

## ASPECTS OF CHILD VIOLENCE DURING COVID-19 IN A STATE IN THE LEGAL AMAZON

Leidiane Ferreira Santos<sup>1</sup>; Michelle Tavares Barbosa dos Santos<sup>2</sup>

Juliana Bastoni da Silva<sup>3</sup>; Leonora Rezende Pacheco<sup>4</sup>

Danielle Rosa Evangelista<sup>5</sup>

**Highlights:** (1) The COVID-19 pandemic has seen an increase in the number of sexual abuses against children. (2) Girls are the main victims of sexual abuse. (3) There is significant incompleteness of Individual Violence Notification forms.

PRE-PROOF

(as accepted)

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<sup>1</sup> Universidade Federal do Tocantins – UFT. Palmas/TO, Brazil. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2969-6203>

<sup>2</sup> Universidade Federal do Tocantins - UFT. Palmas/TO, Brazil. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0831-8940>

<sup>3</sup> Universidade Federal do Tocantins - UFT. Palmas/TO, Brazil. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6642-8910>

<sup>4</sup> Universidade Federal de Goiás – UFG. Goiânia/GO, Brazil. <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6048-3911>

<sup>5</sup> Universidade Federal do Tocantins - UFT. Palmas/TO, Brazil. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4472-2879>

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### ABSTRACT

This research aimed to analyze the recorded cases of child violence in a state in the Legal Amazon during the COVID-19 pandemic. To this end, a document-based time series was carried out based on notifications of child abuse in the state of Tocantins from 2020 to 2021. The variables used were the year of aggression, sex and age of the victim and aggressor, place of occurrence, and type(s) of violence perpetrated. Simple descriptive statistics (absolute and relative frequency), measures of central tendency (mean and standard deviation), and the Chi-square test were used for categorical variables (outcome variable type of violence). A significance level of 5% ( $p \leq 0.05$ ) was adopted. A total of 2,389 (100%) records were considered valid for analysis. In 2021, there were more records of child abuse than in 2020, going from 1,099 (46.0%) notifications in 2020, the start of the pandemic scenario, to 1,290 (54.0%) in the following year. In addition, in 2021, children had a 0.70 higher risk of suffering neglect and 0.82 psychological violence compared to 2020. It is concluded that child maltreatment was associated with the period, with a higher occurrence in the second year of the pandemic, the sex of the child and the aggressor, and the type of violence. These aspects signal the urgent need for intersectoral actions aimed at a culture of peace and gender equality, especially during the pandemic period.

**Keywords:** Child; Pandemics; Child Maltreatment; Violence; Child Protection Services.

### INTRODUCTION

On the national scene, the Federal Constitution states that it is the duty of the family, Society, and the state to protect children from any form of neglect, discrimination, exploitation, ill-treatment, cruelty, and oppression<sup>1</sup>. In addition, the planning and implementation of intersectoral actions by health, social assistance, public security, and school units should create a protection network, playing an essential role in tackling child violence<sup>2</sup>.

The legal requirement to report suspected and confirmed cases of child abuse is also a protection mechanism. In Brazil, the notification of interpersonal and self-inflicted aggression began in 2006, and in 2011, it became compulsory in all public and private health services<sup>3</sup>. In addition, the Statute of the Child and Adolescent determines the mandatory reporting of suspected and confirmed cases of ill-treatment to the Guardianship Council<sup>2</sup>.

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It is noteworthy that, worldwide, it is possible to identify movements aimed at preventing child violence. However, the literature shows that the rights of this group are often not effectively guaranteed<sup>4</sup>. In many countries, children are exposed to countless forms of abuse that put them at risk of death and comorbidities<sup>4</sup>, as well as reverberating somatic symptoms in adulthood<sup>5</sup>. With regard to the profile of aggression, there is a predominance of physical, sexual, psychological, neglect, and bullying, practiced mainly by parents, caregivers, and other authority figures, with the most frequent occurrence in the domestic environment<sup>6</sup>. Thus, there is a social practice of child abuse, corroborating the invisibility of cases and difficulties in implementing interventions capable of interrupting its cycle<sup>7</sup>.

