How are Youth Doing?
Trends in Youth Victimization and Well-Being and Implications for Youth Policy

By Lisa M. Jones, Ph.D., with the assistance of Rashmi Nair and Michelle Collett

Issues connected to youth victimization and well-being have been on the minds of educators, public health officials, and the media for many years. However, the worrisome stories about crimes against children that regularly fill the media have unfortunately obscured some more positive news from statistical reports on these same issues. Child victimizations of various types have been declining since the early 1990s, in some cases declining dramatically. Similar trends have also been noticed in the areas of maladjustment and youth internet victimization.

However, not much focus has gone into showcasing these achievements, which gives a lopsided picture of the reality and keeps us from learning more about what is behind positive trends, information that could help us further improve youth safety and well-being in an informed manner. 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 FACTS

Declines in Child Maltreatment and Victimization

- Sexual abuse started to decline in the early 1990s, after at least 15 years of steady increases. From 1990 through 2010, sexual abuse substantiations were down 62% (see Figure 1). [21]
- Physical abuse substantiations joined the downward trend starting in the mid-1990s, in a decline that was most dramatic between 1997 and 2000. From 1990 through 2010, physical abuse substantiations have declined 56% (see Figure 1). [21]
- Sexual assaults of teenagers have dropped, according to the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS). From 1993 through 2005, overall sexual assaults decreased 52%. The subgroup of sexual assaults by known persons was down even more.
- Other crimes against teens aged 12–17 were also down dramatically as measured by the NCVS. Between 1993 and 2005, aggravated assault was down 69%, simple assault down 59%, robbery down 62%, and larceny down 54%.
- Juvenile victim homicides have declined 60% from 1993 to 2005 [8].
- Domestic violence has also been declining, according to the NCVS [18], down 68% from 1992 to 2004, meaning that fewer children were being exposed to violent parents.
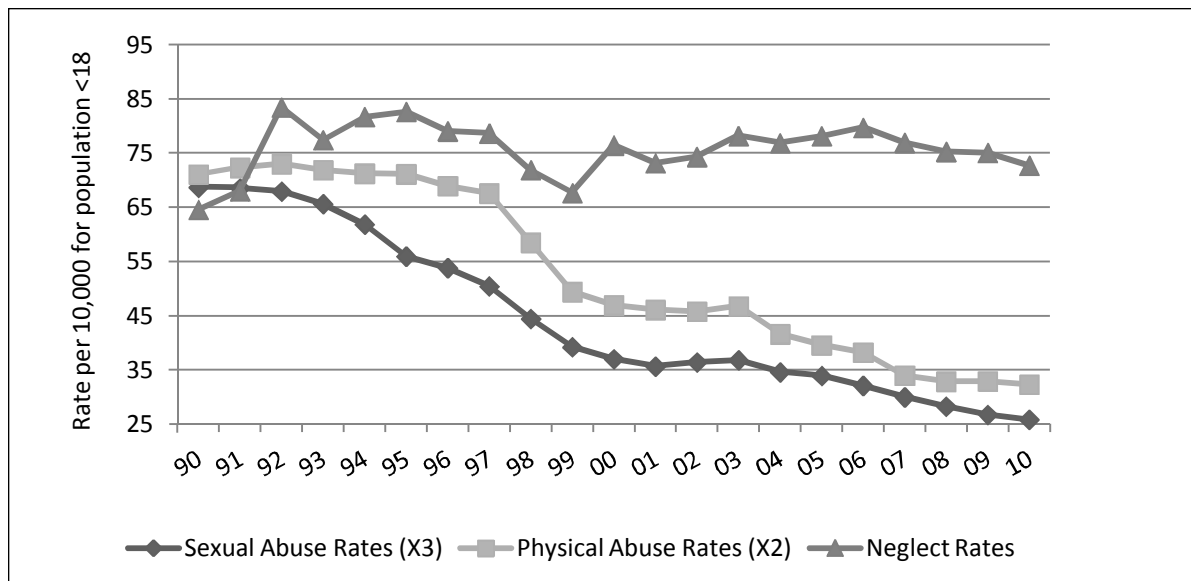
Figure 1: Maltreatment Trends in the U.S. over Time

Exceptions to this Declining Trend

- One exception to the overall declining pattern concerns child neglect. Whereas declines occurred first in sexual and then a few years later in physical abuse, child neglect, one of the other major categories of child maltreatment, has not declined as precipitously. By 2010, substantiated neglect cases were only 10% below the level in 1990 (Figure 1), making neglect one of the few forms of child victimization that did not show a marked decline over the past twenty years. It is possible that greater attention to neglect in recent decades has masked a possible decline in this indicator.

