

Impacts of COVID-19 on Child Maltreatment Reporting:

Findings from NCANDS FFY 2020

Purpose

To define and quantify the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on child welfare systems at the national level by comparing the total number of CPS reports during the initial COVID-19 lockdown period with the number of reports during the same months in previous years.

Highlights



These patterns were observed in almost all U.S. states simultaneously to varying degrees.



Comprehensive national CPS reporting data show **declines in maltreatment reporting** during the COVID-19 lockdown period.



While the largest drops were in reports from educational sources, referrals to CPS from **all report sources declined**.



The **proportion of substantiated reports was elevated** during the lockdown period.



This was the case across all report source categories **except education personnel**.



Reports reached a disposition more quickly during the initial COVID-19 lockdown.

Method

Data Source

- Administrative data reported to the **National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS)**
- Data are collected **annually** on a federal fiscal year (FFY) schedule from all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico

Comparison Period

- The focus of this research was the initial COVID-19 lockdown period, defined as **weeks 12–24 of calendar year 2020 (Sunday, March 15 through Saturday, June 13)**
- **Comparable 13-week periods** were defined for the prior three years



Key Terms

CPS: Child Protective Services

CPS Response: In most states, the majority of reports receive an investigation, which results in a determination (disposition) about the alleged maltreatment. In some states, reports may be assigned to an alternative response track, which focuses on the service needs of the child and family.

Disposition: A determination made by a CPS agency that evidence is or is not sufficient under state law to conclude that maltreatment occurred. A disposition is applied to each alleged maltreatment in a report and to the report itself.

NCANDS: National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System

Report: When a CPS agency receives an initial notification—called a referral—alleging child abuse or neglect, agency hotline or intake units conduct a screening to determine whether the referral is appropriate for further action. Referrals that meet CPS agency criteria are screened in (and called **reports**) and receive a CPS response. Each report may include more than one child.

Report Source: The role of the person who notified a CPS agency of the alleged child abuse or neglect.

Substantiation: A report is **substantiated** when an investigation concludes that the allegation of maltreatment or risk of maltreatment is supported or founded by state law or policy. A report is **unsubstantiated** when an investigation concludes there is not sufficient evidence under state law to conclude or suspect that the child was maltreated or is at risk of being maltreated. Some states also use the disposition of indicated when maltreatment is suspected but cannot be substantiated under state law or policy. In this brief, the term **reports substantiated** refers to reports that were either substantiated or indicated.

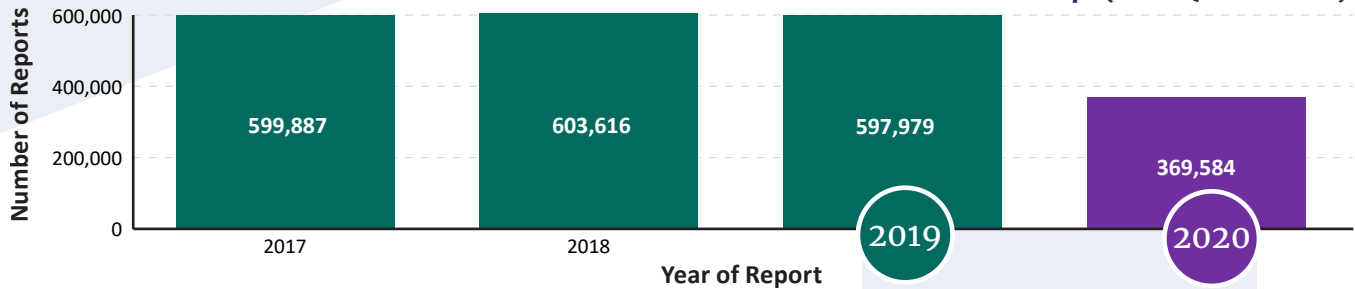
Time to Disposition: NCANDS records include the dates when the report was made to CPS and when the disposition was determined. The duration of the CPS response, or average number of days to disposition, can be calculated as the difference between these dates.



