

Economics professor notes drop in maltreatment reports during school closings

Reports of child maltreatment dramatically declined during the early days of COVID, when schools nationwide closed their doors and switched to online learning.

A new assistant professor of economics at Georgia College, Dr. Cullen Wallace, and his research partners were first to examine the impact of school closings on abuse. By focusing on Florida—which updates its data system monthly—researchers were able to study the issue in ‘real time.’

What they found was startling. While you might think the number of maltreatment cases would go up due to high parental stress, rapid lockdowns, job losses and unprecedented pandemic—the opposite occurred. Maltreatment went largely undetected.

About 27 percent or 15,000 fewer child maltreatment cases were reported in Florida during March and April 2020. This can be generalized to reflect what occurred nationwide, Wallace said. Roughly 213,000 fewer maltreatment cases were reported in the United States during those months.

The decline directly correlated to what’s normally seen in June and July during summer break and in December when schools are closed.

“The magnitude was surprising. I don’t think the cost of keeping schools closed was at the forefront of people’s minds, which is why we wanted to document it,” Wallace said.

“You can think of almost anything in economic terms,” he added. “At the heart of economics are costs and benefits. It doesn’t have to be a financial cost. But there’s still a cost or benefit to everything we do. A good decision, even one regarding school shutdowns, is one in which benefits exceed the costs.”

Wallace got his undergraduate degree in economics from Georgia College in 2015. When COVID struck, he was getting a doctorate at Florida State University and finalizing a paper on U.S. adoption tax credits. Quickly pivoting his focus to maltreatment reports, Wallace teamed up with E. Jason Baron and Ezra G. Goldstein to record the impact of school closings as they happened.

The study, submitted in May 2020, was noted last fall on Fox News by Scott Atlas, a White House advisor and Coronavirus Task Force member under former U.S. President Donald Trump. It was also cited in the New York Times.

“There’s undeniably a huge economic impact from lockdowns in general. First off, the economy shut down as a whole,” said Wallace. “People weren’t able to go to work. People weren’t able to earn. Businesses had a hard time staying open. And, with the virus, you’ve got the school shut-downs. That’s a lot of fodder for economic researchers to look at.”

Schools started closing in mid-March 2020 during the U.S. outbreak of COVID. Many school systems closed the same week. In the three most populous states—New York, California and Texas—schools

closed within four days of each other. So, “you had a massive number of students home that one week in March,” Wallace noted.

There are other negatives to consider before closing schools, like potential loss of learning, children not getting adequate nutrition and parent stress levels as they juggle work and child care. But Wallace’s group wanted to know if educators—as the number one reporter of child abuse—would continue to discern signs of maltreatment online.

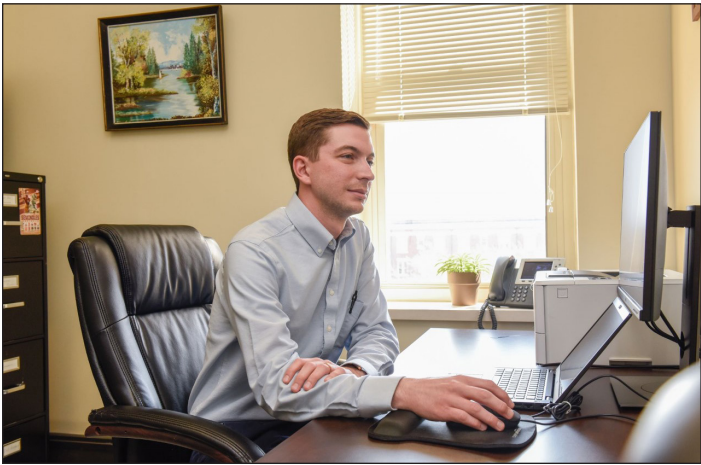
Reporting numbers faltered, and this made school closure too costly, Wallace said.

It seems reasonable to think fewer allegations mean less maltreatment. But with people quarantining at home and facing an uncertain future, Wallace and his partners believe lower numbers point to more children-at-risk.

His team recommended careful consideration before closing schools in the future. They also called for an easier reporting path for family members and neighbors. When teachers can’t closely monitor children, it’s this second line of defense that needs help stepping forward.

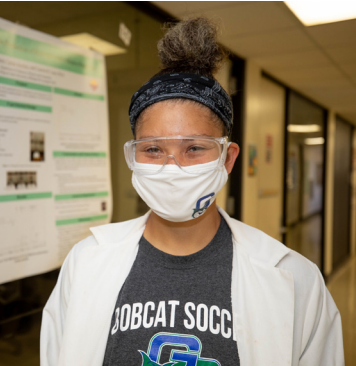
“With policy recommendations, the big one we looked at was ‘Hey, don’t forget about this cost.’ This is a real cost that needs to be considered when you’re weighing the calculus of whether to keep schools open or to close them,” Wallace said.

