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UPDATED TRENDS IN CHILD MALTREATMENT, 2007

Lisa Jones and David Finkelhor

New data released by the federal government about reported child maltreatment for 2007 show a mixed and ambiguous picture about recent trends, with overall substantiated cases flat or declining, but child maltreatment fatalities increasing. The data for the tables and graphs included in this report are derived from the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS), which aggregates and publishes statistics from state child protection agencies. The most recent data from NCANDS were released in April, 2009 and concern cases of child maltreatment investigated in 2007. (See <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/pubs/cm07/index.htm> for more information.)

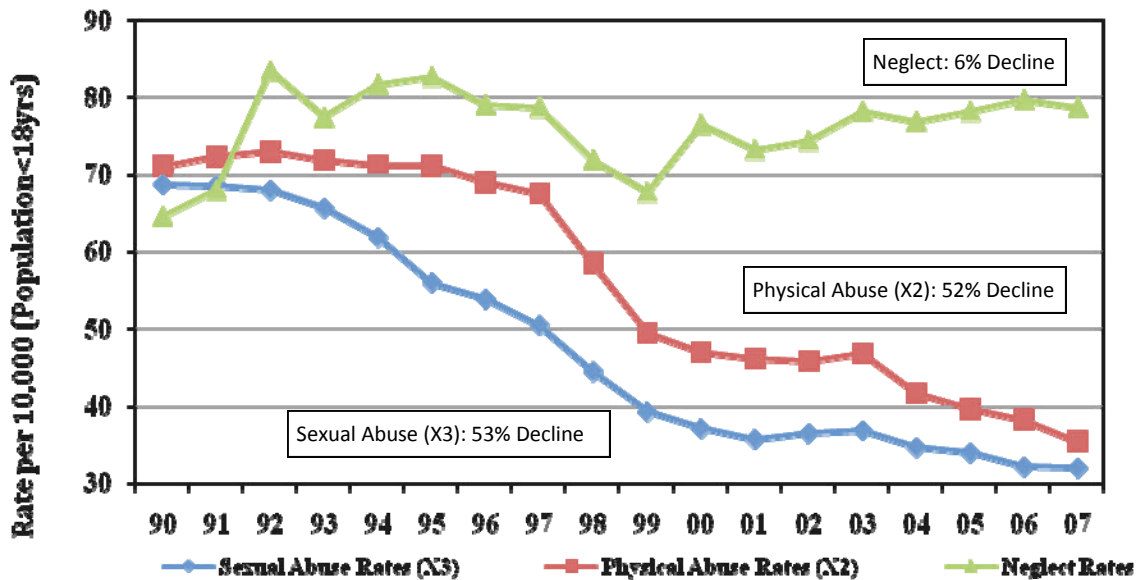
The published NCANDS report (USDHHS, 2009) highlights a 12% decline in the rate of substantiated child maltreatment from 2006 to 2007, one of the largest year-to-year drops ever revealed by the system. But according to notes accompanying the report, at least 4 states (Florida, Louisiana, Nebraska, and

New Jersey) described major administrative and statistical changes in their systems that resulted in declines of 24-60% in one year. In particular, a 60% drop in the number of victims reported by Florida, attributable to a new way the state categorizes cases, accounted for much of the national decline identified in the report.

Recalculated to exclude states with declines or increases of 20% or more, the report data showed that from 2006-2007 there was no change in substantiated sexual abuse, an 8% decline in physical abuse, and a 1% decline in neglect.

The long term trends were still down considerably for sexual and physical abuse. Sexual abuse has declined 53% from 1992 to 2007, while physical abuse has declined 52%. Neglect, on the other hand, has mostly fluctuated, with only a small 6% decline since 1992 (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: US Maltreatment Trends: 1990-2007



Note: Data for 07 excludes FL, LA, NE, NJ and NC, states with over 20% increase or decrease that year. Trend estimates represent total change from 1992 to 2007. Annual rates for physical abuse and sexual abuse have been multiplied by 2 and 3 times respectively in order to compare trends on the same graph.

