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Child Abuse & Neglect

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/chiabuneg

Invisible children and non-essential workers: Child protection during COVID-19 in Israel according to policy documents and media coverage

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Child protective service (CPS)
 COVID-19
 Israel
 Child maltreatment
 Media coverage
 Policy documents

ABSTRACT

Background: The protection of children from maltreatment has become extremely challenging during the COVID-19 pandemic. The public's gaze is focused on the urgent health crisis, while many children are at risk due to social isolation and reduced social services.

Objective: Examine child protection in Israel during COVID-19, as portrayed in mainstream news media and government policy documents.

Participants and setting: The study analyzed all policy documents and mainstream media reports published in Israel from March to May 2020, during the initial mandatory nationwide quarantine.

Methods: (1) Search of relevant articles in mainstream news websites; (2) Search of documents in official websites of relevant government ministries and agencies.

Results: 28 government policy documents and 22 media articles were found relevant. When examined chronologically, what stood out was the initial decision to shut down social services, including some of the residential care units for youth at risk, and declare social workers "non-essential". These decisions were revoked a few weeks into the quarantine, following persistent media pressure by child advocates, resulting in minor changes in policy.

Conclusion: Children were initially invisible to Israeli policymakers facing the pandemic, highlighting the centrality of advocates promoting children's rights and of mainstream news media in disseminating the discourse of protecting children from maltreatment, especially in times of crisis. Moreover, the study points to the heightened threat to at-risk children due to inadequate policies, and to the urgent need to develop child protection policies in order to avoid further risk in future global crises.

1. Introduction

Over the past few months, the COVID-19 disease has dramatically affected many aspects of life. Since March 11, when the [World Health Organization \(2020\)](https://www.who.int/news-room/press-releases/2020/03/11-who-declares-covid-19-pandemic) declared it worldwide pandemic, it has been clear to policymakers around the world that many concerns will arise following this outbreak. The United Nations Framework for the Immediate Socio-Economic Response to COVID 19 ([United Nations, 2020](https://www.un.org/development/desa/en/news/population/2020-report-socio-economic-response-to-covid-19.html)) highlights that the pandemic is not only a health crisis, but is also greatly affecting economies and societies. In addition, scholars worldwide argue that children are particularly at risk of maltreatment due to increased rates of poverty, food insecurity,

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2020.104770>

Received 30 July 2020; Received in revised form 21 September 2020; Accepted 29 September 2020

Available online 6 October 2020

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unemployment, and inequalities (Fore, 2020; Van der Berg & Spaull, 2020). It has also been suggested that child maltreatment (CM) would increase as children are isolated from adults who provide care and support and from those responsible for reporting maltreatment (Humphreys, Myint, & Zeanah, 2020).

In Israel, the wide impact of COVID-19 is due mainly to social distancing regulations, which included a nationwide mandatory quarantine in March to May 2020. Social services, including residential care for youth at risk, were initially forced to reduce their workforce, with many social workers declared “non-essential” and forced to go on leave without pay. The consequences of this initial policy decision on the response capabilities of the local child protective service (CPS) are still unknown. The current study examines this question by analyzing the protection of children from maltreatment as can be captured by in policy documents and mainstream news reports.

1.1. COVID-19 and protecting children from maltreatment

In their recent analysis of the COVID-19 pandemic, UNICEF (n.d., 1) stated that COVID-19 had been creating a toxic and risk context for children worldwide, mainly due to the adverse outcomes of the pandemic in three areas: neglect and lack of parental care; mental health and psychosocial distress; and increased exposure to violence, including sexual violence, physical and emotional abuse. The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action (Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 2019, 2) similarly stated that pandemics such as COVID-19 damage the environment in which children live, increasing their susceptibility to abuse, neglect, violence, exploitation, psychological distress and impaired development.

Recent studies on the impact of COVID-19 on children and families pinpoint main areas of concern. The first relates to mental health struggles by both children and parents. In a review of mental health impacts of the pandemic, Sher (2020) found that psychological consequences would likely persist for months and years to come. Among the reported mental health issues are distress (depression, anxiety, substance abuse, suicidality, insomnia), and fear of contagion. These mental health issues are closely related to the second area of concern, which is the intensive stress generated by the economic crisis. A recent study revealed that parents who lost their jobs were more depressed, and if they had previously psychologically maltreated their children, they were more likely to do so again during the pandemic (Lawson, Piel, & Simon, 2020).

