

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic were broadly understood to impact public health, the economy and the education of children. As the pandemic lengthened, secondary reverberations began to sound throughout every sector and system. During May 2020, the South Carolina Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics (SCAAP) and Institute for Child Success (ICS) conducted a survey and examined other existing public health data sources in order to gauge the lasting impacts of COVID-19 on the pediatric health sector in South Carolina and to provide recommendations for supporting and strengthening the sector to ensure a healthy future for all of the state's children. The research focused on four areas impacting families and child health professionals. These areas included:

1. **Population health**, including impacts on vaccination rates and primary care infrastructure;
2. **Patient/family health**, including obesity, accidents and preventable injuries, and child welfare issues;
3. **Business/professional health**, including the changes to the operations and financial stability of practices as well as telemedicine;
4. **Physician health**, including the well-being of providers navigating this time and professional supports.

Population Health

Pediatric visits for all child health needs declined from March through May 2020. Eighty-three percent of survey respondents indicated that there was a decline in vaccination and/or well-being appointments and over 90% reported a decline in acute and/or chronic condition visits. Further, additional data tied to the increasing prevalence of COVID-19 in South Carolina suggest these continue to be lower. As a result of this reduction in appointments in SC, only 32% of expected vaccinations were administered over this time period, a real-figure reduction of 10,500 compared to previous years.

Patient/Family Health

The combination of missed acute care and well child visits as well as significant changes and stressors in a family's life puts children and families at risk of exacerbating medical conditions or missing early opportunities for preventative care. Specifically, early evidence and projections suggest that existing factors of food insecurity and typical summer weight-gain in children paired with COVID-19 restrictions on summer-enrichment activities negatively affect obesity rates in children.

In addition, necessary quarantine, while beneficial to public health, has drawbacks such as an increase in poisonings, bone fractures, dog-bites and other injuries. Moreover, research has suggested that there is an increase in child abuse occurrences despite a decrease in reported cases of abuse. The crisis has also brought into relief changing needs of patients and families, either created by the crisis or exacerbated. Several SC pediatricians noted the increased in *mental health* needs for patients in the last few months, particularly “teen/ preteen anxiety and depression” and “kids acting out, becoming depressed, etc.” while quarantined.

Business/Professional and Physician Health

A decline in pediatric visits also negatively impacts the financial stability of pediatric practices as most utilize a fee-for-service model through insurance payments. A lack of cash reserves, paired with minimally available financial interventions, little guidance from insurance companies (a major revenue source) and lack of ability to make significant staffing changes has placed the field into an unknown financial status with 77% reporting negative revenue months and over 50% being unsure of how long they could remain open.

As a result, physician and staff health has become a growing concern. On a scale of 1-10, SC pediatricians rated financial health, staff safety and patient well-being as 6.4 or higher, with smaller and/or publicly funded practices generally responding higher on the scale, and larger and/or privately funded practices lower.

Conclusions

Going forward, SCAAP will actively engage with the SC Department of Health and Human Services (SCDHHS) and the SC Department of Health and Environmental Control (SCDHEC) using current and future collaborations to address the specific issues in this report. Public health, patient and family health, professional (business) health and physician personal health are all critical components of the health care puzzle—and especially in a health care crisis such as this current COVID-19 pandemic. Without active integration across governmental, health care systems and professional (private and academic) groups, effective work does not get done. Health care professionals in SC pride themselves on getting the tough work done with the active help of related agencies.

The SCDHHS and SCDHEC collaborations are currently strong. These state agencies work hard on behalf of children and families, and the SCAAP works hard to shore up identified areas for improvement.

As SCAAP reviews national data and data from pediatric colleagues from state chapters across the country, best practices will be sought. A strength of the national AAP and its networks is the sharing of information and best practices in an evidence-based fashion. Representatives from AAP District IV (Kentucky, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia) communicate on a regular basis to seek solutions to shared concerns. This latter network is extremely valuable to the SCAAP leadership.

The SCAAP takes its commitment to the children, families, and the pediatric practitioners of SC quite seriously. As noted throughout this report, the collective health of the population, the health of the children and their families, the professional (business) health of the SCAAP members and the personal well-being of the SCAAP members have all been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. While a volunteer organization such as the SCAAP can often be pulled in too many directions, this dedicated group of professionals shares a joint commitment to address the current health care/public health care crisis with common purpose and determination on behalf of children, families and pediatric professionals.