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Why is sexual abuse declining? A survey of state child protection administrators☆

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Abstract

Objectives: Cases of substantiated sexual abuse have declined approximately 39% nationwide from 1992 to 1999, according to estimates from the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS). Despite the dramatic nature of the decline, little discussion of the trend has occurred at either the national or the state level. Aims of the research were to: (1) gather state-level information about possible sources of the sexual abuse decline, (2) identify child protection trends that might be contributing to the decline, and (3) assess the level of awareness of the decline in state child protection offices.

Methods: Telephone interviews were conducted with child protection administrators in 43 states.

Results: More than half of the officials in states with large declines were unaware of any discussion of the declines within their agency or in the public at large within their state. State officials cited a diverse array of possible causes for the decline, including: (1) increased evidentiary requirements to substantiate cases, (2) increased caseworker caution due to new legal rights for caregivers, and (3) increasing limitations on the types of cases that agencies accept for investigation. More than half also mentioned the effectiveness of prevention programs, increased prosecution, and public awareness campaigns, implying that a portion of the decline may result from a real decline in occurrence.

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Conclusions: Responses from child protection officials have inherent biases, but they are useful in generating hypotheses for further study in trying to account for the decline. The results suggest that further discussion and increased analysis of child maltreatment system data are important next steps. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Sexual abuse; Trends; Child protective services; Administrative data

Introduction

During the 1980s, increasing numbers of child sexual abuse victims were identified each year (American Association for the Protection of Children, 1988) and concerns about this form of maltreatment intensified. However, in the 1990s a dramatic shift occurred in sexual abuse trends. Data from child protective service (CPS) agencies across the country indicate substantiated cases of sexual abuse decreased an estimated 39% from 1992 to 1999 (Jones & Finkelhor, 2001).

The reason for this trend is unclear. It could be that a real decline in the incidence of sexual abuse has occurred. If this were so, it would be a major endorsement for the decades-long mobilization of public policy in this area. Declines of a similar magnitude and over a similar period of time have been occurring in a variety of crimes including adult sexual assault and domestic partner violence. It seems reasonable to suppose that factors behind the declines in these crimes may also be impacting the occurrence of sexual abuse. However, it may also be that without any real decline in incidence, changes in attitudes, policies, and standards have simply reduced the amount of sexual abuse being reported and substantiated. This would suggest the decline in cases has resulted from a decline in the *intervention rate* not the *incidence rate*.

It is crucial to better understand what is happening. If the decline is real, this should be celebrated and lessons taken about what works to reduce sexual abuse. On the other hand, if changes in reporting and substantiation practices are contributing to the decline, additional questions need to be answered. Are these constructive changes? Are child victims more accurately being identified? Are they increasingly being handled through other agencies, such as the police? Or are more victims falling through the cracks and failing to receive needed protection and needed services?

A survey was conducted with CPS administrators in 43 states as an initial step toward sifting through some of the possible reasons behind the sexual abuse decline. Child protection administrators were chosen as the target of the survey because it was anticipated that they would be most knowledgeable about state child maltreatment trends and state-level factors that might be contributing to the decline. Results of this survey and the implications of the responses for better understanding the decline are presented below.

Evidence for the decline

Yearly estimates of substantiated sexual abuse were calculated from child protective service administrative data collected by the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System

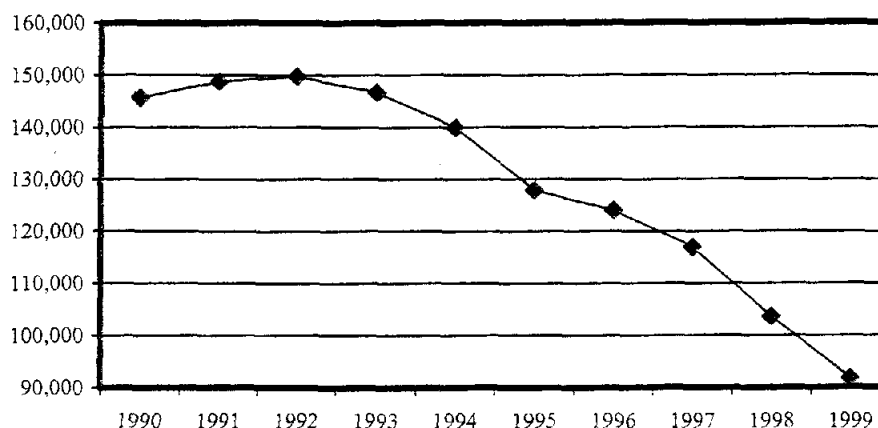


Fig. 1. Substantiated cases of child sexual abuse 1990–1999: extrapolated to the US child population.

(NCANDS). Different numbers of states (43–49) submit data to this system each year, making published totals difficult to compare across years. To arrive at more comparable numbers, sexual abuse totals were extrapolated to account for the population of all 50 states and the District of Columbia as estimated by the US Census (see Jones & Finkelhor, 2001). These extrapolated totals show that substantiated sexual abuse reached a peak of approximately 149,800 cases in 1992 and was followed by declines of 2% to 11% each year through 1999, the last year for which data are available (Fig. 1). In 1999, estimated cases of sexual abuse reached a low of approximately 92,000. This is a total decline of 39% in identified sexual abuse cases over a 7 year period. The trend is not universal, but it is affecting the majority of states. Thirty-eight out of 49 states experienced a total decline of more than 30% in substantiated cases of sexual abuse from their peak year to the year 1999.

Through their Annual Fifty State Survey, Prevent Child Abuse America provides evidence that reports of sexual abuse also show some sign of having decreased during the 1990s. Reported cases of sexual abuse are estimated based on information from a smaller number of states than founded cases, so the results must be interpreted with caution. However, findings from the Fifty State Survey (Peddle & Wang, 2001) indicate that sexual abuse dropped from an estimated 16% of reported cases (based on data from 11 states) at a peak in 1991 to 10% of reported cases (based on data from 29 states) in 1999. Based on the total number of reports estimated each year, this suggests an estimated decline of 22% from approximately 429,000 reports in 1991 to 336,000 reports of sexual abuse in 1999.