Child protection in the context of humanitarian crises involves the “prevention of and response to abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence against children” (Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 2019, 19). CPSs are instructed to provide support and care for both children and parents in time of routine. However, the response to COVID-19 was unprecedented and protocols of safe service provision needed to be rewritten. Finally, while various countries reported attempts to quickly develop strategies to provide children and families with support, clearly, no gold standard could be developed at such short notice.

1.2. Protecting Israeli children from maltreatment

Since 1989, when mandatory reporting of child abuse became law, protection of children from maltreatment has been receiving policymaker attention in Israel. Nevertheless, given the Israeli sociocultural and religious context, many changes have been made in the CPS in Israel along the years (Gottfried & Ben-Arieh, 2019). The Israeli CPS is under the responsibility of the Social Service Department of the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs and Social Services (MOLSA). From the legal, policymaker, and public point of view, it is considered the main actor in protecting children from maltreatment. This means that considerably more responsibility for CM is borne directly by social workers, compared to other professionals such as physicians and teachers (Katz, Glucklich, & Piller, 2019, 2020; Weiss-Dagan & Cnaan, 2020).

Further elaborating on social workers’ responsibility for protecting children, note the policymaker and cultural expectation to protect children without compromising the integrity of the family. Although collaborating with families, and especially parents, is perceived as effective for child protection worldwide (e.g., Munro, 2011), for the Israeli CPS it is of *crucial* importance. Israeli society, although heavily influenced by Western culture, is still relatively collectivist and traditional regarding family ties (Gavriel-Fried & Shilo, 2017; Sulimani-Aidan, 2020). The family is socially seen as central to the individual’s life, and correspondingly, CPS considers family relationships a top priority. This is one of the main explanations why residential care is the most prevalent option for youth in out-of-home placements (74 %), as opposed to foster care that is more common in other Western countries (Kosher, Montserrat, Attar-Schwartz, Casas, & Zeira, 2018). In the Israeli context, it is much more acceptable for a child to grow up in residential care, often referred to as “boarding school”, echoing the first years after statehood in which many children used to live in these settings after immigrating without any family members. Conversely, foster care can threaten the birth parents’ status in the community, as the child is assigned to different parents. Note also that even after placement in residential care, most of the therapeutic resources are devoted to working with the children and their parents on their relationship and maintaining ongoing contact between them.

Importantly, even the residential care policy has been criticized by the Israeli public, eventually leading the government to reduce the proportion of children removed from home. Accordingly, in 2000 about 9675 children were in care (38 children per 10,000), whereas in 2014 there were 9143 (34 per 10,000). To compensate, MOLSA has invested considerable resources to develop community-based services for children at risk (e.g., after-school childcare settings, multipurpose daycare centers, multidisciplinary centers for parents and children). However, the number of children at-risk in the community is on the rise: in 2000, 4.8 % of children at risk were in care, and by 2014, this fell to 2.6 % (Israel National Council for the Child, 2014; Zemach-Marom, Halavan-Eilat, & Sabo-Lael, 2012). It seems that while these efforts reduced the number of out-of-home placements, they changed the profile of at-risk children in the community, stretching the ability of the CPS to protect those children in the community, support the families and avoid out-of-home placement (Kosher et al., 2018; Zemach-Marom et al., 2012).

Additionally, the Israeli CPS adheres to the traditional social work model of investigation and response, according to which the role of social workers is to respond to reports of CM and to determine whether children are safe at their home environments. Thus, by design, social workers' involvement is *reactive* (Katz, 2020). Accordingly, relatively little resources are dedicated to CM *prevention*. Although they have received increasing attention over the past several years, prevention efforts have typically focused on families deemed to be at imminent risk of harming their children or on preventing recidivism.

In a recent analysis of the Israeli CPS policy (Weiss-Dagan & Cnaan, 2020), the researchers developed a framework for addressing changes in Israel policy through the years, and concluded that protecting children in Israel was almost solely the responsibility of social workers.

