



Disparities of First Nations Child Welfare Involvement in Ontario Over Time

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Introduction

The First Nations Ontario Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect 2023 (FNOIS-2023)¹ examines child welfare investigations involving First Nations children and their families, embedded within the seventh provincial Ontario Incidence Study (OIS-2023)². The OIS estimates the number of children 0-17 in Ontario investigated because of maltreatment-related³ concerns and the characteristics of these children and their families. This information sheet describes disparities in rates of First Nations child welfare involvement in Ontario over time. Disparity indices presented in this information sheet were calculated by taking the incidence rate of various investigation characteristics for First Nations children and dividing by the incidence rate for non-Indigenous children.

The information presented must be understood with awareness of the broader systemic impacts of the ongoing colonial, discrimination, and poverty that Indigenous communities in Ontario have and continue to experience. Further information on the colonial practices that impact First Nations families is available in Chapter 1 of the [FNOIS-2023 report](#).

¹ Crowe, A., Miller, M., Fallon, B., Lefebvre, R., Black, T., Trocmé, N., Hélie, S., King, B., Esposito, T., Fluke, J., Collin-Vézina, D., Parada, H., Hill, L., & Kartusch, M. (2025). First Nations Ontario Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect-2023. Toronto, ON: Child Welfare Research Portal.

² Fallon, B., Black, T., Lefebvre, R., Trocmé, N., Hélie, S., Crowe, A., Miller, M., Budau, K., Houston, E., King, B., Esposito, T., Fluke, J., Collin-Vézina, D., Parada, H., Provençal, J., Chhabra, N., Sawh, P., Chan, P., Chowdhury, R., ... Wilson, L. (2025). Ontario Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect-2023 (OIS-2023). Toronto, ON: Child Welfare Research Portal.

³ 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).

Findings

Figure 1 illustrates the disparity in investigation rates between First Nations and non-indigenous children aged 0-15 from 1998 to 2023. In 1998, the investigation rate was 76.05 per 1,000 First Nations children, compared with 26.24 per 1,000 non-Indigenous children, meaning First Nations children were investigated at approximately 3x the rate of non-Indigenous children. This disparity increased over the following decade, reaching approximately 5x higher in 2008, before declining to about three times higher in subsequent years. By 2023, the disparity had widened again, with the investigation rate for First Nations children rising to approximately 5x that of non-indigenous children.

Figure 1. Rates of Investigations for First Nations Children and Non-Indigenous Children (<16 Years) in Ontario, 1998-2023

