

# Child abuse and neglect referrals are down - but that is not good news

**By: Emily Muttillo**  
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**April 19, 2021**



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## Introduction

On March 12, 2020, Governor Mike DeWine ordered all schools, public, private and charter, to shut down at the end of the March 16 school day – for about three weeks - through April 3, 2020. This was only the beginning of a much longer stay-at-home order and, unfortunately, home is not a safe haven for many children.

Ohio was the first state in the country to close schools as an attempt to control the spread of COVID-19 and many others quickly followed. Towards the end of the three-week period, cases continued to rise and a public health order from the Ohio Director of Health continued to require all schools to remain closed for the remainder of the school year. During this time, every student was moved into a remote- learning model for the fourth quarter of the school year. A stay-at-home order was also issued for all residents on April 2, 2020, closing businesses and services that were not deemed essential. Many non-essential workers set up home offices and quickly became very familiar with video chat services. Ohioans stayed home and away from each other. For those with safe, comfortable places to live and supportive family environments, being at home was a safe haven from the deadly virus moving quickly through the world.

Closing schools and issuing a stay-at-home order protected the health of many and saved lives from an uncontrolled virus. It was a wholly necessary action to take in the face of COVID-19. While necessary, it must also be acknowledged that doing so put some people, including children, in harm's way. In Ohio, the number of abuse and neglect cases has steadily increased each year with more than 200,000 referrals made in 2019. Most child abuse is perpetrated by parents, relatives or those in relationships with parents or relatives.<sup>1</sup> Being outside of the watchful eyes of other adults - like teachers and other school employees - left a void in the system designed to protect children from abuse and neglect. As the world begins to feel the hope of a post-COVID-19

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/254893/child-abuse-in-the-us-by-perpetrator-relationship/>

life made possible by vaccinations, our community must also prepare to face the reality that perhaps thousands of Ohio's children have experienced abuse or neglect that has gone unreported.

We can use data from the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) that identifies what school model each public school district<sup>2</sup> in the state uses. Coupling this with data pulled from the Ohio Department of Children and Family Services' (ODCFS) data dashboard, we can begin to assess the possible impact school closings have had on children across the state. All this data has limitations; however, truths can still be gleaned from the data that is available. Looking at four sample counties in Ohio, we see a concerning correlation between remote educational models and a drop in reports of child abuse and neglect.

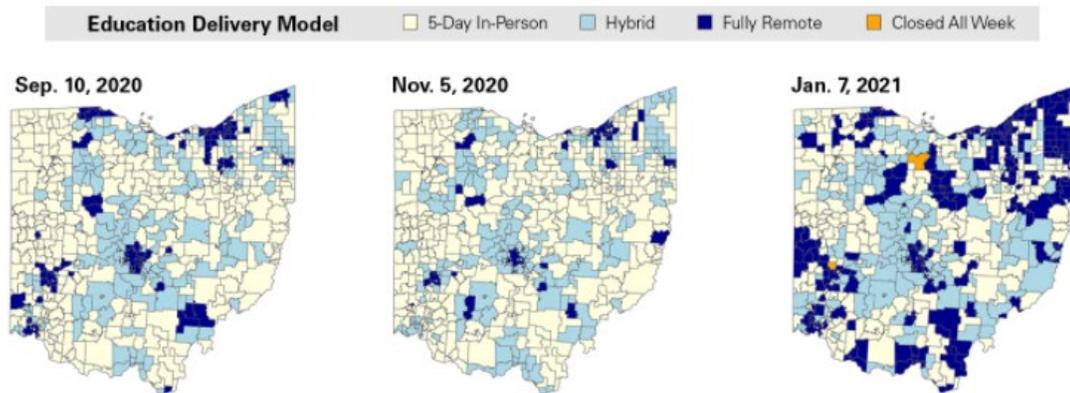
## Open, remote and hybrid schools

All schools (public, private and charter) were fully remote for April and May of 2020, but in the fall of 2020 all districts were able to determine their plans forward to either remain remote, operate using a hybrid model or to fully open schools five days a week. Local control of school building re-opening decisions resulted in a variety of education delivery models throughout the state. Districts developed unique criteria for making school re-opening decisions, often using the reported rate of community spread within the county as a key factor. Models changed from week to week with more in-person school at the beginning of the year and more schools opting for remote instruction as cases surged in the winter months. This mode of school re-opening decision-making provided a naturally occurring opportunity to compare abuse and neglect referrals among counties that had children mostly or fully remote and those that had children mostly attend school in buildings for full days, five days a week.

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<sup>2</sup> Disclaimer from ODE: This spreadsheet incorporates multiple information sources to build an understanding of the general **Education Delivery Model** in use for each traditional public-school district. Districts have not confirmed the accuracy of these data in all cases, and districts remain the best source of up-to-date information on their respective plans. This information is subject to frequent change and does not represent an official categorization by the Department. Here, model refers to the **default education delivery model for the general school population**, which is separate from district options for individual students to elect remote learning for an extended period (e.g., online academies).

