

Referral Sources in Child Maltreatment-Related Investigations Involving Latin American Children in Ontario 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 investigations and the characteristics of children and families investigated by child welfare authorities in Ontario. This information sheet examines referral sources among child maltreatment-related investigations² involving a Latin American child and compares referral patterns with investigations involving white children.

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, representing 2.2% of all child maltreatment-related investigations.

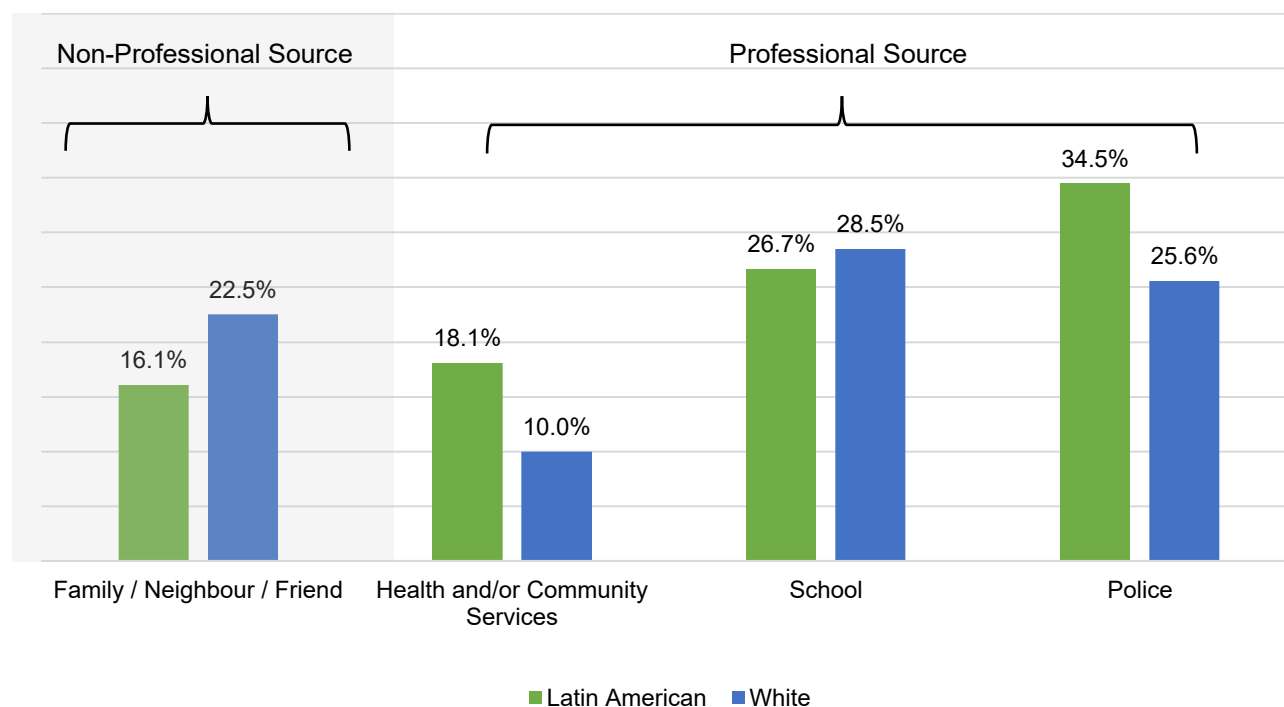
In 2023, professional sources accounted for the majority of referrals for both Latin American and white children. However, investigations involving a Latin American child were more likely to involve professional referral sources compared to investigations involving a white child (86.0% vs. 73.0%). In contrast, non-professional referral sources (e.g., parents, relatives, children, neighbours, or friends) accounted for a smaller proportion of investigations involving a Latin

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).

American child compared to white children (16.1% vs. 22.5%). Figure 1 describes referral sources for child maltreatment-related investigations involving a Latin American or white child under 18 years of age in Ontario in 2023.

Figure 1. *Referral Source in Child Maltreatment-Related Investigations Involving Latin American and White Children (aged 0-17 years) in Ontario in 2023*



Community, health, or social service referrals accounted for a larger proportion of investigations involving a Latin American child than for investigations involving a white child (18.1% and 10.0%, respectively). School referrals were common for both groups, accounting for approximately one-quarter of investigations involving a Latin American child or white child (26.7% and 28.5%, respectively). Police referrals were more common among investigations involving a Latin American child than for investigations involving a white child. Police were identified as a referral source in 34.5% of investigations involving a Latin American child compared to 25.6% of investigations involving a white child.

These findings indicate that professional systems represent a substantial source of child welfare referrals for investigations involving a Latin American child. The higher rates of referral from professional sources may represent an area for further examination.

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. Based on the OIS-2023 weighted estimates, there were an estimated 2,814 maltreatment-related investigations involving a Latin American child and 68,322 investigations involving a white child in Ontario in 2023. Population-based rates were calculated by dividing the estimated number of investigations involving a Latin American child or white child by the corresponding child population in Ontario and multiplying by 1,000.

Information was collected on the source(s) of referral that led to child welfare involvement. Workers could identify more than one referral source for each investigation when multiple individuals or organizations made a report. Referral sources included both professional and non-professional sources. Professional referral sources included community, health, or social services; hospitals; schools; other child welfare services; day care centres; and police. Non-professional referral sources included parents, children, relatives, neighbours, and friends. Anonymous and other referral sources were categorized separately. Because investigations could have multiple referral sources, percentages may exceed 100%.

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 children whose cases may have been reopened within the same year, the weighted estimates represent investigations rather than individual children.

Referral source information reflects the sources identified by child welfare workers during the investigation and may include more than one source per investigation. These data describe patterns of referral but do not indicate why a referral was made, the circumstances leading to the referral, or whether differences in referral patterns reflect differences in reporting practices, service access, or underlying experiences of maltreatment.

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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