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## Mandated Reporting and its Effects on the Rate of Reported and Substantiated Child Abuse

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# **Mandated Reporting and its Effects on the Rate of Reported and Substantiated Child Abuse**

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Spring 2021

# Table of Contents

- Abstract.....3**
- Executive Summary .....3**
- Introduction.....4**
- Literature Review.....7**
  - Child Maltreatment Risk Factors.....7
  - Critiques of Mandated Reporting.....8
  - Issues with Implementation.....10
  - Current Research on the Effects of Mandated Reporting.....11
- Research Design.....11**
  - Data Collection.....11
  - Question 1.....12**
    - Variables.....12
    - Summary Statistics.....14
    - Statistical Model.....14
    - Analysis.....15
  - Question 2.....16**
    - Variables.....16
    - Summary Statistics.....18
    - Statistical Model.....19
    - Analysis.....19
- Limitations & Future Areas of Study.....20**
- Conclusions.....20**
- References.....22**

## **Abstract**

State-level data on the rate of reported abuse per 1,000 children, as published in the Children's Bureau's Annual Child Maltreatment Report, has been used as a metric to rank and compare states' performance in child welfare. States wish to understand what the rate of reported abuse per 1,000 children means, what state-specific policies and issues can affect this number, and how to interpret the data to make effective policy decisions. This paper studies the effects of having mandated reporting laws that require all citizens to report reasonable suspicion of abuse to Child Protective Services on a state's rate of reported abuse per 1,000 children and the rate of substantiated cases. The results of this study find that having mandated reporting laws for all citizens does not affect the rate of reported abuse or the rate of substantiated cases for a state.

## **Executive Summary**

State specific data presented in the Children's Bureau's Annual Child Maltreatment Report has been used to compare and rank states in the U.S. by journalists. States like Kentucky, who have a high rate of reported abuse per 1,000 children, seek to address their state's child welfare policy in response to this. The intent of this study is to help policy makers better understand what affects the rate of reported abuse and if existing child welfare policy is effective. This study does this by analyzing whether having laws that designate all citizens as mandated reporters of abuse effects the reported and substantiated child abuse rates of states who have them.

There is much contention in the literature about whether mandated reporter laws are an effective policy. There is no standardized education or training for professionals who work with children and families to determine at what level reasonable suspicion of child abuse should be reported. Nonprofessionals who are designated mandated reporters in 18 states receive no training at all. This fact has led some child welfare scholars to conclude that nonprofessional reporters report a higher level of unsubstantiated cases of abuse which overloads Child Protective Services and wastes their time and resources. Previous studies that have analyzed the number of child abuse reports from professional and nonprofessional sources over a period of 30 years found an overall increase in child abuse reports, with reports from professional sources increasing at a faster rate than nonprofessional sources.

The analysis presented in this capstone studied the effects of whether a state had mandated reporting laws for all citizens was associated with a higher rate of reported abuse and a higher rate of substantiated cases. The results from both analyses showed that having mandated reporting laws for all citizens was not correlated with a higher rate of reported abuse per 1,000 children nor a higher rate of substantiated cases in a statistically significant way. This could suggest that designating all citizens mandated reporters of abuse is not an effective policy for encouraging nonprofessionals to report. The results did find that having a high percentage of the state population living in poverty was correlated with having a higher rate of reported abuse per 1,000 children. For states who have a high rate of reported abuse as well as a high percentage living in poverty like Kentucky, focusing on services to address families living in poverty could be an effective policy strategy for improving state child welfare.

## Introduction

Every year, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services publishes an Annual Child Maltreatment Report which presents national data about child abuse and neglect known to child protective services (CPS) agencies in the United States. This report includes data on responses to reports of maltreatment, child victim and perpetrator demographics, and child fatality rates. States have their own requirements and procedures for reporting and responding to child abuse reports and the Child Maltreatment Report is an effort to compile state-specific data into a national database so that broader trends in child maltreatment can be analyzed. Though this report is mainly used to observe national trends, it has also been used to compare and rank states by journalists. Many state policy makers then use the interpretations of these results to compare their state to other states in order to evaluate their programs and make policies.

