

Child Welfare Caseload Trends



QUARTERLY
REPORT
JULY
2022

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**Creating Indicators and Improving Outcomes:
Analytic Assistance for Child Welfare, Work First,
Food and Nutrition Services in North Carolina**

UNC-CH SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK
CHAPEL HILL, NC
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(Quarterly Report: July 2022)

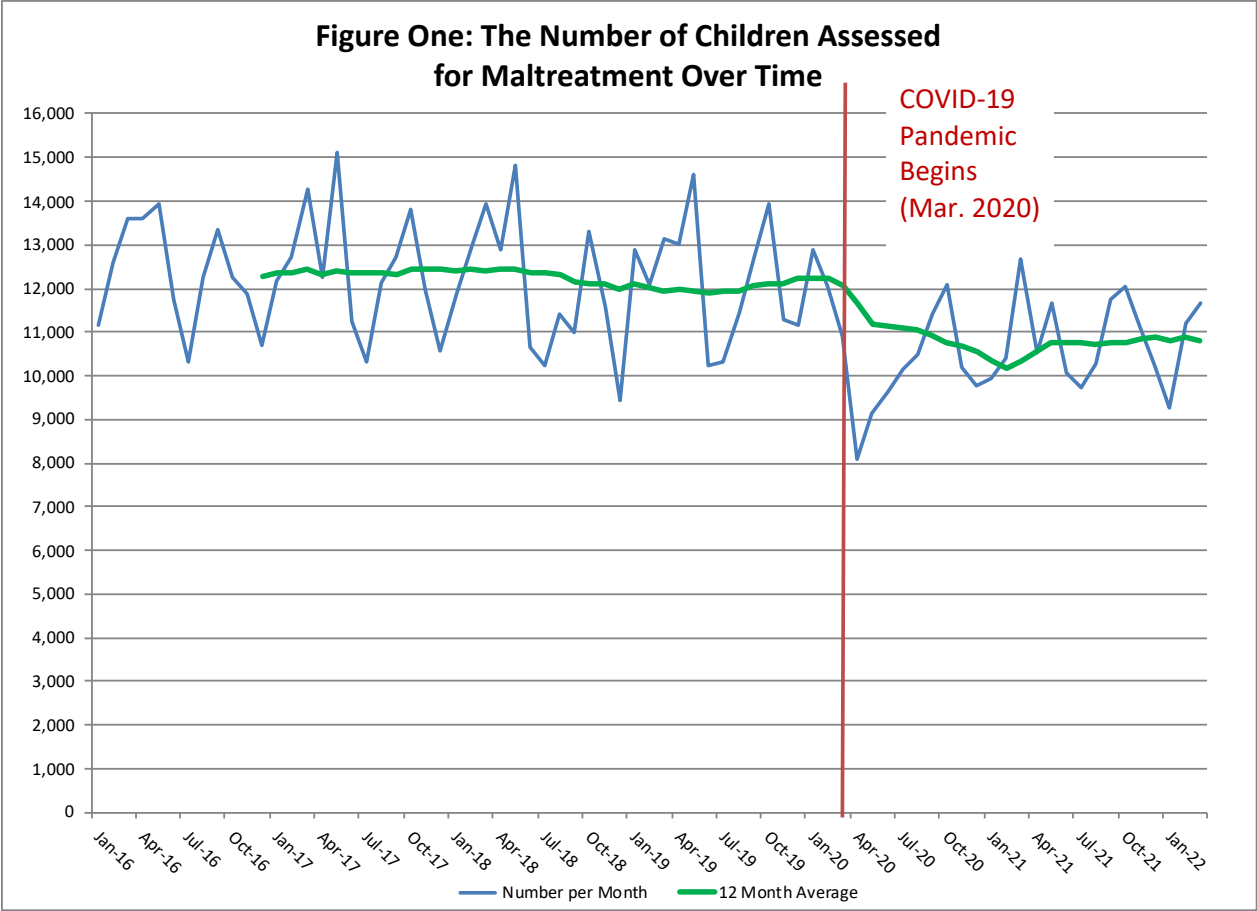
Main Points

- This report demonstrates the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on child welfare caseloads, which have not yet recovered to pre-pandemic levels by early to mid-2022.
- Before the pandemic, the number of children assessed for maltreatment per month averaged 12,000 per month compared to the current average of under 11,000 per month.
- As of early to mid-2022, downward trends were present in substantiations, foster care entries, and exits from care.

This report explores changes and trends in the child welfare caseload in North Carolina. This report covers the time period of the Covid-19 pandemic, which we define as beginning on March 16, 2020 when the governor ordered the statewide closure of North Carolina public schools. This analysis is based on data extracted from state child welfare databases in July 2022. These extracts are used to construct and maintain a longitudinal file that tracks the experiences of children and youth who have been involved with the child welfare system in North Carolina. The analysis explores changes in the number of children reported as victims of maltreatment, the number of those reports which are substantiated, and the number of children entering and exiting foster care. Long-term trends are also discussed.