Figure 1



Source: ODE Report Data Insights on the 2020-2021 School Year<sup>3</sup>

## Child protective services landscape

In 1962, an amendment to the Social Security Act required all states commit to statewide child welfare services, including protective services. The amendment spurred the creation of child abuse reporting laws which were adopted by all 50 states between 1963 and 1967. With these laws in place, systems for reporting and investigating child abuse and neglect were developed throughout the country. Case reporting steadily increased from 1974 when there were about 60,000 cases nationally to 2000 when there were around 3 million cases reported.<sup>4</sup> While systems have evolved over time, statewide mandated child abuse and neglect reporting to child protective services remains.

In Ohio, the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services (ODJFS) supervises child protective services programs. The programs are administered locally in each of the 88 counties, with 64 programs within local Job and Family Services (JFS) offices and 24 operating independently of JFS. Regardless of the agency administering child protective services, it will accept referrals for suspected child abuse and neglect, investigate allegations and provide interventions to allow a child to be in a safe environment.<sup>5</sup> Reports can be made by anyone and can remain anonymous. In Ohio, mandated reporters include attorneys, audiologists, child care workers, children services personnel, clergy, coroners, dentists, foster parents, nurses, physicians, podiatrists, psychiatrists, school authorities, social workers, speech pathologists and animal control officers. A report released by the Children's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in January

<sup>3</sup> <http://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Reset-and-Restart/Data-Insights-on-the-2020-2021-School-Year>

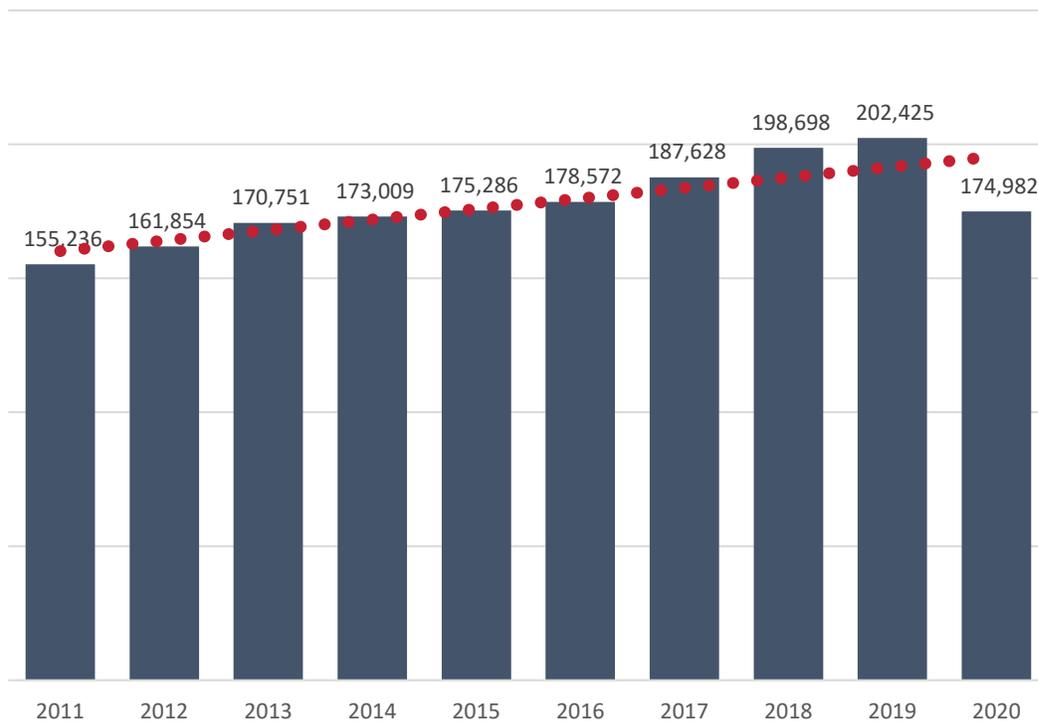
<sup>4</sup> MYERS, J. (2008). A Short History of Child Protection in America. *Family Law Quarterly*, 42(3), 449-463. Retrieved March 29, 2021, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25740668>

<sup>5</sup> Ohio Department of Job and Family Services Fact Sheet [https://jfs.ohio.gov/factsheets/CPS\\_factSheet.pdf](https://jfs.ohio.gov/factsheets/CPS_factSheet.pdf) accessed 3/29/2021

2020 found that educators are the top reporters of suspected child abuse and neglect accounting for more than 20 percent of all referrals.<sup>6</sup>

