



Do State Child Abuse and Neglect Policies Address Sibling Abuse?

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Introduction

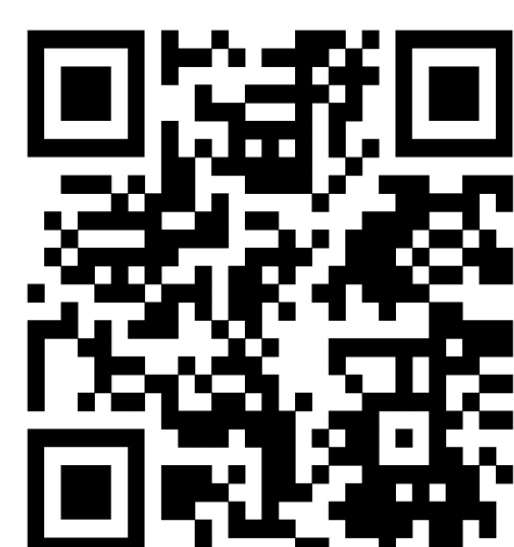
State child protection statutes lack clarity and specificity in their attention to sibling abuse. It may be reportable under family member or household member abuse, but 14 states lack these categories. It also may be reportable under parental neglect, but this does not accurately characterize some sibling abuse. Sibling abuse can be just as harmful as parental child maltreatment, leaving injuries and mental distress, yet there are no consistent statutory policies for responding to it. Child protection and intervention guidelines exist for sibling sexual abuse, but they are varied and unevenly implemented. Professional guidance for responding to physical and psychological sibling abuse is almost entirely absent.

Method

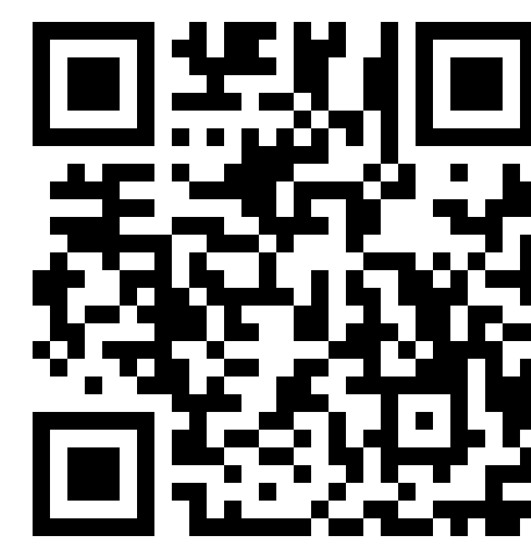
The status of current U.S. state-level child abuse and neglect (CAN) laws and policies was examined by identifying all CAN legal policies that could be relevant to physical, psychological, or sexual sibling abuse using data from the 2021 State Child Abuse and Neglect (SCAN) Policies Database.¹ The SCAN Policies Database contains detailed information—including legal definitions of maltreatment, types of perpetrators, and mandated child welfare responses—for the 50 U.S. states, D.C., and Puerto Rico. The data were organized and studied in RStudio.

More Information & References

Scan for the SAARA bulletin to learn more information:



Scan for the SAARA website:



¹Weigensberg, E., Islam, N., Knab, J., Grider, M., Page, J., & Larson A. (2022). State Child Abuse and Neglect (SCAN) Policies Database [Data set]. National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect. <https://doi.org/10.34681/rpq4-m848>

Whitworth, T. R., Demarest, M., Tucker, C. J., & Finkelhor, D. (2024, January 9). Do State Child Abuse and Neglect Policies Address Sibling Abuse? (SAARA Bulletin #6). Crimes against Children Research Center. <https://www.unh.edu/ccrc/resource/saara-bulletin-6>

