

Survey Results: How Child Welfare and Justice Agencies Are Responding to COVID-19

In March 2020, NCCD surveyed justice and child welfare agencies on system-level responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey, open for eight weeks, was answered by 185 respondents representing 20 states and Australia. Respondents included line staff and administrators (Figure 1).

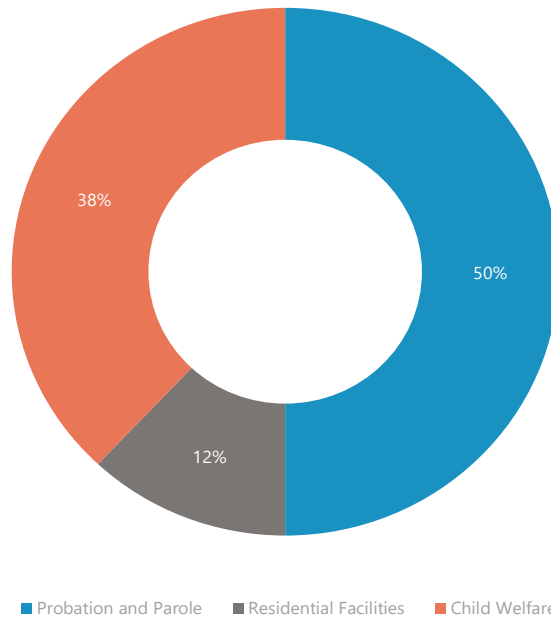
The responses highlighted the accommodations that agencies are making to respond to the virus, as well as the challenges that have arisen and agency-level responses.¹

Caseload/Population Size

In response to the increased safety risks posed by housing people in confined spaces (e.g., residential detention centers, jails), many jurisdictions released some residents back into the community. Highlights of responses follow.

- Almost one fifth (18%) of respondents from residential programs cited a decrease in their population since the outbreak started.

Figure 1: Agencies Responding to COVID-19 Survey



¹ All respondents in the “Residential Facilities” category came from justice (criminal or juvenile) agencies. No residential child welfare facilities were included in the survey responses.

- Of all probation and parole and child welfare respondents, 15% reported changes in caseload size, with 10% reporting a smaller caseload.
- Nearly one third (31%) of probation and parole respondents and 27% of child welfare respondents reported no change in caseload size.

Safety Measures

By late March 2020, almost all states had imposed stay-at-home orders, forcing community-based justice and child welfare staff to work remotely and have little to no in-person contact with their clients. Agencies were also employing additional measures to ensure the health and welfare of clients and staff alike.

- About one third of survey respondents reported safety measures such as additional signage, increased cleaning of common spaces (more frequent and/or more rigorous), and physical distancing techniques (Figure 2).

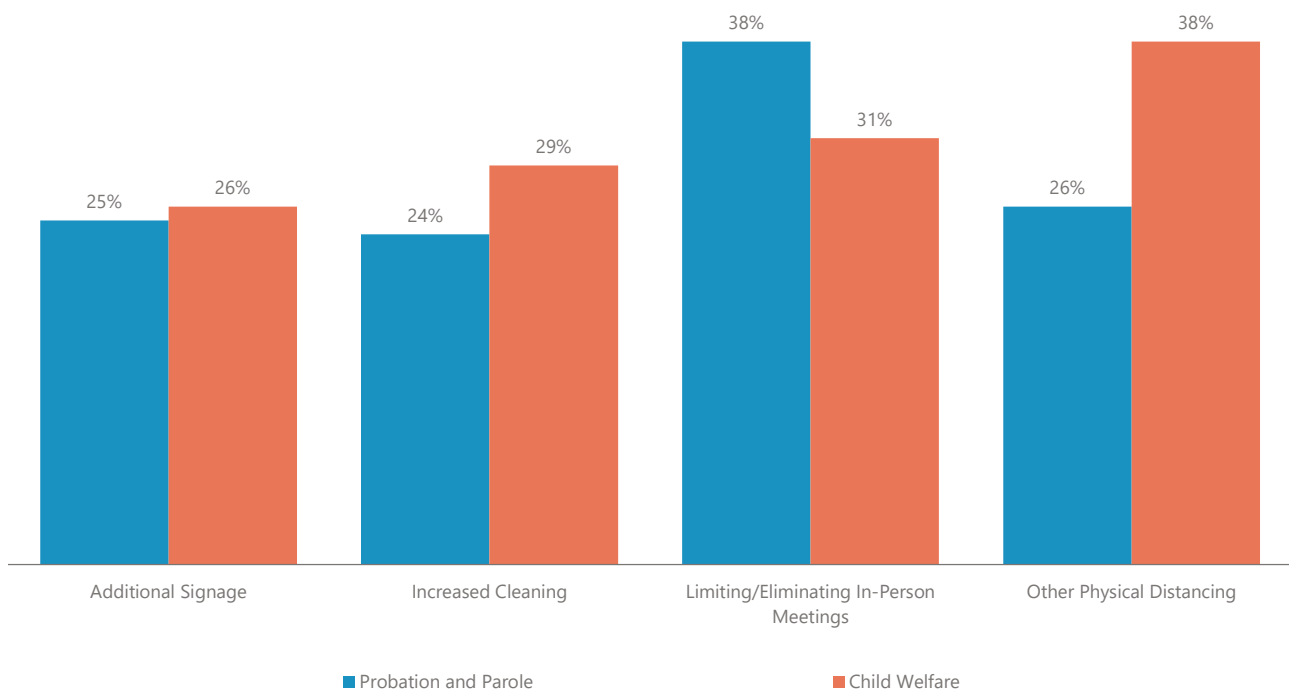
- Other reported safety measures involved:
 - » Use of PPE by staff;
 - » Reduced workforce in buildings;
 - » Teleworking for most staff; and
 - » Use of phone and video technology in place of in-person client meetings.

