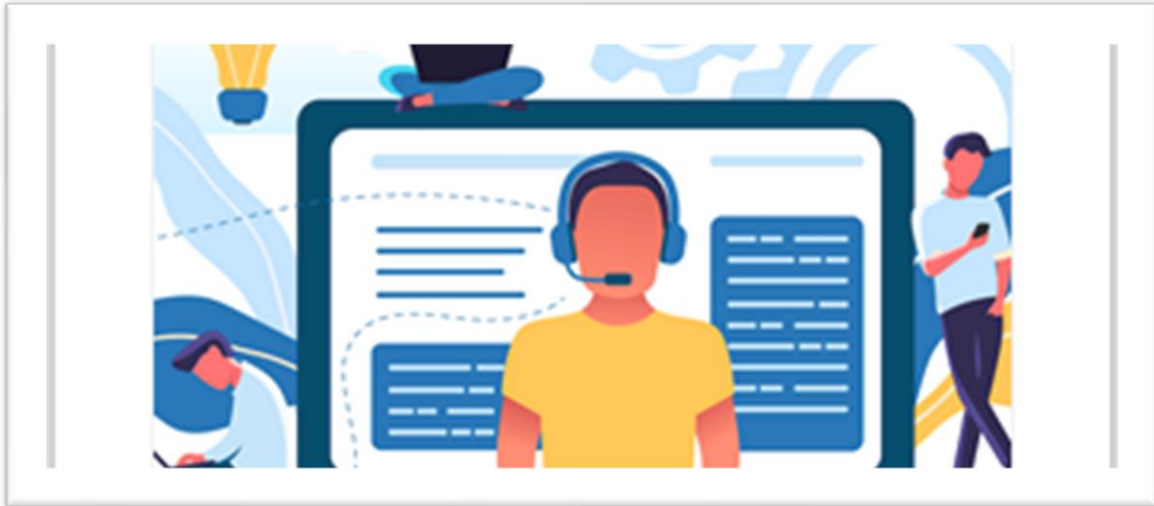


# CHAT AND TEXT HELP SEEKERS' CHARACTERISTICS ACROSS FOUR YEARS

The Childhelp PACTECH Project



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## Introduction



Beginning in 2018, Childhelp partnered with Arizona State University's Southwest Interdisciplinary Research Center (SIRC) for the Childhelp Prevent Abuse of Children Text and Chat Hotline (PACTECH) Project.

The PACTECH intervention offered text and chat services for help seekers looking for information, support, and resources related to child abuse. The objective of PACTECH was to determine the best practices and protocols for the use of text and chat in the crisis helpline environment. This project was supported by Grant No. 90CA1855 from the Administration on Children, Youth and Families (ACYF), Children's Bureau, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services; this funding ended September 2023. The Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline continues to offer assistance to help seekers through call, text, and chat.

"Understanding the help seekers through research provides opportunities to understand and better meet their needs."

SIRC team

Specifically, this brief reports on characteristics and demographics of Childhelp PACTECH text and chat help seekers over four years of the project, July 2019 to June 2023. There were totals of 36,199 text (n=12,907) and chat (n=23,292) reports for help seekers ages 13-24 years of age to the Childhelp National Hotline during this period (i.e., 2019-20 n=6,360, 2020-21 n=10,991, 2021-22 n=9,639, and 2022-23 n=9,209).

### Number of Text and Chat Help Seekers by Year

Year	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	Totals Four Years
Text	2,333	3,686	3,619	3,269	12,907
Chat	4,027	7,305	6,020	5,940	23,292
Totals by Year	6,360	10,991	9,639	9,209	36,199

The characteristics and demographics examined for this topical brief were age, gender, race/ethnicity, states with the most reports to the hotline, category of help seeker, top 10 presenting issues, and how help seekers heard about the hotline.

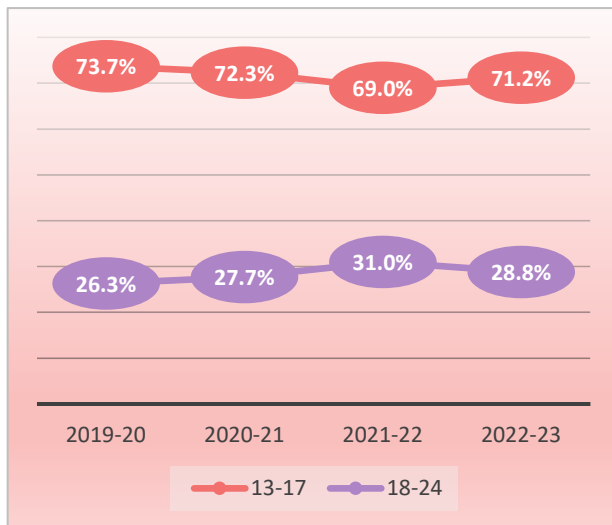
Research reports and topical briefs are accessible at the Childhelp website:

<https://childhelphotline.org/research/>

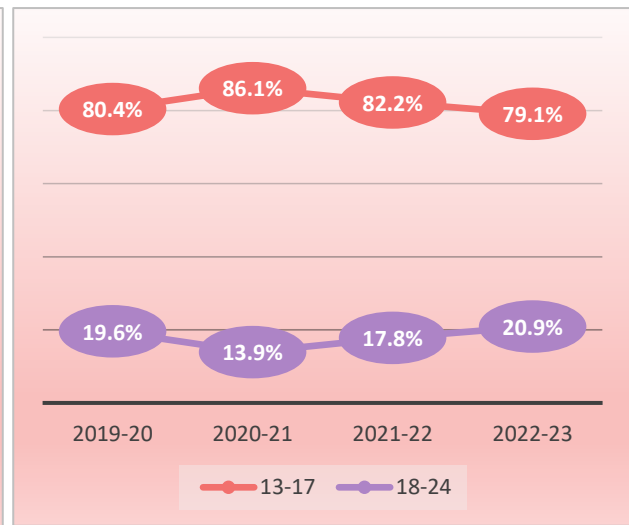
## Age

Text and chat help seeker age was reported in an open-ended pre-contact age item and was then categorized by counselors for ease of comparison. The target age range for the project was 13-24 years. For both text and chat, the majority of help seekers were in the younger group, ages 13-17, across all years. For text, there were slightly more help seekers who were older (18-24 years of age) during the third and fourth years (i.e., 2021-22 and 2022-23). For chat, there were slightly more older help seekers in the first, third, and fourth years, but during the 2020-21 year of the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a slightly smaller percentage of older youth (18-24); thus, there were more youth in the younger age group (13-17) who sought help via chat from the Hotline in 2020-2021.