Figure One illustrates the changes in the number of children assessed for maltreatment¹ over time (specific monthly numbers can be found in Appendix A, Table One). As the figure

¹ The number of children tracked in Figures One through Four of this report do not provide a unique count of children per year. There are a number of instances in which a child may be counted more than once in the analyses for this report. For example, a child may have more than one report investigated within a calendar year. Also, there are some instances where two separate investigations about an individual child are concluded within the same calendar month. However, instances where there are separate allegations of maltreatment for an individual child with the same case decision date are collapsed into a single report. Also, state policies require that when a report of maltreatment is received, all children living in the home must be assessed as a possible victim of maltreatment. As a result, the number of children reported as victims of maltreatment could fluctuate based upon the sizes of families involved, even as the number of reports remains steady.



indicates, while numbers fluctuate monthly, the number of children assessed monthly remained above 12,000 in 2016-2017 until a decline to about 12,000 in 2018 which is illustrated by the twelve-month average trend line. The twelve-month average went above 12,000 again by the end of 2019. At the beginning of 2020, the number per month was similar to previous years until a decline in March 2020 and a precipitous drop to 8,071 in April 2020 which is apparently due to the pandemic. The number of children assessed per month increased to 12,045 in October 2020. The number declined significantly again through the end of 2020 with a twelve-month average of about 10,500. In 2021, the average increased to about 10,900, but as of early 2022 has not returned to pre-pandemic levels.

Figure Two shows the pattern of the number of children assessed each month by year from January through December for 2018 to 2021 and January through March for 2022. This figure is helpful in showing seasonal variation and offers an even more stark view of the pandemic's effect. Much of the usual seasonal variation appears tied to the school calendar. As the figure indicates, the number of children assessed generally peaks in March or May, then falls in June and July reflecting declining reports from educational personnel during summer months. The

number of children increases in August as school starts and then rises through October. The number of children assessed then declines through December reflecting periods of holidays and school breaks. The pattern for 2020 was far different from previous years with the severe declines in March and April 2020 before a slow increase through October 2020 then declining through December 2020 and ending the year well below pre-pandemic levels. While the pattern for 2021 and 2022 is more similar to earlier years than 2020, the number of children assessed remains lower overall.

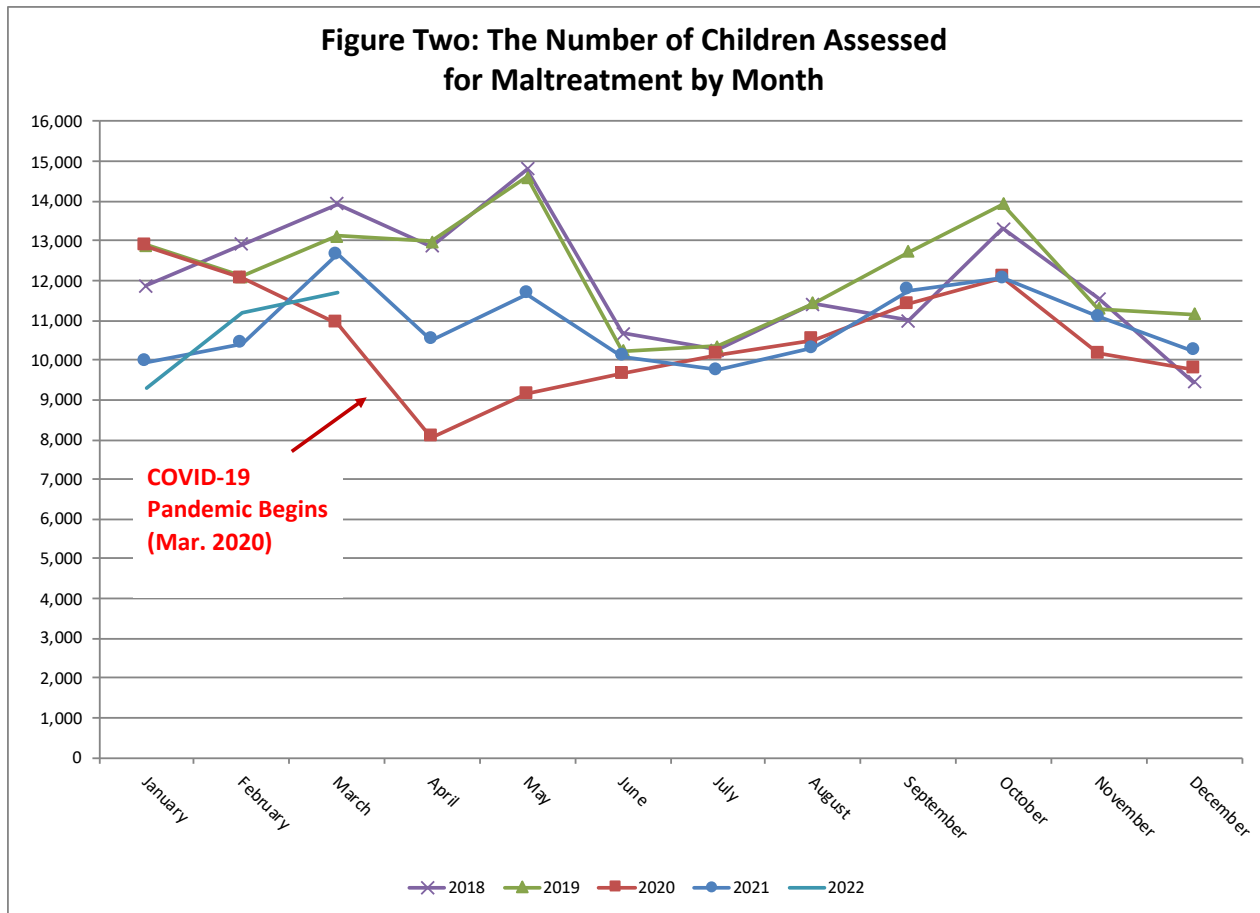


Figure Three illustrates the number of children whose maltreatment reports were substantiated. Specific monthly numbers can be found in Appendix A, Table Two. A report is considered substantiated if there is a finding of abuse, neglect, abuse and neglect, dependency, or services needed. These findings indicate that child protective services confirmed that a child was maltreated and/or that further services are needed to address concerns. It does not include instances where the finding was services provided, child protective services no longer needed. Again, these reports are not based on a unique count of children per year. Given that they are related, much of the trends in the number of

substantiations reflect those of the assessments, although they are not entirely dependent as substantiations are based on case decisions related to the allegations made in reports. The average number per month remained at about 2,000 until early 2018 when a decline to about 1,900 began and went through 2019. Like the number of assessments, the number of substantiations decreased at the onset of the pandemic, although the drop was not as severe, and was actually more pronounced in December 2018. Still the average of about 1,750 for 2020 is lower than the pre-pandemic level. The average for 2021 declined again to about 1,700 with the downward trend continuing into early 2022.

