

Reporting sexual abuse in times of crisis: the case of Iceland

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From 1932, there has been a legal duty in Iceland to report suspected child maltreatment, an obligation that extends to both professionals who work with children, as well as to members of the general public. Most reports to Child Protection Committees (CPCs) are from public bodies, yet around a third of all reports are from the general public. During the COVID-19 pandemic, reports to CPCs increased in Iceland, thus fuelling a general discourse on how the measures taken to combat the virus left some children in a vulnerable position as well as the role of the public in the Child Protection System. This increase in reporting therefore poses questions on whether there is a pattern in reporting during times of crisis and what the role of public discourse entails in the reporting of child maltreatment. The data presented are reports to all CPCs in Iceland from 2007 to 2022, gathered and analysed by The National Agency for Children and Families.

This paper found that during times of crisis, such as the financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, reports to CPCs increased, specifically regarding physical abuse and neglect. This is a pattern that did not hold true for reports regarding sexual abuse. Nevertheless, this paper identified three periods where reporting of suspected child sexual abuse increased markedly. What all three time periods had in common was a loud public discourse on sexual abuse towards children specifically. The main objective of this paper is to detect patterns in reporting over time and understand changes in reporting suspected child sexual abuse. This paper underlines the role of a mandated obligation to report suspected child abuse and how the general discourse may play a role in facilitating such reporting.