



Syracuse and Penn State Cases Focus Attention on Child Sex Abuse

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The revelations of alleged child sex abuse in the news of late might suggest that such crimes are increasing. But one researcher from Maine who has studied the subject says there is evidence that the rates have been trending downward over the last twenty years.

Recent news stories have focused attention on the subject of pedophilia, defined as an adult's sexual attraction to a prepubescent boy or girl. One scientist from Maine says it's hard to pinpoint the prevalence of this disorder.

"Current estimates are that one in five girls experience it over the course of growing up, maybe around five percent of all boys," says David Finkelhor.

Finkelhor, of Scarborough, is director of the **Crimes Against Children Research Center** at the University of New Hampshire. He says it's not clear what percentage of the population has actually committed a sex crime against a child.

"We do have a sense, actually, though that the trend has been down over the last 20 years, that the rates reported by young people in surveys, as well as the cases that are coming to the attention of police and child protection agencies, have actually been declining and declining actually quite a bit," he says. "So though it's still a tremendous problem, we have been making some headway."

But Finkelhor says it's also true that the problem is widely under-reported. He says about 65,000 substantiated cases a year are brought through child protection agencies in the U.S. each year, and between 65,000 and 70,000 arrests.

"We still think that it's only a minority of cases that come to the attention of authorities," he says. "And probably at least two-thirds, or maybe more, remain unreported."

In 80 to 90 percent of child sex abuse cases, says Finkelhor, most of the abusers are well known to the victim. Forty percent are members of the family, and another 40 percent are friends of the family, or are connected through the child's community.

The long-lasting harm done to abuse victims is well documented, says Finkelhor, and there is a evidence that some victims do grow up to become abusers themselves.

"Probably half of individuals who molest other children were themselves sexually abused when they were children. Some additional offenders were physically and psychologically abused, but it's not the whole story," he says. "Many, many people who experience those kinds of things as children do not become molesters--in fact the majority--so obviously other things have to be in place."

Finkelhor says the cases unfolding at Penn State and Syracuse illustrate that it often takes a long time for victims to develop the courage to come forward, particularly when the alleged abusers are prominent and powerful figures.