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## Child Abuse & Neglect

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### Protecting children from maltreatment during COVID-19: Struggling to see children and their families through the lockdowns

It has been one year since COVID-19 took the world by surprise imposing fundamental restrictions to every aspect of daily life across the globe. Even with the vaccine's anticipated impact on preventing the spread of the disease there will be long lasting health, economic, developmental and social impacts of COVID-19. The true extent of the effects of COVID-19 is largely unknown and understanding and intervening in the sequelae will demand scientific and practice excellence. There are examples of child welfare systems responding to these challenges with innovative policies that reflect the best interests of the child. In Canada, there were several jurisdictions where there was an immediate stop to youth aging out of care. McMaster University's Violence-Evidence-Guidance-Action (VEGA) Project is an evidence-based open access interactive curriculum for learning how to recognize and safely respond to family violence. With the focus on COVID infection, the opportunities and responsibilities of professionals to safeguard children need to become a priority of healthcare providers.

Acknowledging the adverse consequences of COVID-19 for children, families and communities worldwide, *Child Abuse & Neglect* continues its efforts to bring you the most advanced and groundbreaking empirical knowledge on the protection of children from maltreatment during COVID-19 beginning with a two volume special issue.

The special issue "Protecting children from maltreatment during COVID-19: First volume," focused on analyzing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on various aspects of child maltreatment and child protective services (Katz & Fallon, 2020). The issue explored three main areas of research, the first examined the psychological effects of COVID-19 in two populations: individuals with a history of abuse and caregivers. The influence of COVID-19 and related stressors on parental stress levels was of particular interest given the well-established relationship between parental stress and child maltreatment (Brown, Doom, Lechuga-Pena, Watamura, & Koppels, 2020; Lawson, Piel, & Simon, 2020; Xu, Wu, Levkoff, & Jedwab, 2020). The second area consists of articles concerning COVID-19 legislation in various countries (including South Africa), and its influence on the ability of child protective services to protect children. A final group proposed new intervention strategies for child welfare professionals in response to the restrictions and challenges presented by COVID-19. This included recommendations for service workers handling the rapid return of children in care to families, and the development of a clinical tool to assist child protection workers in Canada (Fallon et al., 2020; Wilke, Howard, & Goldman, 2020). Overall, this special issue covered a wide range of research areas, providing valuable information on the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic to advance the theory and practice of child protection.

This second volume is a continuation of the first and comprises studies intended to address two core questions: (1) how does COVID-19 impact the rates of child maltreatment (CM); and (2) how does COVID-19 impact the delivery of child protective service responses. These two questions are discussed and studied in a variety of international settings. The first manuscript, by Petrowski and colleagues, is a study examining the use of social media data to assess children's exposure to violence during the COVID-19 pandemic. This innovative approach and measurement strategy is particularly compelling given that formal reporting systems and traditional reporting sources were either unavailable or severely restricted, making the use of other monitoring methods and support efforts essential. A study carried out by Bravery and colleagues takes a novel approach to illustrate children's circumstances in times of lockdown. In their study, conversations of children on Twitter and Reddit were reviewed to assess violence related and abusive content as a proxy for exposure.

Investigating the epidemiology of CM during COVID-19, Adesman provides us with an analysis of CM in New York City from March to May 2020. The results clearly show a decrease in CM reports for all forms of maltreatment and referral sources during the study

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period, revealing the adverse impact of COVID-19 on the ability of a formal child protection system to protect children if vulnerable children are not seen by community members. Barboza and colleagues report a similar pattern for the data from Los Angeles, California. In addition to demonstrating the marked decrease in CM reports during COVID-19, the researchers also conducted a spatio-temporal analysis of clusters of reported maltreatment that identifies locations of emerging hot and cold spots during the pandemic. Associations between neighborhood structural factors (e.g., school absenteeism, poverty, unemployment, housing insecurity and birth assets) and hot and cold spot patterns are explored and reported and explored as a potentially useful direction to inform interventions in times of pandemics and natural disasters.

Despite the decrease of CM reports to formal systems, several studies identify an increase in children's injuries as a result of maltreatment during COVID-19. In their study, Kovler and colleagues illustrate an increase in the proportion of traumatic injuries caused by physical child abuse in Maryland, USA. Similarly, Heyming and colleagues' also reported on increase in injuries as a result of incidents of CM in May and June of 2020.

An international effort to understand the CM epidemiology during COVID-19 along the attempt to assess its impact on child protective services responses, was taken by an international group of scholars who compared initial data of March to June 2020 for 7 countries: Australia, Brazil, Canada, Colombia, Germany, Israel and South Africa. Their analysis clearly illustrate that along significant increase in all risk factors such as domestic violence, mental health distress, economic burden for parents and families, still there was a significant decrease in CM reports in all these countries. The researchers concluded that COVID 19 and especially the force lockdowns hold unique challenge for the protection of children from maltreatment and that for first and foremost the ability to see them and approach them.

