

# Mitigating the Implications of Coronavirus Pandemic on Families

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**This issue presents research-informed policy recommendations regarding the effects of COVID-19 on welfare-youth, and human trafficking and exploitation.**

**The prevalence of human trafficking heightens with the growing impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable communities.** The pandemic fuels the major drivers of human trafficking, such as poverty, marginalization and social insecurity, for the most vulnerable, including women, children, the elderly, and undocumented workers.

- The economic stress is leading to increased vulnerability of human trafficking. The International Labor Organization estimates that 1.25 billion workers are employed in sectors identified as being at high risk for devastating layoffs. With the increasing unemployment and risk of economic recession, individuals may be forced to take [exploitative](#) jobs, with no legal or health protections. Traffickers are more likely to trap those who are especially socio-economically vulnerable or do not have legal documentation to work in the US. Awareness-raising campaigns with clear, timely and accurate information can reach everyone, in particular those in most the vulnerable and marginalized communities – foster care, runaways, migrant workers, minors and LGBTQI people.
- Minors (~25%) are especially vulnerable to [child exploitation](#) and trafficking. Demonstrating cases of familial abuse, several anti-trafficking organizations, such as [Girls not Brides](#) and [Human Rights Watch](#), have already noted cases of familial abuse and expect a rise in child marriage and forced labor. Furthermore, the live-stream child sex abuse trade by relatives earning money per broadcast is likely to grow during this time. Policymakers could consider reinforcing efforts to reduce the demand for labor trafficking and commercial sex.
- Human traffickers often use [online platforms to recruit victims](#). Due to COVID-19 school closures, children are spending more time online with online learning and entertainment. This heightens the risk of “grooming” – the process in which those who intend to abuse minors try to meet children.
- The economic impact of COVID-19 has likely interrupted financial support to anti-trafficking organizations that serve at-risk communities and survivors, which will disproportionately affect areas in which these organizations are the sole providers of these services. Policymakers could consider supporting comprehensive victim services and access to short-term and/ or transitional housing for those vulnerable to and survivors of trafficking, which may reduce the need for the immediate fiscal stimulus.

**The COVID-19 pandemic presents a unique set of challenges for the well-being of welfare-involved youth in the foster care system.**

- Technology is the [#1 need](#) reported by foster youth due to two reasons: (1) Social distancing recommendations have compelled suspensions in visitations between youth in foster care and their biological families; and (2) Telehealth services are not accessible by all families without Wi-Fi or a smartphone, creating a barrier between these youth and the services social workers often provide.
- [Virtual foster care and adoption processes](#) may help to reduce the number of youth without a safe home placement. There is a shortage of foster parents due to the concerns that youths’ previous environments may have led to infection, coupled with parents’ age as a risk factor for deleterious outcomes related to the virus. Furthermore, foster youth who live in group homes or institutions

are at higher risk for infection because of crowded living situations and staff who are still coming to work. Staff could consider using masks at work, reducing large group activities, delivering services outdoors whenever possible, and implementing common sense social distancing protocols, as recommended by local authorities.

- Foster care youth are at a [higher risk for abuse and neglect](#) compared to their peers (10X higher risk for physical abuse and up to 28X higher for sexual abuse when living in institutions or group homes). Distancing from [teachers, who often](#) file reports of abuse or neglect to state agencies, could lead to worsened violence without respite. Furthermore, [Child Protective Service agencies currently do not have the proper tools](#) to identify, investigate, and support youth who may be abused in the midst of the pandemic. Recommendations to address this issue include the following:
  - Schools (counselors or other staff) can send information about hotlines to report abuse so that this critical information can be made available without youth leaving their home.
  - Another option could be short-term “safe-houses” that are run by social workers where youth would temporarily stay until a longer term placement. ([Example for domestic violence survivors.](#))
  - Additionally, Child Protective Service agencies may explore creative avenues of screening families and [conducting investigations.](#)
- Older youth who are aging out of foster care in the midst of COVID-19 are at risk to become homeless or be forced to turn to already overcrowded shelters. States may consider extending care to youth turning 18 until the end of the pandemic and times are more certain (For example [Ohio](#)). Please see the fact sheet ‘*COVID-19 and Welfare-Involved Youth*’.

**The shift in childcare duties during the pandemic may increase the risk of child sexual abuse and decrease disclosure rates.** Essential workers, those working from home, and those who have become sick with COVID-19 or other illnesses may have **had to shift childcare duties** to family, friends, or to a child’s older siblings. Because child sexual abuse is most frequently perpetrated by someone known to the child,<sup>1</sup> often within the same family<sup>1,2,3</sup> and sometimes by siblings or other youth,<sup>4,5</sup> these adjustments **potentially increase the risk of child sexual abuse.**

Additionally, children are less likely to disclose sexual abuse if the perpetrator is a close friend or family member.<sup>6</sup> Children are also less likely to be believed/supported by a non-offending caregiver if the family relies on the person for financial, housing, or emotional stability.<sup>7</sup> In light of this, **disclosure rates in the current circumstance may potentially decrease.**

- **Family risk factors for child sexual abuse relevant to COVID-19:** Parents/caregivers who have a non-biological father figure in the home,<sup>8,9</sup> are single or absent,<sup>9,10,11</sup> mentally or physically ill,<sup>9</sup> under financial strain,<sup>7,10</sup> or who have kids with disabilities.<sup>7,12</sup>
- **Family protective factors against child sexual abuse relevant to COVID-19:** Open dialogue around sexuality and sexual abuse,<sup>6,9,13,14</sup> increased supervision (including online supervision),<sup>4,9</sup> positive parenting skills and involvement (e.g. high warmth and boundaries),<sup>6,10,15</sup> supportive response to disclosure,<sup>7,8,16</sup> and community connectedness and support.<sup>6,8,15</sup>

### Additional Resources

- Efforts on behalf of children in the foster system: [Children's Advocacy Clinic continues advocacy for foster children amid pandemic](#)
- [COVID response for students who are homeless or have experience in foster care](#)
- Child Abuse Reports are Underreported: [Example from Illinois](#)
- [How to protect children during COVID](#)
- National Children Alliance: [Information on tele-forensic interview questions](#)
- American Youth Policy Reform COVID-19 Resource Hub: [Youth in Foster Care](#)

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