



# Child Protection Investigations Involving Adolescents in Ontario

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## Introduction

The Ontario Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect, 2013 (OIS-2013)<sup>1</sup> is the fifth provincial study to examine the incidence of reported child maltreatment and the characteristics of children and families investigated by child welfare authorities in Ontario. This Information Sheet profiles the unique characteristics of adolescents investigated by the child protection system in Ontario and document the services provided following the initial investigation. Child protection agencies in Ontario are mandated to investigate allegations of child abuse and neglect, providing these services to children from birth up to age 15. Children and youth experience unique and diverse forms of maltreatment depending on factors such as their age and developmental functioning.

## Findings<sup>2</sup>

Of the total 29,928 investigations involving youth age 12 to 15, 22,785 investigations (79%) focused on an allegation of maltreatment, whereas 6,143 investigations focused on the risk of abuse or neglect occurring in the future (21%). Almost half (46%) of maltreatment investigations were substantiated, whereas only a small proportion (16%) of risk investigations resulted in the worker determining the youth was at confirmed risk of future abuse or neglect (see Table 1).

Table 1

*Investigations involving youth age 12 to 15 in Ontario in 2013*

	Maltreatment Investigations		Risk Investigations	
	#	%	#	%
Unfounded/no risk	11,024	48	4,617	75
Suspected/unknown risk	1,352	6	533	9
Substantiated/confirmed risk	10,410	46	993	16
Total	22,785	100	6,143	100

<sup>1</sup> Fallon, B., Van Wert, M., Trocmé, N., MacLaurin, B., Sinha, V., Lefebvre, R., et al. (2015). *Ontario Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect-2013 (OIS-2013)*. Toronto, ON: Child Welfare Research Portal.

<sup>2</sup> Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding. Estimates may not add up to totals due to missing data. Estimates under 100 are not reported because they are unreliable (as indicated by a dash).

When examining the estimated 10,410 substantiated maltreatment investigations involving youth age 12 to 15, exposure to intimate partner violence is the most common form of maltreatment followed by neglect. Sexual abuse was the primary form of maltreatment in 3% of substantiated investigations involving adolescents, whereas physical abuse accounted for 16% of such investigations (see Table 2).

Table 2  
*Primary substantiated maltreatment type in investigations involving youth age 12 to 15 in Ontario in 2013*

Age	Physical Abuse		Sexual Abuse		Neglect		Emotional Maltreatment		Exposure to IPV		Total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
12	352	14	-	-	678	28	364	15	1,006	41	2,443	100
13	511	18	-	-	592	21	335	12	1,325	47	2,803	100
14	472	21	128	6	513	23	261	12	858	38	2,232	100
15	377	13	130	4	939	32	486	17	999	34	2,931	100
Total	1,712	16%	341	3%	2,722	26%	1,446	14%	4,188	40%	10,410	100

Workers who participated in the OIS-2013 documented whether the young person displayed signs of mental/emotional or physical harm as a result of maltreatment. Mental/emotional harm was noted by workers in a large proportion of substantiated maltreatment investigations involving adolescents, including over half of young people age 14 and 15. Physical harm was noted in approximately 7% of substantiated investigations involving 12 to 15 year olds (see Table 3).

Table 3  
*Harm in substantiated maltreatment investigations involving youth age 12 to 15 in Ontario in 2013*

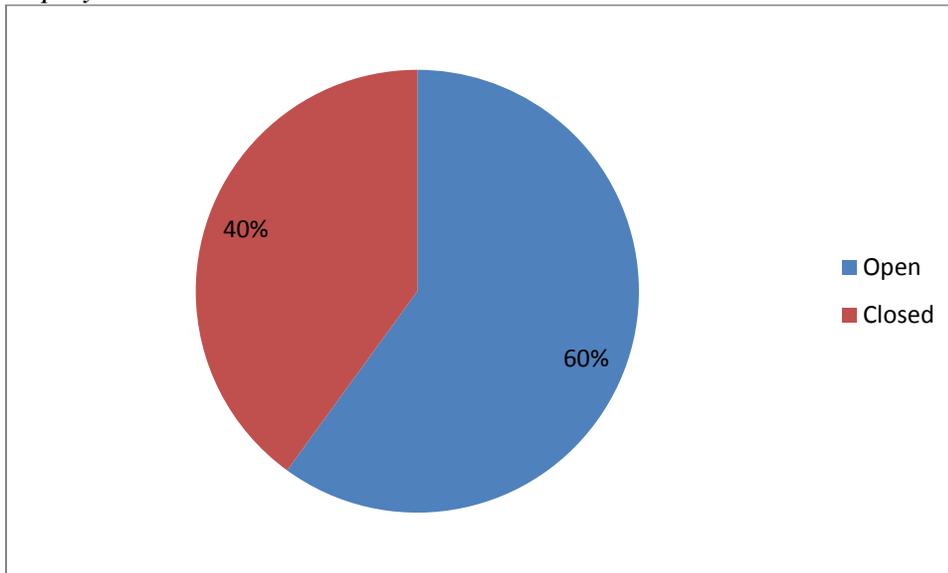
Age	Mental/emotional harm		Physical harm		Total Substantiated
	#	%	#	%	#
12	956	39	192	8	2,443
13	1,387	50	213	8	2,804
14	1,245	56	-	-	2,231
15	1,496	51	254	9	2,931
Total	5,084	49	743	7	10,410

