

How Covid-19 Affected Child Protective Services in Sonoma County

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Introduction

Child Protective Services (CPS) in Sonoma County and the rest of the United States is the institution in charge of ensuring the safety and well-being of all children, teens, and families. CPS staff investigates reports of child abuse and neglect and works closely with the families to make sure children are safe and also that they have a good environment for development.

From the history of CPS, we know that the first organization that devoted specifically to protecting children happened in 1875 and it was the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NYSPCC) and it had many different additions and changes up until the moment that it became what we know today. Currently, CPS is the domain of social work, assisted by law enforcement, mental health, medicine, nursing, law, and education. Nowadays we have what we call mandated reporters, which are people in the professions mentioned above that are required by law to report any case of suspected child abuse or neglect to the appropriate department.

Within the topic of Child Protective Services, we were interested in knowing how the cases of child abuse and neglect might have been affected by the current COVID-19 pandemic and how things are being worked on by the department of CPS. We also wanted to determine how mandated reporters are accomplishing their tasks with the limitations that they face (like not having face-to-face contact with children) because of COVID.

We wanted to research this specific topic because we know very little about it, and we wanted to understand how kids were still being protected by these associations having so limited face-to-face encounters, and in cases reported, how the situation has been handled.

Introduction to the Research Question

With the world continuing to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic, it has been well documented and seen firsthand that things aren't the same as they once were. Knowing this, we are interested in finding out how this has affected the abilities of Child Protective Services. More specifically, we are interested in how Sonoma County Child Protective Services has been able to deal with and adjust during the Covid-19 pandemic. Our goal is to figure out whether or not the number of reported cases has increased or decreased with the pandemic, as well as the reasons why there may have been those changes if there are any. On top of that, we are interested in finding out the severity of any potential cases and how the pandemic affected that aspect of CPS cases. Another major point of interest to us is the ways in which CPS has taken into account the increase or decrease of the cases, the severity of them, and the overall challenges that CPS has had to face in light of the pandemic.

Our Research Question: How has the case management with Sonoma County's Child Protective Services been affected since the COVID-19 pandemic?

Topic/Literature Review

Our topic consisted of investigating Child Protective Services in Sonoma County as well as looking at CPS throughout California. In our topic with CPS, we focus on investigating the positives and negatives within our county. We as well focus on conducting a question and obtaining a real search that informs us of the challenges CPS has encountered during this past

year. With our literature review, we sought to first explore the background of the present-day Child Protective Services and understand the services that they offered before the pandemic hit.

The modern CPS system as we know it today started when child abuse began drawing national attention in the 1960s. It's around this time, more specifically 1962, that the United States Government began funding services to aid victims of a child instead of having them solely rely on private agencies who didn't actually cover a vast majority of the United State's child population. In 1962 the report called "The Battered-Child Syndrome"¹, which was written by pediatrician Henry Kempe and fellow colleagues had a monumental role in bringing the issue to the attention of those in medical professions as well as the media, which in turn influenced the national government to take action. Also in 1962, Congress started to make amendments to the Social Security Act which strengthened services and aid to children subjected to abuse or misconduct, establishing that cases of child abuse and neglect needed to be reported. Another part of these amendments required all states to make child welfare services available statewide by the year 1975. One other key piece of legislation that greatly impacted the CPS system was the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act of 1974, otherwise known as CAPTA. CAPTA was a document that allowed a greater response and amount of funding to counteract an ever-rising amount of child abuse cases across the nation.

Whenever there is a need for Child Protective Services to get involved with a family and their child/children, the last thing that they want to do is take that child away from their family. They exhaust every single alternative they can before resorting to removing the child from the home. When CPS does ultimately make that choice, there is a process they must follow, such as having a mandatory case plan for any out of home services in all states of the nation. In 26 of the

¹ John E B Myers, "A Short History of Child Protection in America." 2010.
https://us.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-binaries/35363_Chapter1.pdf

states it is also required that any in home services provided by CPS must also have a set case plan. The contents of case plan are mandated under federal law and must include where the child is being placed, what the child's caregivers/parents have to do in order to reunite with the child, educational plan, how the child will transition from foster care into adulthood, and lastly a permanency plan if the child can't return to their family.

