

TENNESSEE  
COMMISSION ON  
CHILDREN &  
YOUTH



# Second Look Commission

2025 Annual Report



**2025 Second Look Commission Annual Report**  
**Table of Contents**

Purpose.....	1
Reporting Requirements.....	2
TEN-4 Day in Tennessee.....	2
2025 Second Look Commission Findings, Recommendations, and Observations.....	3
Strengths.....	3
Medical .....	3
Training and Education on Signs of Abuse: <b>Findings</b> .....	3
Training and Education on Signs of Abuse: <b>Recommendations</b> .....	4
Abuse Death Investigations: <b>Findings</b> .....	4
Abuse Death Investigations: <b>Recommendations</b> .....	5
Access to Health Care: <b>Findings</b> .....	5
Access to Health Care: <b>Recommendations</b> .....	5
Relative and Kin Caregivers.....	6
Evaluation and Services for Familial Placements: <b>Findings</b> .....	6
Evaluation and Services for Familial Placements: <b>Recommendations</b> .....	6
No Contact Orders, Visitation and Custodial Decisions: <b>Findings</b> .....	7
No Contact Orders, Visitation and Custodial Decisions: <b>Recommendations</b> .....	8
Safety .....	8
Safety and Treatment of Children Inside Residential Facilities: <b>Findings</b> .....	8
Mental Health .....	10
Autism Spectrum Disorder: <b>Findings</b> .....	10
Autism Spectrum Disorder: <b>Recommendations</b> .....	11
Mental Health Diagnosis and Medication: <b>Findings</b> .....	11
Mental Health Medication Diagnosis and Medication: <b>Recommendations</b> .....	11
Substance Use: <b>Findings</b> .....	12
Substance Use: <b>Recommendations</b> .....	13
Legal.....	14
Prosecution: <b>Findings</b> .....	14
Prosecution: <b>Recommendations</b> .....	14
Child Abuse Statute: <b>Findings</b> .....	14
Child Abuse Statute: <b>Recommendations</b> .....	15
Sexual Exploitation and Material .....	15
Exposure to Sexual Material: <b>Findings</b> .....	15
Sexual Behaviors: <b>Findings</b> .....	16

Sexual Behaviors: <b>Recommendations</b> .....	16
Department of Children’s Services.....	16
Runaway Youth: <b>Findings</b> .....	16
Runaway Youth: <b>Recommendations</b> .....	17
Transition Homes and Offices: <b>Findings</b> .....	17
Transition Homes and Offices: <b>Recommendations</b> .....	17
Investigations: <b>Findings</b> .....	18
Investigations: <b>Recommendations</b> .....	19
Second Look Commission Legislation .....	19
Repeat Child Abuse Data .....	20
Cases from the Sample Population Reviewed by Second Look Commission.....	25
Cases by Judicial District .....	26
Statute Summary .....	28
Conclusion .....	28
Membership .....	30



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## **Purpose**

The Second Look Commission (SLC) was established in 2010 under Tennessee Code Annotated § 37-3-801 et seq to ensure that Tennessee's response to severe child abuse, particularly cases involving a second or subsequent incident, is thorough, effective, and centered on child safety. The Commission is tasked with reviewing an appropriate sampling of these cases and providing findings and recommendations to the Governor and General Assembly to determine whether such cases are being handled in a way that offers adequate protection to the children of this state.

To fulfill this responsibility, the SLC examines all stages of the child protection process. This includes investigation, intervention, service provision, and legal proceedings related to severe child abuse. The Commission's work is grounded in the belief that every child in Tennessee deserves to grow up in a safe, stable, and nurturing environment. Through careful review and analysis, the Commission seeks to identify areas where improvements can prevent future harm.

This year, the list of SLC cases provided for sampling included children from 89 of Tennessee's 95 counties. This broad representation highlights the widespread nature of repeat severe child abuse and reinforces the need for a coordinated, statewide response.

This report is intended to serve as a resource for policymakers, professionals who work with children and families, and members of the public who are committed to child well-being. By highlighting strengths, patterns, gaps, and opportunities for earlier intervention, the Commission supports collaborative, data-informed strategies that reduce the recurrence of abuse and improve outcomes for vulnerable children.

It is our hope that the findings and recommendations in this report will be used by legislators, child-serving professionals, and communities across Tennessee to work together in building a stronger and more responsive system. Our shared goal is to protect children from repeated harm and to promote healing, safety, and long-term well-being.

## **Reporting Requirements**

Under TCA § 37-3-803, the Second Look Commission is required to submit an annual report to the Governor and the Tennessee General Assembly. This report must include findings and recommendations based on a review of an appropriate sampling of cases involving a second or subsequent incident of severe child abuse. The statute requires that the Commission's work address all stages of investigating and attempting to remedy severe child abuse.

The Commission meets this obligation by reviewing case data provided by the Department of Children's Services (DCS), selecting a representative sample for in-depth review, and analyzing how systems responded. The findings and recommendations in this report are based on cases which had a DCS substantiation of severe abuse in FY2024 and were reviewed during the 2025 calendar year. The Commission met on December 12<sup>th</sup> and December 17<sup>th</sup> to finalize and approve the 2025 Annual Report.

In accordance with TCA § 37-3-803(d)(2), this report is submitted to the Governor, the Senate Judiciary and Health and Welfare Committees, and the House Civil Justice Committee. It is also made available to the full General Assembly and the public through the Tennessee Commission on Children and Youth's website.

This year marks the Commission's fifteenth annual report. We hope it will continue to inform policy, guide practice, and encourage meaningful dialogue among child protection professionals and community leaders to reduce repeat abuse and improve child safety.

## **TEN-4 Day in Tennessee**

In 2025, Governor Bill Lee and the Tennessee General Assembly officially designated October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2025 as TEN-4 Day, an important milestone in the state's efforts to prevent child abuse. TEN-4 Day serves as a public awareness initiative to promote the use of the TEN-4-FACESp clinical decision rule, a validated tool designed to help identify bruising in young children that may be indicative of abuse.

TEN-4-FACESp stands for bruising to the Torso, Ears, Neck, Frenulum, Angle of the jaw, Cheeks, Eyelids, or Subconjunctivae. The "4" refers to any bruising in infants 4 months of age or younger, and "p" denotes the presence of patterned bruising. This evidence-based tool is used to screen children under the age of 4 and guide further evaluation when abuse is suspected.

The Second Look Commission is deeply grateful to the Governor and the General Assembly for recognizing the importance of this initiative. The Commission looks forward to supporting the continued observance of TEN-4 Day each year to raise awareness and strengthen child protection efforts across Tennessee.

## **2025 Second Look Commission Findings, Recommendations, and Observations**

In the 2024 audit of the Second Look Commission (SLC) by the Comptroller of the Treasury, Observation #2 recommended that the Commission improve accountability, transparency, and effectiveness by naming specific stakeholders in its annual report findings and recommendations. The SLC has identified responsible entities for each finding. However, in some cases, such as when a finding involves an individual's actions like violating a no-contact order, the responsibility may not rest with a single stakeholder. In these situations, the SLC identified the system most involved with the individual at the time, while acknowledging that the system may not be solely responsible for the circumstances that led to the finding.