1.3. The current study

The current study examines the protection of Israeli children from maltreatment during COVID-19. Through an analysis of official government policy documents as well as media coverage, the current study seeks to answer the following questions: (1) What were the government's policies with respect to protecting children from maltreatment during COVID-19? (2) What was the mainstream news media's stance in relation to these policies and to CM in general? (3) What key lessons can be learned from the challenges that face the protection of children from CM during COVID-19?

2. Methods

2.1. Sample

The sample included two data sources: policy documents of the Israeli government and mainstream Israeli news media coverage of CM-related issues, published between March and May 2020. This period was chosen as it included the initial responses to COVID-19, mainly nationwide mandatory quarantine. Mainstream media coverage was relevant as major news websites are familiar to most if not all Israelis (Katz, McLeigh, Ben-Arieh, 2019). Note that there are additional news websites relevant to various subgroups in Israel, such as those serving the ultra-Orthodox Jewish community, but they were assessed in the current study due to language barriers.

2.2. Procedure

Policy documents were identified in two ways. First, we reviewed all policy and legislative documents published in the various government websites during the general quarantine. Second, we conducted a Google search to ensure no relevant document was excluded, using the following keywords: child maltreatment, abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, neglect, children, children at risk, youth at risk, domestic violence. Inclusion criteria: (1) Official government document discussing CM or youth at risk; (2) Published between March and May; (3) In Hebrew. The search yielded 28 documents from the following sources: Israeli parliament (Knesset, $n = 1$), Ministry of Health ($n = 1$), MOLSA ($n = 16$), Prime Minister's Office ($n = 10$).

Media coverage of CM issues was examined by a Google search of the same keywords used in the previous search. Inclusion criteria: (1) Mainstream Israeli news media articles discussing CM or youth at risk; (2) Published between March and May; (3) In Hebrew. This search yielded 22 articles from the following websites: *Calcalist* ($n = 2$), *Globes* ($n = 2$), *Haaretz* ($n = 5$), *Israel Hayom* ($n = 1$), *Kol Hair* ($n = 2$), *Maariv* ($n = 2$), *Mako* ($n = 1$), *MSN* ($n = 1$), *News1* ($n = 1$), *Srugim* ($n = 1$), *Walla* ($n = 2$), and *Ynet* ($n = 2$). Articles were published between March 8 and the May 24, 2020.

2.3. Data analysis

Thematic analysis was carried out on all the documents in several interrelated stages (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, preliminary ideas were identified: the authors read the documents and broke each down into textual segments representing distinct units of meaning, later grouped into initial themes. In the second stage, some codes and categories were removed or revised, and others added. A research assistant used the codes identified at this stage to analyze the remaining data in consultation with the authors. Next, the authors reviewed themes and subthemes, classified and reclassified them as required (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In the fourth stage, the authors refined and named the final themes and suggested interrelationships (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The authors also referred back to the transcripts to retrieve any information needed to further develop the categories (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994).

2.4. Findings

The analysis of both the policy documents and media coverage identified three main themes: (1) invisible children and non-essential workers; (2) families, not children; and (3) marginalized children in heightened risk. The discussion of each of these themes addressed a timeline that was identified within the analysis of the texts, including the initial government response to COVID-19 and its impact on CPS; the media's role in raising awareness to CM and its pressure on policymakers; and policy revisions by the government.

2.5. Invisible children and non-essential workers

Israel initially responded to COVID-19 by a nationwide quarantine that included shutting down the CPS immediately and forcing social workers to go on unpaid leave, including other employees officially designated as “non-essential”. Some CPS workers were maintained as emergency workers in the welfare departments of several municipalities and were instructed to provide material support for families and the elderly in need. This policy characterized the period between March 3 and April 8, 2020. Policy updates were published periodically through the circulars of MOLSA Director General (hereafter, executive circulars) until the end of the shutdown in May.