The decline in identified cases of sexual abuse does not appear to be just an extension of a general declining trend in overall child maltreatment. According to estimates of the NCANDS data, there has been a 14% decline in substantiated cases of overall maltreatment from a peak of an estimated 1,206,500 cases in 1992 to 1,032,000 cases in 1999. But the decline in sexual abuse appears to account for most of this decline. Neglect cases, which make up the greatest proportion of CPS cases, have declined only an estimated 14% from a peak in 1994. Physical abuse has declined 29% since a peak in 1995 (Fig. 2). This is a large decline but it is much more recent than the decline in sexual abuse. In fact, the largest proportion of the physical abuse decline, or 26%, occurred from 1997

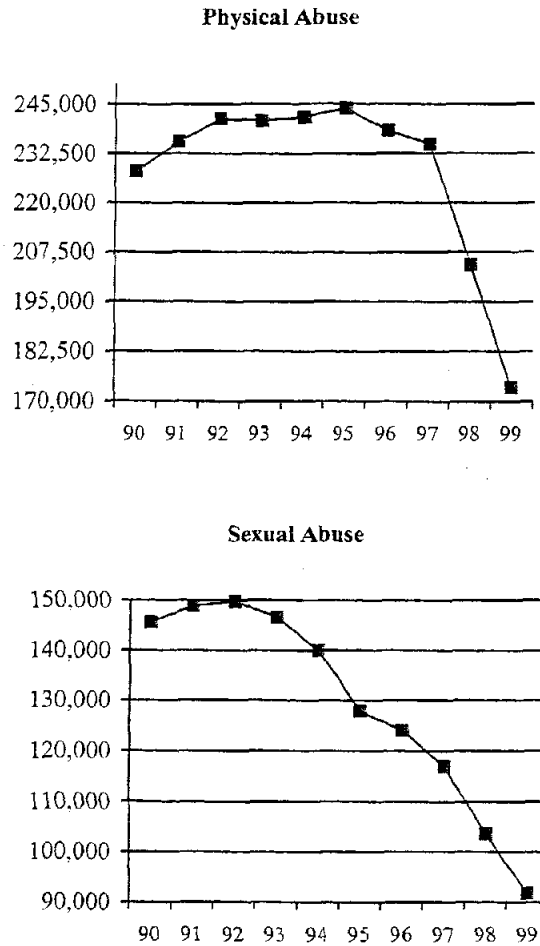


Fig. 2. Comparison of trends for substantiated cases of physical and sexual abuse: 1990 through 1999.

to 1999. This is compared with a more gradual 39% decline for sexual abuse over a 7 year period.

To look more carefully at sexual abuse substantiation trends at the state-level, state trends can be divided into three different trend types: “continuous decline,” “discontinuous decline,” and “fluctuating change” (Fig. 3). The continuous decline pattern describes states that have seen a substantial total decline in sexual abuse cases (25% or more) over a notable period of time (at least three yearly declines since peak). If a state shows a particularly large decline (33% or more) occurring within a single year, it is described as showing a discontinuous decline. These states are placed into a separate category because it is hypothesized that a policy or program change is likely to account for a large decline that occurs in a single year. Finally, states that report either a total decline of less than 25% or fewer than three yearly declines since their peak are described as showing a pattern of fluctuating change. These states are labeled as fluctuating because the most typical pattern shows periods of decline that are offset by years in which sexual abuse cases increased. A map provided in Fig. 4 shows the distribution of these three trend patterns across the country for 1990–1999.

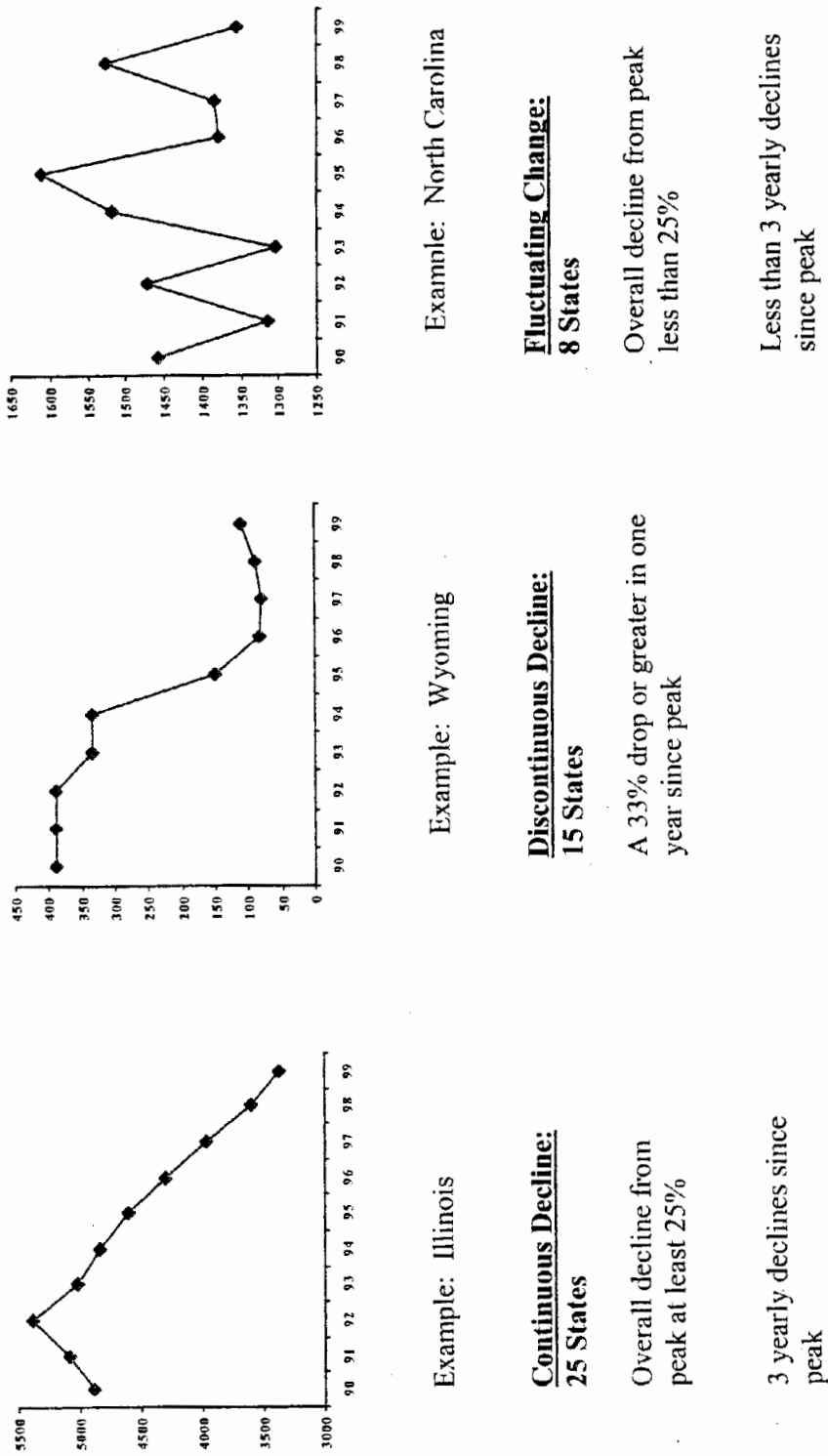


Fig. 3. Three patterns representing state changes in sexual abuse substantiations: 1990 through 1999.

