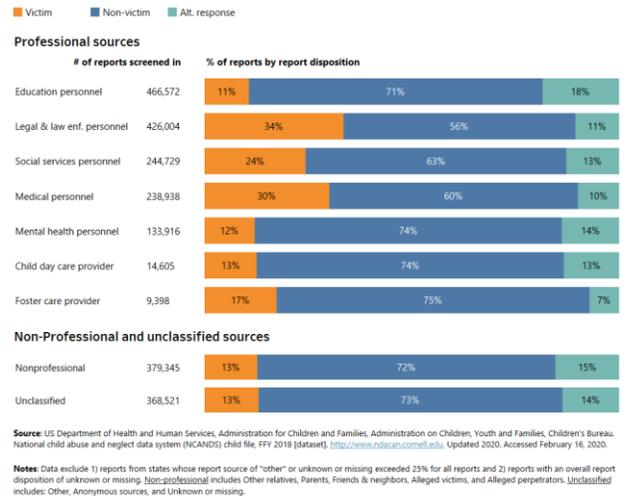




# COVID-19 and Child Welfare: Using Data to Understand Trends in Maltreatment and Response

States across the country have taken extreme measures to prevent the spread of the coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19). Stay-at-home orders and deteriorating economic conditions have placed families under stress, while children home from school have diminished exposure to adults who might detect and report abuse and neglect. Using various data sources, including NCANDS and SACWIS, we performed descriptive and multi-level time-series analyses to answer questions about historical trends and the relationship between community-level stressors and child abuse and neglect. The results from these analyses were incorporated into a dynamic forecasting tool (i.e., *Latent Event Simulator*) that can be used by child welfare agencies to plan system responses.



**INCREASED SURVEILLANCE DOES NOT  
EQUATE TO INCREASED SAFETY**

## FINDINGS

- **What do patterns of reporting and substantiation tell us about what to expect during COVID-19?** Hotline reports from education personnel typically return to baseline rates annually when children return to school each Fall rather than over-correcting with seasonal surges.
- **What is the relationship between community-level stressors and reporting of child abuse and neglect?** The recent rise in unemployment due to COVID-19 may be increasing the risk of child maltreatment, and community-based supports will be necessary to address concrete economic needs.
- **What projection tools can states and counties use to inform preventive service needs and plan for the future after COVID-19?** A Latent Event Simulator<sup>1</sup> can inform strategies to develop new pathways to address family needs and forecast workforce capacity and resources needed to implement these strategies to scale.

## RECOMMENDATIONS: ADAPTIVE SYSTEM CHANGES

While the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted child welfare system operations in countless ways, it has challenged us to think strategically about how to re-orient our systems to promote child and family well-being. While there may be a small subset of children who are at increased risk of maltreatment, there are likely to be increasing numbers of families who require economic and other concrete supports. To that end, we recommend the following adaptive system changes:

1. *Refine child maltreatment categories to distinguish and address poverty-related neglect from child endangerment or abuse.*
2. *Broaden the array of community-based supports and partner with families directly to identify needs and strategies.*
3. *Create alternative pathways to enhance the ways in which mandated reporters can support families.*
4. *Leverage technology to improve access to needed services and supports.*
5. *Expand the responsibility for child and family well-being beyond the child welfare system.*

<sup>1</sup> The simulator produces (1) estimation of the changing rates of abuse; (2) adjustments for changing exposure to reporters of child maltreatment; and (3) projections of unseen events that may require child welfare system response.