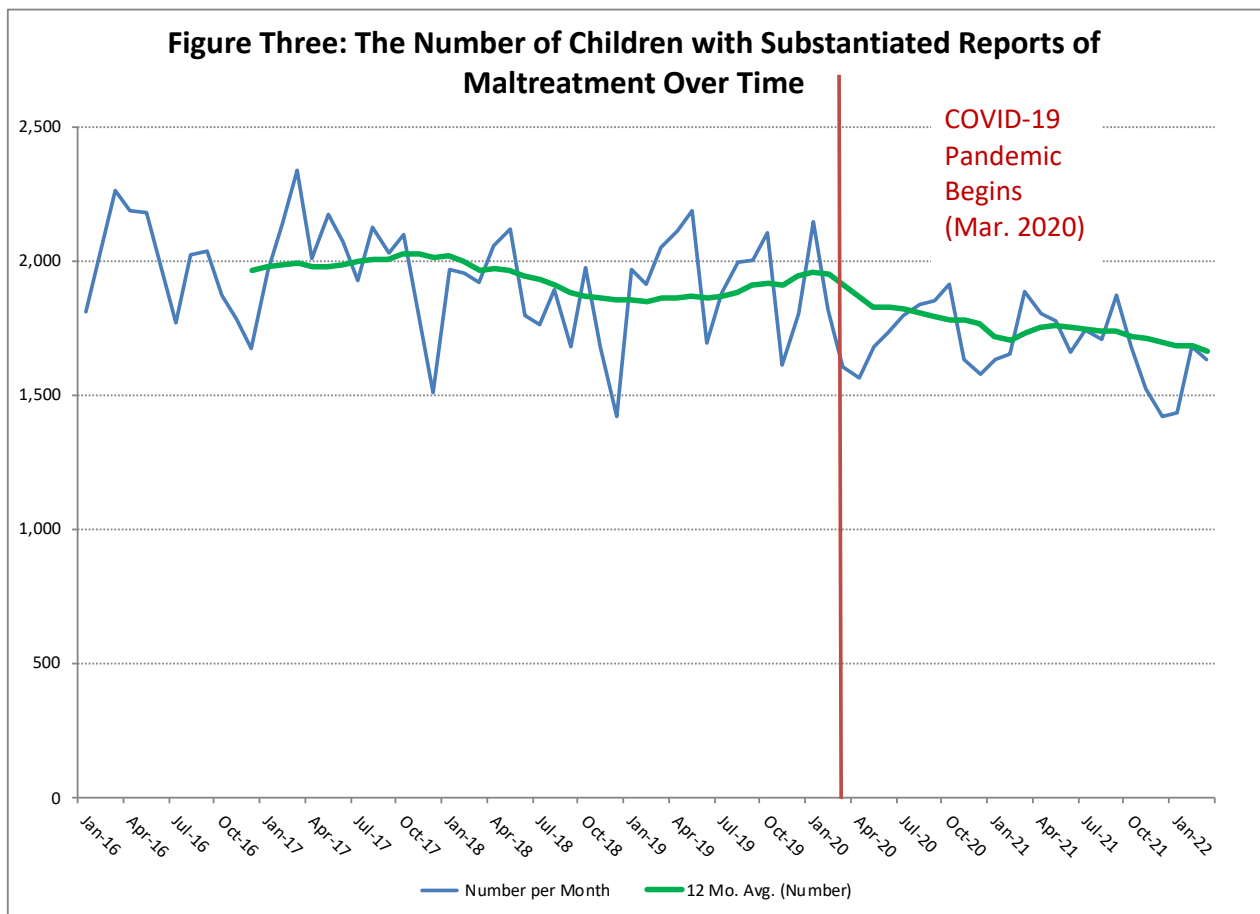


Figure Four illustrates the number of children by assessment finding type over time (see Appendix A, Table Three for specific monthly numbers). Unlike Figure Three, this figure includes all finding types and not just those that are “substantiated” (abuse, neglect, abuse and neglect, dependency, and services needed). While the monthly numbers fluctuate, the percentage of substantiated reports consistently makes up about 16% of findings while all others are about 84% (services provided, services recommended, services not recommended, and unsubstantiated). This trend was noticeably different after the onset of the pandemic.

While numbers decreased across finding types, the substantiated reports made up a higher percentage than usual at about 19% versus 81% for all other types in April 2020 indicating that substantiated reports did not decline at the same rate as non-substantiated finding types. Data through 2021 and early 2022 showed a return to more typical rates of substantiated (16%) versus non-substantiated findings (84%).

