

Child abuse rates in Israel now higher than in US

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'Israeli society is growing more violent,' says Haruv Institute director, who focuses on raising awareness of abuse .

Reports of child abuse in Israel have steadily grown over the past three years, as the number of reported cases in the US is decreasing, according to recent data the Jerusalem-based Haruv Institute collected and provided to The Jerusalem Post this week.

The data presented by the institute, which not only researches the phenomenon but also provides training to professionals working in the medical, educational and community fields, shows that in Israel in 2010 the number of reported child abuse cases was 18.9 for every 1,000 children, compared to 8.7 for every 1,000 children in 1995. The US figures for 2010 were 10 reports for every 1,000 children, compared to 14.7 reports for every 1,000 children in 1995.

While part of the rise in reporting of child abuse cases in Israel stems from greater awareness among professionals and society as to what constitutes abuse and how to report it, Haruv Institute director Prof. Asher Ben-Arieh said it has more to do with an alarming increase in violence throughout Israeli society in general.

"We are definitely a much more violent society than ever before," said Ben-Arieh, who before being appointed director of Haruv late last year worked as associate director at the National Council for the Child.

The figures for Israel are based on data collected by the NCC and Haruv from child protection officers and social workers.

The US data comes from official sources, as well as professional surveys by researcher David Finkelhor .

Ben-Arieh, who has been researching and writing about cases of child abuse for many years, said that violence levels in society, especially those related to violence against children, are often connected to poverty and economic worries among other issues.

He said research shows that when parents are stressed about money issues, they typically have less patience and shorter fuses when dealing with their children. Israel's poverty levels have steadily grown since the onset of the global economic crisis in 2008 and the most recent figures from the National Insurance Institute show that more than 433,000 families lived below the poverty line in 2010. Within that number, some 837,300 children were considered poor; additional data from the Ministry of Welfare and Social Services shows that an estimated 150,000 children are considered at-risk.

Asked whether the reported child abuse cases were mild or severe, Ben-Arieh said that based on the data alone it was extremely hard to determine whether cases being dealt with by social workers involved extreme violence, sexual abuse or negligence by parents.

Since taking over at the institute last last year, Ben-Arieh has focused on raising awareness from the ground up, including providing hands-on training for professionals such as teachers, doctors and educators on how to detect signs of child abuse and how to work with child victims of abuse. Among the programs recently initiated by the institute is a homogenous training program led by community social workers to counsel all members of a family in which abuse has occurred.

The Haruv Institute was founded five years ago by the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation with the goal of becoming a world center for advanced research in the field of child abuse within the family in Israel. The institute works very closely with the Ministries of Welfare and Social Services, Education and Health .