

Children in Out-of-Home Care in Canada in 2019

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When child welfare authorities deem it unsafe for a child to remain in their home because of concerns related to abuse, neglect, or child/youth behaviours a parent cannot manage, they may place the child in out-of-home care. Nation-wide information on the number of children in out-of-home care is lacking in Canada – which largely stems from the fact that child welfare falls under the jurisdiction of provinces, territories, and First Nations. As a result, there is no centralized system for tracking the number of children in care, and reporting methods as well as inclusion criteria vary considerably across provinces, territories, and reserve boundaries. Although out-of-home placements are often necessary to ensure a child’s wellbeing or safety, high rates of placements can be an indication of a lack of access to support services and socio-economic conditions that impact a family’s ability to meet their children’s needs¹.

Previous Estimates

Caution is needed in interpreting and comparing statistics on children in out-of-home care. The number of children in out-of-home care is usually reported either as (1) a *point-in-time* count of the number of children in out-of-home care at a given date (e.g., month-end or year-end), as (2) the number of children who *enter* out-of-home care in a certain year, or as (3) the number of children in out-of-home care at the beginning of the year plus all entries during the year. Because some children come in and out of care multiple times in a year, counts based on entries into care can be complicated to interpret. On the other hand, point-in-time counts, sometimes referred to as “snapshot” or “cross-sectional” counts, while easier to report and interpret, under-represent the volume of children who end up being placed in out-of-home care at one point during their childhood.

CIS: The last national cycle of the Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (CIS-2008) estimated that 8% of the 235,842 maltreatment-related investigations conducted in Canada in 2008, an estimated 19,599 child investigations, led to an out-of-home placement during the initial two-month investigation period². Because many children enter care after the initial investigation, this number significantly underrepresents annual *entries into care*.

Census: Census data from 2011 and 2016 provide *point-in-time* estimates of children aged 0 to 14 in foster care in those years: 29,590 and 28,030 respectively³. However, this estimate does not

include other types of out-of-home placement options, such as group care or treatment care. Furthermore, the voluntary and discretionary nature of the Census can lead to biases in the data that might contribute to underestimating the total number of children in foster care. For example, a grandmother who is fostering her grandchild could select “grand-child” or “foster-child” on the census form, which can undercount the number of foster children.

Previous compilations of provincial, territorial and federal reports: Several previous reports have used administrative data provided by provincial, territorial and federal governments to produce *point-in-time* estimates of the number of children in out-of-home care. Two previous information sheets from the Canadian Child Welfare Research Portal produced estimates for the years 1992 until 2007⁴ and for the years 2008 until 2013⁵, ranging from 42,000 in 1992 to 67,000 in 2007. A report from the Child Welfare League of Canada estimated the number of children in care in 2000 to be 76,183⁶.

In this information sheet, we report on *point-in-time* counts, as this is the measure that is most readily available across the country. We focus specifically on the number of children in out-of-home care in 2019 in order to provide a more in-depth exploration of province-level differences in rates of children in care and reporting methods, whilst updating previous estimates.

Methodology

The data presented in this information sheet was collected almost exclusively through publicly available provincial and federal government reports or websites. When needed, we communicated with provincial or territorial representatives to complete the information that was missingⁱ. Point-in-time counts available for most jurisdictions consisted of end of 2018-19 fiscal year counts (i.e., as of March 31, 2019) - but, in some cases, they were end of calendar year counts (i.e., December 31st, 2019) or a monthly averageⁱⁱ. For jurisdictions for which we were not able to obtain point-in-time information on the number of children in out-of-home care in 2019 (i.e., Prince Edward Island and Northwest Territories) we used counts for the most recent year reported.

In order to adequately interpret the numbers reported by different jurisdictions we considered (1) the types of placements being counted: family foster care, kinship foster care, group care, treatment facilities, other; (2) the legal placement status with respect to both formal and informal placements and temporary and permanent care; (3) the age ranges included in reports, and (4) the extent to which provincial counts include First Nations out-of-home placements funded through the federal government. It is important to note that definitions of ‘children in care’ and placement categories vary by jurisdiction. Definitions used in each province/territory and the extent to which each jurisdiction makes these distinctions are described in a Technical Appendix available from the authors.

Whilst all provinces and territories include foster care (which contains formal kinship care) and residential care arrangements (group and/or treatment care) in their estimates, the inclusion of

ⁱ If provincial or territorial officials have additional information or require further clarification, please email Dr. Nico Trocmé, the corresponding author of this paper, at nico.trocme@mcgill.ca. The information presented in this report will be updated as needed.

ⁱⁱ For clarity purposes, these point-in-time counts will be referred to as ‘end of year counts’ throughout the paper.

informal kinship servicesⁱⁱⁱ, independent living arrangements, and pre-adoption placements is specific to each jurisdiction. Independent living arrangements and pre-adoption placements represent a small proportion of all children in out-of-home care. Informal kinship care placements, however, can represent a larger proportion of children in out-of-home care. For that reason, we specify whether informal kinship placements were included or excluded in the provincial estimates presented.

