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UNH Research Finds Increase in Child Abuse Fatalities and Physical Abuse

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DURHAM, N.H. -- Newly released national data show increases in child abuse fatalities (up 8 percent) and physical abuse (up 5 percent) from 2015 to 2016, according to a detailed analysis released by the Crimes against Children Research Center (CCRC) at the University of New Hampshire. Neglect continued to decline and sexual abuse was unchanged.

The data are the most recent available on cases of child maltreatment investigated and substantiated by state child protection agencies across the country. The number of cases overall declined for an estimated 683,000 victims in 2015 to 676,000 in 2016.

“Single-year changes of this magnitude are not a cause for alarm,” said CCRC Director David Finkelhor. He noted that some states, like Pennsylvania and Minnesota, had major overhauls of their child protection systems that could affect trends. Half the national increase in the fatalities were attributable to Texas and another quarter to Indiana.

According to Finkelhor, the longer-term trends are encouraging. Sexual abuse has declined 65 percent from 1992 to 2016 and physical declined 53 percent. The trends over the last five years have been down for sexual abuse and flat for neglect and physical abuse.

“It’s not clear why sexual abuse and physical abuse substantiations in particular have declined so considerably over the longer term,” said Finkelhor. “The period when the dramatic downward trend started was marked by sustained economic improvement, increases in the number of law and child protection personnel, more aggressive prosecution and incarceration policies, growing public awareness and new treatment options for family and mental health problems.”

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