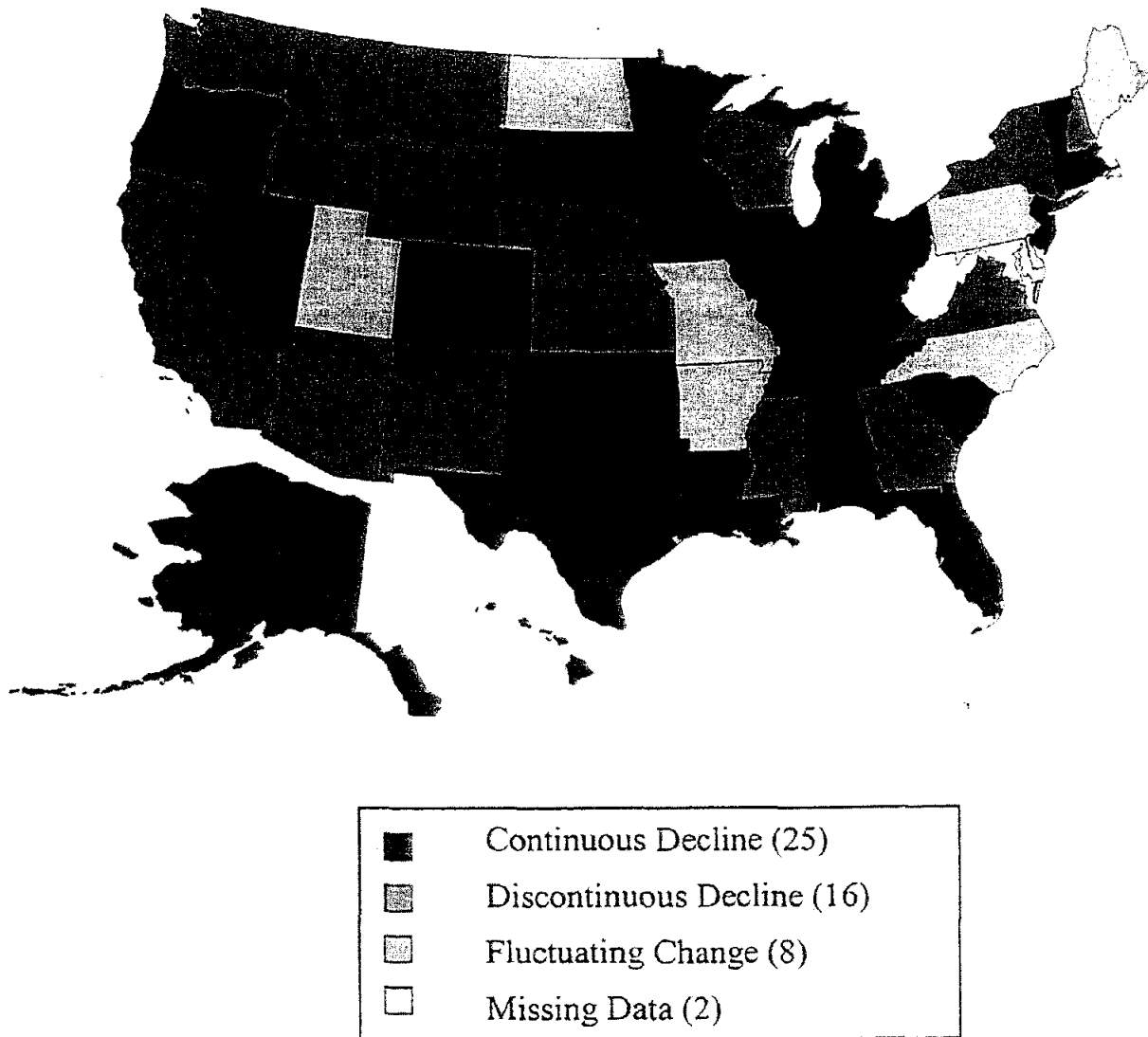


Fig. 4. Distribution of states showing “continuous decline,” “discontinuous decline,” and “fluctuating change” patterns in sexual abuse substantiations (1990–1999).

Survey procedures

A total of 43 states participated in the survey of CPS administrators. The survey was conducted from November 1999 to April 2000, based on state sexual abuse trends from 1990 to 1997 (data from 1998 and 1999 were not available at the time of the survey). Four states, Maryland, North Dakota, Washington, and West Virginia, did not have enough data available to discuss trends in sexual abuse. Four states, New Jersey, Alaska, Kansas, and the District of Columbia either declined to participate or were unable to identify a contact person or set up an interview before the end of the data collection period. Out of these four states, only New Jersey had seen a notable decline in sexual abuse according to NCANDS reports. The remaining three states showed fluctuating change trends as described above. Of the states that participated, 23 showed a gradual

and significant decline in sexual abuse or a continuous decline, 8 states showed a discontinuous decline trend, and 12 showed a fluctuating change trend, based on data from 1990–1997.

Respondents for each state were identified through the list of state contacts published by the 1999 NCANDS report (US Department of Health and Human Services-Children's Bureau, 1999). The study was described to the state contact person and, if they felt they had familiarity with the interview content, an interview was set up. If they felt that there was someone else who would be better able to answer the questions, that individual was contacted about the study. In each state, the goal was to speak with someone who was knowledgeable about the state statistics on child maltreatment and someone who was familiar with state programs and policy. For the majority of states (28) there was a single person identified who had familiarity in both areas. In 15 states, administrators decided that it would be best to have us speak with two or more individuals.

In the 28 states where only one person responded to the questions, the majority (21) of the respondents were program administrators. They held titles such as "Program Consultant," "Program Specialist," or "Program Manager." For three states, the single contact was an administrative "director" and for four states the contact person was an individual primarily responsible for managing and overseeing CPS data systems but who felt that they had enough knowledge of program and policy issues to respond to those questions. In the 15 states where two or more individuals participated in the survey, the most typical situation involved the participation of a program administrator as well as someone responsible for managing the computer information system.

Respondents were given a description of their state's trend in sexual abuse when they were called to set up a time for the interview and told that they would be asked about some of the possible reasons for the decline. The interview began by reviewing the trend and asking respondents for their opinions about the reason for the decline. An initial general question was followed up with questions about whether the respondent was aware of any of a number of changes that could potentially limit the number of sexual abuse substantiations. For example, these included changes in reporting behavior, screening policy, and substantiation criteria for sexual abuse. Finally, the interview concluded by asking respondents about the extent to which they had been aware of the decline, whether there had been any discussions among administrators about the trend before our call, and whether there had been any publicity about the trend or further analyses conducted. Respondents from the 12 states with fluctuating change trends took part in an abbreviated interview to determine if there were any changes in state CPS policy or practice that could mask a decline or in other ways could affect sexual abuse trends. Survey responses from these states allowed a rough qualitative comparison to the states that had seen declines. Respondents from all participating states were also asked their opinions of the national decline in sexual abuse cases and whether they felt the decline might reflect a real decline in sexual abuse.