Text Help Seekers' Age Groups



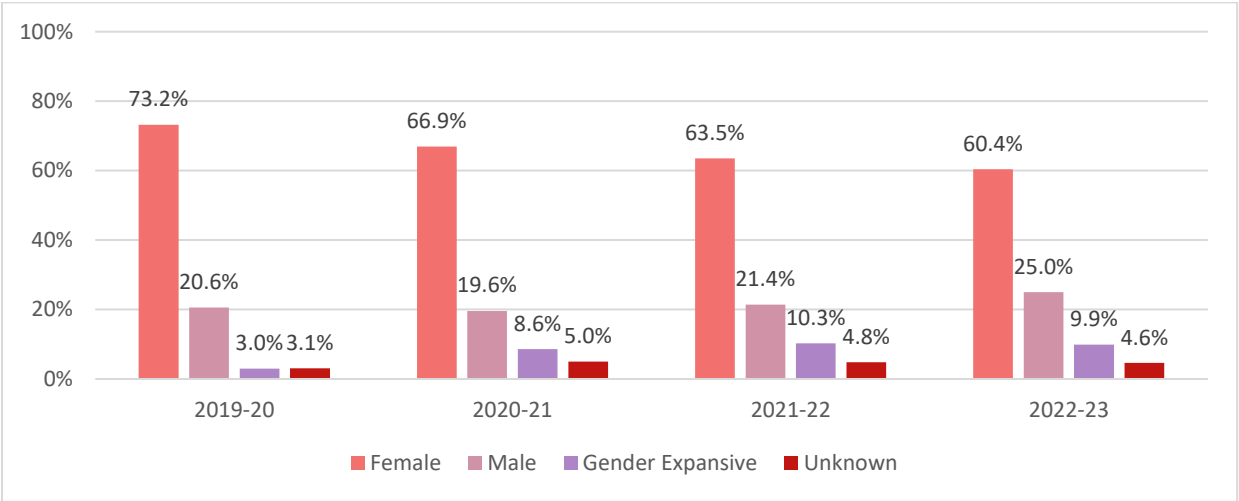
Chat Help Seekers' Age Groups



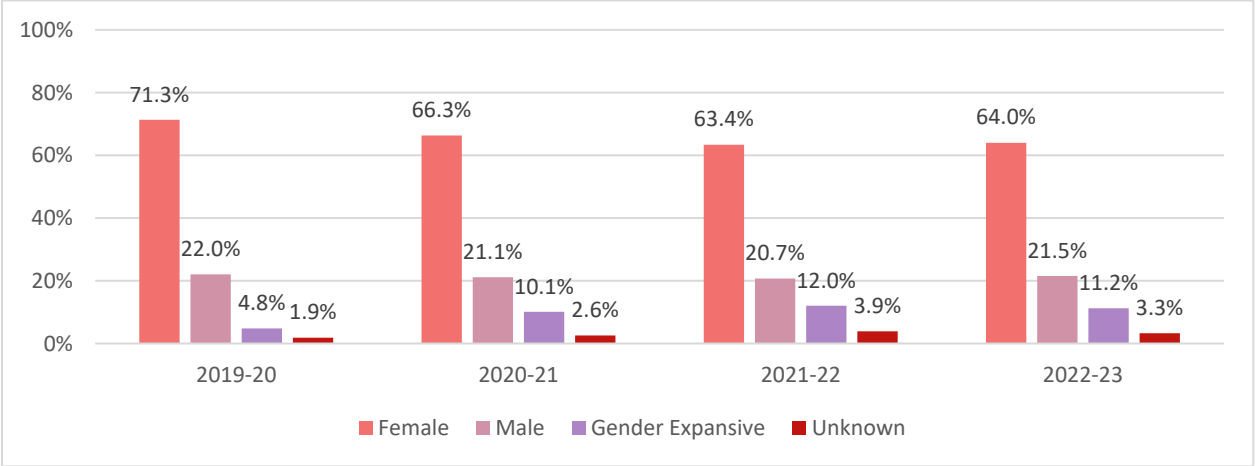
## Gender

For text and chat help seekers, ages 13-24, gender was reported from an open-ended pre-contact gender item. Most text and chat help seekers, ages 13-24, reported being female. Additionally, chat help seekers, ages 13-24, reported gender expansive more than text help seekers. Over time, the percentage of female text help seekers decreased. For chat help seekers, the percentage of female help seekers declined over the first three years but appeared to increase/hold steady in year four.

### Text Help Seekers' Gender



### Chat Help Seekers' Gender



## Race/Ethnicity

For text and chat help seekers, ages 13-24, race/ethnicity was collected from a post-contact item where a list of race and ethnicity categories was presented to help seekers. There were 7,477 (text  $n=2,585$  and chat  $n=4,892$ ) responses to the race/ethnicity post-contact item. Across all years and modes of contact, white was reported most often. In 2019-20, for both text and chat help seekers, Hispanic was the second most frequently reported ethnicity. In 2020-21, 2021-22, and 2022-23 for both text and chat help seekers, Black or African American was reported second most frequently. Over the four years, the percentage of white chat and text help seekers declined with the addition of more help seekers from different backgrounds.

### Text Help Seekers' Ethnicity

Text	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23
American Indian or Alaska Native	0.9%	1.1%	1.8%	0.7%
Asian	7.6%	5.7%	5.8%	5.3%
Black or African American	8.3%	15.2%	14.5%	17.5%
Hispanic	15.1%	13.2%	13.9%	11.5%
Multi-Racial	10.4%	10.6%	7.8%	9.1%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0.2%	0.8%	0.6%	0.7%
Other	2.4%	1.9%	1.5%	2.7%
White	55.1%	51.4%	54.0%	52.7%

### Chat Help Seekers' Ethnicity

Chat	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23
American Indian or Alaska Native	0.5%	0.9%	1.3%	1.8%
Asian	11.3%	9.2%	8.4%	11.2%
Black or African American	8.8%	13.9%	15.8%	15.6%
Hispanic	12.1%	13.7%	11.6%	11.2%
Multi-Racial	10.6%	10.1%	11.8%	12.7%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0.5%	0.5%	0.6%	1.2%
Other	3.3%	1.5%	1.7%	2.3%
White	53.0%	50.1%	48.9%	43.9%

### States with the Most Contacts to the Hotline

Information about the state from which the help seeker was contacting the hotline was collected. Text and chat help seekers were asked their state in the pre-contact items. However, how state data were collected changed in 2019-20, thus, this section only reports on three years of data. The counselors coded all help seekers' responses to this question into a state variable with a drop-down list. The states with the most contacts over the three years included California, Florida, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Texas. California was the most frequently reported state by both text and chat help seekers. Furthermore, when examining across years, fewer contacts were from California in the last year compared to the first year for both text and chat help seekers.

