

# RESEARCH HIGHLIGHT

## Child Abuse in the Era of Coronavirus

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### Introduction

As our national attention focuses on the COVID-19 pandemic and government and health responses, it is important to remember vulnerable populations and the other ways the pandemic places people at risk. April is *National Child Abuse Awareness Month* and *Sexual Assault Awareness Month*. And though these April observances may seem totally isolated from COVID-19, I would argue that the current pandemic presents particular challenges in the area of child abuse. The national child abuse hotline, Child-Help, for instance, has already begun seeing a significant increase in calls and texts reporting instances of child abuse (Child-Help, 2020).

### Social Distancing: Protection or Exposure?

The practice of social distancing during the outbreak of a virus is vital to public health and can stem the tide of new COVID-19 cases (Wilder-Smith & Freedman, 2020). Social distancing practices during the “Spanish” influenza outbreak of 1918 helped the city of Saint Louis, Missouri to keep their infection rate relatively low, particularly when compared to other large American cities (Kalnins, 2006). The current rationale for social distancing is to slow the rate of infections, reduce burden on the healthcare system, and to save lives. Despite these advantages however, social distancing—though protecting people from infection—may expose individuals to other harms, including child abuse.

Vital tactics to slow the spread of the infection—including closing schools, basketball courts, school centers, and other safe spaces for youth—have been adopted throughout the nation. The unintended consequence of these actions, however, is that youths who come from abusive homes are now forced to remain there, indefinitely, 24/7. Compounding this issue, many parents who would otherwise be at work during the day are now being forced to remain at home because they must work remotely or because they lost their job.

Research on victimization consistently focuses on how victimization is often the result of opportunity and the coalescence of situational factors. These *theories of victimization* tend to focus on five key risk factors that contribute to victimization: ex-

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*posure, guardianship, proximity to potential offenders, attractiveness of targets, and “the definitional properties of specific crimes themselves” (Cohen, Kluegel, & Land, 1981).<sup>1</sup>*

Two of these factors, in particular, are pertinent to the issue being raised: exposure and guardianship. What exposure essentially refers to is how accessible a victim or target is to individuals who would intend to do them harm. This component is particularly apropos when considering the challenges that social distancing presents in terms of child abuse. As youths and their abusers—both of whom would usually be away from home during the day—are forced to come into constant contact, the abuser has increased access to the victim. Guardianship refers to having someone (or something) that can assist if a crime was taking place or prevent the crime altogether. Youth are now forced to stay at home with little ability to seek support from their previous guardians—teachers, role models, and other mandated reporters. The person who is legally obligated to be their protector is the same one who is committing the abuse.

Preliminary evidence provided by law enforcement agencies throughout the country supports this assertion (Jacoby, Stucka, & Phillips, 2020). Certainly, we should be concerned about COVID-19 and its physical health consequences. But we should likewise be very concerned about the safety of kids forced to stay

home, a place that has recently been argued the safest place to be during the pandemic.

## Explanations for Abuse

Previous work has considered three particular perspectives that could potentially be used to explain the causes of child abuse: psychological, sociological, and social-psychological perspectives (Thurston, 2006).

- The psychological framework proposes that there are innate biological or psychological characteristics that predispose the parent to abusive behaviors. These may include low self-control, emotional immaturity, addiction, and psychiatric illness.
- Sociological explanations focus on social conditions at the local and national levels. Examples of sociological explanations abound, including poverty, unemployment, and social isolation, to name just a few.
- The social-psychological perspective blends the former explanations and focuses on the interactions among the abuser, the child, and the home/neighborhood environments. Thus, rather than focusing on only external or personal factors, this perspective considers how the abuser interacts with—and acts within—personal relationships and the broader sociological context. Risk fac-

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<sup>1</sup> The “definitional properties of specific crimes themselves” means that some crimes require specific skill-sets or tools, an example being an armed robbery requiring a weapon.



tors within this explanation include family conflict and stress (Sze & Lamar, 1981; Thurston, 2006).

As was mentioned above, the sociological explanations of unemployment, poverty, and social isolation can act as risk factors for child abuse. As the current situation surrounding COVID-19 has developed, it has become obvious that these three risk factors have been impacted immensely. From the beginning of March to April 9, 17 million people submitted new applications for unemployment benefits as a result of the pandemic (Long & Van Dam, 2020). Added to this is that many nonessential businesses have been closed, lessening the likelihood of being able to attain employment relatively soon. As a result, many families may be plunged into poverty or have prior financial difficulties exacerbated.

Although social isolation is argued to be the key to beating the pandemic, it can understandably create stress and strain for families. Stress is likely a key factor in explaining the increased incidence in child abuse. Unemployment, confinement to one's home, and the uncertainty caused by the pandemic are stressors that have likely affected most everyone in the past few months.

COVID-19 and social distancing measures may therefore increase a family's exposure to stressors and reduce usual coping mechanisms, a dangerous combination in even the best of times. This pandemic and the measures that are being taken to contain it may also worsen already precarious or abusive home situations. Social isolation, unemployment,

family conflict, stress, fear, and perhaps anger could thus coalesce to make an already bad situation much worse.

### **Abuse's Effect on Immune Health**

Abuse is harmful in the short term, causing both physical and mental harm, but it can also have far-reaching consequences that can last throughout one's life. Past research has linked childhood abuse—physical, emotional, and sexual—with harmful mental health outcomes in adulthood. These include depression, anxiety, reduced self-esteem, interpersonal issues, sexual dysfunction, substance use, and PTSD, among others (Herrenkohl et al., 2013; Leeb, Lewis, & Zolotor, 2011; Mullen et al., 1996). The enduring physical harms of child abuse are also apparent, as those who have been victimized in this way report increased incidence of migraines, pain disorders, heart disease, and cancer, among others (Leeb, Lewis, & Zolotor, 2011).

Of particular concern at this time is child abuse's effect on immune health. Numerous studies have linked traumatic experiences early in life with immune dysregulation (Ayaydin et al., 2015; Fagundes, Glaser, & Kiecolt-Glaser, 2013). Such immune dysregulation has been shown to occur in both the short- and long-terms, having implications also for adult survivors of childhood abuse (Fagundes, Glaser, & Kiecolt-Glaser, 2013). Further, work examining childhood mental health and its attendant immunological consequences more generally has linked depression and stress to immune dysregulation (Caserta et al., 2008; Caserta et al., 2011). These

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immunological consequences are obviously a cause for concern during a viral pandemic.

## Conclusion

Given the uncertainty and fear that we are all perhaps facing on a daily basis, it is easy to focus on only the immediate concerns. However, this nearsightedness comes at the cost of forgetting about those for whom social isolation is dangerous and traumatizing. Those who would normally have a safe space in school are now relegated 24/7 to the place in which their abuse occurs. Those who confide in their teachers and role models at school—individuals who are trained to notice the signs of abuse and who are mandated to report it—are perhaps left with few to whom they can disclose their abuse or seek support.

As these are unprecedented times, I am hesitant to provide extensive recommendations to address these issues brought

forth by COVID-19, particularly since they are rapidly changing. However, the first step, I think, is to acknowledge that this as a unique challenge that will persist as long as social distancing measures are recommended. The second step that I offer is to raise public awareness of these issues, to identify resources for reporting child abuse, and to make these resources more easily accessible for those who need them. By acknowledging that COVID-19 and social distancing have ramifications for child abuse and by also making others aware, we can make it a topic that is considered alongside other core concerns, including health care, employment, and mental health. Continuing this conversation is vital in giving a voice to those who we can now neither see nor hear.

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