Before any of these steps are taken though, a Child Protective Service worker has to receive and evaluate the case in question to determine whether or not action should be taken. If they determine further action is required, the worker goes to the place of the incident to assess the safety and situation of the child in question. If any immediate danger to the child is detected, the worker will make the choice to remove them and put them into a safe living environment while working with the family for a potential reunification. If it is determined that no such return can happen, the CPS worker then starts to look for a safe adoptive environment in which to place the child. Most CPS workers have backgrounds in psychology or counseling to efficiently help the child, first and foremost, as well as the family to keep them together.

Taking a closer look at our area of interest, Sonoma County Child Protective Services, there was troubling new information regarding the number of cases in the area. According to the Press Democrat article *Cases of child abuse and neglect up 17 percent in Sonoma County*² from early 2017, there was that drastic 17% increase from the year 2015 to 2016. The year 2015 saw a total of 487 confirmed cases of abuse or neglect, but that number jumped up to 569 for the year 2016. The article examines some of the reasons contributing to this rise, citing county data stating that drug abuse and mental health issues played a role in it. There were 5,516 hotline

² Espinoza, Martin. "Cases of child abuse and neglect up 17 percent in Sonoma County." *The Press Democrat*, 9 June 2017, www.pressdemocrat.com/article/news/cases-of-child-abuse-and-neglect-up-17-percent-in-sonoma-county/?sba=AAS. Accessed 20 Feb. 2021.

reports during the year 2016, leading to 2,220 of those reports being investigated. Of those 2,220 cases, 42% of them had some sort of drug or alcohol involvement, which is up from 29% in the year 2012. The county stated that the majority of those cases were resolved using community-based support services that didn't require the children to be taken away from their families. Sonoma County Family Youth and Children Services started utilizing something they call "pathways to prevention", which diversified the types of intervention that were used, and helped to prevent putting kids into the foster care system. Some of these pathways included parental education, housing support, and court ordered family maintenance services which contributed to only 7% of those 2,220 investigated cases leading to a child being removed from their families.

When the pandemic hit, many of the services that Child Protective Services offered became heavily impacted across the nation. Due to this, many articles and organizations voiced concerns about the rates of child abuse or neglect going up in these times. One investigative piece called *Coronavirus pandemic could become child abuse pandemic, experts warn* done by USA TODAY,³ gives a great depth of issues brought up in the trying times. From parents being unaccustomed to giving full time care, to parents being classified as essential workers potentially leaving their kids unattended while they work, there came many ways that experts have predicted increased levels of abuse and neglect. The article continues on to explain that due to the pandemic, state agencies have had to scale back their services to reduce the spread of the virus. The article was written during March of 2020 and saw resources like National Parent Helpline and The Childhelp National Abuse Hotline already receiving an increased amount of calls. While

³ Hirt, Suzanne. "Children more at risk for abuse and neglect amid the coronavirus pandemic, experts say." *USA Today*, 21 Mar. 2020. *USA Today Network*, www.usatoday.com/story/news/investigations/2020/03/21/coronavirus-pandemic-could-become-child-abuse-pandemic-experts-warn/2892923001/. Accessed 15 Feb. 2021.

a portion of these calls were from children afraid of being stuck at home with their abusers, the majority of the calls came from worried parents about child care and inaccessibility to necessary resources. The combined stress and potential economic hardships can often lead to an increased amount of maltreatment or neglect and as the Covid crisis wages on.

The UNICEF Organization published data in January of 2021 which reinforced many of the points from the aforementioned article.⁴ They too echoed the same stance and worries that the pandemic has placed extra strains on families which could increase the rates of neglect and abuse. It also stated that kids and families are left more vulnerable due to the disruptions of prevention and control methods, referral and reporting methods, and lastly delivery of necessary treatment and support resources.

