

PROTECTING OR HURTING: HOW COVID-19 AFFECTED THE LIVES OF CHILD  
ABUSE VICTIMS

By

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## **DEDICATION**

During 2020, many people forgot how the global pandemic impacted children worldwide. This thesis focuses on child abuse victims in Texas to raise awareness for what happened behind closed doors. Although Texas is home to only a small portion of children within the world, it is important to understand that no matter where a child lives, we should have the goal of helping them since they may not be in a position to help themselves.

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## **ABSTRACT**

Many unexpected issues arose when schools were shut down and students were sent home during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, child abuse victims were left defenseless with their abuser, with no teacher or doctor to be their advocate. This thesis focuses on two counties in Texas: Travis County, an urban community, and Smith County, a rural community. The number of alleged child abuse cases and the number of completed CPS investigations from 2000, 2005, 2010, 2015, and 2020 were studied to determine a spike in reported abuse during state-wide quarantines. The data proved a significant spike in the amount of abuse in both Travis and Smith County.

Additionally, there is an organization in each county that provides aid to victims of child abuse. Texas Advocacy Project in Travis County and Hope Haven of East Texas in Smith County had to adapt to continue helping children during school shutdowns. Important information from interviews with individuals from both organizations is included to reveal how the organizations were affected by COVID-19 quarantines. Both organizations had unique approaches to addressing the school lockdowns while simultaneously increasing their aid to abused children. These organizations adapted to COVID-19 quarantines, and the changes that were made reflect the spike in overall child abuse cases during 2020.



## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Since January 9, 2020, when the World Health Organization announced a mysterious outbreak in Wuhan, China, no one could have guessed how drastically the world would change in the following months ("A Timeline of COVID-19 Developments in 2020"). Nations started shutting down one after another because of how quickly the coronavirus was spreading. The pandemic caused people to lose their jobs, schools to close, and economies to crash, and the United States was not immune to these issues ("COVID-19's Historic Economic Impact, in the U.S. and Abroad"). In mid-February of 2020, schools across the United States began temporarily shutting down, which quickly became permit closures as coronavirus cases rapidly grew daily (Decker et al.). When schools were shut down, students had to adapt to online learning, which led to some unanticipated issues. Many institutions and organizations have studied how online schooling possibly affected students, and the Brookings Institute found that learning gains had decreased because students were not physically in classrooms (Kuhfeld et al.). Regardless, these studies focused on how older students have been affected academically when in reality, more attention should have been given to younger children. When students were taken out of school, not only did they lose the opportunity to interact with other students, but teachers were not able to notice any possible issues.

Educators have an enormous responsibility for preparing children for adulthood, but they advocate for students who do not directly pertain to their education. For example, when a child is abused within their home, teachers have been trained to look for signs and help children seek proper help. In Texas, civil and criminal laws protect children from abuse and neglect; someone needs to report it ("When and How to Report

Child Abuse"). Unfortunately, younger children may not know how to or are terrified to ask for help, so it is vital for teachers, nurses, and doctors to be aware of signs of abuse. Since the COVID-19 pandemic sent students home for months, abused children were left in the home with their abusers, and there was no easy way for a teacher to see any possible red flags.

Within the state of Texas, an educator is legally obligated to report "any type of suspected abuse or neglect, not just acts of physical abuse" within 48 hours following the initial suspicion ("Child Abuse or Neglect Reporting Requirements"). According to the global non-profit organization Committee for Children, the main reasons why educators are essential to child safety, especially in abusive households. The article highlighted how teachers are most likely the only individual outside of the family to be aware of the abuse and how a child's safety rests on their ability to file a report (Gulbrandson). Nevertheless, educators seemed to be limited in helping abused students due to school closures brought on by the COVID pandemic.

School closures across the United States started slow and progressively intensified. Across the globe, schools closed for over 168 million children for almost an entire year due to COVID-19 lockdowns ("Covid-19: Schools Globally Completely Closed"). As the COVID-19 virus spread, school closures went from a school district decision to a statewide mandate starting March 6, 2020. In 2020, in the United States, there were 124,000 public and private schools ("Map: Coronavirus and School Closures"). In Texas, there were 8,909 schools closed during the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years. More specifically, in Travis County, there were 210 schools closed, and Smith County had a total of 62 schools closed ("Schools and Education"). Now that

2020 is over, schools are opening back up and allowing children to go back into the classroom. Unfortunately, although society is working towards returning to normal, there is no way of knowing how the shutdown affected abused children mentally and physically.