Policy documents published during this time by MOLSA completely neglected to address the issue of CM, instead focusing on work regulations in services that were to remain open and instructions for reducing the risk of COVID-19 contamination (see [MOLSA, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d, 2020e, 2020f, 2020g, 2020h, 2020i, 2020j](#); presented in chronological order). As a result, Israeli residential care was partially shut down, with hundreds of at-risk children forced to return to their abusive homes, while those with no homes to return to remained in residential care (note that there are no reliable data on how many children were affected by this policy). During this time, a document published by the Knesset outlined the risks of domestic violence during COVID-19 and various plans to address them ([Almagor Lotan, 2020](#)). However, no emergency protocol was created for protecting children.

Parallel to the neglect of children in published policy documents, child protection advocates led a media campaign targeting the public and policymakers, which highlighted the need to provide children and families at risk with services. This campaign intensified upon the murder of six Israeli women by their husbands during the quarantine, which drew attention to the potential risks to children ([Levi & Katz, 2020](#)).

Many identified media items addressed specific struggles of at-risk youth ($n = 10$; [Bagno, 2020](#); [Ilan, 2020](#)). In general, the rise in CM risks was at least partially attributed to the government’s neglect of CM and at-risk youth during COVID-19. These were discussed with respect to the shutdown of educational institutions; as one article stated, “Children who were not at risk might now become at risk” ([Kabir, 2020](#)) due to the pressure in the household reaching a “boiling point” ([Surkes, 2020](#)).

Additional criticism in the media focused on the government’s neglect of CM in official policies, manifested in the lack of resources directed towards mental health services ([Yitschaki, 2020](#)), and the aforementioned initial categorization of social workers as “non-essential” ([Rotlevy, 2020](#); [Surkes, 2020](#)). This was related to welfare services’ diminished ability to accommodate domestic violence victims due to lack of shelter capacity ([Yaron, 2020b](#)) and services being forced to operate through remote interventions with no resources allocated to facilitate this urgent adaptation ([Kol-Hair, 2020a](#)).

The struggles of youth at-risk in residential care were covered in four newspaper articles, one of which reported that approximately 7000 children aged 6–18 did not lose just their school, but their home ([Gamliel, 2020](#)). Due to the initial total shutdown of residential care, many youth at risk were forced to return to an unsafe home, which was “more dangerous than COVID-19” ([Kol-Hair, 2020a](#)). Social workers interviewed talked about these children’s struggles, including hunger, substance abuse and lapses in their mental health ([Yaron, 2020a](#)). Others, with no home to return to, spent the entire quarantine period in residential care ([Gamliel, 2020](#)). As stated in one article, the government was “preoccupied” with reducing the spread of COVID-19, but “nobody is talking about the children’s struggles” ([Rotlevy, 2020](#)).

From April 8 to May 31, few changes were made in policy documents. Relevant policies were published only by [MOLSA \(2020k, 2020l, 2020m, 2020n; Meir, Weisberg Nakash, Sapir, & Levi., 2020\)](#) and the Prime Minister’s Office ([Gold and Windman, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d, 2020e; Prime Minister’s Office, 2020c; Serphos, Gold, & Windman, 2020, b](#)).

The Prime Minister’s Office is the government branch responsible, among other things, for coordinating interministerial activities. Throughout the quarantine, reports were published by an interdisciplinary team convened in the office, including representatives of the Ministry of Justice and MOLSA, as well as of third sector and other organizations advocating for children’s rights (i.e. Israel National Council for the Child, Union of Social Workers, and the Hebrew University Clinical Legal Education Center ([Gold & Windman, 2020, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d, 2020d, 2020e, 2020f, 2020g; Prime Minister’s Office, 2020c; Serphos et al., 2020a, b](#))). This initiative focused on policies regarding children and youth at risk and outlined proposals for reforming the CPS and moving from a reactive to a proactive approach ([Prime Minister’s Office, 2020b](#)). The team’s work and recommendations throughout the quarantine were summarized in a document published on June 1 ([Prime Minister’s Office, 2020a](#)). Crucially, this was to remain a dead letter, without being translated into any official policy document or disseminating the recommendations.

A major change in the published policy documents was the shift from focusing on logistics and reducing contamination to the welfare of families and youth. First, social workers were declared “essential workers” and returned to work after several weeks of unpaid leave. On May 2, prevention of domestic violence was declared a top priority ([MOLSA, 2020b](#)) and on May 10, instructions were released as to ways social workers should contact and support families ([Weisberg Nakash, Markowitz, & Bourla, 2020](#)). Additionally, residential care facilities for youth at risk were reopened ([Prime Minister’s Office, 2020b](#)).

