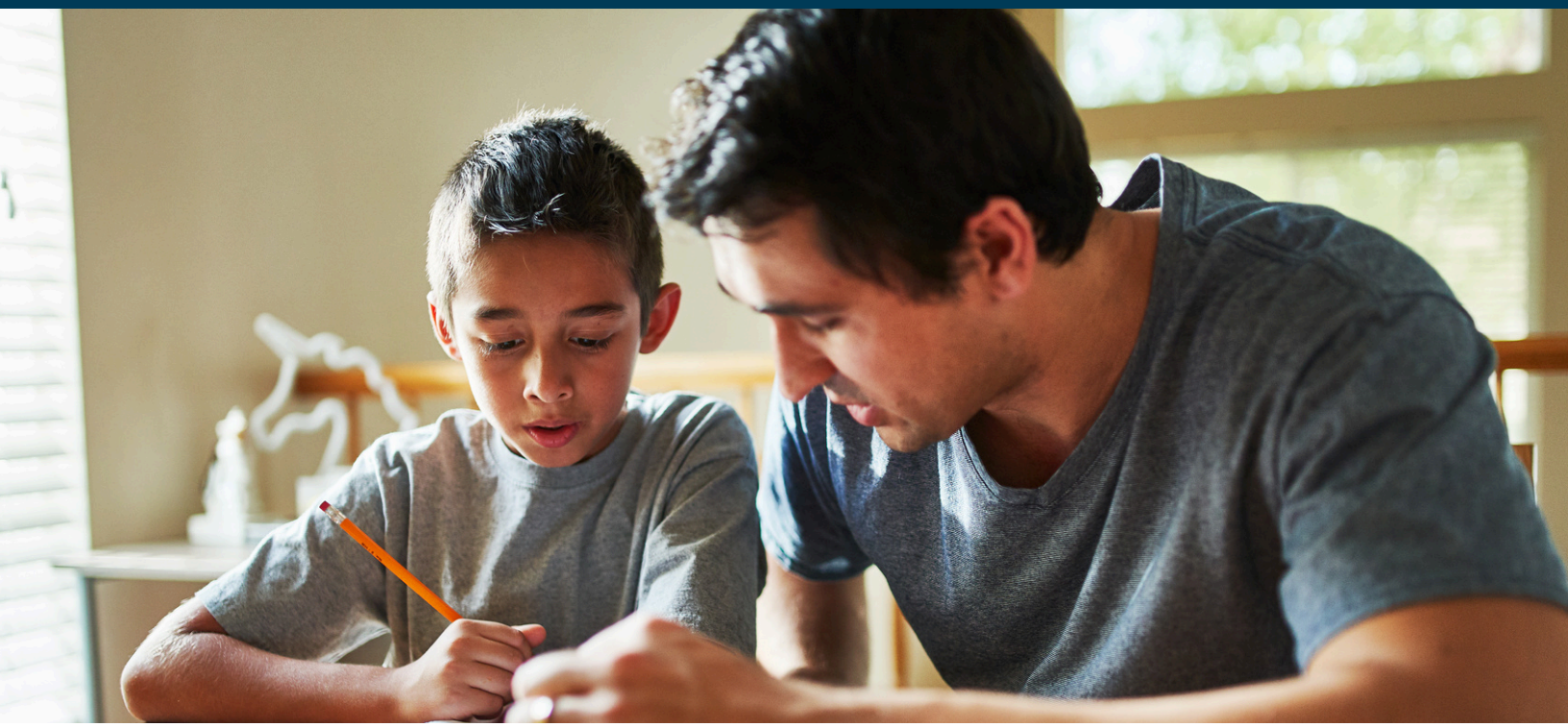
NATIONAL CENTER TO ADVANCE PEACE
for Children, Youth, and Families

# Anonymous Reporting and Its Impact on Survivor Parents



The National Center to Advance Peace for Children, Youth, and Families (NCAP) is a coalition led by Caminar Latino and includes Ujima: National Center on Violence Against Women in the Black Community, the Alaska Native Women's Resource Center, the National Indigenous Women's Resource Center, and Futures Without Violence

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## Introduction

Anonymous reporting was intended to make it easier for people to report suspected child abuse or neglect without fear of retaliation. While this goal may protect some reporters, anonymous reporting systems can also cause serious harm, particularly to survivor-parents navigating domestic violence.