### **Strengths**

In one case, members felt the Department had taken all reasonable steps and there was likely nothing more it could have done to prevent the child's death.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee Department of Children's Services

Members acknowledged the efforts the Department made to keep the child with their family, including arranging TEIS services in the home and referring them to the relative caregiver program, though they were on a waitlist.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee Department of Children's Services

Members commended the police for conducting a thorough and effective investigation into the child's death.

Responsible Entity: Law Enforcement

### **Medical**

#### **Training and Education on Signs of Abuse: Findings**

Members strongly believed that a mother with a history of substance use and abuse cases arriving at a pediatric visit while incapacitated should have triggered a report.

Responsible Entity: Medical Providers

Members identified a need for additional training for pediatricians on recognizing and reporting signs of abuse. For example, members emphasized that when a child

presents with multiple injuries, providers should assess the overall pattern. While individual injuries might seem explainable, taken together they could indicate abuse.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee General Assembly and Medical Providers

Members emphasized the need for greater public awareness of the TEN-4 FACES-P rule to help identify potentially abusive bruising. For example, members noted that bruising around the ear and eye, potential signs of abuse, were overlooked during the hospital visit. They felt the child should have received a head CT and skeletal survey.

Responsible Entity: Governor, Tennessee General Assembly, Tennessee Department of Children's Services, Law Enforcement, District Attorneys, and Medical Providers

Members noted that a young child, who had been experiencing steady weight gain, then gained almost no weight for a year between annual well-child visits. This was not noted as a concern in his medical files. Lack of weight gain at this age is extremely concerning and should have warranted a work-up. Members felt this could have been one of the first signs of neglect and had intervention been initiated it might have saved his life.

Responsible Entity: Medical Providers

### Training and Education on Signs of Abuse: **Recommendations**

The Second Look Commission recommends an investment in education for all medical professionals on training in child abuse indicators. Such training, created by experts in their field currently exists through Evidential Learning (<https://www.evidentialearning.com/>) the SLC recommends appropriating funding to make the training available to all medical professionals in Tennessee.

Responsible Entity: Governor and Tennessee General Assembly | Appropriation

In 2025, Tennessee recognized October 4<sup>th</sup> as TEN-4 day, a significant milestone in child abuse awareness. The SLC recommends continuing to recognize TEN-4 day each year and establishing funding for community education initiatives.

Responsible Entity: Governor, Tennessee General Assembly, District Attorneys, Child Advocacy Centers, and Municipalities and Counties | Resolution and Appropriation

### Abuse Death Investigations: **Findings**

Members noted that the child's autopsy revealed healing rib fractures, which were not addressed in the abuse investigation or linked to the cause of death. This suggested prior abuse. They emphasized that a two-month-old child is unlikely to sustain such injuries without significant trauma, and there was no documentation

showing these fractures were investigated further.

Responsible Entity: Medical Examiner, Tennessee Department of Children's Services, and Law Enforcement

Members discussed the significance of the term "child torture" and felt it should be used when a case meets the clinical definition, to accurately reflect the severity of the abuse.

Responsible Entity: Law Enforcement, Tennessee Department of Children's Services and Medical Providers

Members stated that the caregiver's explanation for the bruising was not possible. They felt DCS should have been alerted to the unusual nature of the injuries to prompt a more thorough investigation.

Responsible Entity: Medical Providers

Members noted that while the deceased child's siblings were medically evaluated, a half-sibling who frequently stayed in the home was not. They felt all children in the environment should have received medical evaluations.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee Department of Children's Services

Members noted that in certain instances a finding of an "undetermined" cause of death creates challenges in prosecution.

Responsible Entity: Medical Examiners

### Abuse Death Investigations: **Recommendations**

Members recommend defining child torture in statute in TCA 39-15-402 (Haley's Law).

Responsible Entity: Tennessee General Assembly | Legislation

### Access to Health Care: **Findings**

Members emphasized the importance of educating individuals about and providing access to voluntary long-acting reversible contraception.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee General Assembly

In one case, a child needed follow-up medical care, but the mother struggled to find a pediatrician who both had availability and accepted TennCare.

Responsible Entity: TennCare

### Access to Health Care: **Recommendations**

The Second Look Commission recommends allocating funding to expand access to and education about free, voluntary long-acting reversible contraception (LARC).

There are existing programs within the state that could be partners in facilitating

this work. The Commission suggests prioritizing this funding for the five counties with the highest rates of substance-exposed infants and for educational initiatives within substance use treatment programs.

Responsible Entity: Governor and Tennessee General Assembly | Appropriation

## Relative and Kin Caregivers

### Evaluation and Services for Familial Placements: **Findings**

Members discussed that it was not clear if there were mental health concerns regarding the caregiver in a safety placement that were missed, or if the mental health concerns were brought up after the death of the child were a way to mitigate or downplay the caregiver's role.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee Department of Children's Services

In several cases, we observed that a thorough evaluation of the home and caregiver was not completed. Prior to an Immediate Protection Agreement (IPA) being implemented, there should be a thorough evaluation of the safety of the home and caregivers in accordance with DCS Policy 14.13 Non-Custodial Immediate Protection Agreements.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee Department of Children's Services

Members observed multiple cases where children remain with grandparents or other relatives despite repeated maltreatment allegations. They noted that in a non-relative home, the child likely would have been removed under similar circumstances.

Responsible Entity: Judicial System and Tennessee Department of Children's Services

Members reiterated the need for relative caregivers to receive support comparable to that provided to foster parents including the full daily board rate, access to respite care, insurance, and social support.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee General Assembly and Tennessee Department of Children's Services

### Evaluation and Services for Familial Placements: **Recommendations**

The SLC recommends additional support for Relative Caregivers and Kinship placements including funding, respite care, and insurance. There also needs to be greater assessment and supervision of non-custodial placements. Prior to making the placement, there should be a clear understanding between the Department and the caregivers regarding what support and services will be available. In 2023, a federal rule change ([45 CFR § 1355.20](#)) allows for agencies to have a separate kin-specific licensing or approval process. Creating a tailored licensing for these placements will allow the state to use Title IV-E funding for Relative Caregivers. This process would also ensure that Relative Caregivers receive the same Foster Care

Maintenance Payments as if the child was placed in a licensed or approved non-relative foster family home. Additionally, if the children were being supported through Title IV-E funding they would have easier access to Medicaid coverage.

Responsible Entity: Governor, Tennessee General Assembly, and Tennessee Department of Children's Services

There remains a critical need to ensure that children placed with relative caregivers are safe and have their needs adequately met. The Second Look Commission recommends evaluating the staffing requirements necessary to assign a Family Support Services worker to these cases.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee Department of Children's Services

### No Contact Orders, Visitation and Custodial Decisions: **Findings**

Members expressed concern that the father was granted custody despite a serious history of domestic violence, including incidents where the child was present or involved.

Responsible Entity: Judicial System

Although the mother was permitted to have supervised visitation, she was unsupervised with the child at the time of the child's death. Additionally, it's unclear whether this occurred during her scheduled visitation or if she had more access than the court order allowed.

Responsible Entity: Judicial System

Members believed DCS should have been informed when the court awarded custody to the father, given his history with domestic violence and prior DCS involvement. Members also noted that in scenarios such as this the court should be requesting DCS to do an investigative order or order of reference.

