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Increased Uncertainty: Child protection in the era of COVID-19

Early discussions and empirical findings from Germany

Research into children, young people and families at the interface between science, politics and professional practice

The German Youth Institute (DJI) is one of the biggest social science research institutes in Europe. For more than 50 years it has conducted research into the life situations of children, young people and families, advising national government, the German federal states and local authorities and providing key stimuli for professional practice.

Founded in 1963, the governing body of the institute is a non-profit association with members from the fields of politics, science and federations as well as child, youth and family welfare institutions.

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Contents

Abstract: The Covid-19 pandemic is turning the world upside down, affecting almost all private and public domains, including child protection. In order to shed some light on the consequences of the early months of the pandemic for organized child protection, the project "Child and Youth Welfare Services and Social Change" at the German Youth Institute (www.dji.de/jhsw) conducted a brief online survey of local Children and Youth Welfare Authorities in spring 2020. In order to frame and contextualise the empirical findings, we also conducted a narrative review of the professional discourse in spring and summer 2020.

The results of our study have already been widely disseminated in the national context (e.g. Mairhofer et al. 2020, 2021 a,b,c). In addition, the final report of the study was translated into Croatian language on behalf of the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Croatia. With this report we would like to make selected results of our study and our literature research also available to a more general international audience. Although our survey investigated several facets of child and youth welfare services, this article only presents selected findings relating to child protection and positions them in the context of further reflections on child protection in times of pandemic.

Child protection is characterized by a high degree of complexity, uncertainty and ambiguity. What is already true under "normal" conditions is even truer in the current exceptional pandemic situation, as will be shown in this article. The pandemic has acted as a multiplier, intensifying the structural challenges of organized child protection. This finding follows from a narrative review of literature and empirical results of our nationwide survey of local Child and Youth Welfare Authorities.

1 Introduction

Since 2020, the coronavirus pandemic and the globally introduced measures for containing it have profoundly impacted numerous facets of everyday life and society. This report addresses the question of which consequences the early months of the pandemic had for organized child protection. The focus of this report is on local Child and Youth Welfare Authorities, the organizations primarily responsible for child protection in Germany.

We take a two-pronged approach to answering our question on the consequences of the coronavirus pandemic on child protection: On the one hand we outline the professional and public discourse on child protection during the early months of the pandemic. Taking the perspective of local Children and Youth Welfare Authorities, we identified uncertainty as a core concept under which different aspects of organised child protection during the pandemic can be subsumed. Accordingly, the focus of this report is on identifying and describing four types of uncertainty among institutions responsible for child protection during the first months of the coronavirus pandemic.

On the other hand we present descriptive findings from a brief quantitative empirical study we conducted online in Germany during the first lockdown in spring 2020. The study was designed as a survey of organizations, namely the German Child and Youth Welfare Authorities (Jugendämter), and 373 out of 575 participated (Mairhofer et al. 2020). The two main sections of the report (literature review and empirical study) are each intended to independently contribute to answering the question of how the coronavirus has impacted organized child protection – exemplified by the German case.

The report's major aim is to provide insight into the situation in Germany. Given the specificity of national child protection systems, the findings cannot be transferred one-to-one to other countries. At the same time, organized child protection is facing comparable challenges, at least in western countries (Merkel-Hoguin et al. 2019; Parton 2020; Spratt et al. 2015; Gilbert et al. 2011). Thus it is reasonable to assume that the basic findings will be relevant for other countries, in particular the central finding that the pandemic situation has intensified the structural challenges of organized child protection, above all that of having to act under conditions of uncertainty.

Consequently, the study aims to strike a balance between an empirical analysis of the consequences of the coronavirus pandemic for child protection in Germany and the hope that this will also provide useful insights for the situation in other regions. To this end, both the discussion of the empirical findings and the presentation of the literature review oscillate between national and international frames of reference.

The report starts with a brief overview of the interrelations between child protection, the coronavirus pandemic and uncertainty (section 2). This is followed by the first main section that presents the methods (section 3.1) and results of our rapid

literature review of the early discourse on the child-protection related consequences of the pandemic (section 3.2). The second main section is on child-protection related results of our survey of local Children and Youth Welfare Authorities. It starts with an introduction into the design of the empirical study (section 4.1) and into the field studied (section 4.2). Next, child-protection related results of our survey are presented (section 4.3). This is followed by a discussion of the findings (section 5) and some considerations on limitations of this paper (section 6).

2 Child protection, Corona and uncertainty

In an interview, the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas described the situation in society at the start of the coronavirus pandemic with the words, "There has never been so much knowledge about our lack of knowledge and about the necessity of having to act and live under conditions of uncertainty" (Schwering 2020, authors' translation). This general diagnosis of the times can also be applied to child and youth welfare services. On the one hand, at the start of the pandemic it was deeply unclear which consequences the pandemic and the measures introduced for containing it would have on the lives and problems of children, youths and families. On the other hand, there was only scant knowledge about how the child and youth care system would act under these conditions. This lack of knowledge, as will be shown below, prompted great speculation and worry, both nationally and internationally.

Habermas's diagnosis of the times certainly seems to apply to child and youth welfare services, too. The uncertainty caused by the pandemic inevitably reached child protection, a field where uncertainty is a constitutive and unavoidable characteristic (Munro 2019; Parton 1998). Accordingly, the pandemic situation amplifies the structural challenges of child protection work, as uncertainty is a constitutive and unavoidable characteristic of child protection.

The uncertainty in child protection results from the fact that decisions have to be made with sparse and contradictory information, in potentially conflictual and poorly-defined situations, under great time pressure and with high caseloads and that the decisions made have far-reaching consequences for the affected children's and families' lives (Munro 2019; Mansell et al. 2011; Carr et al. 2018a, b; Herrenkohl et al. 2020; Broadhurst/Mason 2020). Child protection decisions are therefore wicked issues/problems (Rittel/Webber 1972; Head/Alford 2015) and thus have a structural similarity to decisions in organizational (or political) crises (Sayegh et al. 2004). Similar to decisions in an organizational crisis, child protection social workers reach their decisions through a "dynamic interplay of intuitive and analytic processes with emotionally informed intuitive processes as the primary driver" (Whittaker 2018, p. 1967). Therefore, decision-making does not just have a rational basis but is affected by unconscious references and established routine behaviours (Kahneman 2003; Miller 2018).

In recent years many attempts have been undertaken to professionalize and to rationalize child protection, in the hope of countering the problem of uncertainty. Examples include attempts to standardize case work and implementing evidence-based instruments for risk assessment. The results of these strategies are diverse. Whereas some studies found indications for greater certainty among practitioners and better decisions, other studies found that such strategies merely mask uncertainty, shifting it to different levels and ultimately increasing it (e.g. Ponnert/Svensson 2016; Sletten/Ellingsen 2020; Mairhofer 2020 for Children and Youth Welfare Authorities in Germany).

Viewed in this light, uncertainty is not only constitutive for the practice of child protection but it is also increasing. According to the thesis proposed here on the basis of an analysis of the early academic discourse and the empirical survey in Germany, the coronavirus pandemic is intensifying this trend further. In what follows the notion of uncertainty will be used to denote situations characterized by sparse, contradictory and potentially unreliable information and expectations in which it is nevertheless necessary to act, irrespective of whether the situation is one of perceiving needs or initiating interventions. In view of our guiding question about the consequences of the pandemic for child protection, this vagueness, or rather openness, qualifies uncertainty as a bridging concept for interconnecting and integrating the relevant issues at different levels.