In Brazil, the total number of notifications increases exponentially every year. From 2016 to 2020, 34,918 intentional violent deaths of children and adolescents were recorded, an average of 6,970 deaths per year, of which 1,070 were under the age of ten. In 18 states, the annual number of violent deaths in the zero to four age group increased by 27%. This significant increase in violence in early childhood is alarming and proves the weaknesses in protecting the rights of this population<sup>8</sup>.

In addition, 60% of victims of sexual abuse are under the age of 14 and more than 80% are female; the main violent deaths are of black boys; neglect and abandonment are strongly associated with different types of social vulnerability, as are pornography and child sexual exploitation; and maltreatment is a form of aggression that is mostly domestic and intra-family<sup>9</sup>. Current data also shows that social isolation and societal reorganization during the COVID-19 pandemic have contributed to increasing the risk of domestic violence, abuse via the internet, and underreporting of child abuse<sup>9</sup>, with children with low socioeconomic status, those who have historically been subjected to structural inequalities based on color/race and those from low- and middle-income countries, such as Brazil, being most affected<sup>10</sup>.

From this perspective, it is clear that the fragmentation of social support, especially school support, structural issues related to gender inequality, competition for scarce resources, especially in the health field, the partial functioning of many services to defend children's rights, work overload and parental stress due to multiple tasks, can contribute to increasing rates of child violence<sup>4</sup>.

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Thus, considering that aspects related to health crises<sup>4,11</sup> and living in regions of greater social vulnerability<sup>9</sup> can make children more susceptible to mistreatment, the objective was to analyze the recorded cases of child violence in a state in the Legal Amazon during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### METHOD

This is a document-based time series, in which the methodological steps were guided by the STROBE tool. The data refers to reported cases of ill-treatment of children under 12 years of age<sup>2</sup> in the state of Tocantins, a federal unit located in the Legal Amazon, in the geographical center of the country. The estimated population is 1,511,460 inhabitants, with approximately 350,986 under the age of 15, which represents approximately 23% of the local population<sup>12</sup>.

The records were obtained from the National Information System for Public Security, Prisons, Traceability of Weapons and Ammunition, Genetic Material, Fingerprints and Drugs (Sinesp), an electronic platform with information from the Brazilian states, which enables operational, investigative, and strategic consultations on public security<sup>13</sup> and coded in its own spreadsheet. The variables used were selected from the fields on the individual notification/investigation form for domestic, sexual, and/or other interpersonal violence, such as year of occurrence, sex and age of the child, relationship with the aggressor, age of the aggressor, place of occurrence, and type(s) of violence.

The data was analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software, version 26.0, using simple descriptive statistics (absolute and relative frequency) and measures of central tendency (mean and standard deviation). For the categorical variables (outcome variable type of violence), the Chi-square test was used to estimate differences between the groups. A significance level of 5% ( $p \leq 0.05$ ) was adopted.

This study included cases of ill-treatment of children up to the age of 12 registered on Sinesp between January 2020 and December 2021. Cases in which the child's age was not recorded and/or with information that did not correspond to violence were excluded.

It should be noted that Sinesp information reflects the level of registration of the system by each Federation Unit, and updates may occur after publication, with a date of up to three months

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after the event occurred. Therefore, the data was collected in April 2022, so as not to lose any records made in 2021.

This research complies with the precepts of National Health Council Resolution (CNS) No. 466/12 (BRAZIL, 2012). It was approved by the Research Ethics Committee (REC), Opinion Number 5.285.565, CAAE 36921.0.0000.5519.

## RESULTS

During the period established for data collection, there were 2,623 files in the system, and, considering the inclusion and exclusion criteria of this research, 234 were not analyzed. One hundred Fifty-one referred to traffic accidents and 83 did not show the age of the child and/or the minor was the perpetrator. As a result, 2,389 (100%) records were considered valid for data analysis.

Concerning the year, there were more records in 2021 than in 2020, and with a statistically significant association with the type of violence perpetrated (outcome variable of this study),  $p=0.002$ , going from 1,099 (46.0%) notifications in 2020, the beginning of the pandemic scenario, to 1,290 (54.0%) in the following year. In addition, it was found that in 2021, children had a 0.70 higher risk of suffering neglect and 0.82 psychological violence compared to 2020. 2,046 forms showed the type of aggression, with sexual aggression being the most common, with 758 (37.2%) cases (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Frequency of cases according to nature of violence and year of occurrence. Palmas, Tocantins, Brazil. 2022. (N=2046).