Responsible Entity: Judicial System

Members felt that after a child is born substance exposed, supervised visits should be a part of the discharge planning process.

Responsible Entity: Judicial System, Medical Providers and Tennessee Department of Children's Services

Members continue to see cases where children are harmed while in the care of individuals under no contact orders. In one instance, a parent left their child with someone with a no contact order due to work obligations, and the child died. Members discussed what other options the parent had and noted that since DCS had an open case, if they had been informed of the challenge the parent was facing, they could have provided child-care vouchers as an alternative.

Responsible Entity: Judicial System, Tennessee Department of Children's Services, and Tennessee Department of Human Services

Members pointed out that the caregiver present at the time of the child's death had a history of aggravated assault. They questioned why this criminal background was not addressed until after the child's death.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee Department of Children's Services

### No Contact Orders, Visitation and Custodial Decisions: **Recommendations**

Although judges are responsible for making custody determinations, the quality of those decisions depends on the completeness and accuracy of the information presented to the court. It is imperative that all known details regarding caregiver suitability, including any safety concerns or risk factors, are clearly communicated to ensure informed and appropriate judicial outcomes.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee Department of Children's Services, Judicial System, Law Enforcement, Medical Provider, Service Providers, Guardian Ad Litem, Attorneys and Court Appointed Special Advocates

In Tennessee, the lack of affordable, high-quality child care, particularly rural areas or child care deserts, can leave children vulnerable to unsafe caregiving situations. This not only puts children at risk but also places pressure on working parents who must choose between earning a living and ensuring their child's well-being. Tennessee should explore pathways to expanding availability and affordability of child care.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee Department of Human Services and Tennessee General Assembly

## **Safety**

### Safety and Treatment of Children Inside Residential Facilities: **Findings**

Members strongly felt the need for additional accountability and transparency regarding the treatment of youth while placed by the state in a residential facility. It was noted that we take a child out of a bad situation and put them in a situation that is supposed to be safe, and it is worse.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee Department of Children's Services, Tennessee Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services

Both children and staff at a residential facility corroborated allegations that staff improperly restrain youth during therapeutic holds resulting in injuries. The reported injuries include broken bones.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee Department of Children's Services, Tennessee Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services and All Residential Treatment Providers

Members had significant concerns regarding the practice of therapeutic holds. It was discussed that these holds are being used too often, incorrectly and with heightened emotions and they are resulting in injuries and a death.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee Department of Children's Services and All Residential Treatment Providers

Members emphasized the need for de-escalation training, but also a complete reevaluation of the use of therapeutic holds.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee Department of Children's Services and All Residential Treatment Providers

Members noted recurring incidents where staff provided children with substances or exposed them to sexual content or conversations while in care.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee Department of Children's Services and All Residential Treatment Providers

Staff at a residential treatment provider corroborated allegations that they served children food with maggots in it and in several instances, they are served food with mold or spoiled milk.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee Department of Children's Services and All Residential Treatment Providers

Allegations that staff members at residential treatment provider antagonize the children, bringing up their trauma in front of others and sending them into crisis were corroborated by children in the facility and other staff members.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee Department of Children's Services and All Residential Treatment Providers

Members noted that an SUI case alleging abuse at facilities was closed as unsubstantiated with safety issues noted, however, there were a significant number of issues that were corroborated by staff members. It was questioned why this was not substantiated.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee Department of Children's Services

Members noted that in one case, the stepmother who appeared to be aware of the repeated physical abuse that was occurring was employed at an agency that contracts with DCS.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee Department of Children's Services

### Safety and Treatment of Children Inside Residential Facilities: **Recommendations**

The Second Look Commission has significant concern regarding the treatment and conditions of children placed in residential facilities throughout the state. In

response, the Commission recommends that the Tennessee Comptroller of the Treasury undertakes a comprehensive audit of all residential facilities housing children. Given its oversight authority and capacity for independent evaluation, the Comptroller's Office is uniquely positioned to conduct a thorough assessment and address any systemic issues identified.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee Comptroller of the Treasury

The General Assembly should undertake a comprehensive evaluation of the current oversight structures and mechanisms governing residential facilities that serve children in state custody. Strengthening oversight is essential to ensure the safety, well-being, and quality of care provided in these settings.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee General Assembly

Upon completion ongoing Sentinel Event Review requested by Shelby County District Attorney regarding therapeutic holds, the Commission urges all facilities to implement the resulting guidance to ensure the safety and well-being of children in care.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee Department of Children's Services and Tennessee Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services

There are opportunities for training on safe therapeutic holds, the SLC specifically mentioned Crisis Prevention Institutes training as a resource.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee Department of Children's Services and All Residential Treatment Providers

The Second Look Commission in conjunction with the Juvenile Justice Review Commission should review incident reports case recordings and all documentation related to therapeutic holds, the existing systems of oversight and how they are currently implemented. Residential treatment providers shall comply with requests pursuant to TCA 37-3-809 and 37-3-909 to complete these reviews.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee Second Look Commission and Juvenile Justice Review Commission

## Mental Health

### Autism Spectrum Disorder: Findings

Members noted that a child was given a self-diagnosis of autism, but it was normal behavior for a maladaptive environment. The behavior exhibited by the child was due to the child reacting to a traumatic environment. There should be consideration that these may be normal adaptive behaviors to a non-ideal or traumatic situation. They also acknowledged that access to psychological testing can be delayed due to waitlists.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee Department of Children’s Services, Tennessee Department of Education, and Tennessee Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services.

Members noted that children who have experienced severe abuse are sometimes misidentified as having non-verbal autism, when their silence may actually be a trauma response.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee Department of Children’s Services, Tennessee Department of Education, Tennessee Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services and Medical Providers.

### Autism Spectrum Disorder: **Recommendations**

If autism is to be considered as a factor in a child’s case and a basis for decisions, there needs to be a formal clinical diagnosis consistent with DSM-5 criteria, conducted by qualified medical professionals.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee Department of Children’s Services

### Mental Health Diagnosis and Medication: **Findings**

Members expressed concern about the number of psychiatric medications prescribed to a 12-year-old diagnosed with Bipolar Schizophrenia. They noted that abruptly stopping these medications can cause serious side effects, and prescribing them to a child with a known history of non-compliance was considered highly risky.

Responsible Entity: Medical Providers

### Mental Health Medication Diagnosis and Medication: **Recommendations**

The Second Look Commission recognizes the critical need for integrated healthcare services for children in foster care. Members recommend adopting a model similar to the University of Oklahoma’s Fostering Hope Clinic, which serves as a centralized, trauma-informed medical home. This model brings together a multidisciplinary team to provide developmental screenings, early intervention referrals, mental health evaluations, on-site psychiatric care, social work support, referrals for individual and family counseling, and access to a network of community resources. Such a coordinated approach ensures continuity of care and addresses the complex health needs of children in state custody.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee Department of Children’s Services

**Tennessee Department of Children’s Services Comment:** The model for intake, assessment, and screening in the DCS Real Estate Plan will incorporate a similar approach to provide screenings, evaluation, and assessments to make the most

appropriate placements for custodial youth within 30 days of entering custody.

