that her husband undermined her when she disciplined the children: when she tried to get the boys to bed, her husband would say, "Oh, don't listen to her."

Dr. Cronen tried to get Mr. Riegler to come for counseling, too, but after the first few sessions he quit, saying his back hurt. So Dr.

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Cronen concentrated on teaching Mrs. Riegler how to control her temper. She seemed to be improving, he said, and did well on extended visits with her children.

Between September 1988 and September 1989 Mrs. Riegler got her children back one at a time, Yaakov last. She also gave birth to a boy, Ben-Zion. And she stopped seeing her psychiatrist. Her last face-to-face session with Dr. Cronen was in March 1989. After that, they only chatted occasionally on the phone. "It seemed O.K.," Dr. Cronen recalled. "She said things were fine."

School

Beloved Aide Grows Suspicious

When Yaakov came home, he was enrolled at Public School 205. He was happy with simple things: playing with construction paper, saying his colors out loud. He doted on Jo Anne Pesce, a teacher's helper in his class.

"He always wanted to hold my hand," Ms. Pesce said.

But just a month after school began, Ms. Pesce began to notice that Yaakov was bruised. One day, he pointed to his chest and said, "Boo-boo." She lifted his shirt and saw bruises on his chest and back. Later, she said, she saw an impression of fingernails on his cheek. Another time, the skin above his right ear was bruised and cut.

Worried, Ms. Pesce went to the school guidance counselor, Elizabeth Lantiere. Mrs. Reigler's explanation was that Yaakov had fallen down on the kitchen floor.

Mrs. Lantiere, unaware of Mrs. Riegler's history of abusiveness, was uncertain what to do. The boy was difficult to understand. He had brothers at home. Maybe they fought, Mrs. Lantiere told herself.

'I Didn't Think of This'

"Jo Anne was most worried," Mrs. Lantiere said. "She kept pestering me. But I didn't think of this kind of abuse from the mother."

Nonetheless, on Nov. 27, 1989, Mrs. Lantiere called the state child abuse line. Her report stated only that there were marks on Yaakov's face, ear and back.

The case was assigned to a city child abuse investigator, David Schwartz, who had been hired eight months earlier — one of hundreds of caseworkers hired to handle an exploding number of abuse reports.

Mr. Schwartz went to the school the day after Mrs. Lantiere called. Ms. Pesce said she lifted Yaakov's shirt to show Mr. Schwartz the marks on the boy's back. "He was shocked," she said.

But that same day in Family Court, the Human Resources Administration, apparently unaware of the new investigation by one of its own workers, asked a judge to approve a final return home for the Riegler children and end its supervision of the family.

Judge Did Not See Yaakov

Ohel, the agency that the city had assigned the case, recommended that the family be reunited. Yaakov was not present in court where the judge could have seen his bruised face. School officials said no one from Ohel ever contacted them to ask how Yaakov was doing. Lester Kaufman, Ohel's executive director, said he could not comment because of confidentiality.

Days after the abuse report was filed, Yaakov disappeared from school for virtually the entire month of December and much of January. On Feb. 7, 1990, the school attendance officer called the boy's home. Mrs. Riegler told her that Yaakov "is sick til further notice," a school log shows.

Mrs. Riegler's peremptory tone aroused the school's suspicions. A week later, Mrs. Lantiere's records show, she called Mr. Schwartz and left a message that Yaakov had been absent too much. The school's truant officer went to Yaakov's home. Mrs. Riegler told him over the intercom that Yaakov had an ear infection. The records have no further details on the incident, and it is unclear whether the truant officer insisted on seeing the boy.

During this time Mrs. Riegler was also on probation for Israel's beating. But in March 1990, a year and a half before her five years probation were up, the city's Probation Department moved to end its supervision. Such early releases are not unusual when the person on probation keeps appointments and the department learns of no new problems. Twice, her probation officer had asked Human Resources for any reports that the mother had again abused her children, and was told the information was confidential.

Trouble Throwing a Ball

On March 5, Yaakov briefly returned to school and his teacher noticed he was having trouble throwing a ball in gym. His right elbow was swollen and bruised. School records show that the teacher called Mrs. Riegler, who said she hadn't noticed anything, but would take Yaakov to a doctor.

An autopsy after his death found signs of a partly healed broken right elbow, which may never have been treated.

On March 15, 10 days after the school noticed the swollen elbow, Mrs. Reigler took Yaakov to the family pediatrician, Max Bulmash. The doctor said he noticed nothing wrong with the boy's elbow. "Unless I'd put him through the maneuvers of ball throwing," the doctor said recently, "I would not have noticed that."

Yaakov did have a scrape on his forehead. Dr. Bulmash said Mrs. Reigler told him that Yaakov had walked into a wall — an explanation that the doctor said he found plausible. Yaakov was a clumsy child who bumped into things, the doctor said — a description of the boy that school officials dispute.

A Reminder to Call Welfare

A handwritten note at the bottom of Yaakov's chart that day includes a reminder the doctor wrote himself to call city child welfare workers. Dr. Bulmash said he did not suspect abuse, but did think Mrs. Riegler was having trouble coping with Yaakov and needed homemaker services.

"He was a lovable child, no question," the doctor said. "He was responsive to human touch, but he needed care like an infant. He frequently soiled himself and got into things."

Dr. Bulmash said that some time before Yaakov's death, he had heard that Mrs. Reigler had beaten one of her other sons. He had also talked with the city investigator, Mr. Schwartz. At one point, Mrs. Reigler called him while Mr. Schwartz was at her home, complaining that the investigator was snooping around. Mr. Schwartz told the doctor over the phone that he had found no problems, Dr. Bulmash said.

Mr. Schwartz declined to speak about the case.

The doctor said he never saw any signs of abuse on Yaakov, nor did he ever call the state child abuse number.

Crisis

Putting Off Frantic Teachers

Yaakov's absences from school began again, starting two days before he went to see Dr. Bulmash and lasting for two solid months, until May 15. During that time, the school again called the child abuse line to report the absences.

On May 21, 1990, just a week after Yaakov finally returned to school, Ms. Pesce noticed that his right cheek was bruised. Again, she took him to Mrs. Lantiere's office. The counselor took out dolls. When she asked who had hurt him, the boy picked up the female doll and said, "Mommy boo-boo."

Two days later, Mrs. Lantiere got in touch with Mr. Schwartz, the investigator, to let him know Yaakov was back in school and still bruised.

'Used to Make Me Crazy'

"Mr. Schwartz used to make me crazy," Mrs. Lantiere said. "The teachers were begging me every day to call and find out. He never said anything concrete. He would say, 'We're looking into it. We're aware of it.'"

The next day, Mrs. Riegler again took Yaakov to see Dr. Bulmash. The doctor said he saw no suspicious bruises. "I always undressed him entirely," he said. "I never noticed anything."

That day, Dr. Bulmash gave Yaakov stiches for a cut near his eye. The mother told him her son had cut himself with scissors at school. "The explanation was plausible and didn't seem suspicious," the doctor said. "But I thought a child like that shouldn't be handling scissors."

He said Yaakov's eye might have been bruised, though he made no note of it. "A cut near the eye will settle blood around the soft tissue of the eye," he said.

Oozing Gash on Head

A month later, on June 20, Yaakov's teacher noticed an oozing gash on top of his head, which was "severely bruised." Mrs. Lantie called Mr. Schwartz's supervisor, Harold J mas. He promised to look into it, she said.

That same day, Mrs. Riegler took Yaakov to see Dr. Bulmash. The doctor's chart notes "a wound on back of head." The mother "denied knowing how it happened," he wrote. "I elected to treat with Bactoban."

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A week later, Mrs. Lantiere called Mr. Schwartz again. School was almost out for summer, and she wanted to be sure Yaakov was safe. He assured her that the city was referring the family to the Ohel agency.

She sighed in relief, only to learn later that the children remained in the home without Ohel's supervision.

Death

A Month of Signs And Excuses

The next school year began ominously. On Sept. 13, Yaakov's teacher noticed a burn under his right eye. The next day, Mrs. Lantiere was on the phone to Mr. Schwartz, asking him to find a home for Yaakov "where he will not be getting hurt all the time," her notes say.

Sept. 18: Yaakov is black and blue on his chest, his hip, along his spine and close to his collarbone.

Sept. 19: "Yaakov is walking strangely. His left knee gave way while walking up the stairs." At lunch time, he was "extremely frightened of water," school records say. "He screamed and his whole body was trembling."

Sept. 24: He had scratches on the left side of his neck and a bruise on his cheek and forehead. He had fingerprints on his neck.

"I was frantic," Mrs. Lantiere said.

Sept. 25: Mrs. Lantiere called Mr. Schwartz again.

Sept. 26: She went over the investigator's head and called the state child abuse line, the third such report made by the school.

Appeared to Be Burn Marks

The next day, another H.R.A. investigator, Keith Glascoe, visited the Riegler home. He later told a hospital social worker that he had seen what appeared to be burn marks on the boy. Yaakov told him that both his mother and father had hurt him, but that his mother hurt him more. Mrs. Reigler's explanation was that Yaakov always fell and hurt himself.

Mr. Glascoe visited the school and told the principal, Philip Tritt, that he was having trouble finding an Orthodox Jewish foster home for Yaakov.