Residential Facilities

Staff from criminal and juvenile justice-run residential sites reported similar safety precautions, with a notable difference being the use of physical distancing and isolation. Since the pandemic started, critics have warned against using seclusion or isolation strategies to achieve physical distancing in residential facilities. However, this survey found that 14% of facilities were using isolation as a strategy for physical distancing.

Respondents from residential facilities also cited symptom checking upon entering the facility and

Figure 2: Prevalence of Additional Safety Measures in Community-Based Agencies



quarantine for suspected or confirmed cases and for new admissions as common safety practices.

Problems, Challenges, and Remedies

Respondents across the board faced a variety of challenges in dealing with COVID-19. Limited PPE was cited as the most significant across all groups. Agencies being short staffed as a result of self-quarantine and limited in-person contact with clients also were cited as problematic. Other challenges included:

- Limited access to technology;
- Outdated technological resources;
- Lack of access to office resources (e.g., equipment, office supplies);
- Lack of court proceedings; and

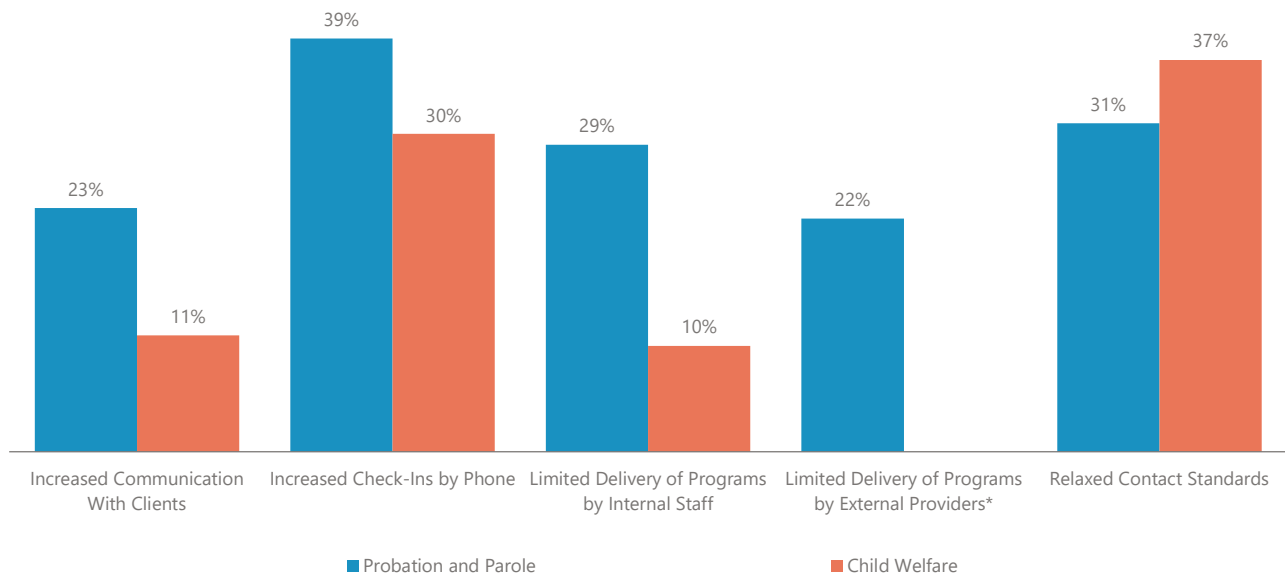
- Staff and clients expressing fear about the virus.

