

Analysis of Child Abuse in the U.S and Emerging Trends due to COVID-19

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1 Introduction

The novel COVID-19 pandemic has overwhelmed the United States social, economic, and political system. With a reported death count of over 450,000, one of the most vulnerable populations have been overlooked during the pandemic, children and youth in the child welfare system. Many of these children are already a part of a system of financial hardship and experience a disproportionate amount of poverty. Add the additional trauma of COVID-19, the forgotten children are at high risk of being neglected and abused as parents deal with additional childcare responsibilities, financial hardship, and out of the eyes of mandated reporters (Herrenkohl et al, 2020). This report aims to address the relationship between the COVID-19 pandemic and children in the context of child abuse.

The primary question explored in this report is ‘**What social trends have emerged in the child welfare and foster care system due to COVID-19?** Secondary topics needed to be addressed to try to answer the primary question are:

- What are the beliefs surrounding child abuse in America?
- What does child abuse look like in the U.S. pre-COVID?
- How has COVID-19 impacted the U.S?
- How has COVID-19 impacted the child welfare system?

This report is limited due to the nature and newness of the COVID-19 pandemic. Academic universities and researchers are only beginning to access the available resources and studies on how foster children have been affected due to the pandemic. Hopefully, within future months and possibly years more trends will emerge. After the literature review, the report will acknowledge and analyze social and medical trends related to foster children. Within the social context, a New York Case Study with monthly indicators on their welfare system will be analyzed. Lastly, Minnesota specific trends for foster youth as well as trends from the news will be used.

2. Literature Review

This section of the report aims to understand current research and situation in the U.S. related to child abuse and maltreatment. It also delves deeper into the state of the foster care system and the abuse within.

2.1 Child Abuse and Welfare System in the U.S.

A 2021 article by the *ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* discuss the scope, nature and causes of child abuse and neglect. First, child maltreatment is generally defined as act or failure of parent or caretaker which results in: death, serious physical harm, serious emotional harm, sexual abuse, exploitation, or not acting or failure to act which presents an imminent risk of serious harm. An important aspect to address is that most states' statutes consider neglect only due to poverty is not defined as child neglect (Font and Maguire, 2021).

The child welfare system addresses the maltreatment caused by individuals responsible for the child. This system investigates allegations received through CPS. And if further assistance is needed to protect the child, the welfare system provides in-home and foster care services to at risk families. Of course, when the abuse is perpetrated by individuals outside the home the individual responsible for the child is to take protective action. Followed by following through with law enforcement intervention and the criminal justice system to protect society at large (Font and Maguire, 2021).

Unfortunately, many children reported and investigated by CPS are from low-income families. An important consideration when determining if the report is neglectful or as a

result of poverty is asking the question, “Would a reasonable person make the same choices if given the parent’s constraint?”

The study did an analysis of incidences of child maltreatment estimated based on annual rate per 1,000 children. The overall findings is that CPS substantiations underestimate all forms of maltreatment, particularly physical abuse. The National Abuse And Neglect Data from 2016 found that Investigated children physical abuse accounted for 11.83 whereas confirmed victims accounted for 1.66. However, the National Survey of Children’s Exposure to Violence shows that 50 children were exposed to Physical abuse in a similar timeframe, suggesting that CPS understates and underestimates the number of children affected by physical abuse.

A final point from this article is whether or not child maltreatment in the U.S. is increasing or decreasing? Rates of physical and sexual abuse between the 1990’s and 2000’s saw a significant decline. However, recently CPS-substantiated reports of sexual abuse have increased, while rates of physical abuse stagnated. Conclusions have been made that the reason for decreased cases overall is that a) public awareness and prevention efforts b) increased treatment and medication for children with behavioural issues and c) aggressive prosecution for violent crimes against children (Font and Maguire, 2021).

A second article called *Hidden Protections: Identifying Social Norms Associated with Child Abuse, Sexual Abuse, and Neglect* addresses the social norms amongst U.S. citizens on a federal level. The U.S is no role model for how to address child abuse as it effects hundreds of thousands of children yearly. Unfortunately, this only accounts for those identified, the problem is much bigger with abuse that goes unnoticed. Identification systems need to be improved to stop repeated neglect and help improve communities.

A 2014 study by Prevent Child Abuse America and the Montana institute conducted a survey to understand U.S actual and perceived norms associated with child maltreatment

followed by its prevention. Actual norms refer to behaviours and attitudes held by a majority of people in a group or community, whereas perceived norms refer to the perceptions of behaviours, beliefs, attitudes and values that their reference group engages in. The survey included 1000 adult participants across the U.S. The National Norms Survey for Child Abuse and Neglect found actual norms among majority of U.S. adults believe “child abuse is a serious problem (87%), is preventable (87%), and that they would (97%), and should (98%) take action if abuse was suspected (Klika et al, 2019).”