Sept. 29 was Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the Jewish year, a day of atonement. Yaakov stayed home with his mother while his father and older brothers went to temple.

Mrs. Riegler was pregnant with her fifth child, and felt sick. Yaakov had diarrhea and soiled himself several times. Mrs. Riegler had to clean up after him repeatedly. She later confessed in court that she "lost control" and beat Yaakov. His head hit hard against the wall.

The comatose boy was taken to Maimonides, where his brother had been treated four years earlier. Mrs. Reigler blamed Yaakov's injuries on his clumsiness, just as she had with Israel. She told a hospital administrator that she was praying in the dining room when Yaakov fell.

The mother, dressed in a nightgown, sat talking with Dr. Bulmash, who had came into the emergency room looking "white" and very upset, the hospital social work report stated.

"I did not push him!" hospital workers heard her shout.

On Oct. 14, 1990, Yaakov died.

In a subsequent trial of the parents in Family Court, it took a medical examiner almost an hour just to describe the bruises on Yaakov's arms.

Epitaph

Mild Punishment, Much Secrecy

Postscript: Yaakov's death led to new calls by the city's Probation Commissioner, Catherine M. Abate, to ease confidentiality laws. New legislation is pending.

Dr. Bulmash is under investigation by the Brooklyn District Attorney's office, which is trying to determine whether he violated laws that require doctors to report signs of child abuse to the state phone line.

H.R.A's child fatality review panel recommended that the agency report Dr. Bulmash to the state Office of Professional Medical Conduct, but was prevented from doing so by the agency's lawyers, who said confidentiality laws forbade it.

Mrs. Riegler's probation officer, Yvonne Hernandez, who was carrying about 160 cases at the time Mrs. Rieger's probation ended, was mildly disciplined for sloppy record keeping. Her supervisor agreed to early retirement after an internal investigation of the case, probation officials said.

The abuse investigators, Mr. Schwartz and Mr. Glascoe, as well as their supervisor, are still working in the same Brooklyn office. H.R.A. would not say whether they were disciplined, citing confidentiality.

Mr. Riegler pleaded guilty to failing to stop Yaakov's abuse and is on probation. Yaakov's brothers are living with an uncle.

FATAL CHILD ABUSE IS HIDDEN BY LAWS ON CONFIDENTIALITY

NEW YORK SEEKS CHANGES

Family-Privacy Rules Are Linked to Beatings — Challenges Made in Several States

By CELIA W. DUGGER

After 16-year-old Tawana Scott was charged with murder last May for abandoning her baby to die next to the swirling waters of the Harlem River, her relatives were left with many questions: Among them, why had New York City's child-welfare authorities returned the baby to Tawana when she had abandoned the child once before?

"I just saw my niece handcuffed and led away," Tawana's aunt, Cynthia Murray, said at the time, "but what about the social workers? I blame the system."

In this case, as in any case in which a child under its supervision dies, the city's Human Resources Administration had the same reply: no comment.

This boilerplate response springs from laws intended to protect the privacy of families. Similar statutes exist in every state and often make it difficult for anyone outside the child-welfare system, including relatives, reporters, probation officers and teachers, to find out how the system worked, even after a child has been murdered.

Varying Success

But increasingly these laws are being questioned as some advocates for children charge that the laws too often shield bureaucracies that function poorly and make dreadful mistakes.

In recent years, some states have tried to ease restrictions, with varying success. In Florida, administrators made more information public simply by re-interpreting existing laws more liberally. But in Georgia, the Legislature voted to release some facts about child-death cases, only to run into opposition from Federal regulators.

"The whole system is hidden by confidentiality," said a New York City Family Court judge, Jeffry H. Gallet, who would like to see the laws changed. "Nobody is really watching how it works. And this is a system that frequently goes wild."

In New York, the Legislature is now considering proposals that would open small windows on a shuttered child-welfare system that costs more than $1.6 billion a year and serves 65,000 foster children and 150,000 troubled families. Usually, it is only when a child

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Efforts Pressed to Ease Confidentiality Lau

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dies that the system's failings reach the public eye, typically because police, school or hospital officials speak out. In October, 8-month-old Ashlei Orellane was beaten to death in the Bronx and her mother charged with murder. Two months earlier, the baby had been hospitalized with severe bruises at North Central Bronx Hospital. The hospital had warned child-welfare officials at the time that they suspected abuse and recommended that the baby be removed from the home, but no action was taken.

Citing the state's confidentiality laws, the Human Resources Administration has refused to discuss its investigation of the hospital's complaint or why agency workers left Ashlei with her mother.

The legislation under consideration in Albany would give government auditors, and to a more limited extent the press, access to information about specific cases like Ashlei's. It would also allow probation officers supervising convicted child abusers to find out about new abuse reports filed against felons.

The proposed changes in the law have run into opposition from many social workers and child-welfare administrators who say that greater openness could discourage people from reporting abuse because they fear public exposure. They also worry that releasing information when a child in the system dies could stigmatize surviving brothers and sisters by identifying them as coming from an abusive home.

And they say that changing the confidentiality rules could also undermine a central mission of the system: to help troubled families stay together or regain custody of children in foster care. Families enmeshed in the system — often poor black or Hispanic families — will only talk freely about their problems if they are safe from the prying eyes of the public, administrators say.

"When a family goes to a worker in a public agency — the poor person's psychiatrist — why should the records be more accessible than a psychiatrist's?" said Peter Forsythe, vice president for children's programs at the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation.

The tricky balancing of a family's right to privacy with the public's

'I blame the system,' a young mother's aunt says.

right to know is especially difficult once a parent has been charged with abuse and a case has been widely publicized. Does the family's privacy right still outweigh the public's need to know what, if anything, went wrong in the system? And how can an agency be held accountable for fixing the system if the public never knew what was broken in the first place?

Those questions came up last September when the police arrested the mother of 8-year-old Tiesha Carter on abuse charges. The girl told the police that her mother, who had been imprisoned before for assaulting a 5-year-old stepson, had handcuffed her by an ankle in the bathtub, whipped her with a cord, scalded her in the shower and rubbed off the blisters with a scouring pad.

Officials of the human resources agency refused to say whether they monitored the mother after she got out of prison and regained custody of her daughter.

A Prior Conviction

Some officials outside the child-welfare system say the confidentiality rules themselves obstruct the protection of children.

After 8-year-old Yaakov Riegler's mother beat him to death in 1990 in Brooklyn, school officials said they had repeatedly warned child-welfare authorities that the boy was being abused before he was killed. But because of confidentiality laws, they were never told that his mother had a prior conviction for assaulting another son.

Confidentiality rules impeded protection of Yaakov in another way, city probation officials say. His mother's probation officer twice asked city child-welfare workers whether there were new complaints of abuse against the mother and was told that the information was confidential. Unaware of the new abuse reports, the city ended her probation a year and a half early.

In New York, confidentiality laws have been interpreted so rigidly that some government oversight agencies have been denied access to child-welfare records. In 1990, the City Comptroller's office was unable to investigate how the City Health Department handles child-abuse complaints against day-care workers.

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›s That Help to Hide Deadly Child Abuse

A bill in Albany seeks more access to child-abuse data.

State Senator Roy M. Goodman of Manhattan, chairman of the Committee on Investigations, Taxation and Government Operations, is sponsoring legislation this year that would allow the state and city comptrollers to audit child-welfare programs, and require the child-welfare agencies to share information about abuse complaints with probation officers.

He says he believes those measures have a good chance to pass, though he is pessimistic about another of his proposals that would allow local social services commissioners to release information to the news media when a child in care has died or or a parent is criminally charged with abuse.

Trouble in Washington?

But even if the Senator's bills pass, some may run into trouble in Washington. To obtain Federal money for some child-welfare programs, states are required to have confidentiality rules that shield families.

Georgia legislators voted in 1990 to allow limited release of information in child-death cases, but the Federal Department of Health and Human Services said the state would lose about $800,000 if the law was carried out. Georgia backed down.

Nonetheless, some states have found ways to be more open. In Florida, Gregory L. Coler, who headed the State Social Services Department from 1987 to 1991, released the agency's internal investigations of cases in which children had died of abuse. He blanked out the families' names to protect their privacy. He also released specific information about one particularly notorious case.

In New York, the laws have been strictly interpreted. Barry Ensminger, general counsel at the human resources agency, said the agency was merely carrying out the laws as they were written. He cited a 1989 state court ruling that prohibited the release of records about the beating death of a 5-year-old girl.

Barbara J. Sabol, who heads the H.R.A., declined to comment on proposals to ease confidentiality rules, except to say through a spokeswoman, Sheila Jack, that she "hasn't taken a stand on them one way or another."

But in a hearing before Senator Goodman's committee last year, Mrs. Sabol said she was uncomfortable with proposals to weaken confidentiality rules. She said the release of any information about specific cases could encourage people within the agency to leak more information to reporters.

A Different Conclusion

Her immediate predecessor at the H.R.A., William J. Grinker, reached a different conclusion about confidentiality laws. He became an advocate for change after seeing the system from the inside.

Confidentiality restrictions, he said, "have become, in the worst instance, a shield behind which bureaucrats hide their mistakes or a means to mask inadequacies in the child-welfare system."

Douglas Besharov, who drafted the state confidentiality statutes in the early 1970's while he was staff director of the Assembly's Select Committee on Child Abuse, said he believed that the state and the city have interpreted the laws too narrowly. The laws were never supposed to prevent the release of reports on investigations into child deaths if the names were deleted, he said.