ODFJS provides a dashboard that includes data on child abuse and neglect referrals from each county in the state. Data is available from 2011 to the present. Abuse and neglect referrals have increased across the state over the past 10 years, until 2019. In 2011, 155,236 referrals were made in the state with 53 percent of cases screened in<sup>7</sup> for further investigation. Just under 50,000 more referrals were made in 2019 compared to 2011, with 44 percent of cases requiring investigation. Had the trend of the past nine years continued, close to 200,000 referrals would have been expected in 2020. This however did not happen. In 2020, referrals actually went down by 25,000 from the previous year, representing a 14 percent decrease.<sup>8</sup>

Ohio Child Abuse and Neglect Referral Trend  
2011-2020



14%  
decrease  
in  
referrals  
from 2019  
to 2020

<sup>6</sup> Child Maltreatment 2018. Children’s Bureau (Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Administration for Children and Families) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

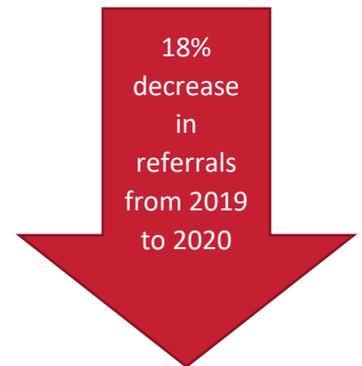
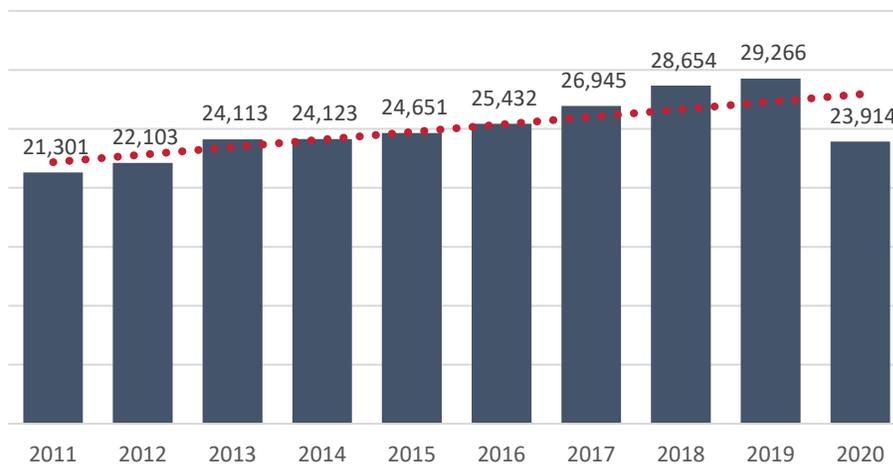
<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/report/child-maltreatment-2018>

<sup>7</sup> Screened-in definition: the public children services agency has accepted referral information as a report and assignment for assessment/investigation.

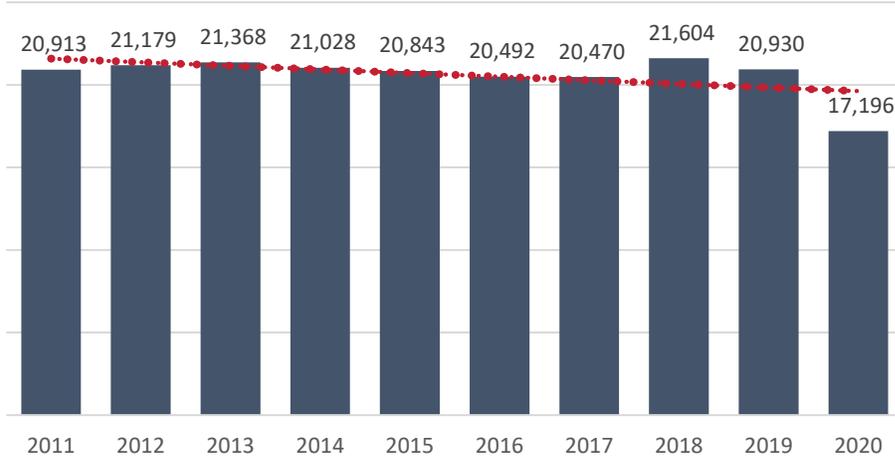
<sup>8</sup> The calendar year was used to analyze data.

Similar patterns can be seen in the two counties with the highest number of referrals over the past 10 years, Franklin and Cuyahoga counties. Similar to statewide trends, Franklin County’s referrals had steadily increased going from 21,301 in 2011 to 29,266 in 2019. However, in 2020, Franklin County had just 23,914 referrals, an 18 percent decrease from the previous year. Cuyahoga County referral numbers have been more consistent, with case numbers deviating by just more than 1,000 cases from 2011 through 2019, ranging from 20,400 to 21,600, that was until 2020. Last year, the county had 17,196 referrals; an 18 percent decrease from the prior year. While Franklin and Cuyahoga have the two highest number of referrals in the state, Defiance and Ross counties are near the middle of the pack for the number of referrals for a county. Although much lower in overall number of referrals than counties like Cuyahoga and Franklin, there are still enough referrals yearly to identify trends. Defiance County saw decreases between 2019 and 2020, but in smaller overall percentages than the higher referral counties. Ross County actually saw an increase in referrals of 2 percent from 2019 to 2020. The difference in school instruction models may be one factor accounting for some of the differences in 2020 referral trends between the high and middle referral counties.

