

UPDATED TRENDS IN CHILD MALTREATMENT, 2021

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New national data for 2021 show mixed trends for child maltreatment compared to 2020. Physical abuse declined 7% and neglect declined 4%. At the same time sexual abuse rose 4%. Child maltreatment fatalities increased less than 1%. Given disruptions to social life and investigative behavior due to COVID-19, all interpretations of recent trends should be made very cautiously.

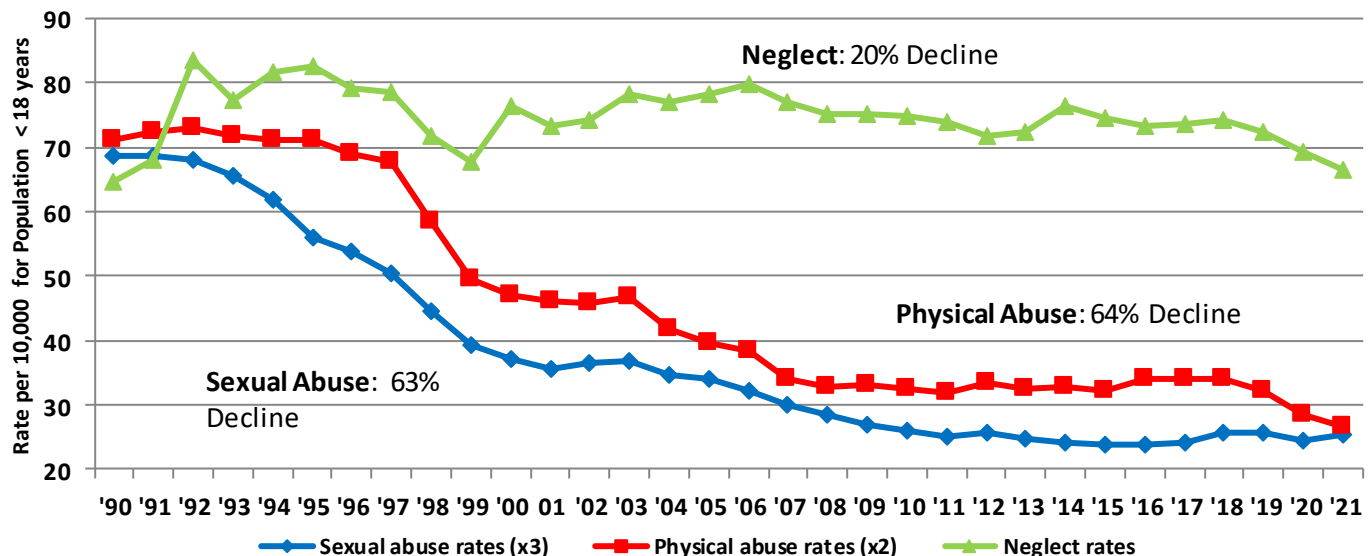
The data used in producing the graphs and tables come from a special calculation obtained from the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) to supplement the data published in the original report which aggregates statistics from NCANDS and publishes statistics from state child protection agencies.

The most recent data from NCANDS were published in February, 2023 and concern cases of child maltreatment investigated in 2021. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/report/child-maltreatment-2021>

The newly released NCANDS report combines sexual abuse, physical abuse and neglect with several other kinds of maltreatment and estimates a total of 600,000 for 2021, a 3% drop from an estimated 618,000 for 2020.

Breaking out cases by type of abuse, the data show that physical abuse declined by 7% to a nationally estimated 96,000. Neglect declined 4% to a nationally estimated 479,000. Sexual abuse increased 4% to 61,000. Figure 1 represents the trends as rates per 10,000 minors in the population for all three maltreatment types.

U.S. Maltreatment Trends: 1990-2021



Note: Trend estimates represent total change from 1992 to 2021. Annual rates for physical abuse and sexual abuse have been multiplied by 2 and 3 respectively in Figure 1 so that trend comparisons can be highlighted.

¹ The statistics in Table 1 and Figure 1 concern substantiated cases of sexual abuse, physical abuse and neglect. A substantiated case means a case that has been reported to a child protection agency, investigated and deemed to have occurred according to a “preponderance of evidence.” The child maltreatment cases referred and investigated by state child protection agencies primarily involve abuse by caregivers. The cases do not include many involving stranger abusers, unless some element of caregiver neglect was involved.

