

# Napa County child abuse cases fall — but there's a catch

- Barry Eberling

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Substantiated child abuse and neglect incidents fell 33% in 2020 in Napa County, but local officials say that this statistic is misleading.

Napa County Child Welfare Services last year received 1,243 referrals on its child abuse hotline, with 98 substantiated cases involving 162 children. That **compares to 2019 totals** of 1,726 referrals, with 149 substantiated cases involving 243 children.

The drop is due to having fewer eyes on children with the closure of schools during the pandemic, said a new report by the Child Abuse Prevention Council of Napa County.

“COVID certainly did not cure child abuse,” said Veronica Piper-Jefferson of county Child Welfare Services.

The Napa County Board of Supervisors last week heard a presentation from the council. Supervisor Brad Wagenknecht said he as a teacher has had to report possible child maltreatment cases.

“It really reinforces to me the need for all of us to be involved,” Wagenknecht said. “We all see these children in our neighborhoods and somewhere in our community.”

Even before the pandemic, Child Abuse Prevention Council officials said, child abuse and neglect cases were severely underreported. They estimated at least 500 children in the county are “suffering toxic stress, emotional trauma, physical abuse, neglect or all four.”

Of the 162 substantiated child abuse and neglect victims in 2020, 63 children were removed from their home, the report said.

People-of-color accounted for 54% of the referrals to Child Welfare Services, while accounting for less than 35% of the population. In addition, 67% of the referrals of child maltreatment were for neglect, the report said.

“Research suggests that concentrated poverty among demographic groups explains much of the difference in substantiated rates, particularly in substantiated rates of neglect,” the report said.

To that end, the report goes beyond listing statistics and looks at various ways to help families. Among them is having adequate, affordable child care.

“Child care is essential for Napa County’s economic recovery, as most working families need child care in order to return to work,” it said. “Additionally, early care and education is critical for children to have a safe place to learn and get ready for a lifetime of learning, including kindergarten.”

The pandemic has been devastating for the early child care and education field. Napa County has lost seven child care sites, or 110 slots, the report found.

“Despite the importance of the child care, the coronavirus pandemic is extinguishing the early care and education industry, which consists mostly of small businesses, many operated by women of color,” the report said.

The cost for infant care in Napa County is almost \$17,000 annually, more than the annual tuition for a University of California school, said Erika Lubensky of Community Resources for Children.

Forty-seven percent of local child care providers last September said they would have to close by April 2021 without additional money, Lubensky said. They had trouble securing federal COVID-19 business relief loans under the Paycheck Protection Program because of language barriers and a lack of technology and financial literacy.

Community Resources for Children harnessed public and private support to provide more than a million dollars in small business grants. Eighty child care providers received grants ranging from \$3,000 to \$32,000.

As a result, 82% of local child care businesses say they will be able to stay open for the next six months, the council report said.

Of these child care businesses, 94% are owned by women and 48% by minorities. Fifty-three percent of the owners have household incomes of less than \$75,000 annually, Lubensky said.

As county residents receive vaccines, it remains to be seen whether working parents will find child care so they can fully return to work.

The problem could particularly affect low-wage workers in lodging and hospitality and winery operations who have variable schedules and work nontraditional hours, the report said.

The Child Abuse Prevention Council urged the county to do such things as support legislation that supports community-based organizations working to prevent adverse childhood experiences and train county staff in child abuse and neglect reporting.

The Napa County Board of Supervisors declared April as Child Abuse Prevention Month.