The same respondents were asked the same questions about what they think most adults would respond to child abuse. Comparing to, 75% believe child abuse is a serious problem, 74% believe its preventable, 87% would intervene and 91% perceive that majority of others would take action if abuse was suspected (Klika et al, 2019). Some differences discovered by group differences include age as a major factor. Older adults (65+) had a more pessimistic opinion on child abuse and neglect, this may be due to it being a newer phenomenon in terms of awareness. They often felt a sense of hopelessness. Adults also felt knowledge on sexual abuse was less than knowledge on physical abuse, people without children and males felt the least knowledgeable. 65% of respondents also said fear of making the situation worse for the child was a primary reason for not intervening. Other concerns included personal safety (37%), retaliation of perpetrator (36%), and some reported they did not know what to do (32%). (Klika et al, 2019).

The reason this study is valuable to understand is to help understand individuals actions, behaviours and beliefs related to child abuse and maltreatment. It is also known that abuse, whether physical, sexual, or neglect can have life-long negative impact on both physical and mental health. Preventative action needs to be prioritized through focus on policies, programs, and within the context of where families live. Although prevention is the intention, sometimes even when neglect is known little action is taken. A national survey

commissioned by Children's Institute International found the majority of adults said they would take action (92%) but only 34% who suspected abuse/neglect made an official report. This reinforces that even though more adults are publicly aware, many cases of abuse go unreported which harms communities and children within the U.S.

2.2 Covid-19 in the U.S

This section addresses the need to contextualize how COVID-19 has affected people in the U.S. as certain conditions may have a direct or indirect effect on the child welfare system. This section will look at two factors: economic and social.

At the time of writing up, February 14, 2021, up to 28 million people in the U.S. have been infected with the virus, with close to 500,00 of those infections resulting in deaths. The virus entered the country on January 20, 2020. COVID-19 has become the third leading cause of death in the U.S., and has now claimed more U.S. lives than World War II. Responses to stop the spread of the virus include the prohibition of large-scale gathering, stay-at-home orders, social distancing, being required to wear a mask in public places and the closure of schools (Sergent & Padilla, 2021).

The impact of the virus is felt by everybody, but it is felt more in African American and Latino communities. Those communities are almost three times as likely to know someone who died than white Americans. People with this background suffer from a much higher share of the negative economic and health issues (Karson and Scanlan, 2020). African American deaths are close to two times higher than expected; Latinos account for a greater share of COVID-19 cases than their share of the population, while white Americans have a lower death rate than their share of the population. A clear bias can be seen in these statistics. This is the direct result of pre-pandemic issues, such as the fact that African Americans have more underlying conditions, less access to quality health-care and are overrepresented in frontline jobs. (Godoy, 2020)

In early 2020, when the pandemic arrived in the U.S., job insecurity and financial concerns weighed heavy over Americans. Health experts quickly advised social distancing guidelines which resulted in many states to close non-essentials businesses. By April 2020, the U.S. unemployment rate was the highest it's been since the Great Recession at 14.7%. The

social distance measures resulted in 41 million workers filing for unemployment between February and May. The financial insecurities may have led to the increased mental health problems of anxiety and depression amongst Americans (Wilson et al, 2020). Continuing, the article discusses a study conducted studying anxiety and depressive symptoms due to financial and job insecurity due to the pandemic. Overall, the study found that job insecurity but not financial concerns are associated with depressive symptoms. Greater job insecurity resulting from the pandemic is “ indirectly associated with greater anxiety symptoms through greater financial concern. (Wilson et al, 2020). This means that people who are worried about job insecurity have anxiety due to wanting to ensure financial stability. The increased economic and financial pressures have negatively impacted a large portion of the population. This is relevant because as parents and guardians experience more stress it can lead to more abuse and neglect towards children. Additionally, children who are experiencing isolation during COVID-19 are not in contact with mandated reporters to report and reduce harm.

Another concern due to job loss during the pandemic is millions of Americans losing health insurance as a result of COVID-19. Using 2019’s U.S. Census Bureau’s Survey on health coverage, unemployed individuals had an uninsurance rate of approximately 26.3% whereas insured people had a rate of 10.7%. The article published in July, 2020 estimates that of the 9.955 million who filed for unemployment, 1.553 million newly unemployed will lose health coverage. Projections from the Federal Reserve Economist predict 7.3 million workers and their families will become uninsured based on 47.05 million people becoming unemployed. States who did not join the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act’s Medicaid expansion will likely see an even higher rate of coverage loss to 40% (Woolhandler & Himmelstein, 2020).

