

Academic Difficulties among Ontario's Child Welfare Involved Population

Barbara Fallon and Melissa Van Wert

Introduction

The Ontario Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect, 2013 (OIS-2013)¹ 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 characteristics of children and youth who are investigated by child welfare authorities and determined to have academic difficulties in Ontario. Children and youth who are involved in the child welfare system are at increased risk of poor academic outcomes.

Findings²

Academic difficulties were commonly noted by investigating child welfare workers. Among all maltreatment-related investigations, approximately 22% of children over age four were struggling academically.

Table 1 displays the substantiation and risk confirmation levels within investigations involving children and youth with academic difficulties. Maltreatment investigations that noted academic difficulties were only slightly more likely than investigations not noting these difficulties to be substantiated (46% versus 43%). However, risk investigations documenting academic difficulties were more likely to have a finding of confirmed risk (32% versus 13%). Almost one-third of risk investigations that noted academic difficulties were confirmed (an estimated 940 investigations), whereas only 13% of risk investigations that did not document such difficulties were confirmed (an estimated 2,046 investigations).

¹ 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.

² Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding. Estimates may not add up to totals due to missing data. Estimates under 100 are not reported because they are unreliable (as indicated by a dash).

Table 1

Substantiation and risk confirmation in investigations involving children and youth with and without academic difficulties in Ontario in 2013

		Academic Difficulties Noted		Academic Difficulties Not Noted	
		n=20,599 (22%)		n=74,965 (78%)	
		#	%	#	%
Maltreatment Investigations					
	Unfounded	8,321	47%	30,828	52%
	Suspected	1,174	7%	3,354	6%
	Substantiated	8,205	46%	25,461	43%
Sub-total maltreatment		17,700	100%	59,643	100%
Risk Investigations					
	No future risk	1,643	57%	11,632	76%
	Unknown risk	316	11%	1,643	11%
	Confirmed risk	940	32%	2,046	13%
Sub-total risk		2,899	100%	15,322	100%

Case dispositions among investigations in which academic difficulties were noted and not noted are compared in Table 2. When academic difficulties were noted, workers were more likely to open the case for ongoing services, refer the child or family to specialized services, and place the child in out-of-home care. Only 21% of investigations (an estimated 15,258) in which the child did not have academic difficulties were opened for ongoing services, whereas 35% of investigations (an estimated 6,970) in which the child struggled academically were opened. Likewise, 7% of investigations (an estimated 1,518) involving a child with academic difficulties resulted in a placement in out-of-home care compared to only 2% of investigations (an estimated 1,798) involving a child without these difficulties.

Table 2

Case dispositions in investigations involving children and youth with and without academic difficulties in Ontario in 2013

	Academic Difficulties Noted		Academic Difficulties Not Noted	
	n=20,599		n=74,965	
	#	%	#	%
Case opened	6,970	35%	15,258	21%
Case closed	13,020	65%	58,788	79%
Referral to specialized service	10,285	51%	30,366	41%
No referral	9,705	49%	43,680	59%
Placement	1,518	7%	1,798	2%
No placement	19,081	93%	73,167	98%

Table 3 displays the characteristics of children with and without academic difficulties. Investigations noting academic difficulties more commonly involved older children and youth, and young people who were Aboriginal. Almost half of investigations that indicated academic difficulties also documented externalizing problems for the child (45%, an estimated 9,231 investigations) and developmental or other disabilities (48%, an estimated 9,842), while 39% of investigations noting academic difficulties also noted internalizing issues for the child (an estimated 8,093 investigations). ADD/ADHD, attachment issues, and substance abuse were also more commonly noted in investigations in which the child or youth struggled academically, compared to investigations that did not note academic difficulties.

Table 3

Child characteristics in investigations involving children and youth with and without academic difficulties in Ontario in 2013

	Academic Difficulties Noted		Academic Difficulties Not Noted	
	n=20,599		n=74,965	
	#	%	#	%
Child age				
4-7 years	5,153	25%	31,595	42%
8-11 years	7,134	35%	22,773	30%
12-15 years	8,331	40%	20,597	28%
Child ethno-racial				
White	14,100	68%	46,273	62%
Black	1,517	7%	6,105	8%
Aboriginal	2,366	12%	4,971	7%
Asian	1,422	7%	10,984	15%
Arab	-	-	835	1%
Latin American	432	2%	2,087	3%
Multiple	705	3%	3,709	5%
Child functioning				
Internalizing issues	8,093	39%	9,177	12%
Externalizing issues	9,231	45%	6,236	8%
ADD/ADHD	8,279	40%	5,858	8%
Attachment issues	5,529	27%	3,908	5%
Developmental/other disability	9,842	48%	4,204	6%
Substance abuse	1,880	9%	942	1%

The primary maltreatment-related allegation in investigations that noted and did not note academic difficulties is depicted in Table 4. Neglect was the most commonly investigated form of maltreatment among investigations in which the child had academic difficulties (30%, an estimated 6,135 investigations), followed by physical abuse (27%, an estimated 5,651). Exposure to intimate partner violence was more commonly noted in investigations in which the child did not have academic problems (25%, an estimated 18,986).

Table 4

Maltreatment-related allegation in investigations involving children and youth with and without academic difficulties in Ontario in 2013

	Academic Difficulties Noted		Academic Difficulties Not Noted	
	#	%	#	%
Physical abuse	5,651	27%	16,502	22%
Sexual abuse	688	3%	3,238	4%
Neglect	6,135	30%	14,555	19%
Emotional maltreatment	2,198	11%	6,363	8%
Exposure to IPV	3,029	15%	18,986	25%
Risk	2,899	14%	15,322	20%
Total	20,599	100%	74,965	100%

Summary

- Almost one-quarter of children and youth who were subject of a child welfare investigation in Ontario had academic difficulties.
- Workers who noted academic difficulties for the young person were more likely to determine that this person was at significant risk of future maltreatment.
- Children and youth are more likely to receive child welfare services when they have academic problems, including referrals to specialized services, ongoing child welfare services, and placements in out-of-home care. Workers may be more likely to provide services to these young people because academic difficulties are associated with various other child functioning concerns.
- Young people with academic difficulties were more likely to display internalizing problems, externalizing problems, developmental and other disabilities, ADD/ADHD, attachment issues, and substance abuse problems. These other difficulties may have caused or compounded their problems in school.
- Aboriginal children and youth were more likely than their non-Aboriginal counterparts to display academic difficulties.
- Academic difficulties were also more common among older children and teens.
- Young people with academic difficulties were more likely to be investigated because of a neglect allegation.

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.

Workers were asked to provide information about the maltreatment-related allegations and the characteristics of the investigated child and family. Workers also provided information on several short-term investigation outcomes including referrals to specialized services, ongoing child welfare services, and placement in out-of-home care.

Maltreatment investigations and risk of future maltreatment investigations were tracked separately. 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.

The present analysis focused on all maltreatment-related investigations (i.e., maltreatment and risk investigations) involving school aged children (age four to 15, n=4,033). When weights were applied to the sample of 4,033 investigations, there were an estimated 95,565 maltreatment-related investigations involving children age four to 15 in Ontario in 2013.

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.

Suggested Citation: Fallon, B., & Van Wert, M. (2017). Academic Difficulties among Ontario's Child Welfare Involved Population. CWRP Information Sheet 182E. Toronto, ON: Canadian Child Welfare Research Portal.