When reports are made anonymously, there is little ability to assess the credibility, intent, or context of the report. For survivor-parents, especially those who have experienced coercive control, anonymous reporting can trigger unnecessary Child Protective Services (CPS) investigations, family separation, and re-traumatization. In practice, anonymity can be misused in ways that undermine family safety rather than promote it.

This brief examines how anonymous reporting impacts survivor parents and offers policy recommendations to reduce harm while preserving child safety. Effective child protection systems must balance child safety with fairness, accountability, and the prevention of unintended harm to non-offending caregivers.

# Key Harms of Anonymous Reporting

## Anonymous Reporting Can Be Used as a Tool of Control

People who use violence may exploit anonymous reporting to maintain power and control over survivor parents. By filing a report without identifying themselves, an abusive partner can initiate a CPS investigation that disrupts a survivor's stability, creates fear of child removal, and forces continued contact with systems, all without accountability.

This tactic is often part of a pattern of coercive control, where civil and legal systems are weaponized to intimidate, monitor, and destabilize survivors.

## Lack of Accountability Enables False or Malicious Reports

Anonymous reporting removes meaningful accountability. Anyone, including neighbors, acquaintances, or individuals acting in bad faith, can file a report without consequence. Although it is illegal in many states to knowingly make a false report, the anonymous nature of these reports makes it extremely difficult to pursue legal consequences or hold the reporter accountable. This lack of accountability increases the risk that the child welfare system may be used as a tool for harassment, retaliation, or coercive control, particularly in cases involving domestic violence.

When reports are false, exaggerated, or retaliatory, families may still be subjected to investigations, surveillance, and mandated services by child welfare agencies.

Without identifying information, CPS has no way to assess whether a report is credible, repeated, or motivated by harassment, rather than genuine child-safety concerns.

## Biased Reporting

Anonymous reporting disproportionately impacts Black, Indigenous, Latine, and other families of color.[1] Research shows that families from marginalized communities are more likely to be reported, investigated, and surveilled, often for conditions linked to poverty rather than actual harm.

For further discussion on how economic hardship is often mischaracterized as neglect, see NCAP's brief, The Blurred Line Between Poverty and Neglect, which outlines how poverty-related conditions are frequently mistaken for child maltreatment and the policy implications of that confusion.

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[1] National child welfare data consistently show disparities in reporting, investigation, and removal rates across racial and ethnic groups, with families of color more likely to experience CPS involvement at multiple decision points in the process. See, for example, the Children's Bureau's annual Child Maltreatment Report as well as Detlaff & Boyd (2021), Racial Disproportionality and Disparities in the Child Welfare System.



Anonymous reporting can reinforce existing racial bias in child welfare systems by enabling reports rooted in stereotypes, cultural misunderstanding, or racialized suspicion.[2]

## Disproportionate Impact on Low-Income Families

Families experiencing economic hardship are more likely to encounter mandated reporters through public benefits systems, housing programs, schools, and healthcare settings. Research has shown that poverty-related conditions, such as inadequate housing, food insecurity, or lack of childcare, are frequently conflated with neglect, increasing the likelihood of CPS reports and investigations among low-income families.[3] This dynamic contributes to over-policing, unnecessary investigations, and higher rates of child removal among low-income families.[4]

## Mandated vs. Permissive Reporters

Definitions of mandated and permissive reporters are established by state statute and vary across jurisdictions. In some states, such as Florida, all individuals are considered mandated reporters; however, anonymous reporting may still be permitted under state hotline procedures. Mandated reporters have a legal requirement to report suspected child abuse and may face criminal charges if they fail to do so.

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[2] Harris, M. S., & Hackett, W. (2008). Decision points in child welfare. Children and Youth Services Review, 30(2), 199–215.

[3] https://centertoadvancepeace.org/media/com_resources/files/28-the-blurred-line-between-poverty-and-neglect.pdf

[4] Mandated Reporter. False claims and anonymous reports. https://mandatedreporter.com

| Reporter Type | Who They Are | Required to Provide Identity? |
|---|---|---|
| **Mandated Reporters** | Typically, includes teachers, doctors, therapists, law enforcement, etc.; who are required to report. State laws define who is considered a mandated reporter. | In many states, mandated reporters are required to provide their name and professional role. However, reporting requirements and anonymity rules vary by state. |
| **Permissive Reporters** | Any other individual who may report. | No – may remain anonymous |

In many states, permissive reporters may remain anonymous, while mandated reporters are expected to provide identifying information. However, reporting procedures and anonymity rules differ across jurisdictions.