"The public should learn about all these cases so it can make its own judgment about what the system needs," said Mr. Besharov, an expert on child abuse who now serves on the city's internal panel that investigates child deaths.

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Troubled Children Flood Ill-Prepared Care System

By CELIA W. DUGGER

New York City's child welfare system, like many others across the nation, has been flooded with thousands of emotionally traumatized children, products of families ruined by crack, AIDS and homelessness.

But the system, already overburdened by the sheer volume of children, has often failed to diagnose, let alone treat, troubled youngsters who range from depressed to suicidal, defiant to violent.

The city estimates that up to 30 percent of the 49,000 children in foster care have emotional and behavior problems, but experts outside the system believe that more than half are troubled.

Inadequate Training

Child welfare experts say that there are simply not enough services for all the children who need help. But some of the problem rests with inexperienced and poorly trained caseworkers who do not recognize children's needs or who fail to negotiate the tangled bureaucracy in a way that will get them help. Many, in fact, have little or no background in child development or psychology.

Yet they are encountering children damaged by circumstances that were rare or nonexistent before the 1980's. The upsurge in homelessness in the last decade, fueled by crack and AIDS, has not only led to the destruction of thousands of families and produced a huge influx of children into the foster care system, it has also contributed to an extraordinary new set of deprivations and emotional traumas.

In households governed by crack, for instance, children sometimes go hungry. There are no regular hours for sleep. They often live in filth, their clothes and bodies unwashed. Violence is common. As parents grow desperate for the drugs, they sometimes sell themselves in full view of the children, or they send their children out to steal for them. In many cases, these events are compounded by bouts of homelessness and life in squalid welfare hotels.

Shattered Lives

When Foster Care Fails

First of three articles.

One measure of the system's failure to treat children is the number who end up in such bad shape that they must be taken to mental hospitals. In recent years, there has been a dramatic rise in admissions. From 1985 to 1992, the number of children under age 13 admitted to New York state psychiatric hospitals more than doubled. Last year, 747 children went into state hospitals.

A state study of a sample of these children found that 70 percent had been in the city's foster care system. More than a third were not receiving any mental health treatment at the time they were hospitalized.

"We end up with the casualties," said Richard C. Surles, state commissioner of mental health. "By the time we see them, they've been through the foster care system and had up to a dozen placements. On one extreme, the kids are out of control. They will assault you for no reason. On the other, they are withdrawn, suicidal, depressed."

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Experts say that the children's behavior often serves to earn them harsh treatment in the foster care system. Frequently, they bounce from home to home, as foster parents throw up their hands. Each move, another rejection, adds to their pain and causes further damage.

"I've spent a lot of years in the field working with these kids and they can provoke you to a breaking point," said Mary Armstrong, director of the Bureau of Children and Families at the State Office of Mental Health. "That can lead to child abuse."

When Odd Behavior May Lead to Death

In at least two extreme cases, their strange behavior appears to have contributed to their deaths at the hands of foster parents. Three-year-old Quintessa Murreld, a sad and silent girl whose natural mother was a crack addict, died last year of severe abuse by her foster father. Five-year-old Randi Anderson, who infuriated her foster family by hoarding food and defecating on the floor, died of abuse in November 1990.

New York City's Child Welfare Administration, under the leadership of Robert Little, has concentrated in recent years on keeping families together, pouring its resources into services like drug treatment and counseling in an attempt to reunite families.

Mr. Little has said he would rather spend scarce money on social services than on medical care. For example, he said, the best way to help a boy depressed by separation from his mother is not necessarily to send him to a therapist. It may be better to help his mother get off drugs so he can go home to her.

The agency does not keep track of how many of the children in their custody need or receive mental health care, Mr. Little said, and he discounted studies that show a majority of foster children are troubled. Psychologists who study the children tend to see illness because that is what they are trained to do, he said.

While many advocates for children praise Mr. Little's attempts to keep children out of foster care altogether and help them go home, they also point to the thousands of children who spend years in foster care still bearing the scars of life in a home where drugs were a way of life or where there was no home at all.

As Families Shatter, Problem Grows

The problem is not unique to New York. Across the nation, the crack epidemic has shattered thousands of families.

Nationally, the number of foster children has soared from 280,000 in 1986 to 430,000 in 1991. Recent surveys in cities from Baltimore to Oakland have found that more than 50 percent of foster children suffer from behavioral, developmental and emotional problems, including depression, hyperactivity and aggressive behavior. Howard Dubowitz, a pediatrician at the University of Maryland, found that the proportion of troubled foster children in Baltimore who got treatment was "alarmingly low."

In New York City, there is no central office that refers children for mental health care, nor is there a computer that enables it to track how many are on waiting lists.

"It's legitimate to ask how many children need mental health care and how many are getting it," said David Fanshel, a professor at the Columbia University School of Social Work. "That question cannot be answered by this system because it doesn't take the trouble to gather the information."

Foster children depend on caseworkers to make sure that they and their families get the services they need. Typically, the workers have a college degree, but little background or experience in child development or psychology. Turnover is high. Last year, almost four out of five of the workers who investigate allegations of child abuse and make the initial assessment of a child's needs quit or were laid off.

A 1990 state survey of caseworkers found that they identified only 16 percent of the children as having mental health problems, much lower than the proportion found by trained professionals.

"They're inexperienced," said Ms. Armstrong, the social worker. "They're young. They turn over very quickly. And many times, they don't know the behavior triggers that are a sign of trouble."

Costs Are High And Services Scarce

Even when workers detect a problem, services are hard to find.

Sandra Hagan, executive director of the Queens Child Guidance Center, said that there are as many as 60 children waiting to get help at the center's foster care clinic. The Medicaid reimbursement rate, $60 per session per child, only covers one-third of the clinic's costs. The rest comes from foundations and contributors.

"It would cost the city a fortune to help all these kids," Ms. Hagan said. "We don't have enough therapists and our budget hasn't grown in three years."

Ms. Hagan, an experienced social worker, adopted an emotionally troubled foster child whose mother was a heroin addict. The boy had lived with five foster families before he came to their home. When he first arrived, he threw temper tantrums every day, lashed out with his fists and spoke only in single words. He panicked when Mrs. Hagan went to the bathroom. "He was afraid I wouldn't come back," she said.

He is 8 years old now, and his life is still a struggle. Sometimes, in the blink of an eye, he regresses to babyhood, crawling on the kitchen floor. Or he acts like a toddler, wobbling unsteadily down a subway platform.

"I think he wasn't cared for when he was a year and a half," she said. "There's part of him that's trying to go back and get that. He feels safe enough with us to do that."

Quintessa Murreld probably never felt that safe. A depressed foster child, she was almost 3 years old when she was battered and strangled last year. Her foster father has pleaded guilty to manslaughter; her foster mother to recklessly endangering her life.

The details of Quintessa's story come from city records that are confidential by law. They were provided to the The New York Times by a city official, who was outraged at how the system has handled such children.

The records show that Quintessa's caseworker had recognized for at least four months before her death that the child was extremely sad, silent and unsmiling. And a month before she was killed, the foster mother asked that Quintessa be psychiatrically evaluated. But nothing was done to treat the girl.

When the toddler was admitted to the hospital in February 1991, she was comatose and suffered from malnutrition, burns, bruises and an old arm fracture that appeared to have been untreated. The medical examiner said she had been strangled with a cord.

Quintessa was placed in a foster home because her mother, a crack addict, neglected her. After six months there, she was moved in October 1990 to another foster home with her aunt and uncle, Vicki and Donald Murreld. Attempts to reach Mr. Murreld in prison were unsuccessful. His wife could not be located for comment.

There were signs of trouble from the start. A month after Quintessa arrived, Mrs. Murreld showed caseworkers a photograph she had taken of the toddler defecating on the bathroom floor as evidence of what Mrs. Murreld had had to endure. She made it clear she had no intention of adopting Quintessa.

In November and again in December, the caseworker noticed that Quintessa was sad and withdrawn. On one visit, Quintessa sat listlessly in her bedroom, not playing with her toys.

In January, Mrs. Murreld complained to the caseworker that Quintessa cried all the time and still defecated on herself. When the worker asked Quintessa questions, the girl was silent and unsmiling. The worker picked her up, but Mrs. Murreld instructed her to put the girl down "or she will begin to think she is a baby again and begin to cry," the worker later told city investigators.

Mrs. Murreld also told the worker "she will not tolerate this behavior for long" and asked for a psychiatric evaluation of the girl.

In February, an extremely upset Mrs. Murreld called the caseworker. She had caught Quintessa in the living room next to a broken candy dish that had cost $80. "The foster mother stated that she was so angry that she wanted to kill Quintessa," the city investigative report stated. "She asked the worker to please get the child a psychiatric evaluation."

The worker said she would try to put in a request for the evaluation and visit the home within a few days, but by then Quintessa had been admitted to the hospital in a coma.

Quintessa's caseworker had only been on the job three months when she was assigned the case; she already had a caseload of 31. Her supervisor had only been employed by the agency for two years and had only been a supervisor for two months. The supervisor was given only three days of training before being handed her new responsibilities.