States' awareness of declining trends

Of the 31 continuous and discontinuous decline states, CPS agencies in the majority of these states had spent little time considering the implications of the trend. In fact, respondents

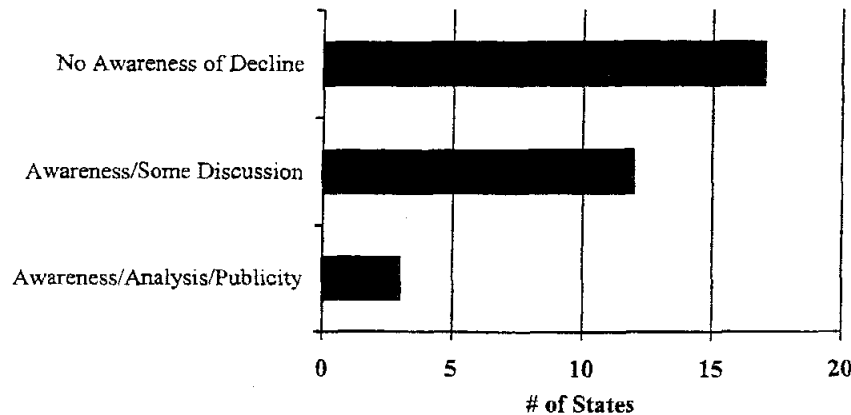


Fig. 5. State-level awareness of declines in sexual abuse cases.

in 16 states, or about 50%, were unaware of any discussion or consideration among CPS administrators of the decline at all (Fig. 5). Six of these respondents commented spontaneously that they were not even aware there had been a decline in sexual abuse in their state before our call. Respondents in 12 states reported that they were aware of the decline and knew that some discussion of the trends had occurred at the administrative level. However, there had been no publication of these trends and no additional analyses conducted.

In only three states, Vermont, Oregon, and Massachusetts, were respondents able to describe either (1) more extensive efforts to better understand the sexual abuse decline or (2) publicity of the decline and public discussion of possible reasons for its occurrence. In Vermont, the decline in sexual abuse cases was the basis for a press release from Governor Howard Dean's office on July 16, 1997. In the press release, Governor Dean noted, "we have to believe that our efforts on behalf of young children. . . , improvements in child care and active interaction with communities to protect children—are truly making a difference. . . ." In Oregon, a 1998 annual report from the Department of Human Resources (State Office for Services to Children and Families, 1998) noted a decline in sexual abuse. The report suggested that factors in the decline might include a greater focus by CPS agencies on in-family abuse, a more rigorous method of recording founded cases of abuse, and "a decade of educational efforts to teach children how to protect against sex abuse and how to respond if it occurs." Finally, Massachusetts described a notable state-level decline in sexual abuse in a 1997 report published by the Massachusetts Department of Social Services (Felix, 1998). Hypotheses offered for the decline included: (1) that better trained staff may be more judicious in their screening; (2) that allegations of sexual abuse involving young children may be more difficult to substantiate; and (3) that more care is being taken to only classify a case as "substantiated" if the evidence could withstand a challenge in court.

It is noteworthy that so few states have taken their consideration of dramatic declines in sexual abuse beyond casual discussion. Several respondents mentioned that looking at and analyzing trends was a low priority for their agency. A respondent from one state described his basic distrust of the data and noted that he felt little incentive to better understand what was happening. When asked if the state had looked further at the trend, he responded "it makes no sense to look too carefully at bad data." However, even if there *are* problems with

current data collection procedures, “bad data” cannot satisfactorily explain a consistent and notable declining trend in sexual abuse across the majority of states over a 7-year period. Furthermore, whether the decline reflects changes in incidence, in reporting behavior, within child protection procedures, or even problems with data collection, the trend has important implications for how well victims are being protected.

Explanations for declining trend

Respondents from the 31 participating states with continuous or discontinuous declines (from this point forward referred to as “decline” states) were asked questions about the possible reasons for their state’s decline in sexual abuse. Responses about potential causes of the decline given by the CPS administrators have been divided into three general categories: (1) factors that would support the argument for a real decline in sexual abuse, (2) changes in reporting behaviors, and (3) changes in CPS agency procedures and policies. In discussing participant explanations of the decline in sexual abuse, suggestions of changes clearly occurring after 1997 have not been included.

A real decline

State officials from 18 of the 31 decline states suggested causal factors for the decline that implied the decline is real. Respondents mentioned the increase in community programs that developed in the late 1980s such as prevention programs for children in the school and other education campaigns. Such programs, respondents noted, may be preventing some instances of abuse, may be catching dangerous situations at an earlier point, and may be deterring potential perpetrators as a result of increased community awareness. Respondents also cited better treatment for offenders, better enforcement of laws, and increased incarceration of offenders as possible factors in the decline.

Vermont is an example of a state where the respondent felt very strongly that the decline in sexual abuse cases was a real decline in incidence and not an artifact. He noted that Vermont has made a commitment since the early 1980s to “very aggressively” investigate sexual abuse and that the state has very good treatment programs for both adult and juvenile sexual offenders. He commented, “Vermont has really turned a corner regarding sexual abuse. . . from a combination of reasons.”

Not all of the respondents felt so confident that what appears to be a declining trend is real. The 43 states that participated in the survey responded to a question asking them if they thought, based on their experiences as administrators in the field, the national decline in child sexual abuse cases represented a real decline in the incidence of this crime. This question came at the end of the survey after having discussed many possible reasons for their state’s sexual abuse trend. The majority (21) of respondents felt that it was very unlikely that the decline was real (Fig. 6). These included respondents from four states who had themselves suggested the possibility that prevention programs and criminal justice policy may have been effective. Sixteen respondents thought that it was possible that the decline was real. Eight expressed a good deal of confidence that the decline was real, while eight respondents

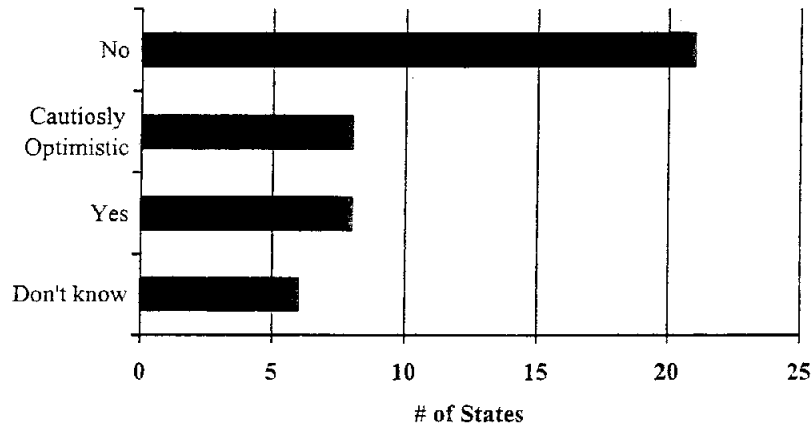


Fig. 6. Respondent opinions on whether decline indicates a real decline in incidence.

expressed what one called “guarded optimism.” Respondents from six states felt they were entirely unable to speculate in response to the question.

