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UPDATED TRENDS IN CHILD MALTREATMENT, 2008

David Finkelhor, Lisa Jones and Anne Shattuck

Recently released national child maltreatment data for 2008 show a generally encouraging situation during the first year of the serious recession that began in late 2007. Overall substantiated child maltreatment declined 3% from the previous year, including a 6% decline in sexual abuse. Child maltreatment fatalities stayed stable.

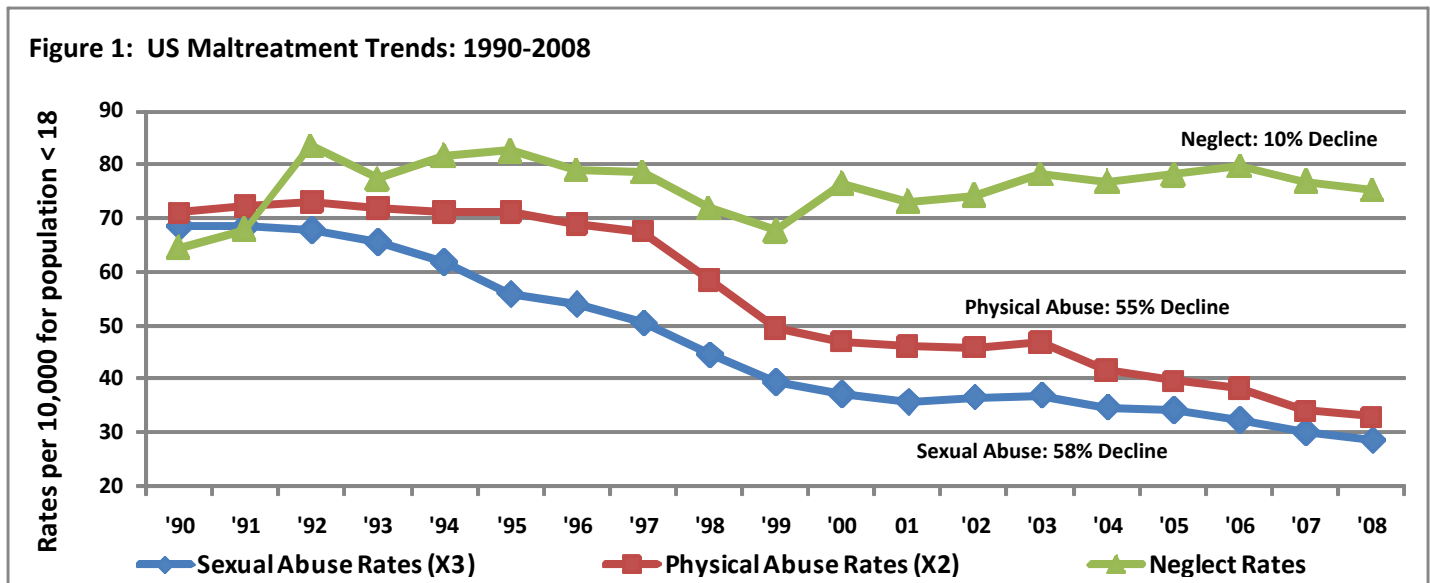
The data in the tables and graphs included below are derived from the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS), which aggregates and publishes statistics from state child protection agencies¹. The most recent data from NCANDS were released in April, 2010 and concern cases of child maltreatment investigated in 2008 (USDHHS, 2010).

<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/pubs/cm08/index.htm>

The published NCANDS report shows overall substantiated child maltreatment dropping from 10.6 to 10.3 per 1000 children, a 3% decline in the rate of substantiated child maltreatment from 2007 to 2008. The new rate, equivalent to about 772,000 children, is the lowest level of child maltreatment since the NCANDS system was put into place in 1990.

Disaggregated data from the report show that sexual abuse declined 6% from 2007 to 2008 to a nationally estimated 68,500 substantiated cases. Physical abuse declined 3% to an estimated 119,500 cases. Neglect declined 2% to an estimated 546,600 substantiated cases (see Figure 1).

These declines add to an already substantial positive long term trend, especially for sexual and physical abuse. Sexual abuse has



Note: Trend estimates represent total change from 1992 to 2008. Annual rates for physical abuse and sexual abuse have been multiplied by 2 and 3 respectively in Figure 1 so that trend comparisons can be highlighted.

¹ 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”. 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.