### Franklin County

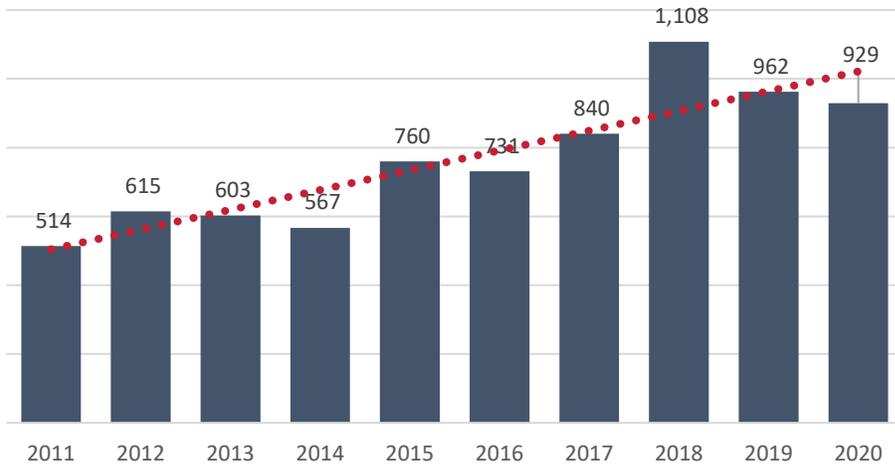


### Cuyahoga County



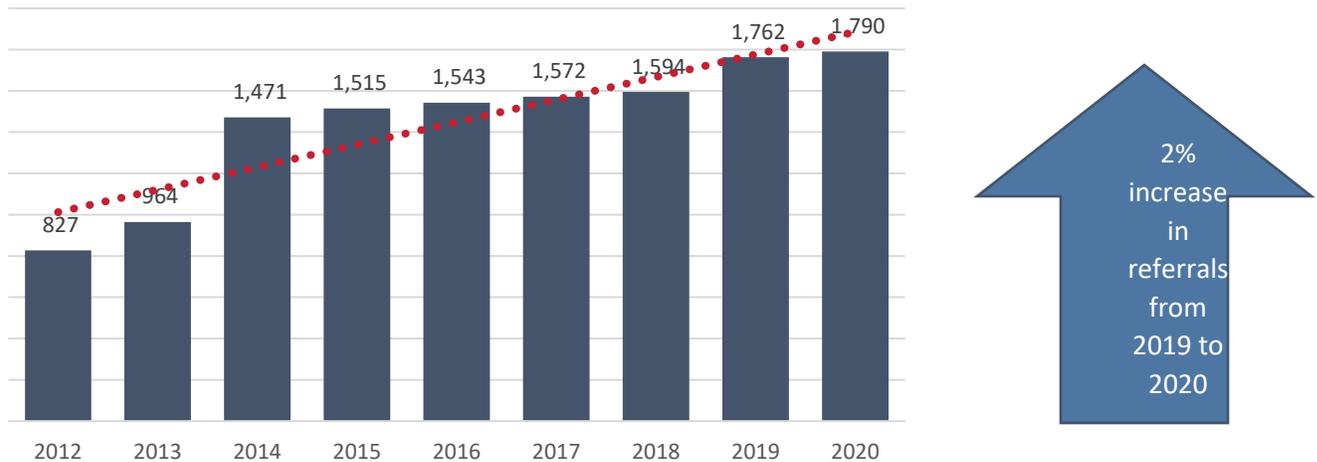
18% decrease in referrals from 2019 to 2020

### Defiance County



3% decrease in referrals from 2019 to 2020

## Ross County



## Relationship between educational model and child abuse and neglect referrals

Nearly everything in 2020 was different than any year before in drastic ways. School closures were believed to be an effective way to “flatten” the curve of COVID-19 by mitigating the risk of children becoming carriers of the virus between home and school. A study published in July 2020 in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* produced a model indicating spring school closures were effective at reducing spread of the virus.<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, while the risk of COVID-19 decreased with children out of physical school buildings, the safe haven that schools provide for many children abruptly disappeared and the risk of undetected abuse and neglect likely rose. What initially was expected to be a three-week shut down turned into months and for some, a full year, out of school buildings and out of the physical presence of watchful eyes.

