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Child Maltreatment Reporting Statistics During the Covid-19 Pandemic: A cursory  
Analysis

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## ABSTRACT

This goal of this research is to provide a cursory analysis of publicly available child maltreatment data collected during the COVID-19 pandemic. The number of total allegations of child maltreatment between the months of March and June—a span of time representative of the COVID-19 pandemic thus far—were analyzed in five different states in the years 2017, 2018, 2019, and 2020. An analysis of total numbers of allegations and the percentage change in allegations per year revealed a disproportionate decline in child maltreatment reports during the COVID-19 pandemic. This data corroborates nationwide reports of decreases in child maltreatment allegations in the immediate aftermath of stay-at-home orders and illustrates the sustained impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on child maltreatment reporting.

## INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic has posed many unique issues relating to the education and welfare of minor children. While staying home is key to preventing the spread of COVID-19, children face an entirely new set of challenges, the extent of which may not emerge until in-person instruction resumes and social distancing measures relax. Factors that contribute to domestic violence, such as economic stress, social isolation, instability, and increased familial exposure (Usher et al. 2020) have become characteristic of American life in recent months. Additionally, “social isolation exacerbates personal and collective vulnerabilities, while limiting accessible and familiar support options” like teachers, counselors, and other trusted adults. (Usher et al. 2020).

News media from nearly every state reported a sharp decline in calls made to child protection agencies immediately following stay-at-home orders. Some states, such as Wisconsin, Washington, South Carolina, New Hampshire, and Missouri, reported a 50% or greater decrease in reports of alleged child maltreatment. Experts from across the country believe a decrease in reports is likely a byproduct of social isolation, rather than an authentic decline in the incidence child maltreatment (Campbell 2020). Because educators account for 1 in 5 reports of suspected child maltreatment nationwide (Fitzpatrick et al. 2020), virtual learning poses considerable challenges to detecting abuse. Signs of physical abuse that would be noticed in the classroom might be missed in a virtual learning environment. Some researchers suggest that despite fewer reports, child maltreatment is likely on the rise. Statistically, child maltreatment cases increase following natural disasters and in times of economic recession (Griffith 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic mimics the stress of disaster conditions in terms of both unemployment and environmental strain.

Of the four categories of child maltreatment—neglect, physical abuse, emotional abuse, and sexual abuse—neglect occurs most commonly. Allegations of neglect disproportionately affect low income families, as “parental inability to feed, clothe, or house a child is often perceived as child maltreatment and can lead to government involvement [...]” (Dale 2014). In conjunction with economic insecurity, stay-at-home orders have created childcare challenges for working parents who can no longer send their children to school or to the home of a relative. Over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, parents will likely be challenged to meet increasing demands with fewer resources. A report in the *Journal of Family Violence* details how a psychological phenomenon called parental burnout may contribute to an increase in cases of neglect and physical abuse (Griffith 2020). The phenomenon, defined as “a prolonged response to chronic and overwhelming parental stress,” increases the likelihood that a parent will engage in neglectful or abusive behavior toward their child (Griffith 2020).

Though media coverage on the sharp decline in total reports of child maltreatment during early quarantine is abundant, ongoing data across reporting agencies has yet to be analyzed. While many states release yearly reports of child maltreatment data, only five states release this data on a monthly basis. Additionally, states vary with respect to the types of data points that they collect and in the ways in which they categorize different forms of maltreatment. This creates a significant barrier when comparing data between jurisdictions. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children’s Bureau, releases an annual Child Maltreatment Report collected from the states by the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data Systems (NCANDS). The most current version of the national Child Maltreatment Report is from 2018. Due the unavailability of accessible and comparable nationwide data, a comprehensive survey of reported incidents of child maltreatment during the COVID-19 pandemic is not feasible at this time.

However, this report will provide a cursory analysis of the noted decrease in child maltreatment allegations throughout the United States using available data from Arizona, Florida, Indiana, Nevada, and New Jersey.

## METHODS

Data collected in this study was taken from five U.S. states that publicly report child maltreatment data on a monthly basis. The total number of child maltreatment allegations was gathered for the months of March, April, May, and June, in the years 2017, 2018, 2019, and 2020. For the purposes of this study, March 2020 marks the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and stay-at-home orders in the United States. The most current available data for all five states in the 2020 calendar year extends into June. By collecting data from the same seasonal period (March-June) over the course of three years, this study aims to quantify the noted decrease in reports during the COVID-19 pandemic in comparison to yearly decreases in reports since 2017.

