

COVID-19 is not causing a “pandemic of child abuse” – and the myth is endangering children, child advocacy group says

NCCPR's new report, [Child Welfare's Pandemic of Fear](#), counters a misleading, racially-biased “master narrative”

ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA , UNITED STATES , December 15, 2020 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Widespread claims that COVID-19 is leading to a “pandemic of child abuse” are built on a foundation of myth – and it’s the myth that’s really hurting children, according to a national child advocacy organization.

“COVID-19 is horrifyingly real. So is child abuse. But the idea that the absence of teachers constantly watching for signs of abuse and rushing to call child protective services is leading vast numbers of parents to commit acts of savagery upon their children is a myth,” said Richard Wexler, executive director of the National Coalition for Child Protection Reform. NCCPR reviews the research and challenges what it calls the media’s “master narrative” about child abuse and coronavirus in a new report, [Child Welfare's Pandemic of Fear](#), released today.

“The impulse is understandable,” Wexler said. “For generations, we’ve read horror stories about parents beating, raping and murdering their children. The stories often are followed by misleading use of statistics, leaving the impression that there’s a child abuser under every bed. No wonder people assume a decline in child abuse reports due to COVID-19 is cause for alarm.”

The myth continues to spread, even after news organizations such as the Associated Press, The Marshall Project and Bloomberg CityLab challenged it. So has Chapin Hall, the child welfare think tank at the University of Chicago.

But, Wexler said, “accepting the myth risks scaring vulnerable families away from seeking assistance, it risks deluging caseworkers with false reports, stealing time from finding children in real danger. It even risks increasing the spread of COVID-19.”

At the root of the problem, Wexler said, is what’s been called [“health terrorism,”](#) “an ends-justify-the-means approach to advocacy that says it’s OK to distort the true nature of a problem in the name of ‘raising awareness.’ (The phrase did not originate with us. It was used by a group that admits to having engaged in it.) So when we hear that reports alleging child abuse are down, we assume that thousands of children are being tortured – just like in the horror stories. But that is

not what's really happening."

NCCPR's report cites federal data showing that nationwide, of every 100 calls to child abuse hotlines, 91 are either so absurd they are screened out or are found to be false after an investigation – even though, in most states, all that is required to "substantiate" an allegation is a caseworker's guess that it is slightly more likely than not that abuse or neglect occurred.

Another six calls involve "neglect." On very rare occasions neglect can be horrific. Far more often it simply means a family is poor. "If a family doesn't have enough food, that is a reason to call a foodbank, not a child abuse hotline," Wexler said. "Housing instability should be dealt with through housing vouchers."

The report explains that three of every 100 hotline calls have even the potential to be the kinds of horror stories we think of when we hear the words "child abuse."

The report notes that although child protective services agencies like to see themselves as benevolent helpers, that is not how they are seen in poor communities – especially poor communities of color. In those communities, they are just another police force. At best, they put families under constant surveillance, adding enormous stress and sometimes driving families deeper into poverty. At worst, they take the children and consign them to the chaos of foster care.

"Even as we are supposed to be in the midst of a racial justice reckoning, we have not stopped to consider the bias that underlies the messaging about COVID-19 and child abuse," Wexler said. "What we're really saying is: Now that fewer mostly white middle-class professionals have their 'eyes' constantly on overwhelmingly poor disproportionately nonwhite children, thousands of their parents will unleash a pandemic of child abuse upon them. The racism in that message should be obvious.

"Yes, COVID-19 is putting more stress on everyone. But why do we rush to assume that for poor people in general and poor Black people in particular the only way they'll cope is to beat up their children?"

Wexler noted some might argue even all this damage to poor families of color is worth it to find those very few children in real danger. "But the deluge of false reports only steals worker time from finding those children," he said. "And now, there are new dangers: If a poor family has to worry that the person dropping off a food basket also is peeking through the door looking for 'symptoms' of child abuse, will they ask for help when they're hungry? Will they accept a neighbor's offer of respite via a zoom call with the kids if they fear the neighbor will call a hotline because of some 'gut feeling' the child on the screen is abused?"

The report notes that if the fearmongering encourages more frivolous calls that means more caseworkers inspecting homes, looking through cupboards and closets, and sometimes

stripsearching the children looking for bruises. That increases the risk of spreading COVID-19 to families and caseworkers alike. And the fearmongering can lead politicians to suggest it's worth risking increased transmission of COVID-19 by prematurely reopening schools.

"The challenge of COVID-19 brings with it a rare opportunity to rethink our approach to so many aspects of our lives," Wexler said. "It's a chance to rebuild child welfare in a way that makes all children safer. But only if we finally free ourselves from the grip of health terrorism."

The National Coalition for Child Protection Reform is a small, nonprofit child advocacy organization that works to make that system better serve America's most vulnerable children. [Read what other child welfare leaders and journalists say about NCCPR here.](#)

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