This issue will have a lasting impact on American families. With individuals losing health insurance for themselves and their families due to unemployment, it could result in

fewer medical visits for children. If children are abused or neglected, mandated reporters such as doctors cannot only not provide care but also not help children from future abuse. Overall, this issue will likely also negatively impact the health of families and could lead to future traumas such as sickness, death, moving away, physical injury and so on. Financial concerns for the hospitals in the states will also impact Americans. Closed hospitals and physician offices will result in decrease of capacity to individuals during and after the pandemic. It will limit the ability to provide health care services to deferred care and future demands. Hospitals in rural communities and underserved areas who already had access problems pre-covid are predicted to face the greatest financial challenges. It is likely layoffs and closures could become more prevalent (Barnett, Mehrotra, & Landon, 2020).

2.3 Covid-19 and Child Welfare and Foster System in the U.S

The first article ‘How COVID-19 Is Placing Vulnerable Children at Risk and Why We Need a Different Approach to Child Welfare’ addresses the increased concern for households impacted by poverty and social isolation during the pandemic and how the current statutory child welfare systems need change. Families experiencing financial hardship and domestic violence, risk for severe and chronic forms of child abuse and neglect is already high, add the direct and indirect effects of covid and risks increase. Racial and ethnic minorities are also at further risk of the detriment of the pandemic. Large proportions of this population experience temporary and low-wage work. This limits their access to basic health care and access to medical insurance. This furthers their disparities as their temporary work and access to paid leave makes them prioritize employment over family safety. (They are also unsafe due to the environments they work in and lack of ppe). **A national study of parents found that within 2 weeks of stay at home orders and physical distancing that negative parenting practices were increasing. 20% of parents reported spanking or slapping as a form of discipline and 60% yelled or screamed at their children in the previous two weeks.** This is attributed to increased stress of parents due to childcare responsibilities

Although reports show a decline in abuse and neglect, this is likely not the case as fewer maltreatment reports are more likely due to social distancing and isolation. For example, **some states have seen drop of 50-70% of child maltreatment reports to child protection units** (Herrenkohl et al, 2020)

Next, the PennState Social Science Research Institute has examined and contextualized the impact covid-19 is affecting foster care in the U.S. First, the pandemic has impacted the ability of children to be placed in a permanent household. These children enter foster care with physical, mental health needs, development delays, and behavioural challenges. Combine this with no access to schooling, the children have lost structure. This

can be damaging for foster children's development. The goal of children in foster care is reunification, and thus, state and federal agencies acknowledge children need a stable environment to avoid harm (Font, 2020).

If stability is required for a child to avoid harm, why have social welfare systems failed us? Since the start of the pandemic, in-person visitations have been delayed or paused in a majority of states. In addition, the parents are unable to meet required services and hours to meet agency requirements to bring their children home. To make matters more difficult for families, foster parents who tend to be in the older demographic cannot take the risk of family visitations at this time due to risk of illness (Font 2020).

Another major concern presenting itself due to COVID-19 is that foster children are unable to attend school. Children in foster care are harmed more than their peers by loss of in-person learning due to experiencing academically delayed learning due to disabilities. Foster children are also moving more frequently due to less access to foster homes. Moving through foster homes and thus school districts will also negatively impact their sense of belonging and community. Children in foster care face more social consequences due to loss of opportunities facilitated by school (Font, 2020). Children in foster care have less resources than their peers such as the internet or even a computer to do school work. Therefore, foster children are being disproportionately hurt academically throughout the pandemic.

Finally, to contextualize violence against children, the World Health Organization's (WHO) 2020 report on the global status report on preventing violence against children was reviewed. WHO surveyed 155 countries on efforts to reduce violence against children and examined policy implementation based on the INSPIRE prevention plan. For the purpose of the project, covid based topics were explored. In the U.S, the economic consequences in one year of child violence has an estimated cost of \$428 billion. With the introduction of covid-19, violence against children is predicted to have a long lasting negative impact.

Globally 1.5 billion schools have closed, leading to social isolation and increased risk of abuse. Globally, there have been spikes in crisis hotlines, but a decrease in child abuse calls to CPS. Also identified is actual or potential harm to children via cyber exploitation. Economically, covid 19 has been devastating to many communities. The financial distress to families may take years to overcome and there will likely be more homicides and violent assaults than pre-lockdown levels (WHO, 2020, xi).

Covid-19 has had a grand impact on child welfare all around the world and will disproportionately affect vulnerable youth within the foster system. The financial costs of \$428 billion in the U.S alone will increase with more youth becoming vulnerable due to the pandemic. As the article states, with schools closed more youth are at risk of being abused and not being reported by mandated reporters. With an unknown future, the economic and social costs of covid-19 will likely perpetuate for future generations.

2.4 Minnesota State Analysis prior to COVID-19

The State of Minnesota has its own unique experiences related to child abuse and foster care. The Department of Human Services Legislative produced Minnesota's Out-of-home-Care and Permanency report (2019) highlights work across the state to improve the wellbeing of children with out of home experiences. Out of home care refers to any 24-hour substitute care away from a parent or guardian. This can include foster placements such as group homes, foster family homes, emergency shelters, residential facilities, child-care institutions and pre-adoptive homes. (Minnesota Department of Human Services Child Safety and Permanency Division, 2020). Although the data reported is pre-covid, it is an excellent resource for when comparing to the future report in 2020 and analyzing in which ways COVID-19 has impacted the state's system.