In Quintessa's case, the city panel that reviews deaths of children in foster care recommended better training of caseworkers in recognizing mental illness and behaviors that can signal deeper troubles, such as defecating on the floor.

But as it stands now, researchers say, foster children commonly receive no mental health counseling until they have extreme symptoms. "A child who walks up to you with a dead cat he just lit on fire gets help," said Anthony Urquiza, a psychologist at the University of California-Davis. "The shy little girl who is withdrawn and suicidal is equally in danger, but probably would not be in therapy."

Therapists at the Queens Child Guidance Center see this phenomenon daily. Debra Bondy, a social worker, treated a girl who went into foster care at age 8 when both her parents were sent to prison for drug offenses. For two years, the girl drifted in and out of foster homes before she was finally treated for depression.

"She didn't give anyone any trouble," Ms. Bondy said. "She wasn't stealing or wetting her bed. No one noticed her."

At the age of 12 the girl has now sought solace in having a baby of her own, a decision that is likely to lead only to more heartache and disappointment. She is five months pregnant.

"She says she will love the child and the child will love her and take care of her," Ms. Bondy said. "She is trying to make up for everything she has lost."

NEXT: A child dies as signs are ignored.

Fatal Beating Points Up a System in Crisis

By CELIA W. DUGGER

Randi Anderson, 5 years old and 3 feet 7 inches tall, scrawled on the walls of her foster home with lipstick. She stole money from her foster mother's purse. She broke all her toys. She hoarded food. She defecated on the floor.

Three New York City child-welfare workers concluded that Randi needed counseling, but, as one said, "Somehow it never happened."

Finally, Randi provoked her foster mother's 20-year-old son once too often. "She got on my nerves," Robert Murray told the police after the fatal beating. Randi's thigh bone was broken in two, her liver lacerated, her body battered. On July 7, Mr. Murray was convicted of criminally negligent homicide.

A Systemic Failure

Randi did not fall through a small, isolated tear in the safety net. Although hers was an extreme case, it points up the failings of the city's child welfare system in caring for the thousands of emotionally troubled children from homes damaged by crack, AIDS and homelessness who have poured into foster care in recent years.

The system in New York, as in most major cities, often fails to identify the children's problems or to treat them. Even when it does, social workers and state officials say, there are simply not enough services available, and many foster parents are left to struggle alone with children who are depressed, anxious or violent.

In Randi's case, psychologists say her strange behavior provided the clues to her deep emotional distress. But the constantly changing cast of unseasoned caseworkers were unable to negotiate the vast child welfare bureaucracy, and she received no treatment. Randi's actions infuriated her foster family and appear to have contributed to her death from a beating in November 1990.

A panel of consultants hired by the city to review cases of children who die in foster care concluded that the agency used "poor judgment" in failing to have Randi psychologically evaluated.

It is impossible to know how many other children endured such an experience in foster care because the case files of the city's Child Welfare Administration are confidential. But records of the agency's internal investigation of the case were provided to The New York Times by an official who believed it illustrated problems the agency had in caring for troubled children.

Combined with trial testimony and interviews with Randi's relatives, these records allow a rare look inside the system that failed to help her.

Shattered Lives

When Foster Care Fails

Second of three articles.

Born Into a Life Of Rage and Neglect

Randi was exposed to a hellish side of life virtually from birth. She was born on May 26, 1985. Her family lived in a Harlem tenement and survived on welfare. Records show that her natural parents were reported to the state child-abuse registry five times in the first four years of her life for domestic violence and for neglecting the children while they got high on crack, among other things.

Randi's father beat her mother in violent, frightening explosions, the parents said in recent interviews. Both were crack addicts. The children were somber and rarely played, neighbors say.

Because of their parents' crack addiction, Randi and her six brothers and sisters often went hungry and bedraggled. "We'd get a neck bone from the refrigerator and put it on the radiator to heat it up," said Randi's older brother Sherman. "We ate fried chicken fat."

Randi was almost 4 years old when the city removed her from the home. The night in March 1989 when Randi and her siblings — two of them babies — went into foster care, a caseworker found them asleep in one bed with no sheets, no blankets and no diapers. There was no food in the apartment, which was open to crack-starved strangers who wandered in and out getting high.

In foster care, the seven children were scattered to four different homes in Manhattan, Queens and Long Island. Randi and her 6-month-

old sister went to a paternal aunt, Sandra Priester, on Long Island. The city paid Mrs. Priester about $400 a month for each child, the usual foster care rate. Records show that Randi stayed there 15 months.

Larry Sutton was the first caseworker assigned to monitor the Priester home, according to the records. He had a bachelor's degree in politics from SUNY Westbury and had started the job just three months earlier.

Mr. Sutton carried a heavy caseload of 44 children. To juggle the work, he needed to be sure the Priesters were home, so he gave 24 hours' notice before his monthly visits. The home was always clean and the children healthy, the records said, though Mrs. Priester had told him that she was having problems with Randi and was not sure she was the right person to care for her.

But Mr. Sutton, who said in a telephone interview that he had no other recollections of Randi, did not stay on the case long. No worker did.

On April 4, 1990, a year after Randi had been placed with Mrs. Priester, all the Anderson children had a rare reunion at a city office: all but Randi.

Mrs. Priester said the girl was home with a bad cold, but according to Mrs. Priester's mother, Esther Reed, who went to the reunion to see her grandchildren, the truth was uglier.

Mrs. Reed said in a recent interview that Mrs. Priester had tied Randi up with rope in the basement to punish her, and that was how Mrs. Reed said she found the girl that morning. Randi stayed home because she had rope burns on her wrists. Mrs. Reed said she not mention the incident at the reunion because she didn't want to become involved.

Mrs. Priester could not be located for comment. None of her family know where she is.

A Caseworker Sees a Child's Pain

A few days after the reunion, Randi's case was assigned to yet another new worker, Arpana Berry. Fresh out of college with a biology degree, she had no background in social work, and she said in an interview that the city did not give her the training she needed to help the 25 children in her caseload.

The two weeks of classroom training she had received from the city was more about filling out paperwork than understanding family dynamics and child development, she said. Her supervisors did not have time to guide her.

"You felt you really weren't capable of handling the lives of these children," she said. "They'd already been through so much pain, you didn't want to make a mistake."

Ms. Berry said she knew Randi was hurting. The girl craved love. She always gave the worker hugs and kisses and promised to do whatever was asked. "She was very lovable," Ms. Berry said.

But the worker did not know how much to believe the 5-year-old girl. Randi told her that Mrs. Priester hit her with a belt and required her to sweep the kitchen, make the beds and wash the dishes. Was Randi a modern-day Cinderella, the worker wondered, or had she made it all up?

In June 1990, Ms. Berry visited the foster home after Mrs. Priester complained that Randi had stolen money.

The caseworker took Randi to a bedroom to talk privately. The girl admitted to taking the money from her aunt's coat pocket. She also admitted that she had urinated and defecated in the closet, broken all her toys and poured dye on her cousin's shoes.

Ms. Berry told Randi she shouldn't touch things that didn't belong to her and advised Mrs. Priester to hide her money, or give Randi some loose change of her own. But Mrs. Priester did not like the advice. She felt stealing should be punished.

Mrs. Priester told the worker she had spanked Randi and locked her in a room for a night, removing the doorknob. Ms. Berry, alarmed that Randi would have trapped had there been a fire, reported the incident to the child-abuse registry and searched for a new placement.

A week later, Mrs. Priester called Ms. Berry to tell her that Randi had written all over the bedroom walls with lipstick and told other children sex stories.

Ms. Berry promised to seek professional help for Randi. But everywhere she looked there were waiting lists, she said.

"The places were booked," she said. "They'd tell us there were waiting lists. You knew a child needed counseling, but it was so hard to get the services. Meanwhile the child was suffering."

New Home, Last Stop

Mrs. Priester was not home when city workers came to take Randi and her sister away on June 15, 1990.

Randi sobbed as she and her sister were separated. Randi was sent to live with another aunt, Sophilia Murray, who was already caring for Ran-

di's two little brothers, Eddie and Rafael. Ms. Murray's 20-year-old son, Robert Murray, took care of the children while his mother was at work as a telephone operator.

Randi lived with the Murrays less than five months before she was killed. No caseworker ever saw her in the Murray home at a housing project in Harlem.

Ms. Berry, frustrated by her job, had transferred to a different unit. Another caseworker, Melodye Grissom, took over. She had a B.A. in international politics and had been on the job about a year.

Ms. Grissom declined to comment on the case to a reporter, but she told city investigators that she had believed Ms. Murray was a wonderful foster mother, "funny, open, honest and very patient."

But not long after Randi's arrival, the foster mother's attitude hardened. A friend, Helen Lewis, testified in court that she saw Ms. Murray hit Randi in the face. "It was like she had a hatred for the child all of a sudden," Ms. Lewis said.

Barbara Strayhorn, who cut the Anderson children's hair at her Harlem barbershop, said Ms. Murray doted on the two boys, but despised Randi. "She told me, 'Randi is sneaky and mean,' " Ms. Strayhorn recalled.

Ms. Murray, who is now in prison, did not respond to a written request for an interview.

In August, Ms. Grissom phoned the Murrays to say she was just a block away and wanted to stop by. Mr. Murray answered the phone. When Ms. Grissom arrived minutes later, no one was home. She left a note. She tried again in September, but again no one answered.