Table 1: State Trends in Child Maltreatment: 2006-2007 and 1992-2007

US States	Recent Trends: 2006-2007			Long-Term Trends: 1992-2007		
	Sexual Abuse	Physical Abuse	Neglect	Sexual Abuse	Physical Abuse	Neglect
Alabama	-8%	1%	-1%	-53%	-53%	-70%
Alaska	-26%	-37%	5%	-91%	-88%	-26%
Arizona	0%	10%	-19%	-94%	-66%	-76%
Arkansas	-9%	-11%	16%	4%	-47%	33%
California	6%	-5%	1%	-79%	-82%	-22%
Colorado	-12%	-14%	-6%	-65%	-58%	17%
Connecticut	-1%	-8%	-4%	-61%	-86%	-23%
Delaware	-15%	4%	10%	-41%	-23%	6%
District of Columbia	-19%	-14%	6%	284%	-18%	-40%
Florida	-49%	-66%	-39%	-79%	-73%	-52%
Georgia	-11%	-10%	-11%	-80%	-65%	-34%
Hawaii	42%	-7%	-10%	-56%	-76%	-55%
Idaho	9%	-7%	-9%	-94%	-89%	-71%
Illinois	13%	6%	15%	-2%	48%	-21%
Indiana	-22%	-12%	-9%	-57%	-71%	-16%
Iowa	-22%	-11%	-1%	-56%	-41%	178%
Kansas	-6%	-21%	-14%	-29%	-47%	-11%
Kentucky	3%	-12%	-5%	-70%	-73%	5%
Louisiana	-34%	-23%	-23%	-50%	-31%	-18%
Maine	-6%	14%	14%	-40%	-20%	87%
Maryland	missing	missing	missing	-22%	-38%	-21%
Massachusetts	-10%	2%	6%	-66%	-31%	83%
Michigan	missing	missing	missing	-52%	-17%	87%
Minnesota	1%	-9%	-12%	-35%	-77%	-28%
Mississippi	-4%	6%	14%	-52%	-57%	-22%
Missouri	-3%	-3%	0%	-34%	-39%	-67%
Montana	-14%	-7%	8%	-84%	-91%	-57%
Nebraska	-50%	-31%	-32%	-60%	-68%	10%
Nevada	46%	5%	-6%	-62%	-65%	-54%
New Hampshire	-16%	27%	16%	-75%	-40%	57%
New Jersey	-28%	-41%	-32%	-59%	-73%	-49%
New Mexico	-11%	4%	7%	-72%	-57%	8%
New York	0%	6%	7%	-62%	-58%	106%
North Carolina	38%	36%	34%	0%	56%	-41%
North Dakota	28%	16%	30%	-47%	-83%	-20%
Ohio	-10%	8%	-10%	-41%	-32%	-30%
Oklahoma	-8%	-9%	-2%	-34%	-33%	92%
Oregon	-10%	-1%	-10%	-68%	-63%	18%
Pennsylvania	1%	2%	-6%	-40%	-59%	-43%
Rhode Island	-12%	-34%	-9%	-64%	-78%	26%
South Carolina	-8%	14%	17%	-66%	47%	23%
South Dakota	-15%	-9%	-4%	-89%	-67%	-24%
Tennessee	-1%	-20%	-23%	18%	64%	47%
Texas	-9%	-4%	3%	-51%	-42%	26%
Utah	0%	-5%	-2%	-24%	-36%	7%
Vermont	16%	-6%	-12%	-42%	6%	-85%
Virginia	-1%	-14%	-6%	-66%	-62%	-62%
Washington	-10%	0%	-5%	-86%	-80%	-76%
West Virginia	-17%	-10%	-17%	-56%	-3%	30%
Wisconsin	-33%	-12%	13%	-72%	-81%	-57%
Wyoming	16%	20%	0%	-79%	-88%	-53%

It is not possible to directly compare state maltreatment rates because states differ in how statutes define abuse and how abuse is investigated and processed. However, looking at within-state trends, almost all individual states experienced substantial declines in sexual and physical abuse during the period since the early 1990s (see Table 1). Out of the 48 states submitting data to NCANDS, 33 states have seen declines of 50% or more in sexual abuse since 1992. Twenty-nine states have seen declines of this size in physical abuse. The data do not show any obvious patterns to the decline by region.

In contrast to these declines, however, the latest NCANDS report identifies a large **increase** in child maltreatment fatalities for 2007. The number of fatalities rose to an estimated 1760 for 2007 from an estimated 1530 for 2006, a rate increase (2.35 from 2.05 per 100,000) of 15% in one year. NCANDS notes suggest that for Mississippi, Nevada, and Washington, the increase was at least partly due to administrative changes; and for California, the increase in fatalities actually occurred over two years (from 2005 to 2007). However, the total rise in U.S. child maltreatment fatalities in 2007 was driven by increases in a large number of states: 21 states reported increases of over 20% between 2006 and 2007, including 12 of the 25 most populous states in the U.S. (See Table 2). The type of case with the largest increase between 2006 and 2007 (an increase of 110 cases) were those in which the perpetrator relationship to the child was categorized as "unknown or missing." This raises a possible question of

Note: Negative percentages: % decline; Positive percentages: % increase. Due to missing data, long-term trends calculated for: CA, 1993-2007; MD, 2001-2005; MI, 1992-2006; WA, 1995-2007; WV, 1998-2007.

whether categories or criteria could have changed, since it is not clear how authorities determine whether maltreatment by a caregiver (the definition of child maltreatment) occurred when the perpetrator is unknown. Before the increase in 2007, cases of maltreatment fatalities recorded by NCANDS showed a fluctuating trend with only a 5% overall increase from 2001 to 2006.