Through comparative analysis, data from 2000, 2005, 2010, 2015, and 2020 will be used to determine any irregularities during 2020 of child abuse reports and investigations in two drastically different Texas counties. Smith and Travis County will represent the difference between rural and urban cities; thus, data for these counties will be the main focus. Additionally, each county is an organization with the specific goal of helping abuse victims, predominantly children. For example, Texas Advocacy Project is based in Austin, Texas, which is found in Travis County, and Hope Haven of East Texas is based in Lindale, which is found in Smith County. Alongside abuse report data, these organizations will be compared to how they function and adapt to constantly changing COVID-19 regulations.

## **II. STATISTICAL DATA**

### **2000**

According to the “2000 Data Book” put out by the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, in 2000, Travis County reported a child population of 176,335. Of these children, there were 8,633 alleged victims of some form of child abuse or neglect. Due to so many alleged victims, 5,277 Child Protective Service cases were opened. However, only 1,653 children were confirmed to be victims of abuse or neglect.

Compared to Smith County, which is relatively more rural than Travis County, the reported child population was 40,433. There were only 2,300 alleged victims of child abuse within this population, which led to 1,414 completed CPS cases. Out of the 1,414, there were 476 confirmed victims of child abuse or neglect.

Across the state of Texas the child population was 5,650,627, and within that population there were 199,184 alleged victims of child abuse and neglect. However, there were only 121,732 opened and completed CPS investigations. Of the completed CPS cases, there were 46,817 confirmed victims of child abuse and neglect.

Within the two counties, the percentage of confirmed abuse victims to overall CPS cases was very similar. In Travis County, 31.3% of abuse or neglect cases were confirmed, and Smith County was slightly higher with 33.7%. Additionally, both counties had a lower percentage rate than the state of Texas, which totaled 38.5% of confirmed investigations and victims of child abuse.

## **2005**

According to the “2005 Data Book,” in 2005, Travis County reported an increase in the child population, totaling 205,511. Of these children, there were 9,545 alleged victims of some form of child abuse or neglect. Due to so many alleged victims, 5,869 Child Protective Service cases were opened. However, only 1,971 children were confirmed to be victims of abuse or neglect.

The statistics in Smith County from that year were significantly smaller than those of Travis County, and the reported child population was 49,126. There were only 2,135 alleged victims of child abuse within this population, which led to 1,281 completed CPS cases. Out of the 1,281, there were 351 confirmed victims of child abuse or neglect.

In comparison, the data for Texas was considerably lower. Although the child population increased to 6,277,205, the total of alleged child abuse victims in 2005 was 265,349. There were 160,069 opened and completed CPS investigations, and of these investigations, 61,433 were confirmed victims of child abuse and neglect.

Since 2000, the percentage in Travis County only slightly increased to 33.6% over five years. On the other hand, Smith County significantly decreased to 27.4%. Thus, even though the above counties had changed over five years, the entire state stayed relatively consistent, with the amount of confirmed CPS cases being 38.4%.

## **2010**

According to the “2010 Data Book,” in 2010, Travis County reported an increase in the child population, totaling 232,199. Of these children, there were 9,278 alleged victims of some form of child abuse or neglect. Due to so many alleged victims, 5,529

Child Protective Service cases were opened. However, only 1,735 children were confirmed to be victims of abuse or neglect.

The statistics in Smith County from that year were significantly smaller than Travis County's, and the reported child population was 52,391. There were only 1,728 alleged victims of child abuse within this population, which led to 1,063 completed CPS cases. Out of the 1,063, there were 363 confirmed victims of child abuse or neglect.

The overall child population in Texas increased to 6,584,709 in 2010; of these children, there were 288,080 total alleged victims of child abuse and neglect. In addition, there were 169,583 opened and completed CPS investigations. Of these investigations, there were 66,897 confirmed victims of child abuse and neglect.