“Going forward, if heaven forbid there’s another pandemic, unless you have a virus that more heavily affects children, you might want to react differently,” he said. “There are serious costs that come with closing schools down.”



Wallace reviews his research online.

Class of 2021: Soccer captain, chemistry major makes her mark



Sophia Bonser grew up exposed to the medical field through her mom who is an OBGYN. She always had an interest in healthcare. Initially, she wanted to be a nurse, then a physical therapist. But everything changed when she took her first chemistry class at

tions,” said Bonser. “Talking with them about going to school here and playing for the team—they just made it sound amazing.”

Bonser made the soccer team, was given a scholarship and became a leader early on.

“I’m currently captain of the soccer team, and I have been since the start of my sophomore year,” she said. “I’ve just I’ve had a ton of incredible opportunities here that I did not expect to happen at all.”



The one-on-one connections made with faculty and coaches made the difference for her. She calls her former coach Hope Clark and Lisse personal mentors. She also credits her current coach Tinna Gallagher with being supportive during a challenging time of racial injustice in the aftermath of George Floyd’s tragic death. Bonser was an effective advocate for active conversations around race and inclusivity.

“Coach Gallagher was there for me, and she organized a seminar discussion about race with our Office of Institutional Equity and Diversity last summer,” said Bonser. “We are currently also working to start a diversity and inclusion seminar for the whole athletic department to talk about what it means to be inclusive.”

A leader on and off the field, Bonser sets an example in her personal life, as well as her academic studies of the importance of hard work.

“It has been a true pleasure getting to know Sophia over the past three and half years. Any problem or roadblock Sophia encountered with her research project; she never got frustrated or gave up,” Lisse said. “It is rare to find a student of her age with such a level of professionalism, respect and maturity with an ability to systematically problem-solve. I wish I could clone her or keep her around for a few more years.”

Bonser plans to take a gap year before starting medical school. During that year, she hopes to join an elite program for pre-med students to become medical assistants in a hospital who are exposed to all things in the field. Her goal right now is to become a surgeon after completing medical school.

Celebrating the Class of 2021



Garrett Scroggs majored in mass communications. He’s worked full time at Smith Farm Supply since 2016. His education gave him experience in public speaking and marketing, which he uses on the job.

“I plan to work in marketing for my current company Smith Farm Supply,” he said. “GC prepared me for this goal by allowing me to access many classes that helped me understand marketing, advertisement and crisis situations.”

Kelsey Fudge is a public health major who has been accepted into Emory University’s Rollins School of Public Health for her master’s degree. She was drawn to Rollins’ Vision Statement, which says, “Every community, whether it be global or domestic, deserves to live a healthy, quality life, free from social injustices.” She believes she and her peers can help make the Rollins Vision Statement a reality for communities across the globe.



Diondra Franklin is an English major with a Spanish minor. Her favorite part of college was that Georgia College is very immersed in Milledgeville. After she graduates in May, she will continue in Georgia College’s Master of Arts in Teaching program to then begin to teach high school English. She was a part of the Latino Student Association (LSA) and sat on the board as the Community Service Representative for her sophomore and junior years.

What’s going on in Bobcat Territory?

Visit frontpage.gcsu.edu/calendar

Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
<p>20</p>	<p>21</p>	<p>22</p> <p>7:30 p.m.: An evening of electronic music will be online as Georgia College’s Music Department presents “Sound Sculptures XVI: Remote Control.” Directed by faculty members Douglas Bassett and Dr. David H. Johnson, this concert features newly-composed electronic compositions by Georgia College students. Please follow the Department of Music at facebook.com/GCMusicDepartment to view this live-streamed concert.</p>	<p>23</p> <p>1 p.m.- Greenway Cleanup with Environmental Science Club.</p> <p>6 p.m.- GC Baseball vs. Augusta.</p>	<p>24</p> <p>GC Homecoming</p> <p>1 p.m.- GC Baseball Doubleheader vs. Augusta.</p> <p>4 p.m.-Georgia College’s annual “JazzFest” will start at 4 p.m. in the parking lot tent outside Bell Hall. This year’s festival may include lively tunes like Sonny Bravo’s “Hot & Heavy,” Bill Cunliffe’s “Mary Lou’s Blues” and Miles Davis’ “So What.” Please follow the Department of Music at facebook.com/GCMusicDepartment to view this live-streamed concert.</p>