- Another exception to the pattern has been child maltreatment fatalities. While homicide in general and child homicide in particular have declined overall, the level of child maltreatment fatalities has stayed level nationally. However, this is probably due to data system changes; it is likely that the development, implementation, and growing use of Child Fatality Review Boards [5], and other intensive forensic efforts, have identified child maltreatment as a feature of a considerable number of child deaths that might not have been previously identified as such.

Child victimization and maltreatment trends in New England

Even in the midst of continuing difficult economic times, recent data from New England generally mirrors the long term trends in child victimization [21]; long term (1992-2010) trends in the area of sexual abuse showed a decline. Below are child maltreatment trends across different states in New England.[i]

- Reports of child sexual abuse dropped by 60% in Connecticut, 61% in Maine, 67% in Massachusetts, 77% in New Hampshire, 76% in Rhode Island and 39% percent in Vermont between 1992 and 2010 [21].

- Similar trends were true of reports of physical abuse. Declines of 85% were noted in Connecticut, 40% in Maine, 49% in Massachusetts, 57% in New Hampshire, 71% in Rhode Island, and 36% in Vermont [21].

- Once again child neglect was found to be an exception. While we saw a decline of 14% in Connecticut and 90% in Vermont, other states showed a rise in the incidents of child neglect. Maine showed an increase by 74%, Massachusetts 29%, New Hampshire 70%, and Rhode Island 22%. [21]

- Child maltreatment fatalities trends remained stable in Connecticut, New Hampshire and Rhode Island. Maine showed a decrease in fatalities due to maltreatment by 50% and Vermont showed an increase of 33%. Data from Massachusetts were missing [21].

[i] Rates cannot be compared directly across states because of differences in how they define abuse and how abuse is investigated and processed. Individual state trends can also be affected by changes in definition or procedures.

Similar Trends in Youth Maladjustment

Some have expressed skepticism about the declines in sexual and physical abuse because the data is drawn from child protective service agency administrative files, and thus affected by state-level changes in definition, procedure, and documentation. However, it is important to note that these trends have also been verified in numerous other data sources.

The National Incidence Survey (NIS), a rigorous national survey of youth-serving professionals, found large declines in identified sexual and physical victimization of youth over the last few decades. Declines over the last two decades have also been identified in a regularly administered self-report survey of school children in Minnesota.

Moreover, trend data published by the U.S. Departments of Justice and Education, and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) show similar improvements in multiple indicators of youth safety and well-being over the same time period. For example, data from the CDC show a 16% decline between 1991 and 2007 in teenagers reporting being in a physical fight within the past year, a 31% decline in suicide rates between 1990 and 2005, a 43% decline in the teenage birth rate between 1991 and 2006, and a 16% decline in the percentage of 9th graders who have reported having sexual intercourse.

Other data show a 60% decline between 1995 and 2005 in the percent of students reporting criminal victimization at school in the previous 6 months [4], a 60% decline in teen runaway arrests between 1994 and 2006 [16], a 12% decline in a range of problem behaviors among children between 1989 and 1999 [1], and a 13%, 22%, and 27% decline in drug use for 12th, 10th, and 8th graders, respectively, between 1997 and 2007 [11].

HOW DO WE UNDERSTAND THESE TRENDS?

There are a number of likely reasons for the improvements in youth safety and well-being. One possible contributing factor could be the economic prosperity in the U.S. during the 1990s. Over those 10 years there was considerable job growth, hourly wages rose, and social and occupational improvements occurred [6]. The percentage of children living in poverty declined, and many people who had been chronically unemployed or underemployed were able to work or work more. The graph of the unemployment rate had a drop that looked very similar in the 1990s to the trends cited above, and criminologists at that time endorsed prosperity as a likely candidate in crime declines [3]. However, given the fact that child maltreatment declines have continued in recent years, even as the U.S. has experienced substantial economic difficulties, it is likely that something more substantial has contributed to the improvements.

Below, we focus on three other explanations that we believe provide the most comprehensive and plausible explanations for the trends documented. These explanations include the increase of police involvement and other social agents in addressing child maltreatment, the impact of the advancement of psychopharmacology and other mental health treatments, and the expansion of laws and bills that connect to issues of child victimization.