In 2010, Travis County seemed to have a slight statistical decrease to 31.4%, which is nothing compared to the significant increase of confirmed cases in Smith County. Over five, the amount of completed CPS investigations decreased. Yet, the percentage of confirmed cases was up to 34.1%, which is alarming considering that since 2000 the number of confirmed cases has stayed relatively consistent. Smith County was not the only percentage that changed because the overall percentage of confirmed abuse cases was up to 39.4% in Texas.

## **2015**

According to the “2015 Data Book,” in 2015, Travis County reported an increase in the child population, totaling 277,652. Of these children, there were 9,545 alleged victims of some form of child abuse or neglect. Due to so many alleged victims, 7,701

Child Protective Service cases were opened. However, only 1,618 children were confirmed to be victims of abuse or neglect.

The statistics in Smith County from that year were significantly smaller than those of Travis County, and the reported child population was 56,308. There were only 2,135 alleged victims of child abuse within this population, which led to 1,434 completed CPS cases. Out of the 1,434, there were 330 confirmed victims of child abuse or neglect.

In Texas, the child population jumped to 7,311,923 and there were a total of 290,471 alleged victims of child abuse and neglect in 2015. During 2015 there were 176,868 completed CPS investigations. Of these 176,868 investigations, there were 66,721 confirmed victims of child abuse and neglect.

After five years, the data in Travis County changed for the better because the overall percentage of confirmed cases to completed CPS investigations continued to decrease to 21%. Smith County also continued to decrease during the five years to 23%. Compared to the entire state, not only were both counties lower than the state percentage, but the state percentage also decreased to 37.7% out of 176,868 total completed CPS investigations.

## **2020**

2020 was a very unprecedented year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the lack of data regarding child abuse cases within Texas, the following data was collected from a variety of sources to provide the most accurate information.

According to the “Child Abuse/Neglect Investigations: Alleged and Confirmed Perpetrator Recidivism FY2011-FY2020” by the State of Texas, Travis County reported

a continuous increase in the child population, which totaled 287,355 in 2020. When 2020 came to an end, there was a highly significant increase of alleged and confirmed abuse cases throughout Travis County. In Travis County, there were 8,212 completed abuse and neglect investigations, and of those completed investigations, there were 2,391 confirmed abuse and neglect cases.

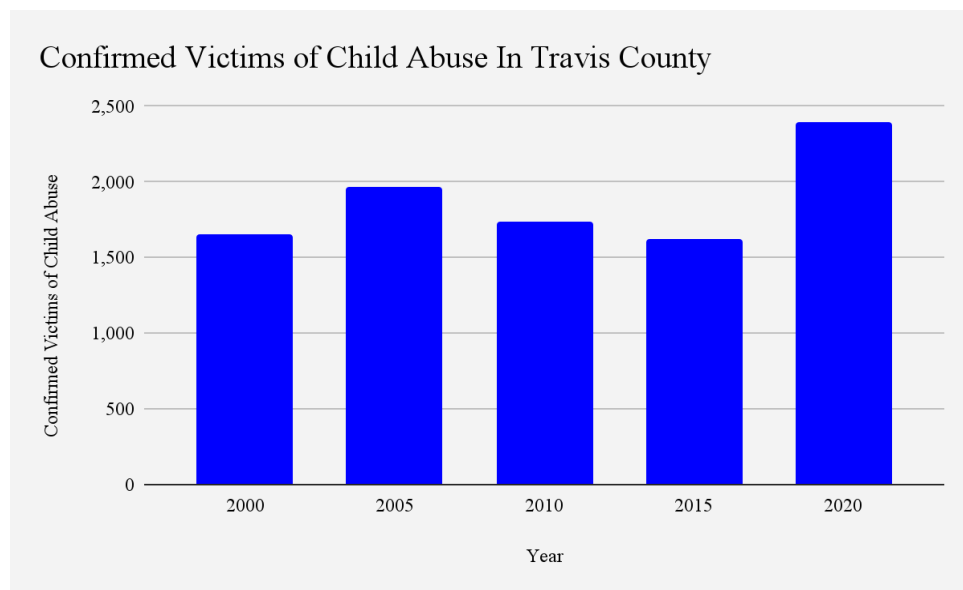
In 2020, the population continued to increase, and the reported child population was 57,206. Smith County had a slight increase regarding CPS cases and child abuse, but the increase was not as significant of an increase. In Smith County, there were 2,063 completed abuse and neglect investigations, and of those completed investigations, there were 634 confirmed abuse and neglect cases.