### **State Selection Criteria**

The following states were selected for this study: Arizona, Florida, Indiana, Nevada, and New Jersey. Each state was required to maintain a record of total monthly reports of child maltreatment from March 2020 to June 2020 and a record of the same reports from the years 2017, 2018, and 2019. Some states included in this study have drastically lower numbers of child maltreatment allegations than others; this study does not seek to compare the total number of child maltreatment allegations between the states presented, but rather variations in the number of allegations within each state. Additionally, this study does not examine the number of substantiated cases of maltreatment, because this data was not available for the year 2020 in all of the selected states. The method of data collection used by each state varies and is as follows:

**Arizona.**

The Arizona Department of Child Safety maintains a database of various department-wide performance measures (Arizona 2020). Total child maltreatment allegations for each month are contained within a monthly Operational Outcomes Report (Arizona 2020). The number of alleged child maltreatment reports are categorized by report type, including neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse (Arizona 2020). For the purpose of this research all types are included.

**Florida.**

The Florida Department of Children and Families maintains an interactive database of child maltreatment allegations gathered by the Florida Safe Families Network (Florida 2020). The database contains all allegations of child maltreatment from reports made and investigated during the calendar month and includes both substantiated and unsubstantiated reports (Florida 2020). Any allegations of child maltreatment that are not investigated in a given calendar month are included in the results for the following calendar month (Florida 2020).

**Indiana.**

The Indiana Department of Child Services maintains statewide data of child maltreatment allegations collected through the Indiana Child Abuse and Neglect Hotline (Indiana 2020). Hotline data includes calls, faxes, emails, and mail-in correspondence (Indiana 2020). According to the Indiana Department of Child Services, “Some calls received at the hotline turn into more than one report per call” (Indiana 2020).

**Nevada.**

The Nevada Division of Child and Family Services maintains statewide data of referrals made to Child Protective Services (CPS) from outside agencies (Nevada 2020). This data is



collected on the 10th of every calendar month and includes the total number of child maltreatment allegations referred to CPS (Nevada 2020).

### New Jersey.

The New Jersey Department of Children and Families issues a monthly Commissioner's Report containing the total number of child maltreatment allegations collected from a statewide hotline (Department of Children 2020). This data includes Child Protective Services reports, Child Welfare Services referrals, and human trafficking referrals (Department of Children 2020). Each of these categories of reports and referrals is included in this study.

## ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Figures 1 and 2 below illustrate the total number of child maltreatment allegations made between March and June from 2017 to 2020. The data is split into two figures for scale.

Figure 1.

*Total Number of Child Maltreatment Allegations from March-June by State*

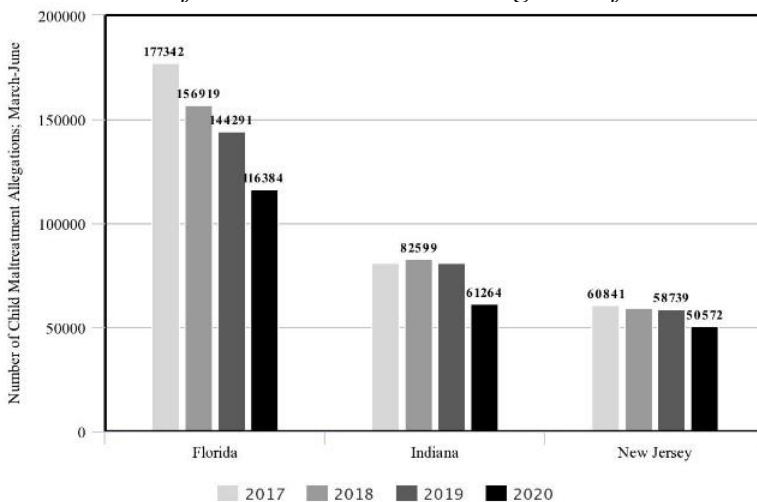
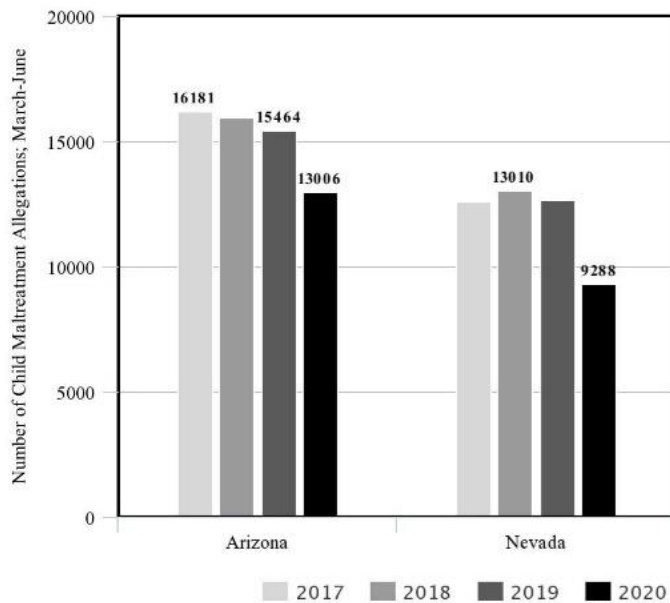


