



Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Child Abuse and Neglect

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ABOUT THE STUDY

Child Abuse and Neglect (CAN) is a worldwide problem because of the biological, psychological, and social consequences. The latter can be a significant burden for children, negatively impacting their development. For these reasons, research in this field is especially important for understanding CAN aspects that are still unknown and developing updated intervention strategies. The importance of the latter statements was demonstrated by the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. Indeed, due to a lack of available information in the scientific literature during the pandemic, the only available data about the possible effect on CAN were clinical perceptions of healthcare professionals.

For these reasons, the scientific community has recently begun to report the first data on the possible impact of the pandemic on the CAN phenomenon, highlighting meaningful information that can be useful in understanding and identifying corrective strategies. All organizations dealing with CAN should contribute to closing this knowledge gap. In light of the foregoing, the authors of this paper propose a single-center, retrospective, and observational study in which they compare quantitative and qualitative variables from pre-pandemic and pandemic samples. The primary goals were to determine whether there was a decrease or increase in the number of cases referred for CAN during the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, as well as whether there were statistically significant differences in variable distributions between the pre-pandemic and pandemic periods.

Natural disasters, economic downturns, and emergencies have all been linked to an increase in the risk of CAN in the scientific literature. A meaningful review was conducted in 2021, and it was discovered that "violence increases after many emergencies compared to the conditions prior to emergencies and disasters." Polyvictimization or being subjected to multiple types of abuse such as physical violence, neglect, and mistreatment, appears to be more common in disasters."

There are currently no clear indications of the possible effects of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic on CAN. It is unknown whether stay-at-home policies and/or the closure of the majority of extra-

familiar activities influenced the CAN phenomenon. We believe that, by confirming the data available in the scientific literature about the reduction of CAN referrals during the pandemic, the current manuscript emphasizes the need for collecting useful and updated indications on a phenomenon that is still far from clear explanation in order to identify corrective measures and eventually adjust the activities of child protection systems. This could be useful not only for mitigating the potential negative effects of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic on children, but also for planning corrective interventions for future pandemics and/or disasters. For example, because it is difficult to assess whether a pandemic will have a negative impact on child protection systems, researchers should develop new tools capable of objectifying a potential impairment of the afore mentioned systems during pandemics and/or disasters in order to implement corrective measures in a timely manner.

The present manuscript's limitations stem from its monocentric, retrospective, and observational nature. As a result, our analysis cannot be used to clearly identify and explain the reasons for similar or different frequency distributions in pre-pandemic and pandemic samples. Furthermore, our findings cannot be generalized to other populations or geographic areas.

Finally, we cannot rule out the possibility that during the pandemic period, the distributions of frequencies observed between pre-pandemic and pandemic samples were heavily influenced by the fact that some CAN cases may not have reached and been properly activated by our child protection system.

In this study, the distribution of frequencies for the majority of variables did not differ between pre and post pandemic samples. The most important finding of this study is that the number of CAN cases observed decreased during the pandemic period. This allows us to validate the findings of the scientific literature. We cannot rule out the possibility that the decrease was caused by the pandemic's negative impact on the child protection system. The data mentioned above will be useful in planning corrective interventions for future pandemics and disasters.

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