



Safe Children, Stable Families, Supportive Communities

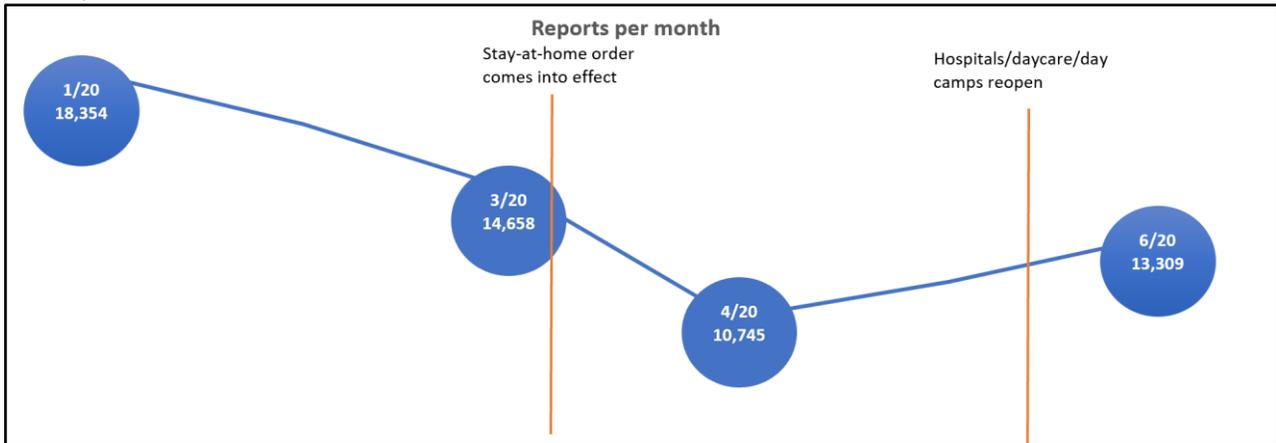
The COVID-19 Pandemic's Impact on Ohio's Children Services System September 2020

Like every other part of life, the COVID-19 pandemic has a tremendous impact on children services. Throughout the pandemic, Ohio's public children services agencies (PCSAs) continue to respond to reports of maltreatment of children and carry out their mandated responsibilities for the safety and well-being of children. Flexibility and support provided by the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services have been critical during this period.

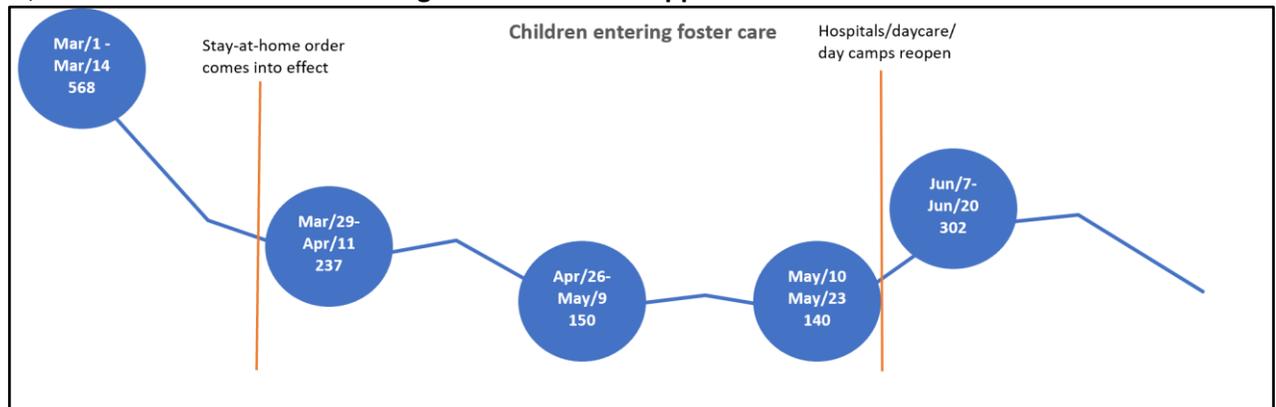
Six months into the pandemic, the system is operating under a high level of stress and uncertainty. Adhering to public health guidelines while managing COVID-19 exposures, diagnoses, and quarantines for caregivers, youth in custody, and the child protection workforce is stretching leadership, human, and fiscal resources. And that is on top of the already daunting nature of children services work.

