
Child Abuse: New US Data Shows Continuing Drop

By [DAVID CRARY](#) 12/12/11 08:08 PM ET Associated Press 

NEW YORK -- Fears that persisting economic woes would increase child abuse in the U.S. have proved unfounded, according to the latest federal data.

A comprehensive new report, to be formally unveiled Wednesday, shows overall abuse and neglect figures declining slightly between 2008 and 2010, and child fatalities dropping by 8.5 percent during that span.

"The recession hasn't had the draconian effect that some feared," said Richard Gelles, dean of the University of Pennsylvania's School of Social Policy and Practice and an expert on child welfare. "The doom and gloom predictions haven't come true."

The annual report from the Department of Health and Human Services said the estimated number of victimized children dropped from 716,000 in the 2008 fiscal year, when the recession began, to 695,000 in 2010. That's down from 825,000 in 2006.

The rate of abuse – factoring in cases where some children were abused more than once during the year – was 10 per 1,000 children, down from 10.3 in 2008, to reach the lowest level since the current tracking system began in 1990.

The number of fatalities from abuse and neglect has dropped markedly, from an estimated 1,720 in 2008 and 1,750 in 2009 to 1,560 last year. About 80 percent of those killed were 3 or younger.

Overall, 78 percent of victims suffered neglect, nearly 18 percent were physically abused and 9.2 percent were sexually abused. The report tallied 63,527 children who were sexually abused in 2010 – a drop from 65,964 in 2009 and down more than 55 percent from the peak of about 150,000 in 1992.

The report, formally known as the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System, is based on input from child protection agencies in every state. According to its data, about 80 percent of abuse perpetrators are parents, and 6 percent are other relatives of the victims.

Federal officials welcomed the new data, but added words of caution.

"We are heartened to see maltreatment on the decline, but even one child being a victim of abuse and neglect is too many," said George Sheldon, HHS acting assistant secretary for children and families. "The report reminds us of the continuing need for investment in prevention efforts and the importance of coordination between federal, state and local agencies."

Sociologist David Finkelhor, director of the University of New Hampshire's Crimes Against Children Research Center, said some of the new data might reflect methodological changes as well as lower levels of abuse. For example, the number of abuse-related child fatalities in California dropped in part because the state changed the parameters for how it tallied them.

Finkelhor also noted that a recent study led by Dr. Rachel Berger of Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh documented an increase in head-trauma injuries to infants during the recession.

Overall, however, Finkelhor said the federal report was evidence of a sustained decrease in the prevalence of serious child abuse.

"It shows that whatever processes are involved in the decline are fairly deeply rooted, so they aren't being reversed by the considerable adversity that families are experiencing," he said.

Among the likely factors, he suggested, are greater public awareness about child abuse, wider use of psychiatric medications by adults who might have abusive tendencies, and more knowledge among parents of good child-rearing practices.

"No one should take this as a sign of victory, but it is encouraging and suggests that the things we've been doing are helping, and we should be doing more of them," Finkelhor said.

Gelles, the University of Pennsylvania professor, noted that a range of social problems did not worsen during the recent recession, despite some fears to the contrary – the overall crime rate was down, for example, and welfare caseloads did not surge.

"Economic disadvantage in the U.S. may not be so bad that it has a one-to-one relationship with the abuse of children," Gelles said. "The life preservers still function."

Child sex abuse has been in the national spotlight because of the Penn State scandal, in which former assistant football coach Jerry Sandusky is charged with abusing 10 boys over more than a decade. Reacting to the scandal, a Senate subcommittee will hold a hearing Tuesday to examine the nation's child abuse laws. Among the proposals to be discussed is one by Sen. Bob Casey, D-Pa., seeking to ensure that states require all adults to report suspected child abuse, not just certain professionals such as doctors, teachers and social workers.

Such professionals accounted for 60 percent of abuse reports documented in the new federal survey.

Some child-welfare experts say it would be counterproductive to require all adults – most without any training – to report suspected child abuse because it could overload child protection agencies with dubious cases. Already, about four-fifths of the reports received by the agencies do not lead to findings of abuse, according to the federal report.

Richard Wexler of the National Coalition for Child Protection Reform, which seeks to reduce the number of children unnecessarily placed in foster care, said the new report suggests that child welfare agencies have become more sophisticated in distinguishing between children endangered by neglect and those who are simply disadvantaged by poverty.

"Notwithstanding the hype about what the recession would do, there has been no increase in physical abuse," Wexler wrote in a commentary. "And notwithstanding the post-Penn State paranoia suggesting there is a child molester under every bed, there was no increase in sexual abuse either."

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