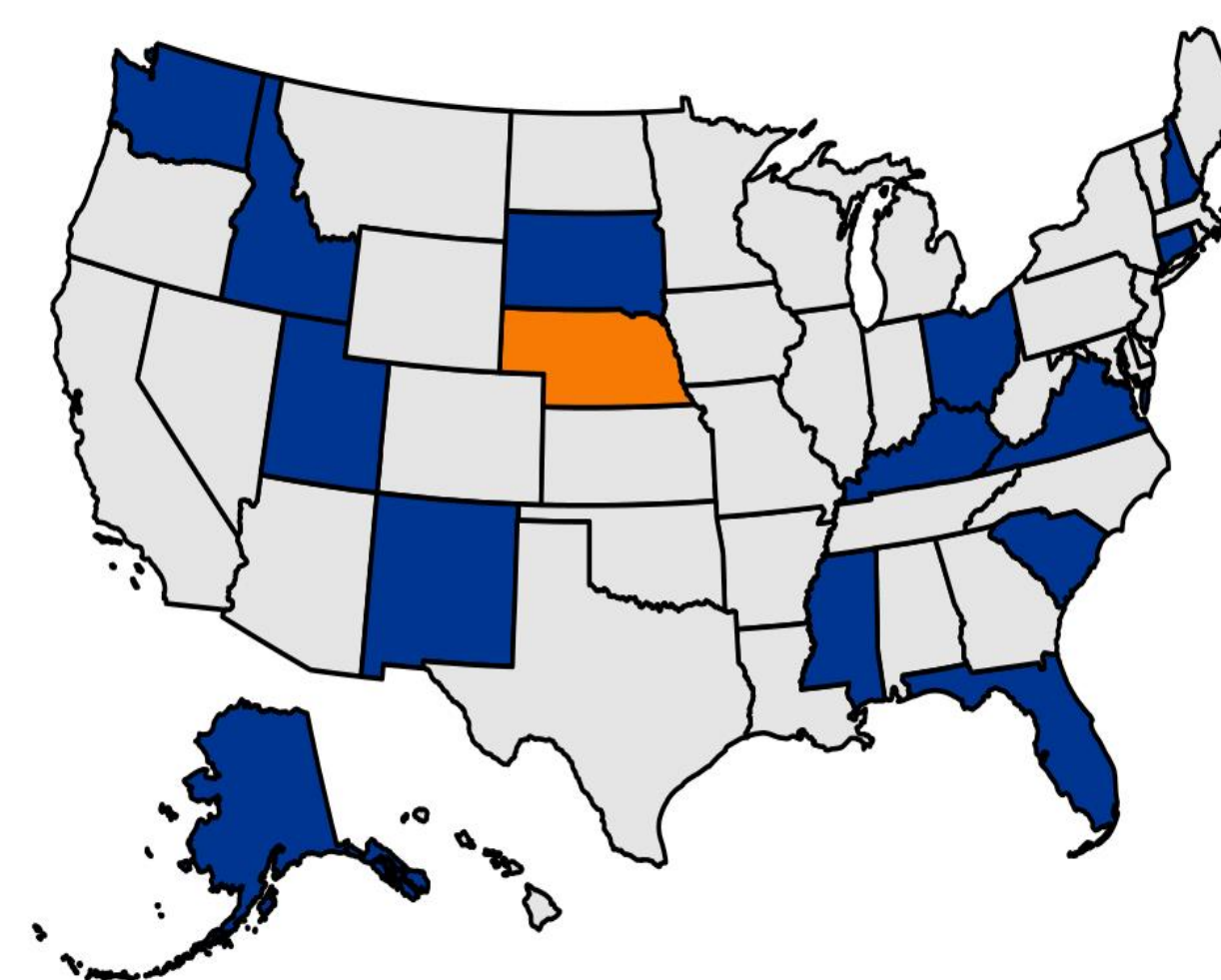
Tables & Figures

Percent of states defining specific perpetrator types.¹

Parent	96.2%
Guardian	94.2%
Caregiver	86.5%
Family Member	51.9%
Household Member	63.5%
Person Responsible	94.2%
Any Adult	38.5%