In 2020, the Texas child population only increased to 7,432,103, which did not follow the pattern of previous years. According to the “2020 Data Book,” the number of alleged victims of child abuse and neglect drastically decreased to 253,274. In 2020, there were 154,593 investigations across Texas; of these investigations, there were 68,461 confirmed child abuse victims.



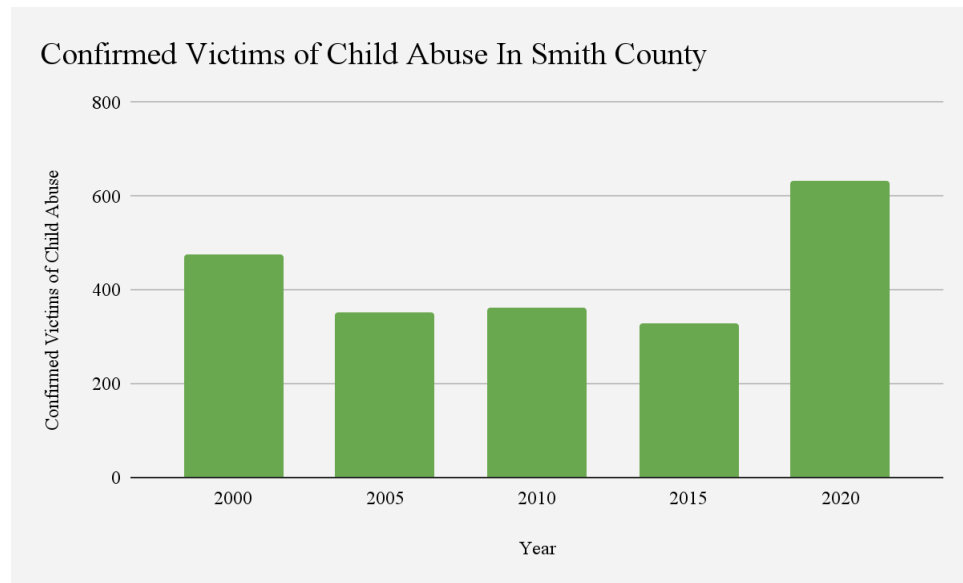
### III. UNDERSTANDING THE DATA

Within the data above, it is important to focus on the patterns of increasing numbers through the years, and then how the 2020 data changed in comparison to previous years. Once the data is broken down to raw numbers, it speaks for itself. In the last 20 years, there is no consistent increase or decrease pattern in Travis County, although there is an uncommon change in 2020. Compared to 2015, the number of alleged victims spiked, and the confirmed victims of child abuse almost doubled in 2020. This proves that in a highly populated county such as Travis, school closures and quarantines had an impact on child abuse and neglect cases.