Table 1: State Trends in Child Maltreatment: 2007-2008 and 1992-2008

| US States | Recent Trends: 2007-2008 | | | Long-term Trends: 1992-2008 | | |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------|---------|--------------------------------|----------------|---------|
| | Sexual Abuse | Physical Abuse | Neglect | Sexual Abuse | Physical Abuse | Neglect |
| Alabama | 1% | 5% | -6% | -52% | -50% | -71% |
| Alaska | 45% | 80% | 53% | -87% | -78% | 14% |
| Arizona | -12% | -22% | -12% | -94% | -73% | -79% |
| Arkansas | 3% | 0% | -9% | 7% | -47% | 21% |
| California | -9% | -9% | -1% | -80% | -83% | -23% |
| Colorado | 11% | 8% | 9% | -61% | -55% | 27% |
| Connecticut | -2% | 6% | -14% | -61% | -85% | -33% |
| Delaware | 42% | 4% | -1% | -16% | -20% | 4% |
| District of Columbia (DC) | -5% | -6% | 11% | 265% | -23% | -34% |
| Florida | 1% | -4% | -6% | -79% | -74% | -55% |
| Georgia | -23% | -20% | -28% | -85% | -72% | -53% |
| Hawaii | -10% | 9% | 3% | -61% | -74% | -53% |
| Idaho | -6% | 36% | 14% | -94% | -85% | -67% |
| Illinois | -15% | -18% | -6% | -16% | 21% | -26% |
| Indiana | 12% | 16% | 23% | -52% | -66% | 3% |
| Iowa | -13% | -8% | -23% | -62% | -46% | 115% |
| Kansas | -15% | -21% | -28% | -40% | -58% | -36% |
| Kentucky | -10% | -3% | -3% | -73% | -74% | 2% |
| Louisiana | 23% | 8% | 3% | -39% | -26% | -16% |
| Maine | -3% | -5% | 3% | -42% | -24% | 92% |
| Maryland | missing | missing | missing | -22% | -38% | -21% |
| Massachusetts | 10% | 12% | 11% | -62% | -23% | 103% |
| Michigan | missing | missing | missing | -51% | 6% | 132% |
| Minnesota | 1% | -6% | -18% | -34% | -78% | -42% |
| Mississippi | 24% | 8% | 12% | -41% | -53% | -13% |
| Missouri | -23% | -25% | -21% | -49% | -54% | -74% |
| Montana | -22% | 4% | -16% | -87% | -91% | -64% |
| Nebraska | 32% | -4% | 11% | -47% | -69% | 22% |
| Nevada | -21% | -12% | -13% | -70% | -69% | -60% |
| New Hampshire | 6% | -10% | 35% | -73% | -46% | 112% |
| New Jersey | 17% | -10% | 36% | -52% | -76% | -31% |
| New Mexico | -6% | 0% | -6% | -74% | -57% | 1% |
| New York | 3% | -3% | 1% | -61% | -59% | 108% |
| North Carolina | 0% | -10% | -6% | 0% | 41% | -44% |
| North Dakota | 2% | 8% | -2% | -46% | -82% | -21% |
| Ohio | -3% | 17% | -15% | -43% | -21% | -41% |
| Oklahoma | -15% | -15% | -16% | -44% | -43% | 61% |
| Oregon | -3% | 3% | -7% | -69% | -62% | 11% |
| Pennsylvania | 0% | -11% | 24% | -41% | -64% | -29% |
| Rhode Island | -25% | -13% | -19% | -73% | -81% | 3% |
| South Carolina | -6% | 5% | -5% | -68% | 54% | 18% |
| South Dakota | 28% | -17% | -8% | -86% | -73% | -30% |
| Tennessee | -9% | -49% | -29% | 7% | -16% | 5% |
| Texas | -5% | -4% | 0% | -54% | -45% | 26% |
| Utah | -10% | -15% | -9% | -31% | -45% | -2% |
| Vermont | -21% | -22% | -13% | -55% | -18% | -87% |
| Virginia | 2% | -1% | -11% | -65% | -62% | -67% |
| Washington | 22% | 10% | -8% | -83% | -78% | -78% |
| West Virginia | 1% | -20% | -13% | -55% | -22% | 13% |
| Wisconsin | -18% | 4% | 2% | -77% | -80% | -56% |
| Wyoming | 2% | -28% | -7% | -79% | -91% | -56% |

declined 58% from 1992 to 2008, while physical abuse has declined 55%. Neglect has dropped less with only a comparatively small 10% decline since 1992.

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, 32 states have seen declines of 50% or more in sexual abuse since 1992. Thirty-one states have seen declines of this size in physical abuse. The data do not show any obvious patterns to the decline by region.

