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Youth victimization concerns have engaged educators, public health officials, and the media for many years. Cases of child victimization regularly make headlines, and in recent years public concern has focused in particular on sexual abuse, child abductions, online predators, school shootings, bullying, and cyberbullying. But little attention has been given to evidence for substantial declines in child victimizations over the past 20 years. Even for internet victimization, an area of high current public anxiety, trend data do not suggest a growing epidemic but instead find that some types of online victimization have declined over the past decade.

The failure to successfully promote information about positive youth victimization trends means that the public, professionals, and policy makers are making decisions based on unbalanced information. Attention is often directed erroneously, and we are prevented from identifying what policies and practices work best at helping improve youth safety even further. This report discusses the trends in various forms of child victimization and well-being, the potential reasons for these trends, and the implications of these findings for policy makers.

Child Maltreatment and Victimization Trends

One of the best sources of data on child maltreatment trends comes from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS), which aggregates and publishes statistics from state child protection agencies. NCANDS data released in December 2012 concerns cases of child maltreatment investigated in 2011.[1] The NCANDS report shows that the overall substantiated rate of child maltreatment is the lowest level of child maltreatment since the NCANDS system was put into place in 1990.

Our analyses of the data posted annually by NCANDS since 1990 shows that the maltreatment trends look different when separated by type of abuse (see Figure 1). Whereas the rates of physical abuse and sexual abuse declined steadily between 1992 and 2011, the long-term trend for neglect fluctuated.

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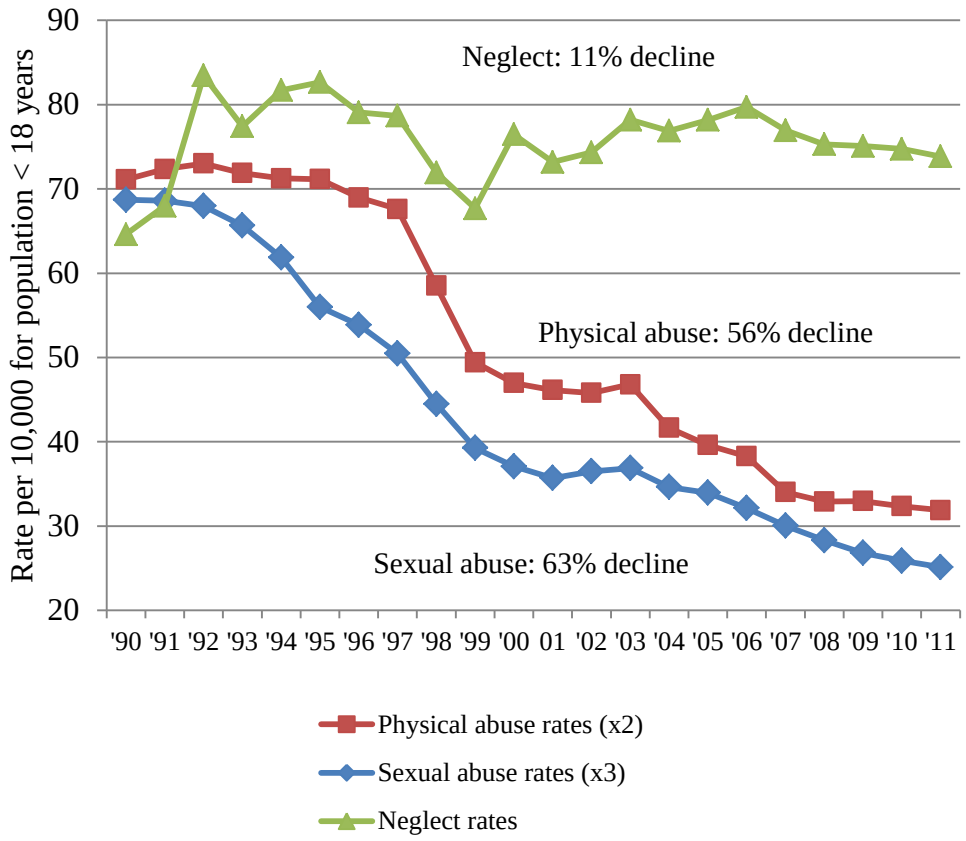

Figure 1. U.S. child maltreatment trends, 1990–2011. (Trend estimates represent total change from 1992 to 2011. Annual rates for physical abuse and sexual abuse have been multiplied by 2 and 3, respectively, to highlight trend comparisons.)

