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By Erika Mantz
UNH News Bureau

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DURHAM, N.H. -- The number of cases of child sexual abuse coming to the attention of child welfare authorities nationwide has declined 31 percent since 1992, according to a new report by University of New Hampshire researchers. However, it is not clear whether fewer children are being victimized.

These findings, released today by the U.S. Department of Justice, are reported in "The Decline in Child Sexual Abuse Cases." The study was prepared by the Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire and authored by research associate Lisa Jones and Center director David Finkelhor.

The decline from an estimated 150,000 cases in 1992 to less than 104,000 cases in 1998 represents a dramatic new development for child protection authorities. Throughout the 1980s, sexual abuse cases increased at a rapid rate, as they had since national statistics were first published in 1976. Other forms of child maltreatment, like neglect and physical abuse, have not declined at the same rate.

The report reviews a variety of factors that may account for this decline in sexual abuse cases. Fewer children may be experiencing sexual abuse today. This could be the result of more than two decades of prevention education, more aggressive case finding and prosecution, and the incarceration and treatment of many offenders. The decline in sexual abuse parallels similar recent declines in other kinds of crime, such as rape and domestic violence, which may have benefited from similar public policy efforts.

Other evidence suggests that some or all of the decline
may be due to changed attitudes, policies or standards that result in fewer cases of sexual abuse being reported to or confirmed by authorities. For example, the public and professionals may have become more conservative in the identification of possible signs of sexual abuse in the 1990s.

In addition, child protection authorities in some states have become more restrictive in the kind of cases they are willing to investigate. For example, they may increasingly refer all sexual abuse non-family members to the police without investigation. If the decline is entirely due to these changed attitudes and practices, it might mean there has not been any true decrease in the number of children experiencing sexual abuse.

"Depending on the explanation for this decline, the news could be either very good or bad," says Finkelhor, UNH professor of sociology. "If fewer children were experiencing sexual abuse, it would be a major endorsement for the mobilization of public policy in this area. Even if changes in attitudes or practices were responsible, the implications could be good. It could be that the public and professionals were being more accurate and judicious in their handling of sexual abuse."

On the other hand, he says, the decline could be bad news as well.

"If intimidation and apathy were increasingly keeping sexually abused children from being reported and thus receiving needed intervention and assistance, this would require immediate attention," Finkelhor says. "In light of these dramatically different implications, we're calling for additional study to better understand the causes of the decline."


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