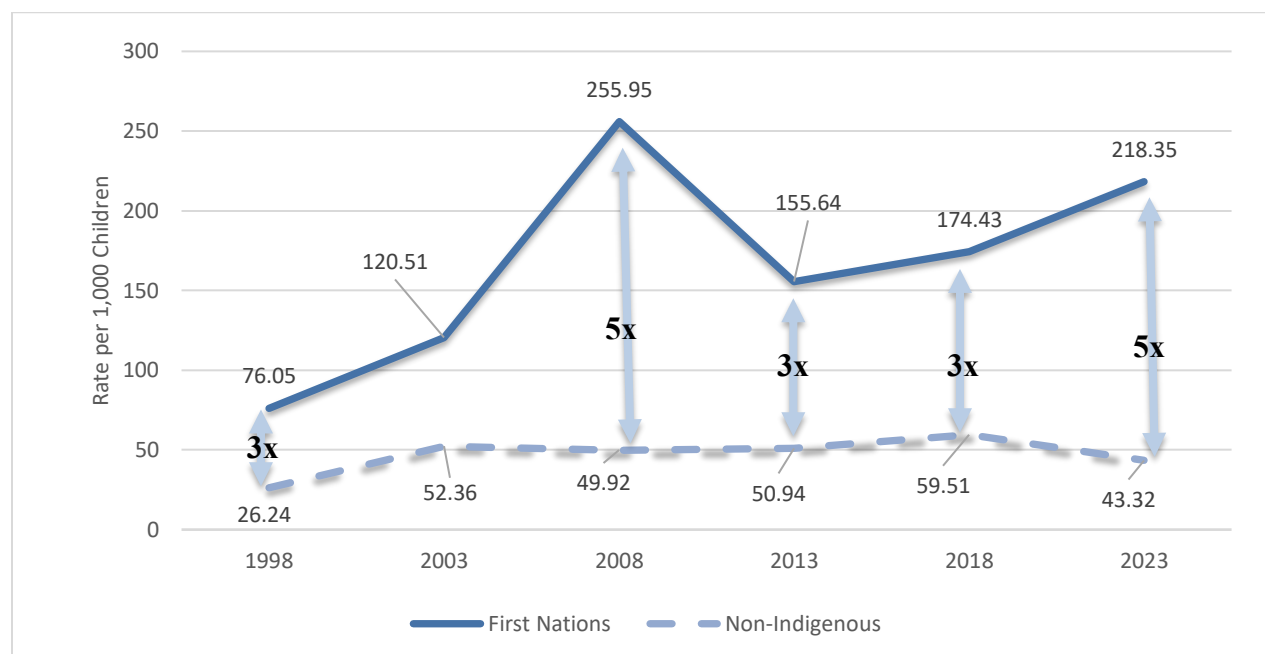


Figure 2 compares the difference in rates of investigations, transfers to ongoing services and placements for First Nations children aged 0-15, in Ontario, from 1998 to 2023. In 2008, there was a spike in rates of all forms of child welfare involvement (investigations, transfers to ongoing services, and placements). In 2013, there was a decline in the rate of all forms of child welfare involvement. Nonetheless, in 2023 the rates of investigations and placements increased again. Despite the growing rates of investigations for First Nations children in 2023, transfers to ongoing services have remained relatively consistent. Placements of First Nations children peaked in 2008 at 32.6 per 1,000 children. By 2013, the rate had fallen to less than half, continued to decline in

2018, and then rose again in 2023 to 17.51 per 1,000 children, although still 1.8x lower than the 2008 peak.

Figure 2. Rates of Investigations, Transfers to Ongoing Services, and Placements for First Nations Children (<16 Years) in Ontario, 1998-2023

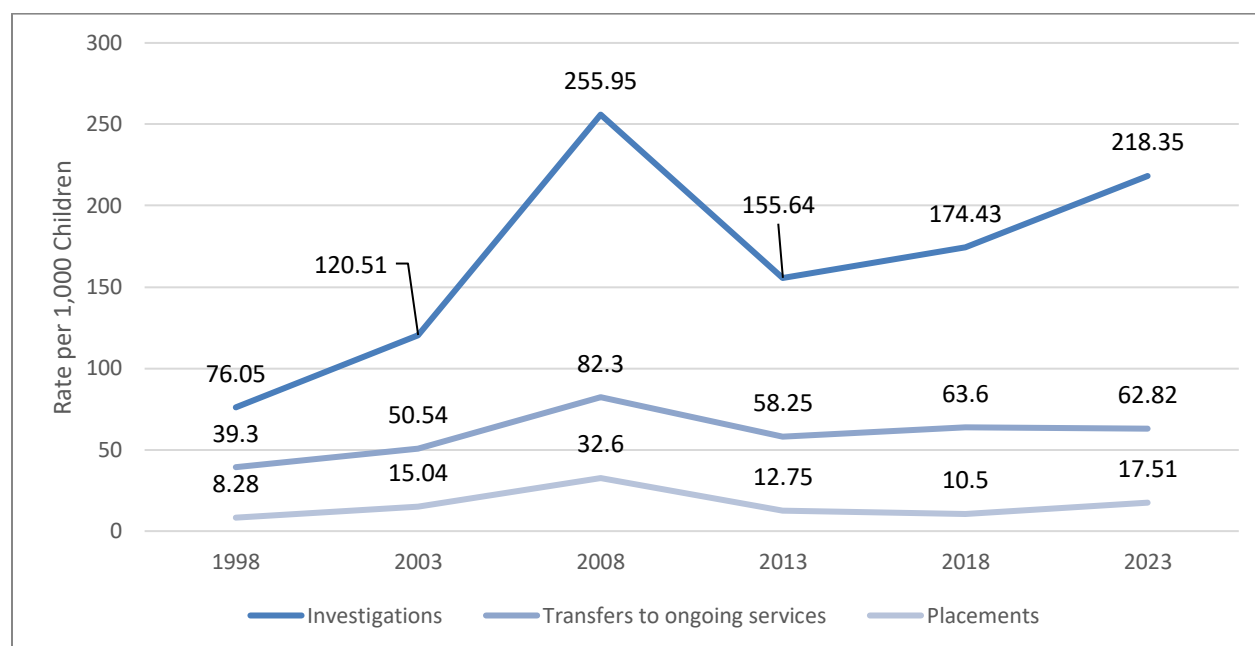
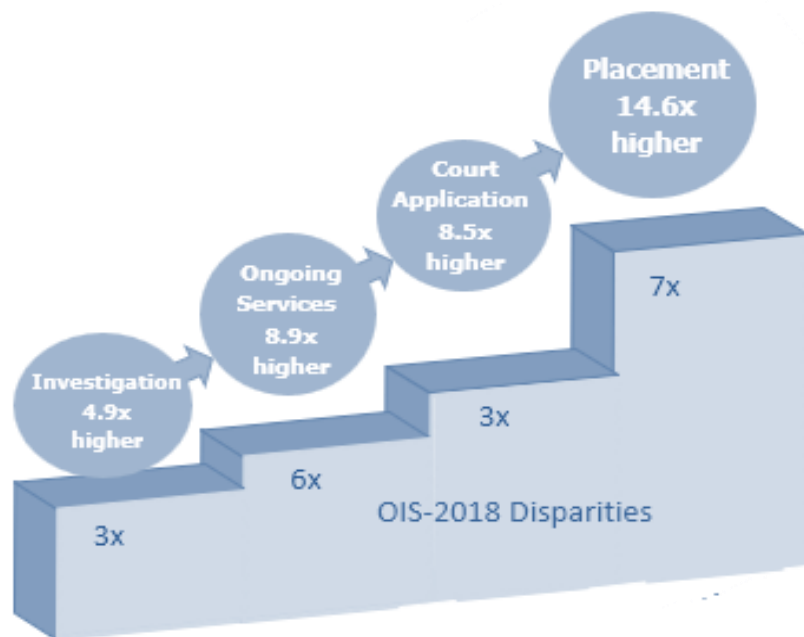