In January 2020, journalist Deborah Yetter wrote a 5-part article series about child abuse in Kentucky. She highlighted specific substantiated abuse cases in Kentucky and used the measure of reported rate of abuse per 1,000 children from the Annual Child Maltreatment Report to rank Kentucky as number one in the nation. “The problem has plagued Kentucky for generations: The state has ranked among the 10 worst states for child abuse for more than a decade. And it's getting worse” (Yetter, 2020). She focuses mainly on detailing extreme cases that ended in child fatalities and linked Kentucky’s child abuse rate with the state’s opioid epidemic. In response to this article series, State Attorney General Daniel Cameron made a public statement in which he “vowed to take an aggressive, coordinated approach to prosecuting Kentucky’s child abuse cases and provide county and commonwealth attorneys with a formal guidebook to do the same” (Acquisto, 2020).

Yetter was right in her connection of poverty, substance abuse, and mental health problems to Kentucky's rate of child abuse as child welfare research has established these as key factors that contribute to child maltreatment. She is also right in her statement that, in terms of the Annual Child Maltreatment Report, Kentucky leads the nation in the rate of reported child abuse. However, she makes this statement under the assumption that the Annual Child Maltreatment Report is meant to be used as a measure to rank the states' performance. In the most recent edition of the report, the Children's Bureau explicitly states that readers should exercise caution when using data from the report to make state-to-state comparisons. "While the purpose of the NCANDS project is to collect nationally standardized aggregate and case-level child maltreatment data, readers should exercise caution in making state-to-state comparisons. Each state defines child abuse and neglect in its own statutes and policies and the child welfare agencies determine the appropriate response for the alleged maltreatment based on those statutes and policies" (HHS, 2021).

There is also the discrepancy between the true prevalence of child abuse and neglect versus the reported prevalence. The Annual Child Maltreatment Report details data from child abuse and neglect cases reported to the state Child Protective Services agencies which is not the true number of child abuse and neglect cases in a state. A study that explored risk factors for child maltreatment looked at both official reports of abuse and self-reports of abuse via survey over a 17-year period. They found that "State records and self-reports of child maltreatment did not correspond in most cases when maltreatment was reported through at least one data source, underlining the importance of obtaining data from both official records and self-reports" (Brown et al., 1998). Therefore, it's inaccurate to view the results of the report as absolute numbers and is problematic to base policy solely around them.

Another issue with using the data from the Annual Child Maltreatment report as a comparative measure between states is that it does not take into account the differences in state reporting laws. All states have mandatory reporting laws which require a person who suspects that a child is being abused and/or neglected to report it to Child Protective Services (CPS). However, most states only have mandatory reporting laws for specified professions such as teachers, counselors, and nurses. In approximately 18 states and Puerto Rico, any person who suspects abuse or neglect of a child is required to report it (Child Information Gateway, 2019). Differences in mandatory reporting laws between states could further widen the disparity between the true prevalence of child abuse and neglect and the reported prevalence.

There has been much debate in child welfare research as to the efficacy of mandated reporter laws. Some argue that these laws can lead to a higher number of reports that bog down a state's Child Protective Services and prevent them from using their resources to tackle the social issues that cause child maltreatment. They have argued that this inflation of reported cases comes mainly from unsubstantiated cases (cases where investigators found no evidence of abuse or neglect) rather than substantiated cases (cases where investigators did find evidence of abuse or neglect). This is particularly important to study as a state's rate of reported abuse per 1,000 children is based on both substantiated and unsubstantiated cases. Kentucky is one of the 18 states that has mandated reporter laws that require all citizens to report. In trying to understand the true nature of child welfare in Kentucky and know how best to move forward, it is imperative to study how current child welfare policies can affect such measures as the reported rate of abuse per 1,000 children.

I have used data from the Children's Bureau's Annual Child Maltreatment Report as well as census data to investigate whether having mandated reporting laws for all citizens has

different effects on reporting and substantiation rates than mandated reporting laws for specified professions only. My analysis seeks to answer two questions: does designating all citizens mandated reporters actually increase the rate of reporting to child abuse hotlines, and does this policy seem to identify more substantiated cases of abuse or does it just waste Child Protective Services' time and resources without yielding any real additional level of protection to a state's children?