N=52 states¹

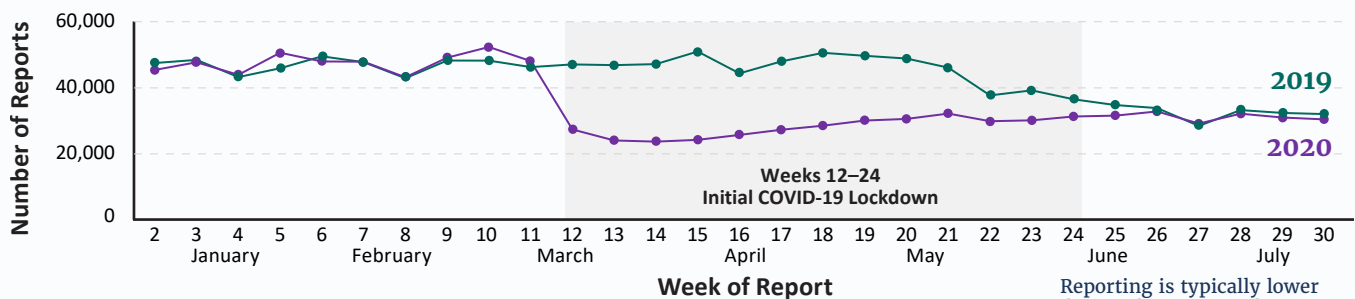
CPS screened in 38% fewer reports during the initial COVID-19 lockdown (weeks 12-24 of 2020) than during the same period in 2019.

CPS Reports Weeks 12-24 (2017-2020)



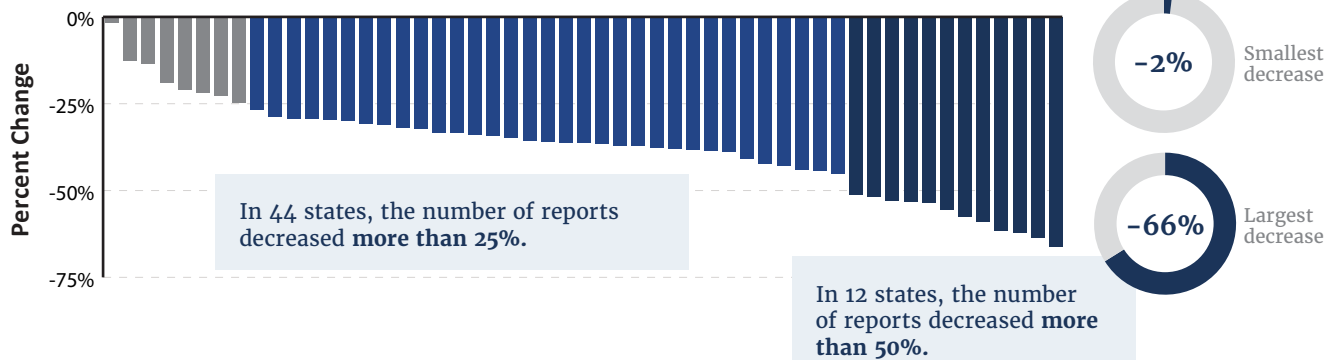
Comparing 2019 and 2020, the number of reports diverged primarily during weeks 12-24 but were similar during the weeks before and after.

Weekly CPS Reports Weeks 2-30 (2019-2020)



Reporting is typically lower during the summer due to drop in reports from schools.

Percent Change in CPS Reports by State Weeks 12-24 (2019-2020)

