

Sexual Abuse Decline in the 1990s: Evidence for Possible Causes

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Sexual abuse cases substantiated by child protective service (CPS) agencies dropped a remarkable 39% between 1992 and 1999 from an estimated 150,000 cases to 92,000 cases, but professional opinion is divided about why (Jones & Finkelhor, 2001; Jones, Finkelhor, & Kopiec, 2001). An optimistic possibility is that there has been a real decline in the incidence of sexual abuse, the result of two decades of prevention, treatment, and more aggressive criminal justice activity. It is also possible that there has been no real decline, and that the decline is explained by a drop in the number of cases being identified and reported or by changes in practices of child protection agencies themselves.

Identifying the source or sources of the decline is important. The possibility that a real decline may have occurred is heartening and could point the way to more effective strategies for preventing all kinds of child maltreatment. On the other hand, if the decline is due solely to decreased reporting or changes in CPS procedures, it could mean more children failing to get help and services.

This bulletin evaluates the evidence for six commonly voiced explanations for the decline. It explores the strengths and weaknesses of these six explanations with data from a number of different sources (see Box A): aggregate data from the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS); more detailed child protective service data from four states,

Oregon, Minnesota, Illinois, and Pennsylvania; and self-report data from the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) and from school children in Minnesota. It provides substantially more evidence about the decline than was available in a previous bulletin on this topic (Jones & Finkelhor, 2001).

Summary

- There was little evidence from the detailed state CPS data that the declines were due to more conservative judgment by CPS about the types of sexual abuse cases they would investigate or substantiate or an increasing reluctance by CPS to become involved in cases where the perpetrator is not a primary caregiver.
- There was also no strong evidence that the decline is largely due to a depleting reservoir of older, on-going cases available for new disclosures.
- There was some evidence that the sexual abuse decline in one of the states could be partly explained by changes in CPS procedures and data collection methods; although, according to national data, this explanation does not successfully account for the declines seen in the majority of states.
- There was mixed evidence that reporting of sexual abuse to CPS has declined because of a “backlash,” i.e., a greater public and professional skepticism about reports of sexual abuse.
- Finally, evidence from a number of different sources, including a 56% decline in self-reported sexual assault against juveniles in the National Crime Victimization Survey, is consistent with a real decline in sexual abuse.

I. Evidence for the Decline

Yearly estimates of substantiated sexual abuse were calculated from CPS administrative data collected by the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS). The numbers of states that submit data to this system each year varies (43-49), making published totals difficult to compare across years. In order 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 U.S. Census. 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 (Figure 1). In 1999, estimated cases of sexual abuse reached a low of approximately 91,900. This is a total decline of 39% in identified sexual abuse cases over a 7-year period. The trend is not universal, but it has occurred in the majority of states. Thirty-eight out of 49 states experienced a total decline of 30% or more in substantiated cases of sexual abuse from their peak year to the year 1999 and 18 of these states have seen declines of over 50% in their sexual abuse caseload. The decline in 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, while there has been a decline of about 14% in overall child maltreatment, the decline in sexual abuse appears to account for a large part of the trend. Neglect cases have declined 14% from a peak in 1996 and physical abuse has declined 29% since a peak in 1995. Both of these are noticeable enough declines but are smaller and more recent than the decline in sexual abuse. In fact, the largest proportion of the physical abuse decline, or 15%, occurred most recently from 1998 to 1999. This is compared with a more gradual 39% decline for sexual abuse over a seven-year period.

Begin Box A

Data Sources on Sexual Abuse Trends

The National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS): NCANDS is a data system organized by the Children's Bureau that collects information from state child welfare agencies on a number of variables related to child maltreatment. Data collected through this system began in 1990. While a growing number of states are submitting case-level data to this system, aggregate data from the Summary Data Component or SDC was used to calculate national sexual abuse trends from 1990 through 1999. The SDC provides annual estimates of child maltreatment cases substantiated by CPS.

State Child Protective Service Data: In order to examine sexual abuse trends in more detail, the authors also examined state CPS data from Illinois, Oregon, Minnesota, and Pennsylvania. These were states that showed large declines in substantiated sexual abuse and were among the few that had consistent and extensive case-level CPS data available from the early 1990s through 1999. The data provided by these states allowed an examination of trends in sexual abuse investigations by age of the victim, type of abuse, perpetrator relationship to the victim, age of perpetrator, and investigation outcome, among others.

National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS): The NCVS is an annual survey of households conducted by the Bureau of Census on behalf of the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) that gathers information from U.S. citizens on crime victimization. Approximately 55,000 households and 100,000 individuals 12 years of age and older are surveyed. Information is collected about the characteristics of victimizations including victim and perpetrator demographics; the incident location; and a description of the incidence.

Minnesota Student Survey: The Minnesota Student Survey is an anonymous, self-administered questionnaire that asks students about a range of experiences including substance use, sexual behavior, and school climate. Two survey questions ask about sexual abuse victimization. The survey has been administered to Minnesota 6th, 9th, and 12th grade students five times: in 1989, 1992, 1995, 1998, and 2001. Participation is voluntary and anonymous. Approximately 90% to 99% of Minnesota school districts have participated in the survey each year. For trend analyses, data are limited to school districts that participated in all five survey administrations, representing approximately 69% of Minnesota's school districts. A weighting procedure is used to adjust for differences in student participation rates across districts. For more information about the survey's methodology see Harrison, Fulkerson, & Beebe (1997) or Minnesota Department of Children, Families & Learning (2001).

End Box

II. Explanations for the Decline

As part of earlier research on this topic, the authors conducted a survey of state child protection administrators to gather hypotheses and evidence about the decline in sexual abuse (Jones et al., 2001). Although administrators expressed many ideas about the decline, there were six frequently offered explanations that were backed by some anecdotal support:

1. Increasing CPS conservatism. In this view, sexual abuse cases were declining in state caseloads because CPS was adopting more conservative standards regarding more “questionable” cases (e.g., allegations arising in divorce-custody disputes) or cases with weak initial evidence.
2. Exclusion of non-caretaker cases. In this view, CPS was increasingly excluding from their jurisdiction sexual abuse cases in which the perpetrator is not a primary caregiver.
3. Changes in CPS data collection methods or definitions. In this view, the decline was due to changes in the way in which CPS tabulated or counted its cases such as going from three to two-tiered classification system (substantiated /indicated/unsubstantiated to substantiated/unsubstantiated).
4. A sexual abuse backlash. In this view, negative publicity about sexual abuse cases and the potential liability of reporters was making the public and professionals more reluctant to report sexual abuse.
5. A depleting reservoir of older cases. In this view, there had been a reduction in the supply of older but previously undisclosed cases available for new disclosures, but no true decline in new cases.
6. A real decline in incidence. In this view, there had been a reduction in the number of children actually being abused in the population, as a result of increased prevention

efforts, more prosecution and incarceration of offenders or other social or cultural changes. (Specific mechanisms for a real decline will be explored in subsequent research.)

Explanations and the Evidence

The following sections review evidence that might be marshaled about the six explanations. Evidence was drawn from a variety of sources but especially from the four states with extensive CPS data.

A. Increasing conservatism by CPS regarding more “questionable” cases of sexual abuse or cases with weak initial evidence

One very plausible explanation of the sexual abuse decline is that child protection agencies have become more conservative in what they investigate or substantiate. This may reflect a better knowledge base, a reaction to criticism about overzealous investigations, caution in anticipation of legal retaliation, an effort to triage cases brought about by limited resources, or a concern about unnecessarily stigmatizing people by subjecting them to investigations that have a questionable basis. An obvious place to look for increasing skepticism about questionable cases would be in the substantiation rate. That is, if workers were applying more conservative standards and confirming less sexual abuse, there might be a greater drop in **substantiated** than in **reported or investigated** cases.

However, there is not much evidence for such a pattern. For example, in Illinois substantiations and investigations declined in tandem (Figure 2). Similar patterns were identified in Pennsylvania, Minnesota, and Oregon. Nationwide, evidence provided by the 50-state Survey shows that the substantiation rate for all types of maltreatment has remained constant at 33% from 1994 through 1999 (Peddle & Wang, 2001).

Another set of predictions from this explanation of increasing conservatism would be that certain kinds of potentially questionable cases might have experienced more conservative judgments. Certain allegations have been particularly targeted in recent years by skeptics concerned about unnecessary investigations. These include, for example, allegations arising in divorce and custody disputes, allegations involving very young children whose testimony is often deemed unreliable, and allegations involving less intrusive forms of sexual contact.

If such increasing conservatism about questionable cases were an important factor in the decline of sexual abuse, we might predict a differentially greater decline among cases growing out of divorce or custody issues, or involving very young victims or less invasive kinds of sexual contact. Conversely, we might expect less decline among cases involving more credible evidence, such as medical evidence or a perpetrator confession, and more serious kinds of contact, such as penetration. Trend data about cases involving such attributes are presented in Figures 3, 4, 5, and 6. Unfortunately, cases are not coded in any of the available states according to whether they were preceded by a custody dispute, but they are coded in Pennsylvania by family structure of the child's household. Cases where a custody dispute precedes a sexual abuse allegation are less common in families that contain two biological parents at the time of the allegation. (Sometimes a custody dispute follows the allegation of sexual abuse in an intact family, but CPS would be less likely to assume that the sexual abuse allegation was an attempt to manipulate an already existing custody conflict.) Such allegations, growing out of a previously existing custody dispute, would be expected more often when children reside in single parent or step-parent households than in two parent biological households, and if CPS was increasingly skeptical about such cases, we might expect a greater decline there. Trends in Pennsylvania show no such trend. Figure 3, in fact, shows that in Pennsylvania, the largest declines have occurred in

allegations coming from 2 parent adoptive or biological families, not from the single parent or stepparent household categories.