3 Literature review: Early discourses and evidence on child protection during the coronavirus pandemic

After the WHO declared the SARS-CoV-2 outbreak a pandemic on 11 March 2020 and as national infection figures rose, governments around the world took measures to contain the spread of the pandemic. Following the advice of medical experts, social distancing has become an important instrument in fighting the pandemic (WHO 2020). As a result, many countries closed their schools, early childhood education and care (ECEC) facilities and youth centres, wound down the economy or shifted to working from home where possible, and strongly restricted the number of people meeting in public, if not passing outright bans (Our World In Data COVID-19 Dataset). Only a short time after these measures came into force, the first warnings about their risks appeared. Bradbury-Jones and Isham (2020) speak of a 'pandemic paradox' because measures to protect people from the pandemic produce unintended negative consequences (especially for women and children). In this vein the UN Secretary-General Guterres tweeted already on 23 April 2020 "#COVID19 is a public health emergency – that is fast becoming a human rights crisis".

National and international actors expressed concern about protecting children from abuse and neglect. A common line of argument was that the measures to contain the pandemic would increase problems and tensions in families, leading to stress and escalating violence. Due to the lockdown, professional and informal local support structures as well as mechanisms of social control would become inaccessible (The Alliance et al. 2020; United Nations 2020; Sitovaris et al. 2020). The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action (2020) stated: "Infectious diseases like COVID-19 can disrupt the environments in which children grow and develop. Disruptions to families, friendships, daily routines and the wider community can have negative consequences for children's well-being, development and protection. In addition, measures used to prevent and control the spread of COVID-19 can expose children to protection risks. Home-based, facility-based and zonal-based quarantine and isolation measures can all negatively impact children and their families."

The aid organization World Vision (2020a) estimates a worldwide increase in violence against children as a result of the coronavirus pandemic of 20–32%, which translates into 50–85 million more child victims.[1] UNICEF (2020) also warns of the direct (primary) health consequences of the pandemic (illness) and the indirect (secondary) social consequences, naming as the latter 1) neglect and lack of parental care, 2) mental health and psychosocial distress as well as 3) increased exposure to

1 World Vision (2020a) bases its estimate on, among others, evidence of an increase in phone calls to helplines for intimate partner violence in various countries worldwide and the assumption of a strong relationship between intimate partner violence and child abuse and neglect.

violence, including sexual violence, physical and emotional abuse. From a global perspective, not only the social consequences of a lockdown – which in itself is a privilege of wealthy nations (O'Leary/Tsui 2020) – are problematic, but also the consequences of economic collapse (e.g. poverty and child labour), incomplete education or the dangers of disrupted aid programmes (e.g. suspending vaccination programmes) (United Nations 2020; World Vision 2020b).[2]

In western industrialized countries the child protection discussion is dominated by concern about an increase in violence in the domestic context on the one hand, and a reduced efficiency of the child protection system during the lockdown on the other. This dual threat has also been postulated in Germany. After the number of COVID-19 cases increased sharply in several regions of southern and western Germany, the governments of some federal states already introduced measures to contain the pandemic on 16 March, including closing schools and ECEC facilities, before a national lockdown was introduced on 22 March.[3] In Germany too, actors from politics, academia and NGOs expressed early concern about protecting children and youth from abuse and neglect (e.g. UBSKM 2020). Such claims were partly substantiated by indications of an increasing use of telephone helplines for parents, youth and professionals (e.g. BMFSFJ 2020; Fegert et al. 2020). In addition, journalists' investigations and anecdotal evidence from practitioners cast doubt on the ability of organized child protection to function properly (e.g. Zitelmann et al. 2020; Grünberg 2020).

What appears from the outside to be a dual threat to child protection is seen from the perspective of the local Child and Youth Welfare Authorities, responsible at the local level for ensuring effective child protection, as an increase in uncertainty, complexity and inconsistency. This situation is related to different but in fact closely interwoven aspects. Before presenting these aspects (3.2), the methodological approach is briefly described (3.1).

3.1 Review Methodology

We conducted a narrative literature review in order to gain a more comprehensive and a more nuanced picture on the consequences of the corona-pandemic on organized child protection in general and particularly on types of uncertainty within this context.

2 It is estimated that worldwide an additional 30 million children will fall ill or die because vaccination programmes have been suspended during the coronavirus pandemic (World Vision 2020a). Experience with such "secondary impacts" (ibid.) has been gained from the Ebola epidemics of recent years (see also United Nations 2020, p. 13).

3 The national lockdown included far-reaching bans on meeting in public and private, the closure of educational institutions, cultural facilities, restaurants and hotels and almost all shops and businesses with customer contact. In addition, many companies and public services – except for organizations considered part of the so-called critical infrastructure – closed down or introduced short-time working.

A range of considerations prompted us to decide against a classical type of literature review (Grant/Booth 2009): First: At the beginning of the pandemic, relevant findings and assessments were published by different actors (e.g. science, NGOs, press) through various channels (e.g. homepages, newsletters, journals) and diverse formats (mostly grey literature or pre-print repositories). A classical type of literature review would therefore in our eyes not have been able to cover the breadth of relevant topics. Secondly we did not want to wait for the publications to be indexed, meaning that a systematic literature review, for example according to the PRISMA model (cf. Moher et al. 2009) was ruled out. Thirdly, less formalised approaches, such as scoping reviews (Arksey/O'Malley 2005; Levac et al. 2010), were also unsuitable, given the specificity of the situation and the openness of the search question. Above all, the purpose of our review was not to provide an overview on the state of research and discussion, its systematisation or even a result synthesis. Instead our focus was on relevant dimensions of uncertainty in the pandemic situation. We rather followed a qualitative empirical understanding of research and tried to discursively and iteratively develop types of uncertainty in the pandemic context. For this purpose, sources of explanatory value beyond the observed discourse of 2020 (March 2020 – September 2020) were also included, for example on digital communication.

To compile our observations, we conducted weekly searches for publications on the topic of the coronavirus (not only with reference to aspects of child protection) from the start of the pandemic onwards. The searches covered national and international websites of political, academic and professional institutions involved in child and youth welfare or child protection (e.g. www.unicef.org, ifsw.org, www.bmfsfj.de), relevant platforms and newsletters (e.g. www.jugendhilfeportal.de) as well as newsfeeds from nearly one hundred national and international journals covering the fields of child protection, social work, social services and public administration (e.g. Children and Youth Services Review; Trauma, Violence & Abuse; International Social Work). If the title or abstract of a publication (e.g. scientific article, report, press release) indicated that it could be relevant, the publication was read, summarized in excerpts, assigned keywords and saved in a literature database (Citavi 6). In total, we included 211 publications. Using an open approach, we discussed the publications comprehensively within the researcher team. By means of an inductive and iterative process, we collated different aspects, consequences and perspectives of the pandemic and identified four types of uncertainty that are relevant for organisations active in child protection.

3.2 Results

3.2.1 Uncertainty about the situation in the families

Firstly, there is great uncertainty, among both researchers and practitioners, about the consequences of the measures for containing the pandemic on families and the

risks to children. This uncertainty can be amplified, but also reduced, with information from different sources. We can distinguish between different types and sources of information whose relevance has changed over time.