#### Text Help Seekers' State

Text	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23
<b>California (CA)</b>	11.3%	10.5%	8.9%
Florida (FL)	6.4%	6.6%	7.0%
New York (NY)	5.3%	5.2%	4.9%
Ohio (OH)	4.3%	4.4%	4.0%
Pennsylvania (PA)	3.8%	3.6%	4.2%
Texas (TX)	6.5%	8.6%	7.6%

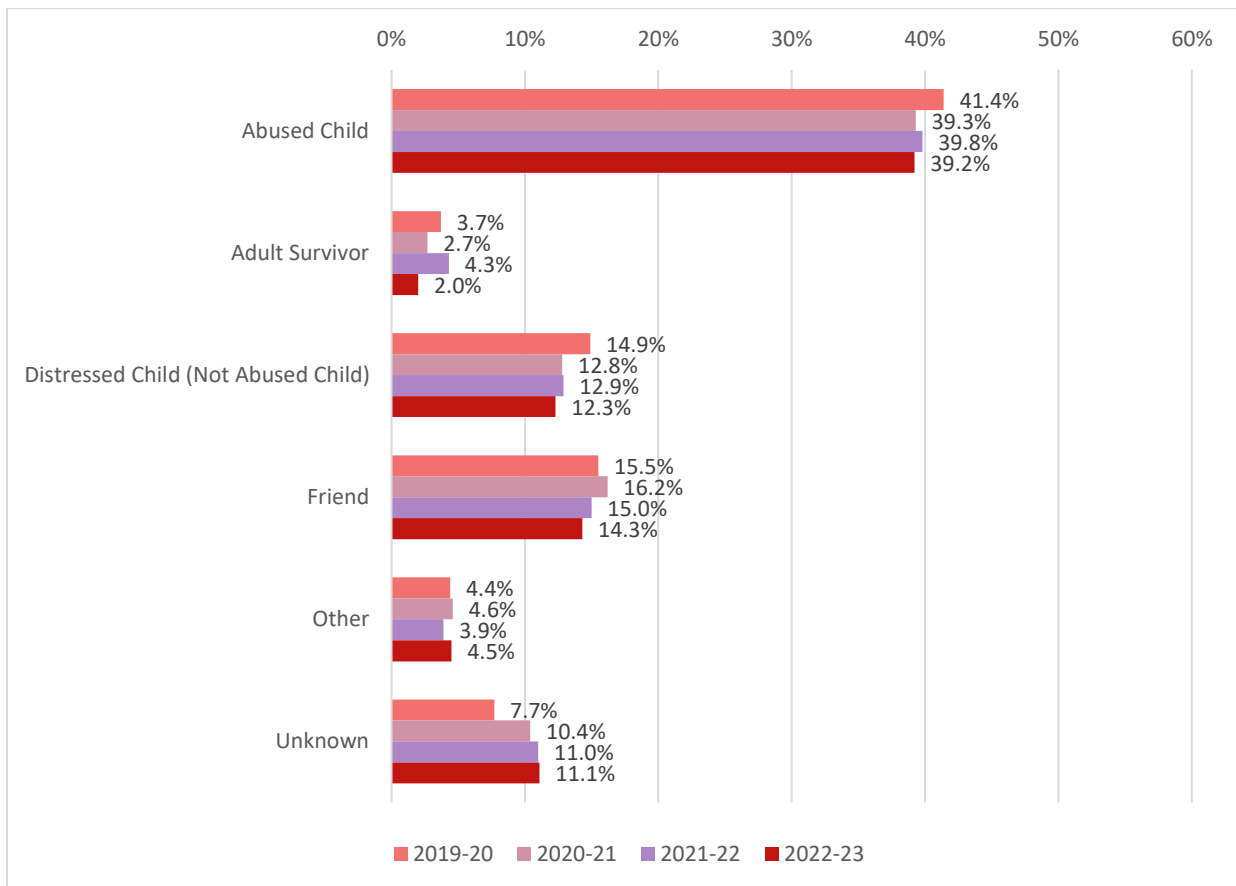
#### Chat Help Seekers' State

Chat	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23
<b>California (CA)</b>	10.2%	7.6%	8.0%
Florida (FL)	6.1%	4.9%	6.2%
New York (NY)	4.8%	4.9%	4.9%
Ohio (OH)	3.7%	3.7%	3.8%
Pennsylvania (PA)	3.2%	3.5%	4.6%
Texas (TX)	7.0%	6.4%	6.3%

