



## National Child Abuse Rates Drop

### Figures Dip to Lowest Rate since 1990, but Child-Abuse Fatalities Continue to Rise

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**(AP)** The rate of child maltreatment in the U.S. dipped in 2008 to its lowest level since 1990, but the number of abuse-related child fatalities continued to rise, according to new federal figures.

The annual report from the Department of Health and Human Services, issued Thursday, said the estimated number of victimized children had dropped sharply, from 903,000 in 2006 to 772,000 in 2008. However, there were 1,740 reported fatalities, up from 1,330 in 2000.

Carmen Nazario, HHS assistant secretary for children and families, said she was encouraged by the decrease in maltreatment, but sounded a note of caution.

"The results show too many children still suffer from abuse and neglect, and we have not yet experienced the full impact from the economic situation," she said.

The HHS data was for the 2008 fiscal year, ending Sept. 30, and did not reflect the recession that took hold in the final months of that year.

The report did not explain the decrease, but child-welfare experts - spotting the trend in some previous studies - have suggested that increased awareness and intolerance of child abuse has had an impact over the past decade.

According to the HHS report, the rate of child victimization was 10.3 per 1,000 children in 2008. That's down from a peak rate of 15.3 in 1993 and is the lowest since the congressionally

mandated survey - titled the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System - began in 1990.

Of the victims, 71 percent suffered neglect, 16 percent were physically abused, 9 percent were sexually abused and about 7 percent suffered psychological maltreatment.

Regarding fatalities, the worst rates were for infant boys. Children under 4 accounted for 80 percent of the estimated 1,740 fatalities.

The recent increase in fatalities might be due, in part, to changes in how data is collected and reported by the states, the report said.

"They're right to ask the question of whether the increase could be the result of more careful investigations," said Professor David Finkelhor of the University of New Hampshire, a leading researcher in the field of child abuse. "But it's a cause for concern - and somebody ought to be looking into it."

Overall, according to the HHS report, an estimated 3.3 million referrals involving the alleged maltreatment of about 6 million children were received by child protection agencies in 2008. About 63 percent of the referrals resulted in an investigation or assessment, and about 25 percent of those cases ended with a determination that a child had been victimized.

Most of the reports were filed by professionals - including teachers, police officers and social workers.

About 45 percent of the victims were white, 21 percent Hispanic and 16.6 percent African-American. As for the perpetrators, about 80 percent were parents and 6.5 percent were other relatives of the victim.

Nazario, in a statement accompanying the report, said HHS would work to further strengthen abuse-prevention programs.

One such strategy is in the recently signed health care overhaul bill, which provides funding to states for home visiting programs that have been shown to be an effective tool in curtailing abuse and neglect.

"Something very positive has been going on," Finkelhor said. "And it's good news that some of the programs that have shown the most promise are going to get some additional support."