

We spend billions after child sexual abuse happens and nothing to prevent it

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For weeks, the nation has been gripped by details surrounding Jeffrey Epstein and his child sex-trafficking operation. An operation uncovered more than a decade ago but badly addressed by prosecutors. Last year we learned that Larry Nasser continued to sexually abuse child athletes for 20 years after the first accusations surfaced against him.

These aren't isolated incidents. We've seen similar patterns of open secrets that everyone knows about and no one acts upon with Jerry Sandusky and Cardinal George Pell. With too many people in too many sectors of society, assaulting children for years or decades with impunity.

When we finally do hold someone accountable for child sexual abuse we want credit for making it count. New charges against Epstein carried a maximum sentence of 45 years — essentially a life sentence had the 66-year-old lived to be convicted.

Nassar was sentenced to a maximum of 360 years; at 56 years of age, he will likely die in prison. It costs about \$35,000 to imprison someone for one year. We were willing to “invest” more than 1.5 million dollars to lock up Epstein and will likely invest that much or more in Nassar. Annually, the U.S. spends nearly six billion dollars to incarcerate people convicted of sex crimes.

These efforts to compensate for complacency may seem justified, but they come too late and they do too little. We desperately need more resources focused on the development of effective prevention strategies. Strategies that keep children safe from sexual abuse in the first place.

Previously convicted sex offenders account for just 5 percent of all new sex crimes. We focus enormous resources to address this small sliver of the problem. How much do you think we spend to address the other 95 percent of the problem — to prevent first-time sex crimes from being committed by people unknown to the law?

Almost nothing. In 1978 Congress authorized 3 to 4 million dollars annually to develop effective prevention, treatment and law enforcement strategies to address child sexual abuse. That funding disappeared in the 1980s and never returned.

A successful national approach would comprehensively address all child sexual abuse by emphasizing primary prevention as well as treatment and accountability. Earlier this year, the Moore Center for the Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse led 25 youth-serving organizations including Boys and Girls Clubs of America, Boy Scouts of America, Committee for Children, and the National Children's Alliance to urge Congress to support child sexual abuse prevention research. Specifically, these organizations requested that \$10 million in new annual funding be included in the Labor HHS appropriations bill.

That's 0.001 percent of the amount we spend each year to incarcerate sex offenders.

The House Labor HHS Appropriations Committee responded by including \$2 million for child sexual abuse prevention research in its 2020 budget. This is a promising start. We don't yet know whether the Senate Labor HHS Appropriations Committee includes any such funding.

We need Congress to lead the way by funding research on prevention strategies that work. Strategies focused on protecting all children, instead of giving the illusion of safety after harm has already occurred. Child sexual abuse is preventable — and it's time to invest the resources needed to protect our children.

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