It was about this time, the fall of 1990, that the Murrays began to abuse Randi, Mr. Murray told the police. Sometimes in the middle of the night, Randi took food from the refrigerator. Furious that the girl was "stealing," her aunt beat Randi with a belt, Mr. Murray said. An autopsy later found scars on her legs and face consistent with the marks left by a looped-over belt.

On Oct. 27, Ms. Murray called Ms. Grissom to complain that Randi had put a new bedspread on the floor and defecated on it. Ms. Grissom advised Ms. Murray to reward Randi with candy or fruit when she used the bathroom correctly.

Randi was, by then, sad and desperate, relatives say. She ran into the middle of the street and almost got hit by a limousine. Mr. Murray said she was screaming, "I want to get hit. I want to die."

"So I grabbed her and I smacked her," he said.

Randi sidled up to her invalid grandmother, Johnnie Mae Burton, one afternoon. Ms. Burton remembers the child saying, "Grandma, I love you. I wish somebody loved me."

On Nov. 7, 1990, Mr. Murray was baby-sitting as usual. In the afternoon, he and Randi's two brothers were watching television, but Mr. Murray would not let Randi watch because she had been "stealing" food and "messing with the VCR."

"I pushed her out of the room," he said. "I put my hands on her chest and shoved her out." Randi screamed in protest, and Mr. Murray said he picked her up and threw her down hard on the couch. "I kicked her and I told her to shut up and lay down," he said. "She went into a ball. I don't know if she was trying to protect herself."

Eddie, Randi's 4-year-old brother, was watching. He testified at the trial that Robert not only kicked his sister but also jumped up and down on her back.

About 6 P.M., Ms. Murray got home from work. She asked what was wrong with Randi, who was lying on the couch. Mr. Murray told her Randi had misbehaved. A little later, Ms. Murray said she smelled something. Randi, lying motionless on the couch, had soiled herself.

"Go get me a belt," Mr. Murray recalled his mother as saying.

Ms. Murray washed Randi off in the bathtub. The 38-pound girl was lying naked on the floor when Ms. Murray grabbed her by the ankles and began to beat her with a green leather belt, Mr. Murray said. He did nothing to stop the whipping.

"I heard Randi screaming, 'I'll be good. I'll be good. I'll stop going to the bathroom,' " he said.

Mr. Murray said he later went to his girlfriend's and returned at about 11:30. Ms. Murray and Eddie were watching "The Honeymooners." Randi was on the couch. Mr. Murray said that sometime after midnight, Randi started crying that her stomach hurt. She asked to go to the hospital. Ms. Murray was downstairs talking to her boyfriend, a cabdriver.

"She kept screaming, hollering," Mr. Murray recalled. "So I smacked her. I said, be quiet." Randi moaned. "She kept making lots of noise. Noises. Noises."

When Ms. Murray saw Randi, she panicked. She scooped her up, caught a cab and got to the hospital at 3:15 A.M. The little girl was already dead.

Trying to Learn From a Tragedy

Last year, a panel appointed by Barbara J. Sabol, Commissioner of the Human Resources Administration, reviewed Randi's case. It recommended that workers be trained to recognize damaged children whose behavior is inappropriate.

In July 1991, Robert L. Little, who heads the Child Welfare Administration within the Human Resources Administration, said the agency would offer training on normal childhood development for some of its foster-care workers.

On May 19, Sophilia Murray pleaded guilty to attempted manslaughter for failing to seek medical attention promptly after Randi's beating. She was sentenced to one and a half to four and a half years. On July 7, a jury convicted her son, and he was given one and a third to four years.

The caseworkers are still scarred by Randi's death. "It made me even more scared of the job," said Ms. Berry, who left the agency to study social work. "We thought we had made the right decision to place her in that home. There's guilt, shock."

Randi's brothers and sisters remain in foster homes. Her father is in a drug-treatment program and visits his children twice a month. Her mother is still using crack. Last month she gave birth to a baby girl, who is now living in a foster home.

NEXT: Through love and therapy, a child recovers.

A Boy Back From the Brink: When Love and Care Prevail

By CELIA W. DUGGER

When the 5-year-old foster child first walked into Debra Bondy's psychotherapy office, she noticed that his front teeth were missing (knocked out by his mother, it turned out). The beautiful, dark-eyed boy did not know how to play. He sat very still, clutching a toy ambulance and making a wailing, siren noise: "Lee-loo, lee-loo, lee-loo."

As the months passed, he learned to express himself, but his games were violent and bizarre. He made little human figures jump to their deaths from the windows of a toy house. But gradually, his fury diminished.

"Instead of wanting to destroy," Ms. Bondy said, "he started to create. He put model cars together. He made boxes with Popsicle sticks. He painted."

A Happy Ending

He also learned to trust his therapist and foster parents, Annie and Rafael Padilla. Soon the Padillas, who live in Queens, will adopt him, a happy ending in a foster-care system that too often fails to treat troubled children who have been abused by their parents and separated from all that is familiar.

Doctors who study foster children estimate that a majority of them have emotional and behavioral problems and that many never receive any therapy. Early treatment of the children and special training for their foster parents are critical steps to helping the children cope with devastating losses, social workers and psychologists say.

"Kids with serious emotional problems do get better," said Mary Armstrong, director of the Bureau of Children and Families at the State Office of Mental Health, "if we can get to them early enough and with appropriate services and treatment."

The Padillas' son-to-be, whose name is withheld because of state confidentiality laws, is typical of the thousands of children who have poured into the city's foster-care system since 1986. He is Hispanic, the son of a poor, crack-addicted mother. In New York City, 85 percent of foster children are black or Hispanic. Most come from homes in which the parents abused drugs.

The boy, now 8, has made great progress, but he is still scarred by the abuse he suffered and the instability of his years in and out of foster care. He takes medication for hyperactivity.

One recent afternoon he sat restlessly at the Padillas' dining-room table. His leg jiggled. He zoomed toy cars around the table, sending them sailing off the edge into his hand. Words exploded from his mouth like small, hard pebbles.

Do you remember your life before

Continued on Page B2, Column 4

Shattered Lives

Last of three articles.

A Boy Brought Back From the Brink

Continued From Page A1

the Padillas, he was asked. "No, no, no," he replied, shaking his head. Do you want to stay with the Padillas forever? "Yeah, yeah," he said.

What was your mother like? "She's bad," he said vehemently. "She's like a stinking cat, that different other dummy mother, not you," he said, looking at Mrs. Padilla, who was making him a ham sandwich. "She's so ugly, but you're not." He went to his new mother and laid his cheek against hers.

Information about the boy's early years is extremely sketchy, but his therapist gleaned a few facts. He was placed in foster care when he was a month old, because his mother physically abused him. He was returned to her a year and a half later, for reasons that are unknown because records on the case are confidential.

When he was 3, he was once again placed in foster care after his mother had knocked out his baby teeth and inflicted deep gashes on his head. He spent about a year and a half in a foster home, but then the foster family gave him back. Ms. Bondy believes his behavior was probably "intolerable."

In November 1988, he was placed with the Padillas, who had been unable to conceive a child in their 24 years of marriage. Mrs. Padilla, 53 years old, had just closed her beauty shop. Mr. Padilla, a 62-year-old real-estate agent, was nearing retirement.

"I don't want to grow old in a rocking chair with nobody around me," he said. "More kids, more happiness!"

In a new family, a 5-year-old learns love and trust.

Months of Training For a Full-Time Job

Mr. and Mrs. Padilla are among a growing number of older people who are rearing foster children. The Padillas, energetic and affectionate, went through months of training to learn to care for emotionally disturbed chil-

dren. They are paid $845 a month for each troubled child they take into their home. They were told this would be a 24-hour-a-day, 7-day-a-week job, but nothing prepared them for the reality.

Mrs. Padilla found herself petrified of the 5-year-old boy with long eyelashes, smooth olive skin and pixie's face. "He came very, very destroyed, like a wild animal," she said.

When she wrapped him in her arms and drew him to her, he bit down hard on her chest with his side teeth. His speech was garbled because of his missing front teeth, heightening his frustration. Full of rage at his own mother, he threatened to kill Mrs. Padilla. He banged doors, threw furniture, waved a knife around.

His behavior was frighteningly unpredictable. Sometimes, he wanted to be babied. He sucked on a bottle while she cradled him. But in a flash, he would strike out. When she sent him to his room for misbehaving, he kicked the door, the walls, the pillow.

Mrs. Padilla took her concerns to Ms. Bondy, the therapist. "I said to Debra, 'When he gets to be 16, is he going to hit me or the pillow?' " Mrs. Padilla recalled. Ms. Bondy told her, "Take one day at a time."

Once, the Padillas looked up to see the boy trying to strangle their 4-year-old foster daughter with string. He showed no remorse. "I was just playing," he said.

Making It Through The Hard Parts

It is at moments like this that foster parents often give up on a troublesome child and send him back into the system to be passed on to another family or a group home.

But the Padillas and their foster son had already established a relationship with Ms. Bondy that helped them make it through the harrowing moments. The family was participating in a new effort by the Queens Child Guidance Center to reach troubled children soon after they are placed in foster homes and counsel them before the children go into an emotional meltdown.

He was assigned to Ms. Bondy, who has a master's degree in social work from Columbia University and specializes in the treatment of foster children.

