

Does limiting government surveillance compromise child safety?

ARONS, A. (2022). AN UNINTENDED ABOLITION. COLUMBIA JOURNAL OF RACE AND LAW, 12(1).

What can we learn from this study?

The near-total lockdown during the first three months of the COVID-19 pandemic forced New York City's child welfare system to curtail or modify many activities. School closures meant teachers were not making as many calls to the hotline. Investigation protocols were adjusted to be less intrusive and prioritize only the highest risk cases, with the family court system focusing on cases with imminent risk of physical or emotional harm. At the same time, a rise in mutual-aid projects and the availability of unrestricted cash assistance through the CARES Act gave families access to critical and flexible support in their own communities. Taken together, these circumstances created a unique opportunity to understand the implications of limited government surveillance on child safety.

Study details:

- **Data source:** New York City Administration for Children's Services and family courts
- **Methodology:** Analysis of descriptive data
- **Dates:** March to June 2020 (lockdown period data) compared to data from the same period one year prior; fall 2020

What are the critical findings?

During the three-month shutdown — with less surveillance, fewer court-ordered separations, and more opportunity for families to access community-based support and unrestricted cash assistance — children remained safe, based on the data. Compared to the same period during the prior year:

- The number of reports to the child protection hotline fell by more than 40%, with the greatest decrease among reports from mandated reporters (53%, compared to 21% for community members).
- The types of reports received and rates at which reports were substantiated remained the same.
- The number of new neglect and abuse cases filed in court fell by more than 50%, signifying that only the most serious cases were being referred, and half as many children were placed in foster care. In cases where parents immediately challenged their children's removal, judges kept children with their families slightly more than 50% of the time.
- Child maltreatment-related fatalities dropped by 25% and reports of physical abuse dropped by 60%. There were no significant changes in emergency room visits among children.

Why is this important for our work?

The study concludes that the temporary shutdown in New York City resulted in major reductions in the number of children and families involved with the child welfare system, without compromising child safety. The forced limitations on the child protection system, coupled with the advent of community-based support during COVID, provide a compelling opportunity to consider the benefits of narrowing the front door of the system in favor of robust community support networks.

This summary synthesizes the findings from a single research study. To learn more, please review resources about the importance of [economic supports](#) and [alternative pathways](#).

For additional information, [access the article directly](#) or email KMResources@casey.org.