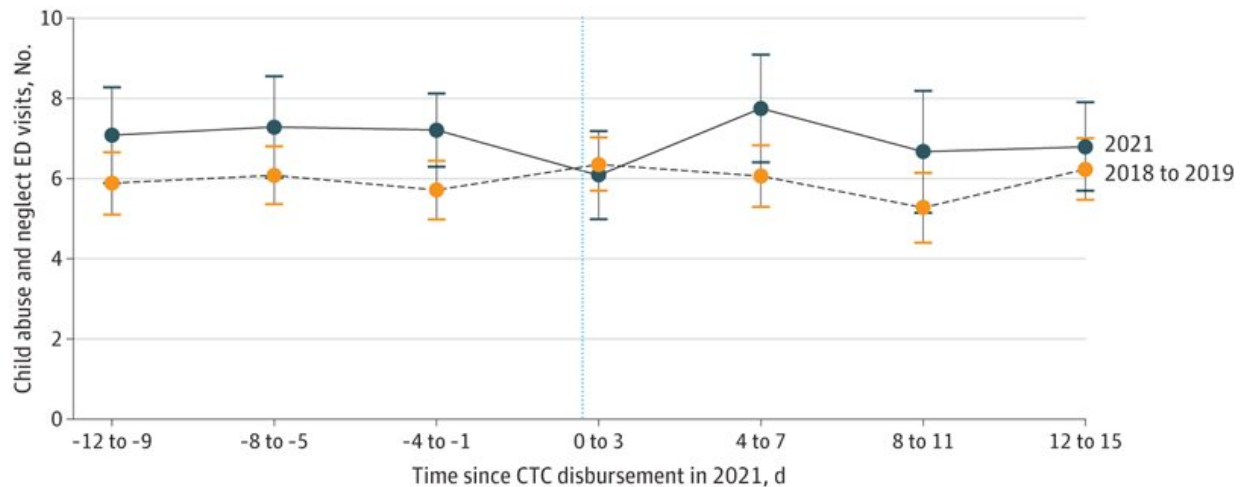


# Study links child tax credit payments to reduced child abuse, neglect

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Descriptive Trends in Child Abuse and Neglect-Related Emergency Department (ED) Visits Relative to Child Tax Credit (CTC) Payment Dates in 2021. Data were obtained from Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta medical records July to December, 2018 to 2019 and 2021. The error bars represent the 95% CIs. The vertical dotted line represents the point at which CTC payments were distributed in 2021, specific to each month. Credit: *JAMA Network Open* (2023). DOI: 10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2022.55639

Research has shown that the 2021 expansion of the federal Child Tax Credit (CTC) significantly reduced childhood poverty, put food in kids' stomachs, and helped families secure their finances. Now, a new study led by School of Public Policy Assistant Professor Lindsey Rose

Bullinger shows the expansion's monthly payments also helped reduce child abuse and neglect—at least temporarily.

The study was published on Feb. 16 in *JAMA Network Open* and is the first to examine the link between unconditional payments such as the tax credit and changes in [child abuse](#) and neglect (CAN). It found that child abuse and neglect-related [emergency room visits](#) to Children's Healthcare of Atlanta temporarily declined in the days following tax credit payments compared to those leading up to the disbursements and to similar periods in years with no such remittances.

"This research adds to the evidence showing that income-support public policies such as the child tax credit expansion, more generous tax credits, and minimum wage increases support parents in keeping their kids safe and secure," Bullinger said. "This is important research for policymakers, child advocates, really anyone who is committed to keeping kids healthy and safe."

## **After payments, fewer emergency room visits**

To reach their conclusions, Bullinger and co-author Angela Boy of CHOA's Stephanie V. Blank Center for Safe and Healthy Children analyzed visits to the system's emergency rooms before and after the implementation of the credit, which provided approximately 38 million U.S. families with monthly payments of up to \$300 per child in the fall of 2021.

They found that in the four days following payments, the hospital system saw 1.13 fewer daily cases of child abuse and neglect than in the two weeks before payments. During the same periods in 2018 and 2019—when there were no payments—cases rose by 0.65 per day.

Researchers know that [financial stress](#) too often results in abuse and

neglect of children. Still, it hasn't been clear how parents might use unconditional payments and what impact they might have in reducing maltreatment. While not definitive, the numbers in the study paint a picture of strapped families finding financial relief from the monthly payments in 2021 compared to 2018 and 2019 when they were under increasing stress as the month went on and their funds dwindled.

"Because experiencing material hardship is associated with child maltreatment, we expect these CTC payments to also be associated with child abuse and neglect in the short run by potentially reducing material hardship, reducing parental stress, and improving family functioning," Bullinger and Boy wrote in their paper.

The researchers also found the apparently-protective effect of the payments wore off over time, with abuse and neglect cases returning to roughly pre-[payment](#) levels after just four days.

However, the research did show greater reductions in abuse and neglect cases in the final three months of the six-month program, potentially due to the cumulative effects of the payments.

## **What policymakers need to know**

The research adds to a growing body of evidence—including work by Bullinger on the impact of increasing the [minimum wage](#) and increased accessibility to food benefits—that raising family incomes, including through direct benefit programs, can significantly reduce child abuse and neglect.

"Together, these studies suggest how child maltreatment can be influenced by even modest changes in income benefit schedules," the researchers wrote.

Bullinger said lawmakers should consider child abuse and neglect (CAN) prevention when thinking about enacting or extending unconditional payment programs such as the child [tax credit](#).

"Child [abuse](#) and [neglect](#) is very costly, both to individual children and families, and also to society. If we can reduce exposure to this adverse experience with small improvements to policies here and there, the benefits are likely large in the long run," she said.

The paper, "Association of Expanded Child Tax Credit Payments With Child Abuse and Neglect," appears in *JAMA Network Open*.

**More information:** Lindsey Rose Bullinger et al, Association of Expanded Child Tax Credit Payments With Child Abuse and Neglect Emergency Department Visits, *JAMA Network Open* (2023). [DOI: 10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2022.55639](#)

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