In Minnesota, there was an overall reduction of the total number of children experiencing out-of-home-care by 7.8%, a reduction of 9.4% of children **entering** home care and a 9.2% reduction of children **continuing** care. In Minnesota, of 15,384 children who experienced out-of-home-care episodes, 15,297 of those spent one or more days in care. The primary reason that children enter care is related to substance abuse accounting for approximately 29.9% of cases. The reduction of children entering care during this period is a positive relationship (Minnesota Department of Human Services Child Safety and Permanency Division, 2020). When the same report is released for 2020, we should consider based on the overall trends across the U.S that this is likely not a positive experience as it was prior to COVID-19.

2.5 State Performance Measures in 2019

The Department of Human Services in Minnesota created a dashboard (2020) with 6 indicators of state performance measures: timeliness, caseworker visits, relative care, physical health at entry, maltreatment reporting and aging out of foster care. This dashboard

should be compared to the 2020 reports to make inferences on how COVID-19 may have impacted the system. The section below will describe the indicator, state the statistic, and ways in which to analyze when the 2020 report is produced and shared.

1. Timeliness measures of all Child Protection reports closed in 2019, what percentage of alleged victims were seen in-person within the time limit specified by MN state statute?
 - a. The 24 hour response timeliness measure is for alleged substantial child endangerment and forwarded to **family investigation**. Minnesota performed at 85.5%. They did not meet the state standard of 100%.
 - b. The 5 day response timeliness measure is for Child Protection reports that did not involve alleged substantial endangerment were forwarded to **family investigation**. Minnesota performed at 91.1% and did not meet the state standard of 100%
 - c. The 5 day response for Child Protection reports that did not involve alleged substantial child endangerment were forwarded to **family assessment**. Minnesota performed at 88.5% and did not meet the state standard of 100%.
 - i. Applicable to all 3 timeliness indicators, when comparing this data to 2020 dataset one should ask the question:
 - ii. Has state performance increased or decreased? This question is valuable because if the performance decreases it may be due to the fact family investigation and assessment are not able to go to visitations due to COVID-19. If the performance increases, we may need to evaluate the number of children in out-of-home-care. If the total number (denominator) has decreased substantially, it may be due to

decreased reports and less stress on the family investigation/assessment system.

2. Caseworker visits measure the percentage of face-to-face visits with a caseworker in a given period where face-to-face contact with a child was required during that month.
 - a. The percentage of face-to-face visits made by caseworkers within any given month where it was required was 83.4% and failed to meet the state performance standard at 95%. This is already over 11% away from what the department should be meeting.
 - i. When comparing to future reports post-covid-19, a similar strategy as the first indicator should be used to analyze. For instance, if the number of visits decrease, it may be an indicator that in some months of lockdown caseworkers were not able to make visits. Even further, many in-person visits may have been suspended completely in some counties, where stats are unavailable.
3. Relative Care indicator measures the percentage of days a child spent with a relative during the given period
 - a. Minnesota's performance measure in 2019 was 60.9% and performed higher than the state standard at 35.7%. There has been a steady yet significant incline since 2014 which only accounted for 35.8%
 - i. When the 2020 version of this report is released, it will be valuable to see what direction the trend follows? More kids may be sent to relative care since another article by PennState University stated that less foster parents are able to take in these children as they usually are in an older demographic and more at-risk for getting sick (Font, 2020).

4. Physical Health at Entry indicator measures the percentage of all children that entered out-of-home care who stayed for at least 30 days that received a medical exam or comprehensive checkup within 30 days of entering, or in the 12 months before entering.
 - a. Minnesota's percentage who received a medical exam or comprehensive check-up was 62.9%. This is approximately 7% lower than the state performance standards of 70% or more.
 - i. This statistic will be very important to compare to the 2020 report as a trend has emerged in some states that less children have been admitted to the hospital for physical and sexual abuse, while severity of abuse admitted has increased (Woodall, 2020). Therefore, although this number receiving exams may decrease overall due to COVID-19 but it is not an indicator that less abuse is occurring.
5. The maltreatment rereporting indicator measures what percentage of children who had a maltreatment report in the prior year had a subsequent report within 12 months.
 - a. The percentage reported in 2019 was 19.5% which is approximately 4% higher than the state's performance standard of 15.2% or less.
 - i. Similar to the point by Woodall, many children may not have rereported maltreatment due to the trend the U.S is seeing of child abuse reports declining due to aspects such as lack of mandated reporters (Herrenkohl et al, 2020).
6. Aging Out of Foster Care is the final indicator which measures the percentage of children who spent 1+ years in out-of-home-care who were discharged from foster care to emancipation or turned 18 while in foster care.