Especially at the start of the pandemic, the positions of prominent organizations (e.g. UNICEF, The Alliance, World Vision) played a major role. Their concerns that social isolation resulting from the lockdown would lead to increased tension in families, exacerbating psychological stress due to social isolation, uncertain employment prospects and the demands associated with supervising and teaching children at home so that existing domestic violence would become amplified (e.g. also Posick et al. 2020; Kaukinen 2020), appeared highly plausible.

Empirical data on the actual situation in families only became available with a lag and were anything but clear. Basically, two types of data can be distinguished: first, findings on general risk factors and previous crises and second, findings from the current pandemic. Social isolation, psychological stress as well as poverty and economic hardship are empirically substantiated risk factors for child abuse and neglect (e.g. Vanderminden et al. 2019; IOM/NRC 2014, WHO 2013; Herrenkohl et al. 2008). Since these risk factors are apparently being exacerbated by the current situation, an increase in child abuse and neglect is assumed. Brooks et al. (2020), for example, conducted a review of papers on the psychological effects of quarantine. Most studies reported on effects like stress, confusion and anger. Additionally, results from studies on previous crises and catastrophes can be extrapolated for the current situation. These imply that child abuse and neglect increase as a consequence of major disruptions to daily life (Campbell 2020). A study from 2014 on the Ebola epidemic in West Africa found that 55% of children questioned reported an increase in family violence (OECD 2020). Other studies find differentiated effects. Schneider et al. (2017), for instance, show that economic problems during the Great Recession (2008–2010) led to more violence against children but not to more neglect. Studies on the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina (2005) indicate an increase in both abuse and neglect (Campbell 2020), but some also show that violence increased especially in families who were evacuated or became homeless, i.e. in a situation where it was not possible to withdraw into the privacy of their own home (Kaukinen 2020).

The problem with all these studies is their applicability in the current pandemic situation. However, there are also problems with the applicability of studies on the effects of the coronavirus pandemic, especially when these were conducted in other cultural environments or when lines of argument mix empirical findings with speculation. Parental psychological stress is an empirically proven risk factor for child abuse and neglect, but whether parental psychological stress has in fact increased was initially only speculation. While early findings (from Asia and North Africa) show an increase in psychological stress (Qui et al. 2020; Arnout et al. 2020), the first studies in Germany surprisingly showed that the lockdown situation hardly had any adverse effects on the overall psychological situation (e.g. Entringer/Kröger 2020). Later, further analyses showed an increase in the negative effects of the pandemic over time (e.g. Möhring et al. 2020), that the pandemic situation had differentiated effects and that, in particular, populations groups with lower socioeconomic status and mothers are in fact experiencing higher levels of psychological

stress (e.g. Huebener et al. 2020; Schröder et al. 2020; Brown et al. 2020). Furthermore, empirical studies have shown that the measures for containing the pandemic have a negative effect on the well-being of young people (e.g. OECD 2020; Andresen et al. 2020). The increasing number of findings over time not only provide a more detailed picture of the consequences of the pandemic, they also show how estimations and consequences change over time.

Differentiated and reliable scientific findings on the direct consequences of the current pandemic only appeared with a certain time lag. This is not surprising, given that disaster research is generally confronted with specific methodological and ethical challenges (van Brown 2020). Especially at the start of the coronavirus pandemic, this knowledge gap was frequently filled – also in scholarly texts – by drawing on newspaper articles that appeared very soon after the start of the pandemic. Frequent reference was made, for instance, to an article in the New York Times by Taub (2020) about an international increase in domestic violence. The newspaper articles were not the object of scientific analysis but functioned as a source of evidence for empirical facts. Given the lack of scientific studies, even prestigious international NGOs often used media reports to support their case, not always drawing on quality media. Gradually, a critical reflection on the quality of such media reports set in (e.g. Kaukinen 2020). Furthermore, the usage and evaluation of different sources of information changed over the course of the pandemic.

An increase in domestic violence or intimate partner violence, for which currently more information seems to be available (WHO 2020; Rauhaus et al. 2020), is considered a reliable indicator for an increase in child abuse and neglect. This nexus is evident since a co-occurrence of both types of violence is well proven (Chan et al. 2019; Herrenkohl et al. 2008). In the current situation, a rise in the usage of telephone helplines for victims of intimate partner violence is commonly viewed – and transported in the media – as proof for an increase in domestic violence (and consequently child abuse and neglect). Many countries have reported increased usage of such helplines (e.g. World Vision 2020a; Rauhaus et al. 2020). Indications for an increased usage of advisory helplines is, without doubt, an important alarm signal. In Germany, the Ministry for Families reported increased usage of the national child protection hotline already at the end of March. In comparison to the previous month, the number of phone calls from parents increased by 21% and the number of online chats with children by 16% (BMFSFJ 2020), and both increased considerably again in April (Nummer gegen Kummer 2020). However, there is a danger of misinterpreting this indicator. It should be noted that the number of consultations already increased by 35% from 2018 to 2019 (ibid.). Furthermore, alternative explanations are credible in a developed welfare state with differentiated local infrastructure for specialized support and advice services, as in Germany. The increased number of calls to crisis helplines could at least partially be a consequence of a substitution effect: since local support infrastructure was not available during the lockdown, supraregional structures (such as national crisis helplines) were used instead. Due to local closures, some services at the local level explicitly advised their users to use national services offering support remotely (NZFH 2020). This means that it is difficult to determine what really led to the increased number of calls to advisory and counselling helplines.

With regard to the related topic of intimate partner violence, Kaukinen (2020) also warns against drawing conclusions too quickly. In a differentiated reflection she shows how complex and multifaceted the topic is and, consequently, how difficult it is to draw robust conclusions.

Uncertainty applies also to local data from Germany. For example, the child protection emergency clinic at Berlin's Charité hospital – a medical diagnostic centre for child abuse and neglect in Berlin – reported an increase of 23% in diagnosed and confirmed cases of child abuse in the first six months of 2020. However, the (semi-) professional publication contained neither absolute case numbers nor information on the situation in the whole city (aertzeblatt.de 2020). Violence against women and children was also recorded in a study by the Technical University of Munich (Steinert/Ebert 2020). The study's ability to show an effect of the pandemic is limited by the lack of comparable data collected in the same fashion before the pandemic.

3.2.2 Uncertainty regarding the capacities of local social and educational services

In child protection, everyday institutions providing social services, healthcare and education assume an important role both nationally and internationally (Breimo et al. 2017). Paediatricians, schools, ECEC facilities, community centres or youth clubs as well as a tight-knit networks of professional advisory and counselling services offer children, young people and families, among other things, advice and support in coping with psychosocial adversity. In this way they contribute to defusing tension and conflict before they escalate and cumulate in violence. Furthermore, in Germany these institutions of a local social infrastructure also explicitly function as actors in child protection and are required by law to actively follow up on reports or indications of child abuse and neglect, to initiate contact with the parents and, if necessary, inform the local Child and Youth Welfare Authorities. From the perspective of Child and Youth Welfare Authorities, these everyday institutions are therefore important child protection intermediaries, standing between the social workers working for the offices and the families, and fulfilling two important functions: direct support and information provision.