Increased Involvement of Police and Other Social Change Agents in Youth Victimization

In analyzing crime declines in particular, one factor that has been suggested is the role of increased policing. Funds were made available in the 1990s through various mechanisms to hire tens of thousands of additional police. Furthermore, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, police increased their involvement in domestic violence and child maltreatment.

The number of child advocacy centers increased throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, involving law enforcement through their participation on multi-disciplinary child abuse investigation teams. Along with increases in the number of police in this area, there were also increases in the number of social workers, child protection workers, and people engaged in various child safety and child abuse prevention activity.

The new police activities in place by the early 1990s included not just community patrols, but also specialized domestic violence units with a mandate to intervene aggressively in violent families [19], specialized sexual assault officers to work in the investigation and prosecution of sexual abuse inside and outside of families [10], and specialized school resource officers trained to reduce the quantity of youth-on-youth victimization.

This diversification of police activity was accompanied by a diversification of prosecutorial activity as well, as district attorneys took on domestic violence, sexual abuse, and in some cases juvenile crime. The mental health profession also increased the number of its professionals who were in social control activities like facilities for delinquent youth and offender treatment programs in prisons and communities [15].

The presence of these new agents of social control could well have curbed child victimization through a number of mechanisms. These agents were increasingly visible, both in media and in the community, and this presence may have deterred many offenders or would-be offenders. Reading about arrests of child molesters in the news, other molesters may have become less confident of getting away with a sexual encounter with a child.

The new agents also undoubtedly had many cautionary encounters with offenders that may have terminated or reduced offending patterns. Some of these new agents worked directly with victims, whereas some provided education and prevention information to school children and parents. This education probably protected children considerably.

Advances in Mental Health Treatment and Psychopharmacology

Mental health treatments for depression, anxiety, and trauma have seen great improvements over the last several decades, and such treatments have become increasingly easy for the public to access. Furthermore, access to psychopharmacological treatments for depression and anxiety expanded right around the time that the child welfare improvements began.

Prozac came to market in 1987, and within 5 years, there were 4.5 million users in the U.S., the fastest acceptance ever for a psychiatric drug [17]. Along with its descendants, Prozac spurred a sea of change in the approach to depression, anxiety, and other related mental health problems. Data show that the percentage of the population being treated for depression in a given year jumped from 0.7% in 1987 to 2.3% in 1997, and by the end of the period, much of that treatment involved psychopharmacology [17, 24].

Advances in mental health treatment and psychopharmacology could have impacted child well-being and maltreatment in several ways. First, by alleviating chronic depression, discouragement, and despair among a large segment of the population, fewer individuals might act out aggressively. Second, if treatments help youth with similar mental health problems, it could result on a national level in less delinquency and less risk-taking, behavior that can put young people in danger of victimization.

Mental health treatments may also help to improve family life and reduce interpersonal stress, leading to more effective parenting, less child maltreatment, and better supervision. Thus, mental health advances may have had broad effects on a variety of crimes, including running away and suicidal behavior, for which at least one study suggests time trend benefits [9].

Changing Norms, Practices, and Laws

Another possible reason for the declining trends could be attributed to opinion leaders drawing attention to these issues. Around the same time that the declines began, the population was becoming more educated about children and the impact of child victimization. It is plausible that this greater awareness resulted in more protective action by families and others who work with children, and that this awareness has changed norms regarding acceptable treatment of children.

Evidence of these changing norms is reflected in the variety of laws that have been enacted across the country in attempts to reduce child maltreatment and victimization. Specifically 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.

These are only a small portion of the laws passed in recent years in order to address the problems in this area. Aside from these are also many other bills that are currently being considered. Specifically in Massachusetts, there are several bills in the pipeline that attempt to fill the gaps in the current laws (e.g., human trafficking) or address newer concerns that have emerged regarding youth internet safety.

Efforts like these by policy makers, lawyers and other social actors in the formulation of these laws and bills may have been important contributing factors to the declines in youth victimization. Furthermore, publicity of these laws by the media may have led to increased awareness among the public. Such laws and bills help to ensure that child victims have a greater chance for justice and safety.

Why Aren't the Trends for Child Neglect Declining?