- a. The percentage of children aged out of foster care who spent a 1+ years in foster care was 70.2%. This is just under the state performance standard of 70% or less.
 - i. Youth aging out of foster care during COVID-19 are at more significant risk of harm as a result. Therefore, it would be beneficial to see the Minnesota performance. It is uncertain at this time whether it would be beneficial to see the percentage decrease as this could be due to lack of youth in harm being put into foster care.

3 Findings

3.1 Examining Trends relating to Child Abuse during Covid-19 across the U.S.

3.1.1 Trends from the 2008 recession

History never fails to repeat itself. From 2007 to 2009, the U.S experienced their greatest economic recession since the Great Recession (“Chart Book: The Legacy of the Great Recession”, 2019). It is important to see what trends occurred to help understand and predict what possible effects covid may have. For example, the peak of the unemployment rate as a result of the recession was 10.6% in January, 2010. Although there are measurement restrictions, the U.S government estimates unemployment may be as high as 16% in May of 2020 (Kochhar, 2020). During the Great Recession, job insecurities such as job loss, taking a job below experience, or taking an additional job was associated with more anxiety and depressive symptoms up to four years post-recession (Wilson et al, 2020).

Why does this matter? The added stressors produced by the pandemic on parents due to the crisis’ such as unemployment, financial hardship etc may parallel the recession. For example, chief of child abuse pediatrics at Penn State Children’s hospital saw an increase in shaken baby syndrome and it is known at least half will have developmental delays. A study conducted by Dr. Rachel Berger, child abuse specialist at UPMC Children’s Hospital of Pittsburgh found child abuse had skyrocketed during the pandemic. The study analyzed more than 500 patients ages 9 days to 6 years with abusive head trauma. It found that of those, 300+ had severe head injuries severe enough requiring hospitalization in pediatric ICU. Approximately 100 had died. More children at UPMC were dying from abusive head trauma than non-inflicted brain injury (Woodall, 2020). This is important to analyze because if stressors related to parenting have grown due to the pandemic such as more child care responsibilities and financial strain, children are at risk for experiencing abuse in the home.

3.1.2 Social Trends

Many trends have emerged since the start of the pandemic. However, most of the trends that have emerged have been state specific. This does not mean they do not provide value as many of the trends as one can infer that although some states may feel a greater impact depending on resources, the overall trend likely applies to children in foster care.

First, prior to covid-19, trends show that “approximately 50% of children who exited foster care were reunified, typically within 12 months of removal”. Of those, 20-40% end with new cases of abuse and neglect in the household and re-enter the foster care system.

With the pandemic, foster youth are at risk for reunification delays of over 12 months!

The foster children are at risk of being returned to homes without assurance of stable homes, which could increase risk of neglectful behaviour (Singer, J. & Brodzinsky, D, 2020)

Next, since the pandemic began parental visitation in support of family reunification has become problematic for families. Parent-child visitation is crucial for reunification and maintaining parent-child relationships. Due to covid, face-to-face visits have been cut, and instead virtual visitation has been used. These visits also allow social workers to assess progress towards reunification. Studies have shown that for young children engagement is critical for development. The lack of physical affection and social contingency such as responding to a child’s behaviour is impaired. This makes it more difficult for parents to connect with their child and build an emotional connection with them. It also limits their ability to build the necessary parenting skills needed to reunify with their child. One of the biggest barriers to online visitations for foster youth is that in the U.S.:

- 29% of households with income less than 30k do not own a smartphone
- 44% do not have home internet
- 46% don't have a computer and;
- 70% dont have tablets (Singer, J. & Brodzinsky, D, 2020)

Children in rural areas are even more affected by lack of access to steady internet. Considering all these factors, it is assumed that both families and children suffer when unable to meet for in-person visitations during the pandemic. Next, statistics listed above can also have a negative impact on foster children's education.

Although computers for access to education are critical for foster children, another concern arises.

Cyber abuse has skyrocketed. Sexual offenders are taking advantage of the fact that children are at home on computers. A report from the National Center for Missing And Exploited Children reported that in the first month of the pandemic, March, there were more than 2 million reports. This is double the amount from the same period in 2019 at 984,000 reports (Monthly Flash Reports, 2020). Sexual abuse has become a more prevalent issue throughout the pandemic. The Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network reported towards the end of March 2020 that for the first time ever, one-half of the victims receiving help from the National Sexual Assault Hotline were minors. Minors who discussed coronavirus-related concerns, 79% stated that they were currently living with their abuser. (Li et al, 2020). Sexual abuse concerns are becoming even harder to manage throughout the pandemic as mandated reporters are inaccessible to children and the same children are isolated in a home with the abuser.