The ongoing shortage of accessible services for youth remains a significant barrier to care. Extended waitlists for treatment place considerable strain on both children and their caregivers. Additionally, the high level of clinical need among youth who have experienced such significant trauma often exceeds what can be effectively addressed through telehealth. The Second Look continues to recommend expanding access to mental health treatment providers across the state.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services and Tennessee General Assembly

Mental health conditions such as Conduct Disorder, Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD), or Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) can significantly impact a child's case. However, before any such condition is used to inform case decisions, there should be a documented diagnosis made by a qualified mental health professional in accordance with DSM-5 criteria.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee Department of Children's Services, Tennessee Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services, and Tennessee Department of Education.

#### Substance Use: **Findings**

Members noted that in many child death cases, the family's first contact with the department was due to substance exposure at birth. They questioned what ongoing services or supports are available to parents or caregivers after a child is born substance exposed.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee Department of Children's Services and Tennessee Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services, and Medical Providers.

**Tennessee Department of Children's Services Comment:** The collaboration between DCS specialized drug teams and Safe Baby Courts has proven to be invaluable to identify supports and resources for parents/caregivers with substance abuse disorders.

In one instance, family members and caregivers displayed a repeated inability to quit substance use. This resulted in repeated injuries and poor supervision for the children. The substance use disorder by caregivers was perpetually putting the children at risk.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee Department of Children's Services and Judicial System

In one case a young child accidentally ingested a marijuana gummy purchased by an older (yet still underage) youth. Members noted the ease of access and did note

that laws around this are changing.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee General Assembly and Tennessee Alcohol Beverage Commission

In one of the child's first interactions with the department, there was a two-month-old and found naked and crying next to their caregiver who was passed out from substances. Members noted what an extremely dangerous situation that is and questioned what resources and services a small rural county would have to address that situation.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee Department of Children's Services, Tennessee Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services and Judicial System.

### Substance Use: **Recommendations**

Tennessee has seen measurable success in improving outcomes for families involved in Safe Baby Courts, particularly those facing substance use challenges. These specialized courts provide a trauma-informed, family-centered approach that prioritizes the safety and well-being of infants and toddlers while supporting parents in recovery. By fostering collaboration among child welfare agencies, treatment providers, and the judicial system, Safe Baby Courts have demonstrated their effectiveness in reducing time in foster care and increasing family reunification rates. The Second Look Commission strongly recommends continued expansion of Safe Baby Courts statewide to ensure more families can benefit from this proven model of intervention and support.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee General Assembly, Tennessee Department of Children's Services, Tennessee Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services, Administrative Office of the Courts and Judicial System.

Stable housing is a cornerstone of recovery and family reunification, yet many caregivers with substance use disorders face significant barriers to securing safe and affordable housing, especially those with prior involvement in the criminal justice system. The Second Look Commission emphasizes the urgent need to expand housing opportunities tailored to this population. Without access to stable housing, caregivers are less likely to succeed in treatment and more likely to experience family separation.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee General Assembly

The Tennessee Alliance for Drug Endangered Children (TADEC) plays a vital role in identifying and supporting children affected by parental substance use. The Second Look Commission supports the expansion of TADEC's programs and resources across the state. Continuing to support this alliance will enhance Tennessee's ability to respond effectively to the needs of drug-endangered children and their families,

fostering safer communities and healthier futures.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee Bureau of Investigation

## Legal

### Prosecution: **Findings**

Members questioned the threshold for initiating prosecution, noting that in two cases, the same harmful behavior occurred repeatedly without any legal action.

Responsible Entity: District Attorneys and Judicial System

Members continued to express concern about the lack of prosecutions, stating that while the statutes are strong, they are not being enforced consistently through legal action.

Responsible Entity: District Attorneys

Members noted ongoing difficulties in obtaining data on child abuse prosecutions, especially in cases resolved through plea agreements.

Responsible Entity: District Attorneys and Child Advocacy Centers

It was noted by law enforcement that the victim in a human trafficking case chronically absconded from the Department making maintain a location difficult, however, during that timeframe she remained at one facility for eight months with no runaway incidents.

Responsible Entity: Law Enforcement and Tennessee Department of Children's Services

### Prosecution: **Recommendations**

In accordance with TCA § 37-1-607(a)(5), the District Attorneys General Conference should collaborate with local District Attorneys to systematically collect and report data on decisions to pursue or decline prosecution following Child Protective Investigative Team (CPIT) recommendations. This information should be communicated back to CPIT to ensure transparency and provide insight for future cases.

Responsible Entity: District Attorneys General Conference and Local District Attorneys

### Child Abuse Statute: **Findings**

In several cases reviewed by the commission strangulation occurred. Members discussed whether strangulation alone should be a factor for severe abuse.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee General Assembly

When hotline calls report that a child over the age of 13 is sexually active with an older adult who is not in a caregiving role, those cases are often screened out as not falling under DCS jurisdiction and are referred to local law enforcement. This

creates a gap where children do not receive forensic interviews or support services. Members suggested that including statutory rape as a trigger for forensic interviews could address this issue.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee General Assembly and Law Enforcement.

Members again reiterated the importance of anonymous mandated reporting. In one case, multiple people around the child had noted frequent bruising including black eyes, bruising on the ear, and facial bruising/cuts. These individuals did not make a report.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee General Assembly and District Attorneys

Members questioned where the line is when it comes to corporal punishment versus physical abuse. It was noted that what was occurring was described as corporal punishment by the caregiver, yet it was leaving extensive bruising and scarring.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee General Assembly, Law Enforcement and Tennessee Department of Children's Services

### Child Abuse Statute: **Recommendations**

The Second Look Commission recommends amending TCA 37-1-102(a)(28) to include strangulation as defined in TCA 39-13-201(a)(2) as a severe abuse offense and to 39-15-402 as a factor for aggravated child abuse.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee General Assembly | Legislation

The Second Look Commission recommends that legislation be brought that would require law enforcement to refer Statutory Rape cases to a Child Advocacy Center for a forensic interview and for that case to be staffed by the appropriate Child Protective Investigative Team.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee General Assembly | Legislation

### **Sexual Exploitation and Material**

#### Exposure to Sexual Material: **Findings**

Members discussed the lack of restrictions on phones and the children's easy access to harmful material.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee General Assembly

Members raised concerns about children's access to pornography, particularly the widespread availability of stepsibling-themed content, which may normalize incestuous behavior.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee General Assembly

### Sexual Behaviors: **Findings**

The SLC has reviewed several cases in which the parents permit or facilitate sexual behavior in their children who are below the age of consent, including children as young as eleven.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee General Assembly and District Attorneys

Members discussed a case where a child repeatedly expressed a desire to have a baby in hopes of feeling loved. They emphasized the importance of providing her with a stable, loving adult presence in her life.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee Department of Children's Services, Mental Health Providers and Judicial System

### Sexual Behaviors: **Recommendations**

The Second Look Commission recommends there be legal consequences for adults who play an active role in facilitating sexual behaviors between children under 13.

Responsible Entity: District Attorneys

## Department of Children's Services

### Runaway Youth: **Findings**

It was noted in a hotline report that "SIU does not investigate concerns that take place while the child is on the run" but Administrative Policies and Procedures 14.25 states that "SIU is responsible for conducting investigations when the abuse or neglect occurred while the child was in custody."