Figure 2.

*Total Number of Child Maltreatment Allegations from March-June by State*



In all five states, the total number of child maltreatment allegations in the period between March and June was lowest in 2020. Florida, New Jersey, and Arizona experienced a decline in the number of reported child maltreatment allegations each year from 2017 to 2020. While the decline between 2019 and 2020 may be explained by the COVID-19 pandemic, the general downward trend in the number of child maltreatment allegations is likely influenced by a number of different factors. The consistent decrease in the number of reports could be explained by an actual decrease in child maltreatment within these states. Indiana and Nevada had a relatively consistent number of child maltreatment allegations between 2017 and 2019 but experienced a significant decrease in allegations only in 2020. Because this data takes into account a period of time representative of the COVID-19 pandemic, these results may very well be attributable to unique social, economic, and environmental factors associated with the pandemic.

Table 1.

*Yearly Percentage Change in Reports of Alleged Child Maltreatment from March-June*

Time Period	Percent Change Per Year (%)				
	Arizona	Florida	Indiana	Nevada	New Jersey
2017-2018	-1.61	-11.5	+2.29	+3.34	-2.17
2018-2019	-2.86	-8.05	-2.00	-2.71	-1.31
2019-2020	-15.9	-19.3	-24.3	-26.6	-13.9

Indiana and Nevada experienced the greatest percentage change in reports of alleged child maltreatment. Nevada experienced a 26.6% decrease in reports between 2019 and 2020. In the previous two years, the state experienced a maximum of 3.34% change in the number of reports of alleged child maltreatment. Similarly, Indiana experienced a 24.3% decrease in reports of alleged child maltreatment in the same time period. In the two years prior, Indiana experienced a maximum of 2.29% change in the number of alleged reports of child maltreatment. This dramatic difference in percentage change is likely due to the impact of COVID-19.

Each state experienced the greatest percentage change in the period between 2019 and 2020. While this data only takes into account the period of time between 2017 and 2020, a consistent dramatic decrease in the number of reports across these five states is indicative of a greater national trend. It is important to note that the five states included in this study are representative of many different geographical regions. As data continues to emerge from both the states included in this study and others in the future, a more comprehensive study of the impact that COVID-19 has on the total number of reports of child maltreatment will be feasible. Additionally, data reported in the future about the number of verified cases of child maltreatment will lend itself to an important study of whether or not decreased reporting during the COVID-19 pandemic is reflective of actual cases of child maltreatment. As stay-at-home orders are lifted

and children return to school in the coming months, a sustained investigation of data from these sources may provide some answers.

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## TABLES

Table 2.  
*Total Reports of Alleged Child Maltreatment Made From March - June in 2017, 2018, 2019, and 2020 by State.*