Changes in reporting

Officials from about half (16 out of 31) of the decline states expressed their belief that changes in the reporting behaviors of professionals and citizens may have contributed to decline in cases of sexual abuse. But respondents were divided about reasons for those changes (Fig. 7). In approximately a third of the states where respondents cited reduced reporting, officials felt that reporters were more and more disinclined to involve CPS and preferred increasingly to deal with situations on their own. One respondent commented “Reporters may be more reluctant to turn to CPS, they are holding off and trying other things”

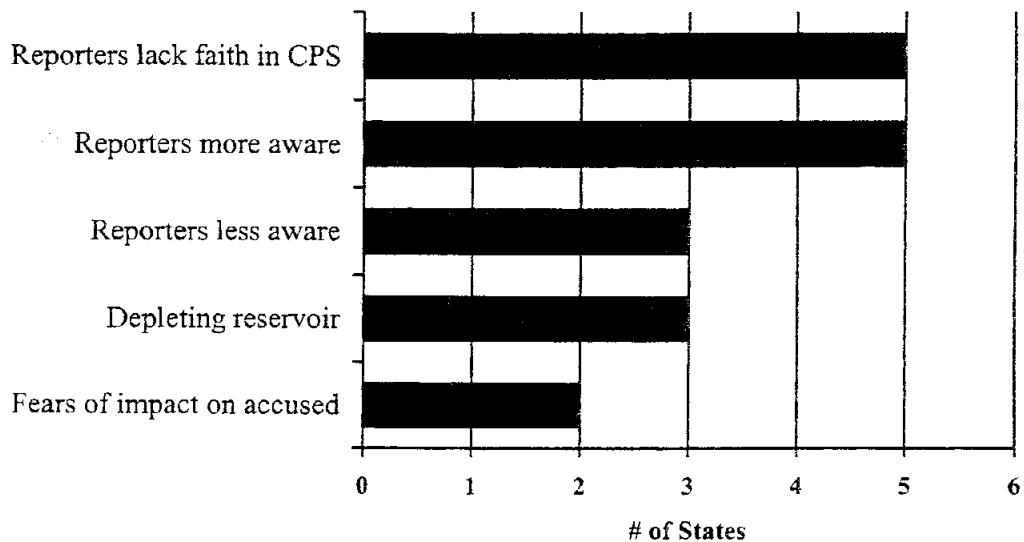


Fig. 7. Respondent descriptions of changes in reporting that could impact trends in sexual abuse cases.

like putting a child in treatment.” Another third of respondents from these 16 states thought that reporters might have become more aware and sophisticated about distinguishing signs of sexual abuse. One respondent commented, “We are getting sexual abuse referrals that are more ‘bonafide’ than five or ten years ago.” Another felt that an emphasis in their state on training mandated reporters had increased the accuracy of the reports. Three respondents, on the other hand, suggested that the change in reporting might be due to *less* awareness in the press and the public about sexual abuse. Reporters, these respondents felt, might be less aware of the issues and the signs of sexual abuse, and therefore making fewer reports.

Respondents from an additional three states suggested the impact of what we have termed a “depleting reservoir” hypothesis. Thirty years ago, when public awareness campaigns and prevention programs were initiated, many victims were identified whose experiences had been previously gone unrecognized. It is likely that the upsurge in cases during the 1980s included many cases where the abuse had occurred over a long period of time or had occurred several years before the report. This reservoir of longer standing cases may have been reduced so that each year increasing proportions of reports are recent cases of abuse. This might appear as a decline in total cases even if the yearly incidence of sexual abuse remains the same.

Finally, respondents from another two states thought it was possible that with increased prosecution of sexual abuse cases and the increased seriousness of consequences for a substantiated charge of sexual abuse (e.g., limited employment opportunities), reporters might be more reluctant to report their suspicions.

Respondents were specifically questioned about the possibility that reporters might be responding to a so-called sexual abuse “backlash.” Some researchers who have analyzed media coverage of sexual abuse have found a more skeptical media orientation to the topic in the 1990s (Beckett, 1996; Myers, 1994). According to these researchers, the dominant message of recent publicity about sexual abuse has been that false allegations are frequent, that many innocent people are being unfairly stigmatized, and that professionals are being overly zealous in reporting possible cases of sexual abuse. As a result of the new skepticism in media attention, and the activity by anti-CPS advocacy groups, such as Victims of Child Abuse Laws (VOCAL), victims and their confidants may have become more reluctant to seek help and professionals more reluctant to report suspicions.

Respondents in all of the 43 participating states were asked whether they thought that fewer reports of sexual abuse were being made because of fears of legal repercussions. The majority of respondents did not think this was an important factor. Respondents from 30 states said that they had seen no evidence of this in their state and many cited the fact that reporters could report anonymously as helpful in keeping such fears from impacting on a decision to report a suspicion. Respondents from seven states however, endorsed the possibility that fears of retribution could be a factor in declining reports. In general, concern that reporters might be reluctant to report for fear of legal retribution was not strong. However, officials’ concerns that reporters might increasingly lack faith in CPS and might be more cautious about what they report, suggest that the impact of a backlash should not be discounted as a possible factor.

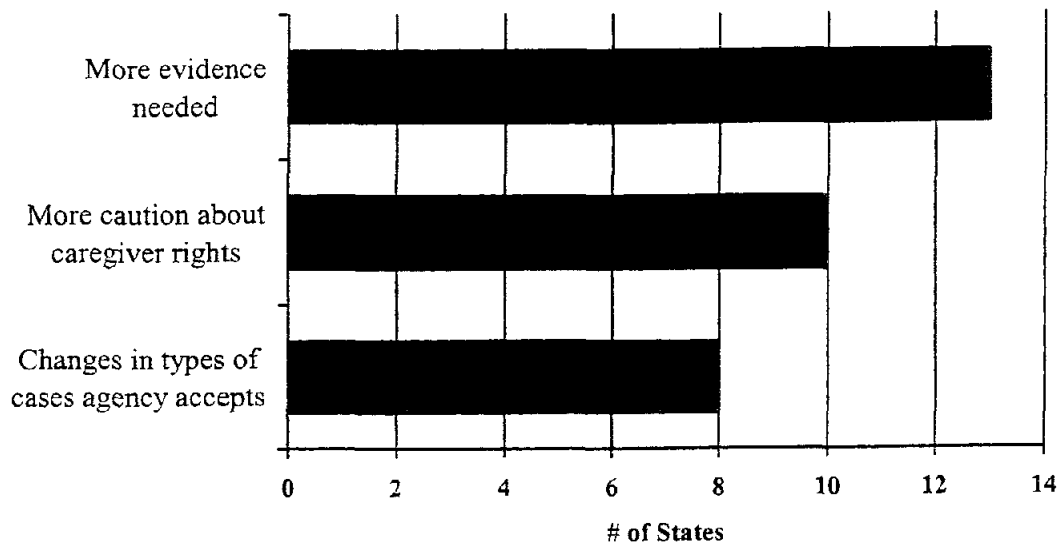


Fig. 8. Respondent descriptions of changes in investigation and substantiation behaviors that could impact trends in sexual abuse cases.