Following substantiation, child welfare workers may decide to open the case for further ongoing child welfare service or instead close the case. Workers may also offer referrals to a child or family for other services, such as counselling or social assistance. Table 4 presents the proportion of substantiated cases that were open and closed. Over half of substantiated investigations involving adolescents were closed. When examining only substantiated maltreatment investigations in which the young person displayed signs of mental/emotional harm, a slightly higher proportion of cases were opened to ongoing services (60%). However, 40% of

substantiated maltreatment investigations involving an adolescent who had been mentally/emotionally harmed were closed and did not receive ongoing child welfare service (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

*Case transfer in substantiated maltreatment investigations involving youth age 12 to 15 who display mental/emotional harm in Ontario in 2013*



Almost one quarter of substantiated investigations were closed without the provision of any referrals to services (an estimated 2,426 investigations or 23% of substantiated investigations involving adolescents). When the case was closed but a referral to service *was* provided to a youth or family following the initial substantiated investigation, the most common referral was to family or parent counselling (53% of substantiated investigations involving an adolescent that were closed), domestic violence services (26% of substantiated investigations involving an adolescent that were closed), and psychiatric or psychological services (23% of substantiated investigations involving an adolescent that were closed) (not pictured in Table or Figure).

Table 4

*Case transfer in substantiated maltreatment investigations involving youth age 12 to 15 in Ontario in 2013*

Age	Case opened		Case closed		Total Substantiated	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
12	965	40%	1,454	60%	2,443	100
13	1,204	43%	1,600	57%	2,804	100
14	1,072	48%	1,159	52%	2,231	100
15	1,358	46%	1,433	49%	2,931	100
Total	4,599	44%	5,646	54%	10,410	100

The results are similar in risk of future maltreatment investigations. Over half of investigations in which the worker confirmed the child was at risk of future maltreatment were closed (see Table 5).

Almost one third of confirmed risk investigations were closed without a referral to other services. Among confirmed risk investigations that were closed but were provided a referral, the most common referral was to family or parent counselling (47% of confirmed risk investigations involving an adolescent that were closed), in-home family or parent counselling (28% of confirmed risk investigations involving an adolescent that were closed), parent support group (20% of confirmed risk investigations involving an adolescent that were closed), and psychiatric or psychological services (16% of confirmed risk investigations involving an adolescent that were closed) (not pictured in Table or Figure).

Table 5

*Case transfer in confirmed risk investigations involving youth age 12 to 15 in Ontario in 2013*

Age	Case opened		Case closed		Total Confirmed	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
12	110	36	197	64	307	100
13	172	61	109	39	281	100
14	105	52	-	-	201	100
15	-	-	125	62	202	100
Total	465	47	528	53	993	100

The OIS-2013 tracked whether a placement occurred at the end of the initial investigation and the types of care arrangements that were established for children and youth requiring out-of-home care. An estimated 1,281 youth age 12 to 15 were placed in Ontario in 2013. Older youth were more likely to enter care. While 7% of youth age 12 were placed in out-of-home care (an estimated 197 investigations), almost one in five youth age 15 entered an out-of-home placement following the initial investigation (an estimated 602 investigations) (see Table 6).