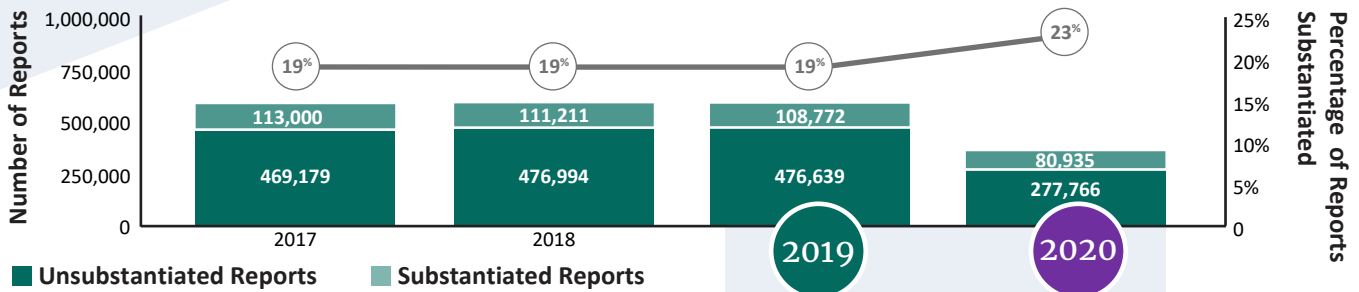




N=51 states²

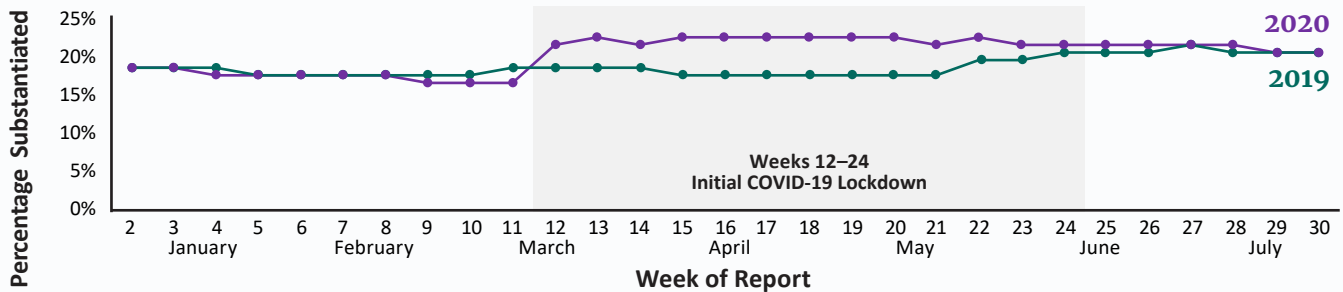
While the total number of substantiated reports dropped, **the proportion of reports substantiated increased** during the initial COVID-19 lockdown.

Number and Percentage of Reports Substantiated Weeks 12-24 (2017-2020)

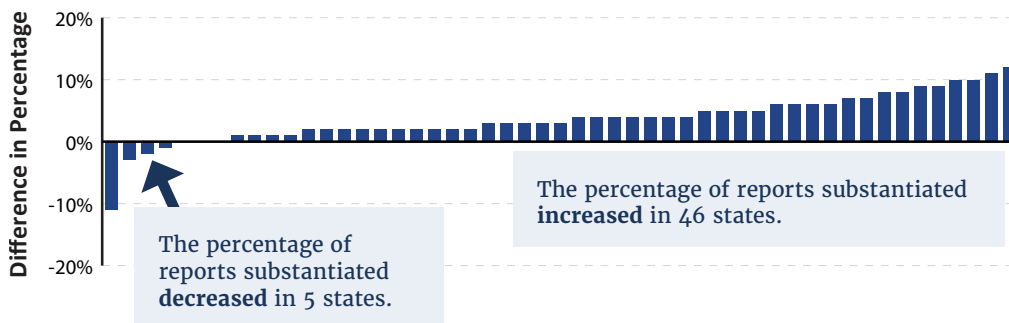


Comparing 2019 and 2020, the percentage of reports substantiated diverged primarily during weeks 12-24 but were similar during the weeks before and after.

