



Primary Investigation Concerns and Investigation Outcomes for Investigations involving First Nations Children On- and Off-reserve in Ontario in 2023

Amber Crowe, Michael Miller, Barbara Fallon, Rachael Lefebvre, Nico Trocmé, Tara Black and Ruby Gaudett
September 2026

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 compares the case characteristics for investigations involving First Nations children living on or off reserve at the time of the investigation.

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

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.

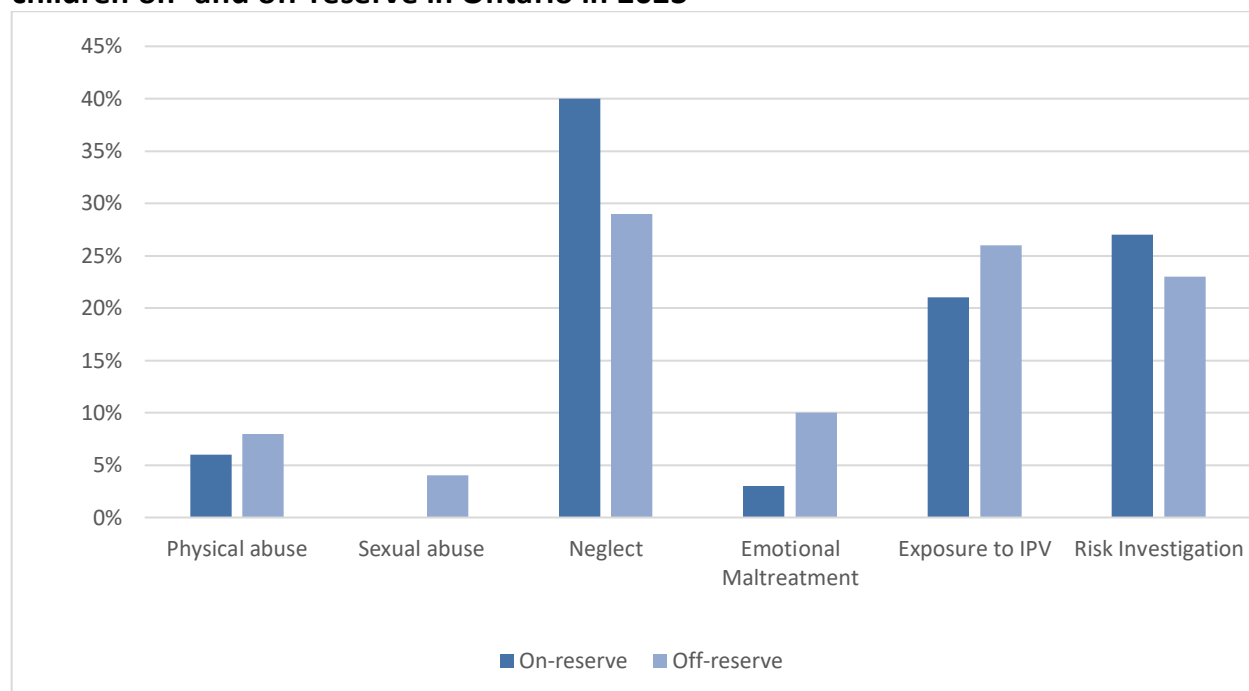
³ A maltreatment-related investigation refers to both maltreatment and risk-only investigations. Risk-only investigations are those in which a specific past incident of maltreatment was not suspected or alleged to have occurred, but rather a constellation of factors lead to concerns that a child may be maltreated in the future (e.g., caregiver with a substance abuse issue)

continue to experience. Further information on the colonial practices that impact First Nations families is available in Chapter 1 of the [FNOIS-2023 report](#).

Findings

In Ontario in 2023, an estimated 125,879 investigations were conducted in response to child maltreatment-related concerns involving children under the age of 18. Of these, an estimated 14,955 investigations involved First Nations children. Figure 1 compares the investigation type for investigations involving First Nations children on- and off-reserve in Ontario in 2023. For both on- and off-reserve investigations, neglect was the most common investigated concern (representing 40% investigations involving a child living on-reserve, and 29% of investigations involving a child living off-reserve). For investigations involving a child living on-reserve, risk investigations were the second most common concern (27% of investigations), followed by exposure to intimate partner violence (21% of investigations). For investigations involving a child living off-reserve, exposure to intimate partner violence was the second most common concern (26% of investigations), followed by risk investigations (23% of investigations).

