

## ***Child Abuse Cases Drop 51 Percent. The Authorities Are Very Worried.***

The coronavirus has shattered the system that protects children, leaving some confined in troubled homes or lingering in foster care.



By **Nikita Stewart**

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Reports of child abuse in New York City have dropped sharply since the coronavirus crisis began.

And that is worrying the authorities.

The steep decline could be a sign that an unseen epidemic of abuse is spreading behind locked doors, according to the police, prosecutors and child protection officials. As the virus has shuttered the city, the fragile system of safeguards designed to protect children has fallen apart.

Teachers are normally the leading reporters of suspected abuse, calling for help when they notice bruises or signs of hunger or mistreatment at home. Now, teachers get a glimpse of their students only in a virtual classroom, if they see them at all.

And while much of the city has been staying indoors and “staying safe,” for many children from troubled homes, the coronavirus pandemic has confined them to the most dangerous place they can be.

In the first eight weeks of spring 2019, New York City’s child welfare agency received an average of 1,374 cases of abuse or neglect to investigate each week. In the same period this year, that number fell to 672, a decline of 51 percent.

The citywide shutdowns of schools and, until Monday, nonessential businesses have upended every aspect of the child welfare system. Besides the worrisome decline in the reporting of abuse and neglect, the pandemic has forced investigators to change how they do their jobs. They’ve also had to postpone reunions of children with parents who were successfully undergoing counseling or were cleared of wrongdoing.

“You would think that when we see a decrease in the number of incidents and reports, that would be a good thing: ‘Oh my God, that means kids are safer,’” said Darcel Clark, the Bronx district attorney. “But it’s just the opposite.”

“Those people who would ordinarily see our children,” she said, “their teachers, the pediatricians, social workers, camp counselors, etc., since they don’t have eyes on them now, we don’t know what’s happening with them.”

The tensions resulting from stay-at-home orders and social distancing — isolation, unemployment and even alcohol abuse — can easily erupt into violence, child welfare experts said. Sexual predators now have all-day access to children who would normally be in school; in the Bronx, for example, sexual abuse

is the most common type of child abuse arrest since the start of the pandemic, according to the borough's District Attorney's Office.

Typically, most reports coming into the Administration for Children's Services, the city's child welfare agency, are unsubstantiated. Recently, however, some confirmed reports depict nightmarish scenarios in which children are virtually trapped by abusive or neglectful adults.

In one case, a foster mother was arrested after someone noticed marks on the wrist of an 8-year-old boy in her care.

The mother had strapped the boy to his bed, spreading each of his limbs and tightening them with zip ties until his wrists and ankles were bruised.

According to a criminal complaint that redacted the name of the person who reported the abuse, the foster mother, Lourdes Gonzalez, said that she tied the boy down because he kept leaving her apartment to ride his scooter. "This is the only way I can control him," she said.

Reached by phone, Ms. Gonzalez, 53, said she wanted to consult her attorney before commenting.

In one home, two neglected children had been caring for themselves, including doing all the grocery shopping. They were finally discovered when their mother started a fire after falling asleep while using heroin.

The authorities removed an 11-year-old and a 4-year-old from another home after they grew frightened of their mother, who awoke each day from a drunken stupor and accused them of stealing food from the kitchen.

The number of cases citywide being referred to A.C.S. rose from a low of 472 in the last week of March, when many low-income students were not attending virtual classes because the city had not yet given them iPads, to 823 in the third week of May. That was still far below the normal weekly rate.

Ms. Clark, the district attorney, said she could not speculate as to whether cases would be discovered sooner if children were physically in school. She noted that one teacher called the authorities after she saw a parent hit a child on camera during a virtual class.

The pandemic also has presented new difficulties for A.C.S., which has been heavily scrutinized in the past for missing signs of abuse or neglect that then led to the deaths of children.

The agency has had to adjust the way it handles complaints and checks on troubled families. For example, investigators now talk to parents and children outside their homes, not inside, so as to reduce the risk of spreading the virus. To get a look inside, to make sure there is food in refrigerators, investigators ask parents to give a tour with their phones, said David A. Hansell, the commissioner of A.C.S.