Changes in CPS policies and procedures

Respondents from the majority of decline states (22 out of 31) described changes in their agency's policy or procedures that they believed also could have limited the number of sexual abuse cases identified each year. The most frequently cited change was increasing cautiousness by CPS agencies about investigating and substantiating allegations of abuse. Thirteen respondents mentioned restrictions in official CPS policy about the level of evidence needed to investigate or substantiate an allegation (Fig. 8). Some described a change in policy from requiring "credible evidence" to "a preponderance of evidence" to substantiate a case of maltreatment. Others described the implementation of structured decision making tools. These respondents felt that asking for a specified list of indicators or evidence of maltreatment and risk may have had the effect of narrowing the numbers of cases both accepted for investigation and substantiated. Informal changes were also cited as possibly contributing to the decline by a number of the officials. One respondent noted, "Many more people are suing and... workers' integrity can be called into question... Workers are more reluctant to call cases confirmed."

Respondents in 10 states described the establishment of a state Central Registry, increased rights of the accused to appeal substantiated findings, and increased procedures to alert the accused of those rights as potentially impacting trends. Central registries have been established in many states as a way to track sexual offenders and limit their access to professions that involve contact with children. Some respondents thought that because a record of the abuse would be accessible by others and would impact the offender's employment, case-workers and judges might be more hesitant to "label" someone as a sex offender and might be more likely to opt for a less damaging finding. Others thought that there had been increasing numbers of appeals and increased awareness on the part of investigators that if they substantiated the abuse, it may be challenged in court. Respondents felt that it was

possible that these changes would have the effect of both causing more cases to be overturned and causing more cautiousness on the part of investigators to make sure the evidence was strong before they substantiated.

Finally, respondents from eight states described restrictions in policy regarding the kinds of cases that could be accepted for investigation. Either a stricter definition of “caretaker” had been implemented by their agencies or a clarification had been made by the agencies that resulted in greater adherence to existing restrictions. The most frequent restrictions were exclusions of cases where the offender was noncaretaker (e.g., a neighbor) or a juvenile. Respondents noted that these cases were more frequently referred to the police.

In addition to these changes, other trends in the CPS system were also noted by respondents as potentially having an impact on the decline trend in sexual abuse. Some respondents mentioned that they had seen large reductions in staff and staff resources over the past 5 years and felt that that might limit the number of cases that were accepted for investigation or substantiated. This would imply that a triaging process had occurred where less “serious” cases were increasingly left without intervention.

Officials also mentioned the increased number of Child Advocacy Centers (CACs) in their states and questioned the impact that such agencies might be having on the sexual abuse trend. CACs were set up to help ease the stress of child abuse investigations on the child and the nonoffending caregiver. They are often independent, nonprofit agencies, and one of their primary goals is to reduce the number of interviews required of the child by providing a place for child protective workers and police to coordinate their interview procedures. These programs have proliferated across the country and have added treatment services, case management services, and prevention and education programs. The officials had mixed opinions about how the growth of CACs might have affected sexual abuse trends. Most felt that the better training of the investigators and the focus on successful prosecution would limit the number of cases CPS was substantiating. Several respondents, however, thought that the presence of a CAC should also have resulted in increased numbers of sexual abuse reports because of their visible role in community education on the issue.

Officials from three states suggested that better training of caseworkers might be having an impact on the number of cases that are substantiated. These respondents thought that with the heightened attention to sexual abuse in the 1980s, CPS agencies had been overinvestigating and oversubstantiating. With the passage of time, they now felt that their caseworkers had become much better able to identify situations where sexual abuse had definitely occurred and were less inclined to substantiate more questionable situations. One respondent commented, “National coverage by the press in the mid-1980s might have elevated numbers at this time. . . . Publicity of sexual abuse led to a period of accepting a lot of cases with less evidence.” Another respondent reported, “Previously, our state counted things as sexual abuse that they ‘shouldn’t have,’ for example, two neighborhood kids acting out sexually.”

However, *less* extensive training of caseworkers was also cited as a potential factor by officials from two states. In the 1990s, with a lesser focus on sexual abuse, their agencies had lost professionals with specific training in sexual abuse and they felt caseworkers were less well trained on these issues now than they were 5 or 10 years ago. These contradictory views leave two questions unanswered: (1) Has training in sexual abuse increased or decreased since the late 1980s/early 1990s, and (2) Do poorly trained caseworkers oversubstantiate or

undersubstantiate sexual abuse? The impact that training might have on sexual abuse trends is unclear.

There is some evidence that changes in CPS procedures might be contributing to at least some of the decline in some of the states. Over half of the discontinuous decline states were able to offer reasonable explanations for the large declines in sexual abuse substantiations that occurred in a single year. Out of these eight states, five could pinpoint major program or policy changes that occurred around the time of the large decline. Two states went from a three-tiered system to a two-tiered system of case classification, eliminating the option of “indicated” from the choices in concluding an investigation of child abuse and leaving only the choice of “substantiated” or “unsubstantiated.” In calculating child maltreatment incidence, NCANDS counts both indicated and substantiated cases. If a state drops from a three-tiered to a two-tiered state, many cases that would have been indicated become unsubstantiated. Respondents from the other three discontinuous decline states described changes in screening policy the year of the large decline where either more evidence was required to investigate an allegation of child maltreatment or the definition of “caretaker” was further narrowed. Three states could not offer any clear explanation for the dramatic drop in sexual abuse cases that occurred over a 1 year period.

Weighing the impact of CPS trends on the sexual abuse decline

In assessing the extent to which child protective service procedure or policy trends are behind the large decline in sexual abuse cases, a number of issues need to be considered:

- Explanations would have to account for the greater decline in sexual abuse than in physical abuse or neglect. Because the decline in sexual abuse has been more extensive than the decline in physical abuse and neglect, changes in CPS policy and procedures that are proposed as affecting the decline would have to be able to explain the different trends. It is possible to consider how some of the changes mentioned by respondents might differentially impact sexual abuse trends. For example, a greater proportion of sexual abuse cases are identified in middle class families than are physical abuse or neglect. Middle class families may be more likely to fight a charge of sexual abuse through the courts and CPS agencies might have therefore become more cautious regarding sexual abuse cases than other forms of maltreatment.

Another way that sexual abuse is unique among forms of maltreatment is that, to a greater degree than physical abuse and neglect, it is perpetrated by adults who are not parents or family members. The latest NCANDS report for 1999 data (US Department of Health and Human Services-Children’s Bureau, 2001) notes that with sexual abuse, approximately 50% of perpetrators were not a parent. This is compared to 10% for physical abuse and 8% for neglect. If CPS agencies have in fact limited their involvement with cases of noncaretaker sexual abuse over the past 10 years, it would be more likely to impact on the numbers of sexual abuse cases than other types of maltreatment.

However, a number of the other policy and procedural changes described by the respondents cannot adequately explain the greater decline in sexual abuse cases. For example, if CPS agencies have been requiring more specific evidence to be present

before investigating or substantiating an allegation or have been limiting their involvement in less “serious” allegations, this would most likely impact neglect trends to a greater degree than sexual abuse trends. According to survey respondents, sexual abuse reports are given a high priority status by CPS agencies and these reports more often include clearer evidence of maltreatment, such as a victim or witness statement, than the broader and less clear-cut allegation of neglect.