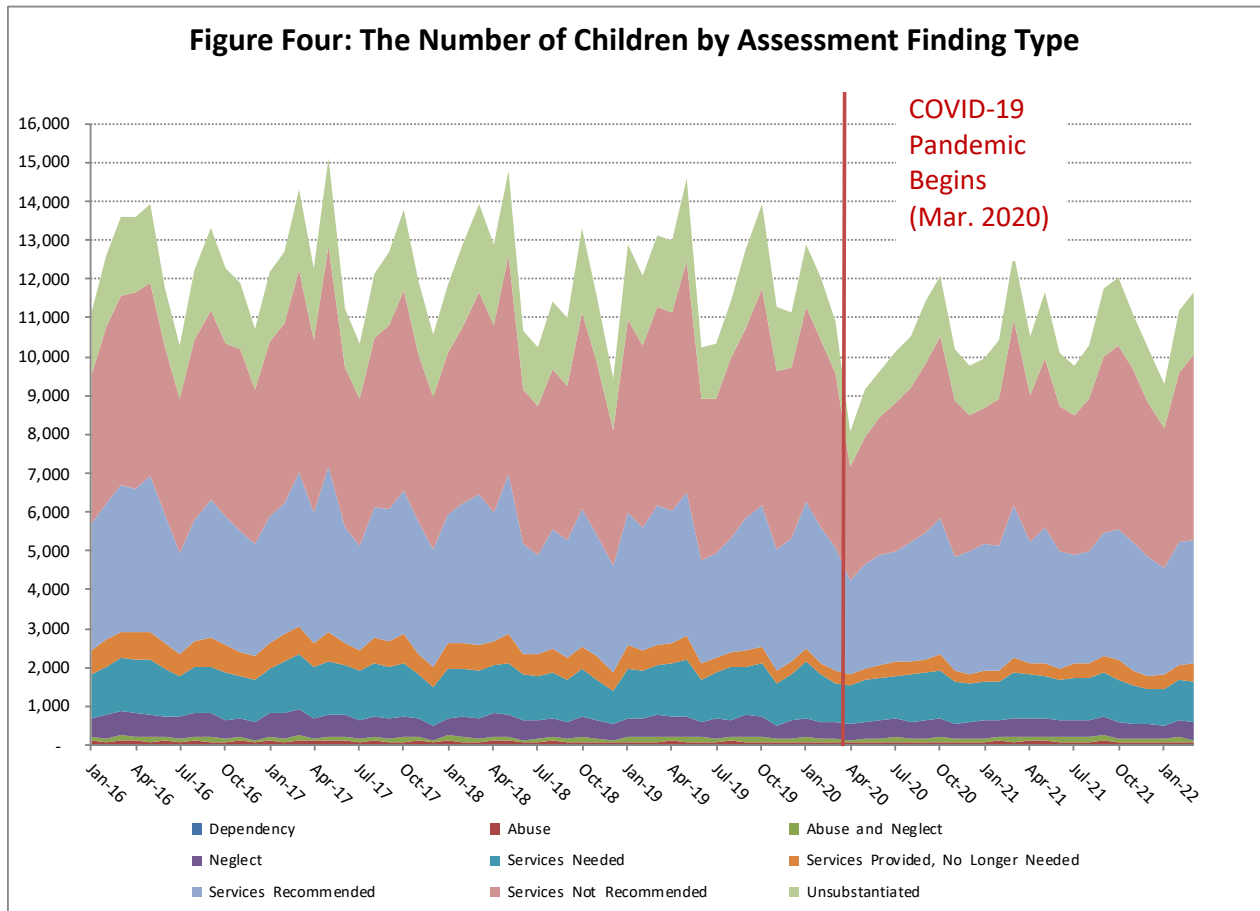


Figure Five reports the number of children entering foster care for the first time, the total entries (including re-entries into care), and the twelve-month average for total entries. Children enter foster care when child protective services determines that the risk of harm to a child is too great in order to safely remain in the home and obtain a court order to assume custody of the child. Specific monthly numbers can be found in Appendix A, Table Four. Over time, about 83% to 88% of children entering care each month are coming into care for the first time. According to the figure, the twelve-month average shows that there were about 514 children entering care per month in 2016 which increased slightly to about 523 in 2017. The number decreased to about 483 in 2018 and slightly again to 482 in 2019. As we saw in other caseload figures, both the initial and total number of entries decreased significantly after the

onset of the pandemic, in particular in April 2020 with a low for initial entries of 271 and 325 for total entries, which were lows not seen in the past twenty years. The number of entries began to rise again in May 2020, however, the average for 2020 at 448 was below the pre-pandemic level. The downward trend continued into 2021 with an average of 442 entries and through May 2022 with an average of 421.

