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# Incidence of sex crimes has declined drastically

**P**redators on the Internet, priests molesting children, Duke lacrosse players accused of rape — judging from the news or TV crime dramas, sexual assault appears to be an endless national epidemic. So powerful is this impression that when evidence emerges to suggest otherwise, Americans may have trouble believing their eyes.

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**BUT THE TRUTH** about the incidence of rape and other sex crimes is no mirage: It has declined drastically and is still dropping.

The *Washington Post* recently reported that since the 1970s, rape has diminished in frequency by some 85 percent. If a major newspaper revealed that rape had increased by 85 percent in the past generation, commentators and politicians would be decrying the fact, pointing fingers and demanding remedies. But this phenomenal success story vanished without a trace — possibly it sounded too good to be true, and perhaps because some people see little to gain from acknowledging the truth.

There is no doubt, though, about the fundamental facts. We tend to discount statistics about rape because many victims don't go to the police. But the best evidence comes from the Justice Department's annual crime victimization survey — which compiles numbers based on interviews with some 75,000 Americans, rather than from police reports. The survey found that in 1979, the rate of rape was 2.8 per 1,000 people over age 11. In 2004, it was 0.4.

Some experts say that because the survey was redesigned in the early 1990s, the most reliable data comes from 1993 and after. Even here, though the trend is the same, with a drop of 75 percent. That translates into hundreds of thousands of rapes that didn't happen.

The change is part of an overall drop in violent crime, which peaked in 1994. But the progress against sexual assaults has been much larger — and while the FBI says murder, robbery and aggravated assault jumped last year, rape kept falling. Sexual abuse of children, a plague in the 1980s, has also gotten much less common, with a decline of 47 percent since 1990.

**WHAT'S GOING ON?** In the last decade and a half, the nation's prison population has doubled, taking many sex offenders out of circulation. The number of people imprisoned for sexually abusing children tripled between 1986 and 1997. According to David Finkelhor and Lisa Jones of the Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of



offenders are more likely to get incarcerated, so potentially small increases in incarceration of high-volume offenders can have large effects on the overall offense rate."

But imprisonment alone can't explain what's happened. As criminologist Franklin Zimring of the University of California at Berkeley notes, Canada has also seen crime recede — even though its prison population has shrunk. DNA databases have made it easier to catch rapists, but the trend emerged long before they assumed a major role in solving sex crimes.

The "Freakonomics" explanation — that legal abortion reduced crime by lowering the number of unwanted children, who are more prone to trouble — also falls short. The decline in rape, after all, began only seven years after *Roe v. Wade*, and 7-year-olds rarely commit sexual assault. Finkelhor and Jones also note that under the hypothesis proposed by University of Chicago economist Steven Levitt, there should have been a decline in child abuse long before the 1990s, since parents should be less likely to harm children they wanted.

One theory about the causes of rape, however, has been thoroughly demolished. Among religious conservatives and left-wing feminists, it's an article of faith that pornography leads inexorably to sexual abuse of women and children. But while hard-core raunch has proliferated, sexual assaults have not. Could it be that pornography prevents rape?

In fact, our changing attitudes about erotica are part of a generally more open and honest approach to matters involving sex. And one vital product of that openness has been a willingness to confront questions that were often avoided in the past. Today, kids grow up being taught that "no means no" — rapists can't be ex-

provocatively, and adults are never allowed to touch children in certain ways.

**THOSE THEMES** have hardly eradicated this scourge, but they have worked to discourage predators and embolden

potential victims. Maybe the main lesson from the decline of sexual assault is an old one: Knowledge is power.

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