Data from New England published by the U.S. Children's Bureau mirrors the long-term trends in child victimization seen nationally, though rates cannot be compared directly across states because of differences in how each state defines abuse and how abuse is investigated and processed.[2] For example, child sexual abuse cases dropped by 57% in Connecticut, 70% in Maine, 69% in Massachusetts, 81% in New Hampshire, 78% in Rhode Island, and 50% in Vermont between 1992 and 2010. Similar trends were true of reports of physical abuse. Declines of 85% were noted in Connecticut, 40% in Maine, 55% in Massachusetts, 70% in New Hampshire, 71% in Rhode Island, and 22% in Vermont. And as reflected in national statistics, child neglect was found to be an exception across New England states. While there was a decline of 24% in Connecticut and 85% in Vermont, other states showed a rise in the incidents of child neglect. Maine showed an increase of 61%, Massachusetts 6%, New Hampshire 88%, and Rhode Island 17%.

Supporting Trends from Other Indicators and Data Sources

The declines in sexual and physical abuse seen in the NCANDS data have been greeted with some skepticism because the data rely on information from child protective service agency administrative files and thus are affected by state-level changes in definition, procedure, and documentation.[3] The trends, however, are supported by findings from numerous other data sources.

A few data sources directly corroborate the declines in sexual and physical abuse identified in the NCANDS data.[4] Most notably, the National Incidence Survey (NIS), a rigorous national survey of youth-serving professionals conducted at different times over the past several decades, found large declines in sexual and physical victimization of youths between 1993 and 2005.[5] Declines in sexual and physical abuse have also been identified in a self-report survey of school children in Minnesota that has been regularly administered over the past two decades.[6]

Different sources of trend data show parallel trends in other youth victimization experiences. According to the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), sexual assaults of teenagers 12–17 dropped 68% from 1994 through 2010. Other crimes against teens are also down dramatically as measured by the NCVS. Between 1994 and 2010, aggravated assault was down 80%, simple assault down 83%, and robbery down 77%.[7] Teenage victim homicides declined 58% from 1992 to 2008.[8] Domestic violence has also been declining, according to the NCVS, down 60% from 1993 to 2005.[9]

The declines in various crime victimization subtypes offer additional support for the validity of the NCANDS declines. Because of the overlap in youth victimization subtypes, one might expect trends to correlate to some degree. The overlap also provides information on possible causal factors. To understand the declines in sexual and physical abuse, we must look in part, at factors that affect a broad category of violence and abuse.

Finally, providing even further context for the declines in physical and sexual abuse, many data sources show that youth well-being and safety has improved across a wide range of indicators over the past 20 years.[10] For example, data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show a 23% decline between 1991 and 2011 in teenagers reporting being in a physical fight within the past year, a 44% decline in the teen birth rate between 1991 and 2010, and a 16% decline in the percentage of 9th graders who have ever reported having sexual intercourse.[11]

Other data show a decline between 1995 and 2009 in the percentage of students reporting criminal victimization at school in the previous 6 months, a 67% decline in teen runaway arrests between 1994 and 2010, and a 38%, 21%, and 9% decline in drug use for 8th, 10th, and 12th graders, respectively, between 1997 and 2012.[12]

These positive trends in youth well-being suggest that it is likely that a set of influential factors has improved the safety and well-being of youths and families over the past 20 years. Our impression is that the declines in youth victimization are part of this broad improvement pattern. The breadth of the improvements and the similarity in trend patterns means that well-being and safety indicators not showing such an improvement need to be examined and understood as exceptions to a larger pattern.