Trend data are somewhat more supportive about cases involving younger children. In Illinois, Pennsylvania, and Minnesota the decline was more pronounced for cases involving children under the age of 6. Figure 4 shows, for example, a 57% decline among children aged 0-3 compared to an average 26% decline across other age groups in Illinois. Nonetheless, it is clear that the decline has not been isolated to this age group, and has occurred broadly across all age groups with a particularly higher rate among the very young. Moreover, because the very young make up a small portion of over all cases, even fairly big declines for this age group are not enough to fully account for the decline.

Where there is other information from states on the quality or seriousness of the allegation or evidence, they generally do not support the hypothesis that more questionable cases had more dramatic declines. Pennsylvania, for example, codes the presence of medical evidence or perpetrator confession, kinds of cases we might expect under this explanation to decline less than cases without such evidence. However, the declines in these strong evidence cases have been as big if not bigger (Figure 5). Illinois codes the presence of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and allegations of penetration, combinations of more credible evidence and more serious allegations that we might expect also to decline less than other cases under this explanation. Here again, the declines are substantial in both these categories, and are lowest in the category of exploitation alone, which might contain some of the least serious and most evidentiarily weak cases (Figure 6).

The failure to find predicted declines is far from fatal to the “increasing conservatism” argument. For example, large STD declines may be due to the decline in STD in the general

population (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2000). Standards of medical evidence may have gotten more conservative too (Carole Jenny, personal communication, May 14, 1997), and perpetrators may be newly emboldened by defense attorneys not to confess. But the data do not give strong or consistent evidence that the exclusion of questionable cases – involving controversial allegations or weaker evidence – is a major factor in the decline.

B. A greater reluctance by CPS to get involved in cases in which the perpetrator is not a primary caregiver

According to child protection officials some states in recent years have dealt with burgeoning caseloads and declining resources by narrowing the scope of child welfare responsibilities (Jones, et al., 2001). Since the traditional and statutory responsibilities of child protection have concerned threats to children’s well-being at the hands of caretakers, some state agencies say they have increasingly excluded cases involving allegations of abuse by non-caretakers, including non-relatives, distant relatives, and juvenile offenders. Sexual abuse has typically involved more such allegations than other kinds of maltreatment. If a rise of such exclusionary policies were responsible for the decline in sexual abuse, we would expect to see greater declines in cases involving such perpetrators.

The available data from the states we examined show some evidence of this kind of differential decline for non-caretaker and juvenile perpetrator cases, but it was not strong. There may have been some differential decline among young perpetrator cases; such trend data was available in Pennsylvania, which evidenced a larger decline in perpetrators 12-17 than in older perpetrators (Figure 7). However, teen perpetrators were a small segment of cases to start with, and their larger decline did not account for much of the overall decline. There was no evidence for the exclusion of non-caretaker perpetrators in the three states where this data was available.

For example, in Illinois the decline was most dramatic for cases involving parental perpetrators, the exact opposite of what the explanation would have predicted (Figure 8). These data are relevant to another, related notion about the decline. This explanation contends that the decline is due to an increasing practice by CPS to label sexual abuse cases as neglect or “failure to protect” on the part of the non-perpetrating caretaker. This practice may have occurred as CPS agencies have more carefully defined their roles as ensuring the protection of the child in the home. However, here again the prediction from this explanation would be a larger decline in cases involving nonfamily or more distant perpetrators, since this practice would primarily apply in such cases. Workers are not likely to label a case of sexual abuse by a father or stepfather as simply neglect by a mother. The more dramatic decline of such perpetrators seems to weigh against both the “failure to protect” as well as the noncaretaker exclusion explanation in the states that were examined.

C. Changes in CPS data collection methods

A number of state child protection agencies experienced changes during the 1990s in the way that they define and categorize child maltreatment, and collect and enter information about the cases that they investigate. In a survey conducted by the authors, many child protection officials felt that these changes were artificially creating what appeared to be a declining trend (Jones, Finkelhor, & Kopiec, 2001). For example, some officials reported that their state had moved from three-tiered system (substantiated/indicated /unsubstantiated) to a two-tiered system (substantiated/unsubstantiated). Others described changes such as the establishment of Central Registries and the implementation of more detailed data collection systems as possible causes for the decline.

If such changes were behind the decline, we would expect state trends to show a significant decline occurring over a short period of time paralleling the implementation of these changes. In examining state trends using the NCANDS data (see Box), the authors did identify 15 states where a very large decline in sexual abuse cases (over 33%) occurred over one year. When state officials from these “discontinuous decline” states were asked about these trends, over half were able to explain a change in procedure that could account for the trend. An example of this effect was evident in Oregon CPS data. Oregon had experienced a 60% decline in substantiated cases (Figure 9) but much of the decline occurred in 1994. Discussions with the Oregon state officials indicated that prior to 1994, a determination about whether abuse occurred was made with every report, making reports indistinguishable in the database from face-to-face investigations. This policy was changed in 1994 with a resulting drop in the number of cases that were labeled as investigated and substantiated.

However, changes such as these still cannot account for the large declines in the majority of states. When the authors examined state trends using the NCANDS data, most of the states (25) had seen significant declines (over 25%) that occurred gradually over several years. Furthermore, if changes in definition and data collection procedures were occurring in a large number of states, it would be expected that state trends would show sudden increases as well as decreases in the data. Changes in definition or data collection do not acceptably explain the size and consistency of the national decline.

D. Less reporting to CPS due to a “backlash”

Another frequently voiced explanation of the decline in sexual abuse is that reporters have been intimidated by a “sexual abuse backlash” – negative publicity in the media about false allegations, overzealous reporting and lawsuits seeking damages against those who make reports.

Sources have documented some change in media coverage of sexual abuse and CPS to a more negative and critical tone, which may have dissuaded both lay and professional reporters from reporting (Myers, 1994).

If a “backlash” or some other intimidation factor were behind the decline in sexual abuse, we might expect two kinds of differential patterns to appear in the composition of sexual abuse cases. First, we might expect a rise in reports made “anonymously,” an option that allows reporters to seek protection for a child while insulating themselves from criticism or legal action. Secondly, we might expect a particular dramatic decline among those reporters who are most susceptible to retaliation, legal action or economic boycott. One such group is private practice physicians, for whom child abuse reporting has always posed a burden and risk, because it potentially alienates patients and who, as independent practitioners, may feel particularly vulnerable to damage claims.

In the state data that were examined there was not, in any instance, evidence of a **rise** in anonymous reporting. In Illinois, however, the anonymous reports have **declined less** than the average rate, which could reflect some shifting preference among reporters for anonymous reporting, but in an overall context of declines from virtually all sources (Figure 10). This pattern is not shared by Pennsylvania, where anonymous reports have declined more, not less, than the average rate.

The pattern among private practice physicians is mixed also. In Illinois, reports emanating from private practice physicians declined much more dramatically than average (Figure 11). But they did not decline that much more than reporting from hospital based physicians, who presumably are more insulated from both economic and legal retaliation from families on whom reports are made. In contrast to Illinois, the decline in Pennsylvania reports

from private practice physicians was dramatically **lower** than the average, lower than the hospital based physicians as well, the opposite of what the backlash explanation might predict.

Thus in Illinois, there is evidence somewhat consistent with the backlash or intimidation explanation, although there was no true rise in anonymous reports, just a slower decline. But such evidence, either among anonymous reports or among private practice physicians, is absent in Pennsylvania. Unfortunately, however, because the backlash explanation concerns attitudes and practices among reporters, it is harder to evaluate with CPS data alone. So the data reported here are only a weak evaluation of the backlash explanation.

E. A depleting reservoir of older cases

Another possible explanation for the decline could involve what might be described as the depletion of the reservoir of older, but previously undisclosed cases without any true decline in new cases. As awareness of sexual abuse grew in the 1980s, it may have flushed into view a large number of older or on-going cases of sexual abuse that had previously escaped detection, creating something of an artificial surge. After these older cases were disclosed, the reservoir was depleted; new disclosures would have to come primarily from the supply of new cases of sexual abuse, and the sexual abuse rates would have declined without any necessary decline in actual incidence levels.

A prediction from this explanation would be a change in the age composition of victims in reported cases. Older, ongoing and previously undisclosed cases would almost certainly involve older victims at the time of disclosure, because older children could have been abused for a longer period prior to disclosure than younger children. Thus, if reservoir depletion explains a considerable amount of the decline, its signature should be a larger decline in cases involving older, as opposed to younger children. Figure 4 showing the age composition of victims was

already reviewed in considering Explanation B, and it clearly showed no differential decline for older victims. So there is no evidence here for the reservoir depletion hypothesis.

F. A real decline in incidence

There are a number of predictions that would be consistent with a true reduction in the number of children and youth who were being sexually abused. One is that self-reports of sexual abuse by victims would themselves decline. Unfortunately, sexual abuse is not a crime category tracked by the nation's most reliable measure of self-reported crime victimization, the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS). But the NCVS does ask about rape and sexual assault for victims down to age 12, and these include acts that are counted within the broader definition of child sexual abuse. The NCVS data show that sex offenses against juveniles (age 12-17) declined 56% between 1993 and 2000, with virtually all the decline occurring among offenses by known (family and acquaintance) perpetrators (down 72%, see Figure 12). These latter cases are the type most likely to be categorized as sexual abuse. The timing and magnitude of this decline in self-reports are parallel to the trend in CPS data on sexual abuse.

