

Child sex abuse said to be on the decline: UNH researchers release latest figures

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DURHAM — Child sex abuse is on the decline both locally and nationally, according to a study released Wednesday afternoon.

Instances of sexual abuse against children declined 11 percent in New Hampshire between 2005 and 2006, and 5 percent nationwide during the same period, according to the University of New Hampshire study, "Updated Trends in Child Maltreatment, 2006."

It also found that child sex abuse in-state has declined 70 percent over the past 14 years, and by more than 50 percent nationwide, according to David Finkelhor, director of the Crimes against Children Research Center.

Helping with the study was assistant Lisa Jones, research assistant professor of psychology at the center. The duo analyzed data compiled by the federal government from state child protection agencies concerning substantiated child sexual abuse cases.

"When they released the data in early April, federal authorities highlighted only a 1 percent decline in overall child maltreatment, and did not draw attention to the strong declines in sexual and physical abuse," Finkelhor said. "Because the majority of maltreatment cases involve neglect, which actually rose 2 percent from 2005, the trends for sexual and physical abuse were obscured."

In effect, the federal figures missed much of the sex abuse trends.

"It is unfortunate that more attention has not been paid to both the short- and long-term declines in sexual and physical abuse, because they represent evidence of an important potential public policy success," Jones said.

Finkelhor added the data studies represented a sort of "convergence" of information, resulting in a study that followed specific trends in child sex abuse, physical abuse and neglect. Addressed below is the issue of child sex abuse.

All told, 34 states experienced drops in sexual abuse cases from 2005 to 2006. Hawaii experienced the largest drop in sexual abuse cases at 40 percent, followed by North Dakota with 39 percent and Idaho with 36 percent. New Hampshire was about average, showing an 11 percent decline.

During that same time, only a few states experienced increases, including Rhode Island, at 53 percent, and Alaska, at 36 percent.

But over the long term, as measured since 1992, the vast majority of states have experienced drops in sexual abuse cases, led by Idaho and Arizona with a 94 percent drop in both states, followed by Alaska with 88 percent, and South Dakota at 87 percent, and New Hampshire further back at 70 percent.

Just Arkansas, Tennessee and the District of Columbia experienced increases over that time period.

While both Finkelhor and Jones conceded that changes in child protection policy and data collection can sometimes impact such changes, the consistent and large declines in sexual abuse suggests a real decrease in the number of incidents that are occurring.

It's not just a reduction in numbers, but a reduction in actual instances.

Finkelhor attributed the decrease to a variety of factors, including sustained economic improvement, increases in the number of police officers, growing public awareness, dissemination of treatment options and help programs, along with new psychiatric medications.

While sexual and physical abuse cases have declined nationally, incidents of neglect increased 2 percent from 2005 to 2006, researchers found.

States with large short-term increases in neglect include Delaware, Rhode Island New Jersey, while large declines were observed in Arizona, North Carolina and North Dakota. In the longer term, 1992-2006, the largest increases in neglect have been in Iowa, Oklahoma and New York, with large declines in Vermont, Washington, Alabama and Idaho.

According to the researchers, neglect cases may not have declined nationally because neglect has not had the same level of policy attention and public awareness as sexual and physical abuse.

Increased education and recent state and professional initiatives about neglect, including the identification of new forms of neglect such as drug affected newborns, also may mask a decline in other conventional types of neglect.