

Fewer kids entering foster care raises concerns for psychologist

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Increasing numbers of Florida children are being placed in foster care due to maltreatment, even though fewer children overall are being placed in foster care during the pandemic, researchers say.

This new study provides a glimpse into how the COVID-19 [pandemic](#) is negatively impacting one of the most vulnerable populations in Florida—[children](#) who face physical and [sexual abuse](#) as well as neglect. Erica Musser, an FIU associate professor of psychology at the College of Arts, Sciences & Education, and a team of collaborators from the University of Miami examined nearly two decades worth of data on children in the Florida [foster care](#) system. They found placements into the foster care system decreased during the pandemic and remained significantly lower throughout 2020 even as placements due to [maltreatment](#) increased.

Parental stress during the pandemic is believed to be a primary culprit for the increase in abuse claims as economic instability, [health concerns](#), child care issues and other factors disrupt daily life. The pandemic has created a cascading crisis where fears of abuse and maltreatment were combined with concerns over fewer calls to Child Protective Services, possibly because those who normally report suspected abuse—namely teachers and medical service providers—were not seeing children in person.

News reports of these possible trends worried Musser. A scientist and a licensed [clinical psychologist](#), Musser has dedicated her research to understanding both the risk and protective factors associated with the development of psychopathology among children, including child maltreatment. She also studies behavior, emotion and social cognition in FIU's Center for Children and Families. Musser knew the best way to uncover what was really happening in Florida was to explore the data.

The data mirrored the media reports. The most dramatic decrease in the number of children entering foster care was during the stay-at-home orders—a 24 percent decrease when comparing April 2019 to April 2020. During this same period, though, there was a 3.34 percent increase in placements due to maltreatment. Parental substance abuse and

domestic violence were the top reasons cited.

Rates of placement and child maltreatment differed according to race. Black children are typically over-represented in the foster care system. Studies show a wide range of reasons, according to researchers, including structural racism and a century of disinvestment in Black communities resulting in higher rates of poverty-based neglect, and lack of access to medical and mental health support. Once in the system, Black children have lower rates of reunification and significantly lower rates of adoption.

However, there has been a dramatic decrease of black children entering foster care during the pandemic. As Musser points out, while the team expected to see racial disparity in foster care during the pandemic, they weren't expecting to see a shift this drastic. Musser said under-reporting of abuse was likely a problem for [black children](#) during the pandemic. With fewer people coming in contact with children, fewer were placed into foster care. This is cause for concern.

"For decades, there have been speculation racial factors may play a role on foster care and this may be one more piece of evidence for that," Musser said.

The findings also give Musser pause. They point toward the reality that rates of maltreatment are likely on the rise and a larger population of children, at least in Florida, are experiencing various forms of [abuse](#) known to negatively impact a child's brain development, as well as their overall mental health and wellbeing.

Musser hopes this study can be used for informing policy and decisions about child welfare and protections during local, national and global challenges.

"It's unlikely this pandemic will be the last crisis that could impact the foster care system, so it is important to think proactively about ways the system could reexamine itself and think creatively about ways to overcome these issues before they become issues again in the future," Musser said.

This study was published in *Child Abuse & Neglect*.

More information: Erica D. Musser et al. Child Maltreatment in the Time of COVID-19: Changes in the Florida Foster Care System Surrounding the COVID-19 Safer-At-Home Order, *Child Abuse & Neglect* (2021). [DOI: 10.1016/j.chiabu.2021.104945](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2021.104945)

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