During the general lockdown, not only schools and ECEC facilities had to close but also most of the other everyday institutions had to suspend their operations or, as paediatricians reported, were consulted less often (BVKJ 2020). In a survey of about 1,000 providers active in social and healthcare services in Germany, 43% of those offering facilities for child and youth welfare stated that they were operating at lower capacity during the pandemic. Roughly one quarter reported an unchanged capacity, a good tenth reported increased demand and one fifth was unable to quantify changes in demand for their services. The principal reason for the reduced demand given by providers from the health and social care sectors questioned was legal restrictions, primarily social distancing provisions (Bank für Sozialwirtschaft 2020). A reduction in operating capacity does not mean that the facilities were closed to service users. The majority of respondents to an online survey of 1,862 professionals working in different fields and organizations in social work in Germany stated that

their facilities remained open to service users during the lockdown. Only around one tenth reported a complete closure (Meyer/Buschle 2020). In order to properly understand these findings it is important to note that the respondents worked for very different organizations including residential facilities and ECEC facilities providing childcare for key workers, which therefore had to remain open.

Even if the facilities were closed, contact to service users was often maintained. Institutions such as schools and numerous advisory and counselling services as well as youth clubs adapted their way of working to the changed social rules and provided their services remotely, especially via digital media. Three quarters of the respondents to Buschle and Meyer's (2020) study still had contact to their service users. In contrast with the pre-Corona period, they reported 50% fewer face-to-face contacts, but a fourfold increase from two to eight percent in video chats and an increase in text chats from seven to ten percent. Communication via phone and email – the most important communication channels during the lockdown – also increased slightly. However, the proportion of respondents who stated that they did not have any contact to their service users increased nearly four and half times. Two thirds of respondents viewed the changes in communication critically (ibid.).

The studies presented here show a heterogeneous picture but underscore that for social services of all kinds the lockdown has meant a severe interruption of established work routines and great uncertainty, and that the organizations are reacting by developing new strategies (Shi et al. 2020 for NGOs in the USA). For Germany, the restricted or changed way of operating of the various social and educational services affects local Child and Youth Welfare Authorities in that the latter can hardly assess to what extent everyday support can still be realized and thus contribute to relieving stress. Furthermore, interrupting psychosocial support services (also those outside the field of child and youth welfare services) because of the coronavirus can lead to an accumulation of problems, as international studies show (Vostanis/Bell 2020; Wilke et al. 2020).

Furthermore, local social and educational services function as actors reporting children suspected to be at risk to the local Child and Youth Welfare Authorities. Debates within German social work identified the loss of schools, ECEC facilities etc. as potential sources for such reports as a major problem for maintaining child protection during the pandemic (Zitelmann et al. 2020). However, in recent years less than one third of reports were made by these services. According to the official German statistics on child and youth welfare services, in 2018 about 11% of reports of suspected children at risk came from schools, 10% from facilities providing child and youth welfare services, including ECEC facilities, and 6% from healthcare facilities. The most important actors reporting suspected child maltreatment to the local Child and Youth Welfare Authorities are the police and the judicial system, who made one quarter of all reports (Statistisches Bundesamt 2020). At least for the police it can be assumed that their way of working was not impeded, rather the measures introduced to contain the pandemic probably did not lead to a reduction in their duties but shifted the focus, e.g. due to changes in crime patterns (Stickle/Felson 2020 for the USA).

3.2.3 Uncertainty arising from changed communication and working methods in the Child and Youth Welfare Services

Uncertainty regarding the capacities of local social and educational services arises to a not negligible extent from uncertainty about the extent to which such intermediaries can realize their direct and indirect child protection function, given their changed working methods due to the measures for containing the pandemic. Local Child and Youth Welfare Authorities are also affected in the same way by the pandemic in their child protection work. Reducing the number of contacts to other people through social distancing is a particular challenge for human services organizations. This arises from the fact that people are the 'raw material' these organizations work with (Perrow 1967, Hasenfeld 2010a). Furthermore, relationships and communication are the principal 'technologies' human service organizations use to realize their purpose (e.g. Jones 2020; Ingram/Smith 2018; Hasenfeld 2010b; Howe 1998; for child protection already Kempe/Kempe 1978; for social work in general already Richmond 1922). Finally, their job can only be done with the co-productive participation of service users (Ostrom 1996; Whitaker 1980). The working methods of human services organizations are thus particularly affected by social distancing and they are forced to adapt their core working methods.

The challenges start with the requirement that, in order to switch to digital communication, both professionals and service users must possess both the necessary devices as well as the skills to use them, which cannot simply be assumed (Hitchings/Maclean 2020; Turner 2020). Digital communication brings additional challenges for the professionals because their existing communicative competences cannot be employed to their full extent and have to be adapted. Furthermore, only some communication channels and therefore information are available when interacting remotely via media (McBeath et al. 2020; Byrne/Kiwan 2019; Richards/Viagó 2013; Bambling et al. 2008). Especially in the field of child protection it is recommended to use all five senses, which is probably also connected with the great importance of intuitive decision-making processes. "It is hard to assess conditions in a home, the state of all family members or to detect potentially abusive relationships or whether service users may be lying or exaggerating without being able to see people, look them in the eye in real life, or smell and feel the living space" (Banks et al. 2020, p. 7). Broadhurst and Manson (2012) use the concept of "co-presence" to capture the important qualities of face-to-face communication. With reference to Zhao (2003) they elaborate "that it is only corporeal co-presence that offers access to fully embodied communication. It is the rich contextual detail of co-presence that enables individuals to sense what is happening (…). [T]hrough co-present interaction, knowledge and understanding of the other are felt and not just known in abstract ways" (p. 580-1).

The problems associated with purely remote interaction include establishing a viable working relationship (Tregeagle/Dary 2008; Cook/Zschomler 2020) and building new relationships, especially to service users with mental health issues (Nisanci et al. 2020). This is also related to the fact that confidentiality is more difficult to establish in remote interactions, because it cannot be ruled out that other people are listening in (Turell 2020; Banks et al. 2020). By drawing on findings that precede the current pandemic and considering the general state of research on forms of remote

communication in psychosocial fields, advantages can be discovered in these forms of interaction, even if they are outweighed by the difficulties (e.g. Richards/Vinagó 2013; Bambling et al. 2008). Being forced to use digital forms of communication can also create new opportunities, especially when communicating with youths (Levine et al. 2020; Cook/Zschomler 2020; Turner 2016).

Challenges are not just associated with remote forms of communication. Other measures such as wearing masks and staying at a distance can also affect communication and relationship building. The effects on decision-making in child protection are also likely to be significant. Child protection is still largely characterized by interventions in service users' direct living environments. The professionals literally go to where it hurts (for the children). Home visits are an established part of the inventory of child protection practitioners (Ferguson 2016, 2018). In 2013 for example, local Child and Youth Welfare Authorities in Germany made home visits in 83% of child protection cases (Urban-Stahl et al. 2018). Greater than usual challenges are associated with conducting home visits while maintaining compliance with stipulations for infection control and can lead to anxiety, uncertainty and resistance on the part of both professionals and families.