She traced his belligerent behavior to the rage and guilt so common among foster children. He was furious with his mother for beating and abandoning him, so he took it out on Mrs. Padilla. But he also felt he was somehow to blame for the abuse he suffered. He told the therapist he had been "a bad boy," and Ms. Bondy speculated that he may have tried to provoke the Padillas to punish him further. He was also testing them to see if they, too, would abandon him.

In treating him, Ms. Bondy used a technique called "play therapy," since he was not able to express himself in words. Children, she said, "tell us how they feel through play."

As she watched what he did, she gave words to his emotions and tried to show him how to understand himself and to empathize with others. When he killed off the toy people, she explained that they must feel terrible.

For Troubled Child, Support and Stability

She also tried to help the Padillas understand his behavior and offered them moral support. Most important, she was available for the boy week in, week out, year after year, a caring adult who never disappeared when he needed her. She currently treats 17 foster children and the families in the process of adopting them.

He still has a destructive streak, a short attention span and difficulty remembering what he learns. But he is capable of giving and accepting love. And he believes he has found a home with the Padillas.

During one session, Ms. Bondy talked to him about being adopted by the Padillas. He kept putting his hands over his ears and shaking his head. She did not understand his distress until he went over to a big sheet of brown paper on her wall. He wrote down his first name and his foster parents' last name and drew a big sun around the words.

"To him, Mr. and Mrs. Padilla were already his parents," Ms. Bondy said.

In September, his therapy will end, though the Padillas will continue to attend a support group for adoptive parents. "I feel like I am holding a fragile bird," his therapist said, "and now I can let him go."

For the Padillas, life with the boy is not easy, but it is joyful. And it comes with its small triumphs. After four years of patient coaching, he can tie his own shoes. He asks for a cookie before taking it.

The Padillas sing and laugh to keep their spirits up. "He loves me a lot, but when I correct him, he hates me!" Mrs. Padilla said merrily. At the sink, she warbled the same two lines of a romantic Spanish ballad like a mantra.

Each morning, Mr. Padilla puts Xavier Cugat (their favorite) or Gloria Estefan (their foster son's favorite) on the tape deck and the whole family dances. Mr. Padilla recently swept the boy up in his arms and twirled him around the floor, past the red velvet couches, the family portraits and the caged green parakeet.

Shortage of Trained Caseworkers Imperils Young Victims of Abuse

By CELIA W. DUGGER

Over the last three years, the Dinkins administration has sharply reduced the staff of caseworkers who investigate child abuse, leaving many of New York City's most vulnerable children in the hands of overburdened, inexperienced workers.

The city has cut the number of workers by a quarter, even though reports of abuse and neglect have continued to surpass 50,000 annually.

The staff reductions, caused by the city's fiscal crisis and a decision to divert staff to a new program for troubled families, have worsened a chronic weakness in the city's child protection system: extremely high turnover among ill-trained caseworkers. Last year, a staggering 77 percent of the workers who investigate child abuse reports resigned, were laid off or moved to jobs in other agencies.

Caseloads Soar, Fingers Point

The Mayor's top budget officials fault the city's Human Resources Administration, saying the agency had enough money to hire the number of caseworkers needed. But agency administrators say budget officials made arbitrary decisions that had devastating consequences.

Whatever the reason, the impact of the reduced work force has been severe: In January 1990, investigative workers carried an average of 14 cases. None had more than 30. Nowadays, caseloads average 19.5 and commonly top 30.

The Cracked Shield

First of two articles.

Advocacy groups and public commissions have consistently documented how staff problems undermine the government's ability to protect children from abuse and even death.

Record Number of Homicides

A city-appointed panel of doctors, social workers and experts reviewed last year's record number of homicides of children in families previously identified as abusive or neglectful. In a report issued in October, the panel concluded that the city's efforts on behalf of the children had been seriously flawed in many cases.

And more detailed, confidential records of 15 child death cases, provided to The New York Times by an official who was alarmed about the system's breakdowns, show that caseworkers bungled time and again.

In one case, a worker visited a family and concluded that all the children were healthy. But the next day a visiting nurse had one of them hospitalized for malnutrition. In another case, a worker closely monitored the mother, but never talked to her boyfriend, who often cared for the children. He was later charged with bashing in he daughter's skull and found to be mentally ill.

In yet another case, a worker accepted a foster mother's explanation that a child's bruises were self-inflicted, but experts later found that the child had been physically abused in the past. The child finally died after a severe beating.

Douglas Besharov, a panel member and the author of a book about identifying child abuse, said caseworkers too often failed to see the classic pattern of escalating beatings. "We saw a slew of cases last year in which the battered child syndrome was missed completely," he said.

The cutbacks among child welfare caseworkers have come while the agency has been under fire for doing little to examine the thousands of emotionally troubled children who have poured into the foster-care system in recent years from families damaged by homelessness and crack.

Foster Parents Struggle Alone

Many caseworkers are unable to recognize the children's special needs or negotiate the bureaucracy to get them help. As a result, foster parents struggle alone with depressed, anxious and sometimes violent children. The children end up bouncing from home to home because parents cannot handle them. And in extreme cases, they are abused because they are so hard to raise.

Flawed casework by undertrained, poorly paid workers is a problem all over the country. In recent years, financially troubled state and local governments have not hired enough workers to handle the rising tide of neglect and abuse reports, researchers say.

Although the job is widely regarded as one of the most emotionally draining in government, experienced city caseworkers are paid thousands of dollars less a year than probation and parole officers, who have similar credentials and duties.

Advocates for children say they are particularly disappointed in the administration of Mayor David N. Dinkins because he campaigned as a champion of poor children. Not only has his administration cut the number of investigative workers to 826 from 1,080, it ended a program that returned more than 100 caseworkers to college each year for social work degrees.

Mismanagement vs. Money

Philip R. Michael, the city's budget director, said last week that the Human Resources Administration had the money to do the job right, but put caseworkers in administrative and other jobs, not on the front lines.

"The Mayor feels somewhat shortchanged," Mr. Michael said. "He's gone out of his way to fund abused children. He's obviously frustrated. We assure him we are budgeting from the caseload reports we get, then we run up against mismanagement at H.R.A."

But Robert L. Little, who heads the Child Welfare Administration within the H.R.A., strongly disagreed. He said the cumulative effect of layoffs, hiring freezes and unrealistically low assessments of how many workers were needed had had a "devastating" impact on services to children. "What we got was not in reality what it takes to do the job," he said last week.

In just one example of their dispute, the number of workers at the Child Welfare Administration overall will shrink from 7,800 in the last fiscal year to 6,400 this year. Mr. Michael said the agency simply needed fewer workers, while Mr. Little said the smaller staff would damage services.

2 Botched Cases

Focus on Mothers Ignores Boyfriends

The relationship between poor casework and death is hard to pinpoint. The panel of experts who studied the record number of homicides that occurred last year — as the city

was losing hundreds of workers — said it was hard to know whether the deaths could have been prevented.

But the panel, appointed by Barbara J. Sabol, who heads the H.R.A., concluded that in many instances the casework was extremely superficial.

The panel found that caseworkers were often so overburdened they had no time to attend training sessions. And in the field, the panel said, workers often failed to take the basic steps to understand a family's problems.

Usually, they focused on mothers, yet fathers, boyfriends and other men were involved in the deaths of 12 of the 27 children last year.

That was a mistake with Adriana Rodriguez, 19 months old, who died of a fractured skull on Jan. 10.

For almost two years, workers had monitored her mother, a homeless woman, after a report of neglect, but had never interviewed the mother's boyfriend, Giovanni Piguave, who often cared for the child. The main worker, who had a college degree in political science and only a year of casework, could not communicate with the Spanish-speaking boyfriend and never arranged for a translator.

Never Talked to Boyfriend

Mr. Piguave was charged with murder, but found unfit for trial. He is in a mental hospital. The unanswerable question is: Would the worker have detected Mr. Piguave's mental illness if he had talked to him? Mr. Piguave's lawyer, Orlando Velez, says the answer is yes.

"This guy belongs in an institution, not around children," Mr. Velez said.

In the case of Richard Williams, 7 months old, a caseworker's ignorance had a profound effects.

The baby's mother, Eleanora Williams, who suffered from severe depression, went to a city office and pleaded with caseworkers to put her newborn son in a foster home. She was under so much stress, she said, she was afraid she would abuse him. She was homeless. Six of her children were living with relatives. Her adoptive mother had recently died.

The city placed the baby in foster care. Three months later, on Jan. 15, the mother was evaluated by a psychiatrist, who recommended against returning the baby to her, city documents indicate.

But before the doctor's report was typed, the case went to Family Court. The caseworker was unaware of the doctor's findings. The judge, also unaware, told the city to find Ms. Williams a home and give her the child.

Later, the caseworker read the report, but did not know that the city could ask the judge to reconsider his decision to send the child home, according to the documents.

On March 15, 1991, the baby went home. A month later, Ms. Williams scalded Richard in hot water, then smothered him with a blanket to quiet his screams. She is now serving 8 to 24 years in prison for manslaughter.

"She cried out to the system for help and the system failed her," said her lawyer, Jay D. Cohen.

Policy Decisions

Best Caseworkers Are Transferred

As a candidate for Mayor, Mr. Dinkins made reform of the child welfare system one of his signature issues. In 1989, he oversaw publication of "Failed Promises," a scathing 130-page indictment of the system. It criticized the failure to develop a stable, seasoned work force, "the missing backbone of the system."