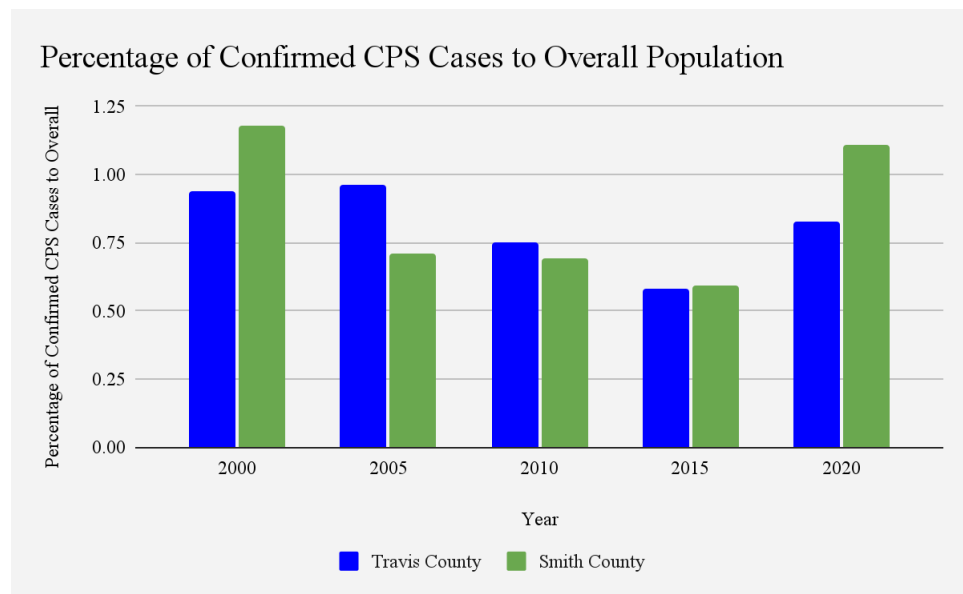


Travis County was not the only one that showed changes in data patterns. For the past 20 years, Smith County has shown a clear decline in alleged and confirmed victims in child abuse and neglect. Nevertheless, Smith County was not immune to changes due to COVID-19. Smith County was 26 cases away from doubling the confirmed number of abuse and neglect cases during 2020. In fact, 2020 had the highest raw number of

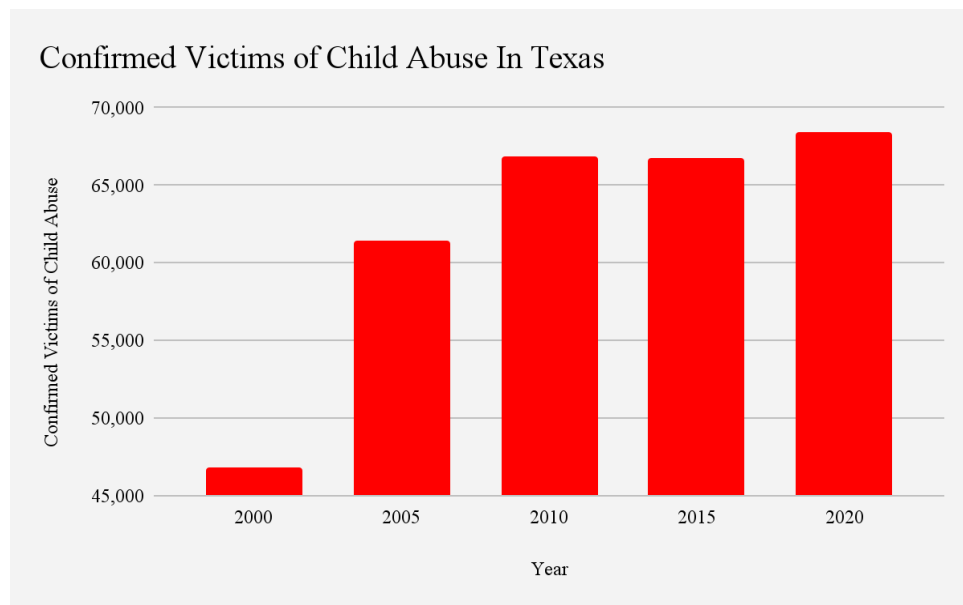
confirmed abuse cases in Smith County's history, and the only change was the global pandemic.



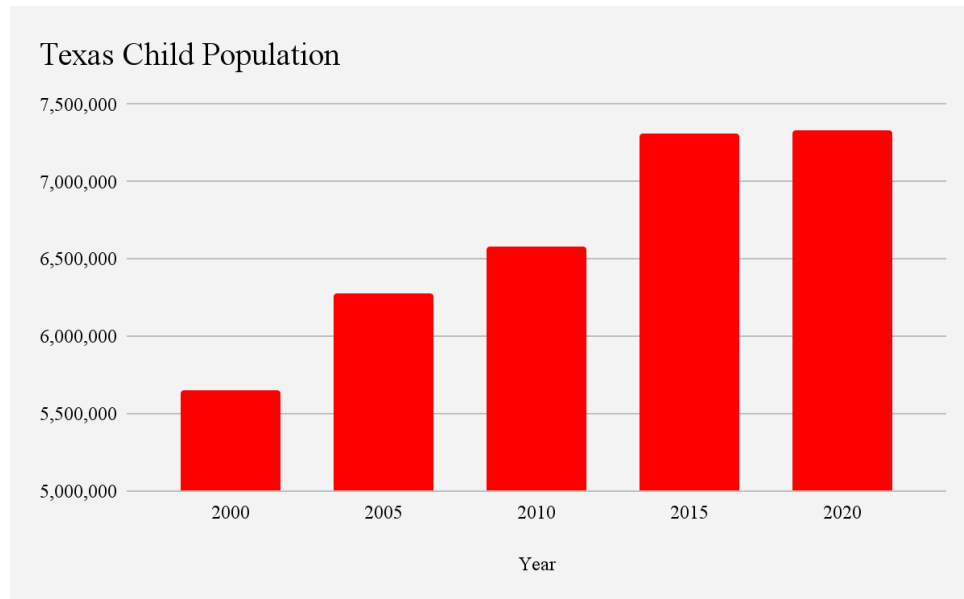
Even though the above graphs show the raw data in each county, it is important to keep in mind that the child population also increased over the last 20 years. The percentages of confirmed child abuse cases to overall child population within each county is also needed to fully understand the affects that COVID-19 had on children.