## **Literature Review**

### *Child Maltreatment Risk Factors*

Literature on child maltreatment indicates that certain environmental and social factors, such as poverty and parental substance abuse, can be high risk factors for child abuse and neglect. There have been many studies done that indicate poverty in particular is a high-risk factor for child abuse and neglect. The data from these studies “indicate that children from low socioeconomic status households (annual incomes below \$15,000, family member participation in a poverty program, and/or parent education less than high school) were about seven times more likely to be neglected than children in higher socioeconomic households” (Sedlak et al., 2010). Substance use disorders are another high-risk factor that can affect a state's child welfare. “According to Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System data for fiscal year 2016, parental substance use is frequently reported as a reason for removal (34 percent)” (HHS, 2017a). A greater understanding of risk factors can help policy makers to develop effective child welfare policies. Risk factors also help professionals who work with children and families identify stressors and situations that put them at increased risk for child abuse and neglect and intervene and support them before maltreatment occurs.



### *Critiques of Mandated Reporting*

In 1962, pediatrician C. Henry Kempe and his colleagues published a paper in which they brought to the public's attention the "battered child syndrome", a clinical condition in young children who have experienced severe physical abuse. In response to this paper and grassroots movements, all 50 states adopted a mandated reporting law within 3 years of its publication (Melton, 2005). Critics of mandated reporting laws contend that though the policy was well meaning, "experience has shown that the assumptions that guided the enactment of mandated reporting laws were largely erroneous" (Melton, 2005). They believe mandated reporting is a misunderstanding of the true issue of child maltreatment and can actually undermine social mechanisms that keep children safe.

One major criticism of mandated reporting is that it shifts the focus of Child Protective Services from providing services to families and children to conducting investigations. "CPS itself is diverted from the task of increasing the safety of children. It is largely engaged instead, as a matter of legal obligation, in evidence gathering and preparation of actual or potential court cases" (Melton, 2005). The cases of severe abuse described by the battered child syndrome are very rare. Most cases of child maltreatment involve some form of neglect (Administration on Children and Families, 2003). Child maltreatment research has found that in most families "in which maltreatment occurs have a multiplicity of serious personal, social, and economic problems" (US Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect, 1993). Child maltreatment is usually correlated with such factors as parental substance abuse and poverty, but resources are instead spent on investigations "that usually result in significant disruption of family life but little if any benefit" (Melton, 2005).

Critics contend that data shows mandated reporter laws lead to an influx of unsubstantiated cases that overburden Child Protective Services. “Approximately two-thirds of the reports of suspected child maltreatment that are investigated are never substantiated or found to be indicated” (Administration on Children and Families, 2003). Proponents of mandated reporter laws suggested that they have led to a decrease in child fatalities from abuse. If this were true, then “there would be an association between rates of child abuse fatalities and rates of child abuse reporting among the states (that is, states with higher reporting rates would have fewer fatalities than those with lower reporting rates). However, the data comparing rates of abuse reports and fatalities by state do not support this hypothesis” (Lindsey, 1994).

Another major criticism of mandated reporting laws is that they foster a sense of distrust in communities. Being in connected communities where there is friendship among neighbors, a collective effort to watch out for each other’s families, and where there is a sense of belonging is associated with healthier families and less child maltreatment (US Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect, 1993). It is believed that mandated reporting can increase distrust among neighbors. This distrust “may contribute to increased isolation and interfere with norms of reciprocal help and thus ironically may aggravate the social conditions that are most closely related to child maltreatment” (cf. US Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect, 1993). It is also thought that the threat of reporting can deter families from seeking help as “the act of reporting leads to disruption of treatment in families in approximately one-fourth of cases among families already receiving mental health services” (Levine & Doueck, 1995).

#### *Issues with Implementation*

Although many professionals and citizens are required to report, the law states they are to do so whenever they have “reasonable suspicion” that a child has been abused (HHS, 2008).

Though there is substantial literature that describes conditions, injuries, and behavior that warrants concern for possible child abuse, there is little to no guidance on how reporters are to interpret the term “reasonable suspicion” and what levels of concern should be reported (Benjamin & Crowell, 2011). There is no standardized education on how to interpret reasonable suspicion which leads to variability in how individuals perceive suspicions as well as unequal protection of children. “Poor recognition and reporting of suspected maltreatment may leave children vulnerable to continued victimization, and the potential resulting morbidity and mortality” (Sege et al., 2011). Studies that have explored the different individual thresholds for mandated reporting among medical professionals who have and have not received education on interpreting reasonable suspicion show no association between having received education and a more consistent and accurate reporting trend (Benjamin & Crowell, 2011).