Figure 3 highlights differences in key disparities for First Nations children aged 0-17 in Ontario in 2018 and 2023⁴. Overall, in 2023, First Nations children experienced investigation rates that were 4.9x higher than those of non-Indigenous children. Since 2018, these disparities have widened. Ongoing service rates increased from 6x higher in 2018 to 8.9x higher in 2023. Court application rates rose from 3x to 8.5x higher over the same period. Placement rates demonstrated the most substantial growth, increasing from 7x higher in 2018 to 14.6x higher in 2023.

⁴ In 2018, Ontario implemented legislative changes that extended the age of protection from 16 to 18. Because of this shift, data for youth aged 16–17 were not collected in earlier OIS cycles and can only be compared beginning with the 2018 cycle onward.

Figure 3. Rate of Investigations for First Nations Children and Non-Indigenous Children in Ontario (0-17), 2018 and 2023



Methodology

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 weighed 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.

For maltreatment investigations, information was collected regarding the primary form of maltreatment investigated as well as the level of substantiation for that maltreatment.

Thirty-three forms of maltreatment were listed on the data collection instrument, and these were collapsed into five broad categories: physical abuse (e.g., hit with hand), sexual abuse (e.g., exploitation), neglect (e.g., educational neglect), emotional maltreatment (e.g., verbal abuse or belittling), and exposure to intimate partner violence (e.g., direct witness to physical violence). Workers listed the primary concerns for the investigation and could also list secondary and tertiary concerns.

Workers were asked to provide information on various other aspects of their investigation, including the characteristics of the household, caregivers, and child subject of the investigation; First Nations status and whether the family was living on or off reserve at the time of the investigation; history of previous child welfare case openings; and short-term child welfare service dispositions (e.g., out of home placement).

Limitations

The OIS collects information directly from child welfare workers at the point when they completed 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 type of information available to them at that point. The OIS does not include information about unreported maltreatment nor about cases that were investigated only by the police. Also, reports that were made to child welfare authorities but were screened out (not opened for investigation) were not included. Similarly, reports on cases currently open at the time of case selection were not included. The study did not track longer-term service events that occurred beyond the initial investigation. For example, this limitation affected the ability to assess placement that occurred following the investigation.

Three limitations of the estimation method used to derive the annual provincial estimates should also be noted. 1) The agency size correction uses service volume as a proxy for agency size; this does not account for potential variations in investigations across agencies. 2) The annualization weight corrects for seasonal fluctuation in the volume of investigations, but it does not correct for seasonal variations in the types of investigations conducted. 3) The annualization weight includes cases that were investigated more than once in the year because of the case being re-opened following a first investigation completed earlier in the same year. Accordingly, the weighted annual estimates represent child maltreatment-related investigations, rather than investigation children.

Most importantly, the study must be understood within the context of limitations of the data. The data collected are based on workers' knowledge at the time of the investigation and their clinical judgement. Workers were asked to indicate caregivers' and children's Indigenous identity, and First Nations status; this was not independently verified and may have undercounted some First Nations children and families.

Suggested Citation:

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