



NATIONAL JOURNAL

What Congress can do for COVID orphans

Advocates and experts say that mental health care resources and services in schools need to be expanded to help the kids orphaned by the pandemic. But finding these children is the first challenge.



ASSOCIATED PRESS

(AP Photo/Seth Wenig, File)

Erin Durkin

🕒 1 minutes ago

As the pandemic death toll in the U.S. hits 1 million, more than 250,000 children are estimated to have lost a caregiver to COVID-19. Globally, the number of children who have lost a primary or secondary caregiver is around 10.5 million, according to [data](https://imperialcollegelondon.github.io/orphanhood_calculator/#/country/United%20States%20of%20America) (https://imperialcollegelondon.github.io/orphanhood_calculator/#/country/United%20States%20of%20America) from Imperial College London.

Advocates and experts who focus on children's health and welfare are looking at ways to identify and provide support for these children as they process their grief. They want the White House and Congress to step up and ensure mental health care and other resources are available, including in schools.

“Across our nation, we want to think that kids are resilient and they will bounce back no matter what, but they don't bounce back without support. They don't bounce back, they're not resilient, alone,” said Vicki Jay, chief executive officer at the National Alliance for Children's Grief.

Jay said bereavement counselors should be placed in schools and that schools should be trained to identify and support kids experiencing grief.

“We need bereavement training in the schools, so that schools know how to identify and then what to do about it, whether that's to outsource them to resources or to build, incorporate resources within their school structure,” she said. Jay is a member of the National Advisory Council for the [COVID Collaborative](https://www.covidcollaborative.us/about) (<https://www.covidcollaborative.us/about>), a coalition of experts working to address issues related to COVID-19.

Teachers should be trained to support a child experiencing grief, said David Schonfeld, director of the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement at Children's Hospital Los Angeles. He said educators should be able to acknowledge the loss, validate the children who are grieving, consider appropriate academic accommodations, and minimize unintended reminders.

“When you do an activity for Mother's Day with your class of young kids and you don't take into account that some of your children—that their mother may be either dead or not currently involved with them—then that places a lot of stress on those kids,” he said. “I would have kids tell me that they would raise their hand and just go to the bathroom and cry in the bathroom because they didn't know how to do the activity for Mother's Day.”

Kids shouldn't feel that they have to further isolate themselves and “grieve in silence,” added Schonfeld, a member of the executive committee of the American Academy of Pediatrics Council on Children and Disasters.

First Focus on Children's Averi Pakulis said the federal government should dedicate funding to these families to help address their needs. Pakulis, who is the vice president for early childhood and public-health policy, said expanding the mental health workforce and services provided in schools would help this group of children, as well as other kids who are struggling.

She said the federal government should “identify all children who have lost primary caregivers due to COVID.”

But there does not appear to be an easy or consistent way to identify these kids. “How does it come to anyone's attention that a child has lost a parent or a caregiver or a grandparent?” said Charles Nelson, professor of pediatrics at Boston Children's Hospital and Harvard Medical School. “There seems to be no systematic way of doing that that I can figure out.”

Nelson coauthored a modeling study published in [*Pediatrics*](#)

(<https://publications.aap.org/pediatrics/article/148/6/e2021053760/183446/COVID-19-Associated-Orphanhood-and-Caregiver-Death>) last year estimating that more than 140,000 children in the U.S. lost a primary or secondary caregiver to COVID-associated deaths. The study also found significant racial disparities—65 percent of children who lost a primary caregiver were part of a racial or ethnic minority group.

But without a way of finding these children, “they fall between the cracks,” he said.

The COVID Collaborative wants to change that.

The group recommended in a December [report](#)

(<https://www.covidcollaborative.us/assets/uploads/img/HIDDEN-PAIN-FINAL.pdf>) that federal, state, and local leaders develop a coordinated strategy to identify children who have lost a caregiver using schools, community organizations, primary care settings, and municipal administration records. The report notes that schools already screen for social needs such as household income, homelessness, and physical health challenges.

Catherine Jaynes, senior director of external affairs at the COVID Collaborative, says the organization is putting together a pilot to identify children using different administrative records and then connect them to resources.

“There is no systematic way to identify a child. ... In the U.S., both with the Social Security and with the IRS, they don’t know that anyone has passed until there’s been somebody out reaching to them for benefits,” Jaynes said.

Jaynes said that eventually the pilot could be expanded to identify all grieving children, but that for now it will be focused on kids impacted by COVID-19 in two cities.

While the current focus is on COVID-19 loss, some advocates emphasized the need for programs to broadly address childhood grief. “We have a whole other group of kids who’ve experienced all kinds of losses, and when we focus entirely on the COVID numbers, we minimize or diminish the impact of losses to other kids,” Jay said. “The emphasis on COVID does service to those, but it does a disservice to other people who are experiencing loss.”

Lessons learned in COVID-19 when it comes to supporting children who go through catastrophic events could be applied in the future, said Nelson. “All of the children impacted by these things could be helped by a more systematic effort,” he said.

“Think of it as mental health preparedness for kids,” he added. “... I think that we should be thinking about a way to roll out whatever we put together for this problem and apply it to other problems up the road.”