- Some states with very large declines in sexual abuse could not describe any relevant program or policy changes. Respondents from a sizeable number of states (8 out of 31) with notable declines in sexual abuse that participated in the survey were not able to identify any change in policy, program, or procedure that might have contributed to their decline. These included states with some of the largest percentage declines in the country.
- Fluctuating change states appear to have also seen similar policy and program changes. There did not appear to be any obvious reason why the 12 fluctuating change states did not see the declines that other 31 states had seen. When asked questions about changes to screening and substantiation procedures, these states mentioned similar changes as those that were mentioned by the decline states. They reported that in the 1990s, they had seen changes to the appeal process, implementation of structured risk assessment procedures, better training of CPS caseworkers, establishment of Central Registries, restrictions on the evidence needed to investigate or substantiate, and restrictions on the type of cases that the agency becomes involved with.
- Evidence on declining reports suggests that part of the cause for the decline is occurring before the investigation by CPS. Although the evidence for a declining number of sexual abuse reports is not as good as the evidence for the decline in substantiated cases, data by Prevent Child Abuse America do suggest that a decline in reports has occurred since 1991. If reports of sexual abuse have declined over this time, then at least part of the reason for the decline in substantiated cases must be occurring before the allegation is investigated by a CPS agency.

Summary and implications of survey results

Respondents from the majority of the decline states described changes in procedure and policy that might be able to explain part of the decline: either formal changes in screening or investigation procedures, clarifications, or impressions that caseworkers were being more cautious about what they investigate or substantiate. Respondents from several states also mentioned the possibility that changes in reporting could be responsible for the trend including less vigilance by reporters, more suspicion of the ability of CPS to successfully intervene, better training or increased knowledge, or more frequent efforts to deal with the problem through other means. Finally, a large proportion of state officials suggested that prevention efforts and criminal justice efforts over the past 20 years may have had an impact. However, when asked their opinion about whether they thought that the decline in cases was caused by a decline in incidence, over half said “No.”

Definitive conclusions about the extent to which administrative changes contribute to the declining trend in sexual abuse cannot be reached with this select sample. The opinions and knowledge of only one to two individuals were surveyed in each state. Also, those surveyed were specifically chosen for their expertise with CPS policy and procedures and their occupational perspective may bias explanations for the decline. Administrators may be more likely to view the decline as relating to administrative issues, practices and changes because these are the areas they are most familiar with. It is also important to emphasize that the survey specifically asked administrators to speculate about the possible reasons for the state trend and the results of the survey should be interpreted with these qualifications in mind.

Their responses, however, do offer an initial inventory of some of the possible causes of the state-level declines in sexual abuse. Understanding more about changing trends in sexual abuse is crucial. If substantiated sexual abuse has declined because fewer children are being sexually abused, this would provide great encouragement for those working in the field and prompt careful attention to the question of which kinds of cases were most readily being prevented and which kinds had been most intractable to prevention. On the other hand, if there have been changes to investigative policy that reduce the number of children identified as victims, it would be necessary to identify the basis for the changes. For example, it would be useful to know whether such changes had been rooted in research and general professional practice, or had been more reactive and politically based. If CPS is redefining its role in such a way that other agencies are taking responsibility for cases that previously fell under the jurisdiction of CPS, it will be important to identify the cases that are no longer being investigated and substantiated and learn what is happening to the children. If citizen and professional reports are declining, it may be important to know whether this means that more sexual abuse is escaping from official identification. Further research is crucial to providing more information.

One of the most important results of this survey is an illumination of the degree to which states are not paying attention to the declining trend. Few states are using their own data to carefully track state trends in reports and substantiations and the vast majority of those that do track these trends have done little work to better understand them or formally speculate on their causes. The lack of attention to the trends at the state level mimics a relative lack of attention at the national level as well. When the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) released the 1998 data from NCANDS, a press statement on April 10, 2000 mentioned briefly that an 11% decline in overall child maltreatment had occurred. But the statement offered no further statistics on the decline, did not mention the particularly notable decline in sexual abuse, and made no comment about why the decline might be occurring. This is in contrast to releases put out by the DHHS the same year on declines in gun deaths among youth, declines in teen birth rates, and declines in teen drug use. The 35% decline in youth gun deaths since 1994 is noted as "significant" and as indicating that, "violence prevention efforts are showing results." A 20% decline in teen birth rates since 1991 is described as "remarkable" and specific details are given regarding which ethnic groups have seen the largest declines. HHS Secretary Donna Shalala notes, "Parents, local communities, government and teens themselves have all been part of writing this success story." In a 1999 press release, the decline in teen drug use is similarly described as "extremely encouraging"

by Barry McCaffrey, White House Drug Policy Director, who notes that the findings “serve as an indicator that the country’s team effort and National Drug Strategy are working.”

It could be argued that the differential attention paid to these declines is related to the greater reliability of the data sources; the indicators described above are all measures of incidence. However, trends identified using data that are more comparable to child protection statistics have still resulted in greater attention and publicity than have child maltreatment trends. Data on reports of crimes to police and arrest rates from the Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) have shown declines in a wide variety of crimes over the past several years. The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) highlighted declining rates of juvenile arrests in a November 1999 press release. UCR data are presented as showing declines in murder, weapons law violations, forcible rape, aggravated assault, and a number of other crimes committed by juvenile offenders. Shay Bilchik, the OJJDP Administrator at the time of the report, is quoted as describing the declines, ranging from 4% to 25% as “substantial.” He expresses his confidence that “. . . we have achieved this result because a balanced approach to juvenile crime is effective not only in reducing violence, but also in decreasing other types of crime.” The fact that equally “substantial” declines in sexual abuse cases have not been similarly trumpeted and the absence of questions about the decline at both the national and state-level are puzzling.

It is important to try to understand why policy makers and those responsible for the data systems themselves have seemed to pay so little attention to the decline that has been occurring. There are a few possible reasons for the lack of attention to this issue:

1. Lack of faith in the data systems. The professionals who work in the child maltreatment field and even the people responsible for the data systems may lack faith in their systems and the numbers they produce. The state and national systems have had problems in the past. National management of the system has changed hands over the years. Even after 25 years of data collection, not all states participate reliably in the system and the definitions used by states are not uniform. Individual states have in some cases been slow to systematize their data collection systems. These are serious problems. But other data systems with similar problems have still generated a great deal of attention when new trends arose. As described above, the best example is the FBI’s UCR system, which has similar problems of variable state definitions of crime, lack of uniform participation, and the possibility that system artifacts can inflate or deflate the numbers. Nonetheless a great deal of public attention is given to UCR changes, even though, in the public discussion, the trends are dismissed by some observers as artifacts of data collection. When the UCR registered a large increase in juvenile crime in the 1980s, it was openly debated with some arguing that it was real and others arguing that it was the result of new “get tough” policies under which police arrested more juveniles (Snyder & Sickmund, 1999). This is a healthy policy discussion that shows that a data system is being used.
2. Lack of funding for data interpretation. Complicating a distrust of the data may be the fact that states and even the NCANDS system may not have the funds or resources to analyze and interpret the data. So, while states may go through the motions of submitting statistics and even preparing summary reports, there may be no time or staff

to examine the statistics and interpret them. To notice the declines in sexual abuse states would have had to break out the sexual abuse data for individual years separately, compare them, and look for trends, something that is not part of the intrinsic process of preparing the data. While many states may certainly perceive it as a staffing and resource issue, it is hard to know to what extent the lack of staff and resource reflects a distrust of the data and other biases such as those mentioned below, and are not strictly a funding issue.