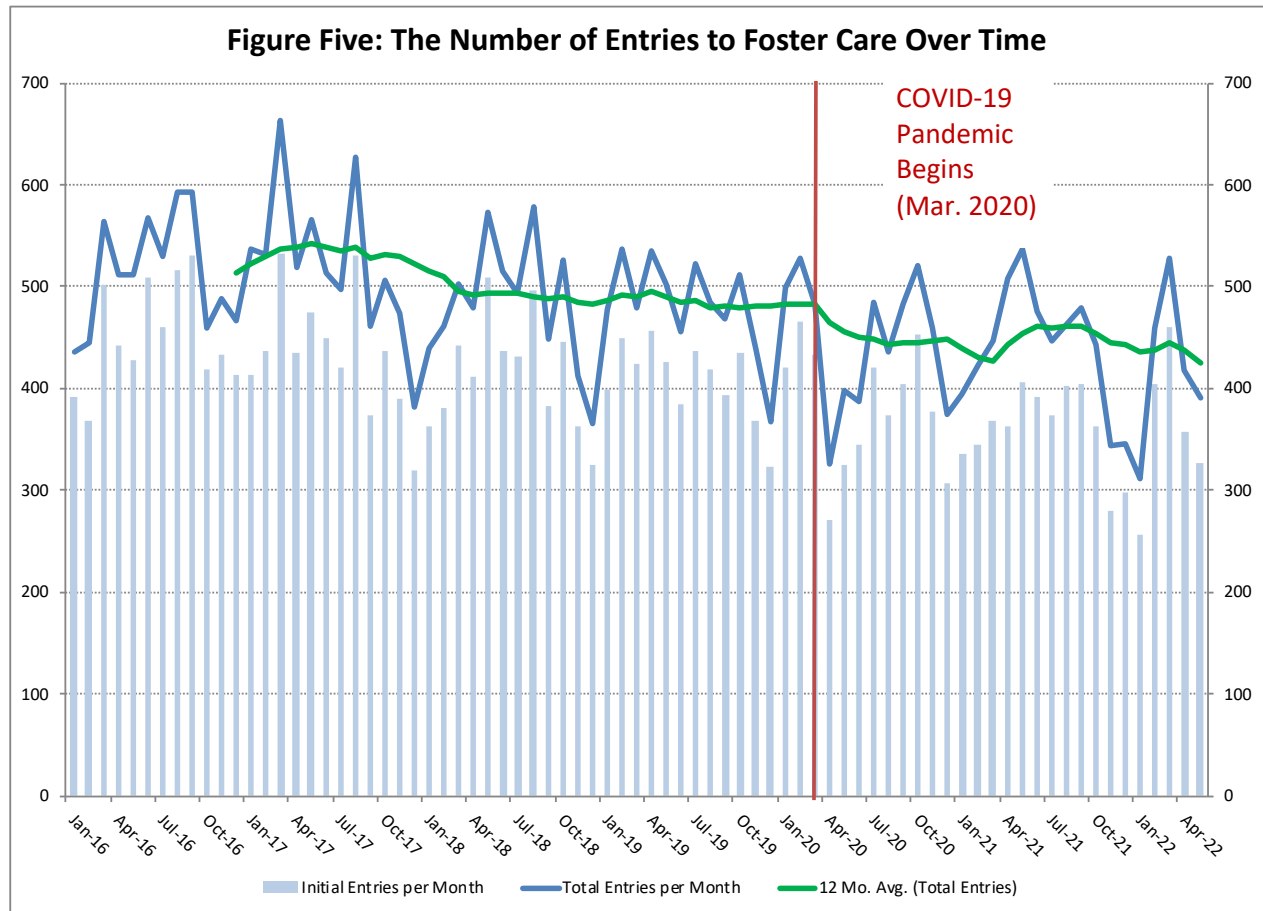
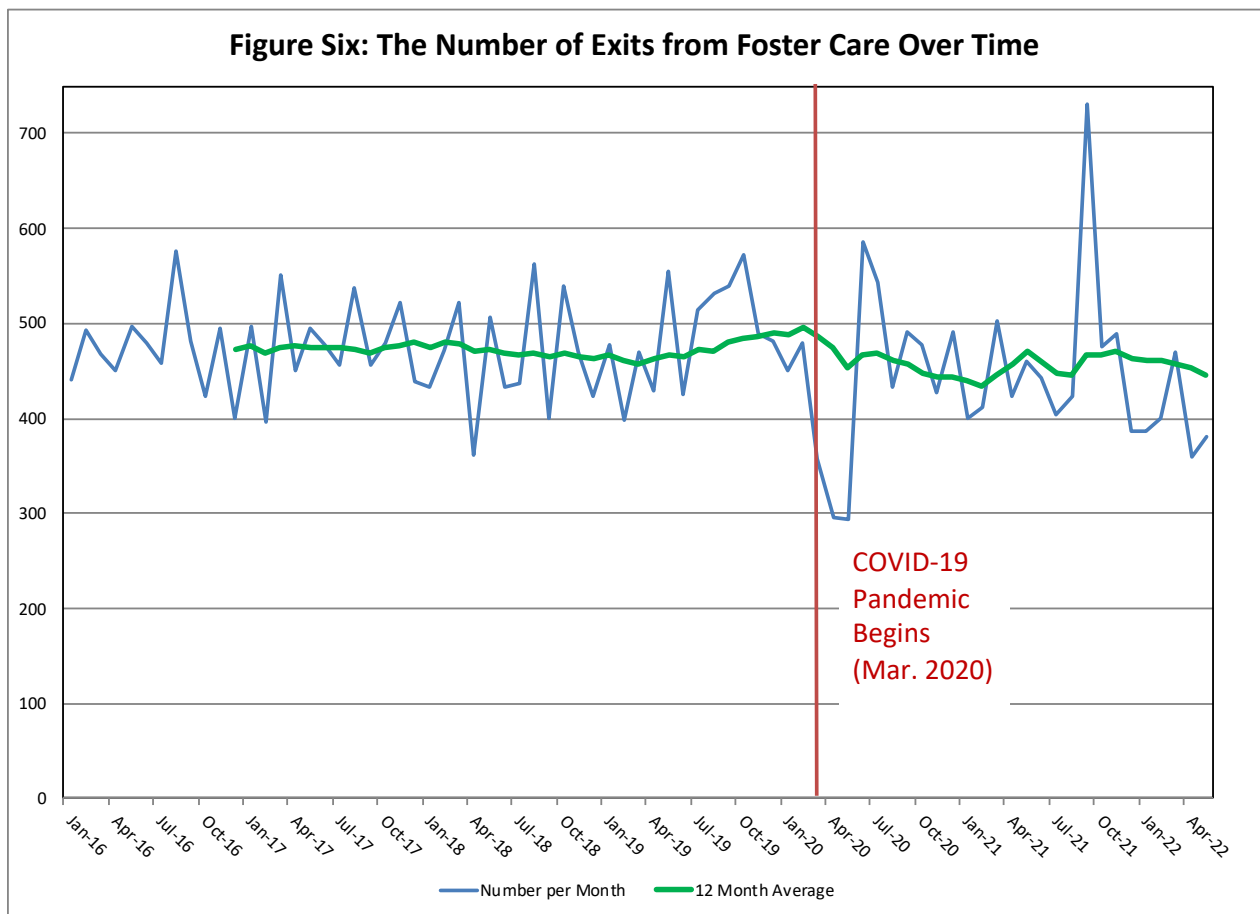


