

APSSAC ALERT



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Special Points of Interest:

- *The NCANDS data system as currently operated is particularly ill-suited as a source of information on the incidence of child maltreatment during COVID-19.*
- *Variations in emergency state policies on investigations and responses will exacerbate the existing variations in definitions.*
- *The pandemic will span multiple fiscal year reporting periods, making the impact of COVID-19 even more difficult to discern.*
- *Users of the NCANDS Child Maltreatment reports are advised to refer to the State Commentary sections of the report for details on state variations in definitions and limitations identified by state data technical staff.*

What Will We Learn From NCANDS About Child Maltreatment During the COVID-19 Pandemic?

by Janet Rosenzweig, PhD, MPA

What is NCANDS?

The National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) is a voluntary data collection system that gathers information from all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico about reports of child abuse and neglect. States voluntarily provide case-level Child Protective Services (CPS) data to facilitate national reporting on an annual basis by the Children's Bureau. Data elements include the demographics of children and their perpetrators, types of maltreatment, investigation or assessment dispositions, risk factors, and services provided as a result of the investigation or assessment (Office of the Assistant Secretary for

Planning and Evaluation (ASPE), 2006). NCANDS was established in response to the [Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act of 1988](#) (ASPE, 2006; Children's Bureau, n.d.-a).

While the federal government has presented reports based on NCANDS data as a measure of the incidence of child maltreatment and consistently uses the data to calculate trends (Children's Bureau, 2020), a closer analysis of the data indicates that it is better understood as a measure of child protective services case processing and workload (Rosenzweig, 2020).

Reliability of NCANDS Data

Reliability in using NCANDS data for national trends analysis is compromised by major variations in state definitions

and reporting laws. Analysis of the state commentaries in *Child Maltreatment* annual reports that accompany data submissions reveals that in any given year as many as 22% of states report that their data is unsuitable for trend analysis due to changes in policy, laws, or technology (Children's Bureau, 2020; Rosenzweig, 2018; Rosenzweig 2015). This will certainly be exacerbated during the pandemic as changes in policy, practice, and technology were continuous and ongoing as states sought to adapt to a crisis whose true dimensions were unknown.

Timing of NCANDS Data

The federal Administration for Children Youth and Families (ACYF) uses NCANDS data to prepare annual reports using data from the Federal Fiscal Year (FFY), which starts October 1st and ends September 30th of the following year. The most recent report, *Child Maltreatment 2019*, released in January 2021, reported on data from October 1, 2018 through September 30, 2019. The most recent dataset available to researchers from NCANDS also covers FFY 2019. The pandemic will span FFYs 2020 and 2021; if the trend of the last 30 years continues, NCANDS data covering this period will not be available until 2022 and will impact the data over two fiscal years.

COVID-19 Related Questions That NCANDS Data Will Not Help Answer

The pandemic offers the opportunity to consider many questions about child maltreatment. Did lack of work offer parents more time to parent or mean more children were referred to CPS for neglect due to loss of income? Did the lockdown keep maltreated children from the eyes of mandated reporters or provide protection from predators? Did less surveillance in low-income communities that tend to be more involved with public systems lead to more equity in reporting or more harm to children with fewer eyes on them? With so many in child welfare considering the issues racial justice in child maltreatment, will this

period bring relief to the issue of oversurveillance of families of color (APSAC, n.d.; Ho & Fassett, 2021)? None of these questions will have easy or absolute answers, and all are worth exploring. These important questions will need to be addressed by bona fide researchers; the NCANDS data system simply does not have the capacity.

The NCANDS data describing child maltreatment during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic may not be suitable to answer even the questions typically reported on in the *Child Maltreatment* annual reports. When the Associated Press investigated the number of referrals to CPS for child maltreatment and CPS response during COVID-19, the 36 states that replied each gathered the requested data in their own way, with few relying on the NCANDS data (Ho & Fassett, 2021).

COVID-19 Related Questions That NCANDS Data Might Eventually Help Answer

NCANDS data might be useful to answer questions about workload, response times, substantiation rates by reporting source during times of COVID-19, and if state data systems continued to capture data, given changes in practice.

A systematic analysis of the variation in responses by states to both data collection and reporting and services may serve as a starting point to develop a blueprint for a coordinated response in a subsequent national emergency.

Conclusion

When NCANDS data files and standard reports based on them are available, they may eventually be a source of lessons learned about responding to child maltreatment during a pandemic. APSAC members can learn more about how NCANDS data is collected in their state, and any changes that occurred during the pandemic, by contacting the state data administrator

listed in the State Commentary of each *Child Maltreatment* Report and make an educated decision before relying on published numbers (see for example the State Commentary section in *Child Maltreatment 2016*, *Child Maltreatment 2017*, *Child Maltreatment 2018*, or *Child Maltreatment Child Maltreatment 2019*; Children’s Bureau, 2020). The more immediate lesson is that the United States needs a timely, reliable, and valid approach to measuring child maltreatment. Procedures used by the public health system and methodologies used by the National Incidence Studies can serve as a model (Children’s Bureau, n.d.-b).

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