To address these challenges, probation and parole and child welfare agencies employed the strategies shown in Figure 3.

For residential staff, enforcing physical distancing was cited as a particular challenge. To address this, 14% reported releasing residents who met certain criteria.²

On the more positive side, respondents from residential facilities reported several steps taken to increase connection and communication between their residents and friends and family outside the facilities. These included more phone calls (32%), free phone calls (23%), video visits (23%), and writing materials provided to residents for letters (32%).

Figure 3: Agency Strategies to Address Challenges Presented by COVID-19



*Not applicable for child welfare.

² Release criteria included low-level offenses and/or nearly completed sentences.

Needed Resources

The pandemic has strained the already limited resources available to many justice and child welfare agencies, and this was reflected in a desire for increased financial and human resources in both agencies. Child welfare agencies reported PPE as their largest need, while among justice agencies, the highest reported need was information from other agencies on how they are handling COVID-19 and associated challenges. Other needs reported include more and better technology and more training and webinars (Figure 4).

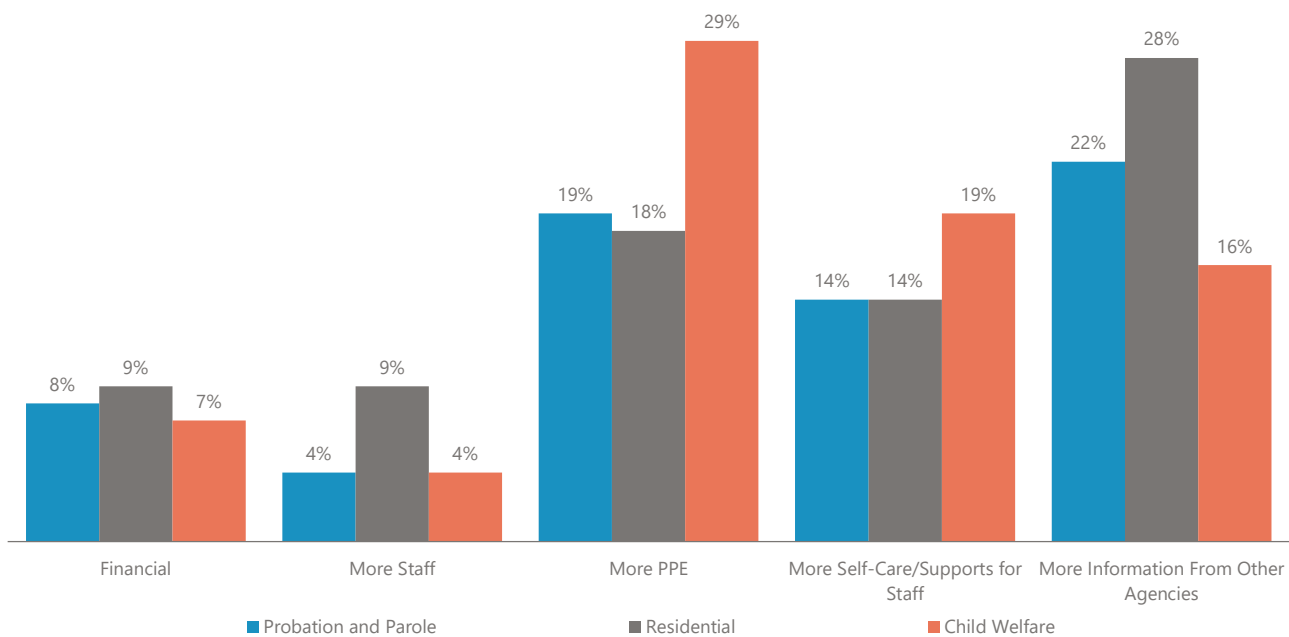
Affected Populations and Trends

Survey respondents were asked to identify any populations among their clients who seemed to

be more significantly affected by the pandemic. Both community supervision and child welfare staff identified clients with substance abuse needs as being most affected. Homeless, undocumented, and lower-income clients with limited technology access were also identified as more affected groups.