Year of occurrence*	Nature of the violence			
	Neglect (%)	Physical Violence f(%)	Psychological Violence f(%)	Sexual violence f(%)
<b>2020</b>	81 (37.8)	306 (49.5)	189 (41.5)	371 (48.9)
<b>2021</b>	133 (62.2)	312 (50.5)	267 (58.5)	387(51.1)
<b>Total</b>	214 (10.4)	618 (30.2)	456 (22.2)	758 (37.2)

Source: Sinesp. \* $p=0.002$ .

It should be noted that 343 (14.4%) forms did not record the nature of the violence perpetrated. Similarly, 378 of them (15.8%) did not include the sex of the perpetrator. This fact highlights

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the weaknesses in documenting child abuse in the state and can make it difficult to implement effective actions aimed at the real demands that exist.

Of the 2,008 (100%) notifications with information on the sex of the child, 1,227 (61.1%) referred to girls (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Frequency of cases according to the nature of the violence and the sex of the child. Palmas, Tocantins, Brazil. 2022. (N=2008).

Nature of the violence	Sex of the offender		p*
	Female f(%)	Male f(%)	
<b>Neglect (n=208)</b>	95 (45.7)	113 (54.3)	0.00
<b>Physical (n=601)</b>	270 (44.9)	331 (55.1)	0.00
<b>Psychological (n=446)</b>	222 (49.8)	224 (49.8)	0.00
<b>Sexual (n=753)</b>	640 (85.0)	113 (15.0)	0.00

Source: Sinesp. \*Chi-squared.

From the 2,008 (100%) records with information on the nature of the abuse and the sex of the child, it was found that sexual violence is mostly perpetrated by males against girls (640; 84.9%), reflecting vulnerability in relation to gender. The nature of the abuse was associated with the sex of the child. When the types of violence were compared, sexual violence was the cross-reference (**p<0.00**).

2,046 (100%) reports included the age of the victim, of which there was a higher frequency of children aged four or over (1,656; 80.9%).

As children grow older, the number of attacks against this group increases, especially sexual abuse. Concerning age group, the reference was one to three years (Table 3).

Considering the forms with information on the sex of the perpetrator, men were responsible for more than half (1,299; 64.6%) of child abuse. With regard to sexual violence, 584 (100%) notifications contained the sex of the perpetrator, and men were responsible for almost all the abuse (564; 96.6%) (Table 4). There was a statistical association between the sex of the perpetrator and the occurrence of violence against children ( $p=0.000$ ).

It was also found that being a girl increased the risk of suffering neglect by 10.84 times, physical abuse by 2.85, and psychological abuse by 3.23 (Table 4).

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**Table 3.** Frequency of cases according to the nature of the violence and the child's age group. Palmas, Tocantins, Brazil. 2022. (N=2046).

Age group	Nature of the violence									
	Neglect f(%)	p	RR (CI)	Physical f(%)	P	RR (CI)	Psychological f(%)	p	RR (CI)	Sexual f(%)
< 1 year	0 (0.0%)	---	---	5 (0.8%)	0.23	1.46 (1.00-2.12)	7 (1.5%)	0.03	1.79 (1.33-2.44)	1 (0.1%)
1 to 3 years	62 (29.0%)			128 (20.7%)			91 (20.0%)			96 (12.7%)
4 to 8 years	88 (41.1%)	0.233	1.48 (1.00-2.12)	290 (46.9%)	0.012	0.82 (0.72-0.95)	189 (41.4%)	0.005	0.76 (0.63-0.91)	322 (42.5%)
9 to 11 years	64 (29.9%)	0.03	1.79 (1.33-2.42)	195 (31.6%)	0.000	0.64 (0.54-0.74)	169 (37.1%)	0.000	0.68 (0.56-0.82)	339 (44.7%)

Source: Sinesp.

**Table 4.** Frequency of cases according to the nature of the violence and the sex of the perpetrator. Palmas, Tocantins, Brazil. 2022. (N=1742).

