

# How can trends in child maltreatment during COVID-19 inform new ways of supporting families?

WEINER, D., HEATON, L., STIEHL, M., CHOR, B., KIM, K., HEISLER, K., FOLTZ, R., & FARRELL, A. (2020). CHAPIN HALL ISSUE BRIEF: COVID-19 AND CHILD WELFARE: USING DATA TO UNDERSTAND TRENDS IN MALTREATMENT AND RESPONSE. CHICAGO, IL: CHAPIN HALL AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO.

## What can we learn from this research?

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, children have less in-person contact with educators and other mandated reporters, which has led to a decline in the number of hotline reports for maltreatment. At the same time, economic stressors for families have increased. Some express concern that these circumstances are contributing to an increase in undetected maltreatment.

### Study details:

- **Population:** Children involved in a screened-in report of maltreatment
- **Data sources:** Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System from one county; Bureau of Labor Statistics ; American Community Survey; National Center of Health Statistics; National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System
- **Methodology:** Descriptive and multilevel time-series analyses
- **Dates:** 2012 to 2020

## What are the critical findings?

This brief analyzes the historical patterns of child maltreatment reports and the impact of economic trends on families to provide information about the child welfare system's ability to effectively *detect* and *respond to* child maltreatment:

- **Patterns in reporting and substantiation:** One-fifth of all calls to child protection hotlines are made by education personnel, but only 11% are substantiated as child maltreatment. (This substantiation rate is similar for child care providers and mental health personnel, but lower than law enforcement and medical personnel.) When compared to other mandated reporters, reporting by educators was least consistent over time. The low substantiation rate suggests families may benefit from supports other than intervention from the child protection agency, and educators need diverse and appropriate alternatives for connecting families to those supports.
- **Economic trends and the impact on child maltreatment:** Reports were divided into two categories, those made for "neglect only" and "all others," which included reports of abuse and neglect. An increase in unemployment rates were positively and significantly associated with the rate of "all other" reports but not "neglect only," suggesting that additional community-based supports might be needed to address the concrete needs of families.

## Why is this important for our work?

This analysis offers critical insight into how the child welfare system can be reimagined to promote child and family well-being, noting that most families could benefit more from upstream supports rather than child welfare intervention. The researchers recommend: 1) refining the maltreatment category of neglect to distinguish it from poverty; 2) investing in community-based supports; 3) using technology to improve access to services; 4) creating better pathways for families to access support; and 5) recognizing that child and family well-being requires investment from a broad array of partners.

This summary synthesizes the findings from a single research brief. To learn more, review resources at [Pathways for Support](#).

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