

What we know about child protective services in the Global North

Christopher Wildeman | June 16, 2025



All over the world, child protective services have a duty to deal with cases of child maltreatment. However, even confining research to the Global North, better equipped, in principle, for this type of intervention and for record-keeping, little is known about this important and seemingly widespread phenomenon. Christopher Wildeman provides an overview of the first results of ongoing research.

Child maltreatment, which encompasses both physical and sexual abuse and a variety of forms of neglect, is both common and consequential for children. Because of its high prevalence and serious consequences, child protective services (CPS) across the world are charged with responding to reports of child abuse, investigating suspected cases, confirming when maltreatment has occurred, and, in the face of serious maltreatment or grave future risk, intervening in some way. This may take the form of less invasive interventions involving services to the family, or more invasive ones ranging from foster care placement, also called out-of-home placement, to the termination of parental rights in the most extreme instances.

Little information on child protective services

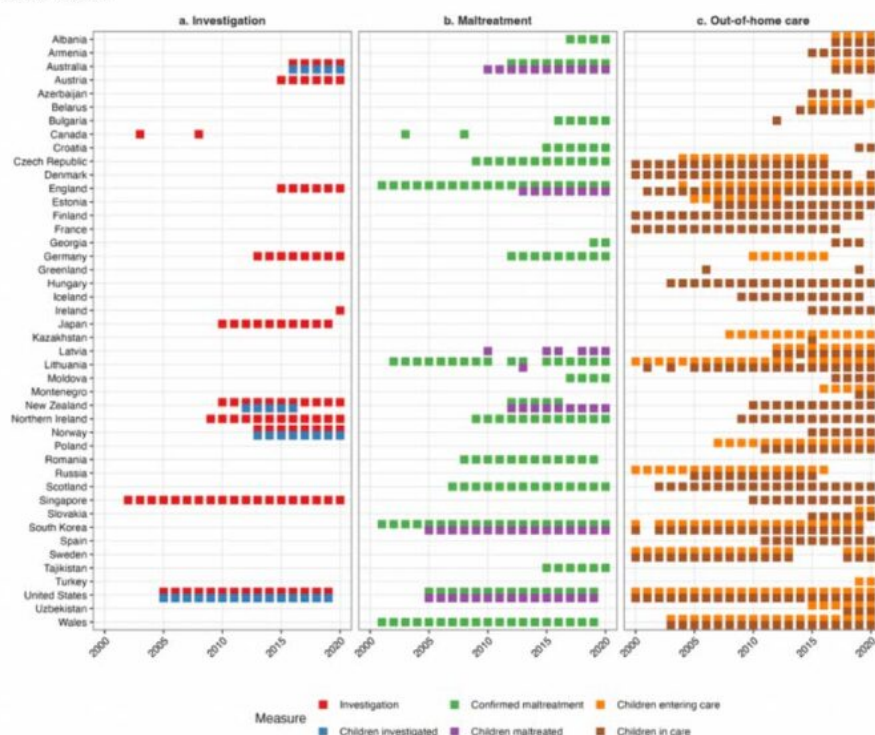
Unfortunately, information on the prevalence of these various forms of CPS contact is scarce, with the limited (but excellent) research on this topic providing data on five to ten countries at most. While we know that CPS contact is extremely common in at least some settings, we lack information on how CPS contact rates vary across countries, and have even less understanding of what might drive such variation.

Having received funding from the ROCKWOOL Foundation in Copenhagen, Denmark, our research team set out with an ambitious plan to find out as much as we could about rates of CPS investigation, confirmed maltreatment, and foster care placement in 64 countries in the Global North and to then make those data publicly available to the field (Roehkrasse et al.

2023; Wildeman et al. 2025). Although we also saw rates of CPS contact as important in other national contexts, the virtual lack of population-representative published research on this topic from many countries in the Global South suggested that such an endeavor would likely be fruitless outside of the Global North. We therefore focused our efforts on those nations.

Our study provided support for three core conclusions, the first of which is represented in Figure 1. For all our efforts – and this study involved a huge amount of labor – data on CPS contact was regrettably scarce and we obtained data on only 44 of the 64 countries we investigated. This was especially the case for CPS investigations (data obtained for about a dozen countries), and confirmed maltreatment (data obtained for nearly 20 countries). Having sunk all that labor into this project, previous research that found data on five to ten countries all of a sudden looked much more successful!

Figure 1. Range of data on child protective services investigations (panel a), cases of confirmed maltreatment (panel b), and out-of-home care (panel c) for 44 countries in the Global North, 2000–2020.



Sources: Roehrkaase et al. (2023) and Wildeman et al. (2025).