Another source of self-report information on sexual abuse comes from the Minnesota Student Survey that has been administered to Minnesota 6th, 9th, and 12th grade students every three years since 1989. Included in the survey are two questions about sexual abuse experiences. These data show a slight rise between 1989 and 1992 and then a 22% drop from 1992 to 2001 in sexual abuse by both family and non-family perpetrators (Figure 13). This trend also parallels the trend from the child protection system.

If the decline in sexual abuse were truly occurring, another prediction might be that the decline would be paralleled by drops in indicators of other etiologically-related, social problems. These could be conditions that are considered precursors of sexual abuse or outcomes of sexual

abuse or affected by similar causal factors. It is noteworthy that the period in which the decline in sexual abuse occurred also saw declines in a number of other child welfare problems. In general the evidence for these other declines is more reliable than the evidence for the decline in sexual abuse.

First, the decline in crime and violent crime during the 1990s has been widely publicized. The evidence for that decline is based both on self-reports from the National Crime Victimization Survey and on police reports. The NCVS has shown a decline of 46% in violent crime (1994 – 2000) (Rennison, 2001) and a 21% decline in the occurrence of intimate partner assault (1993-1998) (Rennison & Welchans, 2000). The decline in intimate partner assault is particularly noteworthy because of its connections to sexual abuse. Child sexual abuse is thought to be more common in families where there is intimate partner violence (Rumm, Cummings, Kraus, Bell, & Rivara, 2000). It is also a problem that has gone through a similar evolution in recent years, as it has been the subject of substantial publicity, increasingly aggressive efforts at case detection, upgraded law enforcement activity and the stiffening of legal sanctions.

Another social problem that has seen a marked decline over the same historic period is the rate of live births to teenage mothers. These rates dropped 28% from a high of 39 per 1,000 females aged 15-17 in 1991 to 28 per 1,000 in 2000 (Moore et al., 2001). Teen pregnancy has often been seen as an outcome of sexual abuse, both in the form of conceptions resulting from abuse (Boyer & Fine, 1992), and in conceptions resulting from the sexualized behaviors that victims sometime manifest in the wake of abuse (Butler & Burton, 1990). The number of teens who report being currently sexually active or as ever having sexual intercourse also experienced a drop during the 90's (Terry & Manlove, 2000).

Yet another related indicator that experienced a decline is the frequency of children running away. Police reported taking 39% fewer children into custody for running away in 1999 than in 1994 (Federal Bureau of Investigations, 1996, 2001). Running away is frequently cited as a coping strategy used by children who are being sexually abused at home, and it is a behavior that also increases a youth's risk for sexual assault and exploitation. (Famularo, Kinscherff, Fenton, & Bolduc, 1990). Its decline is consistent with a decline in sexual abuse.

Another child welfare indicator that declined during the same historic period was the percentage of children living in poverty. This dropped 27% from 22% of children under 18 in 1992 to 16% of children in 1999 (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2000). This was accompanied by decreases in unemployment and reduction in families on welfare. Poverty, unemployment and welfare have generally been considered less of a risk factor for sexual abuse than for other forms of maltreatment. But it is possible that increased employment, particularly among potential offenders, may have reduced opportunities to molest and perhaps some of the motivations (discouragement, anxiety) behind offending as well.

Finally, divorce rates have also declined over the same time period as the social indicators described above. Divorce rates have gone from 4.8 per 1,000 individuals in 1992 to 4.1 in 2000 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001), a decline of 15%. Divorce is generally considered both a risk factor for and a result of sexual abuse.

There are other predictions that one might make about changes in the nature of sexual abuse cases being disclosed that would be based on some assumptions about particular factors responsible for a true decline. One possible reason for a decline is that the intensive public awareness about the problem, combined with aggressive efforts at case finding, prosecution and incarceration, have had some deterrent effect on potential offenders. They may be increasingly

inhibited by fears of detection and prosecution. Deterrence generally has its greatest effect on those offenders with most potential for self-control, the biggest stake in conformity, the fewest other pressures to deviate. One prediction from this logic is that sexual abuse might decline differentially among biological fathers in intact families. Such offenders tend to be the least compulsive offenders with the smallest tendency to recidivate and greatest responsiveness to treatment (Hanson, 2001) – signs of self-control and a stake in conformity.

Data from the examined state data does confirm that there has been a particularly large decline in sexual abuse among this type of offender. Figures 3 and 8 displayed earlier under explanations B and C, showed that sexual abuse declined particularly among parental figures and in families with two biological or adoptive parents present. This could be interpreted as consistent with an argument that deterrence has played a role in a true decline.

However, alternative interpretations of these patterns are also possible. One could argue that biological parents in two parent families might also be the most effective at avoiding detection, and perhaps declining vigilance or increased intimidation among reporters has made the detection of abuse in such situations harder in recent years.

III. Summary and Discussion

The answer to the question why sexual abuse cases have declined in the 1990s is not likely to be a simple one. In all likelihood, multiple factors are involved in the trend. One of those factors is likely a true decline in the occurrence of sexual abuse, based on the strength of current evidence. Changed practices on the part of reporters and the child protective system also probably have played a part, but how large a part is difficult to ascertain.

The evidence for some true decline comes from several directions. One is the decline in self-report measures of sexual assault and sexual abuse. While the number from the NCVS are small and as is the size of the decline from Minnesota, they are crucial markers independent of the filtering or policies of social agencies. While there are always validity problems with the self-reporting of sensitive information, there are no strong reasons to think that candor about sexual abuse has declined.

Another strong piece of evidence for a true decline is the fact that so many other indicators of crime, sexual behavior, and family problems moved toward improvement over the same period of time. It suggests some integrated ameliorative dynamic is at work in vulnerability of children. It creates a plausibility for the decline of sexual abuse that would not exist if other indicators had been static.

A true decline also has theoretical plausibility. Sexual abuse is a type of crime and child welfare problem that has received a massive amount of attention over the last two decades. The attention has greatly overshadowed the attention given to other forms of child maltreatment, so that it should not be surprising that its decline would precede and exceed that of other forms. That attention has included an enormous number of prevention and intervention efforts – from school based prevention education, to treatment programs for juvenile and adult offenders, to greatly enhanced resources for criminal justice investigation and prosecution. A survey of the state correctional facilities suggests that between 1991 and 1997 the number of persons incarcerated in state correctional facilities for sex crimes against children increased 39% from 43,500 to 60,700. (Finkelhor & Ormrod, 2001). This does not include the many sexual abuse offenders who receive sanctions that do not involve incarceration for a year or more. Unlike other forms of child maltreatment, people who commit sexual abuse are much more likely to lose

access to their victims (as a result of court order or divorce) or to lose their liberty altogether.

The incapacitation of offenders alone should be expected to have some effect, and it is reasonable to think that, given their scale, many of the other efforts have had some protective and deterrent effect.

In addition, the argument for a true decline in sexual abuse gains strength as a result of the relatively inconsistent evidence for other explanations. That is not to say the other explanations lack evidence. Indeed, some states clearly have made statistical and administrative changes that have contributed to the decline. There is evidence that allegations involving very young children have differentially declined perhaps because such cases have less credibility and that cases involving young perpetrators may have declined because they are seen as outside the purview of child protection system. There is evidence from at least one state that is consistent with the possibility that some of the decline may be due to the “backlash” or the intimidation of reporters.

But taken together the evidence for these other explanations seems to exist only in some places, or it seems to explain only a small portion of the decline. The declines have been so widespread geographically and have occurred across so many categories of children, offenders, and types of abuse and types of evidence that it certainly does not seem rash to include a true decline as at least one part of the overall picture.

Many observers of the declining numbers, including state officials, have seemed strongly reluctant to entertain the possibility that they represent a true decline, preferring almost any other explanation as an alternative. This attitude may stem from a concern that if people believe sexual abuse is on the wane, their vigilance and concern about the problem and willingness to support

funding will disappear. Increasing numbers were part of what was used to mobilize people and resources during the 1980s, and so declining numbers might readily demobilize the same.

While social problems do go through a well-recognized issue/attention cycle, and there have been some changes in the media attitude toward sexual abuse, there are reasons to doubt that a true decline in incidence of the current magnitude could, if recognized, result in a massive desertion of interest or funding. For one, the public and professional interest in the issue of sexual abuse has roots that go far beyond the matter of its absolute incidence, and relate to the now well established role that it plays in discussions of family problems, gender relations, sexuality and mental health. The high profile public and professional role this problem has achieved in recent years will not easily change. Secondly, the other social problems discussed earlier that have evidenced recent declines do not appear to have experienced any social policy desertion as a result. Homicide, crime, and teen pregnancy are all still issues of ongoing serious policy attention, despite their declines, because even at reduced levels they remain serious problems. The declines may have in fact added policy interest. In part this is because problems that fester for a long time without improvement in spite of considerable policy attention become frustrating. Policy makers and the public can become discouraged and decide that they are beyond immediate solution. The argument can be made that when the public and policy makers see signs of success from social initiatives, this can provide energy and justification for expanded efforts to reinforce what appears to be working. Of course, the factors influencing public interest and policy-making are complex. But there is no strong reason to believe that evidence of a true decline in sexual abuse by itself will have negative effects on the policy environment around the problem.

Because social policy benefits from understanding the factors that result in success, it needs to be a priority to accept the hypothesis that sexual abuse has declined and to turn the search now toward identifying the reasons why. To what extent have prevention education, increased public awareness, greater prosecution and incarceration played a role? Such an understanding can be used to help formulate policies that will extend and accelerate the decline in sexual abuse, as well perhaps as in other forms of child maltreatment.

