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Updated Trends in Child Maltreatment, 2006

David Finkelhor and Lisa Jones

New data released by the federal government show continuing national declines in sexual and physical abuse in 2006, but no decline in neglect.

The data detailed in the attached table and figure, come 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 NCCANDS were released in April, 2008 and concern cases of child maltreatment investigated in 2006.

The statistics in 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.” The child maltreatment cases referred and investigated by state child protection agencies primarily involve abuse by caregivers. The cases do not include many involving stranger abusers, unless some element of caregiver neglect was involved.

Sexual abuse substantiations declined 5% from 2005 to 2006, capping a downward trend of 53% that began in 1992. Physical abuse declined 3% from 2005 to 2006, continuing a downward trend that started in 1996. Overall physical abuse is down 48% since 1992. Substantiated neglect cases increased 2% from 2005 to 2006. The long-term trend in neglect has fluctuated during the period since 1992, but without showing a strong trend either up or down.

Because NCANDS reflects only cases known to and confirmed by state authorities, questions have been raised about whether recent declines might only reflect changes in reporting practices or investigation standards. Our previous inquiry into this question (Finkelhor & Jones, 2004), although far from conclusive, suggests that changed reporting or investigative standards do not explain the breadth and persistence of the decline. In addition, victim 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, 2008; Finkelhor & Jones, 2006). 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. However, one other change -- the passage and implementation of community notification laws related to sex offenders -- mostly occurred after the sexual abuse decline was underway.

Most individual states have experienced substantial declines in sexual and physical abuse during the period since the early 1990s. Twenty-nine states have seen declines of 50% or more in sexual abuse during that interval, and only 3 had no decline. Only 6 states have not seen declines in physical abuse, as well. Unfortunately, it is not possible to directly compare state rates because states differ in how statutes define abuse and how abuse is investigated and processed. Nonetheless, the data do not show any apparent patterns to the decline by region.

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 declines in sexual and physical abuse are not better publicized and more widely known. The way in which the NCANDS data are reported annually does not highlight long term trends or disaggregate maltreatment trends by individual forms of abuse. Since neglect makes up nearly two-thirds of all maltreatment, it tends to overwhelm trends in sexual and physical abuse. Nonetheless, the declines in physical and sexual abuse represent potential evidence of a significant public policy success on an issue of great continuing concern to child welfare advocates and the general public alike.

Additional Information about trends in child abuse and neglect is available at:

<http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/Trends/papers.html>

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Table 1. State Trends in Child Maltreatment, 2005-2006 and 1992-2006

US States	Sexual Abuse		Physical Abuse		Neglect	
	% change 05-06	% change 92-06	% change 05-06	% change 92-06	% change 05-06	% change 92-06
Alabama	13%	-49%	-2%	-54%	-5%	-69%
Alaska	36%	-88%	31%	-80%	27%	-29%
Arizona	-18%	-94%	-21%	-69%	-33%	-71%
Arkansas	-1%	14%	8%	-40%	17%	15%
California*	-5%	-80%	-7%	-81%	-3%	-23%
Colorado	9%	-60%	7%	-52%	28%	24%
Connecticut	-12%	-60%	-20%	-85%	12%	-19%
Delaware	-13%	-30%	-34%	-26%	46%	-4%
District of Columbia	-8%	374%	-13%	-5%	-28%	-44%
Florida	-10%	-59%	-2%	-21%	11%	-22%
Georgia	-27%	-78%	-19%	-61%	-18%	-26%
Hawaii	-40%	-69%	-24%	-74%	-26%	-50%
Idaho	-36%	-94%	-27%	-89%	-15%	-69%
Illinois	-9%	-13%	-11%	39%	-2%	-31%
Indiana	9%	-45%	1%	-67%	15%	-8%
Iowa	-8%	-44%	-5%	-33%	-1%	181%
Kansas	0%	-24%	-16%	-33%	-6%	3%
Kentucky	-21%	-71%	-11%	-69%	2%	10%
Louisiana	7%	-24%	-2%	-10%	10%	7%
Maine	-13%	-36%	-17%	-30%	9%	64%
Maryland**	missing	-22%	missing	-38%	missing	-21%
Massachusetts	1%	-62%	-7%	-32%	2%	72%
Michigan	7%	-52%	9%	-17%	14%	87%
Minnesota	-1%	-36%	-19%	-75%	-13%	-19%
Mississippi	-1%	-50%	-5%	-59%	5%	-32%
Missouri	-15%	-32%	-12%	-37%	-28%	-67%
Montana	-3%	-81%	-11%	-90%	-25%	-60%
Nebraska	0%	-19%	-17%	-53%	-8%	62%
Nevada	-9%	-74%	5%	-67%	8%	-51%
New Hampshire	-11%	-70%	-27%	-53%	-8%	35%
New Jersey	23%	-43%	7%	-54%	34%	-25%
New Mexico	-33%	-69%	-28%	-59%	-18%	1%
New York	0%	-62%	7%	-60%	14%	91%
North Carolina	9%	-27%	55%	15%	-31%	-56%
North Dakota	-39%	-58%	-42%	-85%	-29%	-38%
Ohio	-8%	-35%	3%	-37%	-4%	-23%
Oklahoma	-6%	-28%	-10%	-27%	-7%	97%
Oregon	13%	-64%	-8%	-62%	21%	32%
Pennsylvania	-7%	-41%	1%	-60%	3%	-39%
Rhode Island	53%	-60%	19%	-67%	38%	38%
South Carolina	-16%	-63%	0%	29%	2%	5%
South Dakota	7%	-87%	-3%	-64%	4%	-21%
Tennessee	1%	19%	3%	105%	0%	90%
Texas	-2%	-46%	4%	-40%	12%	22%
Utah	-14%	-24%	-6%	-32%	-5%	10%
Vermont	-26%	-50%	-16%	13%	-25%	-83%
Virginia	-1%	-65%	8%	-55%	9%	-60%
Washington***	-10%	-85%	-6%	-79%	-12%	-75%
West Virginia****	-16%	-47%	-22%	8%	-12%	56%
Wisconsin	-19%	-58%	-3%	-78%	-8%	-62%
Wyoming	-8%	-82%	-22%	-90%	-15%	-53%