Sex	Nature of the violence										Nure of the violence
	Neglect f(%)	p	RR (CI)	Physical f(%)	p	RR (CI)	Psychological f(%)	p	RR (CI)	Sexual f(%)	
Female	151 (8.6)	0.00	10.84 (8.26-14.2)	281 (16.1)	0.00	2.85 (2.57-3.16)	184 (10.5)	0.00	3.23 (2.86-3.65)	20 (1.1)	
Male	50 (2.8)			274(15.7)			218 (12.5)			564 (32.4)	

Source: Sinesp.

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Concerning the place of occurrence, the majority of violence took place at home (1,529; 64.0%), indicating that this phenomenon is present in families' routines and is perpetrated by people who are present in the child's environment. Violence was also recorded in a virtual environment (14;0.6%), indicating yet another scenario in which children can be exposed to violations of their rights.

Although the total number of occurrences in the domestic environment (1,529; 64.0%) indicates that the ill-treatment of the child was carried out by a family member or someone known to them, it was not possible to analyze the type of relationship between the aggressor and the victim, as 95.7% (2,287) of the forms did not include this information.

## DISCUSSION

Children in the Legal Amazon are vulnerable to various types of violence, especially child labor, sexual abuse, recruitment for drug trafficking, and those analogous to slavery. It should also be noted that black and poor minors are exploited in greater numbers<sup>15</sup>.

It should also be considered that the COVID-19 pandemic has increased the risk of child violence, especially due to the emergence/aggravation of mental disorders and changes in family routine, such as increased time spent living close, loss of employment, financial insecurity, isolation and dependence on alcohol and/or other drugs<sup>4,16</sup>. In the weeks following the health measures adopted as a result of the disease, there was an increase in the incidence of child abuse in various scenarios<sup>17</sup>.

In France, there was a 50% increase in the relative frequency of hospitalizations for physical abuse in children aged zero to five during quarantine<sup>18</sup>. In a pediatric emergency room in the state of São Paulo, Brazil, in 2020, the number of reports of child aggression, especially physical abuse, also increased<sup>19</sup>. The children in this study had a higher risk of suffering neglect and psychological violence in 2021, compared to the previous year.

These aspects reinforce the need for social actors in the protection network to act to prevent, detect, record, and monitor child abuse, especially in situations of health crisis<sup>18-19</sup> and in regions of greater social vulnerability<sup>15</sup>. As strategies, campaigns can be carried out and communication channels for reporting can be set up through digital apps and social networks<sup>21</sup>.

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In addition, it is important to note that home confinement has led to constant contact between aggressors and victims, resulting in more abuse and fewer reports<sup>11</sup>. From this perspective, although there has been a proven increase in child abuse in different countries around the world during the pandemic<sup>4</sup>, some places have seen a significant drop in the number of reports<sup>9,20</sup>.

On the contrary, it signals difficulties that people may face in making reports and calling on existing social resources to care for victims<sup>9</sup>, as well as evidence that professionals in the network have difficulties in properly recording and acting on cases<sup>22</sup>.

The incompleteness of the notification form, for example, was observed in this and other studies<sup>23-25</sup>, including regions in the Legal Amazon<sup>30</sup>. It is therefore essential to train professionals who assist children so that they can recognize and fill out the notification form satisfactorily, as it is an instrument of care and guarantee of rights<sup>25</sup>.

Keeping incomplete records and not reporting are aspects that potentially compromise the fight against child violence, given that producing and analyzing information on aggression helps to plan and implement practices that are assertively targeted at the real demands that exist<sup>26</sup>.

In addition, considering the profile of child violence, most occurrences are in the home and perpetrated by people who are close to the child<sup>9</sup>. In the meantime, in addition to the actors who make up the protection network, it is also essential to raise awareness among families and other social representatives about child safety<sup>7</sup>.

Offering support programs for conscious parenting, welcoming families, networking, and giving children a voice are all resources that can help overcome barriers to dealing with child abuse<sup>27</sup>.

Other strategies have also proved successful in empowering children to learn about and report abuse, such as digital apps for smartphones or computers<sup>28</sup>, lectures, and group discussions<sup>29</sup>. In addition, the need to overcome the naturalization of acts of child violence as a coherent care practice supported by families must be addressed in different spaces<sup>7</sup>.

In this study, women were associated with physical aggression and neglect. The mother usually takes care of the child, experiences the burden of single parenthood, and is therefore culturally held responsible when there is child neglect and abuse. These aspects highlight inequalities regarding the social role of the family, women, and gender-based violence<sup>30</sup>.

