

Dramatic decrease reported in incidents of child abuse

By David Crary
ASSOCIATED PRESS

A massive new federal study documents an unprecedented and dramatic decrease in incidents of serious child abuse, especially sexual abuse, a trend seen in San Diego County as well.

Experts said the findings show that crackdowns and public awareness campaigns have made headway.

An estimated 553,000 children suffered physical, sexual or emotional abuse in 2005-06, down 26 percent from the estimated 743,200

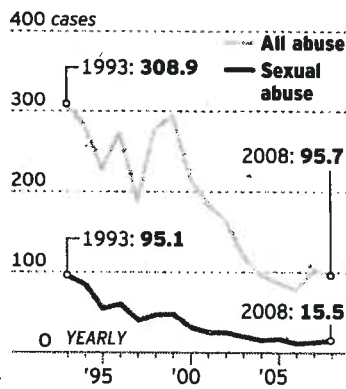
abuse victims in 1993, the study found.

The study did not break out San Diego County numbers. But according to separate California Department of Justice data compiled by the nonprofit research group RAND California, child abuse cases in the county dropped to 2,998 in 2008, down from 8,075 in 1993.

"It's the first time since we started collecting data about these things that we've seen substantial declines over a long period, and that's tremendously encouraging," said professor David Finkelhor of the University of New

RATE OF CHILD ABUSE IN SAN DIEGO COUNTY

Estimated number of cases per 100,000 people



SOURCE: RAND California

MATT PERRY / Union-Tribune

SEE **Child abuse, A7**

CHILD ABUSE

CONTINUED FROM A1

Study results posted online with no fanfare

Hampshire, a leading researcher in the field of child abuse.

"It does suggest that the mobilization around this issue is helping and it's a problem that is amenable to solutions," Finkelhor said.

The findings were contained in the fourth installment of the National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect, a congressionally mandated study that has been conducted by the Department of Health and Human Services. The previous version was issued in 1996, based on 1993 data.

The new study is based on information from more than 10,700 "sentinels" — such as child-welfare workers, police officers, teachers, health care professionals and day-care workers — in 122 counties across the country. The detailed data collected from them was used to make national estimates.

The number of sexually abused children decreased from 217,700 in 1993 to 135,300 in 2005-06 — a 38 percent drop, the study shows. In San Diego County, the number of sexual abuse victims fell to 484 in 2008, down from 2,485 in 1993, the RAND data shows.

San Diego County has seen decreases. In 1993, the county had 309 abuse cases per 100,000 people; the rate fell to 96 in 2008. Sexual abuse cases had a similar decline.

"You certainly want to believe that all of the efforts of law enforcement, dedicated units in police departments, who are trained to detect child abuse, and parental education are working," said former San Diego Mayor Susan Golding, president of Promises2Kids, a nonprofit group that fights child abuse and neglect. "I think the decrease is quite statistically large. I would suspect that most people in the field would agree, but this is promising."

Golding noted an increase in cases since the 2006 data in the national study. She said she is concerned that family stress from the economy and troops returning home from Iraq may have created a new spike in

abuse cases.

The study shied away from trying to explain the trends, but other experts offered their theories.

"There's much more public awareness and public intolerance around child abuse now," said Linda Spears, the Child Welfare League of America's vice president for public policy. "It was a hidden concern before — people were afraid to talk about it if it was in their family."

Finkelhor suggested that the decline was a product of several coinciding trends, including a "troop surge" in the 1990s when more people were deployed in child protection services and the criminal justice system intensified

its anti-abuse efforts with more arrests and prison sentences.

Finkelhor also suggested that the greatly expanded use of medications may have enabled many potential child abusers to treat the conditions that otherwise might have led them to molest or mistreat a child.

"There's also been a general change in perceptions and norms about what one can get away with, so much more publicity about these things," he said.

One curious aspect of the study was the manner of its release. Although Health and Human Services had launched the study in 2004 and invested several million dollars, it was posted

a few days ago on the Internet with no fanfare — neither a news release nor a news conference. Finkelhor, noting that experts had been eagerly awaiting the study, described this low-profile approach as "shocking."

The findings might be disconcerting to some in the child-welfare field who base their funding pitches on the specter of ever-rising abuse rates, said Richard Wexler, executive director of the National Coalition for Child Protection Reform.

"The best use of scarce child-welfare dollars is on prevention and family preservation — not on hiring more people to investigate less actual abuse," Wexler said.

The study found some dramatic differences in child abuse rates based on socio-economic factors. Poor children were three times more likely than other children to experience abuse, and rates of abuse in black families were significantly higher than for whites and Latinos.

Family structure also was a factor. Children whose single parent had a live-in partner faced an abuse rate 10 times that of a child living with two parents.

Wexler said a primary reason for the overall drop in abuse rates was the relatively prosperous economy during the period under study.

"The fact that the economic

gains were unequal explains why maltreatment declined less in black families," he said.

The main author of the study, Andrea Sedlak of the Rockville, Md.-based research firm Westat Inc., said she was heartened by the overall findings of declining abuse rates. Sedlak was troubled to find that more than half of child maltreatment incidents are not investigated by child-protection agencies.

"Is the system still so strapped?" she said. "There's still a lot of material here saying the system has a long way to go."

Staff data specialist **Danielle Cervantes** contributed to this report.