Finally, the stipulations for social distancing not only affect the co-productive process of service provision between professionals and service users but also collegial exchanges and work based on collegial co-production (Roesch-March 2016). In Germany, collegial decision-making is one of the most important, federally mandated standards in child protection work. This form of collegial discussion has also been affected by the measures to contain the pandemic. Nearly one half of the professionals from different fields of social work who participated in Buschle and Meyer's survey said that during the pandemic they had fewer discussions with colleagues. Several participants even believe that this limitation could mean that child protection standards can no longer be maintained (Meyer/Buschle 2020, p. 17).

In addition to these communicative challenges resulting primarily from the special character of social services work, local Child and Youth Welfare Authorities, as well as many other organizations, were confronted with personnel and logistic challenges during the lockdown. Staff shortages can arise due to employees having to supervise and teach their children after schools and ECEC facilities closed, due to illness or quarantine, or because they belong to an at-risk group. Furthermore, actions that are compliant with the anti-coronavirus measures take more time (e.g. putting on protective clothing, remote working or coordinating work processes) and thus bind more resources. Of the professionals questioned by Buschle and Meyer, 43% reported an increase in the number of work steps during the pandemic. Social work organizations, as other employers as well, are required to organize work so as to minimize risks to their workforce (Switzer et al. 2020). This leads to various logistical challenges: the provision of personal protective equipment (PPE), as demanded by international professional organizations (UNICEF et al. 2020), was described both nationally and internationally as partially inadequate, especially at the beginning of the pandemic (Buschle/Meyer 2020; Truell 2020; Nyashanu et al. 2020). A further challenge is to facilitate and organize forms of remote working, especially the hard- and software for digital communication with service users, colleagues and supervisors. Thirty percent of the respondents in Buschle and Meyer's (2020) survey stated

that at the start of the lockdown their organization did not have the technical capacities for remote working. Finally, organizations are also required to inform their staff about current developments and changing rules, which is a difficult task, not least due to the great uncertainty of the highly dynamic situation (Shi et al. 2020).

3.2.4 Uncertainty about the availability of local child and youth welfare services

If parents need support or if an intervention is necessary to protect a child, then usually additional actors are involved. In the German dual welfare state, support services are usually provided by non-governmental organizations. This is the case for in-home parenting support, residential homes or short-term emergency placements. Since child protection is an issue field involving numerous actors, Child and Youth Welfare Authorities are dependent on other institutions in fulfilling their child protection duties. Consequently, when the pandemic disrupts the functioning of these other organizations, actions taken by local Child and Youth Welfare Authorities to protect children can be directly hindered – for example when court hearings are temporarily postponed or if residential facilities are not accepting any new children. After all, courts or service providers are also confronted with the communicative, personnel and logistical challenges described above.[4] A survey of professionals working in care homes in England, for example, found that shortages of PPE, anxiety among service users and staff, difficulties in implementing social distancing rules, staff shortages and constantly changing rules posed additional challenges to their normal work (Nayashana et al. 2020). Residential care facilities for children are likely to face the same challenges. Furthermore, when young people are newly admitted to residential settings, they might have to be quarantined, i.e. isolated, which may also mean re-organizing staff schedules.

4 In addition to the communicative, personnel and logistical challenges previously described, the mostly non-governmental providers of services and support are also faced with financial challenges, such as questions of refinancing the residential places or services that remained unused due to social distancing restrictions. Although national and state government quickly organized financial aid for social facilities, the service providers are still confronted with great uncertainty. Additionally, accessing financial aid is associated with high bureaucratic barriers (Bank für Sozialwirtschaft 2020).

On the whole, considering the four aspects described above suggests that there is a trade-off between professional standards on the one hand and the stipulations or framework for working in a pandemic situation on the other. The additional challenges of the pandemic exacerbate the existing challenges of dealing with uncertainty and balancing contradictions. Banks et al. (2020) describe similar challenges in their international study on social work during COVID-19, identifying six key ethical challenges of working in the pandemic.[5]

5 The study was conducted by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW). Questionnaires were returned by 607 social workers from all continents, supplemented by 11 interviews with social workers in China. One result of the study were six ethical challenges of the coronavirus pandemic: 1. Creating and maintaining trusting, honest and empathic relationships via phone or internet with due regard to privacy and confidentiality, or in person with protective equipment. 2. Prioritizing service user needs and demands, which are greater and different due to the pandemic, when resources are stretched/unavailable and full assessments are often not possible. 3. Balancing service user rights, needs and risks against personal risk to social workers and others, in order to provide services as well as possible. 4. Deciding whether to follow national and organizational policies, procedures or guidance (existing or new) or to use professional discretion in circumstances where the policies seem inappropriate, confused or lacking. 5. Acknowledging and handling emotions, fatigue and the need for self-care, when working in unsafe and stressful circumstances. 6. Using the lessons learned from working during the pandemic to rethink social work in the future.

4 Empirical Study: Statutory child protection during the corona pandemic in Germany

Given the situation described above, the project "Child and Youth Welfare Services and Social Change" at the German Youth Institute (Deutsches Jugendinstitut, DJI) in Munich conducted a brief empirical survey on the work of local Child and Youth Welfare Authorities in Germany during the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic in spring 2020. The aim of the study was to find out which effects the coronavirus pandemic was having on the different areas of child and youth welfare. One of the areas surveyed was child protection. The survey was addressed to local Child and Youth Welfare Authorities because these institutions are responsible for delivering municipal child and youth welfare services and as such are best placed to assess the situation at the local level. In what follows, we first describe the study design (4.1). In the next section, we briefly describe the field under study (4.2). In the results section we present our findings on how local Child and Youth Welfare Authorities perceive the situation and explain their perceptions, how Child and Youth Welfare Authorities handle child protection cases during the pandemic and which support measures they initiated. Furthermore, we briefly presents findings on central challenges of the pandemic (4.3).

4.1 Design of the study

The survey of all 575 local Child and Youth Welfare Authorities in Germany was conducted between 23 April and 12 May 2020, i.e. in the period before the initial tough measures for containing the coronavirus pandemic were loosened. A total of 373 organizations participated in the survey, i.e. the response rate was 65%.

The study was designed as a survey of organizations in order to capture the organizational perspective. Data were collected by means of a closed online survey employing the tool Limesurvey. The invitation to participate was sent with a personalized link to the head of each local Child and Youth Welfare Authority who ought to have responded as a representative of the organization. Since the project regularly conducts these types of surveys with these organizations, the respondents are familiar with this research perspective. Furthermore, previous studies have shown that the respondents trust in the integrity of the DJI and have regularly provided information on problematic situations and even legal infringements. Therefore, we can also assume for this study that social desirability only played a very minor role in answering the questions.

All findings presented here refer only to the level of the organization or municipality, and not to individual cases (children, youths and parents). Given their responsibility for ensuring provision of child and youth welfare services, local Child and Youth Welfare Authorities are well-positioned for providing an overview of the

situation in each local authority area, even though numerous additional actors are involved in directly providing the services.

Following the initial invitation, two reminder emails were sent to the Child and Youth Welfare Authorities. The survey tool made it possible to interrupt questionnaire completion and return to it at a later time. The collection and processing of the information on the Child and Youth Welfare Authorities was completely in accordance with EU and German data protection laws. The authorities responding were made aware of relevant aspects relating to data protection and they explicitly consented to their data being used by the project.

