

Reports of Child Abuse Seem To Be Falling: How Can We Know What's Really Happening?



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Since the COVID-19 crisis began, many have been wondering what impact this crisis will have on children and families. More specifically, many experts in and around the field of child welfare wonder if child maltreatment will increase, decrease, or remain the same. Focus in the news has been on the low number of reports of child maltreatment received by child protection services since March:

- Child abuse cases drop 51%. The authorities are very worried
- Child abuse and neglect reports remain down, experts say numbers are not reflecting reality
- Child abuse reports are down during the pandemic. Experts say that's a bad sign

But how do we really know what's happening? The bigger question: Did we ever really know what was happening, pre-COVID-19?

In 2018, there were more than **4 million “referrals”** to child protective services (CPS) in the United States based on concerns of child maltreatment. Two-thirds ($\frac{2}{3}$) of these referrals are made by professionals (like social workers), largely mandated by law to call CPS when their concerns meet a particular threshold. Professional reporters, or “mandated reporters,” include school personnel, medical personnel, law enforcement, mental health professionals, and social service workers, among dozens of other categories. In some states, **all adults are “mandated reporters.”**

In 2018, 55% of referrals (2.4 million calls) were “screened in” as reports concerning allegations of child maltreatment, and routinely investigated and evaluated for intervention by CPS. The other nearly two million referrals were “screened out” before CPS even got involved.

“Screened out” referrals can fall into a variety of different categories:

- the concerns don’t rise to the definition of child abuse or neglect;
- the referral does not contain enough information to allow for a response (i.e., unknown location of family of concern, etc.);
- the referral is more appropriate to another agency, like a school response team;
- the family involved in the referral is the responsibility of a military installation or tribe;
- the person at risk in the referral is an adult, and not subject to protection under child protective law.

Referrals that resulted in a CPS response involved 3.5 million children in 2018, or about 48 out of every 1,000 children in America. This does not mean that 3.5 million children were abused or neglected in the United States in 2018. The actual number may be less or more, as a result of under-reporting, over-reporting, and other systemic problems in child protection reporting prior to COVID-19.

Some maltreatment is never visible outside the home, and thus the family is insulated from CPS intervention. Many people fail to call CPS when they suspect child maltreatment. Some people don’t know how to

make a report or what to report. Others don't want to get involved, or they are concerned that making a call may lead to more harm than good. No matter what the reason, **research consistently finds** that children experience maltreatment that is never reported to CPS. When child victims are not identified, society misses the opportunity to intervene.

Under-reporting is not the only problem with getting a true estimate of the prevalence of child maltreatment, pre-COVID-19. Over-reporting may also be a problem. Fewer than 20% of reports result in identifying a child as a victim. This does not necessarily mean that 80% of reports should not have been made. Although a very small proportion of these reports are falsely made in an effort to hurt the accused, these reports are most often made by concerned service providers, family members, and friends or neighbors who believe their report will provide the family with needed support services, even though no maltreatment is occurring. This equally concerning phenomenon results in families suffering from unwarranted disruption and adds undue pressure to an already overburdened CPS system straining to keep focused on serving truly at-risk children and families.

Everyone seems to agree that the reduction in the number of calls to CPS since March 2020 is related to children's lack of proximity to professional mandated reporters. Teachers, day care workers, **health professionals**, and social workers are not seeing children on a regular basis. As a result, of course, the number of reports to CPS is likely to go down.

Everyone also seems to agree that the COVID-19 crisis has added to the stress that families already faced pre-pandemic. There are record levels of unemployment, unparalleled food insecurity, along with families forced to spend more time together than ever before. Add to this unprecedented social action in response to the death of George Floyd that has heightened societal perceptions of structural and systemic racism. As a result of these extraordinary circumstances, many have the expectation that child maltreatment will go up.

The question remains: How can we possibly know what is really happening to children in 2020 when we didn't really know what was happening to them pre-COVID-19? A person can still be a child welfare advocate or expert and admit, "I don't know whether the coronavirus pandemic will further mask the actual number of incidents of child abuse, and if so, to what extent."

As social workers, we know that good researchers should not claim decisiveness simply to further personal policy agendas. Especially in today's

polarized environment, reintroducing the phrase “I don’t know” back into our vocabulary should cause no embarrassment. Intellectual integrity should remain unimpaired, even though we cannot answer a question with certainty. Indeed, it is intellectually deceitful to do otherwise. Intellectual honesty implies a commitment to a sincere quest for facts by means of solid evidence. And it is the only way to ascertain the actual incidence of child abuse.

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