Weekly Percentage of Reports Substantiated Weeks 2-30 (2019-2020)



Difference in Percentage of Reports Substantiated Between 2019 and 2020 by State Weeks 12-24



Key Term

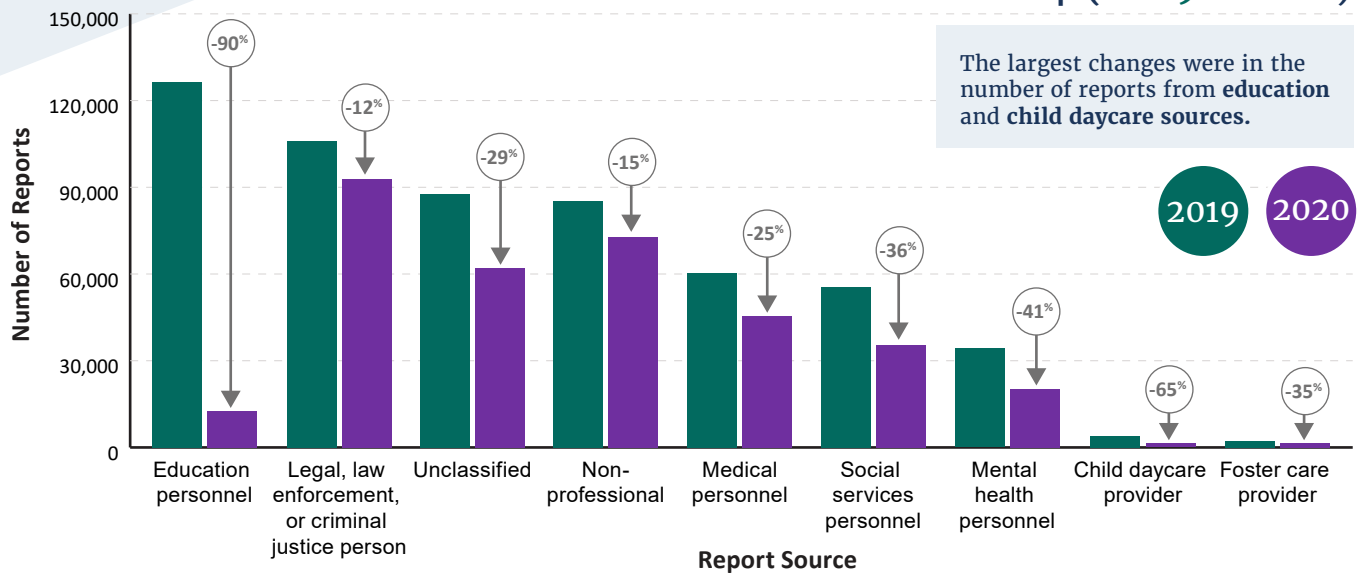
“Substantiation” See page 2 for definition.

The number of reports from **all report sources decreased** during the initial COVID-19 lockdown compared to the same period in 2019.

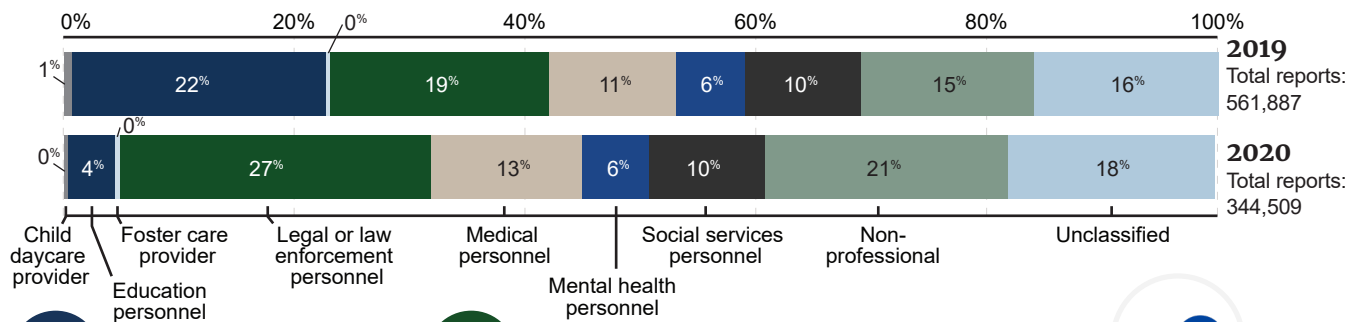


N=48 states³

Number of Reports by Report Source Weeks 12–24 (2019–2020)



Percentage of Reports by Report Source Weeks 12–24 (2019–2020)



Reports from educational personnel accounted for 22% of all reports in 2019 and only 4% in 2020—the largest decrease for any category.