2.6. Families, not children

The analysis of the policy documents throughout the identified timeline reveals that even when policies were adapted to the harmful consequences of COVID-19, the focus was on families, not children, illustrating a regression in terms of protecting children’s rights. Several policy documents addressed parental rights during COVID-19. An example is the protocol published on March 23, which specifies instructions for divorced or separated families with shared custody ([Florentin, 2020](#)). This protocol did not address CM or the children’s well-being and safety, but focused on protecting parents’ rights for maintaining contact with their children and provided specific instructions on how children should be transferred from one parent to the other in order to maintain parents’ visitation rights.

Clearly, in these policy documents no one addressed the children's subjective wellbeing and human rights as individuals.

Adding to the lack of clear reference to children and their rights were policy documents published during May, in which policies were adapted in order to meet the challenges of COVID-19. Many of the protocols addressed domestic violence with no specific focus on children or on CM. Most of the articles identified as dedicated to the urgent need to protect children's rights during COVID-19 outlined the CM risks of quarantine ($n = 14$; AFP, 2020; Rotlevy, 2020; Levi, 2020b, b).

Policy documents published towards the end of May referred to concrete steps taken to protect children's rights. One document elaborated on the development of a program for the COVID-19 state of emergency, including an intervention program for at-risk families with young children. Additionally, community centers were reopened with the purpose of supporting low-income families (MOLSA, 2020i), and a texting service was launched, which allowed domestic violence victims a safe way to seek help (MOLSA, 2020h). Finally, social workers were provided with guidance on how to maintain contact with families and support them remotely.

Importantly, although at this third stage, following the media coverage, adaptations to the policy instructions were made, there was still significant imbalance in the policy documents, with most of those focusing on domestic violence and supporting families in the community discussing mainly support for parents. Considerably fewer documents were dedicated to the protection of children from maltreatment and no policies from other relevant ministries such as Health and Education addressed this issue.

2.7. Marginalized children in intensified risk

Through all identified policy documents and the entire identified timeline, policy documents did not address the protection of children from marginalized groups, which can potentially result in intensified risk. One particularly disadvantaged group in Israel is preschoolers. Some of the news websites (e.g. Katz, 2020) stressed that preschoolers had always been one of the most overlooked groups of children during routine times, a situation that intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic. In Israel, preschoolers from the age of 3 months to 3 years of age do not have standardized, subsidized childcare arrangements. Parents must find their own childcare, which means that it is sometimes expensive and unsafe. From the age of 3–6 children are supposed to be cared for in kindergartens, but these are not monitored or supervised by the Ministry of Education. This means that during the COVID-19 pandemic, infants and toddlers continued to be "undocumented" residents in Israel.

Another group of children completely neglected by policy documents and received little attention in the media (Katz, 2020) was children with developmental disabilities. In Israel, during the COVID-19 pandemic there was no standardized support for children with developmental disabilities and their families. Additionally, their routine support was taken away from them, often leading to regression in these children's conditions, resulting in intensive stress for their parents and families.

In addition to preschoolers and children with developmental disabilities, the situation of several other disadvantaged groups worsened during COVID-19. Palestinian-Arabs in Israel are routinely disadvantaged and excluded, including in terms of CPS resources. This situation was exacerbated during COVID-19 with more racism and fewer resources targeted towards them. Finally, ultra-orthodox Jews experienced considerable hate and racism, including blaming them for spreading the virus (Surkes, 2020). The media (e.g. Katz, 2020) suggested that this group's social isolation and internal competition for limited resources contributed to community alienation.

3. Discussion

The aim of the current study was to examine how the protection of children from maltreatment was officially handled in Israel during the COVID-19 mandatory quarantine. Our analysis of both policy documents and media coverage paints a worrisome picture. Policymakers' automatic response to COVID-19 neglected to address child maltreatment (CM). They overlooked the crucial role of the CPS and declared social workers to be "non-essential", which reveals a blind spot regarding the needs of children, especially those who are already at risk. Consequently, during the first few weeks of quarantine in Israel, the protection of children was not addressed in policies despite elevated risks for children and youth.