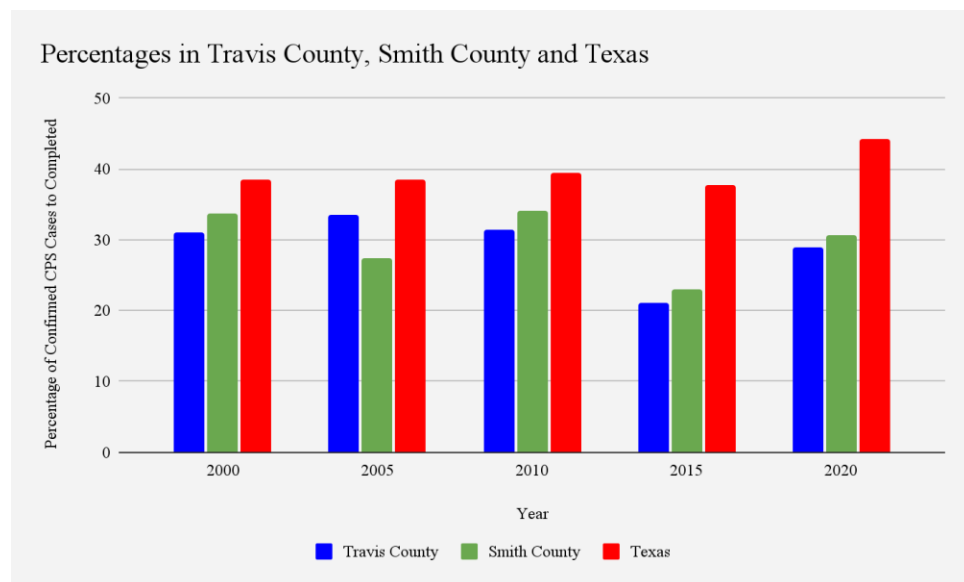
The graph above illustrates a more proportional way to look at the data in both Travis and Smith County. It is very clear that as child population continued to increase, there was a direct link on the amount of child abuse reports and cases, which also increased. The data from the entire state of Texas was similar to the two individual counties; however, since there were 254 counties factored in, the data slightly varied throughout the last 20 years.



Specifically looking at the confirmed cases of child abuse in Texas, there does not appear to be as significant of an increase in 2020 compared to the two counties. The reason for that is because the child population from 2005 to 2015 jumped by almost one million, which affected the overall numbers. That is why understanding the impacts that changes in overall child population have is crucial when studying how school closures and COVID-19 quarantines impacted child abuse reports in Texas.



Considering that the overall child population did not significantly increase between 2015 and 2020, that explains why the data does not jump like it did in Travis and Smith County. In both counties, there was a noticeable change in child population between 2015 and 2020, which caused spikes in child abuse during the COVID-19 pandemic. Regardless, there was still an increase in Texas during 2020 and school closures and quarantines largely factored into that increase.



More specifically, the final graph represents the percentage of confirmed cases to completed CPS investigations in the last 20 years. There are a few things to take note of when studying the data. First, within the past 20 years, Texas has stayed relatively constant but had a slight percentage spike in 2020. Second, since 2005, Travis County appears to be slowly yet consistently declining, spiking in 2020. Finally, Smith County has a consistent pattern of increasing during one five-year segment and then decreasing during the next five years. Overall, the three represent very different changes and patterns regarding the number of confirmed CPS cases over the past 20 years.

