

Disparities Among Latin American Children in Ontario Child Welfare in 2023

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Introduction

The Ontario Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect 2023 (OIS-2023)¹ is the seventh provincial study examining the incidence of reported child maltreatment-related investigations² and the characteristics of children and families investigated by child welfare authorities in Ontario. This information sheet examines the over-representation of Latin American children involved in child welfare investigations using data from the OIS-2023 and population estimates from the 2021 Canadian Census. It compares investigation rates for Latin American and white children and highlights disparities at key decision points within the child welfare system, including substantiation, transfer to ongoing services, and out-of-home placement.

Findings

There was an estimated 125,879 maltreatment-related investigations in Ontario in 2023 involving children and youth under 18 years of age. Of these, an estimated 2,814 investigations involved a Latin American child.

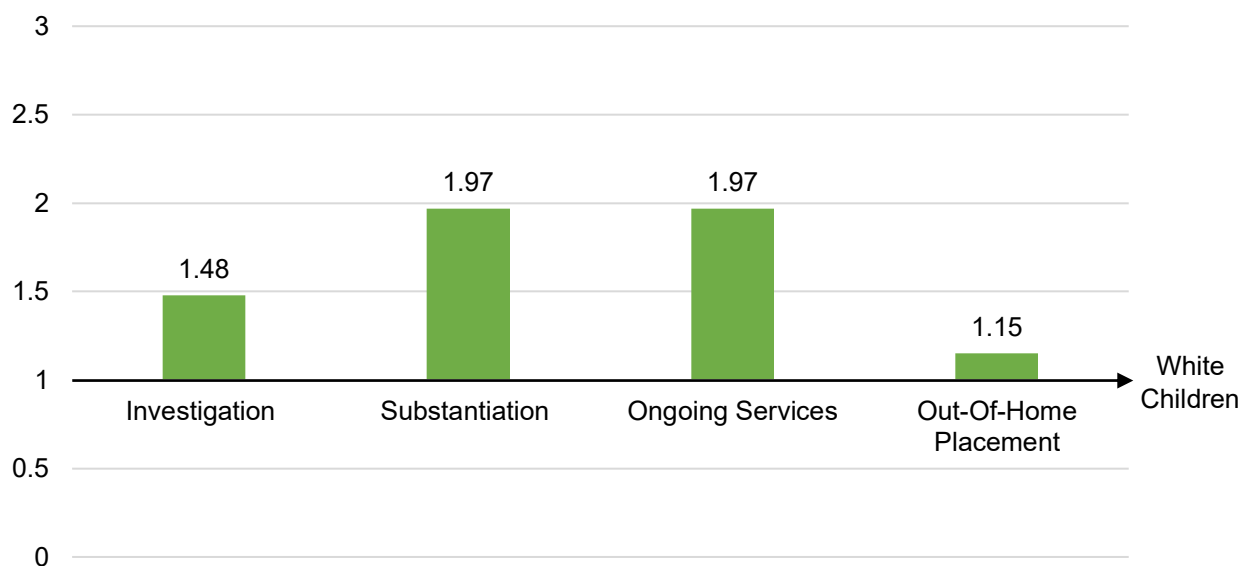
The investigation rate for Latin American children was 66.75 investigations per 1,000 children, compared to 45.04 investigations per 1,000 white children in 2023. Latin American children were therefore investigated at 1.48 times the rate of white children, demonstrating a disparity in the rate of child welfare investigations between these two groups. Disparities remain evident throughout

¹ Fallon, B., Black, T., Lefebvre, R., Trocmé, N., Hélie, S., Crowe, A., Miller, M., Budau, K., Houston, E., King, B., Esposito, B., Fluke, J., Collin-Vézina, D., Parada, H., Provençal, J., Chhabra, N., Sawh, P., Chan, P., Bonnie, N., ... Wilson, L. (2025). Ontario Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect-2023 (OIS-2023). Toronto, ON: Child Welfare Research Portal.

² A maltreatment-related investigation refers to both maltreatment and risk-only investigations. Risk-only investigations are 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).

subsequent child welfare decision-making. Compared to investigations involving a white child, investigations involving a Latin American child were 1.97 times as likely to have maltreatment substantiated, 1.97 times as likely to be transferred to ongoing services, and 1.15 times as likely to experience an out-of-home placement. Figure 1 illustrates disparities for Latin American children relative to white children across the investigation decision-making process.

Figure 1. *Disparate Representation of Latin American Children (aged 0-17 years) in the Ontario Child Welfare System in 2023*



These findings indicate that Latin American children in Ontario continue to experience disparities relative to white children across multiple stages of child welfare involvement.³ The persistence of these disparities beyond the initial investigation suggests that inequities are not limited to system entry but continue throughout subsequent child welfare decisions.

Methodology

The OIS-2023 used a multi-stage sampling design to select a representative sample of 20 child welfare agencies in Ontario and then to select a sample of cases within these agencies. Information was collected directly from child welfare workers on a representative sample of 6,799 child protection investigations involving children 0–17 years of age that were conducted during a three-month sampling period in the fall of 2023. 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 2023 was 125,879. Population-based rates were calculated by dividing the estimated number of

³ Parada, H., Fallon, B., Best, L., Escobar Olivo, V., Filippelli, J., King, B. (2023). Understanding the over-representation of Latin American children in Ontario child welfare services. Toronto, ON: Toronto Metropolitan University. <https://doi.org/10.32920/24085521.v1>

investigations involving a Latin American child and/or white child by the corresponding child population in Ontario and multiplying by 1,000.

For maltreatment investigations, information was collected regarding the level of substantiation for that maltreatment. Workers listed the primary concern for the investigation and could also list secondary and tertiary concerns. In addition, information was collected on investigation characteristics, including short-term child welfare service outcomes such as substantiation, transfer to ongoing services, and out-of-home placement.

Limitations

The OIS-2023 captures information available to investigating child welfare workers at the completion of the initial investigation. As a result, the study does not include incidents of maltreatment that were not reported to child welfare authorities, reports that were screened out before an investigation was opened, new reports on cases already open to child welfare services, or cases investigated exclusively by police. The OIS-2023 also does not capture longer-term child welfare service outcomes beyond the initial investigation period.

Because provincial estimates are derived using sampling and weighting procedures, findings should be interpreted as provincial estimates rather than exact counts. The estimates presented for investigations involving a Latin American child are based on a relatively small sample of investigations and may not reflect regional variation across Ontario. Three other limitations of the estimation procedures should also be noted. The agency size correction uses service volume as a proxy for agency size and does not account for variation in investigations across agencies. The annualization weight corrects for seasonal fluctuations in investigation volume but not seasonal variation in investigation type. Finally, because annual estimates include investigations involving a child whose case may have been reopened within the same year, the weighted estimates represent investigations rather than individual children.

Comparisons across OIS reports must be made with caution. The forms of maltreatment tracked by each cycle were modified to consider changes in investigation mandates and practices. Comparisons across cycles must take into consideration that the OIS-2008 was the first to explicitly track risk-only investigations. Age groupings have also varied across OIS cycles and should be considered when interpreting comparisons over time, as estimates may reflect differences in the age composition of the samples included in each report.

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