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Figure 1: Sexual Abuse Substantiations 1990-99: Extrapolated to U. S. Child Population

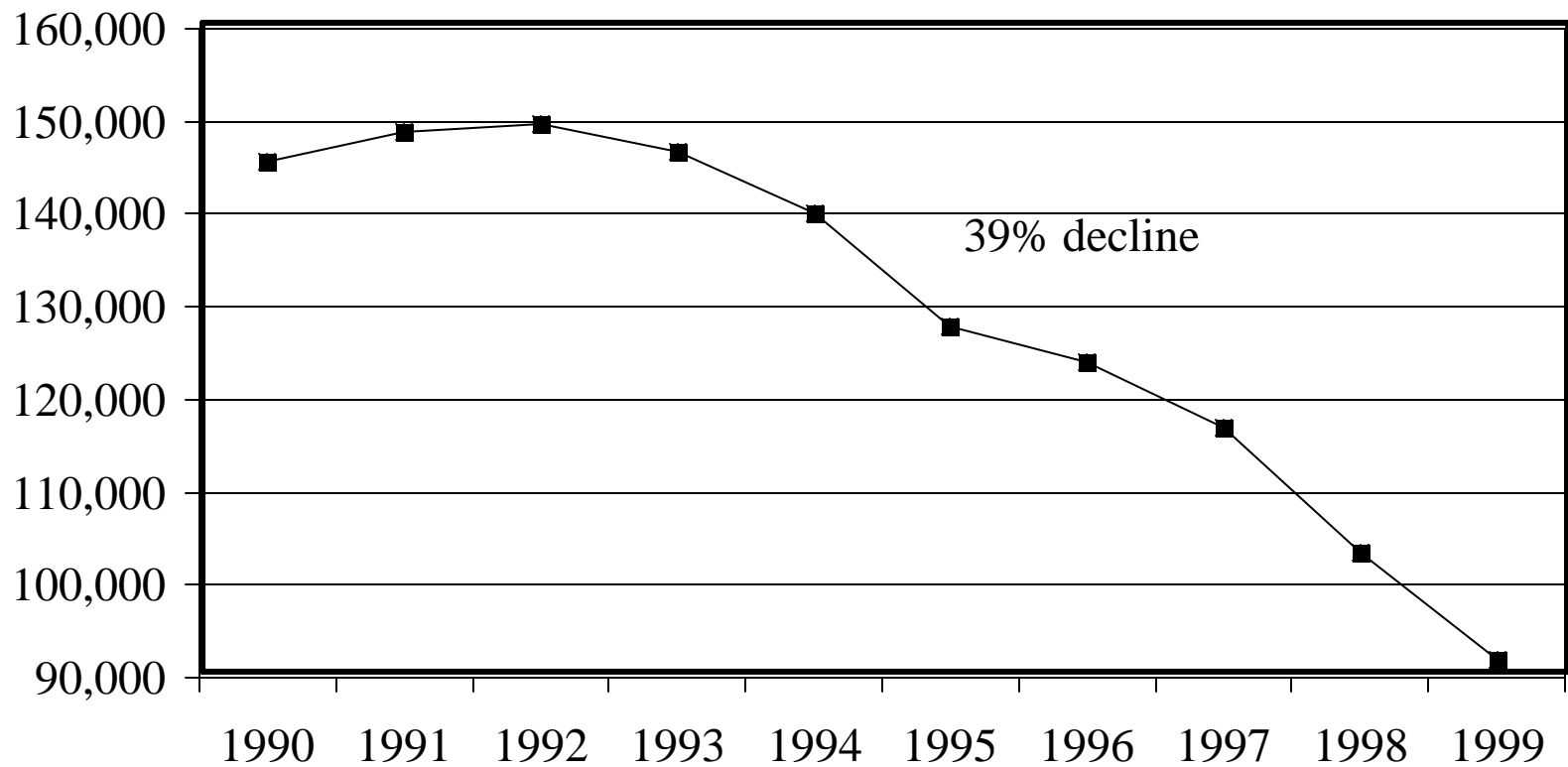


Figure 2: Illinois Sexual Abuse Report and Substantiation Trends: 1990-99

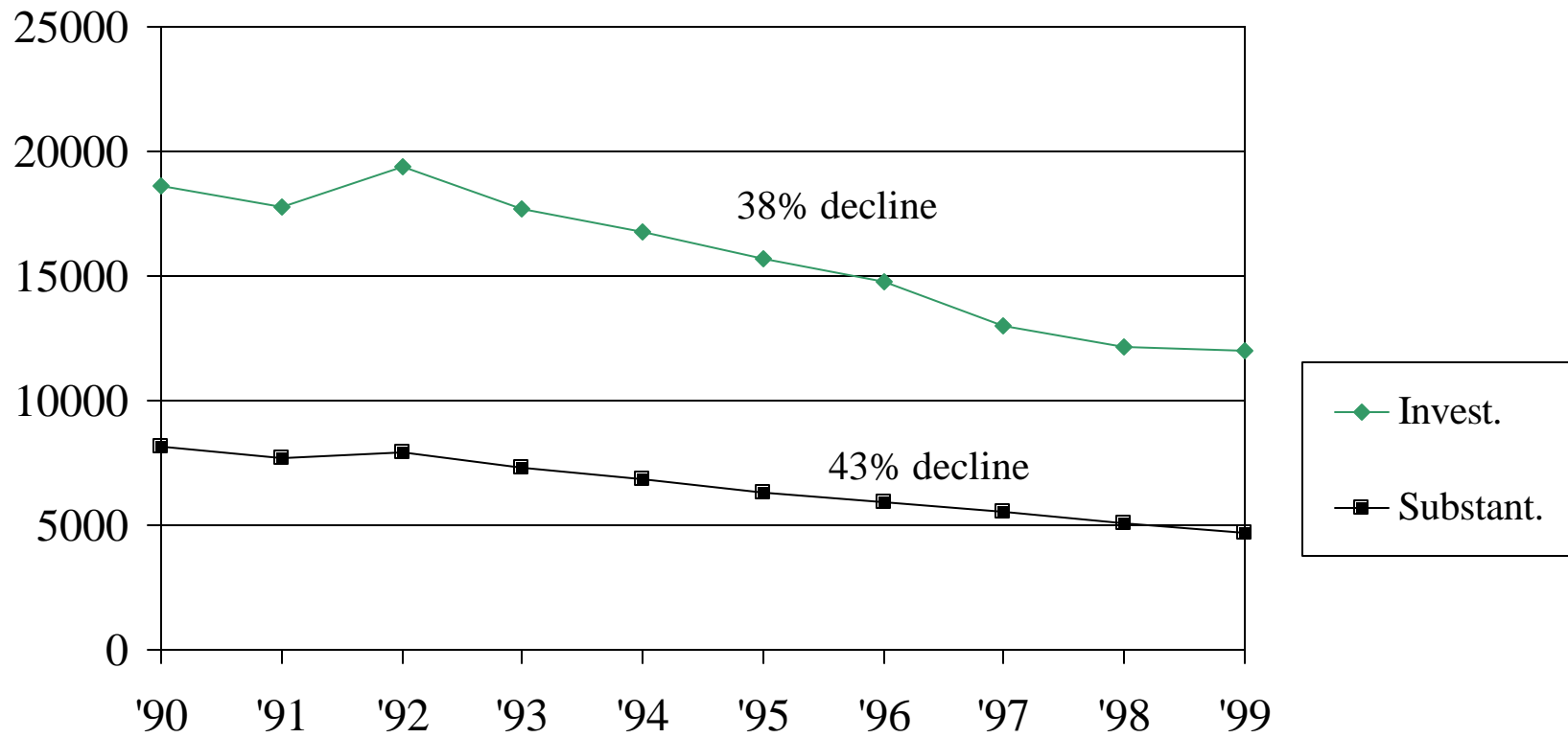


Figure 3: Pennsylvania Sexual Abuse Investigation Trends by Victim Living Situation at Time of Report