A final study to examine is *Examining the Impact of COVID-19 on Parental Stress: A Study of Foster Parents*. The study is a statewide study from an unknown state in the southeast. The study looks at how foster parents' parenting related stress have changed over the course of the pandemic. A sample size of n=990 foster parents were used. Overall, they reported stress in three categories: parenting stress, lack of control and parental satisfaction. Specifically, foster parents who are not married, report poorer mental health and financial instability increase

stress over covid. Survey responses between unmarried and married foster parents were as follows:

- Parental stress: married foster parents ($M=13.41$, $SD=0.16$), non-married ($M=13.82$, $SD=0.34$)
- Lack of Control: married foster parents ($M=9.35$, $SD=0.10$), non-married foster parents ($M=9.72$, $SD = 0.21$).
- Parental Satisfaction: Similarly, married participants ($M = 6.41$, $SD=0.08$), non-married participants ($M=6.60$, $SD=0.17$) (Miller et al, 2020).

Not only are foster parents experiencing increased stress due to the pandemic, but single foster parents are experiencing even further stress in all three categories. Why does this matter? Many foster parents have already decided the system is too difficult to manage and having this additional barrier of COVID-19 reduces their ability to manage and work with foster children who often have special needs. If foster parents stress increases, there is also risk that they could become abusive or neglectful out of stress due to lack of resources during these times.

3.1.3 New York City Child Welfare Case Study

The number of children in group homes or children's centers have decreased substantially. The total number of children in children's centers in June 2020 is about half of the children in children's centres in the same month the year prior. The 14-18 year old age group had been steadily declining since December 2019, while the other age groups did not see a significant drop since the start of the pandemic, namely March 2020. The same trend can be seen when comparing the differences in foster care placements. Placements were declining in 2019, with October as an outlier. However a steep decline in placements can be seen starting in April 2020, a month after the start of the pandemic. In the 8 months leading up to the pandemic the number of placements were down by 32 on average in the same month a year earlier. This number drops to 130 less placements per month on average compared to the year prior since the pandemic started. The total number of children placed in

foster care also experiences a meaningful drop. In the months leading up to the pandemic an average of 291 children were placed in foster care each month. This declines to 193 children being placed in care each month since the start of the pandemic, this is a drop of 66%.

Children placed in foster care in New York can be placed into two groups. Children under and children over 12, with each group accounting for half of all children in foster care. The under 12 group can be further divided into a group of 0-5 and 6-11 years, these groups are also evenly divided amongst each other. (Monthly Flash Reports, 2020)

3.1.4 Medical Trends

This section of the paper will focus on the trends surrounding the health implications the pandemic has had on the physical and mental health of children in the foster care system. The medical data discovered can be a strong indicator of the type and rate of abuse in the U.S. during the pandemic.

First, a prominent trend is emerging through the Pennsylvania healthcare system. An article published by USA TODAY details how hospitals are treating more children with severe abuse injuries since the start of the pandemic. Although numbers are down overall, the cases of severely injured children has increased in teams dedicated in both child physical and sexual abuse (Woodall, 2020). Other staggering statistics include a decrease of 50% of phone calls to ChildLine, a state hotline that accepts reports of suspected abuse 24 hours per day. 21,232 reports were made in April 2019 compared to 10,674 reports made in April 2020, according to the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services (Woodall, 2002). This is a staggering decrease and although ideally child abuse has gone down, the reality is that the children are now hidden from the public eye and mandated reporters are not there to help protect vulnerable children.

Another trend is shown by examining emergency department visits related to child abuse and neglect before and during the pandemic. A report published by the Centers for

Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) shows that during the pandemic that CPS reports have decreased between 20-70%. However, the total number of emergency department (ED) visits related to child abuse or neglect decreased by 53%. However, the percentage of ED visits that related to child abuse or neglect increased during the same period. Moreover, the number of ED visits that resulted in hospitalization did not decline in 2020. This results in the percentage of ED visits resulting in hospitalization increases significantly, from 2.1 in 2019 to 3.2% in 2020. The group with the largest increase of cases is children aged 0-4. (Swedo et al, 2020). This is highly concerning as abuse and neglect is more severe with the pandemic even though less children are having visits. This could be due to multiple factors such as isolation, loss of healthcare or increased stress leading to violence. The U.S. child welfare system needs to be prepared for more cases and hospitals need post-pandemic as capacity decreases.

Last, in-person visitation between children in foster care and their (biological) parents and reunifications have been suspended and postponed as a result of COVID. Frequent contact with parents is critical for a healthy development. Children in foster care who have more and frequent contact with their parents perform significantly better than their peers; Children who have less or no contact with their mothers specifically show fastly higher rates of negative behaviours, such as physical and verbal aggression and bullying. More contact also corresponds with lower levels of depression. Prolonged separation may lead to chronic mental and behavioural health issues. Studies show that children in quarantine show to experience PTSD scores up to four times higher; Children in Foster care already suffer from higher rates of PTSD, and quarantine may worsen this problem (A.C. Brown & C. Hintzinger, 2020).