But almost as soon as he took office, the city's financial prospects soured. Last year, the Child Welfare Administration saved about $10 million from a $1.2 billion budget by cutting the number of child abuse investigators by almost one third, to 745. About 200 workers were laid off, and almost as many more were moved to other jobs, according to administrators.

Many workers went to form a new program that was the brainchild of Mr. Little and his boss, Mrs. Sabol, and won the Mayor's endorsement.

Mr. Little is Malcolm X's brother,

and like his more famous sibling, he grew up in foster care. He said he deeply believed that the city was needlessly taking children from their parents because workers lacked the time and skills to help families in crisis. He wanted to create a staff of workers who would spend up to eight weeks working intensively with only two families at a time.

Insisted on City Workers

The budget office said Mr. Little could have set up the program without using workers from investigative units. But Mr. Little said that the budget office insisted he hire private foster care agencies to provide the new services. He felt that using city workers was essential. The city itself could start the program more quickly, he felt. He said he also believed that the private agencies, often financially dependent on caring for children removed from their families, would not successfully carry out a program to keep children at home.

It was with "some bitterness," he said, that he decided to divert investigative workers to the new "family preservation" program.

"The budget office gave us more bodies on paper, but froze hiring throughout H.R.A.," he said. "That's how they play the game. They give with one hand and take away with the other."

The city now has a new multimillion-dollar program with 150 workers chosen, Mr. Little said, from the best child abuse investigators. He says he believes the new program will eventually save the city money by preventing the costly placement of children in foster care.

But many advocates for children are critical of the administration's record generally, and its decision to go ahead with the new program at the expense of child abuse investigations. While the city has cut staff in child welfare, it has added thousands of police officers, they note.

"Sabol, Dinkins and Little came in with a political perspective, which is to preserve the black family, and that's fine," said Marcia Robinson Lowry, director of the Children's Rights Project at the American Civil Liberties Union. "But everything else falls by the wayside. They're fooling around on the fringes of policy, not managing the guts of the process."

This year, the city is replacing some investigators who were laid off, but by year's end there will still be a quarter fewer workers than there were when Mr. Dinkins took office.

After the layoffs, one worker, Kevin Stewart, saw his caseload soar to 43. "I finally had to realize it's not my problem," he said. "I didn't create this mess.".

Caseloads vary radically by borough because workers were laid off on the basis of seniority and civil service rules. The citywide average is about 20, but in the Bronx, it is 29; Brooklyn, 24; Manhattan, 17; Queens, 13, and Staten Island, 10.

The Caseworkers

Sanitation Job Pays More.

The cuts in staff only worsened the problem of high turnover among young, undertrained caseworkers.

Without benefit of badge, gun, walkie-talkie, car or partner, caseworkers venture into the most treacherous neighborhoods, confronting volatile parents with charges that could cost them their children. They often quit, worn down by low pay, blizzards of paperwork, what they call "fear of the field" and the emotional toll of coping with so much sadness.

New Mexico and North Dakota require caseworkers to have social work degrees, but in New York, as in most of the country, only a college degree is necessary.

In fact, the city ended a program to upgrade the credentials of its staff. Last year, it stopped sending 112 workers annually to obtain master's degrees in social work, in large part because Mr. Little felt he could not spare that many workers. And there is no financial incentive for workers to go back to school on their own. Even if they obtain a master's in social work, the city does not pay them any more than workers with liberal arts degrees.

In general, city caseworkers — predominantly black and Hispanic — are paid worse than other workers with similar or lesser educational credentials. After five years, a child abuse investigator receives about $28,000. A city probation officer makes $32,500; a city sanitation worker $37,000, a city jail guard $40,000 and a state parole officer $44,361.

"You don't get respect," said a caseworker, Derek Phillips. "Parole and police officers — they protect property. But there's no commitment to children who have nothing."

Dream Is Still a Dream

When Mr. Little took his job two years ago, he had grand dreams of remaking the system, he said. From his experience as a foster child, he knew what it was like to depend on harried, insensitive caseworkers.

In the city's system, responsibility for the children and their families is splintered. Cases are passed from unit to unit — and often among private foster-care agencies — as they wend their way from investigation to foster care to adoption. Case files — and the history of a child's past — are often lost in the shuffle.

"As long as we have this system," Mr. Little said, "there are kids who will fall through the cracks."

He wanted to simplify the bureaucratic morass by making a single worker accountable for each family. He also wanted to move workers from a few big, impersonal offices to dozens of neighborhood offices.

But those changes would have been costly, in dollars and political capital. At first, Mr. Little believed it could be done. He hopefully sketched a diagram of this more humane system on the blackboard in his office. Gradually the chalk marks faded. Finally he erased them. The drawing had become a reminder, not of an attainable goal, but of a dream unfulfilled.

NEXT: Frequently, poor casework is the Achilles' heel of New York's child protection system.

Litany of Signals Overlooked in Child's Death

By CELIA W. DUGGER

Even in New York City's troubled child protection system, this oversight was remarkable: None of the caseworkers who investigated allegations that Doris Harden had mistreated her children discovered that she had previously served three years in prison for holding down a 7-year-old girl while another young woman sexually assaulted the child with a toilet plunger.

The four workers missed other important details as well: Ignorant of the prior abuse conviction, they initially did not speak with the mother's parole officers, who knew she was a crack user who had refused treatment. The workers interviewed Ms. Harden, but never talked to her boyfriends, despite warnings that one of the men was prone to violence and drug dealing.

Fatal Burns

It was one of Ms. Harden's boyfriends who later said he had accidentally caused what proved to be fatal burns to the groin, buttocks and legs of her five-month-old son, Jeffrey. The round-faced infant with the soft, fuzzy head of hair died Jan. 17.

The boyfriend, Jeffrey Phillips, told the authorities that he had wiped the baby with a cloth that he had not realized was soaked with cleaning fluid. The medical examiner ruled the death a homicide, saying the burns were caused by immersing the child in scalding water and noting that the child had three broken ribs. Mr. Phillips has not been charged, and the police say the death is still under investigation. Mr. Phillips declined to comment.

The Cracked Shield

Second of two articles.

Whether the caseworkers in the city's Child Welfare Administration could have prevented the child's death will never be known, but the flaws in the handling of Jeffrey Harden's case illustrate what experts and advocates for children have long called the Achilles' heel of the child protection system in New York and the nation: the frequently poor quality of casework in a fragmented bureaucracy staffed by inexperienced, overburdened workers who do not stay in the job for long.

Over the last three years, the problem has gotten worse as the Dinkins administration has reduced the staff of caseworkers who investigate child abuse by about 25 percent, even as reports of abuse and neglect have continued to surpass 50,000 annually.

Last year, a staggering 77 percent of the workers who investigate child abuse reports resigned, were laid off or moved to jobs in other agencies. Inevitably, caseloads have risen sharply. In January 1990, investigative workers carried an average of 14 cases. None had more than 30. Now, caseloads average 19.5 and commonly top 30.

In the Harden case, high turnover led to a constant stream of changing workers. In a span of only 18 months, the case was passed to four different workers, each of whom would manage only a partial investigation before transferring out of the unit responsible for the case. By the time Jeffrey died, every worker in the unit was gone.

The city's 22-page reconstruction of the case, combined with court records and interviews with the family, caseworkers and parole officers, shows what happens when workers with too many cases and too little experience conduct investigations.

But the problem is not simply one of human error. In the Harden case, the workers had to make extremely difficult decisions with incomplete information. Child protection workers are not entitled to parents' prior criminal records, which are kept confidential under state laws meant to safeguard privacy.

But if their ignorance of Ms. Harden's prior child-abuse conviction was understandable at first, it was less so after she went back to prison for a parole violation. Workers talked to her parole officers, but never found out what crime she had committed.

Usually, the city's handling of child-abuse investigations is shielded from public scrutiny by state confidentiality laws meant to protect family privacy. But records of the city's internal investigation of the Harden case were provided to The New York Times by an official who believes they highlight failings of the system.

In a recent interview, Ms. Harden denied all reports that she was an abusive or neglectful parent, and she denied ever using crack. She said she had never left her children alone in her apartment, and she disputed the hospital's account of how rarely she visited her baby before he died, saying that she had "visited every day."

Caseworker No. 1

A Report of Abuse Is Not Followed Up

Ms. Harden, now 28, first got into serious trouble when she was a teenager. She lived at the time with her mother and most of her 11 siblings in a housing project in the South Bronx. She had dropped out of school in the ninth grade, where she had been in a special class for slow learners.

On May 17, 1981, Ms. Harden, then 17, smoked marijuana and angel dust with a 15-year-old friend, Eva Younger, Ms. Harden later said. Then they sexually assaulted a chubby, 7-year-old girl in pigtails. Ms. Younger told the court that she repeatedly forced a toilet plunger into the child while Ms. Harden held the girl down.

Ms. Harden testified that Ms. Younger made her participate in the assault after threatening to hit her with a stick if she did not smoke marijuana. "I felt dizzy and I didn't know what was going on," she told the judge. "Something just come up in my mind and I did it."

A State Supreme Court Justice, Walter Schackman, gave Ms. Harden a three-to-nine-year prison sentence. "The acts were the most brutal I have seen in five-and-a-half years of sitting in a felony part," he told her.