Responsible Entity: Tennessee Department of Children's Services

**Tennessee Department of Children's Services Comment:** Per Protocol for Screening, Priority Response, and Assignment of Child Protective Services Cases; page 4 8(d) Regional CPS is responsible for investigating allegations involving custodial children while on runaway.

In one case, a child who disclosed being trafficked was not given a forensic interview due to being considered a high flight risk. Members questioned whether interviewers could have gone to the detention center to conduct the interview instead.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee Department of Children's Services and Child Advocacy Centers

It appeared that a child's repeated runaways were not properly documented. Although the child ran away around eight times, only two incident reports were filed.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee Department of Children's Services

Over the course of their time in custody a child ran and was trafficked or sexually assaulted on the run at least five times. The final time, they trafficked another child and are potentially now facing criminal charges as a trafficker.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee Department of Children's Services and District Attorneys

#### Runaway Youth: **Recommendations**

The SLC recommends that the Department and contract agencies adhere to the Protocol for Reporting Runaways, Absconders, and Escapees by filing an incident report as soon as possible after a child runs away.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee Department of Children's Services and Contract Agencies

The SLC expressed concern that a child with a well-documented history of being trafficked was now potentially facing charges as a trafficker. Members felt there were missed opportunities to protect her and prevent this outcome. They also recommended that, in such cases, district attorneys carefully consider the individual's prior victimization before pursuing criminal charges.

Responsible Entity: District Attorneys General and Tennessee Department of Children's Services

#### Transition Homes and Offices: **Findings**

A child with a history of being trafficked, and possibly recruiting others, ran away from a facility with a younger child. During that time, the older child trafficked the younger one. Upon return, the older child was placed in a transitional home with other children.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee Department of Children's Services

In some cases, a child's placement ended with the stated reason "PLANNED – Updated Assessment Indicates Placement and/or Level Change," but there was no evidence that an assessment had actually been conducted. The child was then placed in a DCS office or transitional living home.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee Department of Children's Services

A child reported using methamphetamine while staying in a DCS office.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee Department of Children's Services

#### Transition Homes and Offices: **Recommendations**

This is the second time the Second Look Commission has seen a case where a child with a history of convincing another younger custodial child to run and then trafficking them has been placed into a transition home immediately upon return. There needs to be an established protocol for instances like this that ensures the children are secure and not at risk of victimization.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee Department of Children's Services

After a child disclosed using methamphetamine while in a DCS office, the only documented actions were the child surrendering the substance, undergoing a drug test, and having her belongings searched. Members noted that no further follow-up or investigation was recorded. They recommend that in situations like this, a formal investigation should be conducted, including a documented process to ensure that other children in the office were not exposed to the substance.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee Department of Children's Services

### Investigations: **Findings**

Members noted that no follow-up was conducted to verify whether the prescriptions the mother reported were valid or actually existed.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee Department of Children's Services

Members noted that despite ten years and nineteen investigations, the child was never taken into custody.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee Department of Children's Services and Judicial System

Members observed that while no single issue may have justified removal at the time, the cumulative concerns, viewed in hindsight after the child's death look different.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee Department of Children's Services and Judicial System

In one case, the child received numerous services, but their home environment remained unchanged. Members emphasized that the failure was not in the services themselves, but in repeatedly returning the child to a home situation that had not changed.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee Department of Children's Services and Judicial System

Members discussed that the parents continued to have contact with their children despite two years of non-compliance with DCS services or case plans. They questioned what incentive the parents had to engage with the plan under these circumstances.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee Department of Children's Services and Judicial System

Members noted that in abuse cases, it is not unusual for only one child in the home to be targeted, while others may not experience or report abuse, making detection more difficult.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee Department of Children's Services

### Investigations: **Recommendations**

There are mechanisms in place to keep children safe, they just need to be more consistently followed. When a child is at imminent risk of harm, they need to be removed from that situation. If there is an assessment conducted, that needs to be used to inform decisions and actions moving forward.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee Department of Children's Services and Judicial System

### **Second Look Commission Legislation**

The Second Look Commission recommends adding language to TCA 37-3-804 to include the Commissioner of the Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services or their designee to The Second Look Commission Membership.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee General Assembly | Legislation

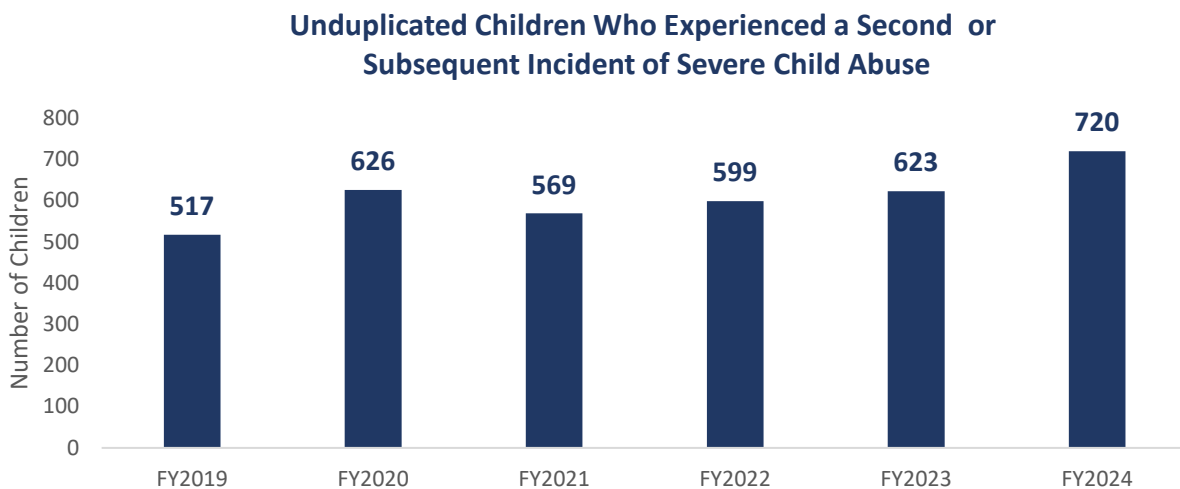
The Second Look Commission Recommends adding language to TCA 37-3-809 clarifying that residential treatment providers and agencies that contract with DCS are subject to and must comply with Second Look Commission records requests.