Mainstream news media coverage appears to have been critical of the government's handling of CM during the COVID-19 crisis. Various websites have repeatedly stated the risks for CM and the alarming rate of abuse reports. At the same time, a special roundtable committee operating from the Prime Minister's Office has both monitored and criticized the initial policies and advocated for children's rights. These actions by child advocates might explain the mild growth in the awareness of policymakers to CM and the importance of the CPS detected a few weeks into the quarantine. However, children have never become a top priority, and most of the policymakers' attention and resources remained devoted to supporting families, while neglecting direct coping with CM and abandoning the discourse of children's rights.

The findings from the current study can be discussed through a recent framework offered for understanding the evolution of CPS-related policies (Weiss-Dagan & Cnaan, 2020). The first aspect of the framework is a *socialist/collectivist-capitalist/individualistic continuum*, which presents the country's commitment to welfare. Although focusing on CM, the analysis presented in the current study illustrates more generally that the Israeli government is far from socialist. In their initial response to COVID-19, policymakers did not take the welfare of the Israeli population into consideration, particularly not that of the children. This is surprising given the response of other countries considered highly individualist and capitalist. For example, the US CPSs were not shut down and were provided with greater resources, thus acknowledging the challenges that COVID-19 posed to welfare (Guerrero, Avgar, Phillips, & Sterling, 2020).

The second aspect of the framework is *transition – from denial of CM to recognition of its existence*. Based on the current study's findings, it is clear that the phenomenon of CM was initially ignored by policymakers. During March, the policies published by MOLSA and the Ministry of Health focused on logistics and guidelines to reduce the spread of COVID-19. In April and May, updates were released, instructing social services on ways to work with families. Updated policies published in May recognized prevention of

domestic violence as a top priority (MOLSA, 2020b). The emphasis was, however, on working with families, and CM was not mentioned explicitly (Weisberg Nakash et al., 2020). It seems that during COVID-19, all the progress presumably achieved in Israel with respect to CM was brought to a complete halt, and that in fact, a regression occurred.

In direct contradiction to the foregoing critical assessment of the government's response to the crisis as arising from the policy documents, the current study results points to the central role played by media coverage during this time. The media have a central role in promoting discussions among the public and policymakers regarding issues relating to public health. The media are the main channel for the language, communication, and contexts of the social structures of modern society (McCartan, 2015). Given that CM, like all social concepts, is only partially understood by society, media representations have the potential to influence policymakers and the public with regard to this social issue (Weatherred, 2015). A recent study on media coverage and public perceptions of CM in Israel painted a worrisome picture in which most of the coverage was episodic, addressing individual incidents rather than addressing CM in its social framework (Katz, Glucklich et al., 2019). Not only that but the discussion in both the news items themselves and in the public comments to them tended to put the blame and responsibility for the abuse on the victims and their families for not educating them better.

Conversely, the current findings illustrate how the active involvement of child advocates can make a difference, through the government and media coverage, as most of the media coverage during the crisis stressed the responsibility of the government and policymakers for protecting children from maltreatment. This shift is extremely important and needs to be maintained and further encouraged in future efforts to advance CM policies in Israel.

The third aspect refers to the *professionalization of care*. This includes the training and appointment of professional practitioners to serve populations in need. A disturbing picture arises from the current findings regarding the policymakers' lack of recognition of society's need for professional welfare services during COVID-19. Policymakers ignored the need for frontline practitioners, mainly CPS social workers, to protect children from maltreatment. No financial support was given and while guidelines were disseminated to social services on reducing COVID-19 contamination, they failed to promote child protection. Moreover, the current results stress the fact that the social work profession in Israel exclusively charged with protecting children, with no identified policies by other professionals (from the Health and Education ministries, for example) referring to the protection of children from maltreatment during COVID-19. This imbalance in responsibility is a source for concern and must to be a focus for change.

The fourth aspect in the framework is the *transition from out-of-home placement to community solutions*. Indeed, when solutions were provided in the third stage of the timeline, they mainly targeted community-based services with no relocation of resources and support to professionals or to children and youth in out-of-home placements. The impact of this neglect of children and youth in residential care needs to be further explored, and it is also necessary to examine thoroughly the impact of the short-notice closure of some residential care facilities on both the children and their family.

