

Despite scandal, US makes headway vs. sex abuse

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Amid the furor over the Penn State sex abuse scandal, it's an easily overshadowed fact: The United States has 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, 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.