Among the medical professionals who have received education and training, many still do not feel confident in their abilities to properly identify suspected child abuse and are reluctant to report. “Physicians and medical students alike have identified that they do not feel that they have received adequate training in the identification of child maltreatment” (Flaherty et al., 2008). The need for more standardized education on reporting suspected child maltreatment is especially important for states that require all citizens, not just specified professionals, to report. Most professionals that work with children and families receive some sort of training and education on determining and reporting suspected abuse, but citizens in general rarely do.

#### *Current Research on the Effects of Mandated Reporting*

Current studies looking at reporting trends over time have found that since the 1970s, the national rate of reports per 1,000 children has increased from 6.33 in 1977 to 25.44 in 2003

(Drake & Johnson-Reid, 2007). Data analysis looking at the source of reports finds that both professional (professions that work with families and children) and nonprofessional sources saw an increase in reports from 1977 to 2003. The rate of increase among professional reporters has been faster at 4.88 times as many reports per child compared to nonprofessional sources at 3.25 times as many reports per child (Drake & Johnson-Reid, 2007).

Many critics argue that mandated reporting laws lead to over-reporting of unsubstantiated cases which are considered wasted effort. “However, empirical research has consistently found that substantiated and unsubstantiated cases are more similar than different, at least with regard to measurable outcomes” (Drake, Jonson-Reid, Way, & Chung, 2003). Substantiation rates have dropped since the 1970s, “and this may be due to differences in screening, substantiation criteria, the cases themselves, movement to two-track or alternative response systems, or, most hopefully, increased reporting having helped CPS agencies to get to families before maltreatment reaches a level which can be substantiated” (Drake & Johnson-Reid, 2007). As prevention is a goal of Child Protective Services, lower substantiation rates and higher levels of investigations and service delivery may be indicators of improved performance.

## **Research Design**

### *Data Collection*

Most of the data I used in this analysis come directly from the Children’s Bureau’s Annual Child Maltreatment Report that presents data from 2019. Because poverty and parental substance abuse are highly correlated with child maltreatment, I have also included 2019 poverty rates for each state as well as the average estimated occurrence of substance use disorder in the past year for adults aged 18 and older based on 2018 and 2019 data. The state poverty rate data

comes from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service and the state substance use disorder data comes from the 2018-2019 National Surveys on Drug Use and Health (HHS, 2020; Table 23). I also used literature on state statutes published by the Child Information Gateway to find which 18 states have mandated reporter laws that require all persons to report. Because I could not find data for Puerto Rico outside of the Annual Child Maltreatment Report, this study will focus on the 50 states and Washington, D.C.

