

A child's right to protection during the COVID-19 crisis: An exploratory study of the Child Protective Services of Estonia



Karmen Toros, Asgeir Falch-Eriksen

Tallinn University, Oslo Metropolitan University

Introduction

The pandemic caused by the novel Coronavirus disease of 2019, known as COVID-19, is arguably the most significant single global event to occur in peacetime. The crisis has restricted everyday life through the shutdown of schools and nurseries, day care centres, general healthcare, public communication, and contact with extended family and friends, and those from existing support networks (Campbell, 2020; Fegert & Schulze, 2020; Usher et al., 2020). In short, it can be argued that the pandemic crisis has vast adverse effects on societies and their citizens (Duan & Zhu, 2020). Sistovaris et al. (2020) explained that in such crises, the CPS system must have the capacity to respond to the vulnerabilities of children in need and their families. For example, during the crisis, CPS can experience particular problems with shut down, isolation and quarantine, whereby the protection of children at risk is limited to the best abilities and support of those in nearest proximity to the family (Fegert & Schulze, 2020). Hence, child protection systems face a challenge not only from the virus but also the societal threat such a public service must deal with. A crisis, then, if not dealt with coherently and in a manner that enforces the child's right to protection, can lead to children being subjected to a type of detriment that in regular times could have been avoided.

Although Estonia was affected by fewer cases of COVID-19 compared to other countries in Europe, it reacted to the crisis in the same manner as most others. The Estonian government declared an emergency beginning on 12 March, 2020, with several restrictions including closing schools. The emergency was ended on 18 May, 2020, with the restrictions gradually eased. Schools had the option of whether to open for a small number of children (up to 10) in one group or to continue with online schooling.

Findings

Some of the findings:

Most of the child protection workers argued that limitations to home visits to children-at-risk and families in need, both announced as unannounced visits, became an immediate and significant organisational constraint on their work.

Some respondents emphasised the absolute prohibition of any physical contact with families, no matter the character of the risk the child was subjected to. Numerous challenges were identified from the data analysis related to the difficulties of non-contact communication in terms of the assessment of children and families in need, and thereby the entire effort of care diagnostics.

Parental anxiety, which child protection workers encounter fairly frequently, was mentioned as influencing the child's well-being and something that was hard to cope with on telephone, text or video.

Child protection workers reported an increase in their workload due to a rise in telephone and conference calls.

Child protection workers were deeply worried about services provided for the families in need, specifically their interruption, especially family therapy, psychology and child psychiatry. Most of the services were ended for the duration of the emergency.

Although most of the respondents reported an increase in the workload, some claimed that the period of the emergency was a quiet time, as the children stayed at home, with no calls about truancy from schools.

Although approximately half of the child protection workers experienced no change in their work content, some respondents considered that child protection practice during the pandemic had indeed changed: child well-being and protection became a secondary consideration, and families' basic food needs became the priority.



Aim

This article provides a glimpse into how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected CPS and its professional practices and aims to unveil the particular challenges to rights-based protection as well as beginning a discussion on how to perform CPS and professional practice during the crisis.

Keywords

COVID-19, child's rights, child protection, child protection worker, pandemic, detrimental care

Theoretical model

Study draws upon Lipsky's (2010) outline of discretionary practices within the structural conditions set by bureaucracies and Goodin's (1986) outline of discretion as a method of reaching decisions in specific client contexts and based upon certain standards. We distinguish between four components of decision-making: (1) the structural conditions, (2) the ability to evaluate the care-context, (3) access to appropriate knowledge and (4) the ability to perform decision-making.

Method

The survey asked three open-ended questions, which we analysed inductively in line with the exploratory character of the study to organise data patterns. To better understand CPWs' ability to perform rights-based professional practice, we asked the following three questions: (1) What challenges did CPWs encounter during the pandemic? (2) How has child protection work changed during the pandemic? and (3) What is the essence of child protection work during the pandemic?

The survey was sent by e-mail to all CPWs working for frontline CPS in Estonia (n = 253). In total, 81 submitted their answers via online software, representing a response rate of 32% (n = 81). This study includes respondents from all five regions in Estonia, with the most significant proportion of respondents from northern Estonia (43%). Based on statistics from 2015, 52% of total registered children in need of assistance reside in that region (Statistics Estonia, 2020). Participants ranged in age from 23–70 years, with a mean age of 46 years (SD = 12.04). Most of the CPWs participating in the study were women; 96.3% (n = 78).

To gain an overview of the findings, we conducted a thematic analysis. X main themes emerged from the data analysis: organisational constraints to responding to children in need; external challenges to facilitating children's protection; individual constraints to responding to children in need; the nature of the work during a pandemic; and the focus of CP work during the pandemic.

Conclusion

In conclusion, our findings offer strong evidence that CPS practices in Estonia were ill-equipped to enforce the rights of the child coherently in the face of a pandemic. Although CPS offices and practitioners attempted to optimise their practices, the fact that no coherent national effort was implemented and children's rights were enforced differently meant that the right to protection was not guaranteed. Although these are lessons learned from Estonian CPS, they represent reactions to challenges from the pandemic that are transferrable to other countries as well. Namely, that CPS practices are not designed in a manner capable of enforcing the rights of the child during a crisis.

Recommendations

Several recommendations are outlined in the paper, for example:

- CPWs must have access to all different platforms of communication: Internet and telephone; video, sound and text. Moreover, this must include automated archiving of the communication data.
- CPWs must treat referrals on new children differently to those they already know, and home-visits should be more frequently called upon.
- As CPWs have the family home as a central work jurisdiction, they cannot end up as the single source of public support during a crisis. Additional services must also be directed to the homes of those most in need.

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