Reports from legal or law enforcement personnel accounted for 19% of all reports in 2019 and 27% in 2020—the largest increase for any category.



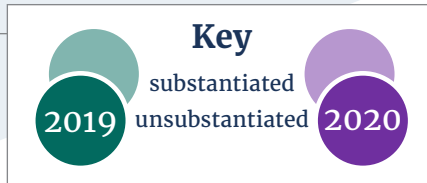
Key Term

“Report Source”
See page 2 for definition.

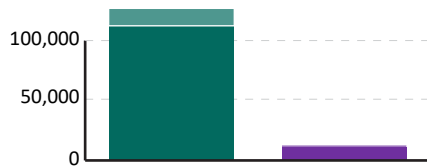


N=48 states³

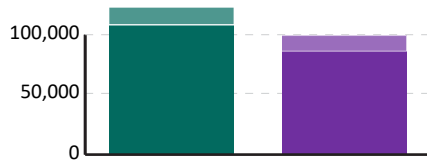
The percentage of **reports substantiated increased** from all report source categories in 2020 over the same period in 2019, **except for reports from education personnel.**



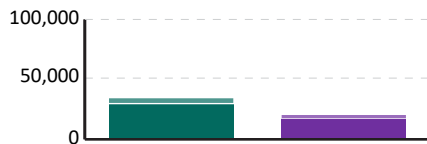
Educational Personnel



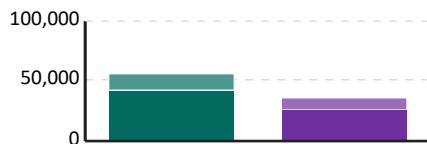
Non-professional



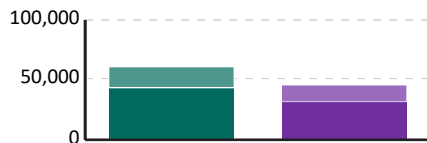
Mental Health Personnel



