

Can decreasing unwarranted reports to child protection agencies improve outcomes for children and families?

RAZ, M. (2020). CALLING CHILD PROTECTIVES SERVICES IS A FORM OF COMMUNITY POLICING THAT SHOULD BE USED APPROPRIATELY: TIME TO ENGAGE MANDATORY REPORTERS AS TO THE HARMFUL EFFECTS OF UNNECESSARY REPORTS. *CHILDREN AND YOUTH SERVICES REVIEW*, 110, ARTICLE 104817.

What can we learn from this study?

The author argues that the unnecessary removal of children from their parents is “a form of child abuse in itself.” Mandatory reporting requirements are not well understood, resulting in unwarranted, poor quality reports that negatively impact families and strain the child welfare system. Mandatory reporting maintains racial and cultural inequalities, and at times, may be used as a form of community policing. **It is essential to improve the quality of reports—reducing the number of unwarranted, poor quality reports—both to reduce the trauma of unnecessary investigations for families and to permit the child welfare system to focus on children at greatest risk of harm.**

What are the critical findings?

Estimates of the number of children who have been the subject of an investigation in the U.S. are staggering: one in three children overall, and over half of all African American children. The system “prioritizes investigations over the provision of services” and often requires an investigation prior to the delivery of services.

Why is this important for our work?

Unwarranted reporting creates unnecessary stress for families and burdens child protection agencies. While protecting children needs to remain front and center, “more” is not always “better” when it comes to reporting. Jurisdictions may need to revisit their mandatory reporting policies in light of evidence of their effectiveness, and consider developing and testing other training materials (such as [iLook Out for Child Abuse](#)) to guide mandated reporters in determining which situations warrant reporting. Further, mandated reporters should be encouraged to refer families to prevention services, such as those offered by [Family Resource Centers](#).

- **There are limits to the benefits of mandatory reporting.** Studies show that more reporting is neither linked to better detection of maltreatment nor correlated with better outcomes.
- **Policies focus on increasing the number of reports, but do not focus on reducing unwarranted reports.** Low substantiation rates reflect overreporting.
- **People use moral judgments in deciding whether to report.** When presented with vignettes of unsupervised children, for example, research participants deemed the situation more or less dangerous based on the reason for the parent's absence. These moral judgments are particularly detrimental to families that are socially or economically disadvantaged.
- **Reporting can be used as a form of community policing.** When families are threatened with calls to CPS for picking children up late from day care or for leaving them in a car for brief periods of time, the power of the state is being misused.

This summary synthesizes the findings of a single research study. To learn more about strengthening and supporting families before a hotline call is necessary, please review [What is a population-based approach to child welfare?](#) and [How can child welfare leaders advance a 21st century child well-being system?](#)

For additional information, [see the abstract](#) or email KMResources@casey.org.