

# Comparing parental characteristics regarding child neglect:

An analysis of cases retained by child protection services in Quebec

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Poster presented at Child and Youth Health, 3rd World Congress  
May 11–14, 2003, Vancouver, British Columbia

## INTRODUCTION

Studies of the incidence of child maltreatment in Canada as a whole (Trocmé et al., 2001) and in Quebec specifically (Tourigny et al., 2002) reveal that nearly half of all reports to child protection services concerned neglected children. In Quebec, the number of cases of substantiated neglect almost doubled between 1993 and 1999 from 3.8 to 6.15 per 1,000 children (Blanchard, Bouchard, Hélie & Mayer, 2002). These statistics highlight a pressing need to understand the relationship between child neglect, family types and parenting. The literature reveals that most neglected children live in families headed by socially isolated single mothers trying to cope with a variety of social and health problems (Gaudin, 1993; Jones & McCurdy, 1992; Swift, 1995).



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However, very little work has been done to investigate the links between fathers and neglect. Lacharité (2001) and Radhakrishna et al. (2001) have recently hypothesized that men are much more of a presence in neglecting families than previous research might suggest. Older studies do not always take into account the complexity of the shifting relationships between couples in these families and the importance of fathers (biological or not) appears to be underestimated.

There is a strong tendency among both researchers and child protection agencies to focus exclusively on mothers when considering issues of child neglect. The biological father and the mother's current partner, are rarely mentioned in studies or involved in child welfare assessments. Yet some research suggests that in some circumstances, the involvement of a father, whether the biological father or the mother's partner, can protect against abuse and neglect (Billor & Solomon, 1986; Dubowitz et al., 2000; Egeland, Jacobitz & Sroufe, 1988; Quinton, Rutter & Liddle, 1984; Turcotte, Dubeau, Bolté & Paquette, 2001). Other studies draw finer distinctions. Male partners are not always a significant source of support to neglecting mothers (Polansky et al., 1981) and these men may sometimes increase the risk of maltreatment (see surveys by Daly & Wilson, 1996, 1999).

The research presented here suggests that fathers are very much present in situations of child neglect and that an analysis of the family type leads to a better understanding of the problem.

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. Describe the various types of families in which reports of child neglect are substantiated
2. Identify the characteristics that distinguish these different family types

## METHOD

Our analysis is based on data from the *Quebec Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse, Neglect, Abandonment and Serious Behavioural Problems (QIS)*.

Using data collected by youth protection workers, the QIS documented all the reports filed with 16 of the Quebec's 18 regional directors of youth protection between October 1, 1998 and December 31, 1998 with respect to the:

- various forms of maltreatment and serious behavioural problems
- nature and severity of the problems reported
- characteristics of the children and their parents

The QIS documented 9,790 reports to youth protection services, of which 4,929 reports (representing 4,774 children) were retained for investigation. Maltreatment was substantiated in 2,965 cases, including:

- 1,778 neglected children (60%) in 1,206 families
- 1,187 abused children (excluding neglect) (40%) in 952 families.



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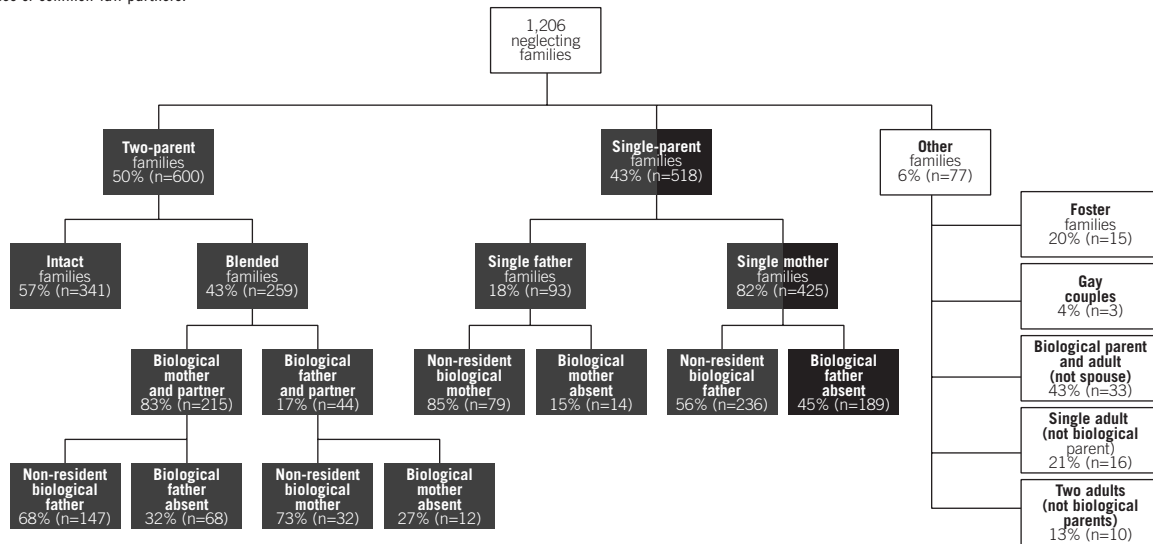
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## Types of neglecting families (substantiated)

Family types with fathers present are shown in grey (except in "Other" types of families).

