

Substantiated Maltreatment and Harm Among Latin American Children in Ontario in 2023

Henry Parada, Leyco Wilson, Tara Black, Barbara Fallon, Samantha Irwin & Rachael Lefebvre
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Introduction

The Ontario Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect 2023 (OIS-2023)¹ is the seventh provincial study examining the incidence of reported child maltreatment-related investigations² and the characteristics of children and families investigated by child welfare authorities in Ontario. This information sheet examines substantiation decisions and characteristics of substantiated maltreatment investigations involving a Latin American child in Ontario in 2023. Findings are compared with investigations involving a white child in Ontario in 2023.

Findings

An estimated 125,879 maltreatment-related investigations involving children and youth 0–17 years of age were conducted by child welfare authorities in Ontario in 2023. Of these, an estimated 2,814 investigations involved a Latin American child.

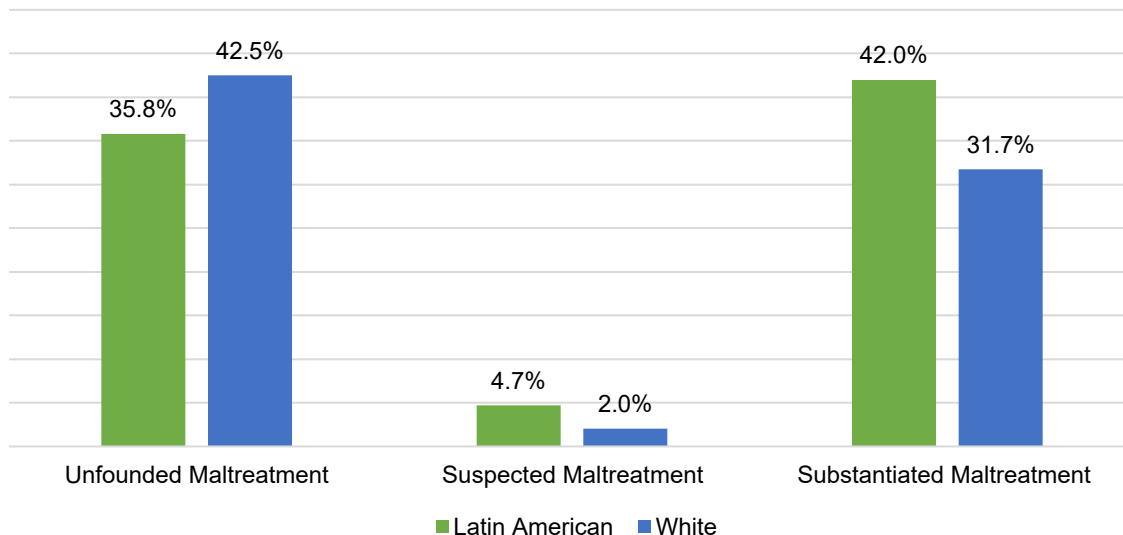
Among maltreatment investigations involving a Latin American child in Ontario in 2023, 42.0% resulted in substantiated maltreatment (an estimated 1,182 investigations; 28.04 per 1,000 children), compared with 31.7% of investigations involving a white child (an estimated 21,638 investigations; 14.26 per 1,000 children). Conversely, 35.8% of investigations involving a Latin American child were determined to be unfounded, compared with 42.5% of investigations involving a white child. A small proportion of investigations involving a Latin American child remained classified as suspected maltreatment (4.7%) compared with white children (2.0%).

¹ Fallon, B., Black, T., Lefebvre, R., Trocmé, N., Hélie, S., Crowe, A., Miller, M., Budau, K., Houston, E., King, B., Esposito, B., Fluke, J., Collin-Vézina, D., Parada, H., Provençal, J., Chhabra, N., Sawh, P., Chan, P., Bonnie, N., ... Wilson, L. (2025). Ontario Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect-2023 (OIS-2023). Toronto, ON: Child Welfare Research Portal.

² 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).

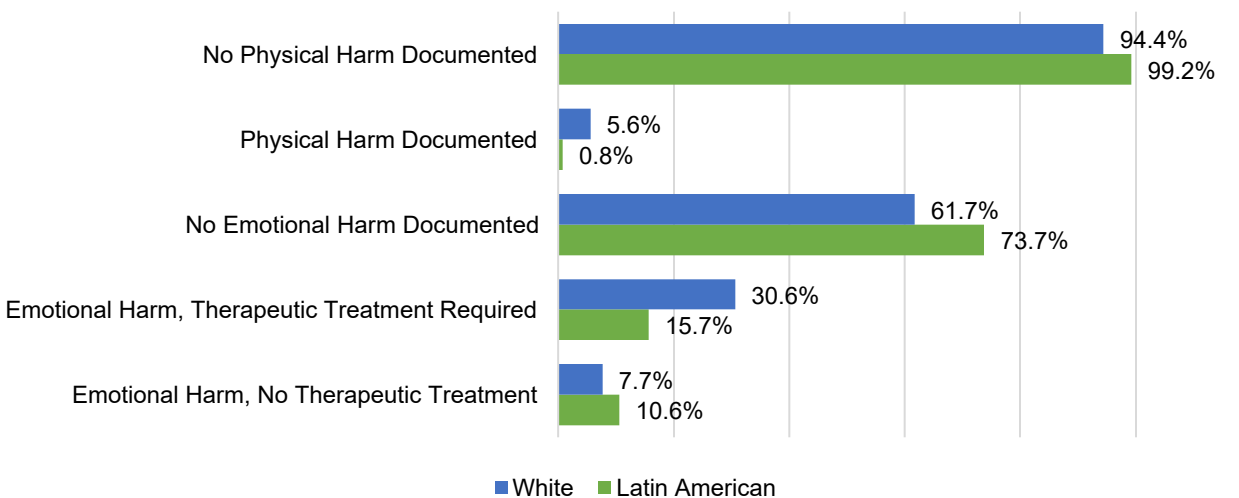
Figure 1 shows substantiation decisions resulting from maltreatment-related investigations involving a Latin American child or white child in Ontario in 2023.