Despite these worries, there have been lower rates of calls and reports made to law enforcement about abuse or neglect during Covid. This is most likely due in part to the absence of mandatory reporters like teachers, childcare workers, doctors, and community members which has only added to the vulnerability of these potential victims. Many of the places and opportunities that one of these reporters may have once had to detect any signs of abuse or neglect before the pandemic are now gone because of safety precautions put in place to help slow the spread of virus.

There were attempts to find solutions to this problem like one proposed by the Los Angeles Sheriff's office which would send uniformed officers to check on children at risk of abuse.⁵ During the pandemic, Los Angeles County saw up to a 50% drop in reported cases, mostly due to the absence of mandatory reporters, and this was an attempt to solve that.

⁴ "Child Protection and COVID-19." (Jan 2021) *UNICEF DATA*, data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/covid-19/.

⁵ Winton, Richard, "Sheriff's plan to check on high-risk kids nixed after opposition from child protective services." *Los Angeles Times*, 13 May 2020. *Los Angeles Times*,

However, the LA County director of Child Protective Services rejected that plan after deeming it to, “more harm than good”. Despite the Sheriff’s office working with the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) to formulate temporary solutions for the pandemic, they were still ultimately denied access with the cited reasons of, “...sending a uniformed law enforcement officer to a family’s home without any articulable suspicion of child abuse or neglect would not necessarily improve safety for children,” and such an action might increase stress on families and children, especially those in already marginalized communities, during one of the most stressful times most have ever experienced.”(pg 4) Another solution has been to invest more money and resources into local programs, such as the Sonoma County Child Care Resiliency Fund which pledges 1.1\$ million, as well as a 42\$ million state investment to ensure the safety of young Californians. The funds from these investments will now go into helping families stay together, supporting social worker and childcare employees, and go into Family Resource Centers which are crucial for the prevention of child abuse and neglect.⁶

While these articles and sources are useful to identify potential cases and situations where child abuse and neglect may occur more rampantly during Covid-19 pandemic, there weren’t many reports or papers at the time of this report with concrete factual numbers about the ways Child Protective Services as whole, including Sonoma County, have been effected.

One of the few studies with data about Covid pandemic is from the UCSF Benioff Children’s Hospital and focuses on the rate of hospital visits of abused kids 5 years and under, across 52 hospitals nationwide.⁷ The data they acquired showed a steep decline in ER and

⁶ California, State of. “Governor Newsom Announces \$42 Million to Protect Foster Youth and Families Impacted by COVID-19.” *California Governor*, 13 Apr. 2020, www.gov.ca.gov/2020/04/13/governor-newsom-announces-42-million-to-protect-foster-youth-and-families-impacted-by-covid-19/.

⁷ Leigh, Suzanne. “Child Abuse Surges in Times of Crisis – The Pandemic May Be Different.” *Child Abuse Surges in Times of Crisis – The Pandemic May Be Different* | UC San Francisco, 12

hospital visits due to physical abuse from March to August 2020, while there was no real change for ICU visits from prepandemic to the time of this study. According to UCSF, their data actually suggests that physical abuse has dropped all across the spectrum. Using the information from the papers that we could find gave us ideas and helped us frame the type of information we would seek while conducting the interviews. As a research group we wanted build upon the leads that were got from these other sources to try and provide a clearer understanding of how exactly cases of child abuse and neglect have been impacted during the pandemic.

Research Methods

As stated before, our research question is, “How has the case management with Sonoma County’s Child Protective Services been affected since the Covid pandemic?” We thought conducting qualitative interviews to answer our research question would be the best way to collect the information we needed. After figuring out our research question we started brainstorming on who we could contact to conduct interviews. We thought of schools, daycares, Child Protective Services (CPS) in Sonoma County, and the police. We stuck to places in Sonoma County because our research question was directed towards Sonoma County’s CPS. We contacted as many people as we could from the suspected agencies that we thought would answer our research question.