"Partners" are spouses or common-law partners.



## Results

### Families in general population compared with those investigated by child protection services

Type of family	Quebec		All of Canada	
	Population <sup>1</sup>	Retained Reports <sup>2</sup>	Population <sup>3</sup>	Retained Reports <sup>4</sup>
Intact	70%	80%	38%	83%
Blended	10%		24%	19%
Single-parent	20%	38%	17%	50%

#### Sources

1. Santé Québec (1998). Families with at least one child under 18.
2. QIS (1998).
3. Statistics Canada census (1996). Families with at least one child under 18.
4. Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (1998).

- Of all the types of families, only intact two-parent families are under-represented among retained reports. Blended two-parent families and single-parent families are clearly overrepresented.
- Reports about children in intact or blended two-parent families are retained for investigation slightly more often in Quebec than in Canada as a whole. On the other hand, children in single-parent families are investigated much more often in Canada as a whole than in Quebec, representing half of all Canadian cases reported.
  - Single-parent and blended families seem to be more likely to be investigated. Are they perceived as more vulnerable or more worrisome?

### Single parenthood: a multifaceted reality

- The vast majority of neglecting single-parent families are headed by a mother, *but*, in close to half of all cases, there is a biological father who does not live with the child. Often these families are what we call single mothers/non-resident fathers.
- When these families are headed by a father, there is generally a biological mother living elsewhere. Most of these families are what we call single fathers/non-resident mothers.
  - There is, therefore, a distinction to be made between single-parent families that have a biological parent living elsewhere and those that do not. Frequently the other parent is around.
  - Fathers are often present, either as single parents or as non-resident parents. Most statistics on single parents overlook non-resident parents with a presence in their children's lives, however.

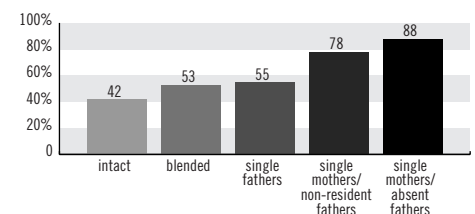
### Two-parent families: equally multifaceted

- Neglecting two-parent families are often blended families.
- Blended families are usually made up of a biological mother and a stepfather or common-law boyfriend.

- In a very large percentage of cases, there is a biological parent living elsewhere in addition to the adults in the blended family, so blended families often involve three parents.
  - There is a distinction to be made between two-parent families composed of two biological parents and those that are not. Blended families are frequent.
  - Once again, men are often present, either as fathers or husbands living with the child, or as biological fathers not living with the child. Statistics usually do not track this phenomenon.

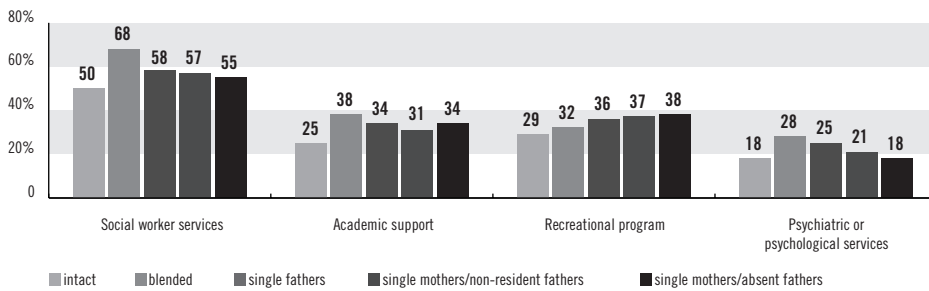
### Socioeconomic characteristics of neglecting families

Percentage of neglecting families with annual income under \$15,000



- Families headed by single mothers in which the fathers are absent are the poorest of all family types, followed by single mothers with non-resident fathers. Single fathers and blended families are in a better financial position, although over half have an annual income of less than \$15,000.

## Percentage of neglected children who need services



- Most single mothers do not participate in the labour market: 87% of single mother/absent father families and 82% of single mother/non-resident father families have no employment income, as opposed to 43% to 49% of other family types.
- Many of the single parents have not completed high school: 72% of single mother/absent father families; 70% of single father families and 64% of single mother/absent father families. In about 56% of two-parent families, neither parent has completed high school.
  - Families headed by single mothers are extremely poor, especially when the father is absent. Poverty, coupled with unemployment and little education results in profound socioeconomic distress.
  - Families headed by single fathers are often in a better position than those headed by single mothers, although they, too, face significant problems.

