



Alberta's Child Welfare System

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This CWRP Information Sheet provides an overview of the child welfare service delivery system in Alberta. The summary is based on the authors' synthesis of information collected from publicly available documents. The summary presented in this information sheet were prepared by the authors with funding from a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Partnership Grant and a gift from the Royal Bank of Canada foundation to support the McGill Centre for Research on Children and Families' Children's Services Research and Training Program.

Background

In Alberta, the Ministry of Human Services oversees the delivery of child intervention services provided by 8 regional Child and Family Service Authorities (CFSAs), one of which is a Métis Authority, under the [Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act](#) (CYFEA). 17 Delegated First Nations Authorities (DFNAs) also provide services under CYFEA through agreements between the First Nations, the Government of Canada and the Government of Alberta. The *Child and Family Services Authorities Act* (2000), regulated in 2004, was the result of a series of policy initiatives designed to increase services to families before they reach crisis, establish permanent homes more quickly for children in government care and strengthen the involvement of First Nation, Métis and other Aboriginal communities in planning for their children. A key feature of the reform was the implementation of the Alberta Response Model (ARM), a differential response system with two legislated streams of activity: family enhancement services and protection services. A 2010 review of these policy initiatives by the Alberta Child Intervention Review Panel confirmed the principles and vision of the ARM, but found the current system lacked accountability and quality assurance mechanisms. The final report of the review panel, titled, "Closing the Gap Between Vision and Reality" further noted that confusion arose from the hybrid partially decentralized governance model. In response, the Ministry established a Quality Council, reorganized the CFSAs as regional offices that report to the Ministry and enhanced the role and independence of the Child Advocate (Alberta Child Intervention Review Panel, 2010).

The responsibility for funding services to First Nations children and families living on reserve rests with the federal government under the *Indian Act*. Child intervention services are provided through agreements between the Government of Alberta, Government of Canada and incorporated societies representing the on reserve delivery agency. In Alberta, DFNAs are directed by non-profit Boards of Governors/Directors and receive support from the Ministry. The Alberta Child and Youth Advocate Annual Report (2012-13) found that Aboriginal children

represented the majority (72%) of children in permanent care with rates steadily rising since 2001, while rates of permanent care for non-Aboriginal children have been decreasing.

Child in need of protection

Under the *Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act* (Sections 2 and 3) children and youth up to the age of 18 are in need of intervention if there are reasonable and probable grounds to believe that their survival, security or development is endangered because of any of the following:

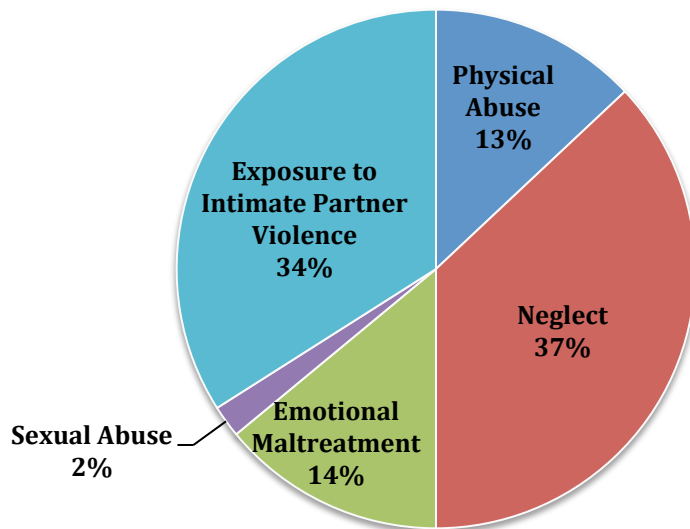
- The child has been abandoned;
- The child has been neglected of basic necessities; adequate care or supervision, or essential medical, surgical or other remedial treatment necessary for the child's well-being;
- The child has been or there is substantial risk that the child will be physically injured or sexually abused;
- The child has been emotionally injured given impairment of the child's mental or emotional function or development; and there are reasonable and probable grounds to believe that emotional injury is the result of: rejection, deprivation of affection or cognitive stimulation, exposure to domestic violence or severe disharmony, inappropriate criticism, threats, humiliation accusations or expectations toward the child, the mental or emotional condition of the guardian or anyone living in the same residence, chronic alcohol or drug abuse by the guardian or anyone living in the same residence;
- The guardian of the child is unable or unwilling to protect the child from: physical injury or sexual abuse, emotional injury, or cruel and unusual treatment or punishment.