Figure Six shows the number of children exiting foster care each month as well as the twelve-month average (see Appendix A, Table Five for specific monthly numbers). Most children leave foster care when permanency is achieved, such as reunification with parents, custody or guardianship with a relative/caretaker, or adoption. They may also leave through emancipation or aging out of care at 18 or other less common reasons (for example, death, running away, or court revoking placement authority). As Figure Six indicates, the number of children exiting foster care fluctuates considerably from month to month. The annual average for 2016 was about 472 children which increased somewhat to about 480 in 2017. The average then declined to 463 in 2018 before increasing again to 490 in 2019. Figure Six shows that, at the onset of the pandemic, exits began declining in March 2020 to 357 and then dropped significantly to 296 in

April 2020 and 294 in May 2020, which were lows not seen in the past twenty years. Exits went back up sharply in to 586 in June 2020 and remained high at 544 in July 2020. The average for 2020 was 444 which was below the pre-pandemic level. The average for 2021 was continuing at this level until an unusually high number of exits of 731 in September 2021. These exits were related to the ending of a federal pandemic program that temporarily suspended age, education, and employment requirements for youth to remain in care beyond age 18. Given these types of exits, the average for 2021 increased to about 462. However, a downward trend began in January 2022 with an average through May of about 400.



Summary

In summary, the pandemic had an unparalleled, widespread, and sustained impact on child welfare by decreasing maltreatment reports, substantiations, non-substantiated findings, entries and exits from foster care, which have yet to recover to pre-pandemic levels and instead are continuing or declining in early to mid-2022. Before the pandemic, the number of children assessed for maltreatment per month averaged 12,000 per month compared to the current average of under 11,000 per month. As of early to mid-2022, downward trends were present in substantiations and foster care entries. Exits from care per month were unusually high in September 2021 due to the ending of a temporary extension of care for some youth over age 18 during the pandemic. However, by mid-2022, a downward trend was also present in exits from care.

This research is funded through a contract with the North Carolina Division of Social Services. The views expressed are those of the authors. Any errors due to the interpretation of the analysis of the data are the authors' alone.

Additional information on the child welfare program at the state or county level is available through the Management Assistance for Child Welfare, Work First, and Food and Nutrition Services web site, <http://ssw.unc.edu/ma/>.

A PDF version of this report can be found at http://sasweb.unc.edu/cgi-bin/broker?_service=default&_program=dgweb.help.sas&county=North%20Carolina&label=&entry=1&help=papers_cw&entry=1&anchor=

This report was designed by Rea Aarnio of the UNC-CH School of Social Work.

Appendix A

TABLE ONE: The Number of Children Assessed for Maltreatment

Month	Number of Children Assessed	Month	Number of Children Assessed
Jan-16	11,156	Mar-19	13,122
Feb-16	12,585	Apr-19	12,989
Mar-16	13,583	May-19	14,602
Apr-16	13,581	Jun-19	10,225
May-16	13,943	Jul-19	10,337
Jun-16	11,762	Aug-19	11,434
Jul-16	10,300	Sep-19	12,724
Aug-16	12,235	Oct-19	13,919
Sep-16	13,327	Nov-19	11,287
Oct-16	12,261	Dec-19	11,160
Nov-16	11,891	Jan-20	12,869
Dec-16	10,703	Feb-20	12,050
Jan-17	12,155	Mar-20	10,917
Feb-17	12,712	Apr-20	8,071
Mar-17	14,288	May-20	9,154
Apr-17	12,257	Jun-20	9,642
May-17	15,122	Jul-20	10,139
Jun-17	11,230	Aug-20	10,503
Jul-17	10,323	Sep-20	11,400
Aug-17	12,118	Oct-20	12,085
Sep-17	12,707	Nov-20	10,173
Oct-17	13,795	Dec-20	9,778
Nov-17	11,945	Jan-21	9,944
Dec-17	10,583	Feb-21	10,421
Jan-18	11,864	Mar-21	12,656
Feb-18	12,906	Apr-21	10,511
Mar-18	13,920	May-21	11,653
Apr-18	12,867	Jun-21	10,083
May-18	14,802	Jul-21	9,745
Jun-18	10,660	Aug-21	10,290
Jul-18	10,244	Sep-21	11,752
Aug-18	11,413	Oct-21	12,045
Sep-18	11,004	Nov-21	11,097
Oct-18	13,303	Dec-21	10,227
Nov-18	11,559	Jan-22	9,274
Dec-18	9,453	Feb-22	11,200
Jan-19	12,894	Mar-22	11,675
Feb-19	12,098		

TABLE TWO: The Number of Children Substantiated (including Services Needed)