Responsible Entity: Tennessee General Assembly | Legislation

## Repeat Child Abuse Data

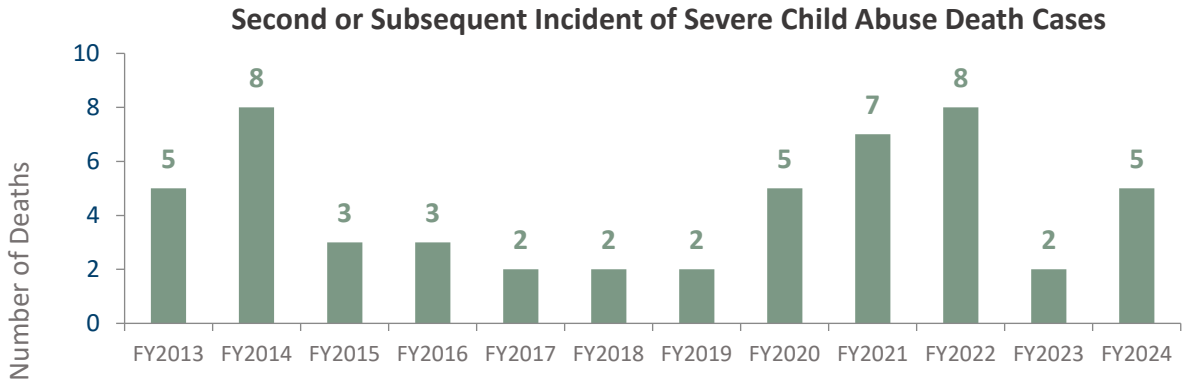
In fiscal year 2024, a total of 720 children experienced a second or subsequent incident of severe child abuse. This is the highest number of victims recorded since the Second Look Commission was established.

The data presented reflects the disposition date of each case. While many dispositions occur in the same year as the abuse, more complex cases, such as those involving child fatalities, often take longer to resolve.



The types of maltreatment for FY 2024 (the second or subsequent incident) are as follows:

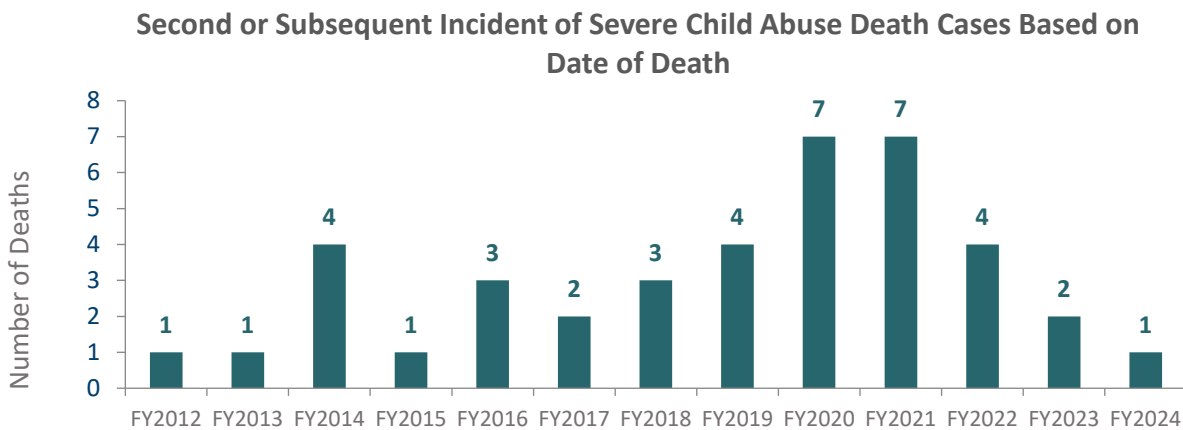
Abuse Death	0.7%	Medical Maltreatment	0.4%
Drug Exposed Child	28.0%	Nutritional Neglect	0.4%
Domestic Violence	1.5%	Physical Abuse	6.7%
Environmental Neglect	0.1%	Psychological Harm	1.2%
Lack of Supervision	6.1%	Sexual Abuse	54.9%



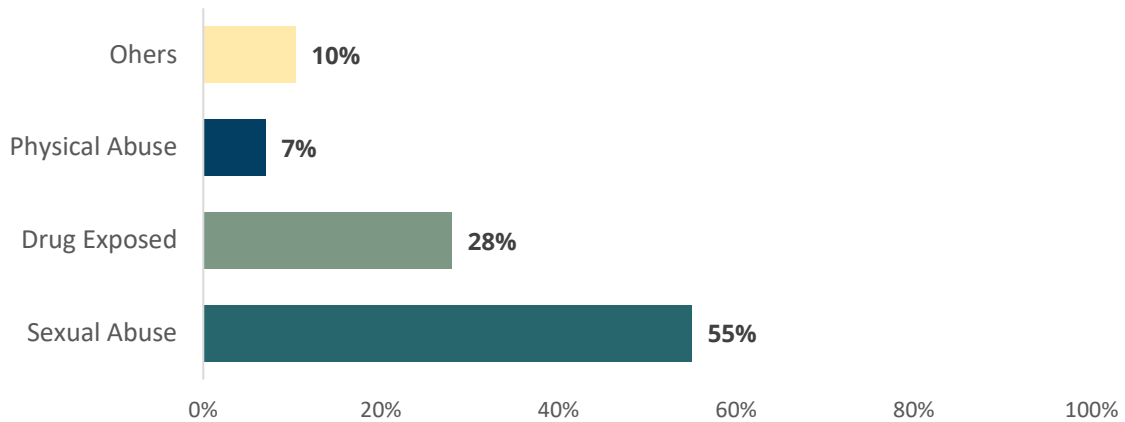
In FY 2024, five children died as a result of a second or subsequent incident of severe abuse. This marks an increase from the previous year, which had two such deaths. Due to the extended time often required to reach a disposition in fatal cases, some deaths reviewed for FY2024 occurred in earlier years.

It is important to note that these figures only include cases that fall within the Commission’s purview, specifically, those where the child had a prior substantiated incident of abuse.

Upon request, the SLC reviewed one additional death, which occurred in FY2024 and was substantiated in FY2025. That death is not reflected in the graphs, due to not having a prior substantiation.



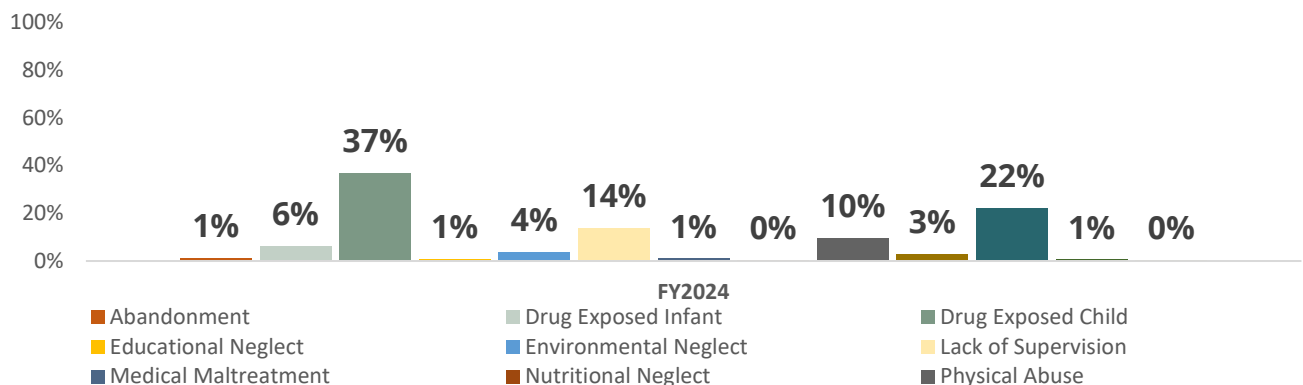
**Percent of Children Who Experienced a Second or Subsequent Incident of Severe Child Abuse by Type (Second Instance Only) In FY2024**