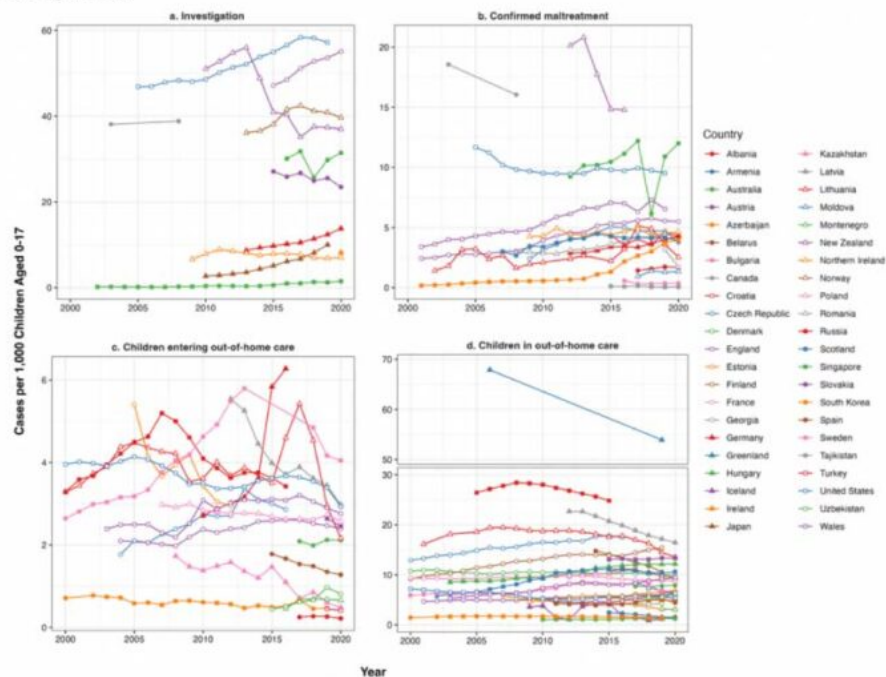
We were more successful for out-of-home care, however, as we were able to recover data on the number of children per 1,000 in the population living in out-of-home care in nearly 40 countries. This was an encouraging finding, as it allowed for a much more intensive dive in terms of variation across countries than would be possible with a dataset half that size.

Great variation in practices ...

This led to our second discovery: as shown in Figure 2, there is vast variation in the prevalence of foster care across countries. Figure 2 also includes the prevalence rates for the other types of CPS contact so anyone who is interested can see those too. The highest rate of out-of-home placement was in Greenland, where an amazing 6.8% of children in 2006 and 5.4% of children in 2019 were living in out-of-home care. These proportions are so extreme, in fact, that the figure had to be rescaled to differentiate between the rates in other countries

while including Greenland in the same figure. Russia and Latvia also had high rates of out-of-home placement, but these were only around one-third as high as the rates in Greenland. Most other countries had rates between 0.5% and 1.0%, with Singapore only having about 0.1% of children in foster care.

Figure 2. Annual incidence of child protective services investigations (panel a), annual incidence of maltreatment confirmed by child protective services (panel b), annual prevalence of children entering out-of-home care (panel c), and point prevalence of children's residence in out-of-home care (panel d).



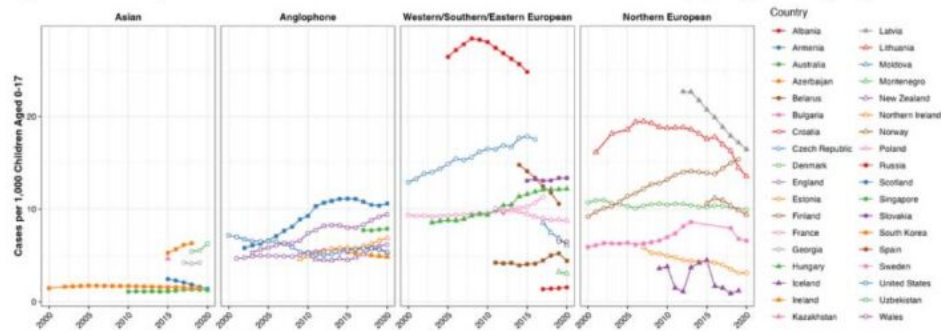
Note the differing y-axis scales, as well as the axis break in panel (d) due to Greenland being an outlier.
Source: Roehrke et al. (2023).

... with no apparent regularity

If finding data on various stages of CPS contact was challenging, figuring out what drives variation across countries was more difficult still. Figure 3 shows how we tried to group rates of out-of-home care across four types of countries:

- Asian
- Anglophone
- Western, Southern, and Eastern European, and
- Northern European.

Figure 3. Point prevalence of children's residence in out-of-home care, by region/language.



Source: Roehrkasse et al. (2023).

The results from this exercise show that Asian and, to a lesser degree, Anglophone countries tend to have low and relatively tightly bounded rates of out-of-home placement. The other types of countries showed considerable heterogeneity in prevalence, however, with virtually no discernible pattern in terms of levels or trends. Thus, it would appear that the specific type of country is only slightly predictive, at best, of the rate of out-of-home placement.

The findings from our studies highlight the considerable heterogeneity across countries in rates of out-of-home placement, although explanations for this heterogeneity are still sorely lacking. More extensive data both on earlier stages of CPS contact and on the factors that might lead a country to have a high, moderate, or low rates of out-of-home placement are especially needed.

References

- Roehrkasse, Alexander F., Liza Becker, Christopher Wildeman, and Peter Fallesen. "Introducing a new data resource for comparative child welfare research: The ROCKWOOL-Duke global child welfare database." *Children and Youth Services Review* 152 (2023): 107075.
- Wildeman, Christopher, Alexander F. Roehrkasse, Alexandra Gibbons, Sarah Sernaker, Liza Becker, and Peter Fallesen. "Two Decades of Child Welfare System Contact in the Global North: A Research Note on Trends in 44 Countries." *Demography* (2025): 11793609.