Table 1: State Trends in Child Maltreatment: 2020-2021 and 1992-2021*

US States	Recent Trends: % change in rate 2020-2021			Long-term Trends: % change in rate 1992-2021		
	Sexual Abuse	Physical Abuse	Neglect	Sexual Abuse	Physical Abuse	Neglect
Alabama	-6%	2%	-3%	-55%	-22%	-60%
Alaska	-24%	-19%	-14%	-82%	-77%	-25%
Arizona	missing	missing	missing	missing	missing	missing
Arkansas	-1%	-5%	6%	-15%	-39%	41%
California	17%	-13%	-9%	-87%	-93%	-32%
Colorado	14%	-6%	-4%	-56%	-70%	50%
Connecticut	4%	-27%	-11%	-60%	-93%	-52%
Delaware	42%	5%	-28%	-9%	-58%	-71%
District of Columbia (DC)	12%	0%	13%	11%	-56%	-52%
Florida	9%	-7%	-5%	-78%	-89%	-73%
Georgia	-7%	-1%	17%	-90%	-90%	-85%
Hawaii	-21%	-41%	-8%	-76%	-92%	-63%
Idaho	39%	-51%	58%	-86%	-84%	-63%
Illinois	-12%	-9%	4%	-11%	37%	30%
Indiana	0%	-15%	-6%	-67%	-82%	15%
Iowa	0%	8%	6%	-50%	-57%	176%
Kansas	-3%	-14%	-8%	-45%	-32%	57%
Kentucky	15%	-14%	-13%	-69%	-85%	-6%
Louisiana	-20%	-20%	-5%	-72%	-82%	-35%
Maine	-20%	-24%	-14%	-40%	31%	112%
Maryland	-2%	-19%	-18%	-13%	-80%	-66%
Massachusetts	7%	-9%	0%	-67%	-74%	32%
Michigan	12%	-10%	-12%	-38%	-25%	127%
Minnesota	-13%	-34%	-16%	-2%	-87%	-46%
Mississippi	13%	-3%	5%	-25%	-54%	23%
Missouri	-9%	-8%	1%	-54%	-62%	-78%
Montana	-18%	-19%	-22%	-89%	-93%	-7%
Nebraska	-11%	8%	6%	-72%	-81%	-39%
Nevada	8%	-7%	16%	-53%	-69%	-52%
New Hampshire	-34%	21%	-20%	-83%	-60%	126%
New Jersey	-9%	-33%	-17%	-65%	-95%	-76%
New Mexico	-17%	-27%	-17%	-72%	-59%	33%
New York	-3%	-23%	-4%	-64%	-77%	75%
North Carolina	13%	-1%	-2%	-43%	-35%	-43%
North Dakota	23%	-24%	-16%	-73%	-92%	-44%
Ohio	1%	-3%	6%	-57%	-14%	-56%
Oklahoma	-4%	-11%	-7%	-42%	-49%	65%
Oregon	24%	-12%	-17%	-72%	-53%	28%
Pennsylvania	0%	1%	12%	-46%	-37%	30%
Rhode Island	-6%	-18%	-3%	-76%	-79%	-32%
South Carolina	9%	4%	13%	-63%	155%	17%
South Dakota	-3%	-9%	-8%	-86%	-76%	-28%
Tennessee	1%	-15%	-22%	-31%	32%	-70%
Texas	14%	-5%	-2%	-52%	-76%	11%
Utah	-21%	1%	-7%	-63%	14%	-18%
Vermont	-15%	-26%	-23%	-82%	-8%	-99%
Virginia	4%	-22%	-12%	-74%	-72%	-70%
Washington	10%	-17%	-13%	-83%	-89%	-88%
West Virginia	1%	-5%	4%	-62%	178%	-3%
Wisconsin	9%	-16%	0%	-85%	-90%	-55%
Wyoming	5%	-21%	-11%	-87%	-97%	-45%

Although the changes in the latest data are likely not reliable as indicators of underlying trends, the longer term trends preceding the pandemic have more credibility. Physical abuse rates have declined 64% from 1992 to 2021 (Figure 1). Sexual abuse rates have siimilarly declined 63%. The longer-term trend for neglect is also down 20% since a peak in 1992.

It is not possible to directly compare state maltreatment rates with each other because states differ in how statutes define abuse and how abuse is investigated and processed. However, looking at within-state trends, most individual states experienced substantial declines in sexual and physical abuse during the period since the early 1990s (see Table 1). The data do not show any obvious regional patterns to the decline.

In its data on child maltreatment fatalities, the 2021 data shows a small change from and earlier 1737 to 1746. (See Table 2).

There was considerable concern that the pandemic would exacerbate child maltreatment, isolating families together under conditions of increased stress and uncertainty, and reducing exterior supervision including child welfare investigations. It may be premature to judge the pandemic's immediate or lasting influence on child maltreatment, but few of the indicators so far confirm the dire predictions. In addition to declines in maltreatment fatalities, physical abuse and neglect, there were no spikes in emergency room visits or hospitalizations for child abuse and neglect (Sege & Stephens, 2022). The increase in sexual abuse is within the range of year-to-year fluctuations seen over the last 5 years.