## **Question 1**

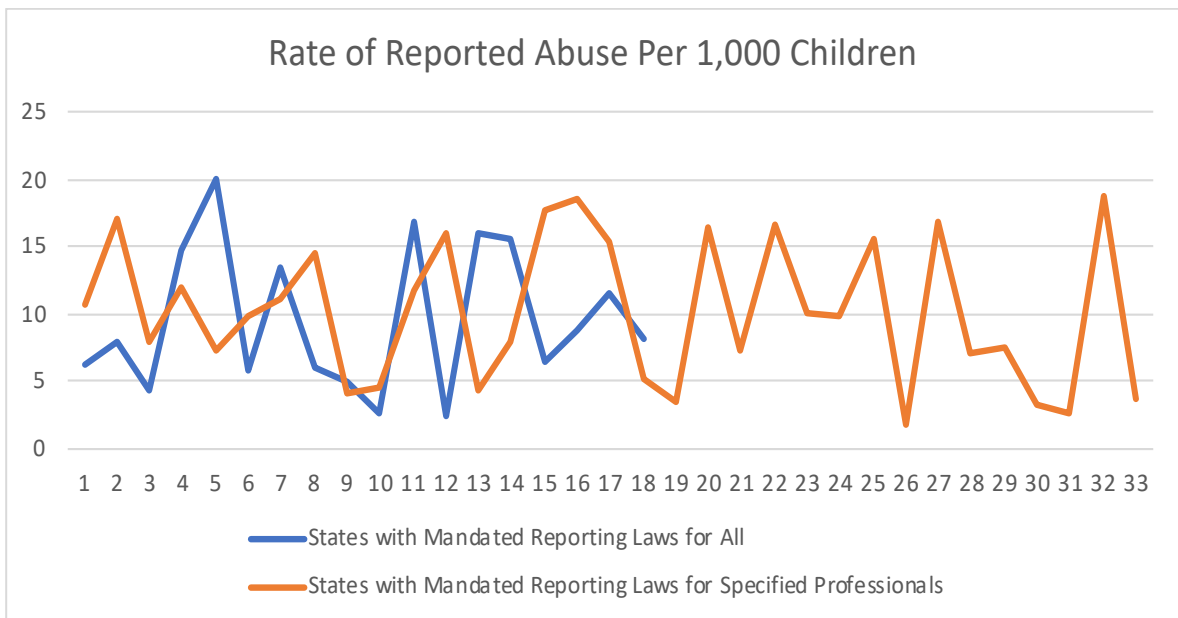
### *Variables*

The first question this study seeks to answer is if having mandated reporter laws that require all persons to report increases a state's rate of reported abuse per 1,000 children. My dependent variable for this question will be the rate of reported abuse per 1,000 children in 2019 as reported in the Annual Child Maltreatment Report. The explanatory variables I will include and their hypothesized relationship with the rate of reported abuse are listed in the table below. I have also included a table comparing the rate of reported abuse per 1,000 children between states that have mandated reporting laws for all and states that have them for specified professions only. I created a dummy variable for whether a state had mandated reporter laws for all by coding yes=1 and no=0. I also controlled for the number of Child Protective Services (CPS) workers per 1,000 children in a state as the rate of reported abuse may be a function of the number of investigative workers. I calculated the number of CPS workers per 1,000 children using the total number of CPS workers in a state and a state's child population from the Annual Child Maltreatment Report.

**Table 1**  
**Explanatory Variables**

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Hypothesized Relationship</b>
Mandated Reporter Laws for All	Positive
CPS Workers per 1,000 Children	Positive
Percentage Living in Poverty	Positive
Substance Use Disorder in Past Year	Positive

**Table 2**  
**Comparing the Rate of Reported Abuse Per 1,000 Children**



*Summary Statistics*

**Table 3**  
**Question 1: Summary Statistics**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Obs</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Dev.</b>	<b>Min</b>	<b>Max</b>
Rate of Reported Abuse per 1,000	51	9.931373	5.337209	1.8	20.1
Mandated Reporter Laws for All	51	0.3529412	0.4826398	0	1
CPS Workers per 1,000 Children	51	0.5030608	0.3726082	0	1.62287
Percentage of all People in Poverty	51	12.15686	2.638125	7.5	19.5
SUD in the Past Year 18+	51	378.7059	448.3509	34	2778

*Statistical Model*

The statistical analysis model I used is Linear OLS regression. The goal of the analysis for the first question was to test if having mandated reporting laws for all citizens resulted in a higher rate of reported abuse. I included the other explanatory variables as the literature on child welfare has found that living in poverty and parental substance abuse are risk factors of child abuse. Comparing the effects of these explanatory variables on the rate of reported abuse per 1,000 children can help policy makers better understand what this metric means and how to make effective child welfare policy decisions. The regression model I used is:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Rate of Reported Abuse per 1,000 Children} = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 * (\text{Mandated Reporter Laws for All}) \\ & + \beta_2 * (\text{CPS Workers per 1,000 Children}) + \beta_3 * (\text{Percentage of People Living in Poverty}) \\ & + \beta_4 * (\text{SUD in the last year}) + e \end{aligned}$$

*Analysis*

The results from the question 1 analysis are as follows:

**Table 4**  
**Question 1: Regression Results**

<b>Rate of Reported Abuse per 1,000 Children</b>	<b>Coefficient</b>	<b>Std. Eff.</b>	<b>t-statistic</b>	<b>P-value</b>
Mandated Reporter Laws for All	-1.208126	1.391129	-0.87	0.390
CPS Workers per 1,000 Children	2.810682	2.024315	1.39	0.172
Percentage of All People in Poverty	0.65659	0.2566846	2.56	0.014
SUD in the Past Year 18+	-0.0012633	0.0010493	-1.2	0.235
Constant	1.440185	3.064157	0.47	0.641

R-Squared= 0.1903

The results from this analysis indicate that a state having mandated reporting laws for all citizens does not affect the rate of reported abuse per 1,000 children in a statistically significant way. This analysis also indicates that the number of CPS workers and the estimated number of adults who have suffered from substance use disorder in the past year, do not affect the rate of reported abuse per 1,000 children in a statistically significant way. The only explanatory variable



that was statistically significant in its correlation with the rate of reported abuse was the percentage of people living in poverty.