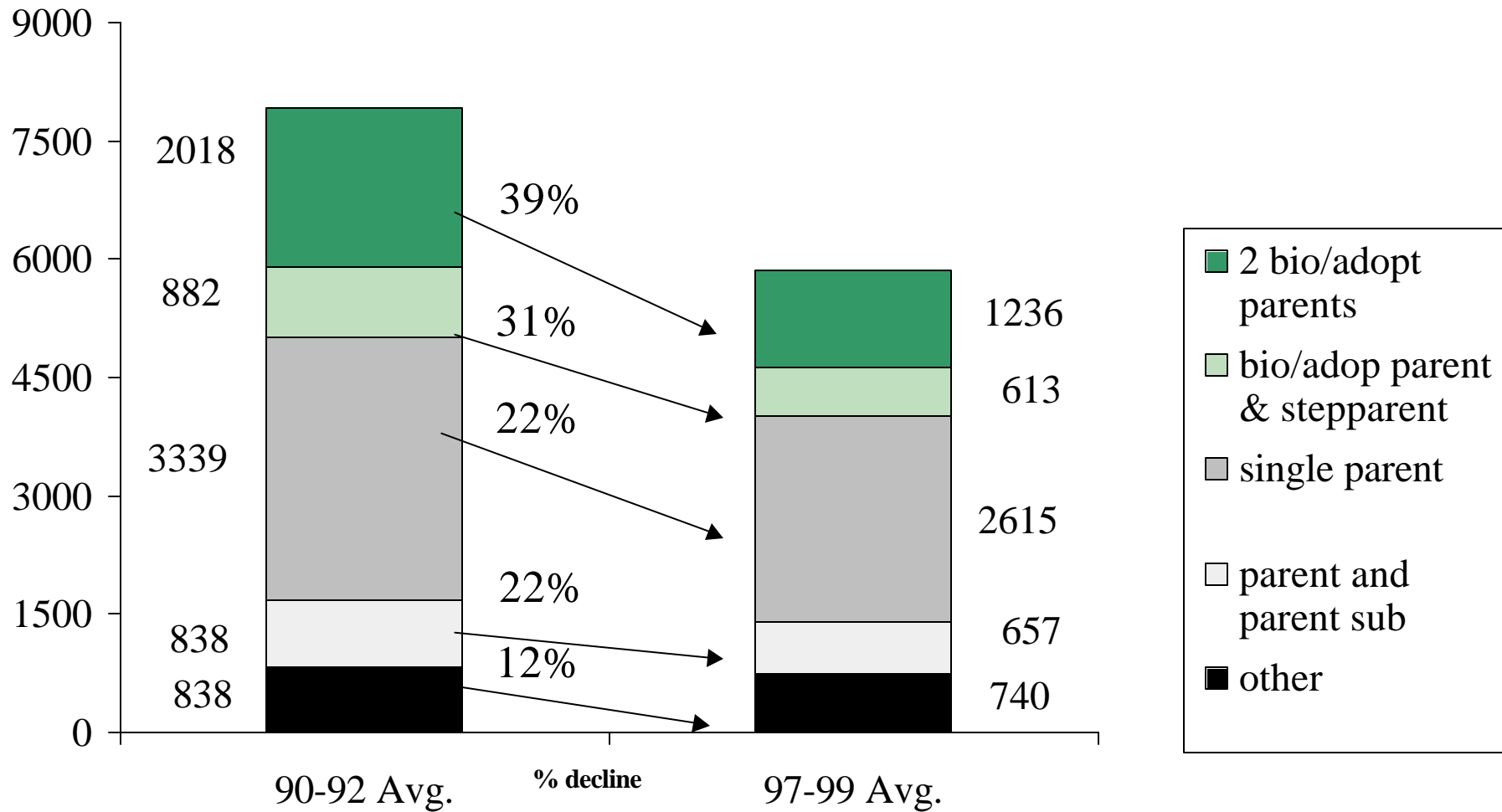


Figure 4: Illinois Sexual Abuse Investigation Trends by Age of Victim

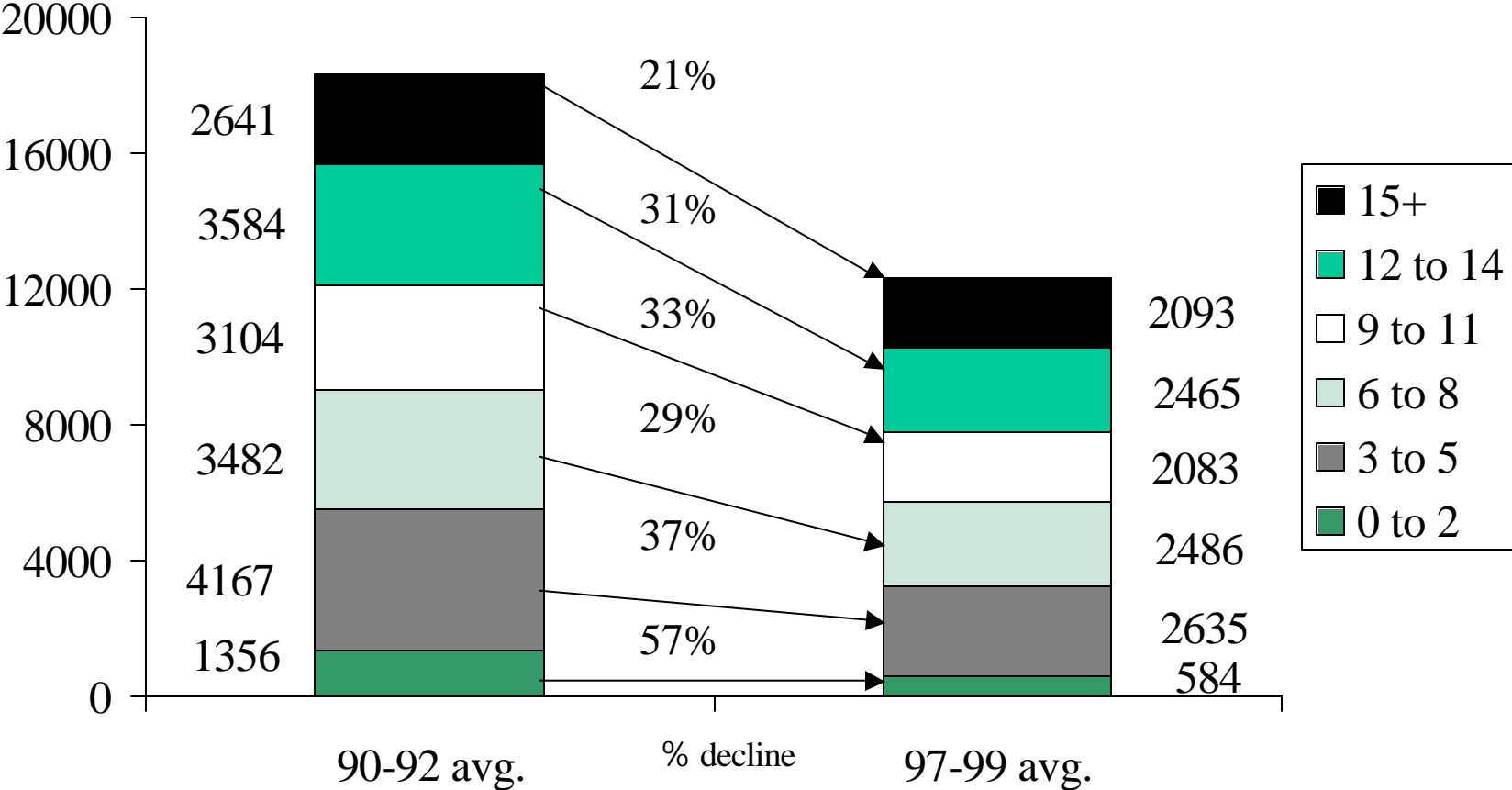


Figure 5: Pennsylvania Trends in Indicated Cases of Sexual Abuse by Investigation Outcomes

