

"Child Maltreatment Trends in the 1990s: Why Does Neglect Differ From Sexual and Physical Abuse," by Lisa Jones, David Finkelhor and Stephanie Halter, Child Maltreatment, May 2006.

This article is a discussion of the national decline in substantiated cases of child maltreatment over the past 15 years with a special emphasis on the large difference in the decline of physical abuse and sexual abuse compared to neglect. The National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) indicates that CPS substantiations of sex abuse reports declined 47% from 1990-2003; substantiations of physical abuse declined 36% from 1992-2003 while substantiations of neglect declined by only 7% during this period of time. These authors compare states' "neglect trend difference", that is the difference in the rate of decline of physical abuse and sexual abuse combined compared to the decline in neglect. Washington State falls into the 'neglect lag small' category along with 11 other states based on a 28% difference in the decline of sexual abuse and physical abuse substantiations compared to the decline in neglect substantiations. Ten states had "neglect lags" of 50-133%. "The median difference score (for all states and the District of Columbia) was a 26 percentage point lag for neglect," according to these authors.

Jones, Finkelhor and Halter review the arguments for believing that the declines of substantiated sexual abuse and physical abuse are real as opposed to "artifactual", i.e., illusory based on a reduction in reporting, changes in CPS classification procedures or reduced CPS willingness to substantiate cases. After taking a careful look at substantiation data in Pennsylvania and Illinois, the authors conclude that the evidence for the "artifactual" hypothesis is weak; for example, state data does not indicate a disproportionately large decline in non-family or adolescent sexual abuse which CPS agencies might be classifying as neglect instead of sexual abuse. In the strongest part of their article, the authors review evidence from self report surveys of victims such as the National Crime Victimization Survey and the Minnesota Student Survey, both of which show the same dramatic decline in sexual abuse and or physical abuse. The authors also note "that numerous child related social problems had seen substantial declines over the same time period," including "declines in overall crimes, juvenile crime victimization and offending, intimate partner violence, births to teenage mothers, runaway children, children living in poverty and teen suicide." The authors believe that "Declines in these areas also suggest a general improvement in the well being of children across the United States" and "the similar trends in so many child well-being indicators argue against the proposition that the declines are artifactual."

Why hasn't there been the same dramatic decline in neglect? The authors consider a number of possible explanations in attempting to answer this question, but they are clearly less confident of their conclusions than their certainty that the decline in sexual

abuse and physical abuse is real. They comment that there has been a greater mobilization of public awareness around physical abuse and sexual abuse compared to neglect and less of an investment in prevention programs targeting neglect. They notice that "neglect represents a broader and perhaps less concrete form of maltreatment and could be more difficult to target through educational messages." They discuss the possible impact of greater criminal justice involvement in sexual abuse and serious physical abuse; "as of 2002, 37 states required reporting of CPS cases to law enforcement, and most specify cross reporting only in cases of sexual abuse and serious physical abuse," the authors state.

The authors consider welfare reform at length and comment that "most of the dire predictions about the effects of welfare reform have not been confirmed by subsequent research." Curiously, they have little or nothing to say about the relationship between and among substance abuse, neglect, and placements of infants and toddlers, the major child welfare trend over the past 20 years; and they say nothing about the high rate of recurrence of neglect compared to physical abuse or sexual abuse, a research finding which strongly suggests that child welfare interventions are less effective in chronic neglect cases than in other forms of child maltreatment.

The explanation which Jones, Finkelhor and Halter favor "is that something is masking a real decline in neglect." "It is possible that changes to definition, reporting or intervention might be masking a national decline of neglect." Perhaps the public is more sensitive to indicators of neglect, the authors speculate, and some states' child welfare systems might have invested in public education campaigns which have increased reporting or substantiation of neglect cases. It is difficult to give much credence to the hypothesis that neglect has declined in a state like Washington which experienced a doubling of neglect reports in the 1990s, the same decade during which CPS reports of sexual abuse declined by half. A more likely explanation is that substantiation data has masked an increase in neglect clearly reflected in the CPS reporting data.

The authors reflect that "The failure of neglect to decline nationally is something of an enigma" given the decline in child poverty in the 1990s."One possibility (they state) is that neglect is harder to prevent or has not been subject to the same intervention efforts or other social change factors that have helped with physical or sexual abuse," a plausible speculation which hints at the tolerance of child welfare agencies and courts for extreme forms of chronic neglect and the uncertainty and confusion which underlie this tolerance. What would it mean for public child welfare systems and courts to become as intolerant of chronic neglect as they generally are of recurrent physical or sexual abuse?

Jones, Finkelhor and Halter maintain that "it is also important to generate hypotheses about the sources of such trends (i.e., the decline in sexual and physical abuse) that can be subject to additional investigation and utilized in public policy discussions." They comment on the reluctance of those advocates and scholars who are well informed about these trends to interpret them, leaving the field open for "others with superficial knowledge or ideological agendas" to fill the explanatory vacuum. More to the point,

these trends are great news for child welfare advocates and practitioners and a possible source of guidance for future prevention, early intervention and intervention efforts. It is of the utmost importance to interpret these trends correctly in order to shape public policy and improve child welfare practice. Jones, Finkelhor and Halter have produced the best thinking to date in the scholarly literature regarding these trends; their work should engender a lively public discussion among advocates, practitioners and policy makers.