



Child Age and Functioning Among Latin American Children Involved in Maltreatment-Related Investigations 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 investigations² and the characteristics of children and families investigated by child welfare authorities in Ontario. This information sheet describes the age distribution and child functioning characteristics identified in maltreatment-related investigations involving a Latin American child in Ontario in 2023. Findings are compared with investigations involving white children. Information presented reflects concerns identified by investigating child welfare workers at the conclusion of the investigation.

Findings

There was an estimated 125,879 maltreatment-related investigations in Ontario in 2023 involving children and youth under 18 years of age. Approximately 2,814 of these investigations involved a Latin American child. For these investigations involving a Latin American child, the largest proportion involved a child 4–7 years of age (25.1%), followed by children 8–11 years (23.4%) and 12–15 years (23.2%). The age distribution for investigations involving a white child was similar, with the largest proportion involving children 4–7 years old (26.7%), followed by children

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).

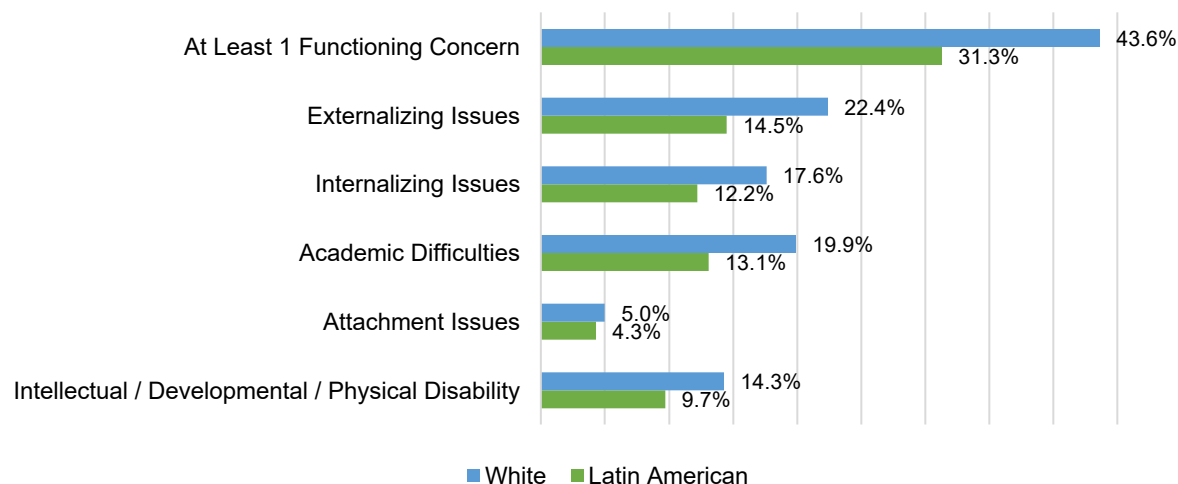
8-11 years old (26.1%), and 12-15 years old (23.2%). Notably, a larger proportion of investigations involving a Latin American child involved a child under one year of age compared to investigations involving a white child (6.3% vs. 3.8%). Population-based investigation rates were higher amongst Latin American children than white children across all age groups, with the largest difference observed among children under one year of age. Table 1 presents the distribution of Latin American and white children's ages during maltreatment-related investigations in Ontario in 2023.

Table 1. *Ages of Latin American and White Children Involved in Child Welfare Maltreatment-Related Investigations in Ontario in 2023*

Child Age	Latin American Children			White Children		
	#	%	Rate	#	%	Rate
Under 1 year	177	6.3%	105.04	2624	3.8%	38.10
1-3 years	424	15.1%	76.81	9242	13.5%	41.20
4-7 years	705	25.1%	79.75	18224	26.7%	55.50
8-11 years	658	23.4%	66.00	17862	26.1%	51.02
12-15 years	653	23.2%	62.25	15878	23.2%	43.70
16-17 years	196	7.0%	34.69	4493	6.6%	24.70

Investigations involving a Latin American child were less likely to involve documented child functioning concerns. Only 31.3% of investigations involving a Latin American child identified at least one child functioning concern, compared with 43.6% of investigations involving a white child. Figure 1 shows specific child functioning concerns for Latin American and white children involved in maltreatment-related investigations in Ontario in 2023.

Figure 1. *Child Functioning Concerns in Child Maltreatment-Related Investigations Involving Latin American and White Children (0-17 Years) in Ontario in 2023*



Among investigations involving a Latin American child, the most frequently identified child functioning concerns were externalizing issues (14.5%), academic difficulties (13.1%), and

internalizing issues (12.2%). Intellectual, developmental, or physical disabilities were identified in 9.7% of investigations involving a Latin American child, while 4.3% involved attachment-related concerns. Investigating workers more frequently identified child functioning concerns for investigations involving a white child across nearly every category. Externalizing issues were identified in 22.4% of investigations involving a white child, academic difficulties in 19.9%, internalizing issues in 17.6%, and intellectual, developmental, or physical disabilities in 14.3% of investigations.

These findings indicate that although Latin American children were investigated by child welfare authorities at higher rates than white children, investigations involving a Latin American child were less likely to involve documented child functioning concerns. This suggests that the overrepresentation of Latin American children in Ontario's child welfare system cannot be explained by higher levels of child behavioural, emotional, developmental, or educational concerns alone.

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

Child age and functioning concerns were documented by investigating workers at the conclusion of each investigation. Workers completed a checklist of child functioning concerns that had been confirmed through diagnosis, directly observed, disclosed by the caregiver or child, or suspected based on available information. Where applicable, the previous six months served as the reference period. For the analyses presented in this information sheet, related checklist domains were collapsed into three composite categories: (1) intellectual/developmental/physical disabilities; (2) internalizing issues, including depression/anxiety/withdrawal, self-harming behaviour, suicidal thoughts, and suicide attempts; and (3) externalizing issues, including ADHD, aggression/conduct issues, inappropriate sexual behaviour, running away, and Youth Criminal Justice Act involvement. Attachment issues and academic/learning difficulties were retained as stand-alone categories.

Limitations

The OIS-2023 collects information directly from child welfare workers at the point when they complete 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 information available to investigating workers at that time. The OIS-2023 does not include information about unreported

maltreatment, cases investigated exclusively by police, reports screened out before an investigation was opened, or new reports involving children already receiving child welfare services.

Child functioning concerns were identified using a checklist completed by investigating workers and reflect concerns known through available records, direct observation, caregiver or child disclosure, and professional judgement. The checklist is not a validated clinical assessment instrument and does not provide a measure of the prevalence of developmental, behavioural, emotional, or educational concerns among children in the general population. Some concerns may have been unidentified or undocumented at the time of the investigation, particularly where children had not previously been assessed or diagnosed.

Because provincial estimates are derived using sampling and weighting procedures, findings should be interpreted as estimates rather than exact counts. Estimates involving Latin American children are based on a relatively small sample of investigations and should therefore be interpreted with caution. 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.

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, in particular, take into consideration the fact 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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