**Child and domestic abuse rates expected to rise in coronavirus pandemic**

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Butte County District Attorney Mike Ramsey, left, talks with Child Abuse Investigator Sabrina Ostberg on Aug. 22, 2017, in the Child Abuse Response Team room in Oroville. Some child abuse prevention specialists worry that the coronavirus shelter in place order has led to an increase in unreported child abuse. (Bill Husa — Enterprise-Record file)

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CHICO — Yet another tragic effect resulting from the coronavirus pandemic is a feared increase in child and domestic abuse this year.

Social isolation as a result of the statewide shelter in place order can have tragic impacts on the lives of children who face insecure living situations. In Butte County, which faces unique challenges for housing and food insecure children, such results are just beginning to be tracked.

The latest report on Butte County for 2019 from Safe & Sound and UC Berkeley Haas School of Business found that in 2018 there were 405 verified child victims of abuse, with 3,019 reports and 5,256 estimated victims. Safe and Sound’s March 2019 report on California details risk factors often present in counties that can contribute to the risk for child mistreatment and abuse:

* Socioeconomic inequality and poverty
* Social marginalization or isolation
* Lack of adequate and affordable housing
* High unemployment rates
* Homelessness
* Substance abuse
* Wildfires and natural disasters

**Social distancing risks**

Butte County Child Abuse Prevention Council Executive Director Wendy Brown said the necessity to shelter in place during the pandemic “absolutely” increases the possibility for child abuse.

Any area where there are already high risk factors like housing, food or job insecurity “is certainly someplace that we want to try to get services to and support because those factors can compound all of those stressors and make it hard for anyone to be effective as a parent,” Child Abuse Prevention Center President and CEO Sheila Boxley said.

Anytime a child is isolated at home while parents are subject to numerous increased stressors, including “looking for food and diapers, and worrying about rent or being evicted next month,” the statistical likelihood of abuse rises, Brown said.

Brown said Butte County is seeing a correlation with the[troubling nationwide trend, according to Boxley](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/07/opinion/coronavirus-child-abuse.html), of child abuse reporting going down — by 25% as of the week of Aug. 6, 2019, she said, according to data provided by the Department of Employment and Social Services.

This is partly due to the loss of contact with children under shelter in place orders — “It is most likely because there are fewer people with eyes on the children and fewer resources for support,” Boxley said.

With schools online and after-school programs closed, teachers, coaches and other mandated reporters are not seeing children in person and can’t easily identify signs of abuse, Brown said.

“They’re not going to see the same things,” Brown said, if children can only talk to these adults via their computer.

“If there is abuse going on, how would they signal for help if their abuser’s in the room?”

The prevalence of adverse childhood experiences in Butte County cannot be ignored, Brown said. According to the ACE report by the Center for Youth Wellness, nearly 62% of Californians reported experiences categorized as “adverse” before the age of 18.

Butte County is one of three counties in California with over 70% of individuals with an ACE score of at least 1 and is the county with the highest number of residents reporting an ACE, at 76.5%. A person with four or more ACEs has more than five times the risk of depression, four times the risk for chronic lung disease and double the risk of cancer.

“Our county has high ACES scores because it happened generationally or people perpetuate behaviors they thought were appropriate,” Brown said.

The coronavirus has also made it more difficult for investigations into child abuse to continue. In some states, investigators of child abuse told [The Marshall Project](https://www.themarshallproject.org/2020/03/24/coronavirus-leaves-foster-children-with-nowhere-to-go) they are so afraid of spreading the illness from home to home that some try to investigate from the front door, or over video chat, instead of going inside a home.

However, Butte County’s Department of Employment and Social Services is working to prevent home visits and court hearings from stopping, in order to prevent children from staying in unsafe situations or delaying hearings that could move along a child’s case for their benefit. Children and Adults Services Assistant Director Jennifer Allen said family courts are now ordered open in Butte County.

In addition, the county’s case workers are increasing their contacts with children and their families as a proactive measure to prevent instances where children are isolated from contact, Allen said.

“If we don’t see or hear from them enough, you then try to make more contact,” Allen said. “Our workers are doing a great job making sure they are making contact, they’re skilled at having conversations about what is going on.”

**Foster cases**

Foster children “are particularly vulnerable,” as they already face ongoing sources of trauma due to moving from their families and homes — so having to stay isolated from other adults and from school is a struggle, Boxley said.

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Despite the shelter in place order, case workers must work to visit foster children — “we’re still required to go out to the homes and see the kids,” Brown said.

“A lot of them are only able to see biological family,” she said. “On the flip side we have foster parents who are concerned that kids will see their parents and then return to their home, and they don’t know what germs they’re bringing back.”

In addition, concern is growing over a rise in homeless youth.

“We have kids who are aging out (reaching the age of 18) of the system without support,” Brown said. “There are new programs (like) the traditional housing program to help, but there’s certainly a number of kids who are aging out and if they don’t know about their resources they’re really stuck.” Brown is also concerned about the number of teen “runaways” increasing.

**Economic effects on abuse**

Not only do economic problems as a result of the pandemic increase the likelihood that children suffer, abuse has an economic effect as well, Brown said.

“It’s an economic problem in that it’s hard to get people to invest in preventative measures,” she said.

Brown cited the 2019 report from Safe & Sound which found that child abuse “is a core underlying factor to many of the ongoing struggles of this community, such as high rates of school dropout, homelessness, incarceration and chronic health issues.”

The report found the economic impacts of cumulative financial impact to the Butte County community for the 405 verified child victims in 2018 totaled $89.7 million.

Brown conceded it is likely these effects on children’s lives could last when the shelter in place order is lifted, if long term economic impacts continue to affect the county.

**Protecting children**

Brown said the Child Abuse Prevention Council recognizes five protective factors to “fortify” families against possible risk factors:

* Parental resilience in recovering from difficult life experience;
* Social connections;
* Knowledge in parenting and child development;
* Concrete support in times of need;
* Social and emotional competence of children, measured when children learn to communicate clearly, regulate their behavior and maintain relationships.

Brown said despite many closures, there are programs to help childrens’ basic needs. The Boys and Girls Club serves drive-by meals to children Monday through Friday to children up to 18 years old. There are local hotline numbers through Northern Valley Catholic Social Services and Butte County Department of Behavorial Health to report abuse.

While child care services are still offered for children of parents employed in essential services, after-school programs still are not.

However, Brown said this could actually be a good time to be a foster parent if adults have more time on their hands and space in their homes.

“There’s always a demand for foster parents — it could be a very good time (to foster),” Brown said, citing campaigns in other states to respond to the need for housing for children who may be at risk in the pandemic.

“We’ll see when schools come back in the fall, that the number of kids in foster care often increases,” Brown said. “We anticipate that increased need.”

**To report child abuse**

* Northern Valley Catholic Social Service can be contacted at 345-1600 or 1-800-339-8336
* Butte County Behavioral Health Crisis lines are open 24 hours a day, seven days a week at 1-800-334-6622, or 891-2810
* The Child Help 24-hour hotline is 1-800-4-A-CHILD or 1-800-422-4453
* The phone number for Child Protective Services in each state can be found through [Child Help’s website list](https://www.childhelp.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/CPS-Reporting-June-2018.pdf) or California’s Department of Social Services [website.](https://www.cdss.ca.gov/reporting/report-abuse/child-protective-services/report-child-abuse) or by calling 538-7882 or 1-800-3400-0902.