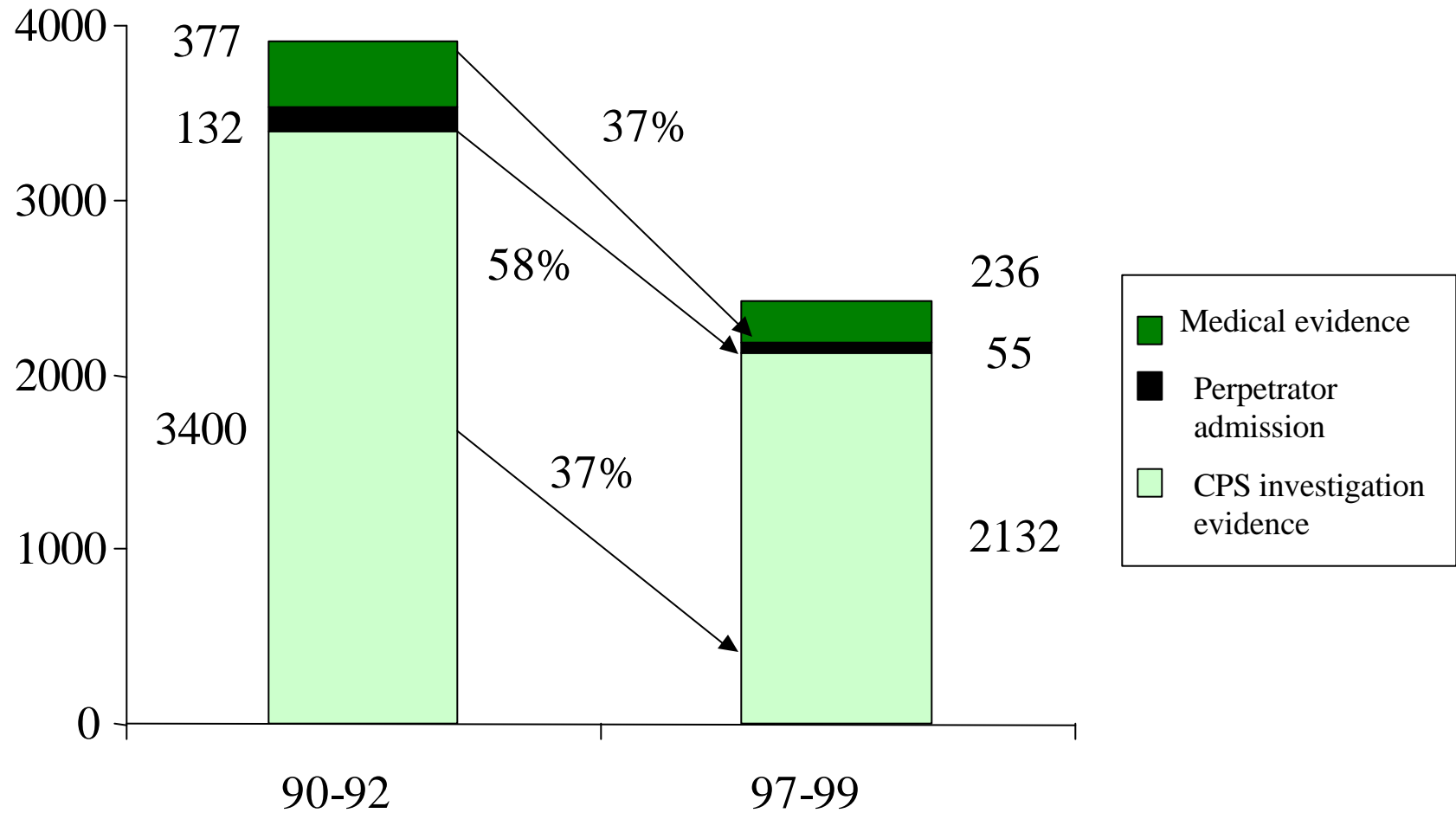


Figure 6: Illinois Investigated Sexual Abuse Trends by Abuse Type

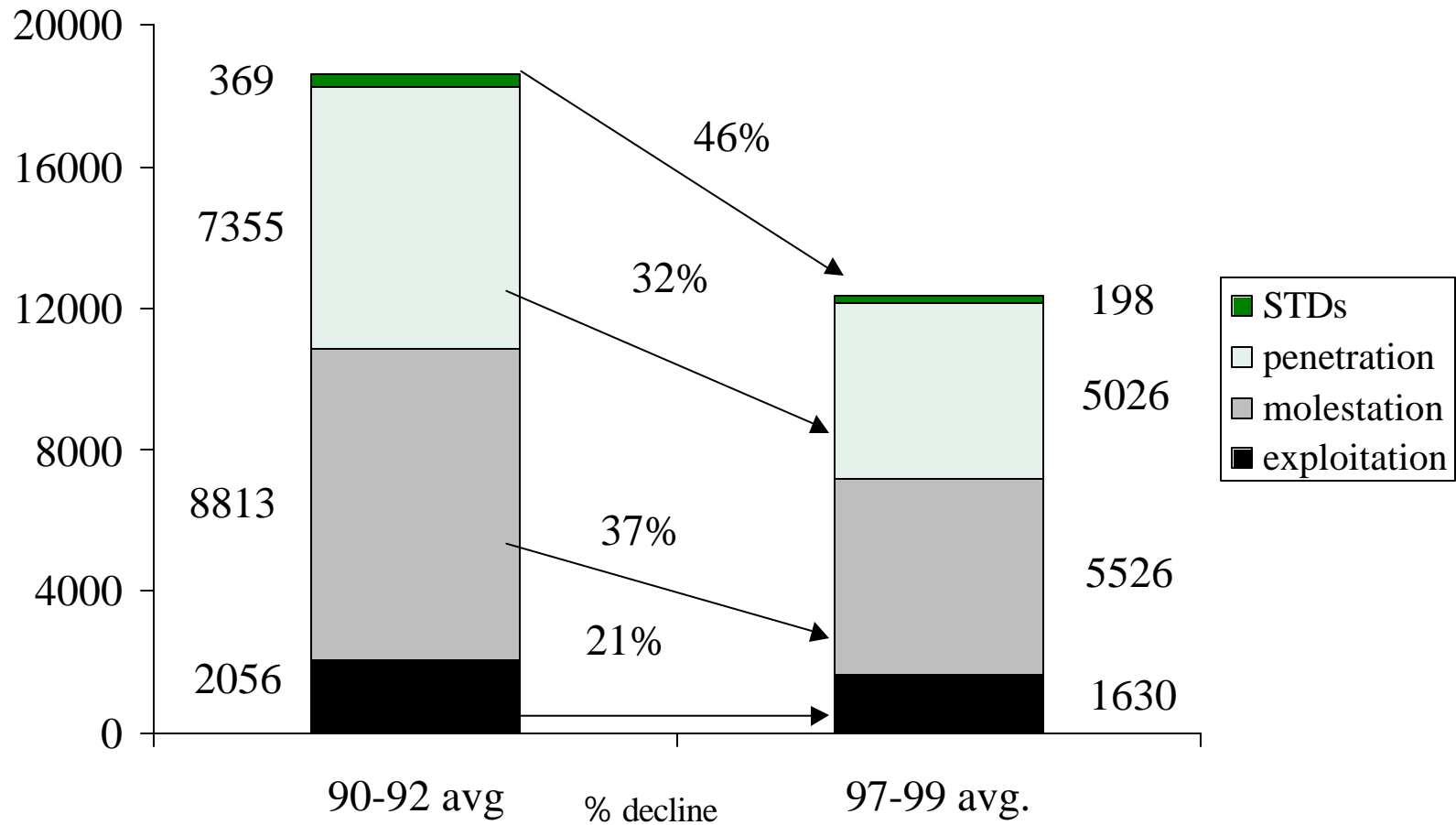
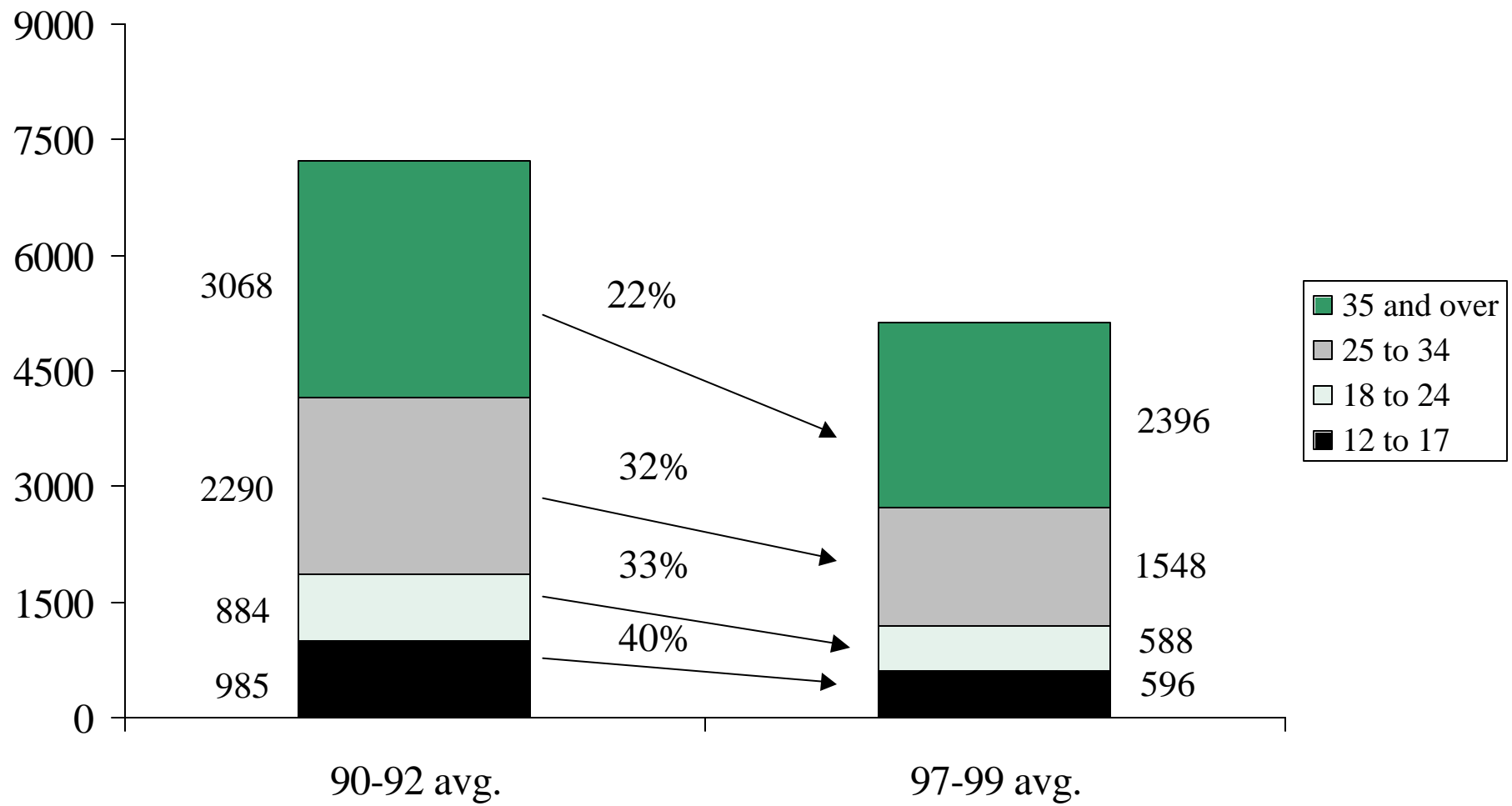


Figure 7: Pennsylvania Investigated Sexual Abuse Trends by Age of Perpetrator



% decline

Figure 8: Illinois Investigated Sexual Abuse Trends by Perpetrator Relationship to Victim