Figure 1. *Substantiation Decisions in Child Maltreatment-Related Investigations Involving Latin American and White Children in 2023.*



Documented physical and emotional harm among substantiated maltreatment investigations involving a Latin American child or white child are presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2. *Physical and Emotional Harm Among Substantiated Maltreatment Investigations Involving Latin American and White Children in Ontario in 2023*



Emotional harm was documented in 26.3% of substantiated maltreatment investigations involving a Latin American child, compared with 38.3% of substantiated investigations involving a white child. Therapeutic treatment was required in 15.7% of substantiated investigations involving a Latin American child and 30.6% of substantiated investigations involving a white child. Physical harm was identified less frequently for investigations involving a Latin American child,

documented in 0.8% of substantiated maltreatment investigations, compared with 5.6% of substantiated maltreatment investigations involving a white child.

Although substantiated maltreatment investigations involving a Latin American child represented a larger proportion of investigations compared to those involving a white child, documented emotional and physical harm were less frequently identified during these substantiated investigations involving a Latin American child compared with substantiated investigations involving a white child.

Methodology

The 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. Based on the OIS-2023 weighted estimates, there were an estimated 2,814 maltreatment-related investigations involving a Latin American child and 68,322 investigations involving a white child in Ontario in 2023. Population-based rates were calculated by dividing the estimated number of investigations involving a Latin American child or white child by the corresponding child population in Ontario and multiplying by 1,000.

Maltreatment investigations were classified into three categories: substantiated, suspected, and unfounded. These classifications represent investigation outcomes and do not indicate whether a report was appropriate or whether concerns raised at referral were unfounded. Investigating workers identified the outcome of each investigation based on the balance of evidence available at the conclusion of the investigation.

For substantiated maltreatment investigations, workers provided additional information regarding characteristics of the investigation, including documented harm. Information regarding emotional harm was collected by asking investigating workers whether the child demonstrated signs of emotional or mental harm following the maltreatment incident(s). Where emotional harm was identified, workers indicated whether therapeutic treatment was required to manage symptoms. Physical harm was identified based on worker assessment of whether physical harm occurred during the maltreatment incident(s).

Limitations

The OIS-2023 captures information available to investigating child welfare workers at the completion of the initial investigation. As a result, the study does not include incidents of maltreatment that were not reported to child welfare authorities, reports that were screened out before an investigation was opened, new reports on cases already open to child welfare services, or cases investigated exclusively by police. The OIS-2023 also does not capture longer-term child welfare service outcomes beyond the initial investigation period.

Substantiation decisions reflect the professional judgement of investigating workers based on the available evidence, records, observations, and information disclosed during the investigation. Differences in substantiation outcomes between groups may reflect differences in reporting patterns, types of concerns investigated, available information, investigation processes, and access to supports.

Measures of documented harm reflect information identified during substantiated maltreatment investigations and should not be interpreted as representing the overall prevalence of emotional harm, or physical harm among Latin American or white children. Documentation of emotional and physical harm may be influenced by differences in disclosure, access to services, recognition of harm, and investigation practices.

The emotional harm measure captures signs of harm identified by investigating workers following the maltreatment incident(s), including symptoms such as nightmares, bed-wetting, or social withdrawal. It does not represent a clinical assessment or diagnosis of emotional or psychological impact. Similarly, physical harm reflects worker documentation of physical harm during the investigation period and does not capture all potential impacts of maltreatment.

Because provincial estimates are derived using sampling and weighting procedures, findings should be interpreted as provincial estimates rather than exact counts. The estimates presented for Latin American children are based on a relatively small sample of investigations and may not reflect regional variation across Ontario. Three other limitations of the estimation procedures should also be noted. The agency size correction uses service volume as a proxy for agency size and does not account for variation in investigations across agencies. The annualization weight corrects for seasonal fluctuations in investigation volume but not seasonal variation in investigation type. Finally, because annual estimates include investigations involving children whose cases may have been reopened within the same year, the weighted estimates represent investigations rather than individual children.

Comparisons across OIS reports must be made with caution. The forms of maltreatment tracked by each cycle were modified to consider changes in investigation mandates and practices. Comparisons across cycles must, in particular, take into consideration the fact that the OIS-2008 was the first to explicitly track risk-only investigations. Age groupings have also varied across OIS cycles and should be considered when interpreting comparisons over time, as estimates may reflect differences in the age composition of the samples included in each report.

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