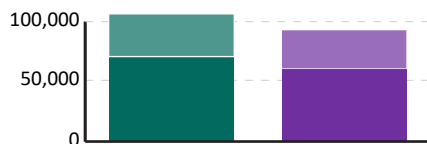
Social Services Personnel



Medical Personnel

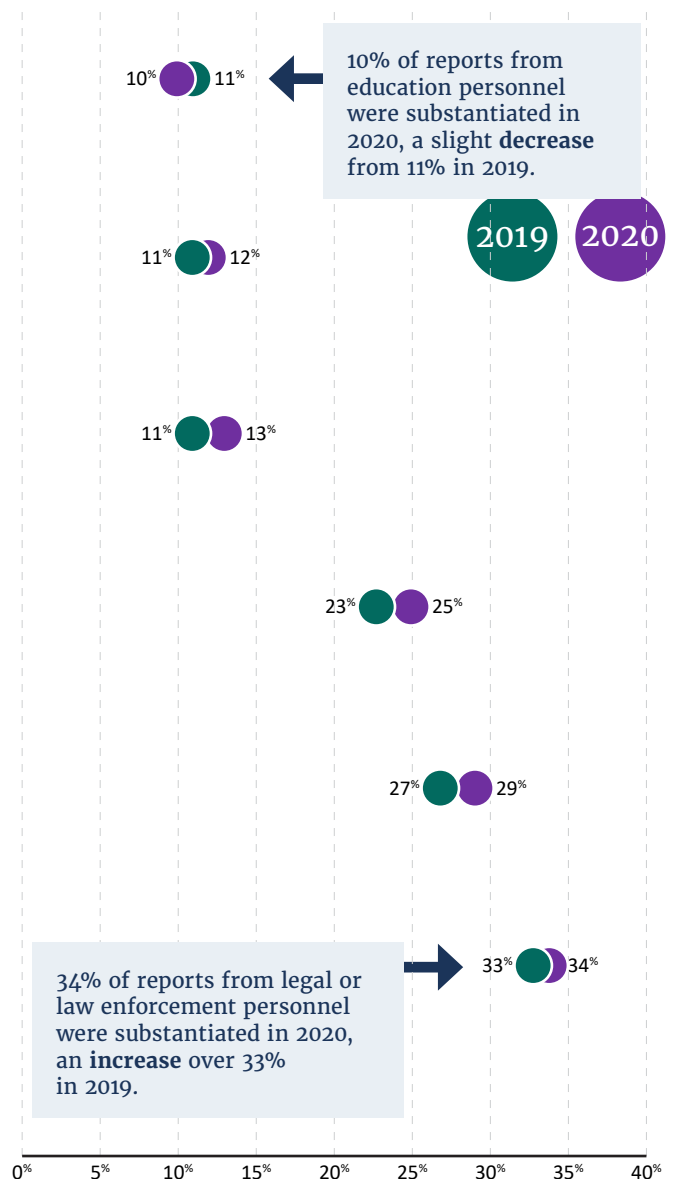


Legal or Law Enforcement Personnel



Additional report source categories not shown for percentage of reports substantiated:
 Child daycare provider: Increased from 12% to 13%
 Foster care provider: Increased from 16% to 18%
 Unclassified: Increased from 15% to 17%

Percentage of Reports Substantiated by Report Source Weeks 12–24 (2019–2020)

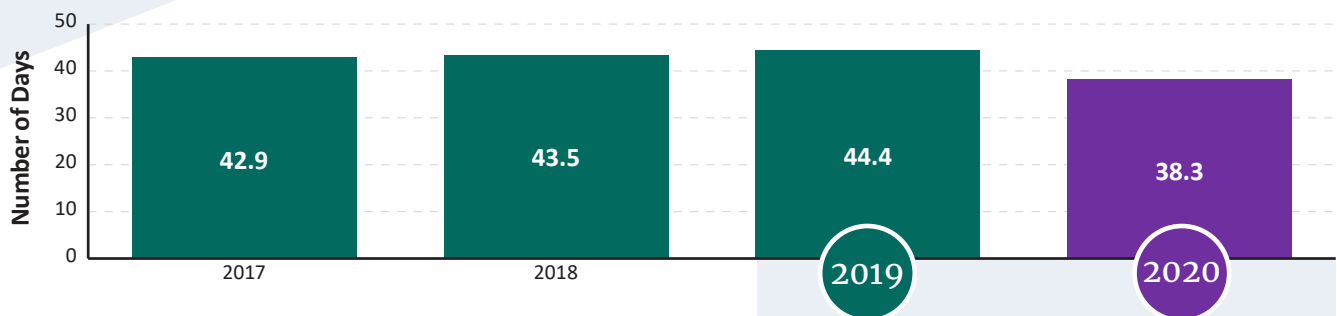




N=52 states¹

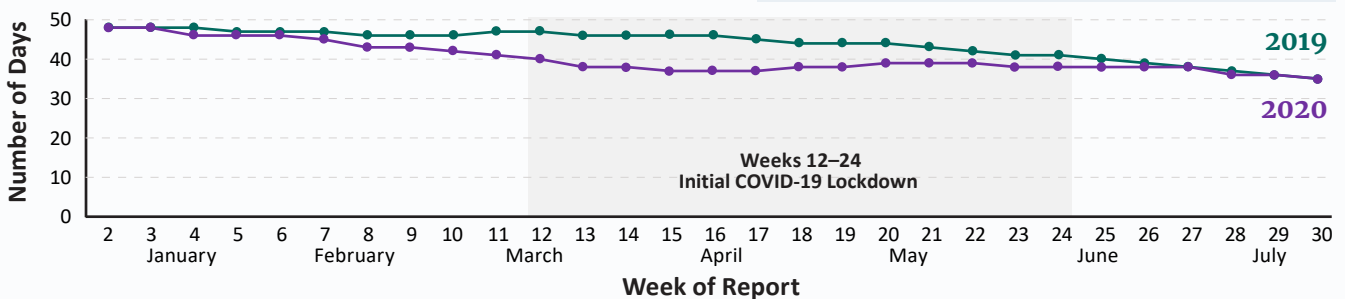
Reports during the initial COVID-19 lockdown reached a disposition more quickly —by an average of 6 days— than reports during the same period in 2019.