Two additional areas pertaining to the impact of COVID-19 on children are presented in the second volume of the special issues on COVID-19. The first focuses on the changes in the Florida Foster Care System, in which Musser and colleagues demonstrate that overall rates of substantiated maltreatment resulting in foster care placement have increased for White youth. Simultaneously, rates of placement due to inadequate supervision, emotional neglect, and/or parental substance use have decreased for Black youth. The researchers stress the need to better implement innovative ways in which children and youth can be protected, seen, and approached during times of lockdown. The second study by Whelan and colleagues assesses the departure from the predictions of the forecasted model in criminal filings of child abuse and neglect during COVID-19 in Oklahoma, USA. The number of criminal cases filed between February and June 2020 had an overall 25.7 % lower average than forecast. The researchers emphasize that, although risk factors for child abuse have increased due to COVID-19, their findings demonstrate a declining trend in child abuse charges. They acknowledge that the significant decrease in reports is likely a confounder.

Further attempts to better understand the impact of COVID-19 on CM epidemiology are carried out by Camilla Fabri and colleagues, who examine violent discipline at home towards children aged 1–14 years using Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS). Their study was conducted in Nigeria, Mongolia, and Suriname and explored the impact of the lockdowns on discipline. Another study that examined the risks for children during lockdown by Berube and colleagues took place in Canada. In their study, they examine the impact of the crisis on parenting and the ability to meet the needs of their children. Their results indicate that, compared to parents of younger children, parents of older children reported less ability to fulfill their child's needs in three measured domains: cognitive and affective, security, and basic care. The researchers stress the urgent need for policymakers to acknowledge the importance of supporting parents in meeting their children's needs during the pandemic and post pandemic.

The call for policymakers to prioritize children during the pandemic is echoed by a study done in Israel. In this study, policy documents and media coverage are analyzed to better understand the failures in responding to the protection of children during the first wave of COVID-19. The role of advocates during the pandemic is crucial in changing policymakers' attitudes towards the protection of children, as policymakers tend to focus solely on mitigating the infection, resulting in neglecting other risks the pandemic and forced lockdown caused for children. The policies of the protection of children are also examined in England by Baginsky and her colleagues. The study demonstrates through in-depth interviews with practitioners, how challenging providing services for children and families is during COVID-19. They recommend further innovation for protecting children during a forced shutdown.

The urgency in fulfilling the accumulating needs of families in times of lockdown, and the need to design innovative ways to do so, is examined in the Netherlands by Bas and colleagues as in another study conducted in both Israel and the USA by Tener and colleagues. In addition, Kimber and colleagues discuss how COVID-19 clearly revealed the need for an online platform for child welfare practitioners and collateral service providers. Specifically, they discuss the development of VEGA (Violence, Evidence, Guidance, Action), which is an online platform of educational resources to support healthcare and social service providers to recognize and respond to child maltreatment.

The enormous challenge of effectively serving children through the numerous lockdowns and their documenting their evolving needs is discussed by an international group of researchers regarding their home countries of Brazil, Canada, Colombia, Israel, South Africa, Uganda, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Using an ecological framework and jurisdictional examples from their countries, the researchers comprehensively identify both risk and protective factors for children during a pandemic. Risk and protective factors are significantly influenced by each country's societal context, which emphasizes the importance of international collaboration in the protection of children, particularly during a worldwide pandemic. This multifaceted picture of children during the pandemic is also discussed in Cappa and colleagues' literature review. Their review portrays what is currently known about protecting children from maltreatment during a pandemic and what the future steps should be for our community.

An important perspective was provided by Kassia Johnson who in her letter to the editor gave us a glance into the increase reports of child abuse in Black families while moving to online schooling. In her letter, Johnson illustrates how the exposure of school teams to children homes through an online platform can perpetuate Anti-Black Racism. The escalation of racism during COVID-19 and its impact on CM reports and services must be the focus of future efforts in our field.

The discussion for the second volume was written by Henrietta H. Fore, UNICEF president, and we wish to express our deep appreciation towards the leadership of UNICEF in heading the creation of knowledge in order to protect children worldwide during a pandemic. One of the most urgent situations is understanding the needs of children who do not have regular contact with community members which is particularly challenging for children with disabilities. Families and caregivers typically rely on extensive support networks to help them meet their complex needs. It is imperative that we develop a much better understanding of the impact of COVID-19 on the physical, emotional, educational and social health as well as interventions aimed at ameliorating the deficits that have most likely been created during COVID-19.

In the midst of this continuous international crisis, we would like to express our deepest appreciation to Professor Christine Wekerle, the editor-in-chief of *Child Abuse & Neglect*, for her trust, support, and leadership in our field. We would also like to express our sincere gratitude to ISPCAN for their outstanding support at all times but especially for their tremendous impact on our society and millions of children worldwide during the pandemic. Finally, we are full of appreciation for our dear colleagues, leading global scholars, who are still struggling in this multidimensional pandemic but persevere in doing whatever they can to develop innovative cutting edge empirical knowledge to advance the protection of ALL CHILDREN AT ALL TIMES.

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