Month	Number of Children with a Substantiated Report	Month	Number of Children with a Substantiated Report
Jan-16	1,808	Mar-19	2,052
Feb-16	2,032	Apr-19	2,112
Mar-16	2,260	May-19	2,185
Apr-16	2,185	Jun-19	1,693
May-16	2,180	Jul-19	1,876
Jun-16	1,971	Aug-19	1,997
Jul-16	1,769	Sep-19	1,998
Aug-16	2,019	Oct-19	2,107
Sep-16	2,034	Nov-19	1,608
Oct-16	1,872	Dec-19	1,805
Nov-16	1,781	Jan-20	2,142
Dec-16	1,672	Feb-20	1,815
Jan-17	1,958	Mar-20	1,601
Feb-17	2,138	Apr-20	1,560
Mar-17	2,339	May-20	1,681
Apr-17	2,011	Jun-20	1,737
May-17	2,169	Jul-20	1,793
Jun-17	2,072	Aug-20	1,837
Jul-17	1,925	Sep-20	1,853
Aug-17	2,122	Oct-20	1,912
Sep-17	2,026	Nov-20	1,634
Oct-17	2,097	Dec-20	1,574
Nov-17	1,805	Jan-21	1,634
Dec-17	1,510	Feb-21	1,652
Jan-18	1,969	Mar-21	1,886
Feb-18	1,952	Apr-21	1,804
Mar-18	1,921	May-21	1,776
Apr-18	2,059	Jun-21	1,657
May-18	2,114	Jul-21	1,740
Jun-18	1,799	Aug-21	1,707
Jul-18	1,762	Sep-21	1,872
Aug-18	1,889	Oct-21	1,682
Sep-18	1,681	Nov-21	1,524
Oct-18	1,975	Dec-21	1,420
Nov-18	1,679	Jan-22	1,435
Dec-18	1,419	Feb-22	1,680
Jan-19	1,970	Mar-22	1,632
Feb-19	1,915		

TABLE THREE: The Number of Children by Assessment Finding Type²

Month	Depen- dency	Abuse	Abuse and Neglect	Neglect	Services Needed	Services Provided, No Longer Needed	Services Recom- mended	Services Not Recom- mended	Un- substanti- ated
Jan-16	32	73	95	496	1,112	611	3,267	3,825	1,645
Feb-16	29	63	98	597	1,245	683	3,491	4,545	1,834
Mar-16	32	87	137	604	1,400	638	3,794	4,886	2,005
Apr-16	21	86	114	607	1,357	722	3,696	5,031	1,947
May-16	30	63	102	572	1,413	724	4,041	4,953	2,045
Jun-16	37	66	96	527	1,245	646	3,333	4,280	1,532
Jul-16	20	68	78	564	1,039	592	2,578	3,986	1,375
Aug-16	17	85	104	611	1,202	664	3,128	4,625	1,799
Sep-16	25	50	126	628	1,205	751	3,518	4,891	2,133
Oct-16	17	54	73	495	1,233	718	3,320	4,445	1,906
Nov-16	26	82	94	488	1,091	620	3,131	4,640	1,719
Dec-16	14	52	60	468	1,078	631	2,854	4,004	1,542
Jan-17	35	76	112	588	1,147	669	3,260	4,475	1,793
Feb-17	19	66	94	633	1,326	726	3,353	4,638	1,857
Mar-17	33	81	126	671	1,428	715	3,963	5,208	2,063
Apr-17	29	77	78	507	1,320	620	3,375	4,433	1,818
May-17	26	73	110	560	1,400	759	4,228	5,669	2,297
Jun-17	24	77	118	559	1,294	543	2,982	4,139	1,494
Jul-17	24	62	103	442	1,294	504	2,704	3,771	1,419
Aug-17	26	75	97	540	1,384	646	3,361	4,367	1,622
Sep-17	16	76	97	512	1,325	659	3,389	4,753	1,880
Oct-17	18	71	103	532	1,373	745	3,697	5,169	2,087
Nov-17	14	93	111	492	1,095	551	3,380	4,313	1,896
Dec-17	21	40	74	374	1,001	484	3,022	3,941	1,626
Jan-18	21	93	127	463	1,265	661	3,285	4,175	1,774
Feb-18	14	79	103	557	1,199	675	3,606	4,547	2,126
Mar-18	20	74	86	491	1,250	648	3,867	5,230	2,254
Apr-18	14	89	101	623	1,232	608	3,297	4,821	2,082
May-18	18	86	132	534	1,344	735	4,145	5,595	2,213
Jun-18	15	36	88	485	1,175	551	2,817	3,993	1,500
Jul-18	17	67	93	441	1,144	571	2,547	3,841	1,523
Aug-18	17	96	96	487	1,193	598	3,060	4,143	1,723
Sep-18	8	71	95	400	1,107	575	3,005	3,968	1,775
Oct-18	23	62	106	525	1,259	575	3,519	5,048	2,186
Nov-18	10	58	100	485	1,026	603	3,140	4,423	1,714

²The count of children is not unique as some may have multiple reports assessed at the same time.

