

Most CPS Probes End Unfounded and Undermine Ability to Help

Unsubstantiated reports cost the county \$13 million in 2024 and erode trust between communities and government, advocates say

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Monroe County, home to Rochester, has one of the highest child poverty rates in the U.S — a factor that lawmakers say can contribute to unfounded CPS reports. (Lori Van Buren / Times Union)

ALBANY — As state lawmakers weigh legislation to curb over-reporting of incidents to Child Protective Services, a new analysis finds focused on Monroe County found more than three-quarters of the county's investigations last year ended with unfounded determinations.

Rochester-based nonprofit HOPE585, citing data from the state Office of Children and Family Services, estimates that investigations based on those unsubstantiated reports cost the county about \$13.8

million in 2024 — nearly \$2,700 per case. The core of the problem, state lawmakers said, is that “poverty is being mistaken for neglect.” Rochester has one of the highest child poverty rates in the country.

“We have a responsibility to use public resources wisely and to respect the dignity of the people we serve,” said HOPE858 Executive Director Ashley Cross. “Monroe County and the state must reduce reliance on surveillance and investigation and instead invest in housing, child care, and community support in the areas most affected by poverty.”

When the CPS system was created, Assemblyman Andrew Hevesi said, the goal was to encourage as many people to report “as humanly possible.” Now, however, the state is facing the opposite problem, with too many reports deemed not credible.

Hevesi and other lawmakers have floated statewide measures to remove certain penalties for mandated reporters, heightened consent requirements for drug tests on new mothers and disclosure of potential CPS consequences, and a fund to invest in local organizations that help build trust between communities and government.

“This report absolutely verifies that has a real cost to the families by way of trauma and money and a lack of trust in the system going forward,” he said. “To the best of our ability, we need to be able to make sure that people are not investigated when they don’t need to be.”

He also pointed to another bill he is sponsoring, headed to the governor’s desk soon for approval, that ends anonymous reporting. Anonymous calls account for about 7% of the reported incidents but are unsubstantiated roughly 97% of the time, he said.

Assemblywoman Sarah Clark, who represents parts of the Rochester area, said her involvement in the matter arose out of stories from parents who were afraid to seek help for issues like substance abuse or mental health struggles out of fear that their children would be taken away from them.

“Not only are you disrupting people’s lives, but then maybe when they do actually need help, they’re not getting it, which can have an even worse effect on that family,” she said.