



# Understanding the Exponential Increases in Child Protection Investigations for Exposure to Intimate Partner Violence

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## Introduction

The Ontario Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect, 2013 (OIS-2013)<sup>1</sup> is the fifth provincial study to examine the incidence of reported child maltreatment and the characteristics of children and families investigated by child welfare authorities in Ontario. This Information Sheet examines the exponential increases in child protection investigations for exposure to Intimate Partner Violence (IPV).

In the mid to late 1990s, Ontario police developed a mandatory reporting policy for cases of domestic dispute when there is a child in that relationship. The policy detailed that the police must make a referral to child protective services, regardless of the child's exposure to the violence. While exposure to intimate partner violence (IPV) is not explicitly mentioned as a reason that a child is in need of protection (s.32) in the Child and Family Services Act, it is defined as a reason for service in Ontario's screening tool (i.e., Eligibility Spectrum). Police are consistently the top referral source for exposure to IPV cases in Ontario since 1998. In 2013, the top three referral sources were by police, parent, either custodial or non-custodial, and school. Of these top three sources, police accounted for 71.5 per cent of referrals, parent accounted for 17.6 per cent and school accounted 10.8 per cent of referrals.

## Findings

In an estimated 125,281 maltreatment-related investigations in Ontario in 2013, the investigating workers identified 97,951 maltreatment investigations and 27,330 risk investigations. The highest investigated form of maltreatment was exposure to IPV, representing 48 per cent of primary substantiated maltreatment.

Figure 1 is a visual representation of the service dispositions for investigations involving IPV in Ontario over the past 20 years. It depicts the growing gap between the number of investigations and the number of cases which are substantiated. There is an even larger gap between the

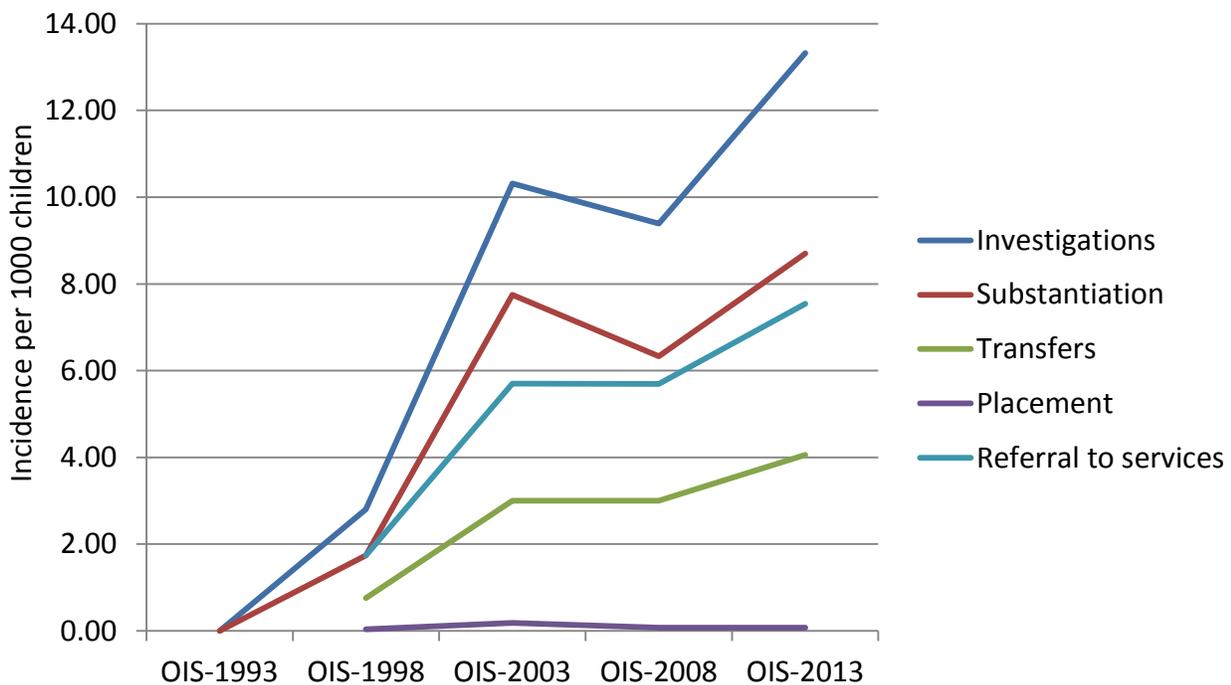
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<sup>1</sup> Fallon, B., Van Wert, M., Trocmé, N., MacLaurin, B., Sinha, V., Lefebvre, R., et al. (2015). *Ontario Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect-2013 (OIS-2013)*. Toronto, ON: Child Welfare Research Portal.

number of cases which are investigated and the number of cases which are transferred to ongoing child protection services. Despite the rising number of investigations, the service responses provided are not increasing at a similar rate.

