

Uncovering the Hidden Cost of the Pandemic on Child Safety and Well-Being: Introduction to the COVID-19 Special Issue

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Many of us continue to grapple with the heartache, crises, and chaos brought about by events of the last couple of years, particularly spawned by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Even now, as we write this editorial, the number of deaths in the United States from COVID-19 have reached more than 565,000 and the number of cases continue to rise as we approach 32 million. For children and families in low-resourced communities, these devastating figures are even higher and expose the preexisting inequities that are exacerbated by the pandemic. It has been more than a year since the pandemic became a reality for many of us and these problems persist, even more so now as we attempt to return to “normal” (whatever that means). Yet for many children and families, the aftermath of this pandemic will persist, and our child-serving systems need to be prepared to respond.

As professionals concerned with the well-being and safety of children, many of us have already been concerned about such a response and the impact this pandemic has brought upon vulnerable children and families. As a means to engage our community of professionals and understand this issue further, we immediately created a call, in the summer of 2020, for papers on a special issue related to the topic of COVID-19 and child maltreatment. This special issue sought to include an interdisciplinary perspective related to practice, policy, and research, with articles focused on 1) the pandemic’s impact on various child-serving systems and their responses; 2) specific

child maltreatment risk and protective factors due to the pandemic; and 3) the pandemic’s exposing and amplifying inequities for vulnerable children and families. Having assumed our new positions as the editorial team of the *Advisor* in this unprecedented time, we felt compelled to pull together a collection of papers focusing on how to prepare our APSAC members’ responses. It is therefore our hope that these papers hold important insights and implications that will help our APSAC members when they are working with children and families during the pandemic and beyond.

We are fortunate to have Ortega and colleagues’ invited paper (written proceedings from the University of Michigan School of Social Work Fedele F. and Iris M. Fauri 2020 Memorial Lecture) in our special issue, which begins with a commentary about the impact of COVID-19 on children and families. This is followed by three panelists’ descriptions of how child welfare systems have been impacted by the pandemic and how these systems can be responsive to such changes. Panelist Rodriguez describes the combination of risk factors related to the pandemic that could contribute to elevated risk of experiencing child maltreatment. Using data from a prospective longitudinal study, Rodriguez described findings of mothers’ self-reports, which included more than a third of the respondents reporting increased yelling and conflict. Additionally, the study found households had financial losses related to the pandemic. The study concluded that such risk factors increased the likelihood of abuse during the pandemic.

Johnson-Motoyama, the second panelist, examines policy implications for child maltreatment prevention in light of the pandemic and economic recession. Integrating theory and research, Johnson-Motoyama presents the importance of a strong safety net for families—especially in times of crisis—and failure to support families will disproportionately impact Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) families and communities in particular. She offers implications for policy to address such disproportionalities.

The final panelist, Merkel-Holguin, explores the impact of COVID-19 on the child welfare system. Specifically, she outlines some of the innovations and adjustments that the system has made in response to the pandemic, which have the potential to redistribute power and decision making. There are opportunities that the pandemic has offered, Ortega and colleagues conclude, including rethinking child protection. The lessons learned from circumstances that the pandemic brought about family well-being and prevention can ground future system reform and ultimately strengthen these systems' ability to support families. In "Behind Closed Doors: The Unintended Impact of COVID-19 on Child Safety," Repine and colleagues explore how the stress and isolation brought by the pandemic can increase risk of child maltreatment. School and workplace closures to promote social distancing decrease the spread of COVID-19, yet children and families become more isolated. The authors lay out a strategy for maltreatment prevention in these times, starting with reducing the stigma of caregivers asking for help. Furthermore, Repine et al. discuss how technology such as telehealth platforms can promote connections and mitigate the risks brought about by the pandemic.

Huang and colleagues use administrative data to explore changes in the numbers of investigations of child maltreatment before the pandemic and in the early stages thereafter. In the paper titled, "Early Stage of the COVID-19 Pandemic and Investigations of Child Maltreatment: An Empirical Study of Administrative Data," the authors found that despite a decrease in the number of investigations, the rate of substantiation increased disproportionately. Variability in the reporting and investigation of types and timing of maltreatment were also present. Specifically, the authors found a general decrease in the reporting

and investigation of physical or medical neglect, failure to protect, and threatened harms, particularly for younger children. The authors suggest that these changes may be attributable to school closures and detail practice implications.