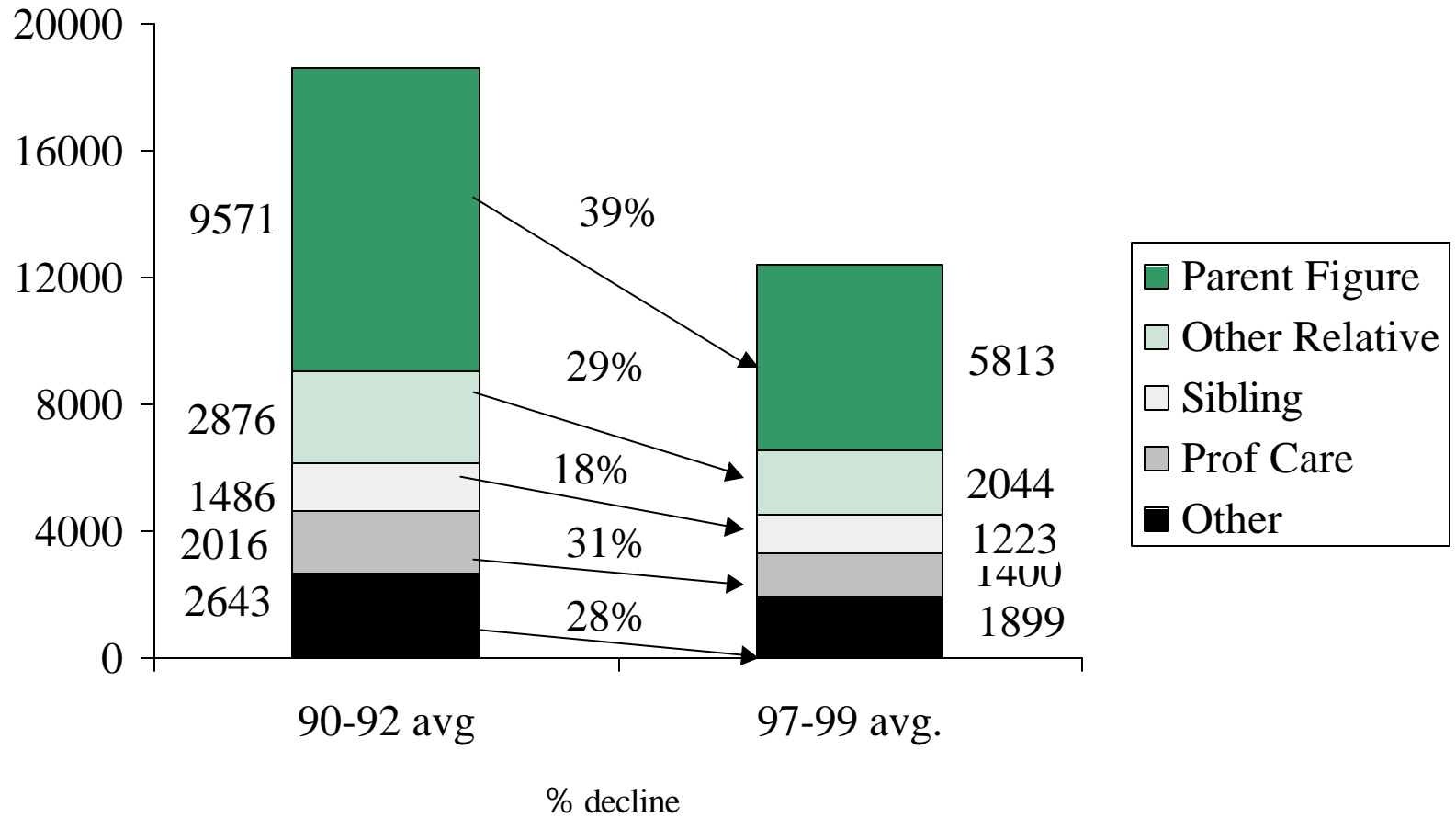


Figure 9: Oregon Sexual Abuse Report and Substantiation Trends: 1989-99

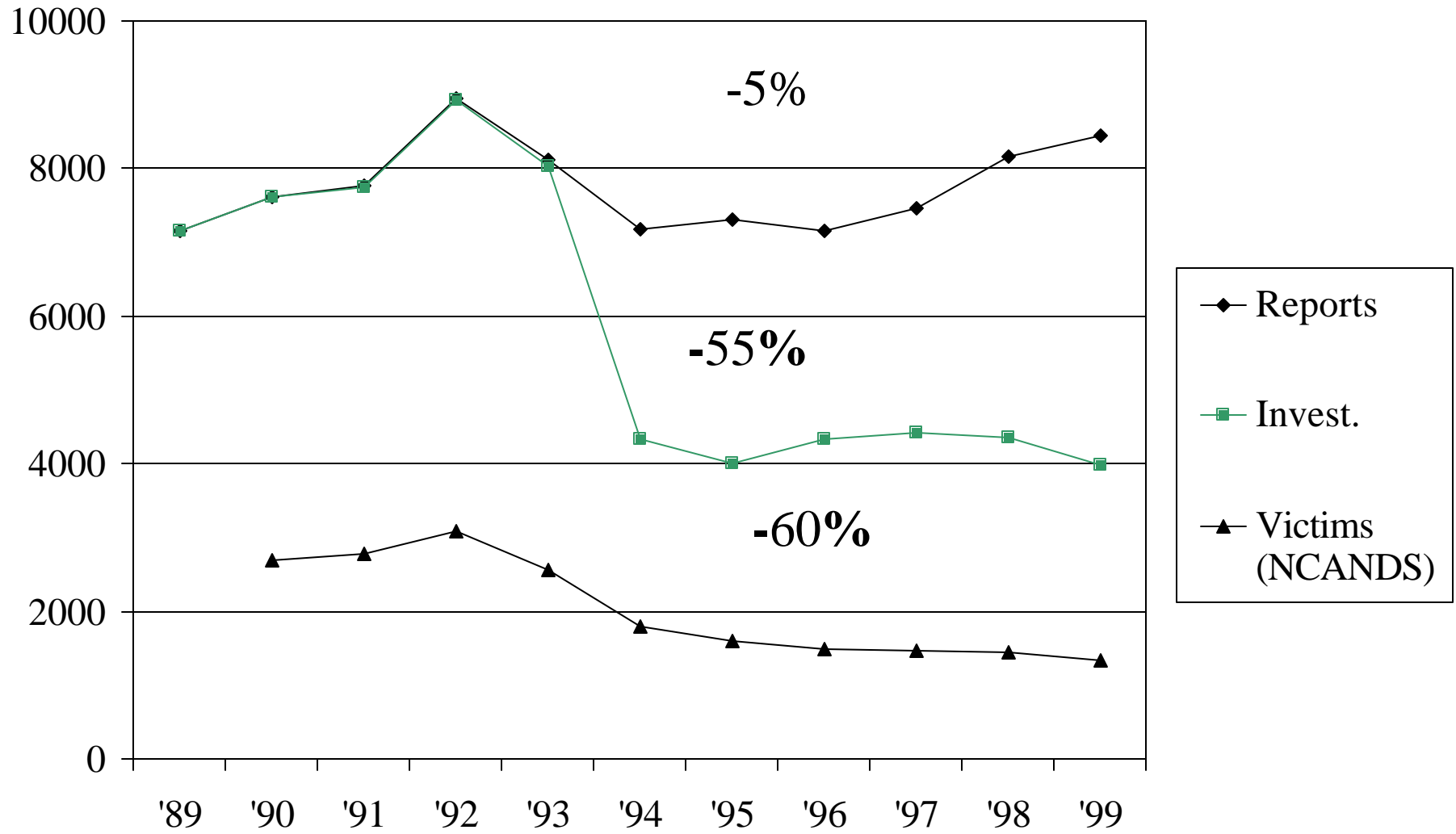


Figure 10: Declines in Sexual Abuse Cases by Anonymous Reporters for Illinois and Pennsylvania (1991-98)