In many cases, investigators have responded to reports of neglect and found that they were related to families' struggles with Covid-19. With the virus in mind, one investigator decided against removing children from a home where the food had run out. Instead, the investigator went to a pantry and took food to the family, according to the agency. In other instances, investigators have been helping families secure computer tablets for their children to attend online school after they were reported as truant because they had not been logging on during class.

In one particularly heartbreaking case, investigators found a teenager living alone and caring for a dog and three cats after his mother died of the virus. Investigators placed him in a foster intake center until they found his godmother, who took in the teenager and the pets a couple days later.

Though A.C.S. has had scandals in the past surrounding the deaths of children, it also has been criticized for what parent advocates have called unnecessary investigations of families, particularly for poverty-related neglect, and the resulting removals of children from predominantly black and Hispanic homes.

Since a spike in the number of children placed in foster care in the 1980s, the agency has steadily reduced such placements, focusing more on keeping children with their families while supervised. It took decades to drive the number down from a peak of about 50,000 to the current 7,700.

But reuniting children with parents or placing them with adoptive families has virtually come to a halt during the pandemic.

Parents hoping for a resolution of custody cases can't get a court hearing — family court has shrunk from 162 courtrooms to 11 virtual ones, and judges are prioritizing cases in which a child is deemed to be in immediate danger.

During the first full week of May last year, there were about 11,300 in-court appearances. During a similar time period this year, there were just 464, according to data from city courts.

[The Coronavirus Outbreak](#) >

## Frequently Asked Questions and Advice

Updated June 5, 2020

- **Does asymptomatic transmission of Covid-19 happen?**

So far, the evidence seems to show it does. A widely cited [paper](#) published in April suggests that people are most infectious about two days before the onset of coronavirus symptoms and estimated that 44 percent of new infections were a result of transmission from people who were not yet showing symptoms. Recently, a top expert at the World Health Organization stated that transmission of the coronavirus by people who did not have symptoms was “very rare,” [but she later walked back that statement.](#)

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And biological parents accustomed to weekly visits with their children in foster homes are now essentially cut off because many foster parents do not want their homes exposed to people who have taken public transportation.

One teenager, Liam, 14, a chronic runaway now staying at the Children's Village, a youth home in Dobbs Ferry, N.Y., said he had been expecting to go home in March. He was on Facebook when he saw the news that the city was about to start shutting down nonessential activities. Fifteen minutes later, he said, the Children's Village staff “told me I wasn't going to be able to go home.”

Liam said he was missing weekend visits with his family; he sees them only through video chats now.

Visitation is key in placing children in permanent homes, whether back with their biological parents, with other relatives or with adoptive families, said Georgia Booth, senior vice president of child welfare for the Children's Aid Society.

During these visits, adults and children receive therapy that involves play. "Visits provide the chance to help parents and teens work through techniques to de-escalate serious arguments," said Jeremy Kohomban, executive director of the Children's Village. And social workers can observe how parents and children are getting along to confirm that they are ready to reunite, he said.

Mr. Hansell, the A.C.S. commissioner, said the agency was encouraging foster care agencies "to think creatively about visits outdoors, in parks, in public settings, with the least amount of transportation for parents and children."

One mother, Jane, who did not want to use her full name to protect her privacy, was expecting in March to regain custody of her 2-year-old daughter, Anna. Jane's daughter was taken from her at birth.



Jane got a steady job and moved out of a homeless shelter and into a rented room. But plans for her to begin regaining custody of her daughter were delayed by two months because of court closures. Natalie Keyssar for The New York Times

Years of drug dependency had contributed to her losing rights to her five older children as well. Now 41, Jane broke an addiction to crystal methamphetamine to get herself on track to regain custody of Anna. “I did a drug program,” she said. “I did a parenting class. They had me do drug tests, random drug tests.”

She got a job at a Whole Foods in Manhattan; she recently was promoted to assistant manager. She moved out of a homeless shelter and rented a room in a house. Her attorneys at the Center for Family Representation helped Jane go before a judge, who slowly restored more and more of her parental rights to Anna. But a March 23 hearing at which she was expecting to get permission for a trial custody period was canceled because of the coronavirus.

Last week, the hearing finally took place. Afterward, for the first time in Anna's life, she spent the night with her mother.