Before we started our interviews we made a set of the questions each of us would ask during the interview. We had one group member conduct the interview and the other would type it out; as a secretary. We were ready to conduct interviews. We received confirmation emails from various people telling us that an interview is acceptable. We also had some declined

interviews because they either didn't respond to us or didn't feel comfortable answering. We understood the CPS system is quite tight and hard to get anyone to talk about it. We respect the people who agreed to have an interview. We got a lot of information from the interviews and it answered our research question.

As we conducted interviews we picked and chose which questions to ask depending on the person we were interviewing. In the end, our interviews answered our research question; along with the information from our Literature Review. The interview guide is structured as follows:

Interview Guide

Thank you for taking the time to share your thoughts with me today. This interview will take up to 10 minutes of your time. We are a team of sociology research students from Sonoma State University researching the impacts of covid on Child Protective Services in Sonoma County. We are working under the direction of Dr. Peter Phillips, professor of Sociology. This information that you give us will be completely confidential. We will not use your name or the names of the people you talk about. If you have any questions after this interview or would like to receive a copy of our study, I will give you my email address at the end. Do we have your permission to proceed with this interview? Do you have any questions before we start?

Interview questions CPS Employees or Associates

1. How many years have you worked or been associated with Child Protective Services?
2. How many reports of abuse has CPS received since Covid hit march 1 2020? Has the number of reported cases gone up or down in the last year?
3. What parts of your job do you find more challenging?
4. Have there been more cases of abuse or neglect with the Covid-19 pandemic?

5. What are some of the most common types of abuse that CPS encounters?/Other than physical abuse, what are some of the most common abuses or maltreatment you've seen working for CPS?
6. As a CPS worker could you explain what are the steps CPS takes when a report is made on a child?
7. Has family isolation due to Covid-19 played a role in the cases reported to Child Protective Services?
8. With the pandemic what has been the most challenging obstacle CPS has faced?
9. How are most cases resolved? What is an example of a successful resolution? Are most cases successful?
10. Are children removed from their home likely to return to their parent(s)?
11. In ranked order what sources are referring to CPS?
12. Since the pandemic hit how have the number of cases reported dropped or increased?
13. In what ways has Covid changed your day to day tasks As a CPS worker?
14. Due to Covid-19, how has family visitations (if any) changed during this pandemic? How are you following up with these cases?

Interview questions for teachers

1. How many years have you been working as a teacher?
2. Since Covid started, what have been some of the most challenging parts of your job?
3. As a teacher, you are mandated reporter for any sort of abuse or neglect correct?
4. What are some things you look out for/ help you identify anything of that sort?
5. What's the process for making a report to CPS like?
6. Have you ever had to make a report to CPS?

7. If you have encountered any incidents, have they been related to abuse or neglect?
8. Since the pandemic began, has your ability to identify potential abuse/neglect been affected? If so has it helped or hindered?
9. Is it harder to spot any potential child abuse/neglect through Zoom/ online learning?
10. How many instances do you typically report per school year?
11. Do you think that there would be more cases/reports without the pandemic?
12. How many reports have you sent to CPS during the pandemic?

Results

When it came to conducting interviews we thought that there would be a drastic change in the work of Child Protective Services as well in the number of cases. Results from our interviews led us to learn that as there wasn't much of a drastic change in the Child Protective Services office but there was a huge change in the number of cases as well as how things had to be done living during this pandemic. As a group we came up with questions that would ask professionals in these types of fields the changes they have had in Child Protective Services throughout the pandemic and find out from them what has been some of their challenges working in the office as well as home visits. Compared to conducting our research on the media articles first, Child Protective Services saw a different side and encountered similar as well as different problems that were talked about in the articles.