## Characteristics of neglected children

Neglected children in blended families have more behaviour-related problems

- More neglected children from blended families have at least one problem (76% as opposed to 59% to 68% for the other types of families).
- More neglected children in blended families also have problems related to attention deficit/hyperactivity (20% as opposed to 12% to 14% for other types of families) or externalization (41% as opposed to 23% to 35% for other types of families).
  - Do children in blended families experience special stress due to the complexity of their family situation and the many parental figures around them?

Neglected children in intact families need fewer services than those in other types of families

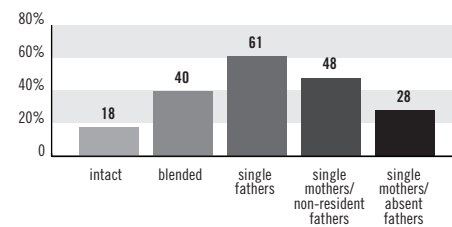
- Children in intact families have less need of social workers, academic support, recreational programs and psychiatric or psychological services than do others. Children in blended families, on the other hand, have greater need of a social worker's help.
- Children in intact families less often need services than the others (81% for intact families as opposed to 87% to 89% for other types of families).
- When children in intact families need more than one service, they less frequently need at least four (12% for intact families as opposed to 18% to 21% for other types of families).

## Characteristics of neglecting parents

Half of all single parents have four or more personal problems (as opposed to 14% for parents in intact families and 42% of those in blended families). Profiles of single mothers and single fathers are different.

Single fathers are mainly coping with difficult separations

Percentage of neglecting parents with personal problems related to a separation

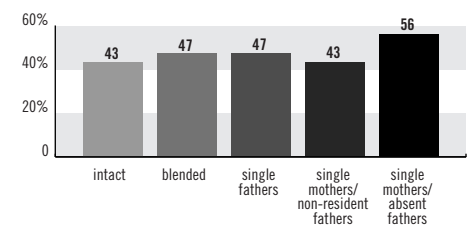


- Single fathers have the most personal problems related to a separation.
- Along with blended families (15%), single fathers are the ones with the most custody dispute problems (18% compared to 2% to 11%).

- Children in families headed by single fathers more often appear to have chronic protection problems. At the time of the report, 27% of children living with a single father had already received child protection services, compared with 12% to 22% for the other types of families. Neglected adolescents (12- to 17-years-old) are more common in families with single fathers than in other families.

Single mothers are more isolated socially and their economic stress varies greatly

Percentage of neglecting parents with financial problems



- Single mother families in which the father is absent are frequently under financial stress and in greatest need of practical assistance (58%). The financial stress of single mother families in which the father has a presence is the same as that of intact families. However, their need for practical assistance remain high (52% as opposed to 30% to 40% for other types of families).
- Whether the father is absent (40%) or not (41%), single mothers suffer the greatest social isolation (between 26% to 29% for other types of families).

## CONCLUSION

The *Quebec Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse, Neglect, Abandonment and Serious Behavioural Problems (QIS)* focuses primarily on the children reported, so some information about their parents is not available. However, secondary analyses allow us to make two observations about the relationships between neglect and family type:

- Child-neglect situations differ sharply by family type. The realities vary, even among two-parent and single-parent families.



- Fathers are far more present in situations of neglect than the literature suggests, even in single mother families.

### Rethinking neglecting families

Neglect looks different, depending on whether families are intact, blended and headed by a single mother or single father. A better understanding of neglect, its causes and treatment, will require closer observation of family diversity. Particular attention should be paid to comparative analyses by family type. The characteristics of the biological and non-biological fathers in neglecting families also warrant closer examination.

### Where do fathers fit in?

Clearly men are involved in situations of child neglect. Yet protection services focus on the mothers, ignoring or avoiding the biological and non-biological fathers (National Child Welfare Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice, 2002; O'Hagan, 1997). If the father helps protect the child, this potential support is being lost. Conversely, if the father is a threat to the child, ignoring the nature of his risk behaviours, their target and their context may exacerbate the risk (Taylor & Daniel, 2000).

### Extreme vulnerability of families headed by single mothers

Of all types of neglecting families, those headed by single mothers are the most affected by economic and social poverty. As this is the type of family most often targeted by protective services, the development of programs that meet the many needs of these families would afford better protection for the children.

The prevalence of poverty among neglecting families, especially those headed by single mothers, demonstrates that it is essential to address the adverse effects of poverty at a societal level if we are to reduce the incidence of maltreatment of children.

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*The Centre of Excellence for Child Welfare (CECW) is one of five Centres of Excellence for Children's Well-Being funded by Health 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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