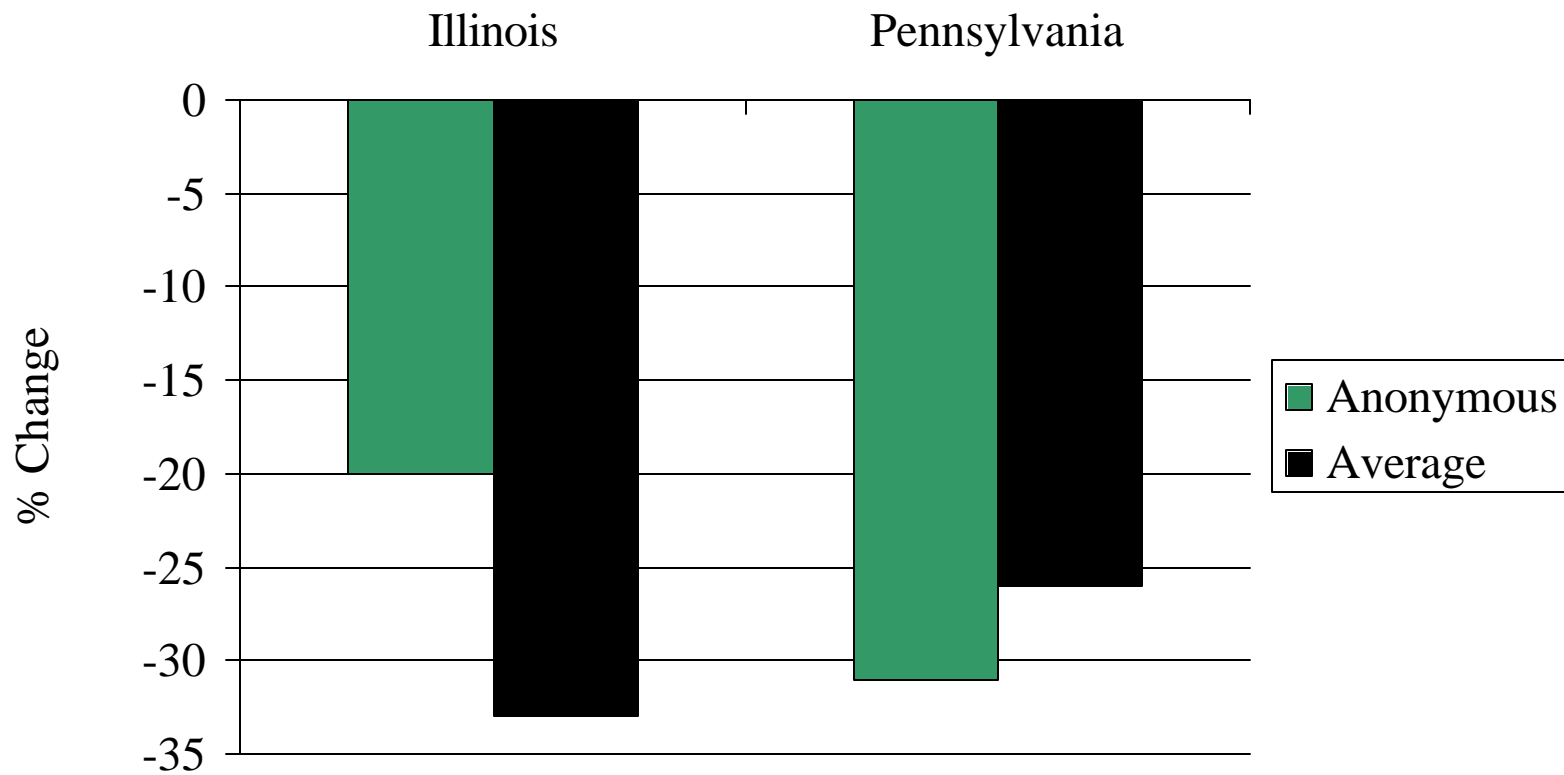
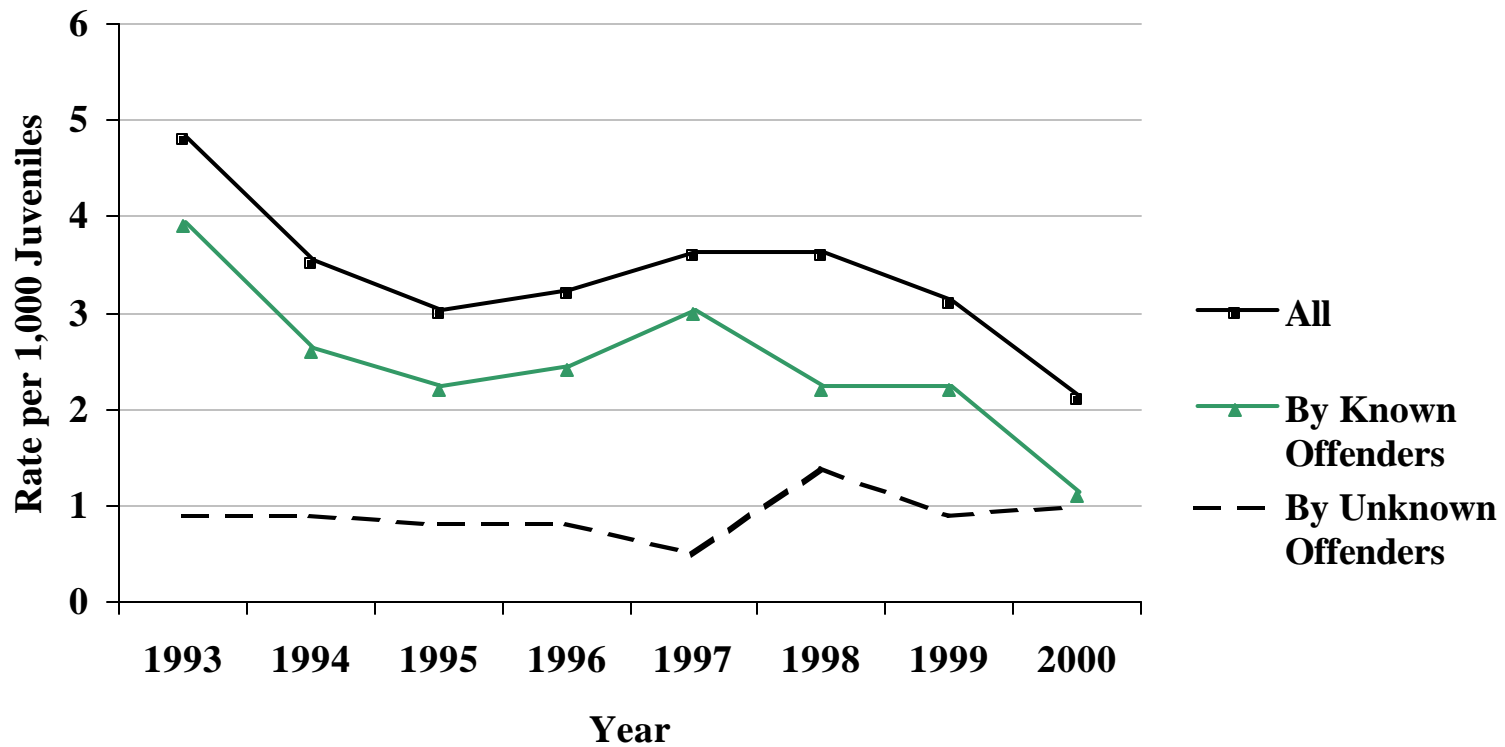


Figure 11: Declines in Sexual Abuse Cases Reported by Private and Hospital Physicians for Illinois and Pennsylvania (1991-98)



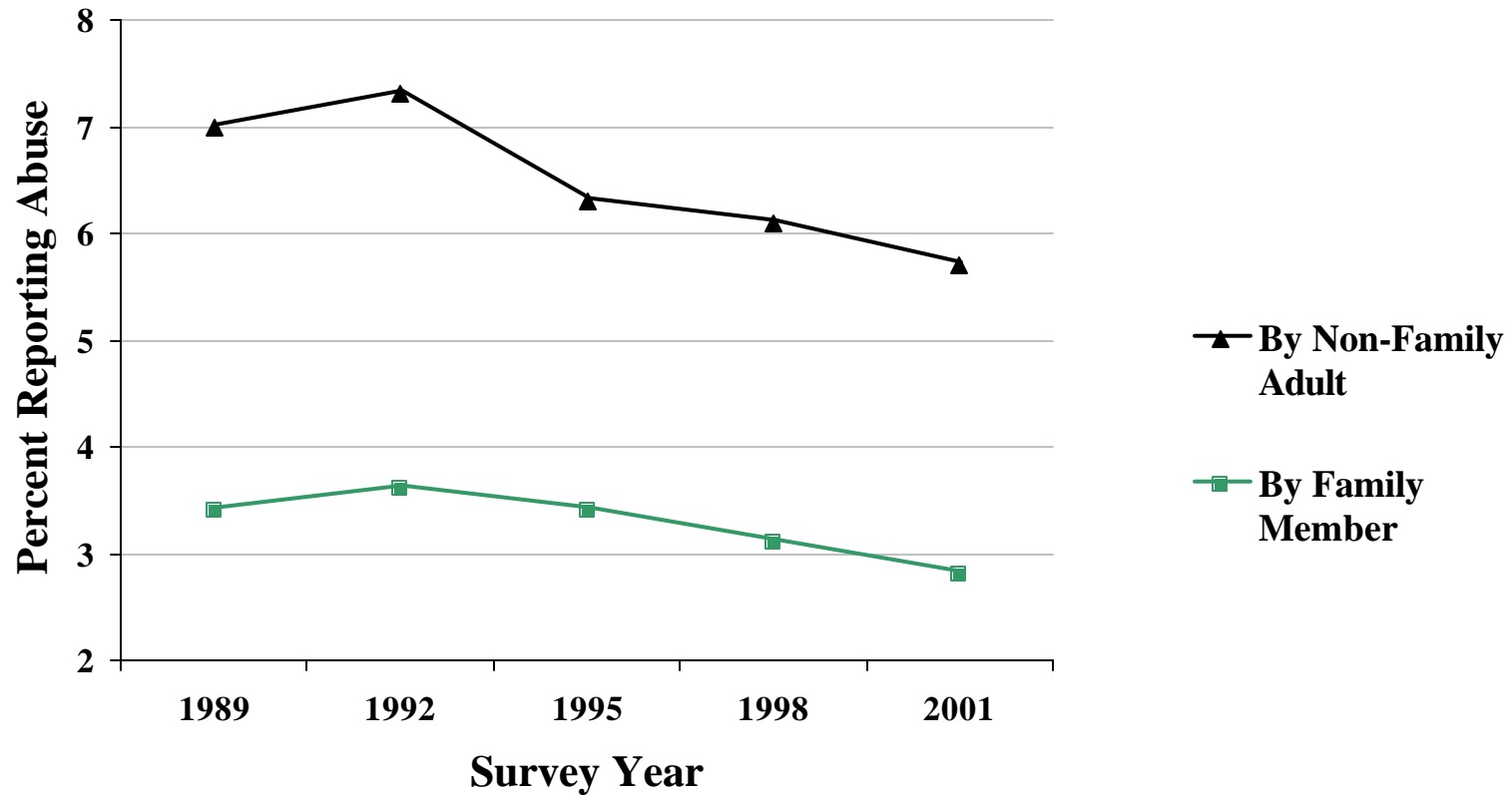
Figure 12: Juvenile Sex Victimization Trends: 1993-2000



Note: juveniles victims are 12 – 17 years of age; known offenders are family members or acquaintances; unknown offenders are strangers or unidentified.

Source: NCVS, each year, for number of incidents; CCRC calculations for rates.

Figure 13: Juvenile Sexual Abuse Trends in Minnesota, 1989 - 2001



Note: Respondents are 6th, 9th, and 12th grade students enrolled in public schools in selected Minnesota school districts.

Source: Minnesota School Survey, unpublished data