

INSIDIOUS:

CHILD ABUSE FESTERS UNSEEN IN HOOD COUNTY



TRAPPED IN TERROR: Due to COVID-19 conditions, with school cancellations and millions unemployed, children have no escape, and the stressors that can trigger abuse thrive. Without exposure to observers, child abuse reports have plummeted. Those who work with victims in Hood County are uneasy about the implications.

'We know kids aren't safe'

Reports of child abuse plummet, but it isn't good news

BY CHRISTINE DORAN
HOOD COUNTY NEWS

When COVID-19 began to spread in the U.S. and states swiftly shut down non-essential businesses and required or recommended that citizens quarantine, they inadvertently created a breeding ground for an even subtler disease to take root: child abuse. Schools shut their doors, and children were suddenly out of the public

schools typical summertime statistics, when kids are out of school and have fewer eyes on them, according to Sinclair.

"It's not that we think that child abuse is down right now - we don't. In fact, if anything, it's probably up," he said. "But the fact that less reports are being made doesn't mean that less child abuse is happening. It just means that it's happening and nobody knows about it. Which is really bad."

But the child abuse reports

curing during COVID-19 is still unknown.

"That's a really subjective term. Overall, the number of calls is going down. I don't know how they're classifying 'severity,' so I can't really speak to that," she said. "The reality is that none of us have been through a global pandemic before. So we don't know what kind of affect it's going to have on child safety overall. We just don't have the data; we don't really have a full picture yet. So we really don't know exactly how it's affecting families and children."

Nonprofit executive directors in Hood County are also grappling with the uncertainty.

"It's just that ambiguity and uncertainty," Margaret Cohenour, the executive director of Paluxy River Children's Advocacy Center, said. "We're used to making decisions based on data and forward-thinking."

"And now we're looking at a 50% reduction in calls to the statewide hotline. And do we really think 50% less child abuse is happening? We know it's not. We know kids aren't safe, and they're not in safe homes, and so that's our dilemma. We can't go check (on the children)."

The majority of child abuse reports come from schools, according to Cohenour and Sinclair. So removing kids from school means third parties aren't around to spot red flags.

And while the severity of the crimes might be higher, the impact of the abuse against children is yet to be determined, according to Layna Lankford, the clinical director at Paluxy River Children's Advocacy Center.

"As far as the severity of the cases, a lot of that is yet to be determined, as far as the impact (on the kids)," she said. "Because we (mental health professionals) are al-

ways going to look at it as the impact of the abuse on the one who experienced it, as far as how severe it was. Law enforcement - they're gonna look at the severity of the crime. So we really have a different perspective on it."

However, the conditions surrounding COVID-19 do present a high-risk environment for kids, making it likely that the abuse that they are experiencing will have traumatizing effects, according to Lankford.

"We do know that stress, financial problems, not being able to escape from a situation - all of these things can increase abuse," she said. "In fact, the feeling of not being able to escape is one of the components of an experience feeling traumatic."

"So even the experience of not being able to leave the house - feeling that out of control - can be experienced as traumatic by some people. And so as that level of stress rises in the home, and not being able to get away from it, if people have poor coping skills, then, absolutely, it can increase the risk of abuse."

The risk factors bode poorly for kids in the county, suggesting that the rates of abuse are likely higher than usual, despite the reports being lower; it is likely that the numbers won't begin to be understood until school

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District Attorney Ryan Sinclair

opens again, according to Cohenour and Sinclair.

"(Quarantine) did create this artificial pressurized environment, I think, in the home, which a lot of kids, I think, are being victimized by," Sinclair said. "I think that when these kids come back to day care, when they come back to school, when they start having these safe third-party adults that they can report to in a manner that the child feels safe, then

See something? Say something

■ If you or someone you know may be a victim of child abuse, call the child abuse hotline: 1-800-252-5400 or report online at: www.txabusehotline.org

■ Texas law states that anyone who suspects a child is being abused, neglected, or exploited is required to report it to Department of Family and Protective Services. If you do not report suspected abuse, you can be held liable.

I think we'll start seeing more reports of this abuse."

Cohenour and Sinclair both expressed uncertainty about the manner in which states should reopen, citing their lack of credentials as disease experts.

"You're always going to have pros and cons, and one of the costs of a lockdown is that kids are getting victimized in a pressurized environment at home, and they don't have anybody to report that to," Sinclair said. "But on the flip side, there's the cost of, 'Well, how do we contain the spread of the virus in the best way?' And I can't speak to that, because I'm not a disease expert. But I can say that kids are feeling the effects of being with their abusers and not having their safe people to report to."

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DISTRESSING DECREASE: CPS has seen a sharp decline in calls reporting child abuse since COVID-19 caused the closure of schools. But child abuse hasn't decelerated. If anything, it's worse than usual, according to those who work with victims of child abuse.

eye, trapped at home; for some, it has had devastating consequences.

The state hotline for child abuse went quiet: the calls to report child abuse were cut in half, according to local nonprofit leaders; but nobody is celebrating this statistic.

"When you have a situation like we have now with COVID, there are less third parties for the kids to report to," District Attorney Ryan Sinclair said. "They're not seeing their teachers. They're not seeing their day care workers. Maybe on Zoom they're going to school, but it's not like going to school in person where those kids have those safe adults who they can report to."

The number of calls mir-

that are being made are out of the ordinary, according to Sinclair, in one crucial sense: The severity of the crimes has worsened, he said.

"While their numbers are down, they are seeing more severe types of, at least, physical abuse cases. Some very, very, very severe physical abuse is being reported," he said. "But overall, their total numbers are down. So it's dropping in total numbers, but (with) an increase in severity of the kinds of cases that are actually being reported."

However, Marissa Gonzales, the media relations director for the Department of Family and Protective Services in North Texas, said that the severity of the child abuse oc-

ture life, and it made me feel worthless. It made me feel less-than. But through my faith I found worth, and even though I struggle with self-image, I struggle with eating, I struggle with all of that - and I always will; it never goes away - I have beauty, in some form or fashion, to some person," she said.

"In Christ, I am beautiful, regardless of how many shatters and pieces of tape and

leftover glue there are in my metaphorical broken vase. It's shattered, but the shatters tell a story. And it's still worth something. So regardless of how hard it is to speak out, it's the best choice you can make, because you're gonna find somebody else who can learn from you. Your story is unique to you, but you're not alone."

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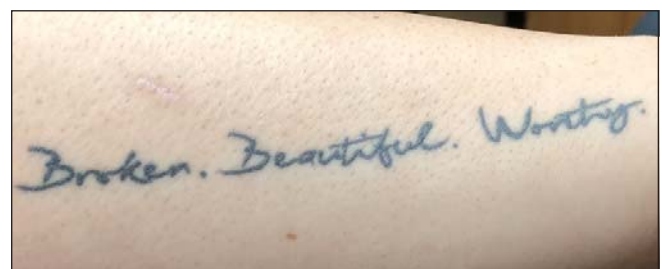
WORTHY: 'I've been broken my entire life, and it made me feel worthless'

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don't know that I would have if I hadn't gone through everything."

She hopes that survivors of child abuse won't lose hope. She wants them to know that there are people out there who will love them unconditionally; finding her support system in close friends, her church, and her husband was key to moving forward, she said.

"I've been broken my en-



BROKEN BUT BEAUTIFUL: After leaving her parents, who shattered her sense of self-worth, she began to build her life. Her tattoo, which reads "Broken, Beautiful, Worthy," serves as a reminder of her inherent value.