Average Time to Disposition Weeks 12–24 (2017–2020)

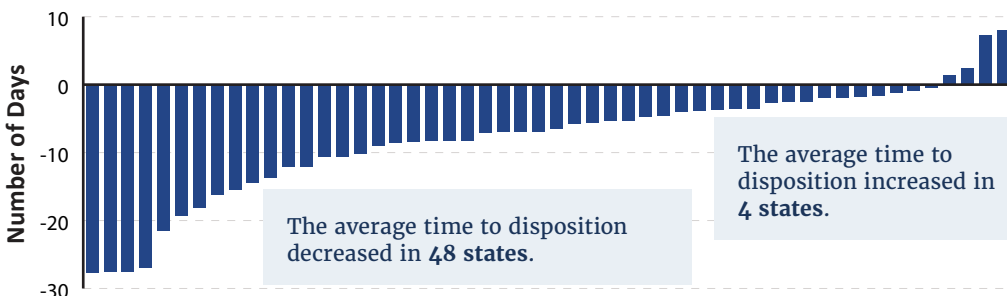


The average time to disposition was more than two days shorter in 2020 for reports that came to CPS beginning at week 7. The lower volume of reports beginning at week 12 in 2020 likely contributed to increased speed of concluding investigations that were already in progress at this time.

Average Time to Disposition (Nonfatal Maltreatments)⁴ Weeks 2–30 (2019–2020)



Change in Average Time to Disposition by State Weeks 12–24 (2019–2020)



Key Terms

“Disposition” and “Time to Disposition” See page 2 for definition.

Conclusions, Limitations, and Next Steps

Analysis of NCANDS data revealed that during the initial weeks following the declaration of national emergency due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of reports to CPS declined sharply at the national level as community sentinels, such as teachers, had limited opportunities for surveillance of maltreatment. While the volume of reporting dropped, investigations were completed more quickly and a higher percentage of reports that did come in were substantiated.

NCANDS data have important limitations.

- NCANDS data includes only records of maltreatment that is observed and reported to CPS.
- State- and local-level policies vary for screening in, investigating, and substantiating maltreatment.

COVID-19 has had continued impact on community routines well beyond the initial lockdown period. Data from NCANDS suggests that reporting and substantiation during the summer months of 2020 returned to a level consistent with the seasonal pattern of previous years, but NCANDS data are currently available only for reports that reached a disposition prior to September 2020. **Future analysis of data for FFY 2021 will reveal whether reporting during the school year of 2020–2021 remained suppressed at the national level or returned to a pattern similar to other years, and the degree of variation in these patterns across states.**

About NCANDS

The data presented here are based on supplementary analyses conducted within WRMA's NCANDS contract. WRMA's longest-running project, the **National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS)**, collects state-level data about child abuse and neglect known to child protective services agencies in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico. NCANDS is funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Administration on Children, Youth, and Families (ACYF), Children's Bureau. Each year, the NCANDS Technical Team analyzes and reports on the NCANDS data in the annual Child Maltreatment report (available at <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/report/child-maltreatment-2020>) and also conducts research on special topics.

Endnotes

- 1 N=52 states: Analyses include all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico.
- 2 N=51 states. Analyses of substantiated reports excluded North Carolina. North Carolina changed its coding for children who had received dispositions of "alternative response victim" in prior years to "indicated" in its FFY 2020 Child File submission, which resulted in a large apparent increase in the number of children being counted as victims.
- 3 N=48 states. Four states (Iowa, Maryland, North Carolina, and Oregon) were excluded due to insufficient data on report source.
- 4 Nonfatal Maltreatments: Duration of investigations of fatalities due to child maltreatment typically lasts longer than investigations of nonfatal maltreatment due to involvement of the criminal justice system. NCANDS reporting guidelines allow for a longer time period for reporting fatalities. Therefore, this small number of records are extreme outliers for investigation duration and were excluded from this analysis.

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Acknowledgments

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