There are a number of reasons why neglect trends may have differed so sharply from those of other indicators of child victimization and well-being [12]. One possibility is that neglect has not declined because it has not been the subject of the same level of policy attention and public awareness as sexual and physical abuse. Media attention has arguably focused much more on sexual and physical abuse compared to neglect, thus drawing more of the attention of social agents such as researchers, program developers, and policy makers to these issues, at least in the 1980s and 1990s.

Another possibility is that an underlying decline in neglect has been masked in recent years by an expansion of definitions and identification efforts [12]. 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. The National Incidence Studies (NIS) found some evidence consistent with this hypothesis [12].

YOUTH INTERNET VICTIMIZATION

The rapid expansion in the use of the internet among youth has recently caused the public and policy-makers to be concerned that new technology is creating opportunities for new areas of youth victimization. Law-makers have begun to seek more information about ways that policy can help.

However, national research data suggest that the problems with youth Internet safety may be less widespread and dire than news reports and anecdotes suggest. Below are findings from a population-based survey [13] that was aimed to understand internet usage among youth in this country. The Youth Internet Safety Surveys (YISS) were conducted in 2000, 2005, and 2010, providing information across a critical 10-year period (2000–2010) on changes in the rates of three widely cited concerns: online sexual solicitations, unwanted exposure to pornography, and online harassment experiences.

General trends observed in the study are:

- Unwanted sexual solicitations declined from 19% in 2000, to 13% in 2005, and to 9% in 2010, for an overall 50% decline (Figure 2).

- There was a decline in youth reports of unwanted exposure to pornography between the 2005 and 2010 YISS surveys, from 34% to 23%. This decline followed an increase between 2000 and 2005 from 25% to 34% (Figure 2).

- There was a small increase in reports of online harassment, from 9% in 2005 to 11% in 2010. This was found to be a problem especially among girls. This continued an increase seen between 2000 and 2005 (from 6% to 9%) (Figure 2).
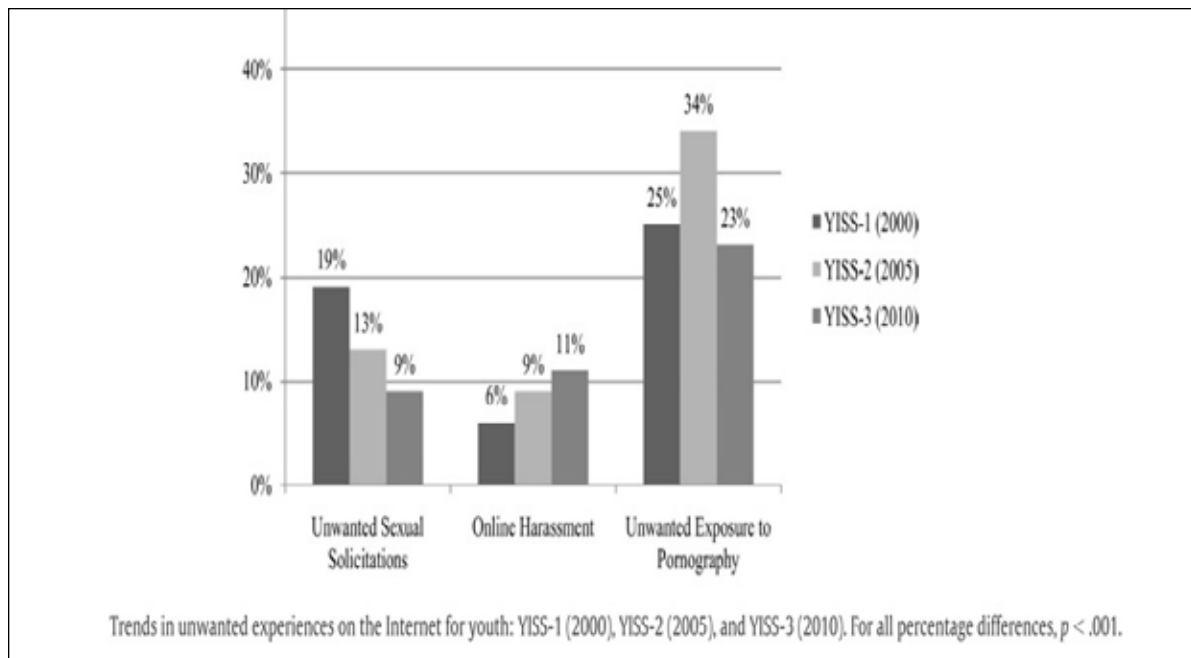
Figure 2: Trends in Youth Internet Victimization

HOW DO WE UNDERSTAND THESE TRENDS?