All categories of respondents cited increased mental health complaints as the most prevalent trend (9% to 18% of respondents across categories). About 15% of respondents from both probation and parole and child welfare agencies reported increased family and home issues as well. Other responses included financial strain (e.g., limited resources and layoffs) and challenges for parents who are homeschooling.

Figure 4: Justice Staff Want More Information, and Child Welfare Staff Want More PPE



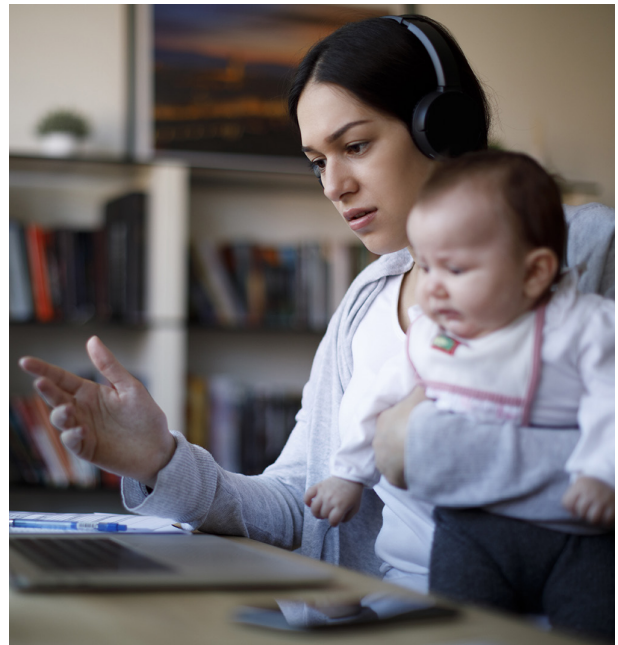
Recommendations

The results of this survey suggest that agencies are doing a good job in some respects in their response to these unprecedented circumstances. Many agencies have appropriate safety measures and other supports for staff and clients. However, some improvements could help justice and child welfare staff do their jobs more effectively and feel more supported in the process, thereby enabling them to better serve their clients.

NCCD previously published a [list of recommendations](#) for probation and parole departments to deal with increasing caseloads as a result of COVID-19. Below are some more general recommendations for justice and child welfare agencies based on survey findings.

For staff:

- **Increase access to PPE.** Staff should have access to masks, gloves, and other PPE when they are required to interact with clients, especially if those interactions take place in the community as opposed to office visits.
- **Address technology limitations.** Many staff cited a lack of computers and personal electronic devices (e.g., tablets, smartphones) that were adequate to support remote work. Agencies should update both hardware and software to support staff.
- **Maintain flexibility in working conditions.** Teleworking and other physical distancing-compliant accommodations can increase staff's comfort level to complete their work and thus result in better service for their clients.
- **Increase support (personal and professional) for line staff.** Many staff reported a need for increased support from management, including more support for self-care (e.g., time off, resources).



- **Transparent and up-to-date communication.** Knowledge and circumstances around the pandemic continue to evolve. Agencies need to maintain clear and thorough communication with staff and clients about changes that will affect them.
- **Information sharing across agencies.** Respondents, particularly among justice agency staff, want to know more about how other agencies are responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. NCCD has a number of [COVID-19 resources](#) for both justice and child welfare agencies. Local cross-agency collaboration could be another easy way for agencies to share information.

For clients:

- **Recognize challenges for different clients and populations.** Certain populations (e.g., older people or clients with medical, mental health, or substance abuse issues) may be more prone to physical and mental health complications associated with COVID-19. Staff should be



vigilant about checking in with these clients and helping them to find the necessary supports.

- **Increase support/access to community supports and resources.** Many clients served by justice and/or child welfare agencies need additional support for financial, medical, employment, food, or other social service needs. Staff are well suited to operate as brokers for and referrals to agencies that can help clients address these needs.
- **Support frequent, meaningful access to friends and families outside (for residential facility clients).** Particularly for clients who are residing away from their families during the

pandemic, communication and connection are paramount to ease the anxiety and stress that many feel.

- **Be ready to respond to domestic violence and other household/family issues.** Anecdotally, incidents of domestic violence, calls for service, and suicide hotline calls have increased. Given the connections and access that justice and child welfare staff have with individuals and families, they may be the first line of defense and response for issues of domestic violence, child abuse and maltreatment, suicidal ideation, and other issues.

Learn More

If your agency would like more information or assistance in coordinating your response to COVID-19, please contact NCCD at (800) 306-6223.