3.1.5 Minnesota Specific Trends

A report by Foster Advocates addresses the impact COVID-19 has had on foster youth. Since the pandemic began, the impact on current and former foster youth has been negative. It amplifies the barriers that they already face in the foster care system. With foster care youth already being at risk, transitioning out of an already broken system with emotional, physical and economic security is now especially difficult as the pandemic has made it even more difficult to reach these goals. Efforts must be taken to prevent foster youth from falling behind even further.

The areas that are identified are financial, employment, housing, mental health and isolation concerns and security. Foster youth over 18 reported doing worse, due to more difficult access to basic needs, as well as uncertainty of having these needs fulfilled in the not so distant future.

Foster youth are a unique group of individuals affected by the foster system and **COVID-19** has impacted Minnesotian foster youth harshly. The study reported that over 80% of foster youth reported to have been negatively impacted by the pandemic; foster youth over 18, African American and American Indians were affected the most. 21% of youth stated that their living situations have been negatively impacted by the pandemic, for youth over 21 this goes up to 38%! Of aged-out youth many said they were concerned about basic needs:

- 43% are worried about housing
- 48% about food
- 43% about phone and communication
- Up to 33% of youth have lost their job

- 40% claim to be concerned about exposure to the virus in their living situation due to shared living arrangements

Many also report not having ample access to resources to prevent the catching and spread of the virus, such as masks and disinfectant.

However, despite all of this youth's orientation towards the future stays relatively even. Excitement about the future and motivation shows a trend similar to the pre-pandemic trend, though the ability to meet goals shows a negative trend. Unfortunately, support systems trended downwards as well; youth aged 14-17 reported having a better support system than their 18+ counterpart, and white youth had better support than their African American peers.

An additional concern reported was that around 21% of the respondents had their living arrangements impacted by the pandemic. This concern is especially felt by 21-26 year olds for whom this number rises to 38%. Youth who have aged-out of foster homes have a particularly hard time. 8% reported not having access to secure housing, and many who had their housing tied to education became homeless when dorms and other living arrangements closed in spring. It is recommended to invest in housing stability at the moment youths age out of foster homes; it contributes to the well being of these youths, and the costs are lower than the investments that have to be made for homeless shelters.

Next, foster youth in Minnesota's education has been impacted due to COVID-19. Even before the pandemic foster youths are at a disadvantage when it comes to education. Foster youth are much more likely to be absent or suspended and are more likely to face expulsion. Despite this, a majority of foster youth report wanting to attend college; at the same time they feel that there is not enough support for them to follow these dreams. This means that they are much less likely to enroll, resulting in only 3% of foster youth acquiring bachelor's degrees. About two-thirds of all foster youth were enrolled in online schooling, with most of them being in high school. Limited access to devices or the internet and a lack

of a suitable workspace are the biggest factors impacting distance learning. Up to half of youths reported not having ample access to suitable academic support.

The last indicator from this study affecting foster youth during the pandemic was employment. During the pandemic up to a third of Minnesotan foster youth lost their employment. This is about 3 times higher than the unemployment numbers of the general U.S. population, and 4 times higher than the Minnesota average. Of the youth that retained their employment, 45% have had their hours reduced, and 13% saw a decrease in their wages. Foster youth are not confident with their future employment, with about over half stating that they were unsure about retaining their job in the next month.

Several issues need to be recognized in order to improve the situation for foster youth in Minnesota. Greater health, and in particular mental health support, greatly impacts foster youths' ability to prosper. Expanding connections, particularly for those who have aged-out, will improve foster youths' mental health.

3.2 Minnesota News Story Trends

The StarTribune produced an article “Minnesota child abuse reports plunge during coronavirus pandemic, worrying authorities”, and the article states the premise of this analysis. Child welfare agencies address the concern that child abuse is going unnoticed in the state. However, agencies remind the Minnesota community of the reform the system saw in 2013 including hiring thousands of child protection staff and social workers as well as expanding eligibility for the Parent Outreach Support Program to help families meet basic needs. Lastly, DHS provided 10,000 cases to local agencies that were provided 6 months prior to the pandemic to ensure re-abuse cases are addressed (Serres, 2021).

Although Minnesota agencies and DHS are trying to protect children, the reality is not positive. Although the full report and dashboard from Minnesota’s Department of Human Services (DHS) has not been released, there has been a **22% decline in child maltreatment reports** to local child protection agencies during the first 8 months of the pandemic. During the March-October period in 2020, cases were at 44,865 compared to the same period in 2019 at 57,440. Lastly, there was also a 27% drop of children removed from their homes into foster care. One reason for this may be a result of isolation between children and mandated reporters who account for 4 of 5 reports of maltreatment. This makes sense as when schools closed from March to June, there was a 32% decrease in child maltreatment reports. This has decreased since schools reopened/lock down restrictions loosened (Serres, 2001). Therefore, with the reduction of maltreatment cases primarily due to isolation of children in their homes it is imperative the Minnesota government, DHS and agencies take a more aggressive reactive approach to protect the children, and continue a proactive approach as the pandemic continues.

