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New UNH Research Finds Child Sexual Abuse is on the Rise

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DURHAM, N.H.—The number of child sexual abuse cases known to authorities increased by 6% from 2017 to 2018, the first jump in more than 15 years, according to new analysis of national data by the Crimes against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire. The uptick was broadly distributed, with 38 states reporting an increase in cases of child sexual abuse.

Using data collected by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the researchers found that overall, the number of sexual abuse cases known to authorities has been declining since the early 1990s, down to about 59,400 cases nationwide in 2017. In 2018, that number spiked to nearly 63,000. Despite the increase in the past year, the sexual abuse rate declined 62% from 1992 to 2018.

“It is too soon to say that the trend is in reverse,” said David Finkelhor, director of the Crimes against Children Research Center. “Single-year changes are not necessarily indicative of a new trend but large changes bear watching.” He urged caution until another year of data is available.

The numbers showing the increase reflect cases reported to and substantiated by state child protection authorities. These numbers can sometimes rise because of highly publicized cases like the USA gymnastics scandal.

Finkelhor also pointed to the greater adoption of prevention programs in schools and youth serving organizations. “There is a new level of mobilization nationwide to try to raise awareness, protect children and promote disclosures. It may be that one of the first things that happens is an increase in reporting.”

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