A range of sources and experience were drawn on in developing the survey instrument: a review of current discussions, empirical findings on the work of the Child and Youth Welfare Authorities, discussions with practitioners as well as the expertise within the project itself, which since the early 1990s has been investigating the services, structures and developments in child and youth welfare by means of qualitative and quantitative empirical studies. The questionnaire was pre-tested in the field before being rolled out.

The survey instrument was deliberately kept short so as to not unnecessarily burden local Child and Youth Welfare Authorities during what was likely to be a very difficult time. It covered the topics of providing support to the public, child protection and means of communication with service users. There were questions on both services, proceedings and case numbers as well as on the organization itself and personal assessments. In addition to closed questions with single or multiple answer options, it was also possible to include additional aspects and to comment on the questions and the answers given. The study only questioned organizations about their view on the situation. There were no questions on individual aspects of the work.

In contrast with other surveys involving local Child and Youth Welfare Authorities in Germany (Gandlgruber 2019), the response rate of 65% can be considered high. To test for selection bias between the population and the responding Child and Youth Welfare Authorities, two regional characteristics of their catchment areas, namely federal state and type of local authority (town, rural district or rural parishes with their own Child and Youth Welfare Authorities) were analysed. Although there was a slight over-representation of West German local authorities (for more details see [our study]), we can still assume that on the whole the results provide a good portrayal of the situation in local child and youth welfare in Germany.

The data were analysed with descriptive statistical methods using IBM-SSPS 23. Results are considered significant if the probability of error is $p < .05$.

4.2 The field under study

In Germany, as in all high-income countries, protecting children from abuse and neglect is considered an important task (Jud et al. 2013) for which all of society bears responsibility. However, the German welfare state does not prescribe one

formal child protection system nor specific child protection services. Instead, "[t]here is an interwoven structure between many different institutions with legal obligations to protect children from maltreatment and to offer help and support if they have been maltreated. But all of these institutions have broader roles and tasks in child and youth welfare. None is focused exclusively on child endangerment or child protection in the narrow sense" (Witte et al. 2019, p. 100).

The local Child and Youth Welfare Authorities are considered the "organizational heart" (Deutscher Bundestag 2013, p. 562) of the child and youth welfare system and play a key role in child protection in Germany (Witte et al. 2019; Kelly et al. 2011). They are responsible for fulfilling the state's role in watching over parents' rights and duties in raising their children, as formulated in Article 6 of the Basic Law. They are the institution where concerns that a child is at risk of significant harm are reported, they investigate the reports, they take children and young people into emergency care and accommodate them temporarily if necessary, they assess and determine the need for protection and support with the participation of the service users, they offer in-home services und out-of-home services for families and, if necessary, initiate proceedings at the Family Court to rule on curtailments of the parents' rights. In contrast, services designed to prevent harm to children or to support parents are usually provided by non-governmental organizations (Kelly et al. 2011). In addition to their responsibilities for child protection, local Child and Youth Welfare Authorities also fulfil a broad spectrum of other duties. These include advisory services for children, youth and parents as well as coordinating local provision of ECEC and youth work.

4.3 Results

4.3.1 Perception of risks

Professional and public discourse conjectured that child abuse and neglect would increase during the pandemic and consequently the number of child protection cases would also rise. However, over half of the local Child and Youth Welfare Authorities (55%) said that there had been no change in the number of reported cases of suspected child abuse or neglect since the start of the pandemic. One quarter of the organizations reported a drop in numbers and only 5% an increase. However, 16% were not able to make a definitive statement about the number of cases, which highlights the high levels of uncertainty in the current situation. On average, this latter group of Child and Youth Welfare Authorities considered ensuring child protection during the pandemic to be a greater challenge than those Child and Youth Welfare Authorities that observed a change in case numbers. The Child and Youth Welfare Authorities that reported no change in the number of cases rate this challenge the lowest.

The local Child and Youth Welfare Authorities were given the opportunity to comment on developments in the number of reported cases of suspected child abuse or neglect. One fifth added a comment. Some participants expressed their concern that due to the closure of schools and ECEC facilities, 'early warning systems' in the

community were probably less effective and possibly the number of hidden cases has risen. Other statements report similar sentiments, describing 'a strange gut-feeling' and worries that children at risk would only be identified later or not at all. Some respondents reported their impression that the lockdown also had stress-reducing effects in families because there was less pressure from stressors such as school and work. Other organizations experienced a shift in who reported child protection concerns, with more neighbours and families themselves initiating contact. Overall, the respondents' comments exhibit great heterogeneity in their perceptions, and actors with leadership responsibility offer very different explanations for the data.

4.3.2 Child Protection Work

During the lockdown, many local authorities closed their offices to the public and focused their work on their key duties. Given this situation, our survey asked which of their various duties the local Child and Youth Welfare Authorities still performed during the lockdown. Without exception, they name child protection as a duty they continued to fulfil during lockdown, and usually other duties too. Two fifths reported that during the lockdown there were no substantial limitations on the range of services offered. However, many Child and Youth Welfare Authorities reported that, on the one hand, in order to deliver services they had to resort to different communication channels. Personal contact to service users was, as far as possible, substituted with forms of remote communication. On the other hand, some Child and Youth Welfare Authorities reported setting priorities differently. This means that they can maintain a full spectrum of services, but only for the cases considered most important. When such priorities are set, child protection always comes out on top. For example, 37% of Child and Youth Welfare Authorities reported that during the lockdown care plans were only drawn up in cases where there was a suspicion of child abuse or neglect.

Furthermore, 99% of Child and Youth Welfare Authorities stated that during the pandemic they were able to fulfil the legal requirement to gain a personal impression of the child and their living situation. Nearly all Child and Youth Welfare Authorities (98%) conducted home visits to this end. Half of the Child and Youth Welfare Authorities (49%) said that they invited families to their offices, 13% used digital media to gain an impression, and 6% used other strategies. The question was phrased to find out which strategies the organizations generally use during the lockdown, which does not mean that they always used these strategies to the same extent as before the lockdown. The question implied that the Child and Youth Welfare Authorities could use more than one strategy to gain an impression of the child and their living conditions.

Table 1: Proportion of local Child and Youth Welfare Authorities according to type of visual appraisal (Combinations of types)

Type of visual appraisal	Share of CYWA
Exclusively home visits	46 %
Home visits and appointments in the office	39 %
Home visits and/or office appointments and digital media	13 %
Exclusively office appointments	1 %
Other	1 %

n=345
Source: Mairhofer et al. 2020, p. 37

Table 1 shows which and how many types of visual appraisal local Child and Youth Welfare Authorities use. In 46% of Child and Youth Welfare Authorities, visual appraisal is exclusively by home visit. Two fifths use a combination of home visits and office appointments. The phrasing of the question does not allow for further differentiation of the combination in individual cases, for example in how many cases there was no home visit or in how many cases a family was visited at home and also invited to the office. Thirteen percent of Child and Youth Welfare Authorities use digital media in addition to home visits and office appointments. None of the Child and Youth Welfare Authorities exclusively used digital media for assessing whether a child was at risk of harm. Here it cannot be ruled out that some of the Child and Youth Welfare Authorities using digital media employ this as the only means of contacting families in individual cases. Whether the different types of visual assessment form a stepwise procedure also remains an open question, e.g. initial contact via digital media then, depending on the impression gained or the result, a second face-to-face contact. In one percent of Child and Youth Welfare Authorities visual assessments are made exclusively in their offices.