In normal times, a drop in abuse and neglect referrals would be positive. In an incredibly stressful time, it is deeply alarming. Even for the most stable families, these are unstable times. No one could have predicted or prepared for the challenges of COVID-19 and the unveiling of racial injustice. Job loss, housing instability, financial insecurity, loss of personal space, racism and social isolation piled on top of the most pervasive and deadly health crisis of our time, upending all normalcy. Although impossible to measure, as caregiver stress increased, abuse and neglect likely increased in tandem.<sup>10,11</sup>

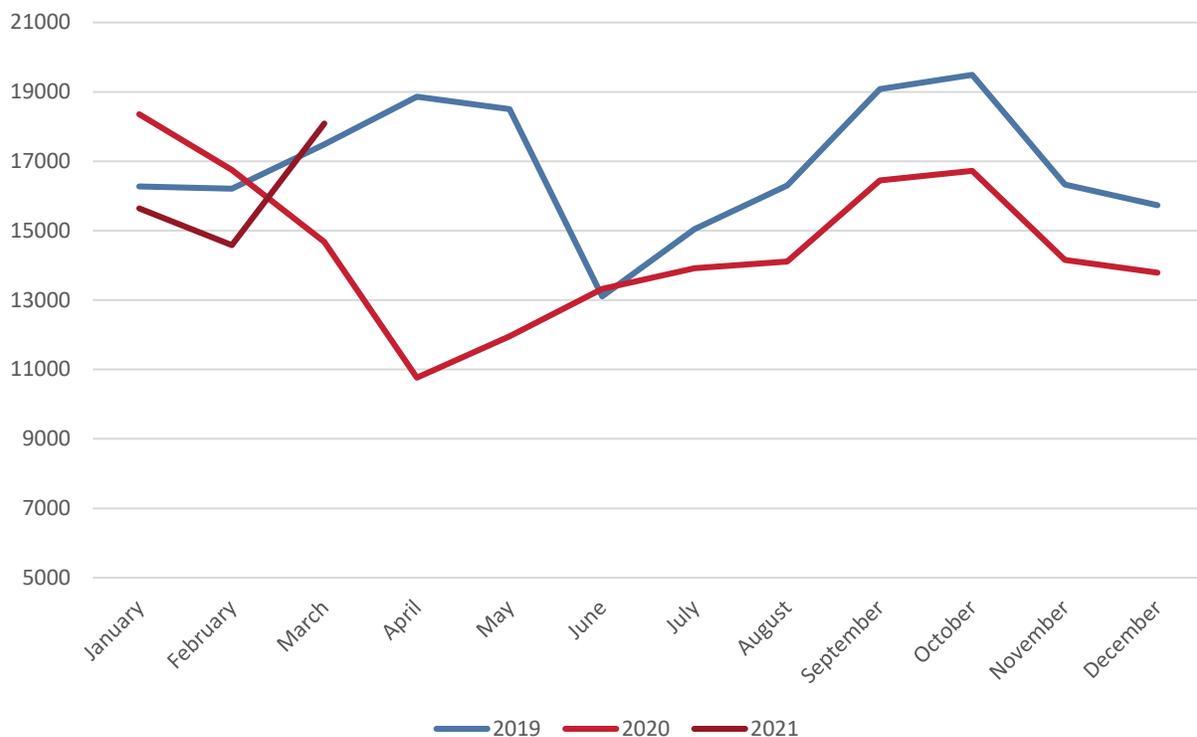
<sup>9</sup> Auger KA, Shah SS, Richardson T, et al. Association Between Statewide School Closure and COVID-19 Incidence and Mortality in the US. *JAMA*. 2020;324(9):859–870. doi:10.1001/jama.2020.14348

<sup>10</sup> Miragoli, S., Balzarotti, S., Camisasca, E., & Di Blasio, P. (2018). Parents’ perception of child behavior, parenting stress, and child abuse potential: Individual and partner influences. *Child abuse & neglect*, 84, 146-156.

<sup>11</sup> Rodriguez, C. M., & Green, A. J. (1997). Parenting stress and anger expression as predictors of child abuse potential. *Child abuse & neglect*, 21(4), 367-377.

Despite wide community effort, many children remained both physically and digitally disconnected through the end of the 2019/2020 school year. A comparison of Spring 2020 to Fall 2020, using monthly data, provides an estimate of the impact of school closures on undetected abuse and neglect. During the last two full months of the 2020 school year (April and May), referrals for abuse and neglect in the state decreased by 43 percent and 35 percent. More than 15,000 fewer referrals occurred in April and May of 2020 compared to April and May of 2019. Decreases compared to the previous year were far less drastic during the summer months, as referrals typically dip when school lets out and climb again in the fall.

