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Drop in Child Sexual Abuse Confirmed by New Study

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DURHAM, N.H. - A new study funded and published by the U.S. Department of Justice adds support to the notion that the United States has experienced a true decline in the 1990s in the number of children suffering sexual abuse.

Cases of sexual abuse substantiated by state child protection authorities nationwide dropped a remarkable 40 percent between 1992 and 2000, according to the report authored by David Finkelhor and Lisa Jones of the University of New Hampshire's Crimes against Children Research Center. But some skeptics have explained the decline as the result of more conservative investigation practices or an increased reluctance of the public and professionals to report offenses, not fewer sexually abused children.

The new study examined the experience of a number of states and concluded that such explanations could not account for the breadth and persistence of the decline.

In addition, the study found other evidence that fewer children are being abused. In self-report surveys of the general population, fewer youth said they had been sexually assaulted or abused in 2000 and 2001 than had said so a decade earlier.

According to the researchers, the study also points to other childhood trends in the 1990s consistent with fewer children being victims of sexual. Statistics show declines during the late 1990s in births to teenage mothers, children running away and teenagers committing suicide. All of these problems can be outcomes of children who experience sexual abuse, and might be expected to drop if abuse did.

The study could not confirm any particular reason for the drop in sexual abuse during the 1990s. It listed as possible causes the increasing prosecution, incarceration and treatment of offenders, the decline in unemployment, and the impact of public awareness and prevention education efforts directed at families and children.

In the report, Finkelhor and Jones urged that new efforts need to be undertaken to understand the actual reasons for the decline in sexual abuse, so that the lessons could be applied to broaden and extend the encouraging trend.

The report is available online at ojjdp.ncjrs.org.

For the purposes of compliance with Section 511 of PL 101-166 (the "Stevens Amendment"), readers are advised that 100 percent of the funds for this program are derived from federal

sources. The total amount of federal funding involved is \$133,233.