

Stemming the tide of child sexual abuse

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Amid the furor over the recent Penn State sex abuse scandal, it's an easily overshadowed fact: The United States has actually made huge strides over the past 20 years in reducing the prevalence of child sex abuse.

Of the two most authoritative national reports, one shows incidents of child sex abuse down more than 55 percent since 1992 and the other documents a 38 percent drop between 1993 and 2006. There are many reasons: more vigorous efforts by police and prosecutors, growing public awareness, effective treatment of abusers and better screening of people who deal regularly with children.

Child protection advocates aren't ready to celebrate, knowing that tens of thousands of children continue to be sexually abused each year, often with long-lasting emotional scars. But some advocates suggest the progress should be highlighted more than it has been, and they hope the Penn State scandal will serve as a catalyst for new initiatives.

Chris Newlin, executive director of the National Children's Advocacy Center in Huntsville, Ala., said most Americans have no idea that abuse rates have declined so markedly - in part because the message they hear is one of a worsening crisis.

"We should change our messaging," he said. "We should be saying, 'we have meaningful programs that are making a difference in reducing child abuse, and now is the time to continue - if not increase - your support of these efforts.'"

Robert Edelman, who has worked with many abused children as a mental health counselor with the Village Counseling Center in Gainesville, Fla., says much more needs to be done to persuade child victims to report the abuse they suffered.

"Many child victims and their parents that I treat do not believe that anything will happen and do not move forward legally due to their level of fear, shame and guilt," he said.

Indeed, reluctance to report sexual abuse is one of several factors that complicate the task of quantifying it. Additionally, the national surveys must cope with reporting procedures and definitions of child sex abuse that vary from state to state.

Nonetheless, experts in the field say the available data from law enforcement and child protection agencies, corroborated by other rigorous surveys, leaves no doubt in their minds that there's been a substantial decrease in child sex abuse over the past two decades.

One of the key barometers is an annual report from the Department of Health and Human Services known as NCANDS (National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System). The latest report, based on input from state child-protection agencies, tallies the number of child sexual abuse cases at 65,964 in 2009 - down more than 55 percent from the peak of about 150,000 in 1992.

Using the NCANDS data, the University of New Hampshire's Crimes Against Children Research Center says the rate of sexual abuse per 1,000 children has dropped from 1.9 in 1995 to 0.89 in 2009.

Another authoritative gauge, issued in 2010, is the latest installment of the National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect - a congressionally mandated study that has been conducted periodically by HHS. It estimated that the number of sexually abused children decreased from 217,700 in 1993 to 135,300 in 2006 - a 38 percent drop.

The incidence study's numbers are larger than NCANDS because it surveys not only child protection services but also a wider range of teachers, police officers, health care professionals and day care workers.

State by state, abuse figures generally mirror these national trends. In Pennsylvania, for example, the number of substantiated sexual abuse reports handled by the Office of Children, Youth and Families dropped from 2,501 in 2000 to 1,963 in 2010.

Sociologist David Finkelhor, director of the UNH Crimes Against Children Research Center, is convinced that the national numbers are valid, but says many people in child-protection services remain skeptical.

"The experience of many people who work in the field is that they've not seen a decline in their caseloads," he said, suggesting that agencies and practitioners with good reputations for coping with abuse are going to be sought after and kept busy even if the nationwide numbers are dropping.

Finkelhor also suggested that some advocates might be wary of trumpeting successes out of concern that the cause of combating abuse might seem less urgent.

"For a long time, the standard way of getting people to pay attention to a problem was talking about how epidemic it was, and there's a fear that somehow people would abandon the problem after learning that progress is made," Finkelhor said.

That's unlikely in regard to child sex abuse, he said. "There are still so many cases, and it's such an intrinsically horrifying and alarming problem."

Richard Gelles, dean of the University of Pennsylvania's School of Social Policy and Practice and an expert on child welfare, said the drop in abuse numbers made sense given that police and prosecutors had ramped up their efforts in recent decades to convict and incarcerate serial abusers.

"It would be pretty depressing to spend the kind of money and energy we do and see it has no impact," he said.

However, Gelles noted that a majority of child-abuse reports filed with authorities do not lead to prosecutions. He expressed concern that emotional reaction to the Penn State scandal might lead to new policies that would prompt more people to report on incidents that would never be substantiated - a possibility that could further burden child protection agencies already strapped by tight budgets.

Several child protection advocates expressed hope that the Penn State case would help fuel a thoughtful national conversation about ways to prevent child sexual abuse, not just prosecute those responsible.

"Having more people willing to report it - that's not enough," said Deborah Donovan Rice of Stop It Now, an abuse-prevention organization based in Northampton, Mass. "I'd love to see prevention as a way to stem the tide, doing things proactively in parity with the severity of the consequences of having been sexually abused."

Rice, herself a victim of sexual abuse, said Stop It Now's strategies focus on community-wide programs aimed at educating a wide range of adults on ways to prevent child sex abuse.

In the Penn State case, former assistant football coach Jerry Sandusky is charged with 40 criminal counts of alleged sexual abuse against eight boys over a 15-year period. He maintains his innocence, as do the two senior Penn State officials who are charged with perjury and failing to report the suspected abuse.

Penn State's longtime football coach, Joe Paterno, was told in 2002 of an alleged sexual assault by Sandusky but did not notify authorities outside the campus and was fired Nov. 9.

As alleged by Pennsylvania authorities, the Penn State case fits the common pattern of child sexual abuse in that the boys knew Sandusky through participation in a charity he founded. Studies suggest that only about 5 percent of child sex abuse is perpetrated by a stranger, with about 40 percent committed by family members and the rest by an acquaintance of either the child or the family.

Those demographics represent a major challenge if further inroads are to be made against child sex abuse, according to Mark Chaffin, a pediatrics professor who directs research at the University of Oklahoma's Center on Child Abuse and Neglect.

"We need to prepare for the reality of what it's like to report a loved one, a close colleague, a mentor, a boss, someone who's a key person in an institution you're invested in," Chaffin said. "Those are going to be very complex and difficult situations, yet they may be the most likely to encounter."