### Statewide Child Abuse Referrals COVID-19



ODE maintains a weekly list of education delivery model utilization for public school districts by county. The models listed are considered a “high level categorization” of education delivery models and variation of the application of the models district by district. Schools operating outside of the public school system (charter and private schools) are not included in the ODE listing.

| Education Delivery Model <sup>12</sup> |   |
|--|---|
| Five-Day In-Person                     | <i>All students have the option of in-person instruction, even if schedules are somewhat adjusted</i>   |
| Full Access to Hybrid                  | <i>Mix of in-person and remote education, whereby every student has access to at least some in-person classes (some students may be entirely in-person)</i>   |
| Partial Access to Hybrid               | <i>A mix of in-person and remote education, whereby some students have access to at least some in-person classes (usually based on grade level or school)</i> |
| Fully Remote                           | <i>All students receive only remote education, which may include teacher-led instruction or student-paced learning</i>  |

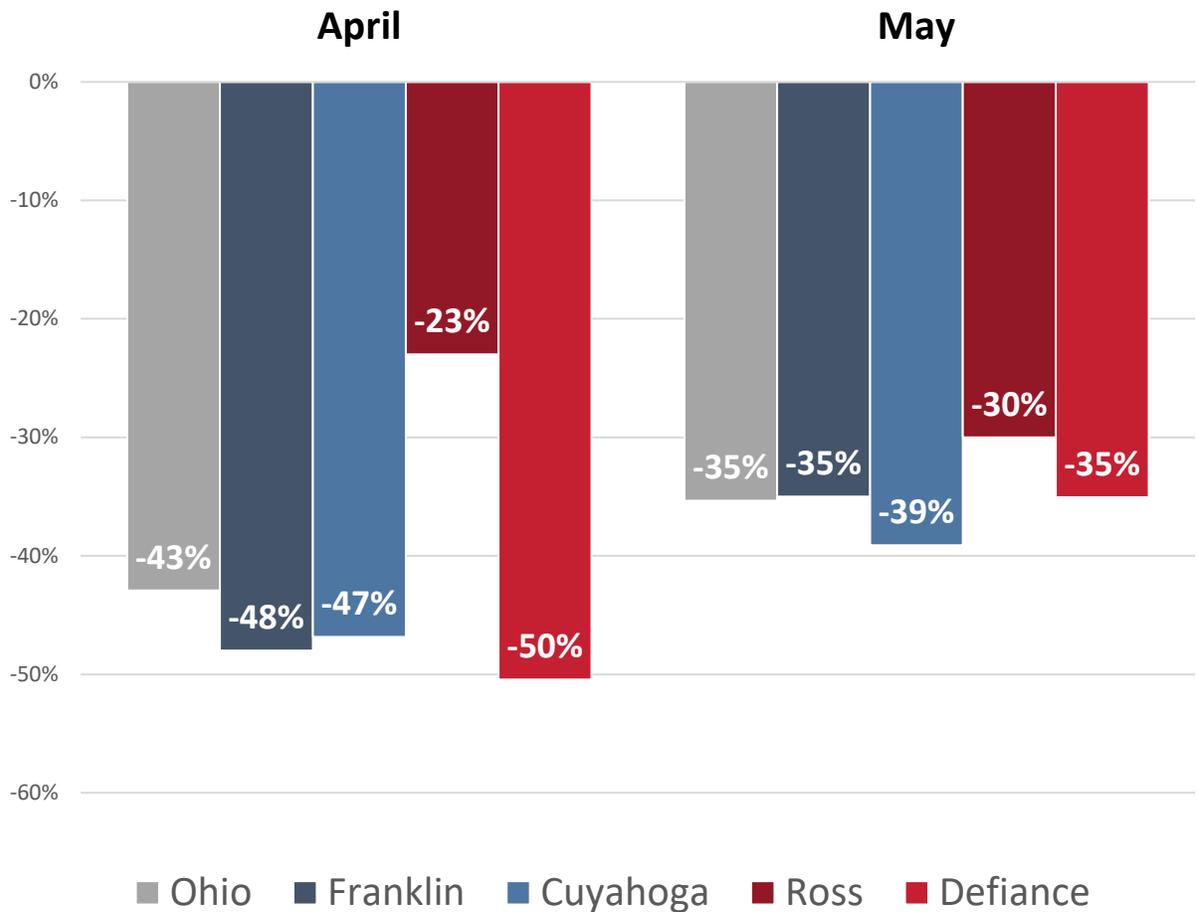
Comparing the change in monthly referrals from the time period when all schools in the state were fully in-person to when some schools were five-day, in-person and others remained fully remote can give insight into the impact an education delivery model has on child abuse and neglect referrals during the pandemic

While all students were physically disconnected from educators in the months of April and May, there were drastic decreases in child abuse and neglect referrals reported to the state. Statewide, 43 percent fewer referrals were made in April 2020 and 35 percent fewer referrals were made in May 2020. Similar decreases can be seen in the counties with the largest number of referrals, Franklin and Cuyahoga as well as a middle referral county, Defiance. While Ross County had a smaller decrease in referrals in April than other counties, the referral decrease in May was similar to those of Cuyahoga, Defiance and Franklin counties.