## **IV. ORGANIZATIONS BY COUNTY**

### **Travis County: Texas Advocacy Project**

Texas Advocacy Project is a non-profit organization that aims to stop “dating and domestic violence, sexual assault, and stalking in Texas (TAP website). The organization provides free legal aid and services to abuse victims and advances prevention through public outreach and education. Texas Advocacy Project is the largest organization in Central Texas that focuses on helping victims of domestic abuse, which is why it is important to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic affected them, and their work.

During the interview with Texas Advocacy Project Chief Executive Officer Heather Bellino, she explained how the organization had to make drastic changes during the pandemic. Before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, Texas Advocacy Project not only helped victims of abuse but also taught multiple statewide seminars in schools regarding the signs of child and family abuse. The seminars also cover steps a child should take to reach out for help if they are in danger. During the early stages of school closures, Bellino explained that the goal was to still host seminars, but the organization needed to adjust them to fit within an online classroom.

Another major change was how the organization provided aid to these victims (Bellino). Texas Advocacy Project increased their online and remote communication, both with live chat and the hotline phone number. Bellino mentioned in the interview that moving everything online did help with the employee recruitment process because Teen Hope Ambassadors did not need to just be in the Austin, Texas area (Bellino). Texas Advocacy Project now has ambassadors and lectures from surrounding states as well, which has allowed for them to increase the number of school seminars they teach.

Now in 2021, Bellino explained that one of the main talking points she has been using in educational seminars is that as soon as the lockdowns were lifted, there was a spike in both abusive and lethal cases. Based on the victims that they have helped over the last two years, specifically, since children weren't able to leave the home a majority of the time, child abusers were left unchecked. "The batterers were using that as power and control" and numerous victims were all telling the same story of how they were not sure if they could even escape due to lockdown restrictions (Bellino). As the nation is starting to return back to what is considered normal, the Texas advocacy project still helps thousands of children, and even adult victims every year, and did not let school lockdowns and the pandemic stop them from teaching people to be aware of signs of abuse.

### **Smith County: Hope Haven of East Texas**

Through partnerships with churches, families, and the community, Hope Haven of East Texas's mission is to provide a safe home environment and equip neglected and abused girls in the foster care system, preparing them for healthy adult living. Hope Haven of East Texas is a unique organization because instead of just providing money for a girl who is abused or in the foster care system, they provide a home that the girls are able to live in until they are 18 years old.

Hope Haven of East Texas officially opened its doors in August of 2017 and was founded by Lisa Ferguson. In an interview with Mrs. Ferguson, she explained that she started working with foster children well before Hope Haven came into fruition. She began working with foster girls in 2010 on a one-to-one basis to counsel them, help find

families, and offer any help in adjusting to the world around them. The purpose of the home is to "give teenage girls in the foster care system who are victims of abuse a sense of safety and provide them with a relatively normal life" (Ferguson). The home can house up to 16 girls at one time, and the girls are still able to go to the local schools, receive fully covered healthcare, and have personal counseling.

Since the pandemic forced everyone to adjust their daily life, Hope Haven was no different. Since girls could enter the home at any given time based on their needs, they had to set up quarantining protocols that kept the other girls safe while still keeping a new member of the house out of an abusive situation. Right next to the house, they "set up an unattached room, it was considered [their] version of a grandmother suite, for a girl to be able to quarantine," explained Ferguson. At the beginning of a pandemic, it took some time to get used to COVID health and safety protocols, but "removing children from abusive homes remained the number one priority" (Ferguson). Even though COVID-19 directly affected Hope Haven because they provide a permanent home, they were able to make the necessary adjustments to still ensure help for girls who needed them.

