



Caregiver Characteristics for Investigations Involving First Nations Children Residing On- and Off-Reserve in Ontario in 2023

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

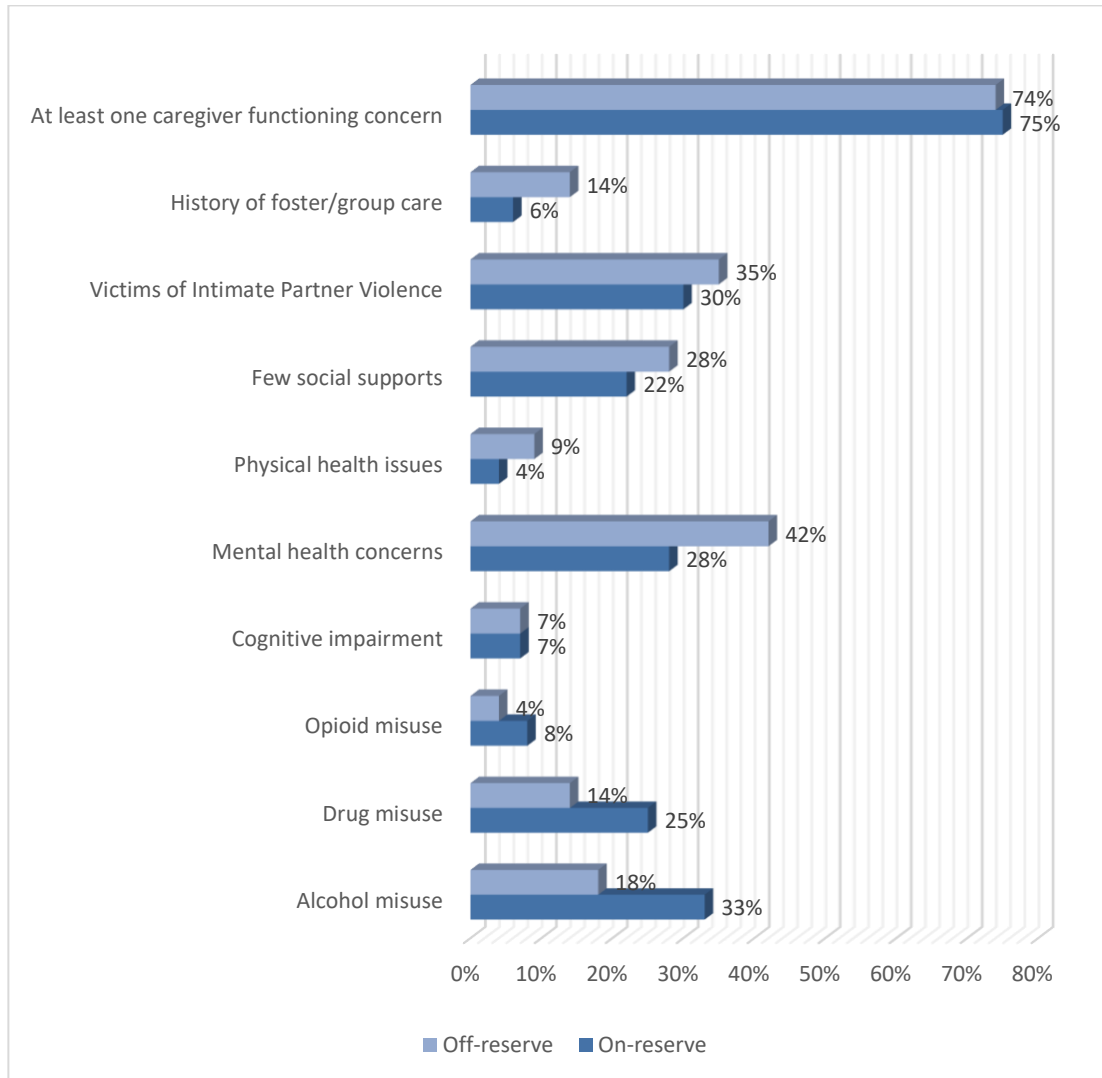
In Ontario in 2023, an estimated 125,879 investigations were conducted in response to child maltreatment-related concerns involving children under the age of 18. Of these, an estimated 14,955 investigations involved First Nations children. Figure 1 compares the primary caregiver concerns that were noted at the time of the investigation for investigations involving a First Nations child, by whether the child lived on- or off-reserve. Investigating workers were asked if in their opinion within the past 6 months primary caregivers had exhibited concerns that were either “confirmed,” “suspected,” “not present” or “unknown.” For the purpose of this information sheet “confirmed,” or “suspected,” concerns are combined as concerns noted by the investigating worker.

In a majority of both on- and off-reserve investigations investigating workers noted at least one caregiving functioning concern, accounting for 74-75% percent of investigations. For on-reserve caregivers, alcohol misuse was the most frequent concern (33% of investigations), followed by caregivers being victims of intimate partner violence (30% of investigations), mental health concerns (28% of investigations), drug misuse (25% of investigations) and few social supports (22% of investigations).

For off-reserve investigations investigating workers were most likely to identify mental health concerns (42% of investigations), followed by caregivers being victims of intimate partner violence (35% of investigations) and few social supports (28% of investigations).

For many of the concerns, there was little difference between the frequency of occurrence for on- and off-reserve investigations. However, mental health concerns were more likely to be noted in off-reserve investigations (42% for off- compared to 28% for on-reserve investigations). Alcohol misuse was more likely to be noted as a concern for on-reserve investigations (33% of on-reserve investigations compared to 18% for off-reserve investigations) as well as drug misuse (25% of on-reserve investigations compared to 14% for off-reserve investigations).

Figure 1: Comparison of Primary Caregiver Concern at Time of Investigation



Based on a sample of 706 maltreatment-related investigations involving a First Nations child aged 0-17 years. Percentages do not add to 100% because investigating workers could indicate multiple caregiver risk factors.

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.

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