



Caregiver and Household Characteristics for Investigations involving First Nations and Non-Indigenous Children 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 worker-identified primary caregiver and household concerns involving First Nations children and non-indigenous children 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.

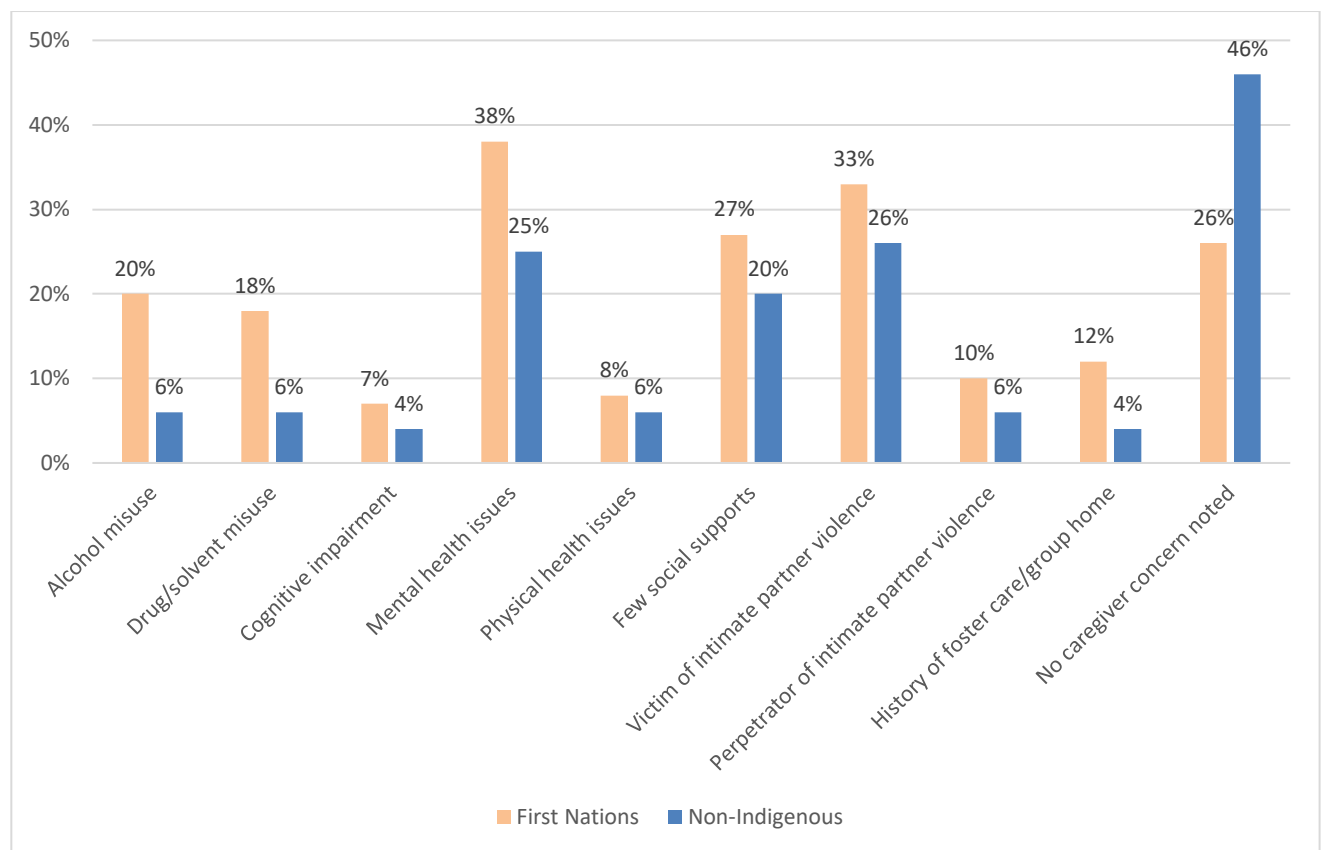
³ A maltreatment-related investigation refers to both maltreatment and risk-only investigations. Risk-only investigations are those in which a specific past incident of maltreatment was not suspected or alleged to have occurred, but rather a constellation of factors lead to concerns that a child may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

Findings

In Ontario in 2023, an estimated 14,292 investigations (a rate of 218.35 per 1,000 children) involved First Nations children under 16 years old. This accounts for 12% of all child maltreatment-related investigations (<16 years) in Ontario in 2023.

Figure 1 compares the primary caregiver concerns identified in child welfare investigations involving First Nations children and non-Indigenous children.

Figure 1: Primary Caregiver Concerns in Investigations Involving First Nations and Non-Indigenous Children (<16 Years) in Ontario in 2023



Based on a sample of 1,183 child maltreatment-related investigations in 2023 involving First Nations children, aged 0–15 years, and 4,797 investigations involving non-Indigenous children, aged 0–15 years, with information about the number of caregivers in the home.