Table 6

*Placement in substantiated maltreatment and confirmed risk of future maltreatment investigations involving youth age 12 to 15 in Ontario in 2013*

Age	Placement		No Placement		Placement Considered		Total Substantiated/ Confirmed	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
12	197	7%	2504	91%	-	-	2751	100%
13	258	8%	2646	86%	183	6%	3087	100%
14	224	9%	2091	86%	117	5%	2432	100%
15	602	19%	2465	79%	-	-	3133	100%
Total	1,281	11%	9,706	85%	416	4%	11,403	100%

Table 7 displays the types of placements provided to youth entering out-of-home care following the initial investigation. The majority of children age 12 and 13 were placed in informal kinship care (68% and 65% respectively), whereas under one third of 14 and 15 year olds were placed informally. Group home/residential treatment placements, however, were more common among older youth age 14 and 15.

Table 7

*Placement type in substantiated maltreatment and confirmed risk of future maltreatment investigations that resulted in out-of-home care for youth age 12 to 15 in Ontario in 2013*

Age	Informal kinship		Foster care/formal kinship		Group home/residential		Total Placements	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
12	134	68%	-	-	-	-	197	100%
13	168	65%	-	-	-	-	258	100%
14	-	-	-	-	-	-	224	100%
15	167	28%	268	45%	166	28%	601	100%
Total	540	42%	465	36%	275	21%	1,281	100%

## Summary

Adolescents are a unique age group served by the child welfare system in Ontario. This information sheet provides a description of the characteristics of maltreatment and the short-term service outcomes for this group. The findings indicate that:

- Exposure to intimate partner violence and neglect are the two most common forms of substantiated maltreatment for adolescents
- Approximately half of teens who are maltreated display signs of mental/emotional harm
- Under half of substantiated maltreatment/confirmed risk investigations involving adolescents were opened for ongoing child welfare service
- Even when signs of mental/emotional harm are present, a large proportion of investigations (40%) involving teens are closed following the initial investigation
- Placement is most common among 15-year-olds, the oldest age group served
- Younger adolescents are more likely to enter informal types of placements whereas older teens are more likely to enter group homes/residential treatment facilities

## Background

Due to changes in investigation mandates and practices over the last 15 years, the OIS-2008 and OIS-2013 differed from previous cycles in that they tracked both risk-only investigations and maltreatment investigations. Risk-only investigations were 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).

## **Methodology**

The OIS-2013 used a multi-stage sampling design to select a representative sample of 17 child welfare agencies in Ontario and then to select a sample of cases within these agencies. Information was collected directly from child protection workers on a representative sample of 5,265 child protection investigations conducted during a three-month sampling period in 2013. 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 Ontario in 2013 was 125,281.

Workers were asked to provide information about the maltreatment-related allegations and the characteristics of the investigated child and family. Workers also provided information on several short-term investigation outcomes including referrals to specialized services, ongoing child welfare services, and placement in out-of-home care.

Maltreatment investigations and risk of future maltreatment investigations were tracked separately. For maltreatment investigations, information was collected regarding the primary form of maltreatment investigated as well as the level of substantiation for that maltreatment (substantiated, suspected, or unfounded). Thirty-two 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 (IPV) (e.g., direct witness to physical violence). Workers listed the primary concern for the investigation, and could also list secondary and tertiary concerns. For each risk investigation, workers determined whether the child was at risk of future maltreatment. The worker could decide that the child was at risk of future maltreatment (confirmed risk), that the child was not at risk of future maltreatment (unfounded risk), or that the future risk of maltreatment was unknown.

The present analysis focused only on the 1,205 investigations included in the OIS that involved young people age 12 to 15. When weights are applied to these investigations, an estimated 28,928 maltreatment-related investigations involving youth age 12 to 15 were conducted in Ontario in 2013.

## **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.

Three limitations to estimation method used to derive annual estimates should also be noted. The agency size correction uses child population as a proxy for agency size; this does not account for variations in per capita investigation rates across agencies in the same strata. The annualization weight corrects for seasonal fluctuation in the volume of investigations, but it does not correct for seasonal variations in types of investigations conducted. Finally, the annualization weight includes cases that were investigated more than once in the year as a result of the case being re-opened following a first investigation completed earlier in the same year. Accordingly, the weighted annual estimates represent the child maltreatment-related investigations, rather than investigated children.

Comparisons across OIS reports must be made with caution. The forms of maltreatment tracked by each cycle were modified to take into account 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.

**Suggested Citation:** Fallon, B., & Van Wert, M. (2017). Child Protection Investigations Involving Adolescents in Ontario. CWRP Information Sheet 184E. Toronto, ON: Canadian Child Welfare Research Portal.