



## Brief Communication

Is child sexual abuse declining in Canada? An analysis of child welfare data<sup>☆</sup>Delphine Collin-Vézina<sup>a,\*</sup>, Sonia Hélie<sup>b</sup>, Nico Trocmé<sup>a</sup><sup>a</sup> McGill University, School of Social Work, Center for Research on Children and Families, Montreal, Quebec, Canada<sup>b</sup> Centre jeunesse de Montréal-Institut universitaire, Montreal, Quebec, Canada

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## Introduction

Four decades of research on child sexual abuse (CSA) have no doubt drawn attention to this social problem and its associated trauma sequelae, such as depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and substance abuse (Putnam, 2003). Nevertheless, the most basic question regarding the magnitude of CSA—that is, the incidence and prevalence rates—has led to an equivocal interpretation of results (Andrews, Corry, Slade, Issakidis, & Swanston, 2004; Gorey & Leslie, 1997). To date, much of the research regarding CSA trends emanate from US studies, the results of which should not be translated to other countries without considering the differences across cultures and social contexts (Leventhal, 1998). In Canada specifically, questions about the epidemiology of CSA are yet to be answered, since the study of child maltreatment is in “its infancy” (Ward & Bennett, 2003). This lack of information limits our capacity to develop appropriate policies, legislation, and services for victims of CSA.

Current evidence from the United States has suggested a remarkable decline of investigated cases of CSA by child protection services: from 1990 through 2007, substantiated cases of CSA have decreased yearly for a total decline of 53% (Jones & Finkelhor, 2009). Given that CSA cases go through different procedures before they are categorized as substantiated, several explanations have been carefully tested to assess whether or not they could account for the decline in CSA cases substantiated by child protection services. For example, more recent victims may have been less likely to report their abuse to authorities than at previous times, or to be screened in for investigation, or to have their case be substantiated by child protection services. Based on the available data, Finkelhor and Jones (2004) show that none of these potential hypotheses could explain

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the steadiness and magnitude of the decline, and they conclude that part of this decline is, at least in part, attributable to a true decline in the incidence of CSA in the United States. Societal efforts to reduce this crime, such as the implementation of prevention programs or incarceration and treatment of offenders, could account partially for this decline in the incidence of CSA (Finkelhor & Jones, 2006). The evidence for a real decline of CSA in the United States is further supported by the parallel decrease in numerous other violent crimes investigated by the police over the same time period, such as violent assault and homicide, as well as child physical abuse (Finkelhor & Jones, 2008b; Jones & Finkelhor, 2001). Police investigations into incidences of forcible rape between 1993 and 2005 also have shown a 52% decrease in this crime (Finkelhor & Jones, 2008a). However, the incidence of neglect cases has stayed relatively stable over time (Jones, Finkelhor, & Halter, 2006).

Statistics in Canada have not followed as consistent a pattern as in the United States. Data from the General Social Survey, a self-reported criminal survey conducted every 5 years by Statistics Canada among Canadians aged 15 and older, shows an increase in the number of sexual assaults reported from 1993 to 1999 (Roberts, Johnson, & Grossman, 2003), with rates remaining stable from 1999 to 2004 (Brazeau & Brzozowski, 2008). However, these surveys do not collect reports of sexual crimes committed against children and youth under the age of 15, a group that is considered at high risk for sexual victimization (Finkelhor, Hammer, & Sedlack, 2008). Reports of sexual assaults recorded by Canadian police forces have declined 24% from 1997 to 2006 (Ministère de la Sécurité Publique, 2007), although rates of less severe forms of sexual assaults, which are more likely to involve children and youth rather than adults, have remained relatively stable during this same period (Zimring, 2007). Noteworthy is the fact that charges related to production and distribution of child pornography increased by 900% between 1998 and 2003 (Federal Ombudsman for Victims of Crime, 2009), which could be linked to an increased awareness regarding these types of abuse and/or better investigation procedures targeting online criminality. In contrast, provincial police data from Quebec, the second largest province in Canada, reveal a significant increase of sexual crimes in 1997 through 2006, rising from 44 to 67 per 100,000 habitants (Ministère de la Sécurité Publique, 2007), which represents a 52% increase. However, the cases of sexual assaults known to police include sexual crimes that could have been perpetrated years or even decades ago. In other words, adults who make a decision to report CSA years after the event occurred still are considered as child victims in the police annual account of their CSA investigations. Indeed, 24% of all sexual violence crimes reported in Quebec in 2006 showed a delay in disclosure of a year or more: 7% disclosed their assault 1–5 years later, 4% 6–11 years later, 4% 11–20 years later, and 8% 21 years later or more. Some factors specific to Quebec could have played a role in the recent increase in the willingness of adults to turn to authorities to report CSA that occurred years ago, which include governmental measures to provide victims and adult survivors of sexual assault with specialized services across the province, and media coverage of publicly well-known adults disclosing their CSA (Ministère de la Sécurité Publique, 2007). In summary, the victimization surveys and the police databases do not corroborate a decline in sexual crimes in Canada. However, because neither source of data is disaggregated by age, these statistics provide a limited understanding of changes in rates of child victimization of any potential decline of CSA. To get a better understanding of CSA trends in Canada, the present paper reviews existing statistics gathered from child protection services. Nation-wide and provincial data from two provinces, Ontario and Quebec, will be analyzed. A focus will be given to contrast fluctuations of CSA incidence rates to those of other forms of maltreatment, namely physical abuse and neglect.

### Canadian nation-wide data

The *Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect* (CIS) is the only nation-wide study to examine the annual incidence of reported child maltreatment and the characteristics of children and families investigated by Canadian child protection services (Trocme et al., 2005, 2001). The CIS examines cases of child maltreatment that are investigated by Canadian child welfare authorities. Cases investigated by only the police, cases known in the community but not reported, and cases unknown to community members or professionals are not included in this survey. National estimates are derived from representative samples of child protection service investigations from all provinces (with the exception of Quebec in 2003). In 1998, 51 sites were selected from a pool of 327 child welfare service areas in Canada, and in 2003, 63 sites were selected for the study. Sexual abuse cases represented 9% (in 1998) and 3% (in 2003) of all substantiated investigations of child maltreatment. In 1998, a total of 160 sexual abuse cases were substantiated in the 51 sites included in the survey, which represents a Canadian-wide incidence rate of 89 cases per 100,000 children. Five years later, a total of 170 CSA cases were substantiated in the 63 sites included in the inquiry, which represents a nation-wide incidence rate of 62 cases per 100,000 children. Based on these results, the rates of CSA substantiated by child protection services dropped by 30% between 1998 and 2003, although this difference is considered statistically nonsignificant due to the few CSA cases that were included in both the 1998 and the 2003 CIS datasets, 160 and 170, respectively, which clearly limit the ability of survey estimates to detect changes. In contrast, United States databases, such as the *National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System*, include thousands of sexual abuse cases every year. That being said, the 30% drop of substantiated CSA cases in Canada between 1998 and 2003 is comparable to the drop observed in the United States data during the same period, which showed a decline of about 20% (see Table 1).

In sharp contrast, based on the 1998 and 2003 CIS surveys, all other forms of child maltreatment have increased in Canada during that 5-year timeframe, which indicates that the Canadian trends of child maltreatment do not parallel child maltreatment trends in the United States. In Canada, between 1998 and 2003, physical abuse and neglect cases increased by 107% and 78%, respectively. Based on the *National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System*, between 1998 and 2003, United States cases of neglect have gone up only by 7%, and physical abuse cases have dropped by 22%. According to the authors of

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