



Physical abuse of children in Canada¹

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The 2003 Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (CIS-2003) is the second nation-wide study to examine the incidence of reported child maltreatment and the characteristics of the children and families investigated by child welfare services. The CIS-2003 tracked a sample of 14,200 child maltreatment investigations² as a basis for deriving national estimates. Information was collected directly from the investigating child welfare workers using a standard set of definitions.³ This information sheet describes cases of physical abuse that were tracked by the CIS-2003 in Canada, excluding Quebec.⁴

Primary or secondary forms of physical abuse

An estimated 31,488 cases of physical abuse were investigated and substantiated in Canada in 2003, excluding Quebec. Physical abuse was the primary form of substantiated maltreatment in 25,257 of these cases and a secondary form of maltreatment in another 6,231 cases. The incidence of substantiated physical abuse (primary or secondary) was 6.62 per 1,000 children in Canada, excluding Quebec.⁵

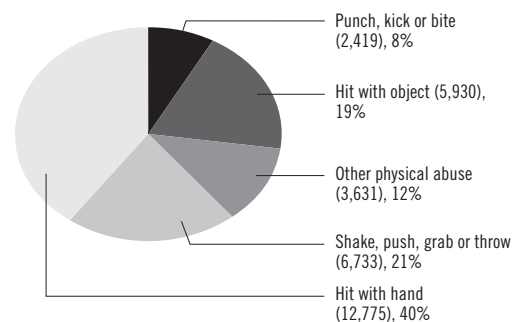
Cases of investigated maltreatment were classified as physical abuse if the investigated child was suspected to have suffered or to be at substantial risk of suffering physical harm at the hands of his or her alleged perpetrator. The physical abuse category includes five forms of abuse:

- **Shake, push, grab, or throw:** includes pulling or dragging a child as well as shaking an infant
- **Hit with hand:** includes slapping and spanking but not punching
- **Punch, kick, or bite:** includes any hitting with other parts of the body (e.g., elbow or head)

- **Hit with object:** includes hitting with a stick, a belt, or other object, throwing an object at a child, but not stabbing with a knife
- **Other physical abuse:** any other form of physical abuse including choking, strangling, stabbing, burning, shooting, poisoning, and the abusive use of restraints.

From an estimated 31,488 substantiated child investigations, 12,775 involved concerns about a child being hit with a hand. An estimated 6,733 involved concerns about a child shaken, pushed, grabbed, or thrown. Being punched, kicked, or bitten was investigated in 2,419 substantiated cases, while 5,930 investigations involved an allegation of being hit with an object. In an estimated 3,631 substantiated cases, the allegation was classified as other physical abuse. (See Figure 1.)

Figure 1: Primary or secondary forms of substantiated physical abuse (CIS-2003)
Estimates based on a sample of 4,090 child maltreatment investigations



Source: CIS-2003 Major Findings Report, Table 3-5.

Physical harm

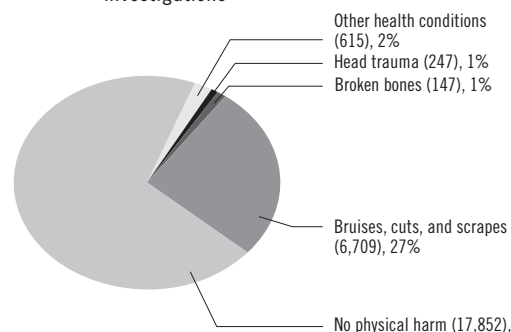
The CIS-2003 tracked physical harm suspected or known to be caused by the investigated maltreatment. Investigating workers were asked to document the nature

of physical harm caused by the substantiated maltreatment. These ratings are based on the information routinely collected during a maltreatment investigation. While investigation protocols require careful examination of any physical injuries and may include a medical examination, it should be noted that children are not necessarily examined by a medical practitioner. Types of injury or health conditions that were documented include:

- **No harm:** there was no apparent evidence of physical harm to the child as a result of maltreatment
- **Bruises/cuts/scrapes:** the child suffered various physical hurts visible for at least 48 hours
- **Broken bones:** the child suffered fractured bones
- **Head trauma:** the child was a victim of head trauma, including internal brain injuries due to shaking
- **Other health conditions:** the child suffered from other physical health conditions, such as complications from untreated asthma, failure to thrive, or a sexually transmitted disease.

Figure 2 presents the four types of physical harm that were found in the cases of substantiated physical abuse that were reported in the CIS-2003. In over two-thirds of those cases (71% of an estimated 17,852 children) no physical harm was documented. Twenty-seven percent (an estimated 6,709 children) involved bruises, cuts, and scrapes. Other health conditions were reported in 2% of these cases while more severe injuries were indicated less often: broken bones and head trauma were each indicated in approximately one percent of cases with substantiated physical abuse as the primary concern.

Figure 2: Substantiated cases of physical abuse by nature of physical harm (CIS-2003)
Estimates based on a sample of 4,090 substantiated investigations



Source: CIS-2003 Major Findings Report, Table 4-1(b).

Severity of harm

Medical treatment was required in 4% (an estimated 1,079 child investigations) of investigations where physical abuse was the primary substantiated maltreatment.⁶ During the three-month CIS-2003 case selection period there was one substantiated investigation of a child fatality. Because these tragic events occur relatively rarely, it is not surprising that only one substantiated investigated child fatality was captured by the CIS-2003. Estimates of the rate of child fatalities cannot be derived from this single case.

- 1 This information sheet is based upon the peer-reviewed report, Trocmé, N., Fallon, B., MacLaurin, B., Daciuk, J., Felstiner, C., Black, T., et al. (2005). *Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect—2003: Major Findings*. Ottawa, ON: Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada.
- 2 The CIS does not track incidents that were not reported to child welfare services, reported cases that were screened out by child welfare services before being fully investigated, new reports on cases already opened by child welfare services, or cases that were investigated only by the police.
- 3 In Quebec information was extracted directly from the administrative information systems.
- 4 National estimates including Quebec are excluded from this information sheet because of incomplete or unavailable data. Where available, estimates including Quebec can be obtained from the CIS-2003 Major Findings Report.
- 5 See CIS-2003 Major Findings Report, Table 3-5.
- 6 See CIS-2003 Major Findings Report, Table 4-1(a).

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Suggested citation: MacLaurin, B., Trocmé, N., Fallon, B., Chaze, F., Black, T., & Lajoie, J. (2005). *Physical abuse of children in Canada*. CECW Information Sheet #24E. Montreal, QC: McGill University, School of Social Work.

The Centre of Excellence for Child Welfare (CECW) is one of the Centres of Excellence for Children's Well-Being funded by Public Health Agency Canada. The CECW is also funded by Canadian Institutes of Health Research and Bell Canada. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the official policy of the CECW's funders.



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