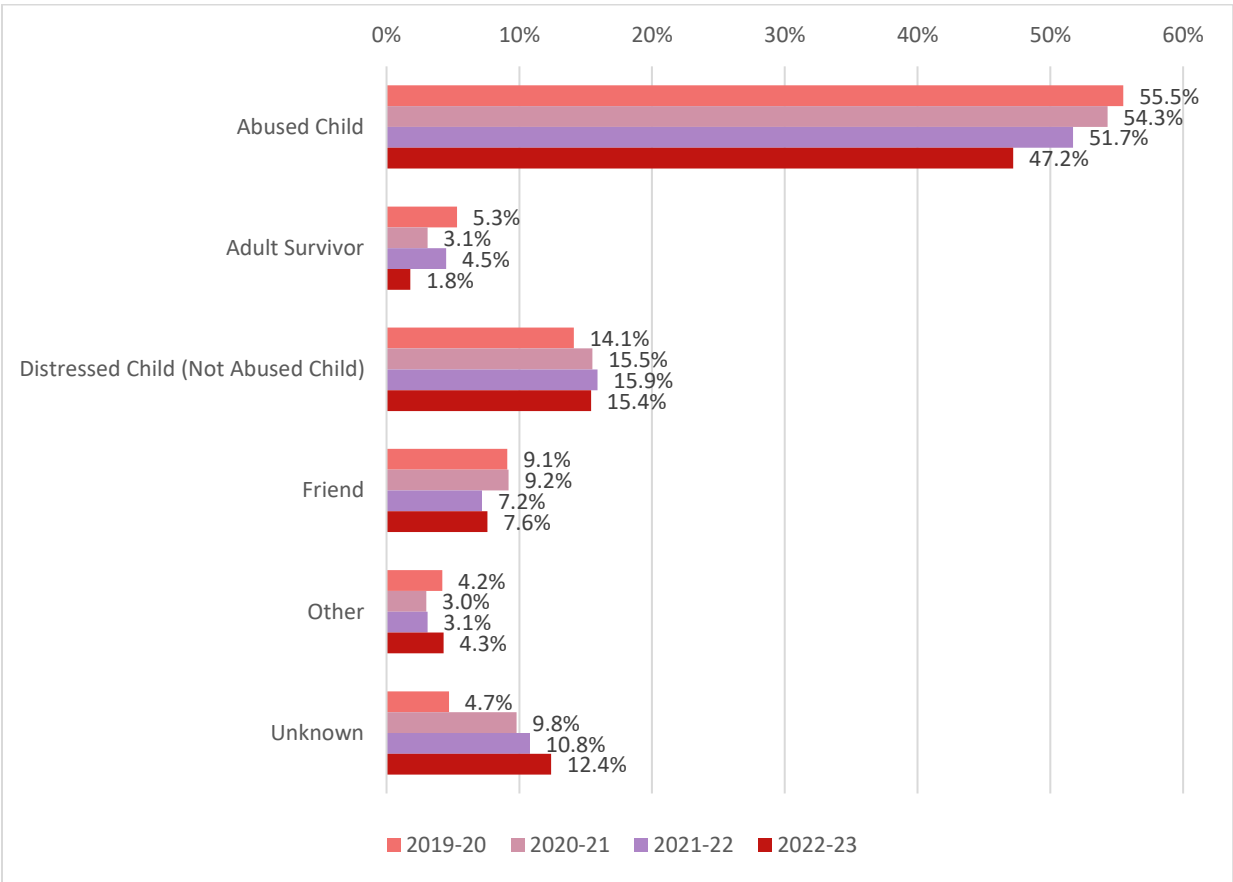
### Category of Help Seeker

Information about the how the help seeker was best categorized was collected and coded by counselors for both text and chat help seekers. The top categories reported were abused child, adult survivor, distressed child (not abused child), friend, other, and unknown. Abused child was the most frequently reported category for both text and chat help seekers. More text help seekers reported being a friend than did chat help seekers. More chat help seekers reported being an abused child or a distressed child (not abused child) than text help seekers. For both text and chat help seekers, the unknown category steadily increased over time.