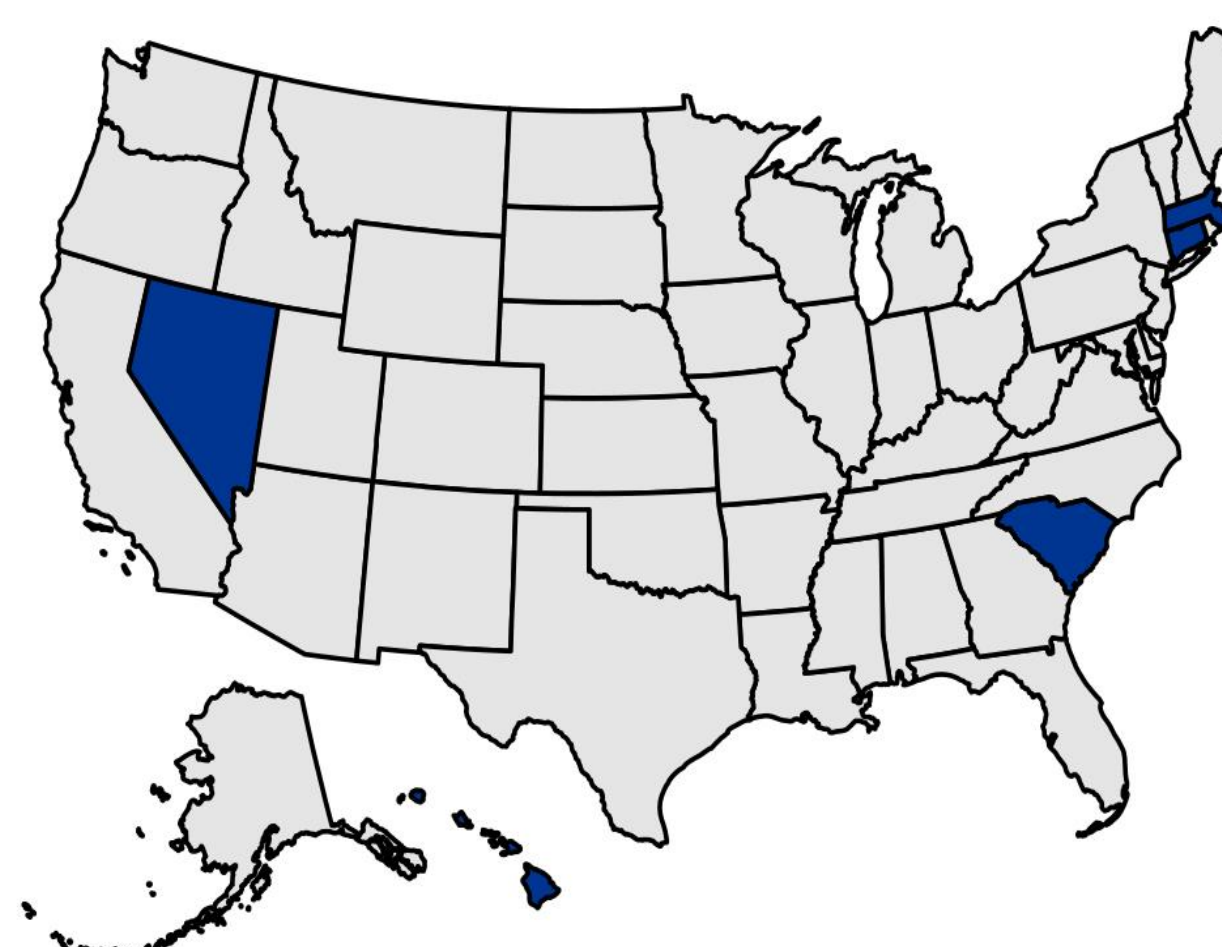
Note: Data includes all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico. Nebraska does not define specific perpetrator types.

States where a family or household member can be a perpetrator.¹



Family or household members included: Yes No N/A

States where child neglect includes failure to protect.¹



Neglect definition includes failure to protect: Yes No

Findings

- Almost all states specify parents or guardians as possible CAN perpetrators, but only a slight majority of states also include other family or household members in their definitions.
- Fourteen states and D.C. have no category that could include sibling abusers.
- In the absence of laws and policies specific to sibling abuse, and as an alternative to classifying juvenile siblings as CAN perpetrators, parents or guardians can be held responsible for neglect when sibling abuse occurs.
- All 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico have statutes regarding inadequate supervision as a subtype of parental neglect.
- Most states also classify failure to protect as a subtype of parental neglect, except Massachusetts, Connecticut, South Carolina, Nevada, and Hawaii.

Conclusion

- This research has demonstrated that existing CAN legal policies can be applied to sibling abuse.
- Sibling abuse is not specifically addressed in most state statutes. Nor are there any policies or laws that explicitly address physical and psychological sibling abuse.
- There is an urgent need to develop laws and policies that explicitly address all forms of sibling abuse. Otherwise, professional responses will remain inconsistent and often inadequate.
- Even when state CAN definitions could be interpreted as encompassing sibling abuse, this is not usually reflected in practice.
- There is a lack of training and education to routinely inquire about sibling abuse, investigate it, or apply the relevant statutes. Sibling abuse is also often dismissed as less serious than other types of interpersonal violence.