Exceptions to the Decline Trends

As revealed in Figure 1, child neglect shows a markedly different trend pattern when compared with other child victimization and well-being trends. By 2011, substantiated neglect cases were only 11% below the level in 1992. There are several possible reasons for the divergent pattern

we see with neglect. One is that mobilization around preventing this type of maltreatment has been delayed and less intensive when compared with efforts to prevent and respond to sexual and physical abuse.[13] Media attention has focused much more on sexual and physical abuse than on neglect over the past several decades, thus drawing more of the attention of researchers, program developers, clinicians, and policy makers. Neglect also is a form of maltreatment that is intertwined with other difficult-to-address social problems, such as poverty and parental substance use.[14]

Another possibility, however, is that an underlying decline in neglect has occurred in concert with other improvements to child well-being, but the decline has been masked by an expansion of definitions and identification efforts occurring over the past two decades.[15] There have been recent child welfare mobilizations around intervening in situations where children are exposed to drug abuse or domestic violence in the home, which are often categorized as cases of neglect after investigation. Data from the NIS support the possibility that the 1990s saw an increasing perception among youth-serving professionals that children exposed to parental violence or drug abuse suffered from neglect.[16]

Data on child maltreatment fatalities have also shown an increase or level pattern since states have started publishing this information.[17] But because child homicides have declined overall since the early 1990s, even among the youngest cohort,[18] the increase in child maltreatment fatalities over this period is most likely due to changing definitions and increasing identification of maltreatment related deaths, such as by Child Fatality Review Boards that might not previously have been identified as such.

Possible Causes for the Declines in Child Maltreatment and Victimization

Though there is currently no consensus about why sexual abuse and physical abuse substantiations have declined so considerably over the long term, recent publications suggest some possible factors.[19] It may be that the economy played a role in aiding improvements during the 1990s in particular. That decade, which showed sustained economic improvement in the United States, also showed the largest declines in sexual and physical abuse. During the 1990s, employment rates climbed and the percentage of children in poverty declined substantially. But other factors must also be contributing to the improvements because child maltreatment declines and other improvements have continued throughout the 2000s and into recent years, even as the United States has experienced substantial economic difficulties.

Another possible explanation is the increasing involvement of law enforcement and child protection personnel in family violence and child abuse concerns. Throughout the 1990s, there were substantial increases in the numbers of law enforcement and child protection personnel, and more aggressive prosecution and incarceration policies targeting child safety were put in place. For example, in Massachusetts, laws have been enacted to protect children against indecent assault and battery, sexual assault, enticing a child under the age of 16, assault and battery for the purpose of coercion, inducing a minor to become a prostitute, deriving support or maintenance from the earnings or proceeds of prostitution committed by a minor, and possession and dissemination of child pornography. The number of child advocacy centers also increased nationally throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, involving law enforcement through their participation on multidisciplinary child abuse investigation teams.[20] The increased professional attention to child victimization may have worked directly to reduce offending by intervening with offenders and by incarcerating the most serious perpetrators. It is also possible that the

visibility of the mobilization against child abuse had a general deterrent effect on some potential offenders.

A third possible explanation is the increased availability of family and mental health treatments, including psychiatric medication, such as Prozac. An increase in use of mental health treatments may have improved child maltreatment and victimization rates, along with the other measures of child welfare described earlier. For example, increased treatments may have worked at a public health level to reduce depression, despair, anxiety, and anger in parents and other segments of the population. They might also have improved youth mental health and behavior, thus reducing parental stress.

A final possibility is that growing public awareness about the effects of child abuse, improved understanding of child safety and development, and increased protective behaviors by parents, youth-serving agencies, and other caregivers have made a difference in child victimization rates over the past two decades. Although conclusive evaluation data are lacking, it is possible, for example, that child safety public awareness campaigns, media attention to child victimization, school-based personal safety and bullying prevention programs, and improved safety policies by organizations such as the Boys and Girls Clubs and Boy Scouts have all played a role in the victimization declines.

Youth Internet Victimization Trends

A discussion of trends in youth victimization must consider what is perceived by the public to be a new and concerning victimization subtype: youth internet victimization. The rapid expansion in the use of the internet among youths has caused the public and policy makers to be concerned that technology is creating new opportunities for those seeking to victimize youths. Law makers have begun to implement policies to target the problem of youth internet victimization through protection policies, funding of prevention programs, and increased police efforts.