The paper, "Parenting Support for Families Impacted by Opioid Use Disorder during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Insights from Pennsylvania Home Visiting Pilot Programs," by Marshall and colleagues is an evaluation of a home visiting program for families experiencing substance use. The authors argue that families for whom there is a high prevalence of opioid use are especially at risk for being adversely impacted by COVID-19. The paper details lessons learned in 20 sites across Pennsylvania during the process of shifting to a virtual setting due to the pandemic. Specifically, the authors describe innovations and practical considerations for home visiting programs. According to the authors, despite the reduced barriers (e.g., childcare and transportation) for service access, the programs still noted increased isolation, unemployment, and client relapse.

Kaye and colleagues explore practitioners' and parents' reports of perceived risk for maltreatment as it pertains to the unique needs and strengths of Army families during the pandemic. Their article, "Practitioner and Military Family Perspectives of Child Maltreatment Risk and Protective Factors During COVID-19: A Multimethod Approach," details the experiences of military families who are expecting a child or have a child under the age of three and who are eligible for the Army New Parent Support Program. The authors found that the pandemic increased military families' isolation, as well as increased mental health issues and stress. To address these pandemic-related challenges, the authors outline specific support structures needed by families, along with the emphasis that resilience and adaptability of military families should be considered as protective factors as well.

In the *Advisor's* section dedicated to racial equity commentary, Maddux and colleagues share insights about the intersection of racial injustice, child welfare, and COVID-19. Written by a team of experts from different disciplines, the article explores the crises and inequities from legal, psychological, health, and faith-

based perspectives. It concludes with a call for change and demands policies and programs that seek to end poverty and trauma rather than exacerbate them. Together, all of these articles have implications for our policy and practice when serving children and families. They inform our ways of thinking and our commitment to supporting children and families in these trying times. In line with the special issue's focus, we need to acknowledge that the aftermath of COVID-19, particularly when combined with preexisting inequities, will persist. Therefore, we must take advantage of the current opportunities to make significant and meaningful changes in society to ensure equity and justice. Furthermore, we need to continually recognize the pandemic's impact on various child-serving systems and how these systems adapt their responses, how the pandemic affords unique child maltreatment risk and protective factors in children and families, and how the pandemic has exposed and amplified inequities for our vulnerable children and families.

As we conclude this editorial, over 86 million people in the United States are fully vaccinated, which equates to more than 26% of the population. Over 40% of the population has received at least one dose. Clearly, the pandemic is far from over; yet as the pandemic continues so does our learning and work to serve children and families.

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About the Editor-in-Chief

Lisa Schelbe, PhD, MSW, is Associate Professor at Florida State University College of Social Work and a Faculty Affiliate at the Florida Institute for Child Welfare. She serves as a Co-Editor-in-Chief of the Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal. Her research focuses on young people transitioning out of foster care and services to assist with their transition out of care. She is a qualitative methodologist with experience working on interdisciplinary teams. She has published over 30 referred journal articles and co-authored a book titled Intergenerational Transmission of Child Maltreatment (Springer, 2017). Dr. Schelbe received her doctorate in social work from University of Pittsburgh, where she was a Doris Duke Fellow for the Promotion of Child Well-being.

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Carlo Panlilio, PhD, is Assistant Professor in the Department of Educational Psychology, Counseling, and Special Education, and a faculty member with the Child Maltreatment Solutions Network at the Pennsylvania State University. He received his PhD in Human Development from the University of Maryland, College Park, with a specialization in Developmental Science and a Certificate in Education Measurement, Statistics, and Evaluation. He was a former Doris Duke Fellow for the Promotion of Child Well-being. His program of research focuses on the dynamic interplay between maltreatment, context, and development and how these processes influence individual differences in learning across the lifespan. His research is guided by an interdisciplinary approach to examine the multisystemic influences of early adversity on self-regulatory processes that explain variability in the academic outcomes of children with a history of maltreatment. He has published several journal articles and chapters and was editor of Trauma-Informed Schools: Integrating Child Maltreatment Prevention, Detection, and Intervention. Dr. Panlilio previously worked as a licensed clinical marriage and family therapist in private practice, community agencies, treatment foster care, and a residential treatment facility for adolescents.