Here is a closer look at some key areas: (click on the charts below to view charts with more detail)

Child abuse and neglect reports to PCSAs decreased sharply early in the pandemic and have since begun to climb—in some counties close to pre-pandemic levels. Regardless of the specific numbers, fewer “eyes on children” raises concerns about child safety and the possibility of a surge in reports as schools and other community activities reopen.

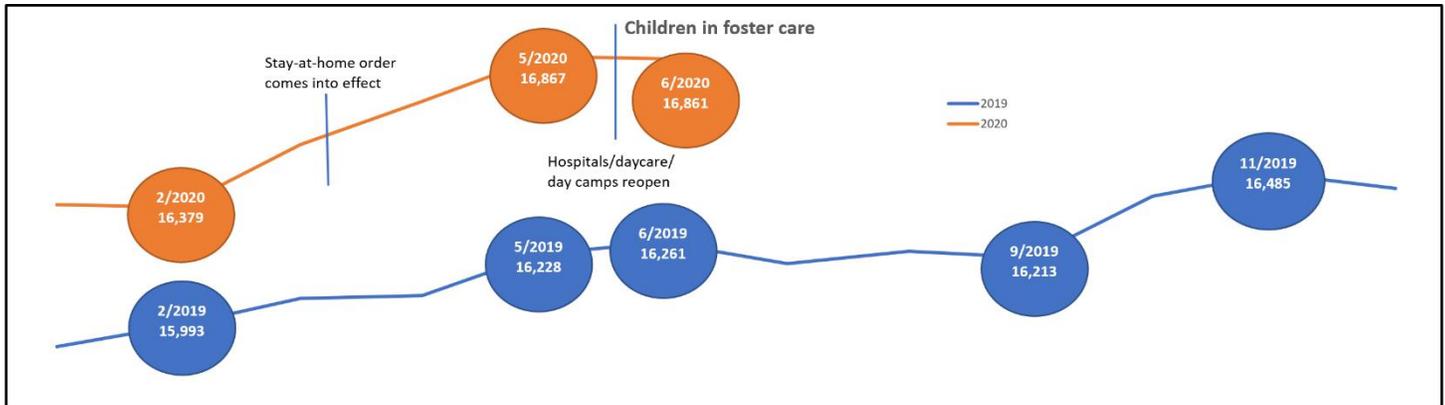


Likewise, the number of children entering foster care has dropped:



At the same time, **the number of children leaving foster care has slowed** with an average decrease of 30% in the first half of 2020 compared to the same time period in 2019. From January to April 2020, the number of children leaving foster care dropped by 52% before rising again to 2019 levels in June 2020.

Combined, these trends have resulted in **more children in foster care** with a nearly 4% increase in June 2020 compared to June 2019.



Impact on parents with children in foster care: As face-to-face visitation between parents and their children in custody moved online to avoid transmission of the virus, the lack of contact with their children has been heartbreaking for parents, and it has slowed reunification. Even now with visitation resuming, parents are not allowed to hug their children so that the virus is not unwittingly carried into the foster home. Case services required of parents before they can be reunified with their children may have closed or slowed, all of which is delaying permanency for children. One silver lining has been an increase in virtual contact and more interaction between parents and foster families.

Impact on caregivers: Foster and kinship caregivers are unsung heroes of the pandemic. By and large, they have steadfastly maintained children in their homes, even when they themselves may be at high risk for the virus. They juggled their own employment with the closing of day care and schools. They accepted placement of children when testing was not available to know if the child might have the virus. They sacrificed family vacations and dealt with the uncertainty of school reopening this fall. Some even cared for family members who were ill in addition to foster children.

Impact on children services workforce: Much like foster parents, frontline caseworkers and other PCSA staff have shouldered a significant personal burden to ensure the safety of children. While friends and family worked from home, they were out in the field, knocking on doors, transporting children, licensing new foster homes, and working alongside healthcare and law enforcement – often without adequate PPE. However, turnover, illness, and childcare shortages have stretched an already strained workforce to the breaking point. Staffing shortages are making the job of a children services caseworker even harder.

What’s needed: With no end in sight to the pandemic, Ohio must ensure that children services agencies can continue to meet mandates to protect children, strengthen families and ensure permanency for children. This includes preserving flexibilities provided by ODJFS, supporting the workforce, and maintaining investments throughout the biennium.

At the same time, transformation is on the horizon. The Governor’s Children Services Transformation Advisory Council’s report will be released this Fall and Ohio will implement the Family First Prevention Services Act in 2021. Ohio needs continued leadership, investment, and innovation as we transform the system to achieve better outcomes for children and families.