In its data on child maltreatment fatalities, the latest NCANDS shows little change for fatalities for 2008 (see Table 2). This is important because the rate rose substantially from 2006 to 2007 (to 2.35 from 2.05 per 100,000), a 15% rise in one year. There was concern that this might be a harbinger of a trend associated with deteriorating economic conditions. But with child maltreatment data, caution needs to be taken in interpreting a single year fluctuations.

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 un-

Note: Negative percentages: % decline; Positive percentages: % increase. Due to missing data, long-term trends in SA, PA, and neglect calculated for: CA, 1993-2008; MD, 2001-2005; WA, 1995-2008; WV, 1998-2008.

derlying abuse (see Jones, Finkelhor, & Kopiec, 2001). These factors can clearly play a role. However, the recently released Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-4) confirmed that the trends documented in the NCANDS data are not statistical or reporting artifacts. The NIS studies use consistent and standardized definitions of child maltreatment and gather reports directly from professionals in schools, hospitals, day care settings, and other community agencies, avoiding problems created when state agencies change their standards, practices or their data systems. The comparison of rates from 1993 to 2005-2006 in NIS-3 and NIS-4 largely tracked the patterns shown in the NCANDS data over the same period, showing a 44% decline in the rate of sexual abuse, a 23% decline in the rate of physical abuse, and no change in the rate of neglect.

http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/abuse_neglect/natl_incid/index.html

In addition, victim self-report surveys conducted across the 1990s and 2000s show declines in sexual offenses and physical assaults against children, further confirming 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

Table 2: Child Maltreatment Fatality Trends: 2007-2008

| US States | Child Maltreatment Fatalities | | |
|---------------------------|-------------------------------|------------|--------------------|
| | Count 2007 | Count 2008 | % Change 2007-2008 |
| Alabama | 23 | 20 | -13% |
| Alaska | 4 | 2 | -50% |
| Arizona | 28 | 11 | -61% |
| Arkansas | 20 | 21 | 5% |
| California | 184 | 185 | 1% |
| Colorado | 28 | 32 | 14% |
| Connecticut | 4 | 6 | 50% |
| Delaware | 0 | 2 | |
| District of Columbia (DC) | 2 | 8 | 300% |
| Florida | 153 | 185 | 21% |
| Georgia | 61 | 68 | 11% |
| Hawaii | 4 | 2 | -50% |
| Idaho | 1 | 2 | 100% |
| Illinois | 73 | 69 | -5% |
| Indiana | 53 | 34 | -36% |
| Iowa | 5 | 11 | 120% |
| Kansas | 10 | 10 | 0% |
| Kentucky | 41 | 22 | -46% |
| Louisiana | 27 | 30 | 11% |
| Maine | 1 | 4 | 300% |
| Maryland | missing | missing | |
| Massachusetts | 16 | missing | |
| Michigan | missing | 59 | |
| Minnesota | 17 | 16 | -6% |
| Mississippi | 19 | 17 | -11% |
| Missouri | 49 | 42 | -14% |
| Montana | 1 | 1 | 0% |
| Nebraska | 16 | 17 | 6% |
| Nevada | 21 | 17 | -19% |
| New Hampshire | 5 | 0 | -100% |
| New Jersey | 33 | 29 | -12% |
| New Mexico | 7 | 19 | 171% |
| New York | 96 | 107 | 11% |
| North Carolina | missing | missing | |
| North Dakota | 1 | 3 | 200% |
| Ohio | 90 | 74 | -18% |
| Oklahoma | 30 | 31 | 3% |
| Oregon | 12 | 14 | 17% |
| Pennsylvania | 47 | 45 | -4% |
| Rhode Island | 0 | 0 | |
| South Carolina | 19 | 21 | 11% |
| South Dakota | 8 | 2 | -75% |
| Tennessee | 44 | 55 | 25% |
| Texas | 228 | 223 | -2% |
| Utah | 11 | 15 | 36% |
| Vermont | 3 | 1 | -67% |
| Virginia | 31 | 37 | 19% |
| Washington | 27 | 23 | -15% |
| West Virginia | 12 | 5 | -58% |
| Wisconsin | 22 | 30 | 36% |
| Wyoming | 2 | 1 | -50% |
| Total | 1589 | 1628 | 2% |
| Total excluding MA & MI* | 1573 | 1569 | 0% |

*The 2% increase reflects MI reporting now but not last year, and MA reporting now for 2007 but not yet for 2008. With both excluded (MI & MA) there is a 0% change.

Note: In states with smaller populations and low rates of maltreatment fatalities, small changes in fatality counts can result in large percentage changes.

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 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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