Note: negative percentages: % decline; positive percentages: % increase.

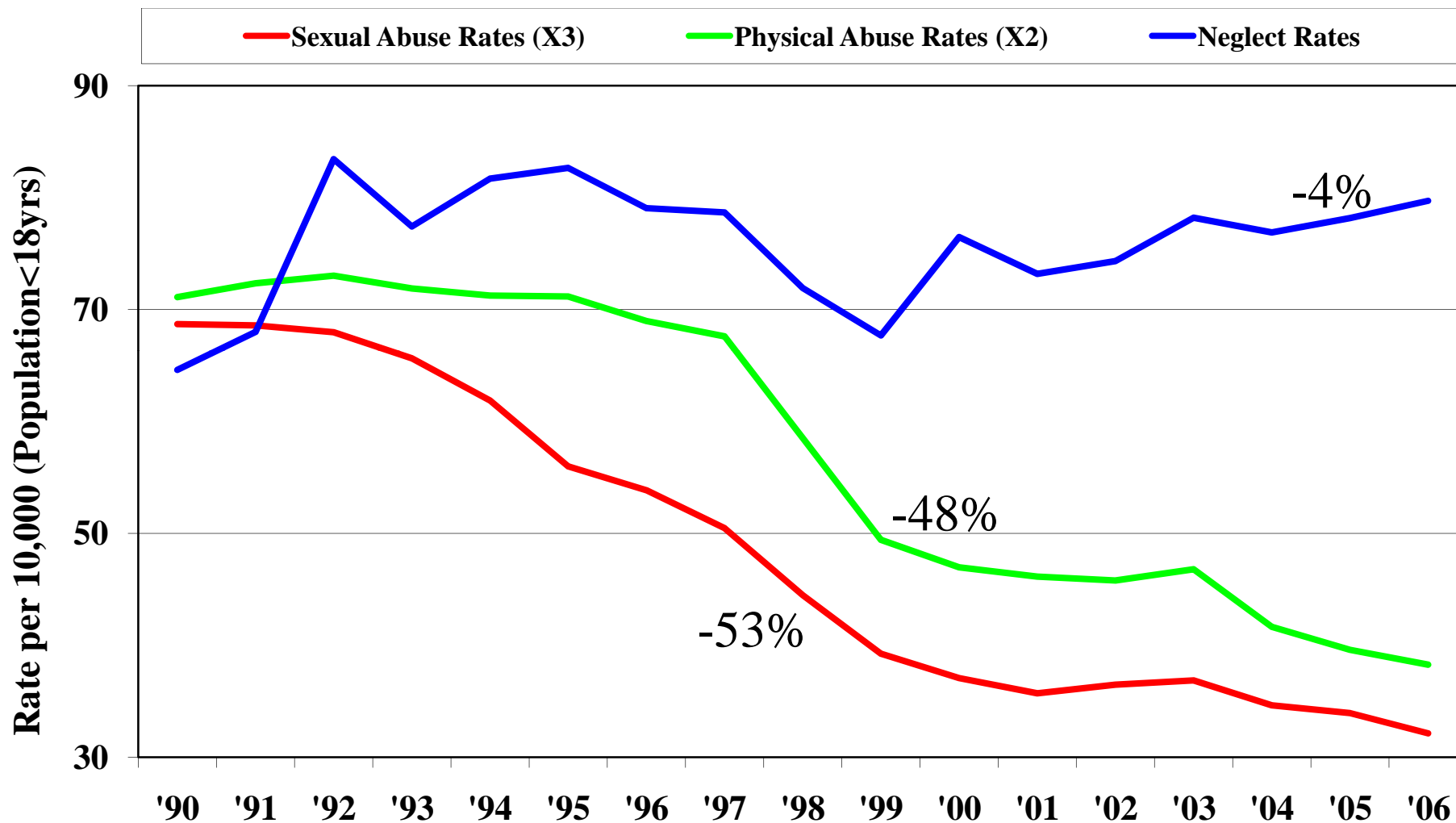
*2nd column for SA, PA, and neglect calculated 93-06 due to missing data

**2nd column for SA, PA and neglect calculated 01-05 due to missing data

***2nd columns for SA, PA and Neglect calculated 95-06 due to missing data

****2nd columns for SA, PA, and neglect calculated 98-06 due to missing data

US Child Maltreatment Trends



Source: NCANDS

Sexual abuse rates have been multiplied by 3 and physical abuse rates by 2 to graph them on the same scale as neglect; The overall % change is for the period 1992-2006.