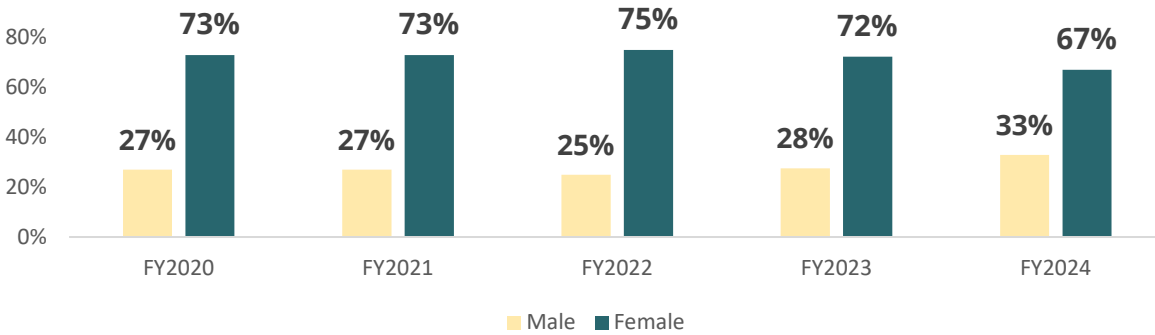
This chart is solely based on the second or subsequent incident of severe child abuse. While sexual abuse accounted for 55% of second or subsequent incidents in FY 2024, it represented approximately 22% of all maltreatment types when both first and second incidents were considered. The most common overall type of abuse (first and second incidents combined) was drug exposure, which accounted for approximately 43% of cases in FY 2024.

Beginning in FY 2023, the SLC began including duplicate cases, children who experienced multiple types or multiple instances of abuse, in its calculations of severe abuse by type. As a result, comparisons to years prior to FY 2023 may not be accurate.

**Percent of Children Who Experienced a Second or Subsequent Incident of Severe Child Abuse by Type (Including First and Second Instance of Maltreatment)**



### Percent of Children Who Experienced a Second or Subsequent Incident of Severe Child Abuse by Gender

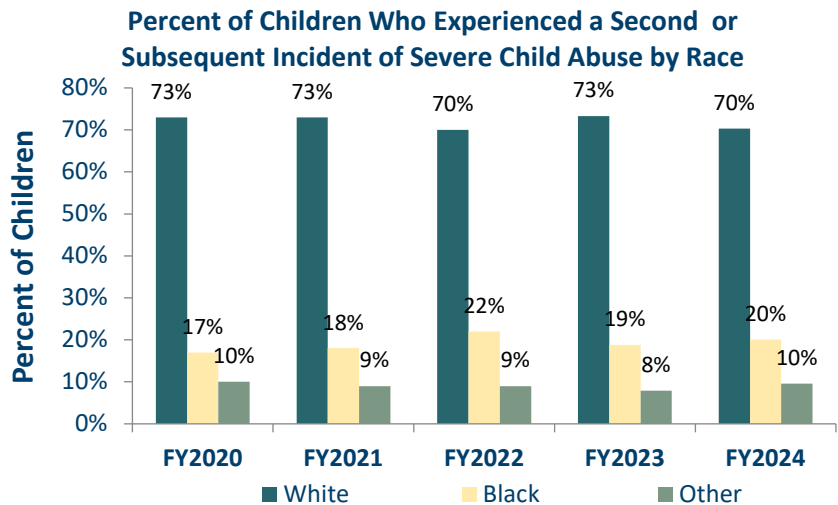


The gender composition of the victims of the total population of cases for FY 2024, was 67 percent female and 33 percent male.

Compared to the general child population in Tennessee (51% male, 49% female), female children are disproportionately represented among victims. However, FY 2024 saw the second-highest percentage of male victims since the Commission’s inception.

The racial composition of the victims of the total population of cases for FY 2024 is as follows:

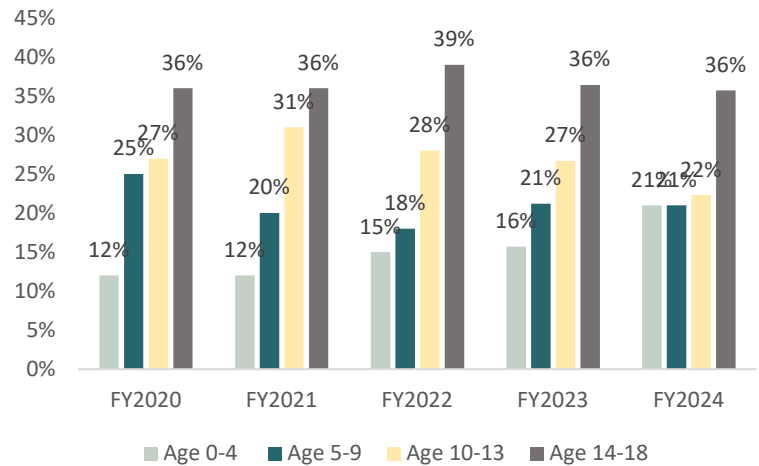
- White: 70 percent;
- Black: 20 percent;
- Multiple/Unable to determine/Declined: 10 percent



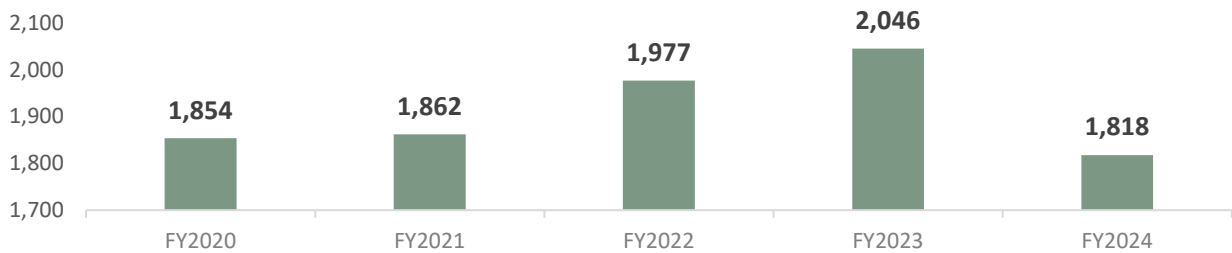
The age range composition of the children at the time of the incidents of abuse for FY 2024 is as follows:

- 0-4 years old: 21 percent
- 5-9 years old: 21 percent
- 10-13 years old: 22 percent
- 14-17 years old: 36 percent

**Percent of Children Who Experienced a Second or Subsequent Incident of Severe Child Abuse by Age**



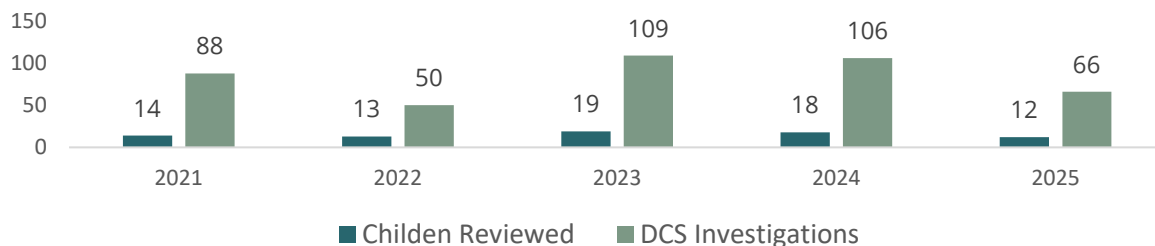
**Average Number of Days Between Incidents of Maltreatment**



The average number of days between incidents of maltreatment for FY 2024 is 1,818 or just under five years. The median number of days was 1,383.

