



A Further Look at Food Insecurity among Ontario's Child Welfare Involved Population

Barbara Fallon and Melissa Van Wert

Introduction

The Ontario Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect, 2013 (OIS-2013)¹ 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 builds on Lefebvre and Fallon (2016) and further examines food insecurity among the children, youth and families who are investigated by child welfare authorities.

Poverty is associated with child maltreatment and involvement in the child welfare system. Families living in poverty may experience food insecurity along with other socioeconomic hardships such as poor housing conditions and unemployment. In the OIS-2013, workers were asked to identify whether the household had run out of money for food in the last six months. This variable can act as a proxy indicator for food insecurity and allows us to examine this issue within a representative sample of child welfare investigations.

Findings²

An estimated 7,640 (approximately 6%) investigations in Ontario in 2013 noted that the child was living in a household struggling with food insecurity, defined as running out of money for food in the past six months. In 99,029 investigations (80%), the household had not run out of money for food in the past six months, and the food security status was unknown in an additional 13% of investigations (an estimated 16,494).

Table 1 displays food insecurity status by the substantiation and risk confirmation status in the investigation. Maltreatment investigations that noted food insecurity were more commonly substantiated compared to investigations that noted the family had not run out of money for food in the past six months. While 66% of maltreatment investigations that noted food insecurity were substantiated, approximately 43% of maltreatment investigations that did not note food

¹ 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.

² 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).

insecurity were substantiated. When the worker did not know the food insecurity status of the family, approximately 41% of maltreatment investigations were substantiated.

When examining risk investigations, those that noted food insecurity were also more likely to note that the child was at risk of maltreatment in the future (486 investigations, 28%) or that the risk to the child in the future was unknown (476 investigations, 28%). Similar findings appeared when examining investigations in which the food security status was unknown. However, in only 17% (3,581 investigations) of investigations that noted the family had *not* run out of money for food, the worker indicated the child was at risk for future maltreatment.

Table 1
Food insecurity and substantiation/risk confirmation status in child welfare investigations in Ontario in 2013

		Household Ran Out of Money for Food		Household Did Not Run Out of Money for Food		Worker Did Not Know if Household Ran Out	
		n=7,640 (6%)		n=99,029 (80%)		n=16,494 (13%)	
		#	%	#	%	#	%
Maltreatment Investigations							
	Unfounded	1,238	21	40,077	52	6,155	50
	Suspected	788	13	3,973	5	1,141	9
	Substantiated	3,882	66	33,516	43	5,062	41
Sub-total maltreatment		5,908	100	77,566	100	12,358	100
Risk Investigations							
	No future risk	770	45	16,189	75	2,272	55
	Unknown risk	476	28	1,694	8	841	20
	Confirmed risk	486	28	3,581	17	1,022	25
Sub-total risk		1,732	100	21,464	100	4,135	100

The OIS-2013 captured detailed information about referrals to specialized services, including whether the worker referred the family to a food bank. As shown in Table 2, households that ran out of money for food were more likely to receive a referral to a food bank, and more likely to receive a referral to another specialized service provider (e.g., child or family counselling). No referral was made in only 28% of investigations in which food insecurity was noted.

Families living with food insecurity may benefit from a referral to a food bank or other services. While under one-third of families living with food insecurity received a referral to a food bank, it is possible that the family was already well connected with the food bank or other resources, or that appropriate food banks were not accessible in the jurisdiction in which the family lived.

Table 2³*Referrals by food insecurity status in Ontario in 2013*

	Household Ran Out of Money for Food		Household Did Not Run Out of Money for Food		Worker Did Not Know if Household Ran Out	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
	n=7,640 (6%)		n=99,029 (80%)		n=16,494 (13%)	
Referral to a food bank	2,379	31	850	<1	261	2
Referral to another specialized service	4,957	65	42,528	43	6,556	40
No referral made	2,147	28	56,213	57	9,866	60

Table 3 displays the case dispositions for investigations by the food insecurity status. Importantly, very few placements were noted across all investigations, and therefore results should be interpreted with caution due to small sample sizes.

As shown in Table 3, approximately 58% of all maltreatment-related investigations (4,409 investigations) that noted food insecurity were opened for ongoing child welfare services, and one in ten resulted in placement for the child (772 investigations). The proportion of investigations that resulted in ongoing services and placements was lower when food insecurity was not noted or the status was unknown.

Table 3

Case dispositions in investigations by food insecurity status in Ontario in 2013

	Household Ran Out of Money for Food		Household Did Not Run Out of Money for Food		Worker Did Not Know if Household Ran Out	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
	n=7,640 (6%)		n=99,029 (80%)		n=16,494 (13%)	
Case opened	4,409	58	21,836	22	4,591	28
Case closed	3,230	42	77,193	78	11,903	72
Placement	772	10	2,695	3	719	4
No placement	6,631	87	95,733	97	15,508	94
Placement considered	236	3	601	<1	267	2

³ Workers could endorse multiple referral categories and therefore totals do not equal 100%.

Table 4 displays similar information about case dispositions **using a different proxy measure for food insecurity: referral to a food bank**. Approximately half of all maltreatment-related investigations that had a referral to a food bank were transferred to ongoing services (1,700 investigations, 49%), and very few resulted in placement (135 investigations, under 1%). This is comparable to the findings for investigations that had a referral to another specialized service. When no referral was made for a family, it was highly unlikely that the case would be opened or a placement would occur. Approximately 11% of investigations (7,489 investigations) with no referral were opened for ongoing services, while 3% (1,721 investigations) resulted in placement.

Table 4

Case dispositions in investigations by food bank referral in Ontario in 2013

	Food Bank Referral		Referral to Other Service (Not a Food Bank)		No Referral Made	
	n= 3,489		n=54,042		n=68,226	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Case opened	1,700	49	23,261	43	7,489	11
Case closed	1,789	51	30,781	57	60,737	89
Placement	135	<1	2,466	5	1,721	3
No placement	3,341	96	50,738	94	66,239	97
Placement considered	--	<1	838	2	266	<1

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. The information collected included various indicators of socioeconomic hardship, such as social assistance receipt and insufficient income to meet basic needs. A proxy measure for food insecurity was used that asked whether the family had run out of money for food in the past six months. 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 included all maltreatment-related investigations (i.e., maltreatment and risk investigations, all substantiation levels) involving children age zero to 15 (n=5,265). When weights were applied to the sample of 5,265 investigations, there were an estimated 125,281 maltreatment-related investigations involving children age zero to 15 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.

References

Lefebvre, R., & Fallon, B. (2016). Household Food Insecurity and Food Bank Referrals in Ontario in 2013. CWRP Information Sheet #180E. Toronto, ON: Canadian Child Welfare Research Portal.

Suggested Citation: Fallon, B., & Van Wert, M. (2017). A Further Look at Food Insecurity among Ontario's Child Welfare Involved Population. CWRP Information Sheet 186E. Toronto, ON: Canadian Child Welfare Research Portal.