## **Question 2**

### *Variables*

The second question seeks to answer if having mandated reporter laws that require all persons to report suspected child abuse lead to more substantiated cases of abuse being found. The dependent variable in this analysis will be the substantiation rate which I calculated using a table in the Annual Child Maltreatment Report that listed all state reports and the categories they were assigned (HHS, 2021; Table 3-2). The table lists five categories that cases are sorted into: substantiated, indicated, alternative response, unsubstantiated, and intentionally false. Not all states use all five categories and simply sort cases into substantiated and unsubstantiated. Substantiated cases are defined as “an investigation disposition that concludes that the allegation of maltreatment or risk of maltreatment was supported or founded by state law or policy” (HHS, 2021). Indicated is defined as “a disposition that concludes that maltreatment could not be substantiated under state law or policy, but there was a reason to suspect that a child may have been maltreated or was at-risk of maltreatment. This is applicable only to states that distinguish between substantiated and indicated dispositions” (HHS, 2021). Alternative response is defined as “the provision of a response other than an investigation that determines a child or family is in need of services. A determination of maltreatment is not made, and a perpetrator is not determined” (HHS, 2021). Unsubstantiated is defined as “an investigation disposition that determines that there was not sufficient evidence under state law to conclude or suspect that the child was maltreated or at-risk of being maltreated” (HHS, 2021). Intentionally false is defined

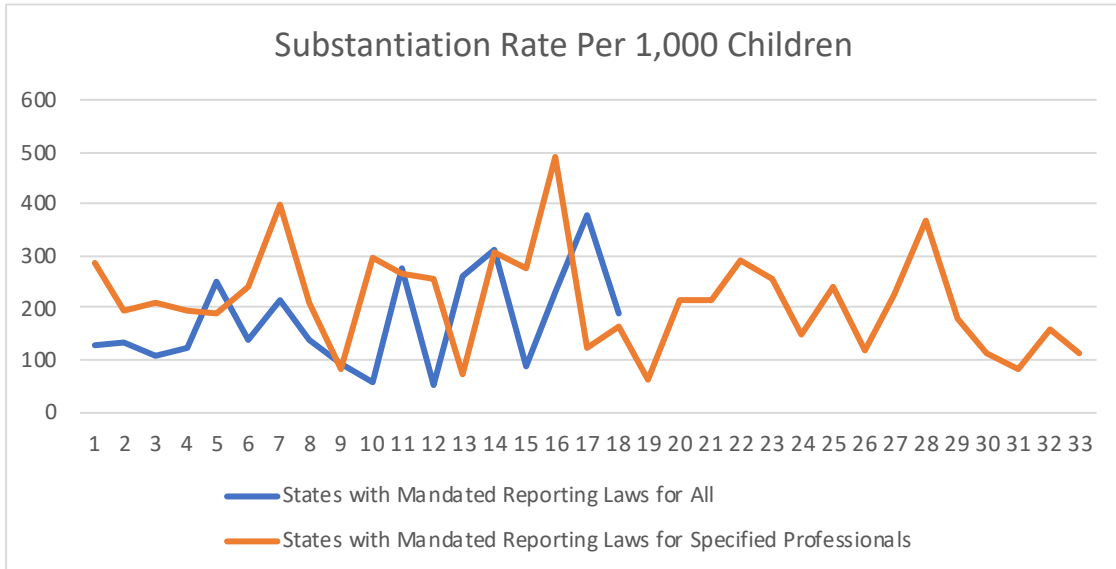
as “a disposition that indicates a conclusion that the person who made the allegation of maltreatment knew that the allegation was not true” (HHS, 2021).

Because not all states use all of the categories, I focused solely on the rate of substantiation per 1,000 cases. To calculate this, I added all reports that were sorted into categories together to come up with a total report number for each state. I then divided each state’s number of substantiated cases by the total number of reports multiplied by 1,000. For this second regression, I used the same explanatory variables that were used in the first regression. I have listed them again in the table below and my hypothesized relationship they will have on the substantiation rate per 1,000 cases as well as a chart with comparative data between states.