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<sup>12</sup> <http://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Reset-and-Restart>

## Percent Change in Abuse and Neglect Referrals From 2019 to 2020



Just a handful of counties had all public schools fully in-person during the month of October and most of September, including Ross and Defiance counties. During the months of September and October all public schools in Defiance were open to students to be fully in-person, five days a week. In Ross, other than one school district that was hybrid the first week of September, the public school districts were fully in-person, five days a week for the months of September and October. With spacing and masking, the school day looked and felt different than the previous year. Yet one thing remained the same, educators had eyes on children five days a week for a full two months.

No counties in Ohio had all public schools fully remote for the months of September and October. However, a majority of public school districts in Cuyahoga and Franklin counties were fully remote during the first month of the school year. And in the second month, the two largest counties had a combination of fully remote, hybrid and five-day, in-person models. Cuyahoga had a higher percentage of public districts fully-remote during those two months compared to Franklin County. The largest school districts within both these counties, the Cleveland Municipal School District and

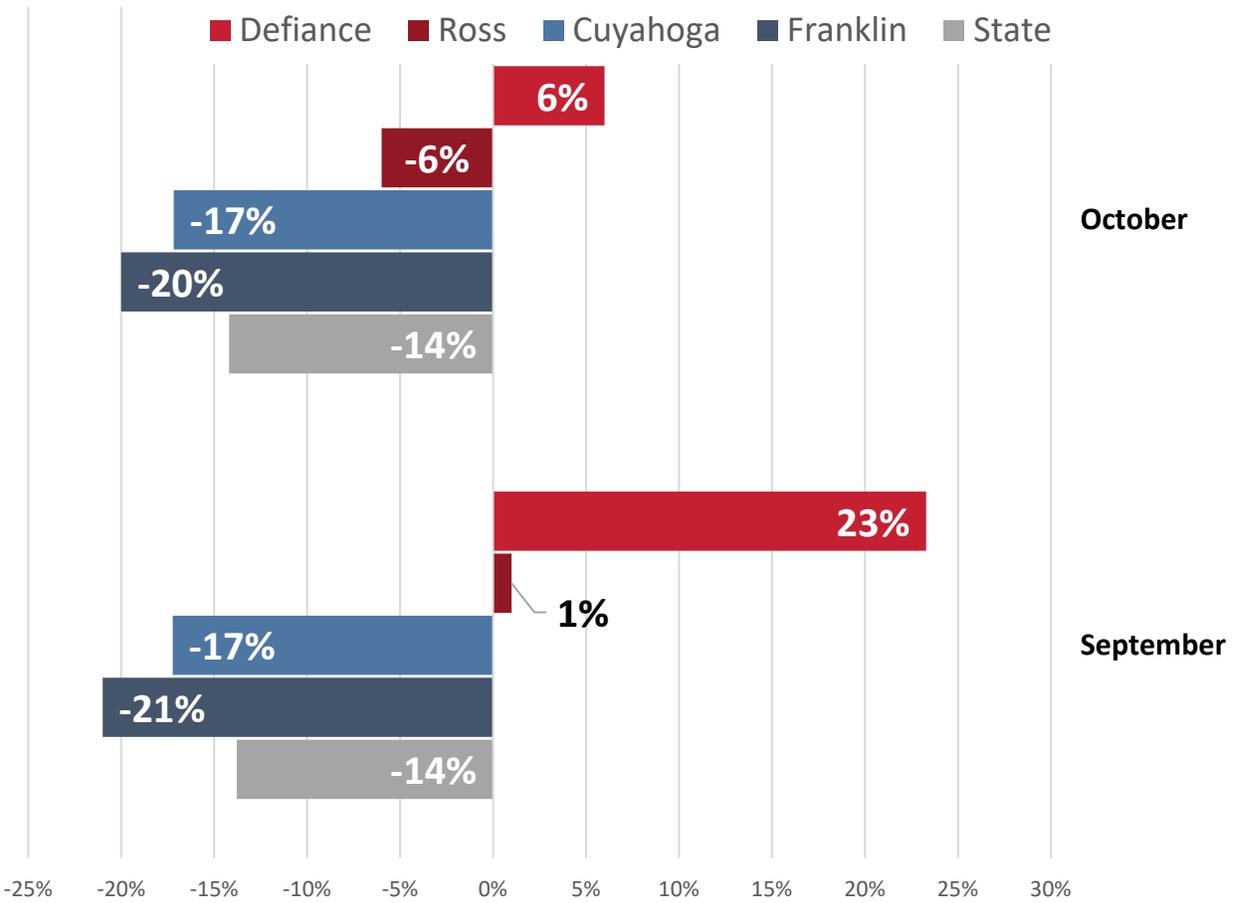
Columbus City Schools, were fully remote for the entire months of September and October. By that point in time, children who attended public schools in fully-remote districts had been out of the physical presence of educators for seven and a half months.