National research data suggest, however, that the problems with youth internet safety may be less widespread and dire than news reports and anecdote suggest.[21] Youth Internet Safety Surveys (YISS) conducted in the United States in 2000, 2005, and 2010 provide information across a critical decade on changes in the rates of three widely cited concerns: online sexual solicitations, online harassment, and unwanted exposure to pornography (see Figure 2). Whereas unwanted sexual solicitations declined 50%, online peer harassment, which was found to be a problem especially among girls, showed a continual, though small, increase. Youth reports of unwanted exposure to pornography increased between 2002 and 2005 but dropped between 2005 and 2010.

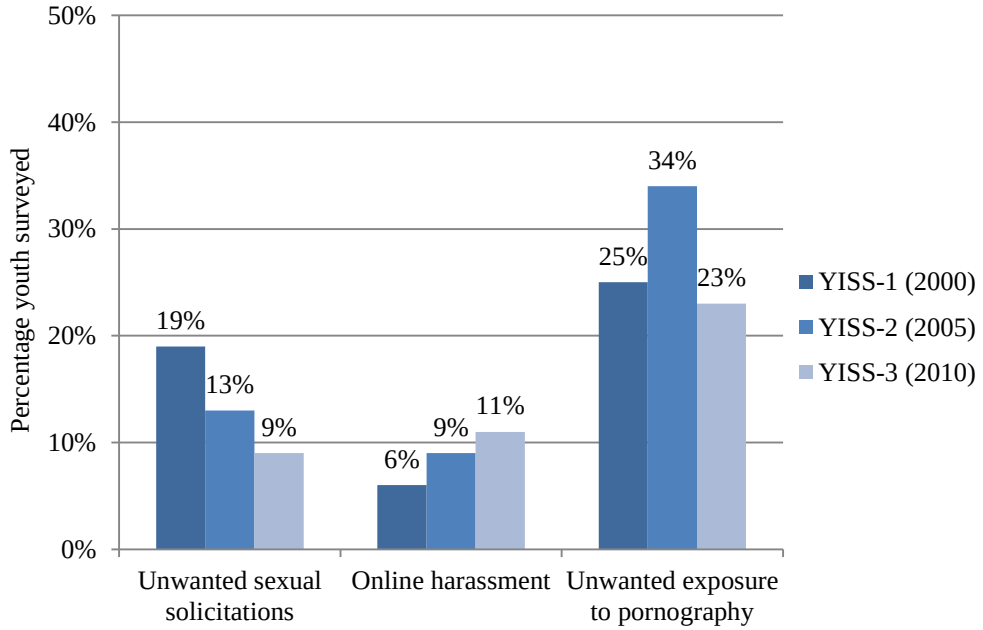

Figure 2: Trend data from YISS conducted in 2000, 2005, and 2010

Possible Causes for the Trends in Youth Internet Victimization

Online Sexual Solicitations

While many online sexual solicitations that youths experience are one-time comments from peers, they also include very rare cases of youth contact by adults seeking youths to meet in person for sexual activity, or online predator cases. It is notable that across the 2000s, even as youth internet activity increased dramatically, social networking became widely popular, and youth communication and access to the internet by cell phone became commonplace, online sexual solicitations declined. Further analyses of the trend data found that the declines were greatest among younger children (10–12 years old), who may be less equipped to handle such solicitations.[22]

The decline in online sexual solicitation rates could be due to several factors. Youth online activities may have changed in ways that reduce such solicitations. For example, during the 2000s, youths migrated from chat rooms to social networking sites. In social networking environments, such as Facebook, youths may be confining more of their interactions to people they know, thus reducing unwanted online sexual comments or requests.

It is also possible that young people have become more cautious about whom they interact with because of internet safety education efforts. Prevention messages have proliferated that warn young people about the dangers of online sexual interactions. Research by Pew suggests that while youths are increasingly likely to share photographs and personal information online, most are fairly careful about their privacy settings.[23]

Finally, publicity about criminal prosecutions may have deterred some individuals from directing sexual messages to youths online. The potential to get into legal trouble from sending such messages may have been impressed on internet participants—both adults and other youths.