Online Sexual Solicitations

The reason for the steady decline in online sexual solicitation rates could be due to several factors. It may be that online behavior has changed in ways that reduce such solicitations. For example, youth have migrated from chat rooms to social networking sites over past several years [14]. In social networking environments, youth may be confining more of their interactions to people they know, thus reducing online unwanted sexual comments or requests.

It is also possible that young people have become more cautious regarding who they interact with because of Internet safety education. A tremendous effort was made during the past decade to warn young people about the dangers of online sexual interactions.

Also, publicity about criminal prosecutions may have deterred some of the aggressive sexual messaging. There have been many prosecutions of adults during the past decade for directing sexual messages to youth. Although research has found that most unwanted sexual messages online come from other youth and not adults, the potential to get into legal trouble from sending such messages may have been impressed on all Internet participants.

Unwanted Exposure to Pornography

The study also found a recent substantial decrease in youth exposure to unwanted pornography. This does not mean that young people who are voluntarily accessing pornography are having a hard time finding it. Rates of intentional viewing of X-rated material among young Internet users range from 13% to 23%, and percentages have remained relatively stable over time [23].

The decline involves unwanted exposures, such as those that occur through errors in searches, unwanted pop-ups, and spam e-mail [23]. The decrease in exposure could be due to two factors. First, spamwares 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 Harassment

The 2010 YISS findings did show an increase in Internet harassment, from 9% in 2005 to 11% in 2010, continuing an increase from 2000. Online harassment – making aggressive or demeaning statements or spreading rumors online – has become a particular concern to policy makers lately.

The data from the YISS studies suggested that the increase was driven primarily by a rise in indirect harassment – someone posting or sending comments to others about them online. Girls made up an increasing proportion of victims: 69% of victims were girls versus 31% boys in 2010.

It is important to note, however, that the percentage of youth experiencing such harassment is still fairly low, and many of these were one-time incidents that were not particularly bothersome to the targeted youth.

This increase likely can be attributed to how youth 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 of time in which overall bullying has declined, according to several sources. Encouragingly, the YISS data also found that victims were disclosing harassment incidents to school staff at greater rates in 2010 than in 2005 or 2000.

WHAT ARE THE 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. This could be in part because those working closely with youth, and particularly victimized youth, feel worried that good news could lead to reductions in policy attention and funding. However, we think that is an erroneous position. It seems to us that highlighting the successes allows 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 which practices and laws have worked, in which areas they have worked, and why they have worked. This includes identifying ineffective practices, understanding the reasons why 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, 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 and gather confirmatory or disconfirmatory evidence about them. Based on the arguments and evidence we have reviewed, we think the explanations of increasing numbers of agents of social intervention, mental health treatments, and the changing norms, practices, and laws around protecting children are ones that merit particular attention. Furthermore, the search for additional explanations also needs to be encouraged. Those reviewed here are certainly not exhaustive.

Another implication for child protection activists and professionals is that social and technological developments beyond their own narrow sphere of effort may assist them in achieving their goals. 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 assist by providing opportunities for sharing knowledge and expertise.

More attention should also be paid to potentially transformative forces such as technology and its ramifications for further improving drug treatment, behavioral management, genetic screening, contraception, family communications, and parenting education. While child protection professionals may not have expertise in these areas, they may have the ability to promote the dissemination and adapt the uses of technologies to have faster and more pervasive impacts on reducing child victimization. Additionally, the child protection field may need mechanisms to better monitor and integrate information from a wide variety of other fields where social, organizational, and technological change may be occurring.

We also need to consider if 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 [22]. 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 of the future.

With regard to internet or technology-related incidents of child victimization, our research [13] suggests to us that while this is an area of great attention right now, it is still affecting relatively few youth in highly negative ways, compared to 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.

Bystander education, which has proven successful in other prevention campaigns [2, 7, 20] should be adapted to include online bystanders so that youth can help intervene effectively when they see problems like Internet harassment occurring. Schools need to have evidence-based policies to discourage all types of bullying problems – online or off-line – that threaten the healthy functioning of youth in school environments.

It is critical that information regarding the declines in child maltreatment and child victimization be disseminated and discussed by researchers, practitioners, and policymakers, who need to collaborate to better understand the nature of the trends and define the policy and practice implications. By using the data that is available to us, improving the data, and answering these questions, we can extend or accelerate our successes in helping youth.

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