**Cases from the Sample Population Reviewed by Second Look Commission**

Over the last 5 years, the Second Look Commission has reviewed on average 15 children’s cases each year, representing an average of 83 DCS investigations. Due to the children’s significant history with the Department, the commission reviewed 12 cases this year representing 66 investigations. The chart below shows the number of children’s cases reviewed each year and the total number of DCS investigations reviewed by the SLC members each year.



## Cases by Judicial District

Number of individual children who experienced a second or subsequent incident of severe child abuse for fiscal year 2024 reported in each county by judicial districts based on the list of cases provided by DCS:

### 1<sup>st</sup> Judicial District

Carter	3
Johnson	3
Unicoi	1
Washington	12

### 2<sup>nd</sup> Judicial District

Sullivan	18
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### 3<sup>rd</sup> Judicial District

Greene	6
Hamblen	3
Hancock	3
Hawkins	8

### 4<sup>th</sup> Judicial District

Cocke	14
Grainger	1
Jefferson	9
Sevier	15

### 5<sup>th</sup> Judicial District

Blount	10
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### 6<sup>th</sup> Judicial District

Knox	41
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### 7<sup>th</sup> Judicial District

Anderson	10
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### 8<sup>th</sup> Judicial District

Campbell	4
Claiborne	6
Fentress	0
Scott	1
Union	4

### 9<sup>th</sup> Judicial District

Loudon	10
Meigs	3
Morgan	7
Roane	9

### 10<sup>th</sup> Judicial District

Bradley	8
McMinn	4
Monroe	8
Polk	2

### 11<sup>th</sup> Judicial District

Hamilton	28
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### 12<sup>th</sup> Judicial District

Bledsoe	2
Franklin	2
Grundy	6
Marion	4
Rhea	6
Sequatchie	3

### 13<sup>th</sup> Judicial District

Clay	1
Cumberland	11
DeKalb	10
Overton	1
Pickett	0
Putnam	9
White	8

### 14<sup>th</sup> Judicial District

Coffee	11
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### 15<sup>th</sup> Judicial District

Jackson	1
Macon	9
Smith	7

Trousdale 2  
Wilson 11

16<sup>th</sup> Judicial District

Cannon 4  
Rutherford 17

17<sup>th</sup> Judicial District

Bedford 7  
Lincoln 2  
Marshall 3  
Moore 0

18<sup>th</sup> Judicial District

Sumner 13

19<sup>th</sup> Judicial District

Montgomery 16  
Robertson 1

20<sup>th</sup> Judicial District

Davidson 48

21<sup>st</sup> Judicial District

Hickman 2  
Lewis 1  
Perry 5  
Williamson 1

22<sup>nd</sup> Judicial District

Giles 11  
Lawrence 12  
Maury 6  
Wayne 5

23<sup>rd</sup> Judicial District

Ceatham 3  
Dickson 8  
Houston 1  
Humphreys 3

Stewart 1

24<sup>th</sup> Judicial District

Benton 5  
Carroll 9  
Decatur 0  
Hardin 8  
Henry 5

25<sup>th</sup> Judicial District

Fayette 1  
Hardeman 1  
Lauderdale 5  
McNairy 7  
Tipton 3

26<sup>th</sup> Judicial District

Chester 3  
Henderson 2  
Madison 8

27<sup>th</sup> Judicial District

Obion 12  
Weakley 6

28<sup>th</sup> Judicial District

Crockett 0  
Gibson 8  
Haywood 1

29<sup>th</sup> Judicial District

Dyer 6  
Lake 0

30<sup>th</sup> Judicial District

Shelby 88

31<sup>st</sup> Judicial District

Van Buren 4  
Warren 13

## **Statute Summary**

The Second Look Commission is authorized to review a representative sample of cases involving a second or subsequent incident of severe child abuse. The purpose of this review is to provide findings and recommendations to the General Assembly regarding whether these cases are being handled in a way that ensures adequate protection for children in the state.

The Department of Children's Services (DCS) is required by law to submit a list of cases that meet the criteria outlined in Tennessee Code Annotated § 37-3-803. The Commission reviews this list and selects specific cases for further examination.

The Commission has the legal authority to access confidential information related to these cases. Meetings held for investigative purposes are not subject to open meetings laws and are closed to the public. Any records or minutes generated during these meetings are sealed and not available for public inspection.

Although the Commission is administratively attached to the Tennessee Commission on Children and Youth (TCCY), it operates independently in all other respects. TCCY provides administrative support, provides case information, and assists in the preparation of the Commission's reports.

## **Conclusion**

In fiscal year 2024, Tennessee experienced an increase in the number of children who suffered a second or subsequent incident of severe abuse, the highest number of individual victims received by the Second Look Commission since its inception.

Substance use disorder remains a significant contributing factor in these cases. In FY 2024, drug-exposed infant/child cases were 28% of second or subsequent incidents of severe maltreatment and 37% of all combined incidents. Addressing substance use continues to be a critical component of child abuse prevention efforts in the state.

Sexual abuse was the most frequent form of subsequent severe abuse, accounting for over half of the cases received by DCS. When both initial and subsequent incidents were considered, sexual abuse represented 22% of all maltreatment types. Physical abuse comprised 6.7% of second or subsequent incidents and 9.5% of all combined incidents.

Tennessee must continue to address all forms of child maltreatment and use data to guide its efforts. The increase in cases this year highlights the need for continued focus and improvement. The Commission will continue to analyze trends over time to help the state direct resources where they are most needed.

The Second Look Commission remains committed to improving the systems that respond to severe child abuse. We thank all child abuse prevention stakeholders for their dedication and collaboration. We also extend our appreciation to the Governor and Tennessee General Assembly for supporting this important work.



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**Representative Mary Littleton, Co-Chair**  
Tennessee General Assembly, 78<sup>th</sup> District

**Carla Aaron**  
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**Brianna Grant**  
Senior Clinical Director of Outpatient Services,  
TN Voices

**Chris Bowden**  
Lieutenant, Nashville Police Department

**Danielle Jones**  
Major, Jackson Police Department

**Margaret Brady Wilkerson**  
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**Sonya Manfred**  
Executive Director, Sumner County Court  
Appointed Special Advocates

**Ella Britt**  
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**Representative Sam McKenzie**  
Tennessee General Assembly, 15<sup>th</sup> District

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Special Agent in Charge, Tennessee Bureau of  
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Baby Court Coordinator, Administrative Office  
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**Senator Bill Powers**  
Tennessee General Assembly, 22<sup>nd</sup> District

**Ted Engle**  
District Public Defender, 12<sup>th</sup> District

**Hans L. Schwendimann**  
District Attorney General, 32<sup>nd</sup> District

**Stephen Woerner**  
Executive Director, Tennessee Chapter of  
Children's Advocacy Centers