

Child Protection in Response to Public Health Crises: Evidence from the Opioid Epidemic

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Abstract

This paper examines the impacts of the opioid epidemic on child maltreatment and how Child Protective Services (CPS) responded to the epidemic. I use the reformulation of OxyContin, a nationwide supply shock in prescription opioids that exacerbated the opioid epidemic, as a natural experiment. Leveraging variation in states' and counties' exposure to this intervention, I find that the opioid epidemic led to an increase in maltreatment allegations, suggesting a rise in the underlying maltreatment risk. Despite heightened risk, institutional responses did not scale protective actions accordingly, resulting in more cases where children were left at home but subsequently reinvestigated for maltreatment. Foster care placement rates remained unchanged and administrative expenditures per allegation declined, pointing to a limited systemic response. This study underscores the intergenerational consequences of the opioid epidemic and highlights how public health crises can weaken protective systems, particularly when institutions lack the flexibility or capacity to adapt.

Keywords: Opioid Epidemic, Child Maltreatment, Foster Care, Child Protective Services

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