

Brief communication

Are increased worker caseloads in state child protective  
service agencies a potential explanation for the  
decline in child sexual abuse?  
A multilevel analysis<sup>☆</sup>

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## Background

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is a common and serious public health problem. National probability samples have estimated that CSA affects between less than 1–16% of men and 3–27% of women in the United States (US) (Kendler et al., 2000; Molnar, Buka, & Kessler, 2001). However, there are many obstacles to obtaining an accurate estimate of the prevalence of CSA in this country. Cases of CSA are understood by researchers to be largely underestimated, especially in government reports. Because of the stigma, shame, and fear of legal action against perpetrators who are often family members, victims and their families are frequently reluctant to report incidents of CSA. Moreover, precise measurement of CSA can be complicated by choice of case definitions which have varied between states and over time (Molnar et al., 2001). For example, during the 1990s several states changed the way they define and categorize child maltreatment. This could have lead to disparate definitions of CSA across states creating what appeared to be a decline in the rate of CSA (Finkelhor, 2004; Jones, 2001). According to government reports, the number of CSA victims increased nationally between 1977 and 1992. Data collected by the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) indicate that cases of substantiated CSA reached a

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peak of approximately 150,000 in 1992, followed by a dramatic decrease of substantiated cases of CSA in the US throughout the 1990s. Specifically, from 1992 to 2000 there was an estimated 39% decline in the number of substantiated cases of CSA, with a reported stabilization of the rate from 2002 through 2004 (Finkelhor, 1998; Finkelhor & Jones, 2004; Finkelhor, Ormrod, Turner, & Hamby, 2005; Jones & Finkelhor, 2001, 2003; Jones, Finkelhor, & Kopiec, 2001; Reports from the states to the national child abuse and neglect data system, 2002–2004). In addition, overall reports of CSA have reportedly been declining at a rate equal to, if not greater than the decline of substantiated cases. The concurrent declines in reported and substantiated cases suggest that there are either fewer actual incidents of sexual abuse to be reported, or that changes in reporting methods or norms have occurred.

### **Explanations for decline in child sexual abuse**

The question of whether the dramatic decline in CSA during the 1990s is a true decline or the result of artifactual explanations remains unanswered. One prevailing opinion is that there has been a true decrease in the incidence of CSA that resulted from public health education and other universal prevention efforts. There may also be a decrease as a result of the targeted and selected prevention efforts, including improved treatment programs for both victims and perpetrators, aggressive criminal justice activity, and enacted legislation (Finkelhor & Jones, 2006). The other opinions include various “artifactual” explanations for the decline (Jones, Finkelhor, & Halter, 2006). The former is the more optimistic explanation, and is bolstered by the concurrent decline in the rates of social problems with similar etiologies, such as intimate partner violence, rape, teenage pregnancy and overall violent crime (Finkelhor & Jones, 2004, 2006; Jones & Finkelhor, 2001, 2003; Jones et al., 2001). Finkelhor and Jones cite as additional evidence that the decline in reported and substantiated CSA was not simply an extension of abatement of general child maltreatment the fact that the decline in CSA accounted for a larger part of the decline in child maltreatment than did physical abuse. The case for a true decline due to effective treatment and prevention programs is supported by the fact that CSA declined more extensively than other forms of child maltreatment (Finkelhor & Jones, 2004, 2006).

In contrast, artifactual explanations for the decline include: (1) adoption of more conservative standards within CPS agencies (e.g., finding more allegations of CSA within divorce or custody disputes as questionable); (2) increased reluctance to report CSA on the part of victims or mandated reporters due to fear of backlash; (3) changes in data collection methods or definitions of CSA within CPS agencies; (4) exclusions by CPS workers of cases not involving primary caregivers; (5) increase in the caseload size due to resource restriction, which altered screening and investigative practices by CPS workers (Jones, 2001). Relevant to the last explanation, respondents to a survey of state child protection administrators conducted in 1999 and 2000 revealed that a plausible explanation for the decline in CSA was the large reduction in staff and staff resources which occurred in the late 1990s and resulted in a limited number of cases that were accepted for investigation or substantiation (Jones et al., 2001). Wells, Downing, and Fluke (1991) have noted there is evidence that changes in screening practices do occur when caseloads increase (Jones & Finkelhor, 2001). According to CPS officials some states have dealt with burgeoning caseloads and declining resources by narrowing the scope of child welfare responsibilities. For example, because the traditional and statutory responsibilities of CPS workers were to address threats to children’s well-being at the hands of their caregivers, some states have increasingly excluded cases involving allegations of abuse by non-caregivers including non-relatives, distant relatives and juvenile offenders. This is

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