Caution needs to be taken in interpreting a single year fluctuation such as the large jump in fatalities from 2006 to 2007. However, a large increase in this most serious form of child maltreatment does need to be taken seriously by authorities, and some deeper understanding of the factors behind this change should be a priority for researchers and policy makers. (Although some recent media discussions have highlighted local child maltreatment increases and associated them with worsening economic conditions, it is important to note that economic conditions did not deteriorate in most of the country until 2008, a year after the data represented in this report.)

Because NCANDS reports only those cases known to and confirmed by state authorities, questions are always relevant about the extent to which trends reflect changes in reporting practices, investigation standards, and administrative or statistical procedures, not real changes in underlying abuse. These factors can clearly play a role. However, our previous inquiry into the possibility of artifactual causes for the long term decline in sexual abuse (Jones, Finkelhor, & Kopiec, 2001) suggested that changed reporting and investigative standards do not sufficiently explain the breadth and persistence of the decline. In addition, victim

The statistics in Figure 1 and Table 1 concern **substantiated** cases of sexual abuse, physical abuse and neglect. A substantiated case means a case that has been reported to a child protection agency, investigated and deemed to have occurred according to a “preponderance of evidence” or “credible, reasonable, or probable cause” depending on the state. The child maltreatment cases referred and investigated by state child protection agencies primarily involve abuse by caregivers. The cases do not typically include stranger abuse, unless some element of caregiver neglect was involved.

Table 2: Child Maltreatment Fatality Trends: 2006-2007

US States	Maltreatment Fatalities		
	2006 Count	2007 Count	% Change 2006-2007
Alabama	24	23	-4%
Alaska	2	4	100%
Arizona	16	28	75%
Arkansas	19	20	5%
California	140	184	31%
Colorado	24	28	17%
Connecticut	3	4	33%
Delaware	1	0	-100%
District of Columbia	2	2	0%
Florida	140	153	9%
Georgia	63	61	-3%
Hawaii	4	4	0%
Idaho	1	1	0%
Illinois	58	74	28%
Indiana	42	53	26%
Iowa	6	5	-17%
Kansas	5	10	100%
Kentucky	36	41	14%
Louisiana	37	27	-27%
Maine	1	1	0%
Maryland	missing	missing	missing
Massachusetts	missing	missing	missing
Michigan	missing	missing	missing
Minnesota	14	17	21%
Mississippi	4	19	375%
Missouri	43	50	16%
Montana	1	1	0%
Nebraska	15	16	7%
Nevada	14	21	50%
New Hampshire	2	5	150%
New Jersey	32	33	3%
New Mexico	14	7	-50%
New York	73	96	32%
North Carolina	missing	missing	missing
North Dakota	2	1	-50%
Ohio	74	90	22%
Oklahoma	26	31	19%
Oregon	17	12	-29%
Pennsylvania	33	47	42%
Rhode Island	0	0	0%
South Carolina	19	19	0%
South Dakota	1	8	700%
Tennessee	22	44	100%
Texas	257	228	-11%
Utah	13	11	-15%
Vermont	0	3	300%
Virginia	20	31	55%
Washington	21	27	29%
West Virginia	15	12	-20%
Wisconsin	13	22	69%
Wyoming	1	2	100%
Total*	1370	1576	15%

*Total for states reporting data. National estimates reported by DHHS for maltreatment fatalities are 1560 for 2006 and 1730 for 2007.

self-report surveys show declines in sexual offenses against children over the same period, suggesting a decline in true underlying incidence.

There is currently no consensus in the child maltreatment field about why sexual abuse and physical abuse have declined so substantially, although a recent article and book suggest some possible factors (Finkelhor & Jones, 2006; Finkelhor, 2008). The period when sexual and physical abuse started the dramatic downward trend was marked by sustained economic improvement, increases in the numbers of law enforcement and child protection personnel, more aggressive prosecution and incarceration policies, growing public awareness about the problems, and the dissemination of new treatment options for family and mental health problems, including new psychiatric medication. While some have suggested community notification laws as a possible explanatory factor, the passage and implementation of these laws actually occurred well after the sexual abuse decline was underway.

There is no obvious reason why neglect trends have differed so sharply from those of sexual and physical abuse (Jones, Finkelhor & Halter, 2006). One possibility is that neglect has not declined because it has not been the subject of the same level of policy attention and public awareness as sexual and physical abuse. Another possibility is that increased education and recent state and professional initiatives about neglect, including the identification of new forms of neglect like drug-affected newborns, has masked a decline in other conventional types of neglect.

It is unfortunate that information about the trends in child maltreatment are not better publicized and more widely known. The long-term decline in sexual and physical abuse as well as the short term increase in child maltreatment fatalities may have important implications for public policy. These trends deserve more discussion, analysis and research. Additional information about trends in child abuse and neglect is available at: <http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/Trends/index.html>

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