## CPS Hotlines and the “Reasonable Suspicion” Standard

CPS typically initiates an investigation if a report meets the state’s definition of abuse or neglect and creates “reasonable suspicion.” [5]

Reasonable suspicion is a low threshold; reports do not need to be verified or detailed to trigger action by child welfare agencies. [6]

When reports are anonymous, CPS cannot evaluate the reporter’s credibility or motive —yet investigations often proceed anyway. [7]

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[5] Loudenback, J. (2023). More States Seek To Curb Anonymous CPS Reports. The Imprint.

[6] Richards, T., Dang-Mertz, T., Graham, E., & James Bell Associates (2022). Language Bias in Child Welfare.

[7] State statutes compiled via Lexis and referenced in table above.

For survivor-parents, this means investigations may be initiated based on anonymous reports that are unverified, retaliatory, or made in bad faith. While formal findings or court-ordered removals require substantiation through investigation, families may still experience intrusive investigations, pressure to agree to voluntary services, monitoring, or reputational harm before allegations are resolved.



## Policy Recommendations

To reduce harm while maintaining child safety, states should consider the following reforms to improve reporting systems, screening, accountability, and system integrity:

**Require Identifying Information (With Confidentiality Protections)** - States should require reporters to provide identifying information, even if that information is kept confidential. Knowing who made a report allows CPS to:

1) Identify repeat or retaliatory reporting;
2) Assess credibility, identify relationships to the parties involved, and determine relevant context;
3) Reduce misuse of the reporting system by increasing accountability and deterring retaliatory or bad faith reports.

**Expand Confidential (Not Anonymous) Reporting -** Many states already use confidential reporting systems for mandated reporters. These systems collect names but protect reporters from public disclosure. Expanding confidential reporting to all reporters, both mandatory and permissive reporters, would increase accountability while still protecting individuals from retaliation.[8]

**Apply Higher Screening Standards to Anonymous Reports -** When reports are anonymous and lack corroborating information, CPS agencies should apply enhanced screening safeguards prior to initiating a formal investigation. Additional screening steps may include supervisory review, efforts to obtain clarifying information, assessment of prior reporting patterns, or evaluation of potential indicators of retaliatory or coercive reporting.

For example, higher standards could include additional screening steps, secondary or supervisory review prior to opening an investigation, or the application of indicators or assessment criteria for particular categories of reports.[9]

[8] Confidential reporting definitions from state codes and CPS policy documents.

[9] https://bipartisanpolicy.org/report/charting-the-course-a-blueprint-for-child-welfare-financing-and-accountability-reform/

## States That Allow Anonymous Reporting (Most States)

| State | Notes |
|---|---|
| **48 states + D.C. + U.S. Territories** | No identifying information required |
| **Montana** | CPS must attempt to obtain name (HB 461, 2023) |
| **California** | CPS should encourage reporter to give name (Penal Code §11167) |
| **Connecticut** | Best effort to obtain name (Conn. Gen. Stat. §17a-103) |
| **Delaware** | CPS should request name when possible (16 Del. C. §905) |
| **North Carolina** | Investigations proceed without name (N.C. Gen. Stat. §7B-301) |



## States That Do Not Allow Anonymous Reporting

| State | Notes |
|---|---|
| Arkansas | Hotline may not accept anonymous reports (A.C.A. §12-18-303) |
| New York | Senate Bill S550A (signed by the governor Dec. 2025) |
| Texas | Anonymous reports prohibited (TX Fam. Code §261.104) |



## States Considering Reform

| State | Notes |
|---|---|
| Florida | H.B. 193 – Increased scrutiny and fines for false reports |
| Oklahoma | S.B. 1673 – Proposes banning anonymous hotline reports |

## Conclusion

Anonymous reporting systems were designed to protect children, but in practice they can undermine family safety, particularly for survivor-parents navigating domestic violence. Policies that prioritize accountability, careful screening, and survivor-informed approaches can reduce harm while preserving the ability to respond to real concerns.

For many survivors, leaving an abusive relationship often means starting over with limited support, requiring significant time and effort to rebuild stability and safety. When anonymous reporting is misused, it can disrupt this progress and create new instability, sometimes reinforcing the very conditions survivors are working to overcome. Fear of retaliation remains a real and valid concern for many families.

Anonymous reporting must be paired with thoughtful policies that prevent misuse while continuing to protect children. Reforming these systems is a critical step toward child welfare approaches that are protective, and responsive to the realities survivors face.


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