For our interviews we spoke to several workers in different departments of Child Protective Services. For example, we spoke to people who work picking up calls, others who work reuniting families and others who have other roles like teachers and professionals who deal with children. More than half of interviewees said that there was a change in one way or another in their field of work during this past year with this while pandemic. For example, one of

interviewers who worked in the “final step” as she calls it reuniting families mentioned how she thought that at one point she thought everything would freeze and would pause for then not knowing what would happen to children and families being separated from each other.

She said luckily people who go out after a call did not stop conducting their work as it did make it more difficult to come into homes with the pandemic and being on lockdown. Other workers were scared not knowing whether children would be removed from homes or if they were able to reunite with their families because of the pandemic. A lot also fear for children that were being abused and not reported.

When it came up to the call center, Child Protective workers said that they saw a huge number of calls dropping as people were staying at home because schools and daycares were closing because of COVID-19. This leads to people working at CPS changing their roles as well, interviewers said. CPS workers who conducted regular visits on children and their families had to change over to online visits over zoom as well as some visits in person reduced from several times a week to just a few. A down part with CPS workers as well was that with so many workers and less work outside the office a lot of workers were put on half time or some even on leave. Workers who would conduct visits would be put as half time employees or on leave because for the first several months workers could not conduct that time of work. As calls dropped for CPS, more work in the office came up for them as they figured out new ways to work around the pandemic and different ways they could offer their services and resources to families in need.

As time moved on during the pandemic not many cases kept coming up. CPS workers realized that those cases that were being reported were severe cases where children were being abused daily and badly due to being stuck at home all day. There were some cases that were

reported during online school as well but CPS workers say it was as easy for teachers and caregivers to see abuse. As things are looking more positive during this pandemic with vaccines and some schools reopening CPS hopes that they can help with services and help children in need.

What people agreed and disagreed on in the interviews

All the people that we interviewed gave us interesting information on the subject of Child Protective Services and how Covid has affected case management. We used the same interview questions for interviewing the staff of Child Protective Services and then we used different questions for school staff. All of the people that we interviewed have agreed that Covid has changed Child Protective Service and its management. Interviewees agreed that Covid has changed Child Protective Services. According to one of our interviewees, calls went down, the staff had to interview children in masks and stay 6 feet apart. They also had to find ways to go to the family's house to investigate instead of doing Zoom meetings. For many of the teachers, it was harder for teachers to see the abuse happening or if the student has changed because of the abuse. It is also harder to get the wheels going to make sure that each case is getting taken care of and make sure the children are safe and put in emergency foster homes. All of the interviewees agreed that their staff's safety was important. However, some reported that they contracted covid from families that they visited. All of the staff at Child Protective Services were reported to have both vaccines.

Even though the cases went down, the cases become more intense such as more domestic violence and substance abuse. The most common types of abuse are physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. Before Covid, most of the calls have been from schools, daycares, and after-school programs but since school started the calls have been from the police and hospitals. Before Covid

hit and everything shut down, there were twelve to sixteen daily reports but after everything shut down the cases went down to five to six a month. With the interviews of Child Protective Services, the daily tasks are different but their purpose is to keep families safe and have a goal for the parents to get their children back. Interviewing the teachers was different. They all had different roles than the staff. Before Covid, the school staff such as teachers, therapists, and guidance counselors could figure out when a student is being abused. They can see the change in their body language, hygiene, how they look, and if they stop being social. However, since Covid started the schools had to change the way they teach by going online and using Zoom. According to one of the school staff, it is harder to spot abuse or neglect on Zoom. They aren't able to spot any changes such as their body language and hygiene. All of the teachers, counselors, and administrators report child abuse to Child Protective Services. 6 out of 8 of the interviewees had the same answers. However, some had different answers to the questions or they disagreed with the answers. The answers that were different were the challenges that they faced. Some said that transferring cases to foster homes was challenging because of how understaffed they were.

