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Barriers to Child Protection During COVID-19: Considering the Impact on Child Maltreatment

© April 22, 2020  Darcey Merritt, Ph.D. and Cassandra Simmel, Ph.D.



Hubert Humphrey once said “the moral test of government is how that government treats those who are in the dawn of life, the children; those who are in the twilight of life, the elderly; those who are in the shadows of life; the sick, the needy and the handicapped.”

In this time of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, in which our attention is understandably and simultaneously focused on multiple vulnerable populations, it is imperative that we



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prioritize the needs and challenges facing our most “at-risk” children in society: those involved with the child welfare system.

The child welfare system is designed to protect children living in fragile families from a host of child neglect and abuse types. The outbreak of COVID-19 has compounded their vulnerability and further exposed salient weak spots of the child welfare system. The majority of these issues existed prior to the pandemic and pertain to child welfare system oversight protocols.

The mission of the child welfare system can no longer be executed as designed, leaving children even more at risk of harm and families even more distressed. With social isolation and distancing mandates, child welfare workers are not able to conduct their in-person family visits to check on the welfare of children and assist parents in their efforts. Some fear a decrease in maltreatment reports given the lack of regular oversight, normally taking place in neighborhood, medical, and school settings. Others are concerned there will be inappropriate maltreatment allegations based on circumstances entirely out of parental control and related to the consequences of COVID-19.



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Children currently living in home environments vulnerable to maltreatment may face enhanced risk due to the heightened stressors now placed on parents and caregivers as they remain isolated from the supports once relied upon. Research has categorically shown that poverty, **household**

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overcrowding and substance abuse are risk elements associated with the perpetration of child maltreatment.

The added stress of coping with COVID-19 is creates significant and tenacious challenges for many of these families who were already struggling financially and emotionally. However, this particular population of vulnerable children has not been on the radar for supports at all. The unasked question is: How can we support children in families already trying to minimize the myriad risk factors for maltreatment, particularly when they may be experiencing profound setbacks in all manners due to the ramifications of COVID-19?

Although all children suffer with school closings, these most vulnerable child welfare-involved children also suffer from an exasperated digital divide because most lack access to the needed equipment and technology to study at home. Many have increased food insecurities because they are among the 22 million children who qualify for free and reduced breakfast and lunch plans. Their home environments are even more distressed and chaotic. Parents may have already been unemployed or under-employed, and thus may not benefit from the relaxed unemployment compensation protocols. They may not have a consistent record of paying taxes and therefore unlikely to benefit from the stimulus cash payments.

The recently-passed stimulus legislation, though not perfect, will provide some much-needed relief and assistance for many vulnerable families across the U.S. There are, however, two striking attributes of this legislation.

First, it reveals the potential reach of governmental action and what federal policy is capable of doing for children and families. When governments prioritize the needs and challenges facing at-risk children and families, and are mobilized to act on these priorities, they demonstrate that far-reaching and comprehensive legislative remedies are available.

Second, this legislation also conveys that some vulnerable populations will continue to be at-risk. Their needs and challenges

are scarcely addressed in the legislation thus far.

For many families, this pandemic is a devastating crisis, which is hopefully time limited. However, for many children and families in the U.S., they have been living in a state of crisis long before the emergence of COVID-19. The risk for child maltreatment is at a crisis point. While some states are enacting innovative measures to address this risk, we need to implement broad federal legislation that addresses the enhanced risk factors many families face in the aftermath of COVID-19.



Cassandra Simmel, professor at the Rutgers School of Social Work

Now is the time for **legislation** that embodies the true meaning of a safety net for this population. This requires an equitable approach that acknowledges the structural and systemic barriers that contribute to the continuation of salient inequities. Specifically, all unjust policies and systems related to child maltreatment risk factors need to be revisited and drastically revised. For instance, programs need to be implemented so these families never experience a digital divide, which hinders academic success and the ability for teachers and social workers to provide needed supports; and all food insecurity needs to be eradicated immediately.

Moving forward, no child should ever be hungry in this country and no parent should ever worry about nourishing their children. Without solutions to decrease risk factors, such crises as the COVID-19 pandemic only serve to exasperate already tenuous family stress levels, resulting in more risk for child maltreatment.

These children and families should have the same resiliency tools as their more privileged peers. Immediate action is

needed to ensure that the pandemic does not launch vulnerable families into irrecoverable circumstances.

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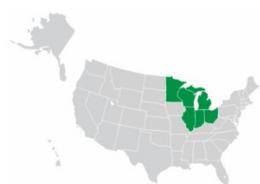
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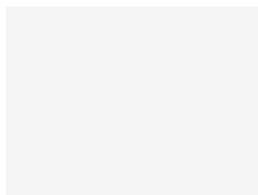
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