



New York City Comptroller
Scott M. Stringer

NEWS

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**COMPTROLLER STRINGER AUDIT: INCONSISTENT,
INCOMPLETE AND SHODDY INVESTIGATIONS AT
ADMINISTRATION FOR CHILDREN’S SERVICES PUT
ABUSED CHILDREN AT RISK**

Even after 30 deaths under ACS’s watch in the last decade, this agency still can’t do its job; “ACS continues to put children in harm’s way,” Stringer said.

Required managerial reviews for two-thirds of the most urgent abuse cases were late or incomplete, leaving children in potentially dangerous situations

Mandatory meetings to assess if children were in danger were late; in one instance, caseworkers didn’t meet with a child for over a month

(New York, NY) – New York City’s Administration for Children’s Services (ACS) is potentially putting thousands of children at risk by violating its own requirements on how to properly investigate allegations of abuse, according to a new [audit](#) released today by New York City Comptroller Scott M. Stringer. Over the last decade, reports have identified 30 instances in which children died due to shoddy investigations and poor oversight at ACS. Despite these fatal consequences – and ACS’s pledges to enact immediate reforms – auditors still found multiple instances in which ACS regularly failed to conduct required check-ins with alleged victims of abuse or neglect on a regular basis, didn’t evaluate homes for signs of domestic violence, and ignored staff members’ concerns about being overburdened by high caseloads.

“The Administration for Children’s Services continues to put our City’s children in harm’s way,” Comptroller Stringer said. “After years of horror stories about children dying under their care and pledges by ACS to reform itself, our audit uncovered an unchanged agency, rife with mismanagement and bureaucratic inaction. No child should have to spend a single night in an unsafe home, and it’s government’s job to make sure that doesn’t happen. This agency must take responsibility for decades of inaction and make the desperately-needed changes to protect our City’s most vulnerable residents.”

ACS investigates an average of 60,000 reports of child abuse and neglect each year through its Division of Child Protection. Each case is handled by a team consisting of a Child Protective Manager, a supervisor and a caseworker. Upon receiving a complaint, the team is expected to determine the safety risk level of every child in a household.

The Comptroller’s audit probed ACS’s protocols for handling of child abuse and neglect allegations from July 1, 2013 through May 31, 2015 and examined a sample of 25 cases. Auditors focused on whether the agency had adequate controls over its processes to investigate allegations of child abuse, which included whether supervisors enforced its policies and procedures.

Today’s findings reflect an agency that continues to resist persistent calls for change despite several reports over the past decade that found significant issues that endangered the lives of children. Investigations by ACS, the Department of Investigation, and a Brooklyn District Attorney Grand Jury identified at least thirty children in ACS custody that died between October 2005 and October 2013 due to inadequate investigations and shoddy casework.

Major findings of Comptroller Stringer’s audit include:

After allegations of abuse, investigations were incomplete, shoddy, and left kids at risk

ACS did not properly oversee investigations of alleged child abuse, as required by the agency’s own policies. During the course of an investigation, ACS staff must meet with children every other week to make sure that they are safe.

- Out of 25 abuse cases reviewed, auditors found that these required regular meetings occurred in just one case. In the most egregious instance, no contact was made with a child for 31 days.
- In one example an allegedly-intoxicated father of a 15-year-old child grabbed her by the hair and slapped her across the face, then threw the child’s mother to

the floor, slapping and choking her – seriously injuring both the daughter and mother. However, instead of meeting with the 15-year-old child every other week to ensure her safety, nearly a month passed between visits from the child’s caseworker, leaving the child in prolonged periods of danger.

- In an investigation of neglect, a mother told caseworkers that her child was absent from school because of asthma, but didn’t provide any evidence to back up her claim. There was no record in ACS files that the caseworker had followed a supervisor’s directive to verify the child’s condition with their pediatrician and ensure the absence was due to asthma and not abuse or neglect.

Supervisors did not review cases consistently or on time, allowing children to remain in potentially unsafe conditions

ACS supervisors and managers are supposed to monitor how their staff track each abuse case on a regular basis. These reviews would allow supervisors and managers to assess the progress of investigations, offer guidance to case workers, and ensure children are removed from dangerous situations before tragedy strikes.

- Auditors found that managerial reviews for two-thirds of “high-priority” cases – those that involve fatalities or families with a history of four or more prior instances of abuse – weren’t completed on time.
- In a sample of 25 abuse cases, which should have been reviewed by supervisors 75 separate times, auditors found that 27% of reviews were late and 11% were never completed.

ACS did not properly screen homes for signs of domestic violence in close to two-thirds of cases

ACS guidelines require caseworkers to do a domestic violence screening for all families as part of an investigation. In a sample of 25 cases auditors looked at, nearly half involved some form of domestic violence, however:

- In 16 of the 25 of the cases reviewed, however, auditors identified problems with ACS’s screenings. Issues included six cases in which there was no evidence that any screening took place and ten cases where screenings began, but were never completed.

ACS did not ensure that caseworkers took notes on cases, meaning supervisors may not detect when children are living in dangerous situations

Each ACS case worker is responsible for overseeing at least ten cases, and typically conducts dozens of interviews per case to determine whether children are at risk. ACS policy requires case workers to take notes and enter them into a computer database – this helps case workers keep track of details, allows supervisors and managers to review progress, and ensures children aren't left in unsafe homes.

- Auditors, however, found that staff kept did not keep any notes for 20 out of 25 cases, and in the five other cases, notes were either conflicting, mixed with other information, or otherwise insufficient.

ACS leadership ignored calls for greater staffing resources, but doesn't know how much staffing it actually needs to protect all children

ACS employees repeatedly told auditors that staffing resources were not adequate to fully investigate all cases of child abuse and neglect.

For each investigation, caseworkers are responsible for conducting safety assessments, interviewing dozens of witnesses, and conducting home visits. In addition to these duties, when necessary caseworkers also set up additional services for children, testify in court, and work with contractors to place children in foster care.

- However, caseworkers repeatedly told auditors that staffing resources were inadequate to fully investigate all allegations of abuse and neglect. Employees were required to work 10-12 cases at a time – double the number they said they could reasonably handle.
- Leadership at ACS claimed that the caseworkers' workload was manageable, but could not show that it had any data to back up that claim.

The Comptroller's audit made several recommendations that will make sure ACS does its job and protects children in New York City. They include:

- Demanding that staff fully investigate all allegations of abuse by following guidelines and keeping proper notes;
- Ensuring managers and supervisors complete reviews on time so that children aren't left in dangerous situations; and
- Studying if the agency actually has adequate capacity to perform thorough investigations.

ACS did not agree with the audit's findings and continued to maintain that it is able to ensure the safety of children.

“Children are being left to suffer in abusive households, and in the face of this damning audit, ACS has the audacity to claim that everything is under control. With our children’s lives at stake, we simply cannot let this go on any longer,” Stringer said.

To read the full audit, please click [here](#).