Studies on the significance of co-presence interactions suggest that the quality of situational assessments in child protections cases varies according to which communication channels are used. It can be postulated that, for example, if there is no face-to-face contact then uncertainty about the decision is greater. The findings of our study confirm this association. Local Child and Youth Welfare Authorities who stated that they did not have direct contact to service users during the lockdown also stated to a significantly higher proportion that recognizing support needs and realizing child protection were a great challenge. It is certainly possible to interpret these relationships as implying that not having personal contact to service users is considered risky and problematic. One reason for not having contact to service users could be the lack of PPE. Local Child and Youth Welfare Authorities that did not have personal contact to service users also, on average, described the availability of PPE as a significantly greater challenge during the pandemic. There could just as well be factors on the part of service users that prevented personal contact, such as fear of infection or attempts to exploit the general situation of uncertainty to avoid

interacting with the Child and Youth Welfare Authority. Since child protection is organized in networks, not only the communication channels used by local Child and Youth Welfare Authorities are relevant, but also those of the other institutions involved. We can empirically show that Child and Youth Welfare Authorities who were aware that support and advisory services were closed to users during the lockdown, consider ensuring child protection to be a significantly greater problem.

Possible reactions to increased uncertainty arising from different or restricted communication channels include strategies aimed at increasing the spread and the reach of the available communication channels. For instance, 89% of Child and Youth Welfare Authorities in our study said they provided the public with more information on support and advisory services during the lockdown, and 46% made additional resources available for online, telephone and chat advice. To counter interrupted communication channels and the lack of depth in communication due to social distancing, new services are being established with new means of access. Thus, a substitution of currently limited communication channels and services as well as an expansion are taking place.

Services provided: Local Child and Youth Welfare Authorities have a range of options for protecting children who are at risk of harm. If a child or youth is acutely at risk of abuse or neglect, Child and Youth Welfare Authorities can take them into emergency care and temporarily accommodate them. These temporary protective measures are to be implemented when the young person requests them, when there is a threat to the well-being of the child, for instance if they are the victim of domestic violence, or are alone in a place deemed 'dangerous', or if they enter Germany as an unaccompanied minor. Of the local Child and Youth Welfare Authorities we questioned for our study, 99% said that, if necessary, children and young people were taken into emergency care during the lockdown.

We also asked local Child and Youth Welfare Authorities to estimate how the number of cases of children and young people being taken into emergency care had developed since the measures for combatting the pandemic came into force. Two thirds of the organizations said that the numbers had remained unchanged, 19% reported a fall, 2% an increase and 14% were unable to say. Taking children into care is a measure that can be initiated by local Child and Youth Welfare Authorities when a suspicion of child abuse or neglect is confirmed. In addition, young people can also be taken into emergency care for other reasons. Consequently, the number of suspected cases reported and the number of children and young people taken into emergency care can both be considered indicators for problematic situations in families and for young people. With regard to how suspected cases of child maltreatment are processed by local Child and Youth Welfare Authorities, the two indicators are only loosely coupled. In our study there is a highly significant relationship between the two items. Of the Child and Youth Welfare Authorities stating that the number of reports of possible child abuse or neglect declined, 68% also reported taking fewer children into care. Of the Child and Youth Welfare Authorities stating that there was no decline in reports of possible child abuse or neglect, only 25% report a drop in the number of children taken into care. Similar relations exist for Child and Youth Welfare Authorities reporting an increase in cases (57% vs. 4%), stagnating numbers (69% vs. 35%) and uncertainty about the trend (49%

vs. 10%). This finding can be partially attributed to the reliable processing of child protection cases by local Child and Youth Welfare Authorities so that a change in the input (number of reports) leads to a corresponding change in the output (number of children taken into care). The finding can also be partially understood as an indication of how the respondents evaluate the current situation in families, especially in the light of their additional comments.

While taking children into emergency care is a short-term, temporary child protection measure, a range of in-home and out-of-home services aim to prevent child abuse and neglect in the long term. Many local Child and Youth Welfare Authorities implemented such measures during the pandemic: 95% of the organizations started residential care measures, 91% in-home services. Three percent reported that residential support could not begin because they were currently unable to find a service provider. This proportion is surprisingly small given the efforts associated with initiating residential support while complying with the stipulations for infection control. Looking at all the measures introduced by local Child and Youth Welfare Authorities during the lockdown reveals a gradient skewed towards favouring strong interventions to directly protect children from abuse and neglect. Practically all local Child and Youth Welfare Authorities still took children into care to remove them from a situation of acute threat. Furthermore, a clear majority also initiated residential accommodation, the most intensive child and youth welfare service. Lower down the list is in-home support, which is mainly preventative but also aims to protect children, although with lower intensity than the previously mentioned measures. Early Prevention Programmes, aimed at supporting expectant and new parents in order to prevent child abuse or neglect, were only started by 75% of local Child and Youth Welfare Authorities. Support measures not related to child protection were initiated less often, for instance for integrating young people into the labour market (69%). These findings highlight how strongly local Child and Youth Welfare Authorities prioritized child protection during the lockdown under conditions of heightened uncertainty. Before drawing further conclusions from these results it should be noted that local Child and Youth Welfare Authorities were only asked which support measures they had initiated. They were not asked whether these measures were implemented to the same extent as before the lockdown, nor whether they had initiated all necessary measures.

4.3.3 Major challenges

Given a list of twelve challenges associated with the pandemic, local Child and Youth Welfare Authorities rated the problem of being able to recognize and prioritize current care needs as the greatest challenge (mean 5.7).[6] The challenge of ensuring child protection was ranked fifth with a mean of 4.0. Local Child and Youth

6 The local Children and Youth welfare offices were asked to rate how problematic each challenge was for them using an 11-point scale. The endpoints of the scale were 0 "not at all problematic" and 10 "highly problematic".

Welfare Authorities found it more problematic to maintain participation of service users, to organize PPE and to cope with technical challenges (see table 2).

Table 2: Children and youth welfare offices' assessment of challenges posed by the corona pandemic

Challenge	Mean
Identify and prioritize current care needs	5,7
Maintaining service users' participation	5,1
Organizing PPE	4,9
Cope with technical challenges	3,4
Ensuring child protection	4,0
Ensuring the financial survival of providers of outpatient care	3,8
Cooperating with the health care sector	3,4
Achieve understanding for the current challenges in child welfare in local government	2,8
Compensate for current staff absences due to illness, quarantine etc.	2,2
Ensuring the financial survival of providers of residential care	1,8
Ensure/establish emergency services	1,7
Comply with the professional staffing standards	1,3

n=350
Source: Mairhofer et al. 2020, p. 58

As the table 2 shows, the children and youth welfare offices rate professional challenges (needs assessment, participation, child protection) and logistical challenges (PPE, ICT) as particularly problematic. Funding-related and staff-related challenges, were rated as less problematic at the time.

On the one hand, the rankings can be related to how relevant or difficult the topic is considered to be. On the other hand, they can also be the result of assessing the difficulty of the task in relation to the options available for dealing with the difficulty. On the whole, the respondents tended to make similar assessments of the different challenges. Except for the items 'recognizing needs' and 'coping with staff shortages', the item ratings correlate significantly with each other. The highest correlation is between the items 'ensuring child protection' and 'recognizing and prioritizing support needs' ($r=.505$; $p < .001$), as well as the challenges of 'ensuring child protection' and 'maintaining service users' participation'.