#### Text Help Seekers' Categories



Chat Help Seekers' Categories

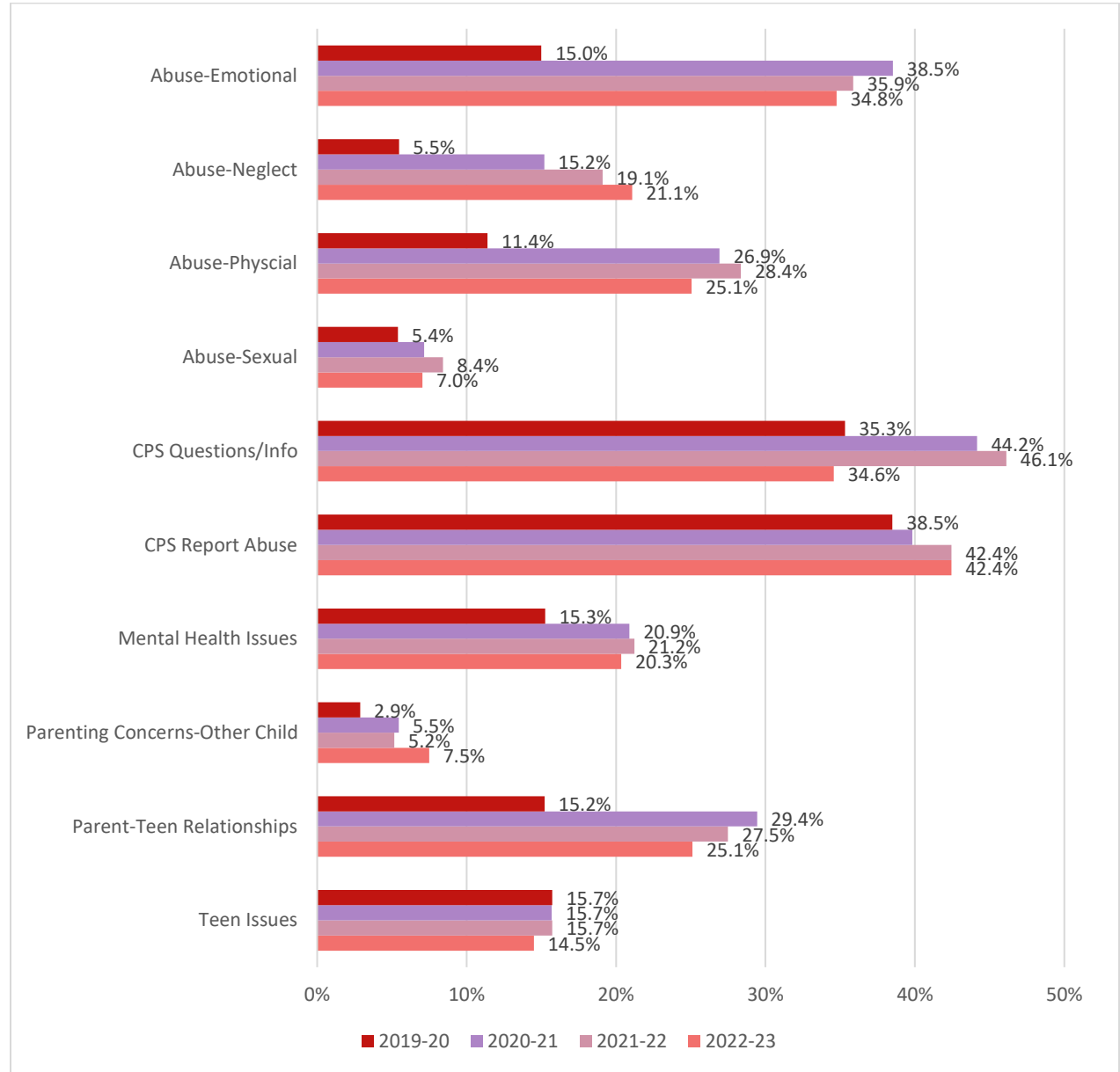




## Top 10 Presenting Issues

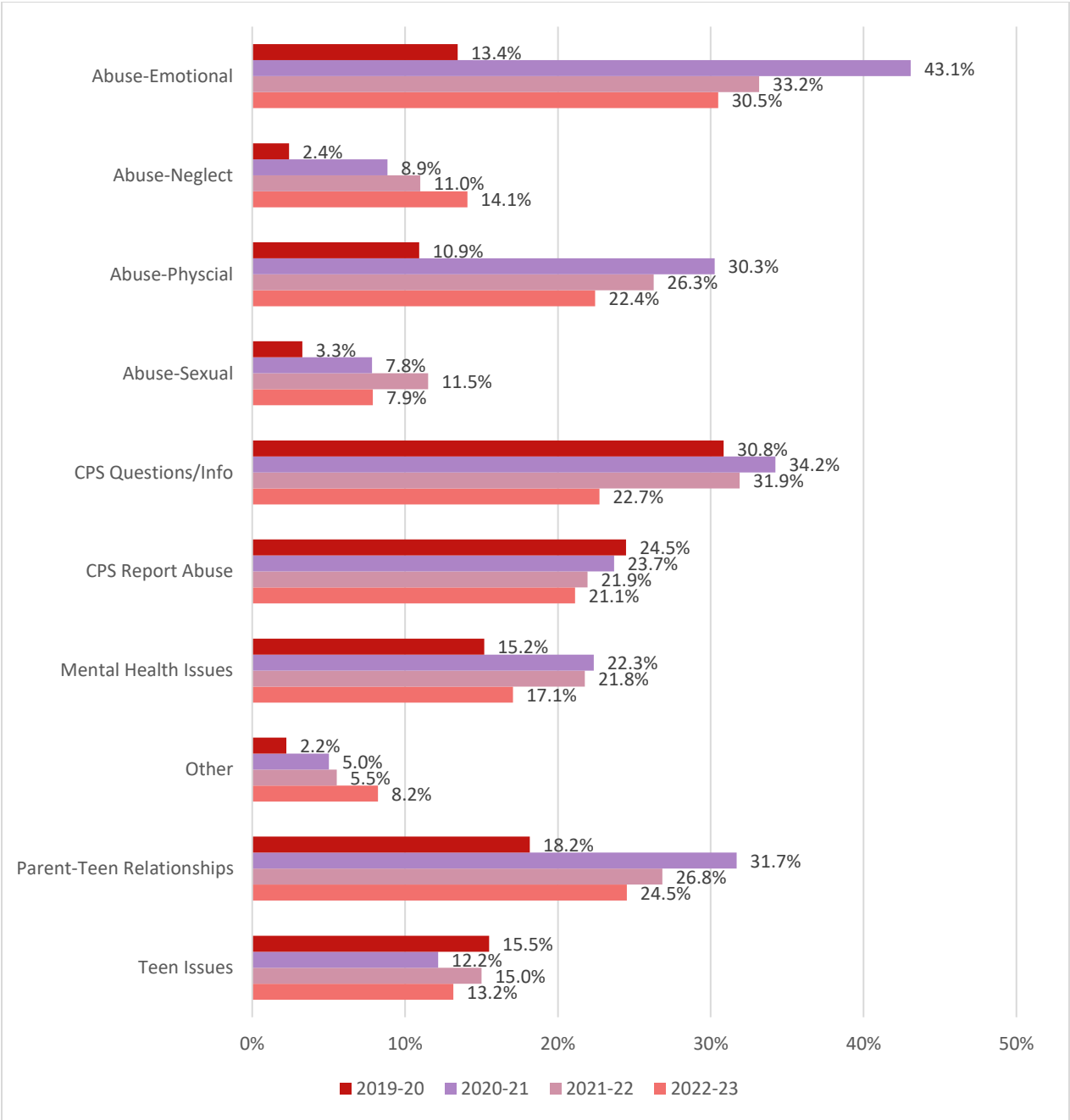
During interactions with text and chat help seekers, counselors coded the presenting issue for which help seekers, ages 13-24, contacted the hotline. Help seekers were able to report more than one presenting issue. For text help seekers, CPS questions/information was the most reported presenting issue when looking across all four years. For text help seekers, reports about CPS questions/information increased in 2020-21 and 2021-22, the years' most impacted by COVID-19.

### Text Help Seekers' 10 Most Frequently Reported Presenting Issues



For chat help seekers, abuse-emotional was the most reported presenting issue when looking across all four years. For chat, the percentage of help seekers contacting the hotline about abuse-emotional increased in 2020-21 but then declined in the following two years. Reports of abuse-neglect increased over the four years for both text and chat help seekers. Reports of teen issues remained steady with a slight decrease in the last year for text help seekers. For chat help seekers, the percentage of reports for CPS reporting abuse decreased steadily over time.

Chat Help Seekers' 10 Most Frequently Reported Presenting Issues



## How Help Seekers Heard about the Hotline

Counselors documented how help seekers heard about the hotline. Family member or friend, other hotline, repeat call/called before, unknown and website were the top categories reported by help seekers for how they heard about the hotline. Over the four years, the top categories remained consistent with website-internet being the most reported way that both text and chat help seekers heard about the hotline.