Month	Dependency	Abuse	Abuse and Neglect	Neglect	Services Needed	Services Provided, No Longer Needed	Services Recommended	Services Not Recommended	Un-substantiated
Dec-18	9	55	76	403	876	463	2,727	3,497	1,347
Jan-19	20	60	113	510	1,267	608	3,398	4,968	1,950
Feb-19	21	58	155	474	1,207	544	3,156	4,670	1,813
Mar-19	21	57	130	562	1,282	507	3,613	5,085	1,865
Apr-19	26	71	111	526	1,378	537	3,363	5,103	1,874
May-19	12	82	105	548	1,438	625	3,714	5,917	2,161
Jun-19	20	67	107	391	1,108	390	2,687	4,143	1,312
Jul-19	14	65	88	511	1,198	373	2,685	3,983	1,420
Aug-19	11	85	108	434	1,359	410	2,928	4,612	1,487
Sep-19	23	64	112	588	1,211	437	3,419	4,857	2,013
Oct-19	15	55	128	546	1,363	419	3,630	5,578	2,185
Nov-19	20	55	77	355	1,101	297	3,142	4,561	1,679
Dec-19	11	63	88	493	1,150	359	3,159	4,374	1,463
Jan-20	17	73	110	502	1,440	364	3,771	5,005	1,587
Feb-20	19	59	83	439	1,215	301	3,506	4,789	1,639
Mar-20	16	53	96	407	1,029	320	3,181	4,476	1,339
Apr-20	11	54	69	399	1,027	244	2,416	2,923	928
May-20	18	64	66	447	1,086	271	2,693	3,281	1,228
Jun-20	6	63	94	456	1,118	327	2,809	3,590	1,179
Jul-20	11	68	154	477	1,083	367	2,807	3,833	1,339
Aug-20	18	51	90	439	1,239	294	3,099	3,965	1,308
Sep-20	11	54	125	437	1,226	361	3,241	4,373	1,572
Oct-20	20	57	117	482	1,236	427	3,510	4,650	1,586
Nov-20	18	59	89	391	1,077	300	2,896	4,043	1,300
Dec-20	22	70	91	386	1,005	252	3,177	3,480	1,295
Jan-21	8	63	88	459	1,016	303	3,224	3,496	1,287
Feb-21	17	80	113	419	1,023	276	3,192	3,781	1,520
Mar-21	10	83	112	458	1,223	352	3,935	4,776	1,707
Apr-21	16	89	113	445	1,141	305	3,107	3,811	1,484
May-21	17	84	107	499	1,069	322	3,519	4,355	1,681
Jun-21	10	71	124	413	1,039	311	3,024	3,728	1,363
Jul-21	9	73	121	437	1,100	366	2,799	3,582	1,258
Aug-21	17	60	120	463	1,047	379	2,926	3,889	1,389
Sep-21	25	81	135	494	1,137	422	3,188	4,542	1,728
Nov-21	9	67	87	395	966	401	3,288	4,473	1,411
Dec-21	12	53	94	363	898	368	3,071	3,949	1,419
Jan-22	11	61	84	359	920	369	2,774	3,594	1,102
Feb-22	22	72	102	449	1,035	395	3,140	4,349	1,636
Mar-22	16	43	81	470	1,022	485	3,152	4,795	1,611

TABLE FOUR: The Number of Children Entering Foster Care

Month	Initial Entries	Total Entries	Month	Initial Entries	Total Entries
Jan-16	391	435	Apr-19	457	535
Feb-16	369	445	May-19	426	502
Mar-16	502	564	Jun-19	385	455
Apr-16	443	511	Jul-19	436	523
May-16	428	511	Aug-19	419	485
Jun-16	509	567	Sep-19	393	468
Jul-16	461	530	Oct-19	435	512
Aug-16	517	593	Nov-19	369	437
Sep-16	531	592	Dec-19	324	367
Oct-16	418	459	Jan-20	420	499
Nov-16	433	488	Feb-20	465	528
Dec-16	413	467	Mar-20	434	482
Jan-17	414	536	Apr-20	271	325
Feb-17	437	532	May-20	325	398
Mar-17	533	664	Jun-20	345	387
Apr-17	435	519	Jul-20	421	485
May-17	475	565	Aug-20	374	435
Jun-17	450	513	Sep-20	404	483
Jul-17	421	498	Oct-20	453	521
Aug-17	531	627	Nov-20	377	459
Sep-17	374	462	Dec-20	306	375
Oct-17	437	507	Jan-21	336	394
Nov-17	390	473	Feb-21	344	423
Dec-17	319	382	Mar-21	369	447
Jan-18	362	440	Apr-21	363	508
Feb-18	380	462	May-21	406	536
Mar-18	443	503	Jun-21	391	476
Apr-18	412	480	Jul-21	373	447
May-18	509	573	Aug-21	403	463
Jun-18	437	516	Sep-21	405	480
Jul-18	432	494	Oct-21	362	443
Aug-18	497	578	Nov-21	279	344
Sep-18	382	449	Dec-21	298	346
Oct-18	446	526	Jan-22	256	312
Nov-18	363	412	Feb-22	404	460
Dec-18	325	365	Mar-22	460	527
Jan-19	399	478	Apr-22	357	417
Feb-19	450	536	May-22	327	390
Mar-19	424	480			

TABLE FIVE: The Number of Children Exiting Foster Care

Month	Number of Children Existing Foster Care	Month	Number of Children Existing Foster Care
Jan-16	440	Apr-19	430
Feb-16	493	May-19	554
Mar-16	468	Jun-19	426
Apr-16	450	Jul-19	515
May-16	496	Aug-19	532
Jun-16	480	Sep-19	539
Jul-16	458	Oct-19	573
Aug-16	577	Nov-19	489
Sep-16	481	Dec-19	482
Oct-16	423	Jan-20	451
Nov-16	494	Feb-20	480
Dec-16	401	Mar-20	357
Jan-17	497	Apr-20	296
Feb-17	397	May-20	294
Mar-17	551	Jun-20	586
Apr-17	451	Jul-20	544
May-17	494	Aug-20	432
Jun-17	477	Sep-20	491
Jul-17	457	Oct-20	478
Aug-17	537	Nov-20	427
Sep-17	456	Dec-20	491
Oct-17	480	Jan-21	400
Nov-17	522	Feb-21	412
Dec-17	439	Mar-21	502
Jan-18	433	Apr-21	424
Feb-18	472	May-21	460
Mar-18	522	Jun-21	443
Apr-18	362	Jul-21	403
May-18	507	Aug-21	424
Jun-18	433	Sep-21	731
Jul-18	437	Oct-21	475
Aug-18	562	Nov-21	490
Sep-18	401	Dec-21	386
Oct-18	540	Jan-22	386
Nov-18	469	Feb-22	401
Dec-18	424	Mar-22	469
Jan-19	478	Apr-22	360
Feb-19	399	May-22	381
Mar-19	469		