To reconfirm the previous news report, an article by Twin Cities Pioneer Press reported that counties are also receiving fewer reports of child abuse during the pandemic.

The article states children are not in contact with mandated reporters due to the lockdown and do not come into contact with services like schools and churches. Minnesotian parents are experiencing new pressures from the combination of full-time workloads and providing childcare and home schooling responsibilities as well as job loss and financial stress. Two counties that have reported a reduction of reports of child abuse in the family investigation department: Ramsay and Washington. Ramsay county saw a decrease of 231 cases in March to 61 cases in April. Washington county child abuse cases dropped from 131 cases to 82 cases in the same period (Horner, 2020). Understanding the state of Minnesota child abuse reportings during the early pandemic may be a reflection that it has continued through out the pandemic. Children at-risk do not deserve to be neglected by the system itself and are at risk for further abuse until they are in the presence of mandated reporters.

“Cyber Exploitation of Minnesota kids surges under quarantine” by the Star Tribune address trends related to child abuse in the digital world. Due to children learning from home and utilizing more digital resources, they have been a target for online predators. Since the pandemic began, the Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension reported in March and April 2020, there have been over 1000 cases reported involving cyber exploitation and child pornography. **This is an increase of 30% compared to the same period in 2019.** Overall in the U.S, there were over 6 million tips in March and April, **a triple increase from 2019** (Mannix, 2020).

Next, an article by KSPT called “Foster care advocates looking for more foster families as COVID-19 crisis creates new challenges” discusses the implications COVID-19 has on the foster system. The foster care system anticipates the increase of children entering the system due to stressors during the pandemic. Over the past year, 6000 children entered into the foster care system. The Ring family shared the challenges that have come with fostering during the pandemic. Two of the boys in their care previously received 40 hours of

therapy pre-pandemic and no longer have access to these services. Additionally, the family is no longer able to coordinate face-to-face visits with their new adoptive family to help them transition to their new life (Gray, 2020). Both foster families, adoptive families and biological families may see greater negative effects on the number of children entering and the health of children and families. The government should provide more resources to help facilitate relationships between different families.

The article also confirms preliminary statistics from the Minnesota DHS. This data can be used as a base for how COVID-19 has affected the child welfare system. The data shows that since schools closed compared to the first 11 weeks of 2020 (pre-covid), **there has been a 33% reduction in the average number of children entering care.** Parallel to this trend, maltreatment reports from mandated reporters have decreased (Gray, 2020). This data should be compared to the 2019 Minnesota DHS report. As the state becomes aware of the drastic drop in children entering care, communities have to hold the stress of not being able to help innocent children and youth.

4 Conclusion

The research topic examined was the effect of COVID-19 on the already broken child welfare and child abuse system in the U.S. The specific question aimed to understand was **‘What social trends have emerged in the child welfare and foster care system due to COVID-19?’** To answer this question social, medical, and some financial trends were discovered. A key point to reinforce is due to the nature of data collection as the pandemic and global crisis continues limits the amount of data related to child abuse and the welfare system as a whole. Given the pandemic has affected every American in some way, one must infer that trends from reputable news stories and academic articles may indicate what is happening nationally across the U.S.

Firstly, the consequences of the pandemic may be compared to the consequences of the 2008 recession. Many of the stressors that had a negative impact on child welfare during that period have been identified thus far and should be examined so the system may be better prepared. Further, reunification is crucial to a child's wellbeing and the pandemic is causing major delays in these reunification efforts. Different pathways to reunification must be studied in order to dampen these delays as much as possible. Moreover, the amount of children coming into the child welfare and foster home systems have decreased substantially. However this does not mean that child abuse cases have gone down. On the contrary, data seems to indicate that children are more at risk during the pandemic; fewer children are administered into the system due to less reports, and less reports are being made because there is less contact between children and individuals looking out for the welfare of the children, namely teachers and other caretakers. Lastly, children in the welfare and foster care systems face greater risks than their peers when it comes to social, health, educational and financial situations. This is mostly due to the lack of a support system. Resources must be made available for these individuals that are particularly at risk due to the pandemic.

Overall the pandemic has had a significant negative impact on children and youth in the welfare and foster care system. More research has to be done on the topic, but it is clear that these at risk individuals require more care and resources than are currently offered to them.

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6 Appendices

Please see separate appendix document for infographics, NYC Child Welfare Dashboard and Minnesota's Out-of-Home-Care dashboard.