State	Year	Total Reports Per Month				March-June Total
		March	April	May	June	
Arizona <sup>1</sup>		March	April	May	June	
	2017	4,197	4,271	4,275	3,438	16,181
	2018	4,243	4,403	4,020	3,254	15,920
	2019	3,819	4,425	4,103	3,117	15,464
	2020	3,585	3,011	3,222	3,188	13,006
Florida <sup>2</sup>		March	April	May	June	
	2017	50,606	41,870	42,038	42,828	177,342
	2018	37,665	37,862	41,073	40,319	156,919
	2019	36,355	34,841	37,321	35,774	144,291
	2020	33,932	32,183	23,678	26,591	116,384
Indiana <sup>3</sup>		March	April	May	June	
	2017	20,301	20,574	22,181	17,696	80,752
	2018	21,322	22,087	22,792	16,398	82,599
	2019	19,671	22,396	22,417	16,467	80,951
	2020	18,026	12,834	14,674	15,730	61,264
Nevada <sup>4</sup>		March	April	May	June	
	2017	3,367	3,031	3,580	2,612	12,590
	2018	3,607	3,414	3,490	2,499	13,010
	2019	3,447	3,404	3,319	2,487	12,657
	2020	2,849	2,034	2,188	2,217	9,288
New Jersey <sup>5</sup>		March	April	May	June	
	2017	15,375	14,478	16,228	14,760	60,841
	2018	14,876	13,558	15,859	15,227	59,520
	2019	15,153	13,518	15,528	14,540	58,739
	2020	15,573	14,684	12,398	7,917	50,572

<sup>1</sup> Arizona Department of Child Safety, State of Arizona (2020), *DCS Reports*. Retrieved from <https://dcs.az.gov/news-reports/dcs-reports>

<sup>2</sup> Florida Department of Children and Families, State of Florida (2020) *Alleged Maltreatments – Data Table*. Retrieved from <https://www.myflfamilies.com/programs/childwelfare/dashboard/alleged-maltreatments.shtml>

<sup>3</sup> Indiana Department of Child Services, State of Indiana (2020) *State of Indiana DCS Hotline Statistics*. Retrieved from <https://www.in.gov/Dcs/3165.htm>

<sup>4</sup> Nevada Division of Child Services, State of Nevada (2020) *Databook as of June 30, 2020*. Retrieved from [dcfs.nv.gov/Programs/Data/DCFSDataPage/](https://dcfs.nv.gov/Programs/Data/DCFSDataPage/)

<sup>5</sup> Department of Children and Families, State of New Jersey (2020) *Commissioner's Monthly Reports*. Retrieved from <https://www.nj.gov/DCF/childdata/continuous/>

Table 3.  
*Yearly Percentage Change in Reports of Alleged Child Maltreatment From March - June*

State	Period	Percentage Change Per Period (%)				
		March	April	May	June	Period Total
Arizona <sup>1</sup>	2017—2018	+1.10	+3.09	-5.96	-5.35	-1.61
	2018—2019	-9.99	+0.50	+2.06	-4.20	-2.86
	2019—2020	-6.13	-32.0	-21.5	-2.28	-15.9
Florida <sup>2</sup>	2017—2018	-25.6	-9.57	-2.30	-5.86	-11.5
	2018—2019	-3.48	-7.98	-9.13	-11.3	-8.05
	2019—2020	-6.66	-7.63	-36.6	-25.7	-19.3
Indiana <sup>3</sup>	2017—2018	+5.03	+7.35	+2.75	-7.33	+2.29
	2018—2019	-7.74	+1.40	-1.65	+0.42	-2.00
	2019—2020	-8.36	-42.7	-34.5	-4.48	-24.3
Nevada <sup>4</sup>	2017—2018	+7.13	+12.6	-2.51	-4.33	+3.34
	2018—2019	-4.44	-0.29	-4.90	-0.48	-2.71
	2019—2020	-17.4	-40.3	-34.1	-10.9	-26.6
New Jersey <sup>5</sup>	2017—2018	-3.25	-6.35	-2.27	+3.16	-2.17
	2018—2019	+1.86	-0.30	-2.09	-4.51	-1.31
	2019—2020	+2.77	+8.63	-21.2	-45.6	-13.9

<sup>1</sup> Arizona Department of Child Safety, State of Arizona (2020), *DCS Reports*. Retrieved from <https://dcs.az.gov/news-reports/dcs-reports>

<sup>2</sup> Florida Department of Children and Families, State of Florida (2020) *Alleged Maltreatments – Data Table*. Retrieved from <https://www.myflfamilies.com/programs/childwelfare/dashboard/alleged-maltreatments.shtml>

<sup>3</sup> Indiana Department of Child Services, State of Indiana (2020) *State of Indiana DCS Hotline Statistics*. Retrieved from <https://www.in.gov/Dcs/3165.htm>

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<sup>5</sup> Department of Children and Families, State of New Jersey (2020) *Commissioner's Monthly Reports*. Retrieved from <https://www.nj.gov/dcf/childdata/continuous/>