

Haredim and Arabs are less likely to recognize, report child abuse

• By RUTH EGLASH

The haredi and Arab-speaking communities are less likely to report child abuse or view it with the same severity as those from more secular segments of the population, according to a report published last week by the Haruv Institute, a Jerusalem-based center for research and training for professionals in preventing child abuse.

Based on interviews with some 812 Israelis, 688 from the Jewish community and 124 Arabs, the study found that secular respondents viewed child abuse as a very serious problem in society, while those from the haredi sector were less informed and saw it more as a secular phenomenon.

The study also found that while 61 percent of Jewish residents viewed child abuse as a very serious problem in their community, only 39% of Arabs felt it was a big issue for them.

"There is an element that different communities have different perceptions and definitions of what is child abuse," Prof. Hillel Schmid, director of the Haruv Institute - which was established in 2007 with funding from the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation - told *The Jerusalem Post* on Wednesday.

"However, a child that has had a cigarette stubbed out on him or one that is abused emotionally is still an abused child," he said. "The law is clear, as is the legal definition of a child at risk. I know there is a lobby that claims social workers remove children from their homes for no reason, but there is an accepted legal process here, even though it needs to obviously be carried out with cultural sensitivity."

Schmid, a former dean of the Paul Baerwald School of Social Work and Social Welfare at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, explained that often the different approaches to neglect or abuse were based on accepted cultur-



MORE INSULAR cultures, like some sectors of the haredi community, are more likely to try and resolve incidents of child abuse 'within the fold' than report them to the authorities, experts say. (Ariel Jerzofimski/The Jerusalem Post)

al norms in the country's varied communities.

"Some groups are more closed [to the outside world] and are less likely to report incidents to the [mainstream] authorities, preferring to deal with the problems using their own systems," he said, giving the example of the Arab community, where problems are often solved within the family structure.

However, Schmid highlighted that in 2008, there had been some 34,000 reports of child abuse and neglect in Israel and that today, one in every 16 Israeli children was considered at risk

from physical abuse.

Figures from the haredi and Arab communities are lower than those from the secular population, he admitted, but emphasized that this was due solely to the underreporting.

"If such communities fail to accept or trust the authorities, then there will likely be a lot more cases of neglect in the future," said Schmid, adding that there needed to be more uniformity among all communities in Israel.

As well as highlighting the lack of awareness of child abuse in certain communities, the report noted the

underwhelming levels of reporting such abuse in all segments of society.

According to the research, only 11% of people who had personally witnessed some form of child abuse said they had reported it to the authorities, and 27% said that even if they were aware of such incidents, they did not know to whom to report them.

The majority, however - 73% - said they would first go to the police if they witnessed child abuse, before turning to social welfare services.

Schmid stressed that the law urged people to report such cases, however insignificant they might seem.