*Note that in states with smaller populations and lower rates of reported maltreatment, small changes can result in large percentage changes

Note: Negative percentages: % decline; Positive percentages: % increase.

The declines in physical and sexual abuse for the period between 1993 and 2008 were reinforced by the Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-4). That study used consistent and standardized definitions of child maltreatment and gathered reports directly from community professionals in schools, hospitals, day care and settings, avoiding problems created when state agencies change their standards, practices or their data systems. The comparison of rates from 1993 to 2008 in NIS-3 and NIS-4 largely tracked the patterns shown in the NCCANDS data over the same period.

<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/report/fourth-national-incidence-study-child-abuse-and-neglect-nis-4-report-congre>

Another study also cast doubt on the idea that changes in practices such as worker caseload (an effect of cutbacks, for example) were related to declines (Almeida, Cohen, Subramanian & Molnar, 2008). In addition, victim self-report surveys show declines in sexual offenses and physical assaults against children over the same period, also confirming a decline in true underlying incidence. (For a summary of some of these supporting surveys, see Finkelhor & Jones, 2012).

<https://www.unh.edu/ccrc/sites/default/files/media/2022-02/why-have-child-maltreatment-and-victimization-declined.pdf>

There is currently no consensus in the child maltreatment field about why sexual abuse and physical abuse substantiations in particular have declined so considerably over the longer term, although a recent article and book suggest some possible factors (Finkelhor & Jones, 2006; Finkelhor, 2008). The period when sexual and physical abuse started the dramatic downward trend was marked by sustained economic improvement, increases in the numbers of law enforcement and child protection personnel, more aggressive prosecution and incarceration policies, growing public awareness about the problems, and the dissemination of new treatment options for family and mental health problems, including new psychiatric medication.

There is no obvious reason why neglect trends have differed so sharply from those of sexual and physical abuse (Jones, Finkelhor & Halter, 2006). One possibility is that neglect has not declined as much because it has not been the subject of the same level of policy attention and public awareness as sexual and physical abuse.

Table 2: Child Maltreatment Fatality Trends: 2020-2021

US States	Child Maltreatment Fatalities		
	Count 2020	Count 2021	% Change 2020-2021
Alabama	47	36	-23%
Alaska	2	6	200%
Arizona	18	-	missing
Arkansas	30	36	20%
California	150	135	-10%
Colorado	24	31	29%
Connecticut	9	14	56%
Delaware	5	7	40%
District of Columbia (DC)	4	2	-50%
Florida	101	84	-17%
Georgia	85	92	8%
Hawaii	0	2	---
Idaho	10	3	-70%
Illinois	102	89	-13%
Indiana	56	57	2%
Iowa	9	12	33%
Kansas	10	10	0%
Kentucky	9	11	22%
Louisiana	18	23	28%
Maine	1	8	700%
Maryland	50	84	68%
Massachusetts	-	-	missing
Michigan	43	35	-19%
Minnesota	21	22	5%
Mississippi	38	49	29%
Missouri	44	75	70%
Montana	5	2	-60%
Nebraska	2	1	-50%
Nevada	14	28	100%
New Hampshire	2	3	50%
New Jersey	17	10	-41%
New Mexico	13	10	-23%
New York	105	126	20%
North Carolina	23	45	96%
North Dakota	5	4	-20%
Ohio	34	38	4%
Oklahoma	42	15	-64%
Oregon	17	18	6%
Pennsylvania	67	65	-3%
Rhode Island	2	2	0%
South Carolina	36	41	14%
South Dakota	12	9	-25%
Tennessee	34	32	-6%
Texas	255	206	-19%
Utah	6	4	-33%
Vermont	0	1	---
Virginia	39	51	31%
Washington	14	19	36%
West Virginia	12	9	-25%
Wisconsin	32	22	-31%
Wyoming	3	2	-33%
Total	1737	1746	1%

Note: Unlike Table 1, Table 2 is not a change in rate, but raw number of child fatalities in each state. Negative percentages: % decline; Positive percentages: % increase.

Another possibility is that increased education and recent state and professional initiatives about neglect, including the identification of new forms of neglect like drug-affected newborns, has masked a decline in other conventional types of neglect.

The fact that overall maltreatment rates did not worsen in the face of economic deterioration starting in 2008 is a surprise to many observers.

It is unfortunate that information about the trends in child maltreatment are not better publicized and more widely known. The long-term decline in sexual and physical abuse may have important implications for public policy. These trends deserve more discussion, analysis and research.

Additional information about trends in child abuse and neglect is available at: <http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/Trends/index.html>.

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