In addition to the *Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act*, Alberta has several laws aiming to support families and communities in providing safe and nurturing environments for children, these include: the [*Protection of Sexually Exploited Children Act*](#) (2000) the [*Drug Endangered Children Act*](#) (2006), the [*Protection of Children Abusing Drugs Act*](#) (2006) , *The Family Law Act* (2005) and the [*Protection Against Family Violence Act*](#) (2000).

The 2008 Alberta Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (AIS) tracked the primary forms of maltreatment reported for each child investigated by child welfare services. In 53% of investigations a specific form of maltreatment was substantiated (MacLaurin et al., 2013). Figure 1 presents the incidence of substantiated maltreatment in Alberta broken down by primary maltreatment category. The AIS uses maltreatment categories designed for application across all provinces and territories; therefore the maltreatment categories in Figure 1 do not directly correspond to the protection categories outlined in the *Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act*. The two most frequent categories of substantiated maltreatment were neglect (37%) and exposure to intimate partner violence (34%). Of the remaining categories, 14% consisted of emotional maltreatment, 13% physical abuse and 2% sexual abuse.

Figure 1.

*Primary category of substantiated maltreatment in Alberta, 2008**



* Source: *AIS-2008* (MacLaurin, et al. 2013)

Spectrum of services

Child and Family Service Authorities (CFSAs) and Delegated First Nation Agencies (DFNAs) have numerous responsibilities under the Ministry of Human Services. Among them is the provision of front-line child intervention services. Child intervention services under the *Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act* are focused on the well being of children, supporting families to be healthy, and ensuring children grow up in safe and nurturing homes (Alberta Human Services, 2012). Intervention services include assessment, investigation and a range of services provided under the two service streams: family enhancement and child protection. Information received by the intake service that contains reasonable or probable grounds that a child may be in need of protective intervention is referred to the *safety phase* of service provision. The safety phase is a more in-depth assessment of the child's needs, parental capacities and environmental factors. After this phase, cases may be referred to the family enhancement stream, the protection stream or be closed. Movement between protective and enhancement streams is permitted but must be done in consultation with a casework supervisor. The family enhancement stream uses a different approach than the protection stream; it is an intensive short-term intervention program aiming to support the family through establishing links with the community to better address the safety concerns. The family enhancement stream is voluntary, with services (such as family support workers, external resources for addiction,

mental health services, family counseling, and the use of medical or psychological assessments) tailored to match each family's specific needs.

CFASAs and DFNAs contract with community agencies to provide a variety of social supports and a range of out-of-home placement services (i.e. foster care, group care and supported independent living). These community agencies are privately owned or fall under Family and Community Support Services (FCSS), through an 80/20 funding partnership between the Government of Alberta and participating municipalities or Métis Settlements. The use of community contract services are designed to allow communities to tailor services to reflect their needs and to engage community resources and volunteers. CFASAs are held responsible for engaging with the community to assess needs, set priorities, allocate resources and provide coordination of services.

As indicated in Table 1, intervention services are primarily provided to the child in their home with 87% of investigations resulting in the child remaining at home and less than a quarter of children having some form of formal or informal out-of-home placement (MacLaurin et al., 2013).

Table 1.
*Placement in Child Maltreatment Investigations in Alberta 2008**

Placement status**	#	Rate per 1,000 children	%
Child remained at home	23,625	30.48	87%
Child with Relative (Not a formal child welfare placement)	1,139	1.47	4%
Foster Care (includes foster care and kinship care)	1,828	2.36	7%
Group Home/Residential Secure Treatment	555	0.72	2%
Total Investigation	27,147	35.02	100%

* **Source:** AIS-2008 (MacLaurin, et al. 2013)

** Placement data are only collected for the initial investigation period in the AIS-2008.

Additional information about child welfare services in Alberta is available on the [Ministry of Human Services website](#), the [Office of the Child and Youth Advocate website](#) and the [Canadian Child Welfare Research Portal](#).

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