Summary of the Interviews

Most of the staff working at Child Protective Services worked there for more than four years. For the question, "what ways has Covid changed your day to day to day tasks As a CPS worker?" Many of them answered that the calls have gone down quite a bit after everything shut down. Some of the interviewees answered how many cases they got before Covid and then how many cases they have gotten now since the pandemic happened. According to one of the staff the cases went from twelve to sixteen cases down to five to six. Since the pandemic started there has been more work for the employees. The workers who answer the hotline mention that the calls have been lower. Some of the staff even said that there were hundreds of cases but that went

down. Another worker mentioned that the ways that Covid has changed their work is that the calls went down, each staff that met families had to wear masks and stay 6 feet apart. During the interviews, some CPS workers mentioned that the cases reported have been more dramatic than they were previously. It was also mentioned that since there is no direct contact with kids from schools, the reports obtained during the pandemic came directly from hospitals or from the police department.

Another topic that we covered was the kinds of abuse they have seen during this pandemic. The answer that they all answered was physical abuse and domestic violence. Before covid, the main abuses were physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse and neglect.

Another question that we had was what are your daily tasks for working for Child Protective Services. One of the staff was a training Supervisor. She would train social workers, work with colleges and universities, Internships, work after hours, respond to calls, and worked with Foster Homes such as Valley of the Moon. One of the interviewees was the one that operates the call center. When a call comes into the hotline, they have to determine if it is a legit call or just someone trying to make a joke. After they figure out that it is serious, they start the investigation. The staff then goes out and talks to the family, and if we have a suspicion of child abuse/neglect, we move on to the next step is to have an in-depth investigation. Then, they take the child from their family, if needed. After that, we work with the family to see if they can be reunited with their kids, and we give them guidance. After all that if the family can not be reunited, the children get placed into foster care.

When we talked with mandated reporters, we decided to reach out to three teachers and see how their job is getting done during the pandemic, and how they are fulfilling their responsibility as mandated reporters now that there are no face-to-face classes. All teachers,

counselors, and people that work at schools are mandated reporters, they all take courses at the beginning and get information on how to identify and report child abuse/neglect. A mandated reporter is the person that is obligated by law to report any instances of abuse/neglect towards a vulnerable section of the population.

We asked the teachers what did they observed in kids that lift a suspicion about abuse or neglect and they said that normally their grades dropped, they have changes in behavior, the way their present themselves was different, their hygiene was another important factor and they even mentioned that during middle school and high school, kids tend to wear lots of bracelets because of cutting.

The process is that the teacher makes the observations, and after they see some of the signs present in students that have been abused/neglected, the teacher would then go to a counselor and report the incident, and if needed, the counselor will report to Child Protective Services.

The teachers also mentioned that it was harder to spot signs of abuse/neglect through the new method of learning: online classes. Because of the pandemic, all students had to take many of their classes via Zoom, which made it hard for the teachers to spot any sign of physical abuse present in the children's body, they said that they could not know what was happening at home, and it was harder to keep contact with the parents.

One of the teachers that we talked to mentioned that usually they report to the counselor five to six instances during a school year, and usually only one or two get reported to Child Protective Services. During the pandemic, one of the teachers that we spoke to has not made any reports about suspected child abuse or neglect during this school year.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the role of Child Protective Services is to protect children from abuse and neglect in Sonoma County. However due to Covid-19, it has been hard checking up on these children and reporting cases.

As a result of our interviews we determined that the majority of CPS staff reports have gone down a bit less than fifty percent since the nationwide shutdown. Since classes were on Zoom, it was hard for teachers to observe the abuse and report it. There has also been an increase of work for the employees. The kind of abuse that has been seen during the pandemic was domestic abuse, mainly physical abuse. As some work increased for CPS and others dropped they are staying busy providing resources for families and children in whichever way possible. And even with the difficulty of home visits CPS is making sure that children stay safe at home and away from danger. They know they face challenges as they don't know where they will go with this pandemic but they are staying positive as they hope that this will end soon and they are able to help children and families come out of hard situations.

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