Unwanted Exposure to Pornography

The decline in unwanted exposure to pornography by young people seen in Figure 2 involves incidents that occur through errors in searches, pop-ups, and spam e-mail. These data do not mean, however, that young people who are voluntarily accessing pornography are having a hard time finding it. Rates of intentional viewing of X-rated material among internet users aged 10 to17 range from 13% to 23%, and percentages have remained relatively stable over the 2000s.[24]

The decrease in exposure could be due to two factors. First, spamware and filters have become increasingly present on networks and individual computers, and their detection capacities have become more refined. Second, young people may have become better educated and more savvy about opening unidentified e-mail or clicking on unidentified links.

Online Peer Harassment

Online peer harassment—making aggressive or demeaning statements or spreading rumors online—has become a particular concern to policy makers lately. Analyses of the data from the YISS suggest that the increase in online harassment was driven primarily by a rise in indirect harassment—taking someone else's comments about a person and either posting them on online or sending them directly to the subject.[25] Girls made up an increasing proportion of victims: 69% of victims were girls and 31% were boys in 2010. It is important to note however, that the percentage of youths experiencing such harassment is still fairly low, and many of these incidents occurred only once and were not particularly bothersome to the targeted youths.

This increase likely can be attributed to how youths are using the internet (for example, more online social interaction with off-line peers), and it is important to keep in mind that the increase occurred over a period in which overall bullying declined.[26] Encouragingly, the YISS data also show that victims were disclosing harassment incidents to school staff at greater rates in 2010 than in 2005 or 2000.[27]

Implications for Policy Makers

Although the trends discussed in this report are critical for identifying best ways to help improve youth safety and well-being, they have received very little attention, perhaps in part because those working closely with victimized youths feel worried that good news could lead to reductions in policy attention and funding. But there are no data to suggest such fears are justified. Highlighting success may in fact allow policy makers to move forward with more confidence on these issues, knowing that their efforts and attention have had positive effects.

It is clear from the improvements we have seen that researchers, policy makers, and active social agents must continue to invest in the practices that are working. Research data should be used to inform interventions and to evaluate their success. We must redouble efforts to understand better the practices and laws that have worked, in which areas and for which subpopulations they have worked, and why they have worked. These efforts include identifying ineffective practices, understanding the reasons they are ineffective, and proposing remedies.

Such efforts are crucial to making sure that we do not lose ground on the advances in youth safety we have made so far and that we increase our successes and expand our achievements to other areas of youth well-being.

More work should be done to investigate the explanations for the trends we are seeing and gather evidence about them. Another implication for child protection activists and professionals is the need to share information. Too often professionals working in areas of youth safety, victimization, and health work in silos, with little cross-understanding of developments and advances in related areas. Policy makers can encourage opportunities for sharing knowledge and expertise.

We also need to consider whether there are specific kinds of employment opportunities, tax incentives, transfer payments, housing subsidies, or income streams that have more effect or specific effects on various kinds of child safety and child welfare outcomes. If more of the mechanisms by which prosperity improves child safety can be discovered, then some targeted programs may be able to continue progress, or stave off deterioration, even in economic downturns.

With regard to internet or technology-related incidents of child victimization, our research suggests that while this area is of great public interest right now, it is affecting relatively small percentages of youths in highly negative ways, particularly when compared with offline victimizations. Online harassment may be an issue that requires some prevention attention, but we recommend incorporating such information into existing evidence-based bullying prevention programs. For example, bystander education, which has proven successful in other prevention campaigns, could be adapted to include online bystanders so that youth can help intervene effectively when they see problems such as internet harassment occurring. Schools need to have evidence-based policies on all types of bullying problems online and off-line that threaten the healthy functioning of youths in school environments.

It is critical that information about the declines in child maltreatment and child victimization be disseminated and discussed by researchers, practitioners, and policy makers, who need to collaborate to better understand the trends and define the policy and practice implications. By using the data that are available to us, improving the data, and answering these questions, we can extend and accelerate our apparent successes in improving youth safety and well-being.

Notes

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