Text help seekers reported hearing about the hotline from website-internet slightly more during the years impacted most by COVID-19 (i.e., 2020-21 and 2021-22) when youth were more online, with many schools conducting remote learning. For chat help seekers, as time progressed, they reported hearing about the hotline more from website-internet than in the first year. Also, in 2020-21, more text and chat help seekers heard about the hotline through friends or family than in other years, which was also a year strongly impacted by COVID-19. Over time, more text help seekers reported hearing about the hotline from other hotlines, whereas fewer chat help seekers reported hearing about the hotline from other hotlines.

### Text Help Seekers Heard about the Hotline

Text	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23
Family Member or Friend	7.7%	8.6%	7.2%	7.4%
Other Hotline	7.8%	8.5%	12.6%	13.5%
Repeat Call/Called Before	4.4%	2.4%	1.9%	3.2%
Unknown	6.1%	6.5%	4.9%	6.5%
<b>Website-Internet</b>	<b>64.9%</b>	<b>68.1%</b>	<b>67.3%</b>	<b>63.5%</b>

### Chat Help Seekers Heard about the Hotline

Chat	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23
Family Member or Friend	6.3%	7.2%	6.0%	6.6%
Other Hotline	16.5%	17.0%	12.9%	13.0%
Repeat Call/Called Before	3.6%	3.7%	2.9%	1.3%
Unknown	15.0%	15.4%	16.0%	13.9%
<b>Website-Internet</b>	<b>50.6%</b>	<b>49.0%</b>	<b>55.7%</b>	<b>56.1%</b>