The fifth aspect is the *transition from punishing to protecting and providing rights*. Our findings clearly show that during the initial COVID-19 outbreak, children overall and at-risk children more particularly were invisible to Israeli policymakers, and that even after a media campaign children were still not a top priority. This attests to an extremely worrisome lack of a children's rights discourse in Israel.

Although Israel ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1989) in 1991, several documents attest to its lack of implementation, including its failure to create a government-appointed commission on children's rights or to adopt a national children's rights strategy or program in order to implement various Israeli laws addressing children's rights (Katz & Kosher, 2020). This general disregard of children's right to live and to be protected, and as made painfully apparent during the pandemic, is cause for concern, suggesting the urgent need to advance the visibility of children's rights in the Israeli policy.

The assumption that was the starting point of the current study was that the issues that had characterized the Israeli CPS in routine would become intensified during COVID-19. Indeed, our findings clearly showed that CM was neglected and overlooked by policymakers and that even after the media campaign the resources were directed towards supporting families with no clear focus on child protection, maltreatment prevention, and children's rights.

Adding to this worrisome picture, certain groups of children that deserve even greater support in times of pandemic were not addressed at all in the identified policies, such as preschoolers, children with developmental disabilities, and children from closed or extremely peripheral communities in Israel, such as asylum seekers.

More generally, the impact of the quarantine and competition over limited resources generated a context of not only social *isolation* but more specifically, social *alienation* in Israeli society (Levi & Katz, 2020). This social context could have a severely adverse impact on all citizens, but mainly those from disadvantaged groups. One such group, Palestinian-Arabs, is routinely disadvantaged and excluded, including from CPS resources. This situation was intensified during COVID-19 with more racism and fewer resources targeted towards them.

Another disadvantaged group, ultra-Orthodox Jews, was the target of hatred and racism during the crisis, with many blaming them for spreading the virus. The impact of racism has adverse effects on all involved: children and their families from such traditional groups might become more isolated and suspicious of others, which might affect their tendency to seek help and disclose CM.

Finally, research indicates rampant racism in Israeli society against non-Jewish immigrants (Birger, Nadan, & Aizenstadt, 2020; Tsfati, Ben-Ari, & Lavi, 2020), which manifests itself in policy documents in the lack of clear policies targeting their children (Kagan, Pinson, & Schler, 2019). On the ground, they are supported and protected almost exclusively by cash-strapped NGOs (Tsfati et al., 2020).

The findings of the current study and the conclusions that can be drawn from them should be carefully discussed in light of the study's *limitations*. The first limitation relates to the fact that the media coverage analyzed was limited to Hebrew-language, mainstream news websites. This means that the media coverage directly is relevant to various disadvantaged groups discussed above were

not studied.

The second limitation of the current study is in its focus on written policy documents. In a retrospective discussion on protecting children from maltreatment during COVID-19 (Levi & Katz, 2020), the way municipalities initiated and led efforts to provide children and families with support was worth mentioning, as was the way the CPS found innovative ways to support children and families remotely. These initiatives were not addressed in formal policy documents or in mainstream media. Accordingly, to fully capture the phenomenon of protecting children from maltreatment during COVID-19, information should be gathered from other important informants such as practitioners from various disciplines as well as interviews with child advocates. Finally, the perceptions of children and parents are of crucial importance in order to better understand the Israeli policy and its outcomes during COVID-19.

To conclude, the results of the current study indicate the potentially harmful impact that lack of policy with respect to protecting children from maltreatment during the pandemic might have. It involves overlooking not only child protection and rights but also their exposure to elevated risks. The disturbing picture portrayed in the current study stresses the urgent need to better establish children's rights in Israeli laws and policies, which hopefully would improve their protection during global crises such as the current one, and in normal times as well. On a positive note, the current study stresses the central role that child advocates and the media play in such alarming contexts. The findings also emphasize the crucial importance of advancing interdisciplinary discussion and responsibility for the protection of children in Israel. In both routine and crisis, the protection of children must be a top priority, and must include everyone.

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