3. Lack of an evaluation orientation. A third problem hampering an interest in the decline may be the lack of a strong evaluation orientation in the field. Some have argued that the field of child maltreatment has a very weak orientation in general toward using statistics and research to evaluate its practice in a systematic way, preferring cases and anecdotes to guide policy (Gelles, 2000). So, policy makers in the field may rarely consult statistics or research studies to provide them with a window on what is happening. They may view the system statistics mostly as ammunition to get funding and not as a way of informing policy decisions.
4. Fear. Some of the unwillingness to look at the decline more straightforwardly may also be related to fears among those who collect and disseminate the data or are in a position to interpret it. One fear may be that, if declines are publicized, politicians and policy makers will use them as an excuse to reduce funding. The basis of this fear is likely that the field used the statistical increases over the years as a primary justification for arguing for more funding and more attention. The disappearance of those increases, if noticed, might reduce the ammunition for such arguments or even be the basis for arguing for funding cuts. Child maltreatment officials may also be afraid that publicity about the decline will lead to the public losing interest in the problem. They may be predisposed to believe, as many of the survey respondents did, that a decline showing up in their data are not a real decline in incidence and that discussion of any statistical drop would lead to misinterpretation, so it would be better not to talk about it at all. Another fear could be that, if the declines are a sign of backlash or reduced vigilance they may be interpreted as a failure of the field and will simply get people discouraged. Such fears have not inhibited publicity about declines in other fields. The decline in crime has been publicly trumpeted with few justice system officials concerned that it will lead to a loss of funding. The same has been the case with the declines in teen pregnancy. In fact, the field should also be concerned about the possibility that the public and policy makers could get discouraged about a public policy issue that they address for years without making any evident progress.

Whatever the reasons, it is disappointing that little public discussion is occurring about a dramatic development in child maltreatment statistics. The systems that produce these statistics have been in development for 25 years and have involved large sums of money and much effort. A decline like the one that has occurred is precisely the kind of event such a system is established to detect. If some of the above reasons are allowing that work to be underutilized, it suggests that further steps are needed: (1) to increase confidence in the data system by both fixing its flaws and publicizing its strengths; (2) to devote more resources to the analysis and utilization of the data from these systems; and (3) to train and educate staff

and policy makers, people at all levels of child welfare systems, in the importance and utility of data and research in policy making.

The statistical decline in sexual abuse and perhaps the approaching decline in other indices of child maltreatment may be the harbinger of a real crisis for the field. It is a crisis that may well define the future of the field because it raises the question of whether the field is prepared to provide a solid and defensible interpretation of major changes occurring in the primary index of the problem. Failing to provide that solid and defensible interpretation may result in two unfortunate outcomes. First, other people from outside the field may define the situation, and may show less fidelity to the facts than to causes or theories they may be trying to promote. Second, the field may lose additional credibility in the eyes of people honestly looking for answers to the child maltreatment problem. If the research and policy analysis from within the field can't tell us whether maltreatment is declining when the statistics make it look like it is, what else can't they tell us? Mounting a concerted effort to draw some conclusions about recent changes in the statistics would seem to be a very high priority.

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Résumé

Objectif: Le nombre de cas d'agressions sexuelles a baissé de 39% à travers les États-Unis, de 1992 à 1999, selon le National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (banque de données nationale). Malgré cette réduction importante, on en parle peu au niveau national ou même dans les états. Cette

recherche avait pour but de (1) cueillir des informations au niveau de l'état sur les raisons possibles de cette réduction; (2) identifier les tendances qui pourraient expliquer cette baisse; et (3) évaluer ce que les bureaux de protection de l'enfance dans les états connaissent de cette diminution de cas.

Méthode: des entrevues téléphoniques ont été menées auprès de 43 administrateurs de la protection de l'enfance dans les états.

Résultats: Plus de la moitié des autorités des états qui accusent des baisses considérables ont rapporté qu'à leur connaissance, on ne parlait pas de cette réduction dans leur agence ni dans l'état en général. Pour eux, la réduction des cas s'explique de plusieurs façons, notamment (1) la loi exige de plus en plus des preuves solides; (2) les travailleurs de la protection de l'enfance sont plus conscients des droits nouvellement acquis des parents ou autres personnes chargées de la garde des enfants; et (3) les agences sont de plus en plus particulières vis-à-vis des cas qu'ils acceptent d'enquêter. Par contre, plus de la moitié des administrateurs citent le succès des programmes de prévention, l'accroissement des poursuites judiciaires et les campagnes de sensibilisation du public comme facteurs pouvant expliquer une baisse réelle de l'incidence.

Conclusions: Il existe sans doute chez les administrateurs une certaine partialité, pourtant, ils peuvent fournir des hypothèses valables pour des recherches plus poussées afin d'expliquer cette baisse de l'incidence. Il faudrait encourager des discussions et une analyse plus robuste des banques de données sur la maltraitance et la négligence.

Resumen

Objetivos: De acuerdo con la Base de Datos Nacional de Maltrato y Negligencia Infantil ("National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System") los casos confirmados de abuso sexual han disminuido aproximadamente un 39% a lo largo de todo el país. A pesar de la naturaleza dramática de esta disminución, esta tendencia ha sido poco discutida tanto a nivel nacional como estatal. Los objetivos de esta investigación fueron: (1) recoger información a nivel estatal sobre las posibles causas de la disminución de casos de abuso sexual; (2) identificar las tendencias de los servicios de protección infantil que pueden contribuir a dicha disminución; y (3) evaluar el nivel de conocimiento que tienen los servicios de protección infantil sobre esta disminución de casos.

Metodología: se llevaron a cabo entrevistas telefónicas con los responsables de protección infantil en 43 estados de USA.

Resultados: Más de la mitad de los responsables de los Estados con grandes disminuciones desconocían la existencia de cualquier tipo de discusión sobre la disminución en su propia agencia o a nivel de la población general. Los responsables mencionaron diversas causas de esta disminución, incluyendo: (1) aumento de los requisitos de evidencia para confirmar casos, (2) aumento de la precaución del responsable de caso debido a los nuevos derechos legales de los padres o cuidadores, y (3) aumento de las limitaciones en el tipo de casos que los servicios aceptan para investigar. Más de la mitad también mencionaron la eficacia de los programas de prevención, el aumento del control legal y las campañas públicas de información. Esto último implica que una parte de la disminución puede ser resultado de una disminución real.

Conclusiones: Las respuestas de los funcionarios de los servicios de protección infantil tienen prejuicios inherentes, pero son útiles para generar hipótesis para posteriores estudios que traten de dar cuenta de esta disminución. Los resultados sugieren que los siguientes pasos importantes parten de una mayor discusión y análisis de la base de datos de maltrato infantil.