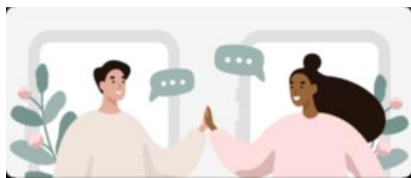
## Summary and Conclusions



The Childhelp Prevent Abuse of Children Text and Chat Hotline (PACTECH) project goal was to help determine best practices and protocols regarding the use of text and chat in the child abuse and neglect helpline environment, adding to the call services already in place. This project focused on serving help seekers in the target population of youth ages 13-24 during the five years of October 2018 to September 2023. Working with the Arizona State University, Southwest Interdisciplinary Research Center (SIRC), evaluation of the effectiveness of PACTECH was measured with data collected. This report documents some of the characteristic and demographic data of text and chat help seekers across four years, July 2019 to June 2023, and identifies trends and opportunities. Findings from the pilot study, the call comparison study, the five sets of focus groups with counselors and youth, as well as documentation of the Practice Model and continuous quality improvement efforts are all examined in other research reports, briefs, and journal articles that can be found at the Childhelp research website.

When text and chat were implemented in 2019 and data collected, Childhelp had to determine new procedures and hire more staff to assure quality help seeker services. Marketing efforts toward youth 13-24 were slowly ramped up as well to notify possible help seekers of the opportunities to use text or chat as an alternative to calling the hotline; it was anticipated that these modes would more likely draw a younger tech-savvy audience than call services. As Childhelp and SIRC started the 12 month call/text/chat comparison study in June 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic was raging. The pandemic changed the situation for staff who had to adapt to working from home, and for young help seekers who were now stuck at home without being able to go to school or largely visit with anyone outside of family, producing anxiety for many.

The impacts of marketing and COVID-19 can be seen in the changing characteristics of the help seekers over the four years. Indeed, between 2019-20 and 2020-21, there was a 73% increase in the number of text and chat seekers contacting the hotline, and numbers remained close to this level for the following two years as well. As anticipated, youth did use these methods for



connecting with the hotline. Across the four years, approximately seven of ten text help seekers and eight of ten chat help seekers were in the age group of 13 to 17 year olds; in 2020-21 the 13-17 year old group percentage rose slightly perhaps reflecting the need to reach out during COVID.

One reason for wanting to know who used text and chat was the desire to reach a diverse audience. Over the four years, there were increased percentages of males (now about one-fourth of help seekers) and those identifying as gender expansive (one in ten) contacting the hotline while six of ten help seekers identified as female in 2022-23. The help seekers were also more ethnically diverse in year four with an increased percentage of Black/African Americans and a lower percentage of white text and chat help seekers. The state location of the help seeker was collected consistently for three years during which California continually had the

highest percentage of help seekers although this decreased slightly over time. Texas and Florida vied for ranking as second and third over the years, followed by Ohio and Pennsylvania. This reach across backgrounds and geography was a goal of the project in order to serve youth from many circumstances and situations.

In wanting to know the reasons behind the text or chat, help seekers' data were collected as responses in two different ways. First, counselors coded the category which most closely aligned with information they gleaned from the help seekers. Four of ten text and five of ten chat help seekers were categorized as an abused child; this trend was relatively steady across the four years. Second, counselors asked text and chat help seekers to report the presenting issues (could report multiple responses) which led them to contacting the hotline. It was not surprising that the help seeker categories and presenting issues were closely aligned. Most frequently reported issues included several areas of abuse: emotional, neglect, physical, and sexual. Having questions or wanting to report abuse to CPS were also major issues. Mental health, parent-teen relationships, and teen issues also were reasons help seekers contacted the hotline using text and chat.

How help seekers heard about the hotline remained consistent over the four years. Hearing about the hotline from the website-internet was by far the most reported way that both text and chat help seekers heard about the hotline. Other ways help seekers heard about the hotline included other hotline, family member or friend, having called before, or unknown.



Overall, these findings demonstrated the importance of text and chat features added to a call hotline. Specifically, by researching the characteristics and demographics of the help seekers, detailed recommendations have continued to be suggested and implemented as part of the ongoing continuous improvements built into the Practice Model. Lessons learned from these data are used to enhance text and chat features and technology, improve marketing and outreach efforts, provide ongoing professional development for counselors, and assess interactions for best practices. Importantly, the use of text and chat provided an opening for tech-savvy youth who might not otherwise have reached out to be able to safely and confidentially contact the hotline to have their needs for information and support addressed by trained counselors who understand the serious implications of child abuse and neglect. The PACTECH project has successfully achieved its goal.

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