5 Discussion

Local Child and Youth Welfare Authorities in Germany fulfil many duties. The findings from our study of local Child and Youth Welfare Authorities' operations during the coronavirus pandemic show that duties related to child protection were given clear priority. Our data have shown repeatedly that a suspicion of child abuse or neglect is the key criterion for prioritizing tasks and cases in local Child and Youth Welfare Authorities.

Local Child and Youth Welfare Authorities do not consider ensuring child protection to be the greatest challenge of the pandemic, but rather recognizing and prioritizing current support needs among children, young people and families. This should not be interpreted to mean that ensuring child protection does not have a high priority in local Child and Youth Welfare Authorities. Instead, it is far more an expression of the institutional logic of a family and service orientation in the German system of child and youth welfare services that considers support services and child protection as two sides of the same coin. Finding it difficult to recognize and prioritize support needs simultaneously entails difficulties in acting to protect children from abuse and neglect. Therefore, it is always (but not only) about child protection. This is underscored by the high correlation in the rating of the items for recognizing support needs and child protection as challenges. Furthermore, as our data clearly show, challenges in using digital communication (and the associated technological requirements) or the availability of PPE are also challenges for child protection work. They make it harder to maintain professional standards and routines in child protection, such as home visits, serious conversations with children and families or case conferences.

The exceptional lockdown situation increases the demands and complexity of child protection work because it creates new challenges and new tensions that need to be compensated for – in addition to the already existing ambivalences. These include balancing social distancing to protect colleagues and service users with professional standards for interaction and closeness. Furthermore, our findings show that the uncertainty that is constitutive for child protection has increased during the coronavirus pandemic, not least as a result of the additional tensions. Maintaining social distance and communicating differently mean that channels for communication and perception are reduced and blocked. This reduces the amount of information available for rational decision-making processes, but also the number of impulses that can initiate intuitive judgements. This means that the usual ways of making assessments in child protection are blocked. Uncertainty is especially apparent in the many and sometimes highly detailed comments made by the study participants, but also in the closed questions, for instance on developments in case numbers. However, uncertainty is particularly evident in the respondents' clear rating of their greatest challenge: being able to recognize care needs, i.e. uncertainty regarding the living conditions of children, young people and families.

Recently, initial findings have been made available from a survey on child protection cases in the months May and June (Mühlmann/Pothmann 2020), commissioned by the Federal Family Ministry. However, only 28% of local Child and Youth Welfare

Authorities responded. The study concluded that in these local Child and Youth Welfare Authorities, compared to the same months in previous years, both the absolute number of child protection cases as well as the number per 10,000 young people remained stable in May and sank slightly in June. These figures on the number of active child protection cases confirm the stability in the development in case numbers shown by our study. However, in the Ministry's survey the stability arises from calculating average values. Of the local Child and Youth Welfare Authorities surveyed, only a minority of 14% reported an equally high number of cases in May as in previous years. In the majority, the case numbers either fell (42%) or rose (44%). Even if the survey's validity should be viewed with caution because of the low response rate, two findings are surprising: First, after schools and ECEC facilities were re-opened the much anticipated increase in case numbers obviously did not materialize. Second, findings relating to actors reporting suspected cases of child abuse and neglect show that during the lockdown the proportion of reports from schools, ECEC facilities and paediatricians fell only slightly. Obviously, these 'early warning systems' still functioned during lockdown. In contrast, the number of reports made by the police and the justice system rose as expected. At least in light of the case numbers presented by Mühlmann and Pothmann (2020), the fears expressed by many local Child and Youth Welfare Authorities in our survey have not been confirmed.

It is possible that this finding is a result of the high priority that the Child and Youth Welfare Authorities assign to child protection – not only during lockdown. Nevertheless, a substantial increase in psychological stress has been reported in Germany during the lockdown, especially among young people (Ravens-Sieberer 2020). Currently, this greater stress has not led to an increase in the number of child protection cases dealt with by the Child and Youth Welfare Authorities that is greater than the usual annual growth rate (Mühlmann 2021). But it obviously leads to a greater need for psychotherapy, especially among children and young people (Rabe-Menssen 2021).

6 Limitations

Our findings are subject to several limitations. Although great care was taken and a broad range of journals and other publications were included in the overview of current research and discussions, a systematic literature review was not conducted. The results of our empirical study can be generalized for local Child and Youth Welfare Authorities in Germany, but only offer findings on some aspects of how child protection duties are being fulfilled in these organizations. This is because the survey was deliberately kept short so as not to overtax limited organizational resources in a pandemic situation.

Using an institutional approach, the study was conducted from the perspective of organizational research. The view on the field of child protection was taken, so to speak, through the eyes of the local Child and Youth Welfare Authorities. Consequently, we could only see and present child protection activities and perceptions as they were related to us by local Child and Youth Welfare Authorities as collective actors (organizations). The data therefore do not permit us to draw conclusions on the situation of children, young people and families during the pandemic. Our research is just as uncertain about this situation as the organizations we questioned were. Furthermore, we do not take an evaluative perspective. We can say, on the basis of our findings, that local Child and Youth Welfare Authorities gave priority to ensuring child protection during the lockdown. However, it is not possible to say whether these efforts were sufficient, successful, or in short, good or bad. Furthermore, many questions in the survey only asked about the situation during the pandemic, but not whether the situation had changed compared to the situation before the pandemic, which limits the validity of the findings. When changes caused by the pandemic were recorded, the assessment was made by the organizational actor who responded and not on the basis of comparing data collected before and during the pandemic. Finally, given the chosen method of a quantitative survey of organizations, it follows that only statements on formal structures and positions of the organization or those of actors with leadership responsibility could be collected. As is frequently pointed out, the formal structure surveyed is usually only loosely coupled with the organization's activities, i.e. with the everyday practice and perspectives of those employees who implement the organization's mission on the frontline (cf. Meyer/Rowan 1977). Therefore, the actions of the frontline professionals under the changed conditions of the pandemic, the effects these had for service users and which challenges the professionals perceive can vary greatly from the challenges identified in this study. Studies on the working methods and views of professionals in the Child and Youth Welfare Authorities show a large degree of heterogeneity (Bode/Turba 2014; Mairhofer 2020). This probably also applies to their work during the pandemic.

Considering this background, a significant expansion of research on working during the pandemic as well as the perception and handling of the challenges associated with it seems necessary. The aspirations of our study were more modest. Firstly, we wanted to gain an empirical impression of the child and youth welfare services system, including child protection, during the pandemic to rapidly provide an empirical foundation for a discussion that has been characterized by speculation. The study

has shown that during the pandemic local Child and Youth Welfare Authorities have managed to keep their child protection work going. The results show that uncertainty and ambiguity, as the essential unavoidable determinants of child protection work, have been multiplied by the pandemic situation. Both the pandemic and the measures to contain it produce new uncertainty and tensions that the organizations and their staff have to withstand and work through. In this regard, many of the organizations we surveyed show a high level of sensitivity and self-reflection, they acknowledge the problems rather than resting on a sense of false security. Even if uncertainty and ambiguity can never be eliminated, strategies are still necessary that will help organizations and professionals cope better with the challenges posed by exceptional circumstances, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and so better protect children and young people from abuse and neglect.

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