In 1998 exposure to IPV was investigated at a rate of 2.80 per 1,000 children. Fifteen years later, the number of investigations increased almost fivefold, and in 2013 was investigated at a rate of 13.32 investigations per 1,000 children. From 2008 to 2013 exposure to emotional violence remained the highest sub-type of exposure followed by direct exposure to physical violence and indirect exposure to physical violence. Despite an increase of investigations for exposure to IPV, the number of substantiated cases for direct and indirect exposure to physical violence has remained constant between 2008 and 2013. However, the number of substantiated cases for exposure to emotional violence has doubled; a rate of 2.5 per 1,000 children in 2008 to 4.5 per 1,000 children in 2013.

Figure 1.  
*Service Dispositions of Exposure to Intimate Partner Violence in Ontario*



## Background

Due to changes in investigation mandates and practices over the last 15 years, the OIS-2008 and OIS-2013 differed from previous cycles in that they tracked both risk-only investigations and maltreatment investigations. Risk-only investigations were those in which a specific past incident of maltreatment was not suspected or alleged to have occurred, but rather a constellation of factors lead to concerns that a child may be maltreated in the future (e.g., caregiver with a substance abuse issue).

## **Methodology**

The OIS-2013 used a multi-stage sampling design to select a representative sample of 17 child welfare agencies in Ontario and then to select a sample of cases within these agencies. Information was collected directly from child protection workers on a representative sample of 5,265 child protection investigations conducted during a three-month sampling period in 2013. This sample was weighted to reflect provincial annual estimates. After two weighting procedures were applied to the data, the estimated number of maltreatment-related investigations (i.e., maltreatment and risk-only investigations) conducted in Ontario in 2013 was 125,281.

For maltreatment investigations, information was collected regarding the primary form of maltreatment investigated as well as the level of substantiation for that maltreatment (substantiated, suspected, or unfounded). Thirty-two forms of maltreatment were listed on the data collection instrument, and these were collapsed into five broad categories: physical abuse (e.g., hit with hand), sexual abuse (e.g., exploitation), neglect (e.g., educational neglect), emotional maltreatment (e.g., verbal abuse or belittling), and exposure to intimate partner violence (IPV) (e.g., direct witness to physical violence). Workers listed the primary concern for the investigation, and could also list secondary and tertiary concerns.

For each risk investigation, workers determined whether the child was at risk of future maltreatment. The worker could decide that the child was at risk of future maltreatment (confirmed risk), that the child was not at risk of future maltreatment (unfounded risk), or that the future risk of maltreatment was unknown.

Workers were asked to provide information on various other aspects of their investigation, including the characteristics of the household, caregivers, and child subject of the investigation, the history of previous child welfare case openings, and the short-term child welfare service dispositions.

## **Limitations**

The OIS collects information directly from child welfare workers at the point when they completed their initial investigation of a report of possible child abuse or neglect, or risk of future maltreatment. Therefore, the scope of the study is limited to the type of information available to them at that point. The OIS does not include information about unreported maltreatment nor about cases that were investigated only by the police. Also, reports that were made to child welfare authorities but were screened out (not opened for investigation) were not included. Similarly, reports on cases currently open at the time of case selection were not included. The study did not track longer-term service events that occurred beyond the initial investigation.

Three limitations to estimation method used to derive annual estimates should also be noted. The agency size correction uses child population as a proxy for agency size; this does not account for variations in per capita investigation rates across agencies in the same strata. The annualization weight corrects for seasonal fluctuation in the volume of investigations, but it does not correct for seasonal variations in types of investigations conducted. Finally, the annualization weight

includes cases that were investigated more than once in the year as a result of the case being re-opened following a first investigation completed earlier in the same year. Accordingly, the weighted annual estimates represent the child maltreatment-related investigations, rather than investigated children.

Comparisons across OIS reports must be made with caution. The forms of maltreatment tracked by each cycle were modified to take into account changes in investigation mandates and practices. Comparisons across cycles must in particular take into consideration the fact that the OIS-2008 was the first to explicitly track risk-only investigations.

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