



SUPPORTING FAMILIES TO PREVENT CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

MAY 2020

As we reflect on the end of Child Abuse Prevention Month in April, we must acknowledge the hardships that many families are experiencing as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and consider new and creative strategies to support them during a time of unprecedented social isolation, economic stress, and mental health challenges — all known risk factors for child maltreatment.

The following shares preliminary data from 21 states¹ that responded to an inquiry from ChildFocus on the reductions in reports to state child abuse and neglect hotlines, and finds that the number of **reports fell an average of 16%** across these states in March. It goes on to share strategies that states and localities are employing to ensure that families get the support they need and communities remain vigilant so they can identify families in crisis. We will continue to track and share these data over the next several months and will also identify strategies to inform state and community-wide prevention efforts.

Recently, multiple states have reported significant drops in calls to state child abuse hotlines. A recent Washington Post article reported a 62% drop in reports in Washington, DC and a 94% decrease in reports from school staff in Virginia.² This and similar reports from around the country indicate that the systems states use to monitor and address child safety may not be working in the current climate.

Though hotline reports are used to track suspected incidences of child maltreatment, they do not represent all suspected occurrences of abuse or neglect, and many of those reports are later found to lack credibility. Previous research has shown that calls to child abuse hotlines disproportionality represent families of color, families living in poverty, and those with prior involvement with child protective services.³ As reporting decreases, it means that we have an even less complete understanding of the number of children who are truly at risk.

Given the many unknowns, it makes it even more critical that we examine the data we do have on child abuse and neglect, to better understand how children and families are being impacted by COVID-19. States will need a different set of strategies to ensure that families have the support they need before child maltreatment occurs, and that professionals they rely on to identify and respond to incidences of maltreatment can do so even when children are not in the community on a daily basis.

¹ We anticipate a more representative sample for future reports, as states will have more time and capacity to prepare their data. Data are from states with varying levels of restrictions due to COVID-19.

² Schmidt, Samantha and Hannah Natanson. "With kids stuck at home, ER doctors see more severe cases of child abuse." *The Washington Post*, April 30, 2020.

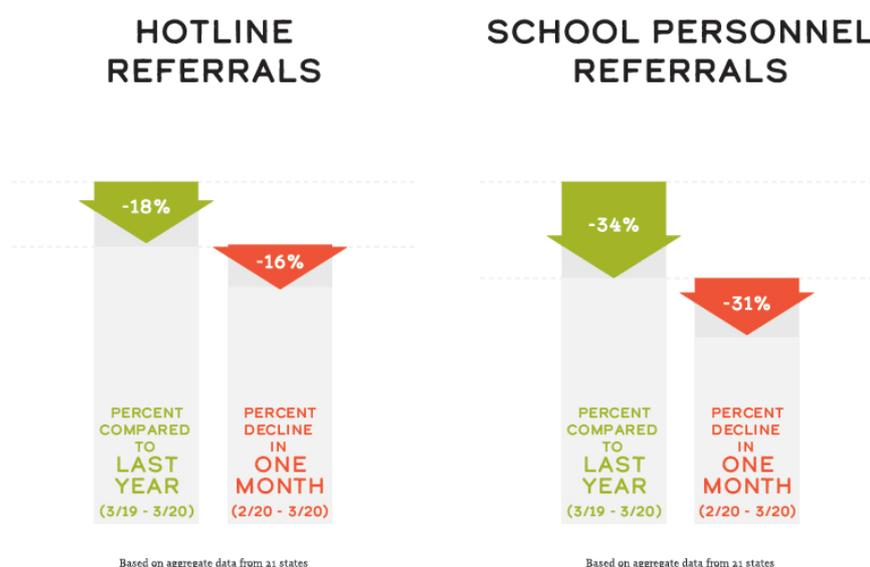
³ Child Welfare Information Gateway. 2016. Racial disproportionality and disparity in child welfare. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau.

Findings

For total hotline referrals, the 21 reporting states showed an average difference of -18% from last year's reporting in March (March 2019 v March 2020). Those states also showed an average difference of -16% from the previous month's referrals (February 2020 v March 2020).

The largest decrease in referral sources was the number of **school personnel** referrals at - 34% (March 2019 v March 2020) and -31% (February 2020 v March 2020). Most states did not close schools until the week of March 16, and 12 states waited until the following week. A full understanding of the impact of school closings on hotline referrals will not be apparent until April data are reported.

Social service and medical professional referrals fell in March 2020 compared to March 2019, by 11% and 10% respectively, and - 3% from February to March 2020 for both. The number of referrals from **law enforcement** showed the smallest decline at -2% (March 2019 v March 2020) and an increase by 10% from February to March 2020. If this trend continues, states will need to engage law enforcement agencies to learn how they are identifying child maltreatment in the absence of other professionals in the community, and how this may impact children and families.



Emerging Strategies

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented a dilemma for many states: reports of child abuse and neglect are declining at a time when there are increased stressors in families from lost wages, food insecurity, grief and loss, and environmental trauma. COVID-19 is also having a disproportionate impact on families of color, which is further complicated by communities already dealing with multiple disparities caused by systemic racism. States and communities must be intentional about examining any impacts on racial and ethnic groups when developing strategies to support children and families during this time. They should also pay close attention to their data to address any racial biases that may present themselves in child abuse and neglect reporting.

Below are several examples of how states are supporting families and encouraging communities to identify potential risk in the wake of this crisis. Many of these strategies can be employed even after stay-at-home restrictions are lifted. This is not an exhaustive list but we expect to gather more examples for future reference:

COMMUNITY OUTREACH TO SUPPORT FAMILIES

- [New Jersey](#) has developed special hotlines for youth to call in times of distress, as well as a QR code that youth can use on their phones.
- In Mississippi and California, staff are leaving notes in take-home school meals to educate families on the warning signs of abuse and community resources.
- Iowa human service and education agencies are collaborating on “comfort calls” to check in with families.

RESOURCES FOR PROFESSIONALS TO ASSESS WELL-BEING AND REPORT CONCERNS

- [Know and Tell](#) in New Hampshire has developed check-in questions to assess child and family well-being.
- [Oregon](#) has also developed a child protection guide for staff to respond and assess for child and family well-being.
- [Michigan](#) has developed an educator’s guide which includes mental health resources to share with families.
- [Maine](#) has developed guidelines for teachers to spot signs of abuse virtually.
- [Missouri KidsFirst](#) has developed several written resources and shareable posters on the role of mandated reporters.

BASIC NEEDS AND SERVICES

- Georgia has increased the amount of SNAP food benefits to families to reduce stressors in homes.
- [Oregon](#) has partnered with a community organization to develop a website that provides emergency response to tangible needs such as cash and food for foster families.
- California has created a \$42 million fund to support child protective services during COVID-19, which includes increased funding for family resource centers. The state has also developed tele-therapy services for children and parents.

As we continue to follow these trends, we will be sharing information to help inform immediate and long-term strategies to support families and prevent child maltreatment.