



Pergamon

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Letter to the Editor

Re: Why is sexual abuse declining? A survey of state child protection administrators (Jones, Finkelhor, & Kopiec, 2001)

Jones, Finkelhor, and Kopiec (2001) have attempted to explain the recent decline in reports of child sexual abuse using a survey of state administrators of child protection systems. Their study and the accompanying editorial underscore the conclusion that it is not possible to determine whether the decline reflects actual incidence or one of several other causes (Jones et al., 2001; Leventhal, 2001). The surprising thing is the belief that, by counting reports to public child protection systems, it might ever be possible to tell if the actual incidence of the phenomenon was increasing, decreasing, or staying the same. The Jones et al. survey appears to demonstrate that this belief is not widespread.

Before the passage of state child abuse reporting laws there were no reports. A few decades later, the number had increased to over a million. Does anyone believe that the incidence of child maltreatment increased following the passage of reporting laws? If reports decrease should we believe that we are making progress?

Jones et al.'s article ends with the sentence: "Mounting a concerted effort to draw some conclusions about recent changes in the statistics would seem to be a very high priority." But what will this concerted effort do? The counting of child abuse reports is an end unto itself, but it will never measure the phenomenon exactly, and it is unlikely to carry a constant error of underestimation. Little research has been done to study reporting, but I have noticed years in which large California counties that are demographically similar have reporting rates that differ as much as twofold. There are millions of mandated reporters and hundreds of agencies that count the reports. There is little likelihood that constant definitions and constant ascertainment processes can be imposed on this large set of people.

We must develop tools for measurement that will tell us whether child maltreatment and its four recognized forms is increasing, decreasing, or staying constant. Four new methods should be developed without delay. Three of these are designed to measure serious physical abuse. The fourth would measure sexual abuse and less serious physical abuse.

The four methods are:

1. The development of a national, medical definition of death from physical abuse, and then counting cases as determined by state Child Death Review Teams.
2. The counting of certain ICD Codes (not just those for known abuse, but also those for associated diagnoses) in the hospital discharge databases maintained by states.

3. The designation of (perhaps 100) “sentinel hospitals” which could utilize precise case definitions and which had known patient referral bases. This method would be very sensitive, very specific, and very timely.
4. The method for determining the incidence and prevalence of sexual abuse and physical abuse which did not result in hospitalization would be a poll of a standard sample of 18-year-old persons for their memories of specific events occurring during the “memory years” of childhood. While this method would likely still underestimate the incidence of the phenomena, if the sample of youth was acquired in the same way every year and if the same questions were kept in the poll every year, the error might well be constant.

These methods, if consistently applied over time would allow the measurement of trends and the comparison of incidence between states and regions. If and when prevention methods are tried on a large scale, they might allow evaluation of their effectiveness. At present we cannot do any of these things.

It’s hard to have good policies and good planning without better measurement. It’s time to try something new.

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References

- Jones, L. M., Finkelhor, D., & Kopiec, K. (2001). Why is sexual abuse declining? A survey of state child protection administrators. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 25, 1139–1158.
- Leventhal, J. (2001). A decline in substantiated cases of child sexual abuse in the United States: Good news or false hope? *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 25, 1137–1138.