**Table 5**  
**Explanatory Variables**

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Hypothesized Relationship</b>
Mandated Reporter Laws for All	Negative
CPS Workers per 1,000 Children	Positive
Percentage Living in Poverty	Positive
Substance Use Disorder in Past Year	Positive

**Table 6**  
**Comparing the Substantiation Rate Per 1,000 Children**



*Summary Statistics*

**Table 7**  
**Question 2: Summary Statistics**

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Substantiation Rate per 1,000	51	199.8861	96.53665	49.93867	491.6979
Mandated Reporter Laws for All	51	0.3529412	0.4826398	0	1
CPS Workers per 1,000 Children	51	0.5030608	0.3726082	0	1.62287
Percentage of all People in Poverty	51	12.15686	2.638125	7.5	19.5
SUD in the Past Year 18+	51	378.7059	448.3509	34	2778

*Statistical Model*

The statistical analysis model I used for the second question was also Linear OLS regression. The goal of the analysis for the second question was to test if having mandated reporting laws for all citizens resulted in a higher rate of substantiated cases being found, or if they result in an overload of unsubstantiated cases that waste CPS's time and resources. The regression model I used is:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Substantiation Rate per 1,000 Cases} = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 * (\text{Mandated Reporter Laws for All}) + \\ & \beta_2 * (\text{CPS Workers per 1,000 Children}) + \beta_3 * (\text{Percentage of People Living in Poverty}) + \\ & \beta_4 * (\text{SUD in the last year}) + e \end{aligned}$$

*Analysis*

The results from the question 1 analysis are as follows:

**Table 8**  
**Question 2: Regression Results**

<b>Substantiation Rate per 1,000 Cases</b>	<b>Coefficient</b>	<b>Std. Eff.</b>	<b>t-statistic</b>	<b>P-value</b>
Mandated Reporter Laws for All	-38.59503	27.70504	-1.39	0.170
CPS Workers per 1,000 Children	-26.59625	28.16173	-0.94	0.350
Percentage of All People in Poverty	3.880802	4.704563	0.82	0.414
SUD in the Past Year 18+	-0.0291732	0.0214247	-1.36	0.180
Constant	190.7571	67.59274	2.82	0.007

R-squared= 0.0642

The results from this analysis indicate that none of the explanatory variables were correlated with the substantiation rate per 1,000 cases in a statistically significant way.

## **Limitations & Areas of Future Study**

The sample size of the data in this study is small as I only looked at data from 2019. To achieve a more complete understanding of the effects of mandated reporting laws for all citizens on state child abuse metrics, further research should be conducted to view trends over time. The rate of reported abuse per 1,000 children for each state comes from a multitude of professional and nonprofessional sources. It would be insightful to have additional analyses conducted to compare rates of reported abuse from different sources.

I looked at state level differences of one child welfare policy in particular, but there are many other policies that are not implemented nationally. Further research into the effects of other policy differences may lead to other insights. Criteria for classifying reports of abuse as substantiated, unsubstantiated, and other categories are different for each state. A case that is categorized as substantiated in one state may be categorized as indicated or as needing an alternative response in another. This could confound the rate of substantiation for states. This may be further evidence that using data from the Annual Child Maltreatment Report to compare states is problematic, as it cannot control for the amount of policy differences between the states or the unique state level issues such as substance abuse and poverty.

## **Conclusions**

This study is intended to help states better understand what the metrics in the Annual Child Maltreatment Report mean and how to use them to make effective child welfare policies.

The analysis of this study indicates that whether a state has mandatory reporting laws for all citizens or just specified professionals, does not affect the rate of reported abuse per 1,000 children or the rate of case substantiation in a statistically significant way. This could mean that designating all citizens as mandated reporters is not an effective way to encourage nonprofessionals to report suspected abuse. Previous research has found that the lack of standardized education for determining reasonable suspicion of child maltreatment led many professionals to not feel confident in their assessment of possible abuse. As nonprofessionals receive no education at all on how to determine reasonable suspicion, this could lead less people to report.

The analysis of this study did find that poverty had a very statistically significant effect on the rate of reported abuse per 1,000 children. For states like Kentucky that have a high rate of reported abuse as well as a high percentage of their population living in poverty, this could be an insight into how to effectively tackle the issue of state child maltreatment through policy.

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