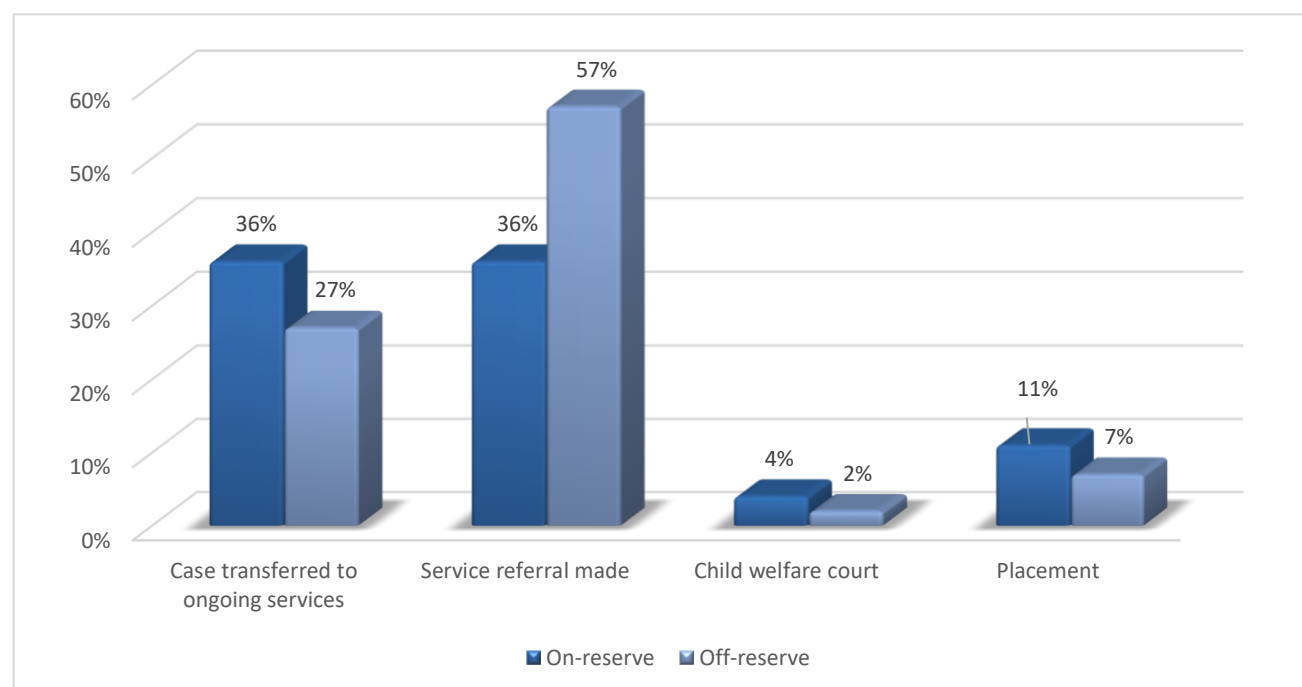
Figure 1: Maltreatment type and risk-only investigations involving First Nations children on- and off-reserve in Ontario in 2023



Based on a sample of 706 maltreatment-related investigations involving a First Nations child aged 0-17 years.

Figure 2 compares the service outcome for investigations involving First Nations children on-reserve and off-reserve. Investigations involving First Nations children on-reserve were more likely than off-reserve investigations to be open for on-going services (36% of investigations involving a child living on-reserve compared to 27% of investigations involving a child living off-reserve), whereas they were less likely to be referred to an external services (36% of on-reserve compared to 57% of off-reserve), a difference that may reflect the relative lack of services in First Nations communities. Investigations involving First Nations children on-reserve were more likely to result in some type of out-of-home placement⁴ (11% of investigations involving a child living on-reserve compared to 7% of investigations involving a child living off-reserve). Child welfare court applications were relatively rare for both on- and off-reserve investigations (4% of on-reserve and 2% for off-reserve).

Figure 2: Service outcomes for investigations involving First Nations children on- and off-reserve in Ontario in 2023



Based on a sample of 706 maltreatment-related investigations involving a First Nations child aged 0-17 years.

⁴ Out-of-home placements include kinship out-of-care, customary care, kinship in-care, foster care and group care.

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: Crowe, A., Miller, M., Fallon, B., Lefebvre, R., Trocmé, N., Black, T. & Gaudett, R. (2026). Primary Investigation Concerns and Investigation Outcomes for Investigations involving First Nations Children On- and Off-reserve in Ontario in 2023. CWRP Information Sheet #262E. Canadian Child Welfare Research Portal: Toronto, ON.