

Child Characteristics for Investigations Involving First Nations Children On- and Off-reserve in Ontario in 2023

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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 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

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. Table 1 compares the age distribution of children involved in investigations by reserve status (i.e., on-reserve and off-reserve). On- and off-reserve investigations are similarly distributed across all age groups, with about half of investigated children being 0-7. For both on and off-reserve investigations, relatively few 16 and 17 years old were investigated.

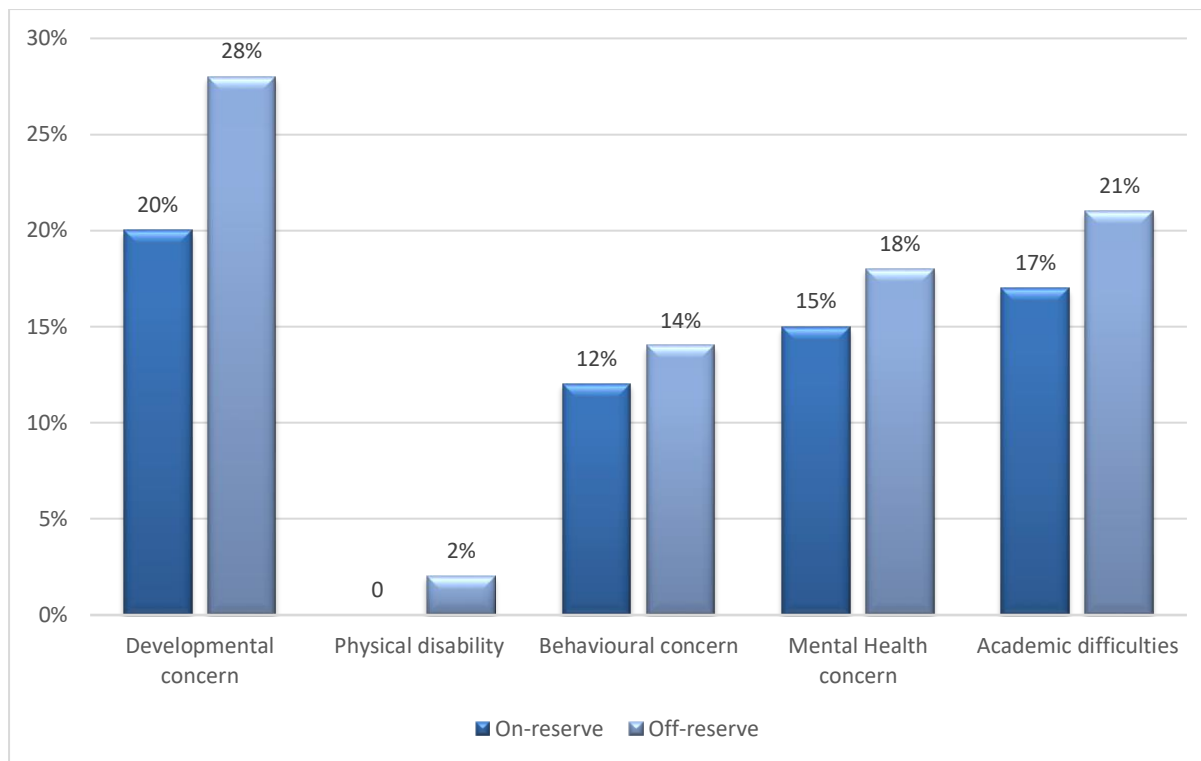
Table 1: Child age by reserve status for child maltreatment investigations in Ontario in 2023

	Reserve Status			
	On-Reserve		Off-Reserve	
Age of Child	#	%	#	%
Under 1 year	224	7%	807	8%
1-3 years old	496	15%	1,720	18%
4-7 years old	822	25%	2,478	25%
8-12 years old	783	24%	2,248	23%
12-15 years old	789	24%	2,100	21%
16-17 years old	142	4%	458	5%

*Based on a sample of 706 maltreatment-related investigations involving a First Nations child aged 0-17 years.
Percentages are column percentages.*

Figure 1 compares the child functioning concerns noted by the investigation worker at the time of investigation. All concerns were more often noted for First Nations children living off-reserve, most notably developmental issues that were noted in 28% of investigations involving off-reserve children compared to 20% on-reserve.

Figure 1: Comparison of child functioning concerns 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.

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). Child 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 four composite categories: (1) developmental child concerns (e.g. failure to meet developmental milestones, intellectual/developmental disabilities, FASD and ADHD) (2) child mental health concerns (e.g. depression/anxiety/withdrawal, self harming behaviour, suicidal thoughts, suicidal attempts, alcohol abuse, drug/solvent abuse); and (3) child behaviour concerns (e.g. aggression/conduct issues, inappropriate sexual behaviour, running from home, involvement with the Youth Criminal Justice Act). Academic difficulties and physical disability were retained as stand-alone categories.

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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