



# COVID-19 Survivor Impact Briefs Children and Youth

The National Resource Center for Reaching Victims conducted a series of listening sessions to unearth the impact the COVID-19 health crisis is having on underserved victims of crime and better resource the crime victim services field to respond to those needs.

This brief summarizes the issues and strategies that emerged from listening sessions on children and youth survivors.

## Introduction

While children and youth have in large part been spared the direct health effects of COVID-19, they are significantly impacted in many other ways. Efforts to reduce the spread of the virus, including school closures and social distancing have disrupted our social safety net, leaving children and youth at heightened risk for abuse. Reduced access to teachers, family members, and friends has resulted in a drastic decrease in reporting, while increased opportunities for abuse are compounded by a host of stressors impacting families across the country. Our existing systems for effectively responding to the victimization of children and youth has been all but dismantled. Fortunately, an army of dedicated advocates, including child protective workers, law enforcement, forensic interviewers, therapists, and Child Advocacy Center staff have mobilized to confront these new challenges. This brief explores some of those needs and creative solutions shared during listening sessions, strategy sessions, and conversations with survivors.

# Unique Impacts

## Increased Risk for Victimization

- Historical risk factors, such as social isolation, family stress, and parenting stress, suggest that children and youth are at extremely heightened risk for victimization during state mandated school closures and stay at home orders. Anecdotal reports from Children's Advocacy Centers (CACs) and hospitals suggest spikes in the number of severe physical abuse cases and child fatalities. While some risk of child sexual abuse may be reduced because of nearly constant parental supervision, technology facilitated exploitation of children is expected to increase as children spend more time on the internet. Already vulnerable populations including children from immigrant families and those with disabilities are believed to be at even greater risk.

## Significant Drop in Reports of Abuse

- Throughout the country reporting of child abuse has seen dramatic declines. Reports suggest that hotline calls in some areas have been cut by more than half. Teachers, school nurses and counselors, who have accounted for as much as 20% of all reporting of abuse and neglect, have lost access to their students. Family members, friends, neighbors, physicians, clergy, and a host of others no longer have the regular interaction that served to monitor the welfare of at-risk children.

## How to Safely Provide Services

- An early and existing concern is how to safely provide victim services to children in a manner that safeguards against coronavirus transmission. While CACs worked quickly to ensure they were categorized as essential services few, if any, were immediately prepared to safely provide services in such new ways. To date, CACs are working hard to secure personal protective equipment for staff and clients, renovating interview and meeting spaces to accommodate distancing and adopting new protocols aimed at ensuring safety. Compromises in safety and/or the quality of service have had to be made in a field where face to face interaction with children, absent their potentially abusive or unsupportive caregivers was not only routine but required.

## **Integrity of the Model**

- For the past 35 years, the effective investigation and response to child victimization has relied heavily on multidisciplinary collaboration. An array of new and challenging barriers to such partnership, imposed by COVID-19 mitigation efforts, have already begun to erode the integrity of the longstanding model of service. Reports of forensic interviews retuning to the field, a reduction in joint investigative efforts and decreased interdisciplinary information sharing are raising concerns within the field.

## **Preparing for the Flood**

- Among the most pressing concerns looks to the future. As communities and schools slowly begin to reopen, child advocates are preparing for what will be without doubt a flood of new cases of child victimization. Service providers, likely with strained funding, fewer staff and limited protective resources, will have to find ways to provide services at a volume that will in many areas exceed capacity. How to effectively prioritize cases and meet demand without sacrificing quality and safety is of utmost consideration. This is particularly troubling for those children in need of disability and language access accommodations, who may experience long waits for such supportive services.

## **Promising Strategies**

### **Essential Services**

- CACs and other children and youth victim service agencies were quickly classified by state and local governments as essential, elevating an often under-recognized service and minimizing disruption in delivery. Most CACs are currently open and operating in some capacity, especially for emergent cases.

### **Tele-Mental Health**

- With almost lightning fast speed many victim service providers have made the shift to tele-mental health. Technology facilitated delivery of therapeutic services has allowed many children to continue to receive the supportive counseling they need at a time when it is needed most.



## Virtual Teaming

- Many local multidisciplinary child abuse response teams rapidly made a shift to conducting virtual case review meetings; maintaining a hallmark of collaborative practice that ensures information sharing and joint decision making in child abuse cases. Many teams have reported increased attendance and participation since making the shift to virtual team meetings.

## Networking and Communication

- Among the most impressive and note-worthy practices within the field of children and youth victim services is the pervasive and robust networking and communication that has been taking place. National, Regional, State and local service providers quickly came together and continue to regularly share information and resources. This has in essence allowed the spread of creativity and innovation in child and youth victim services to outpace the spread of the virus.



## **About the National Resource Center for Reaching Victims**

The National Resource Center for Reaching Victims (NRC) is a clearinghouse for victim service providers, culturally specific organizations, criminal justice professionals, and policymakers to get information and expert guidance to enhance their capacity to identify, reach, and serve all victims, especially those from communities that are underrepresented in healing services and avenues to justice. For more information about the NRC, visit the NRC's website at <http://reachingvictims.org>.

## **About the National Child Advocacy Center**

The National Children's Advocacy Center (NCAC), located in Huntsville, Alabama, revolutionized the United States' response to child sexual abuse. Since its creation in 1985, the NCAC has served as a model for the 1000+ Children's Advocacy Centers (CACs) now operating in the United States and in more than 34 countries throughout the world, with 9 more currently in development. For more information about the NCAC, visit the NCAC website at <https://www.nationalcac.org>

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