Percent of fully-remote public-school districts for September and October 2020

| Cuyahoga County | Week 1 | Week 2 | Week 3 | Week 4 | Week 5 |
|-----------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| September       | 81%    | 84%    | 81%    | 71%    | -      |
| October         | 55%    | 55%    | 42%    | 52%    | 42%    |
| Franklin County | Week 1 | Week 2 | Week 3 | Week 4 | Week 5 |
| September       | 81%    | 77%    | 70%    | 57%    | -      |
| October         | 45%    | 43%    | 36%    | 32%    | 30%    |

Of the counties examined, public school districts that offered five-day, in-person instruction in September and October saw a smaller drop in child abuse and neglect referrals from the previous year when compared to counties where more districts used the fully-remote education delivery model. Across the state, referrals in both September and October 2020 decreased by 14 percent from the previous year. This decrease is 4 percent less than the decrease from April and May 2019 to 2020. Counties with districts that offered five-day, in person instruction, Defiance and Ross, actually saw increases from September 2019 to September 2020. While Defiance County continued to see referral increases from the previous year in October, Ross County again experienced a 6 percent decrease in referrals. In Franklin and Cuyahoga counties, where the majority of public districts utilized the fully-remote education delivery model in September, there were 21 and 17 percent decreases in abuse and neglect referrals from the previous years, respectively. While additional districts in both of these counties switched to partial-access hybrid, full-access hybrid or five-day, in-person in October, the two largest school districts in their respective counties remained fully remote. Referrals in October were down 17 percent in Cuyahoga and 20 percent in Franklin from the previous year.

### Percent Change in Abuse and Neglect Referrals From 2019 to 2020



While it has limitations, this analysis suggests that when children returned to the more traditional five-day, in-person education delivery model, suspected cases of abuse and neglect were identified by educators and subsequent referrals increased. In these districts, children who had been trapped in abusive home environments once again had a non-parental or non-custodial adult monitoring for signs of maltreatment. Unfortunately, this could also indicate that children who remained in fully-remote education delivery models were not as closely monitored as their five-day, in-person peers and some may have been subject to ongoing neglect and abuse for nearly a year.

As noted previously, referrals stayed about the same in the summer months of 2020 as they had in the previous years. This seems to indicate non-school based reporters of abuse continued to have access to children to make those reports. Cuyahoga County had an increase in reports from social service agencies (which include mental health providers) and medical offices and hospitals. These referrals required attention from mental health or medical providers or those that were identified during visits with these professionals. With educators as the most common referral source during school months, removing the in-person access to children from trusted adults outside the family almost certainly had an impact on the total number of referrals.

Educators play a crucial role in protecting children. The variable infection rates of COVID-19 throughout the state over the past year, paired with individual school districts' ability to determine the best education delivery model for their communities, has provided a natural experiment that further demonstrates the importance of educators in identifying suspected abuse and neglect. Without outside sources identifying abuse and neglect, children have few avenues to escape unsafe home situations. As students return to schools after long periods away from educators, coaches, and other trusted adults, the students should be closely observed for signs of abuse and neglect. Knowing the vital role educators play in protecting children, extraordinary efforts should be made to provide those teachers with appropriate resources needed to process any secondary trauma they experience from the process of identifying and reporting abuse. This may include paid time off and immediate connections to mental health providers, among other supports.

Humanity has experienced the collective trauma of living through a pandemic that has taken more than a half a million Americans, including more than 18,500 Ohioans. Students throughout our community will present this trauma in various ways. As of March 2021, every school district in Ohio is offering some option for in-person instruction and every classroom environment should be using trauma-informed practices to mitigate the effects of the pandemic - whether the trauma is personal loss or abuse.

Though the rates of infection, hospitalization and death are currently trending down in many areas, the impact of COVID-19 will be felt for years to come. Families have experienced various disruptions and losses over the past year that will continue to create stressful and unstable home environments. Mandates and decisions to close schools undoubtedly saved lives. We now have an even more powerful tool to reduce the risk of COVID-19: safe and effective vaccinations. All educators in Ohio have now had an opportunity to be fully vaccinated, rates of infection, hospitalization and deaths have decreased. Many professional organizations including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention<sup>13</sup> and the American Academy of Pediatrics<sup>14</sup> have called for the full reopening of schools. Student safety and well-being should be the top priority as school districts make decisions about education delivery models for the remainder of the year and the start of the 2021/2022 school year.

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/operation-strategy.html>

<sup>14</sup> <https://services.aap.org/en/news-room/news-releases/aap/2021/american-academy-of-pediatrics-updates-guidance-on-school-safety-amid-pandemic/>



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