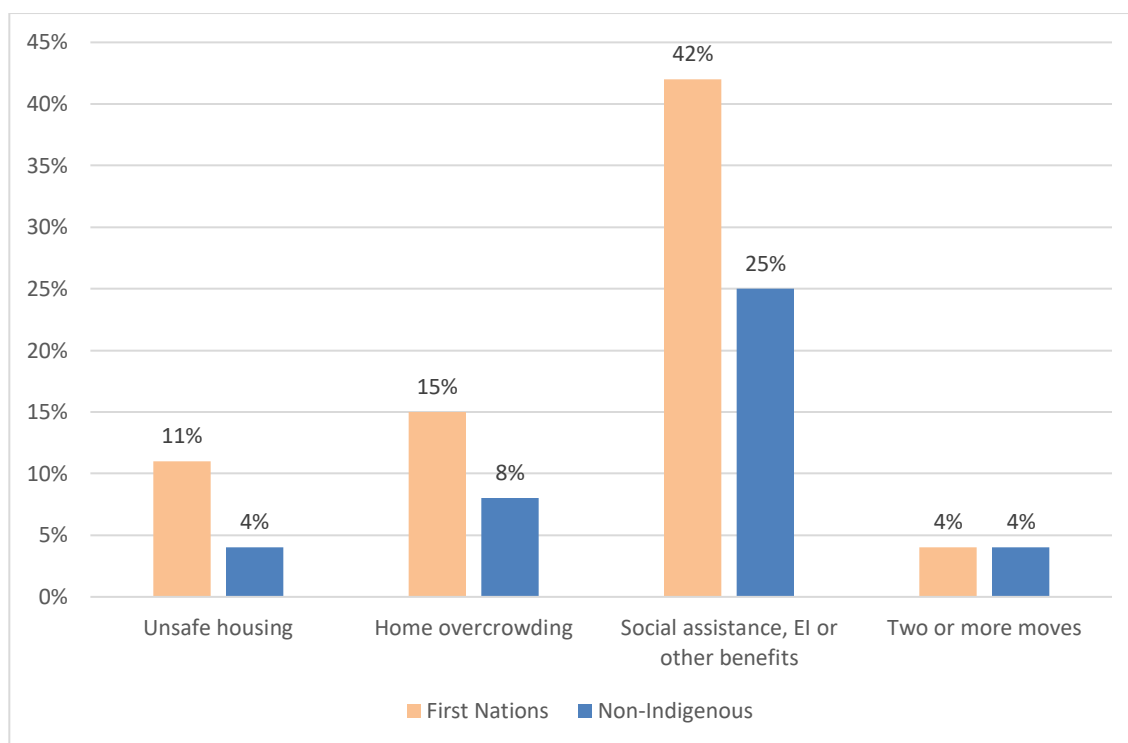
Percentages do not add to 100% because investigating workers could indicate multiple caregiver risk factors.

As shown in Figure 1, several primary caregiver concerns were identified more frequently in investigations involving First Nations children than in investigations involving non-Indigenous children. Mental health issues were the most commonly identified concern among First Nations caregivers (38% compared to 25% for non-Indigenous caregivers), followed by experiences as a

victim of intimate partner violence (33% versus 26%) and having few social supports (27% versus 20%). Alcohol misuse (20% versus 6%) and drug or solvent misuse (18% versus 6%) were also reported more often among First Nations caregivers. Most other caregiver risk factors, including cognitive impairment and physical health issues, were reported at similar rates in both groups. In contrast, investigations involving non-Indigenous children were more likely to report no caregiver concerns (46% compared to 26% for First Nations children). Overall, the findings indicate that investigations involving First Nations children were more likely to identify caregiver, social, and family-related challenges than investigations involving non-Indigenous children.

Figure 2 compares selected household concerns identified during investigations involving First Nations children and non-indigenous children.

Figure 2: Household Characteristics in Investigations Involving First Nations and Non-Indigenous Children (<16 Years) in Ontario in 2023



Based on a sample of 1,183 child maltreatment-related investigations in 2023 involving First Nations children, aged 0–15 years, and 4,797 investigations involving non-Indigenous children, aged 0–15 years. Percentages are column percentages.

As shown in Figure 2, Investigations involving First Nations children were more likely to identify concerns related to housing conditions and reliance on income support programs. Unsafe housing was reported in 11% of investigations involving First Nations

children, compared to 4% of investigations involving non-Indigenous children. Home overcrowding was also reported more frequently among First Nations children (15% versus 8%). Reliance on social assistance, Employment Insurance, or other benefits was the most commonly identified household factor in both groups but was substantially higher among First Nations children (42%) than among non-Indigenous children (25%). The proportion of investigations involving two or more residential moves was similar for both groups (4%). Overall, the findings suggest that investigations involving First Nations children were more likely to identify household circumstances related to housing challenges and reliance on income support programs.

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 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.

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).

Information regarding caregiver characteristics and functioning concerns was collected from investigating workers. Workers were asked to identify whether nine primary caregiver functioning factors were present at the conclusion of the investigation. These included alcohol abuse, drug/solvent abuse, cognitive impairment, mental health concerns, physical health issues, few

social supports, caregiver victimization by intimate partner violence, perpetration of intimate partner violence, and history of foster care/group home placement. Where applicable, the reference period for caregiver concerns was the previous six months. A concern was considered identified when the investigating worker indicated that the concern was confirmed or suspected.

Workers were also asked to identify the primary source of household income as well as a range of concerns related to housing conditions (e.g., unsafe housing, overcrowded housing).

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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