Ms. Harden served three years and was released in 1984, when she was 20 years old. For the first two years, she kept appointments with her parole officers, said David Ernst, a spokesman for the state Division of Parole. But by 1986, her attendance had become sporadic. In 1987, she gave birth to her first child, a girl named Genise.

An Early Sign of Trouble

Finally, in the spring of 1988, she stopped reporting to her parole officer altogether, and a warrant was issued for her arrest. At the time, she was homeless. She was picked up and admitted that she had started smoking crack, Mr. Ernst said. She was referred to a residential drug-treatment program, but never went.

The first time a report of child abuse was lodged against Ms. Harden came the following fall, records show. A city welfare worker called the state central child abuse registry to say that he had seen Ms. Harden hitting Genise, then 10 months old, on the head and chest in a Bronx welfare office because the baby had put paper in her mouth. When the welfare worker suggested to the mother that she take the paper away from the baby instead of hitting her, Ms. Harden

flew into a rage.

"The mother became very angry and slammed the child's tush into the seat, screaming bad language and saying it was her kid and she'll do what she wants," the welfare worker said. "She then took the child and ran out."

Heather Staiman was the child-protection worker assigned to investigate the case. But she quickly discovered that Ms. Harden and her daughter had left their last listed address. "It was an easy case," Ms. Staiman said in a recent interview. "We couldn't find the mother, so we closed it."

Soon after that, Ms. Staiman asked to be transferred to another part of the agency after two years as a child-protection worker. "I felt inept," she said. "My supervisor never sat us down and went over our cases with us. If I had a problem knowing what to do, I tended not to deal with it."

Caseworker No. 2

A Case Is Closed After 2 Short Visits

A year later, a second person called the state child abuse registry on Dec. 1, 1989, to allege that Ms. Harden was neglecting her child, and spending her money on crack instead of food.

At the time, Ms. Harden was living in the Bronx, but the case went back to the Manhattan unit that had investigated the first charge. The Manhattan unit objected because the case was in a different borough, but was overruled. This would have a powerful effect on the handling of the case.

Carlos Pages, who had two years' experience as a caseworker and a bachelor's degree from Florida Memorial College, went to the home, which he found well stocked with food. Both Ms. Harden and her boyfriend's grandparents, whom she was living with, denied that she used drugs. The couple said they had thrown Ms. Harden's boyfriend out of the apartment because he was violent and was using and selling drugs, the records said.

"When I was visiting her, everything was going well," Mr. Pages said in a recent interview. "She had broken up with her boyfriend."

Agency policy required the caseworker to make monthly visits to the home, but three months lapsed before he stopped in to talk to Ms. Harden again. Again, he said, she and her baby appeared healthy.

Review of Case's Handling

Mr. Pages said he was so overburdened with cases and paperwork that it was difficult to make the minimum monthly visits, much less track down relatives, teachers and parole officers, or spend the time it would take to really get to know the families.

"It's impossible to visit these people within a month," he said. "They're all over New York City."

On the basis of Mr. Pages' two brief visits to the home, the case was closed.

But a month later, Peggy Smith, a high-ranking supervisor, reviewed the case because she was worried about the performance of the unit and wrote a scathing critique of the Harden investigation.

She wrote that Mr. Pages had not gathered the most basic facts about the family: He listed Ms. Harden's boyfriend as her child, and he thought she was living with her own grandparents, rather than her boyfriend's grandparents.

Nor did it appear that Mr. Pages had ever read the prior report of Ms. Harden hitting her infant at a welfare office, much less discussed it with her, the supervisor wrote. Ms. Smith directed the unit to reopen the case.

But Mr. Pages said he was never given Ms. Smith's report. He left the unit two months later after he was injured in a car accident.

Caseworker No. 3

A Criminal Record Gets Little Notice

Finally, five months after Ms. Smith ordered the case reopened, a new worker, Rose Rivera, was sent to check on Ms. Harden. Ms. Rivera would never lay eyes on Ms. Harden. Her efforts to talk to Ms. Harden were sporadic and unsuccessful.

Ms. Rivera, who has a sociology degree from Brooklyn College, had been hired just six months earlier. She had 14 cases of her own, but because other workers in the unit were often absent, she had to deal with many additional cases.

When Ms. Rivera finally went to visit Ms. Harden in October 1989, she learned that Ms. Harden was in prison for a parole violation and that her children were living with their grandmother. (Ms. Harden had given birth to a second baby, Shaquan, earlier that year.)

In January 1990, Ms. Harden was released, again on the condition that she participate in drug treatment.

Another Caseworker Leaves

The next month, Ms. Rivera talked to the mother's parole officer, but apparently never asked what crime Ms. Harden had committed. The worker reached Ms. Harden by telephone at her mother's Bronx home. They agreed to meet at the agency's office in Manhattan, but Ms. Harden did not show up, the records said.

Ms. Rivera and her supervisor, Susan Kynor, recently declined to comment on the case. Ms. Rivera told city investigators that she had little memory of Ms. Harden, whom she never met. She thought Ms. Harden had been imprisoned on a drug-related charge. Ms. Kynor was under the impression Ms. Harden's crime was robbery.

Almost as soon as Ms. Rivera arrived in the unit, she left, burned out by the demands of the job. "She found herself working six days a week plus evenings," the internal city report said.

Caseworker No. 4

Report of Progress, And Then a Death

So once again, in March 1990, a new worker was assigned to the case. Cecilia Parris had only been on the job for four months. She had a bachelor's degree in criminal justice from John Jay College.

She caught up with Ms. Harden at her mother's apartment in the South Bronx. The children looked healthy, but their doctor said that Ms. Harden had not brought them in for regular checkups or immunizations.

Ms. Parris also talked with Ms. Harden's parole officer, Wallace Webb, and asked him to have Ms. Harden take the children for immunizations. In an interview, Mr. Webb said he did not recall talking to Ms. Parris, but did remember that Ms. Harden was attending drug treatment. "She was stabilized and happy to have an apartment of her own," he said.

There is, again, no indication that the caseworker asked about Ms. Harden's criminal history. Ms. Parris declined to comment on the case recently, but city records say she decided to close the case since the mother was in contact with the parole officer.

Move to Manhattan

Ms. Kynor later conceded that the case might have been kept open if the mother had not lived in the Bronx, inconveniently distant from the unit, based in lower Manhattan, the city's internal report said.

Later in 1990, Ms. Harden and her children moved into a crumbling, drug-infested building in Harlem, where young men peddled crack and most of the tenants were, like herself, formerly homeless families from city shelters. It is there that her son would be fatally burned.

Ms. Harden became pregnant in 1991. But before she gave birth in August, her boyfriend went to jail for selling crack. Ms. Harden said she was lonely and quickly started seeing her neighbor's cousin, Jeffrey Phillips, 19.

At that time, because the investigation was closed, no caseworkers were visiting the home. But relatives say there were many signs of trouble. In the fall, Shaquan had a nasty bruise on his face. Ms. Harden said Mr. Phillips hit the toddler and sometimes her, too. But Mr. Phillip's sister, Glenda Phillips, who lived in the same apartment with Ms. Harden, suspected Ms. Harden. Shaquan's face looked as if someone with a woman's long, slender fingers had squeezed hard enough to leave a hand imprint, Ms. Phillips said.

Children Often Left Alone

Jenna Fleming, who lived across the hall from Ms. Harden and was Mr. Phillips's cousin, said that Ms. Harden sometimes left her two toddlers and infant alone at home when

she went to the store or to the laundry. She said she sometimes found 3-year old Genise trying to play mother, rocking the infant and holding an empty bottle to his lips.

On Dec. 15, 1991, Ms. Fleming agreed to watch the children while Ms. Harden went Christmas shopping.

That afternoon, Mr. Phillips dropped by to see Ms. Harden and agreed to watch the children while Ms. Fleming stepped across the hall to her apartment. When she came back, the baby was crying inconsolably. She lifted the sheet and saw that the baby was badly burned. Mr. Phillips later said that while changing Jeffrey's diaper, he wiped the baby with a cloth he did not know was soaked with cleaning fluid.

"Being a little high, he probably wasn't conscious of what was on the rag," said his sister, Ms. Phillips. "He told me he was smoking reefer before he came in the house."

Doctors at New York Hospital found the baby had second- and third-degree burns over one fifth of his body, and that three ribs had been broken sometime before he was burned.

Memories of a Short Life

On Jan. 6, three weeks after the baby was admitted to the hospital, a social worker on the burn unit, Joyce Scheinberg, called the city caseworker to report that Ms. Harden was not visiting the infant. Jeffrey needed a skin-graft operation, but his mother was needed to sign consent forms first.

A day later, Ms. Harden signed the consent forms, but then disappeared from her baby's side for another 10 days, Ms. Scheinberg reported. On Jan. 17, he died of a massive infection caused by the burns.

Ms. Harden's surviving children, Genise and Shaquan, were placed in foster care with their grandmother after the death.

Mr. Phillips, who says he hurt the baby by accident, is now in the Union County jail in New Jersey, awaiting sentencing on drug and gun charges.

Ms. Harden is still living in the same dingy Harlem apartment where her son was fatally burned. Four disposable diapers and a single white baby shoe are tacked to the wall to remind her of Jeffrey.