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Concerning men, they appear as the main perpetrators of child sexual abuse, highlighting the culturally instituted power relationship and the role of women as objects of subordination<sup>31</sup>. From this perspective, the results of this and other studies report an increased risk of child sexual violence during COVID-19, especially in girls<sup>9,32</sup>.

Thus, actions aimed at men are essential to contribute to positive masculinity and prevent violence perpetrated by this group<sup>31</sup>. For example, educational activities developed in the school setting are powerful for empowering children concerning positive, affirmative, and inclusive approaches to human sexuality, to social constructions that include respect for gender diversity and emotional learning<sup>33</sup>, and that contribute to knowledge, skills, and attitudes that favor the prevention and interruption of sexual violence<sup>34</sup>.

It should be noted that sexual exploitation is a serious problem in the Legal Amazon region, even though it is underreported, and that it occurs frequently but unevenly between regions. Tackling this problem also requires improving the information system to understand the real scale of the problem and implement effective interventions<sup>25</sup>.

The growth in the number and severity of child abuse cases is a serious public health problem exacerbated by the COVID-19 epidemic worldwide<sup>4,11</sup>, especially in regions with greater social vulnerability and weaknesses in the provision of quality public health care, such as the Legal Amazon<sup>15</sup>.

Thus, the pandemic scenario exposes the urgent need, often silenced, for accessible, effective, and safe ways to report, notify, and quickly attend to cases of child abuse, helping to protect, minimize damage, and prevent the perpetuation of abuse<sup>21</sup>.

In the context of the Legal Amazon, thinking of effective responses to the different realities requires an intersectoral effort, which implies the ability to dialog, build, and develop proposals that take into account regional, cultural, and economic diversities<sup>15</sup>.

A limitation of this study is the incompleteness of the violence notification form and/or the recording of inconsistent information by professionals working in the network. These aspects compromise the analysis of the aspects involved in the cases. However, the information presented provides input for proposing strategies capable of contributing to tackling child violence in the state.

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### CONCLUSION

Over the two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, 2,389 cases of violence against children under the age of 12 (eleven) were recorded in the state of Tocantins, the majority of which were sexual abuse of girls, perpetrated by males.

Child abuse was associated with the period, with a higher occurrence in the second year of the pandemic, the sex of the child and the aggressor, and the type of violence. These aspects indicate the urgent need for intersectoral actions aimed at a culture of peace and gender equality, especially during the pandemic.

Under-reporting and weaknesses were observed in the recording of child abuse in the Legal Amazon. Some types of abuse were not identified in Sinesp, such as child labor, which is present in the region. In addition, almost all the notifications lacked information on the perpetrator's profile.

Thus, to tackle child violence, especially in a context of social isolation, it is necessary to adopt strategies that raise awareness and allow the population to report suspected and confirmed cases of child abuse, as well as to prepare professionals working in the protection network to fill in the notification form properly, and to plan and implement strategies that take into account local specificities.

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## Author contributions:

Leidiane Ferreira Santos: Conceptualization; Data curation; Formal analysis; Research; Methodology; Project management; Supervision; Presentation design; Writing the original manuscript; Writing - revision and editing.

Michelle Tavares Barbosa dos Santos: Conceptualization; Data curation; Formal analysis; Research; Methodology; Presentation design; Writing the original manuscript; Writing - revision and editing.

Juliana Bastoni da Silva: Formal analysis; Research; Methodology; Presentation design; Writing the original manuscript; Writing - revision and editing.

Leonora Rezende Pacheco: Formal analysis; Research; Methodology; Presentation design; Writing the original manuscript; Writing - revision and editing.

Danielle Rosa Evangelista: Formal analysis; Research; Methodology; Presentation design; Writing the original manuscript; Writing - revision and editing.

All the authors have approved the final version of the text.

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**Corresponding author:**

Leidiane Ferreira Santos

Universidade Federal do Tocantins - UFT

Avenida NS-15, Quadra 109 - Alcno 14, Norte, s/n - bloco D - Plano Diretor Norte

Palmas/TO, Brazil. CEP 77001-090

leidienesantos@uft.edu.br

[leidienesantos@uft.edu.br](mailto:leidienesantos@uft.edu.br)

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