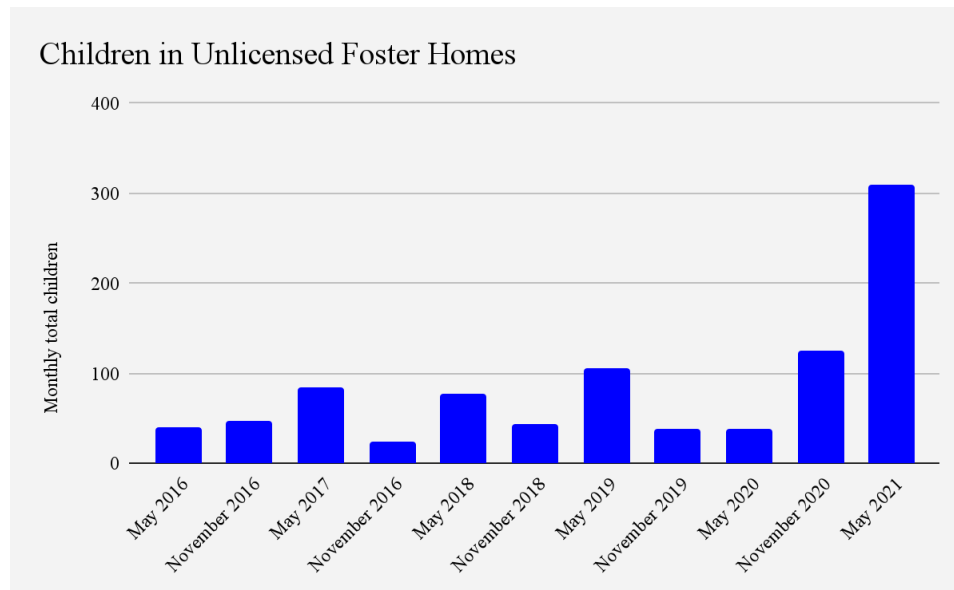
These organizations stood out because they truly adapted to the COVID-19 pandemic and quarantine protocols. Even though there was a global pandemic that affected millions, that does not mean that helping victims of abuse, especially children, get put on hold. Both organizations have been making a difference, even before the pandemic, which is why they should be seen as a standard for other similar organizations. In moments of crisis where a child is being injured, it is pivotal for those abuse victims to receive the most help possible.





## V. IMPLICATIONS

Although the COVID-19 pandemic had devastating effects throughout the year 2020, there are many issues that are likely to carry over into future years. Especially confirmed CPS investigations in Texas where the child was placed in a foster home. Not only was there a spike in the amount of abuse state-wide, but that also means there was an increase in the number of children placed in foster homes and orphanages, and many may not have been able to adhere to questioning regulations. In fact, since there was a spike in abuse cases in 2020, there were many foster care cases pushed to a later date to limit the amount of possible COVID-19 exposure, in turn creating a growing issue with foster home overcrowding, causing “hundreds of children [to] spend their nights in hotels and churches and on office floors” (Bohra). Additionally, makeshift foster homes are put together in a short period of time, which means that some COVID\_19 quarantining rules might have had to be ignored in order to place children in a safer home.



Over the past five years, there has been a drastic increase in the number of children in the Texas foster care system, and foster homes overcrowding is adding to the

problem (Bohra). Looking directly at the data, since November of 2020, there was a significant increase in the number of children placed in unorthodox foster homes, which is when schools started to open back up in Texas. The data for May 2020 was slightly lower than the year prior since teachers and nurses were not as accessible to children to notice signs of abuse. Nevertheless, once schools opened back up, all of the children abused during the national quarantine could receive help. Based on the data, that number is still growing and overflowing into 2021. It is clear that the spikes in abuse cases and foster care overcrowding directly resulted from the impacts of COVID-19, primarily school closures.

In 2020, the world experienced a pandemic that affected everyone's daily lives and had lasting harmful impacts. Across the globe, schools began shutting down at alarming rates, which removed students from an educational environment and gave them no choice but to stay home during the pandemic. Unfortunately, for victims of child abuse and neglect, staying home was not a luxury. Once schools closed and parents were advised to keep children home, teachers, nurses, and doctors could not notice signs of physical or emotional abuse in a child. Without advocates for these children, there was a noticeably significant decline in the number of reported or alleged victims of child abuse in Texas. Of those reported, there was an increase in the amount of confirmed CPS child abuse investigations. The data focused not just on 2020 but how the year compared to the last twenty in Texas.

Without the help of organizations such as the Texas Advocacy Project and Hope Haven of East Texas, abused children would not have a safe space. Implementing online classes to educate teachers about signs of a virtual classroom and creating a permanent

quarantine room ensure that there is still a way to help a victim of abuse. When the global pandemic shut down practically the whole world, most focused on how they were going to cope, thus forgetting that many people could not help themselves, such as children. Schools were designed to be a place for education and a place for growth and safety. It was not until schools began to open back up when teachers and doctors were able to see how extreme the pandemic affected these children and their home life. Being aware of child abuse signs and spikes in each community is critical for positively impacting those who need it.

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