In order to provide an estimate of out-of-home care, we removed all in-home care arrangements when possible. Some provinces indicate the presence of ‘other’, unlisted, placement options, which might include in-home care arrangements. These categories could not be removed without more detailed information, but they represent a small proportion of all children in out-of-home care. Finally, in New Brunswick and Saskatchewan, the number of children in out-of-home care that was publicly available did not include First Nations children living on reserve who were placed in out-of-home care. We estimated the number of children in care on-reserve in those provinces by multiplying national counts from Indigenous Services Canada (ISC)⁷ by the proportion of First Nations children living in those provinces⁸.

Findings

Table 1 below presents end of year point-in-time counts of the number of children in out-of-home care in each province/territory, along with the estimated rate of children in care per 1,000 children. The number of children in out-of-home care in Canada in 2019 at year end was calculated by aggregating each province’s reported point-in-time count. The rate of children in out-of-home care per 1,000 children was calculated using the child population within the age of protection of each province or territory for the year of reference⁹.

ⁱⁱⁱ In this document, informal kinship services refer to when a child is placed with extended family or a person of significant interest, but the child is not in the legal custody of the Director of Child Welfare. The degree of child welfare involvement, the voluntary nature of the arrangement, and amount of financial compensation these entail varies from one jurisdiction to another.

Table 1.

Number of children in out-of-home care and rates per 1,000 in Canada

Province/ Territory	Reference Year	Age of Protection	Child Populatio n ⁹	Includes informal kinship service	Children in out- of-home care (point-in-time)	Rate per 1,000
Alberta ¹⁰	2019	0 to 17 years	970,452	No	7,757	7.99
BC ¹¹	2019	0 to 18 years	926,072	No	6,263	6.76
Manitoba ¹²	2019	0 to 17 years	308,969	No	10,258	33.20
New Brunswick ¹³	2019	0 to 18 years	144,301	Unknown	983^{iv}	6.81
Newfoundland & Labrador ¹⁴	2019	0 to 15 years	76,450	No	985	12.88
				Yes: 'Kinship Services'	1,545	20.21
Nova Scotia ¹⁵	2019	0 to 18 years	176,458	No	995	5.64
Northwest Territories ¹⁶	2014	0 to 18 years	11,343	No	229	20.19
Nunavut ¹⁷	2019	0 to 18 years	14,943	No	358	23.96
Ontario ¹⁸	2019	0 to 17 years	2,765,376	Unknown	12,385	4.48
Prince Edward Island ¹⁹	2018	0 to 17 years	29,226	No	111	3.80
Quebec ²⁰	2019	0 to 17 years	1,584,856	No	9,174^v	5.79
				Yes: 'Confié à un tiers significatif'	11,539^v	7.28
Saskatchewan ²¹	2019	0 to 15 years	244,476	No	4,546^{iv}	18.59
				Yes: 'Person of sufficient interest'	6,620^{iv}	27.08
Yukon ²²	2019	0 to 18 years	8,517	No	95	11.15
				Yes: 'Extended Family Care'	240	28.18
Total	2019	N/A	7,261,439	No	54,139	7.46^{vi}
				When reported	59,283	8.16^{vi}

Number of children in out-of-home care in Canada

According to Table 1, the number of children in out-of-home care in Canada 2019 at year end is 54,139 when informal kinship services are excluded and 59,283 when *reported* informal kinship services are included in the final count^{vii}. As such, the rate of children in care per 1,000 children

^{iv} Number adjusted to include estimate of children in care on-reserve.

^v This number does not include the administrative regions 17 and 18 in Quebec. It is therefore an underestimate.

^{vi} Calculated based on the aggregate children in out-of-home care numbers and child population numbers for each jurisdiction.

^{vii} Given that most provinces/territories do not report the number of children in informal kinship services, the number presented in this paper is an underestimate.

is of 7.46 or of 8.16 in Canada depending on whether *reported* informal kinship care services are excluded or included, which represents approximately 0.75% and 0.82% of children respectively.

Interestingly, regardless of the way in which the final count was calculated, the number of children in care is lower than estimates from Jones and colleagues for years 2003 to 2013 that range from 62,063 to 64,755, even though these focused exclusively on Canadian provinces, whilst excluding territories⁵. According to the authors, a peak in the number of children in out-of-home care was observed in 2009, with this number steadily decreasing in the following years. Likewise, foster care estimates provided by Census data also document a 5.3% decrease in the number of children in foster care in Canada between 2011 and 2016³. Numbers provided by Indigenous Services Canada seem to similarly show a decrease in the number of First Nations children in care on-reserve since 2013⁷. Thus, the estimate for 2019 might also point towards a decrease in the number of children in out-of-home care. In order to confirm that observation, however, it would be necessary to have information on the years 2014 to 2018.

Reasons for a possible decrease in the number children in out-of-home care are numerous. They can be broadly separated into changes in reporting methods (e.g., certain types of placements being removed from estimates over the years) and changes in the actual number of children in out-of-home care. At a national level – given that estimates are produced by aggregating provincial-level information – it is likely to be a combination of the two. Changes in practice might involve an increased reliance on family preservation services that keep the child at home or, alternatively, reducing the time in care by improving access to permanency options (e.g., adoption, reunification). For example, in British Columbia, the use of a Family Development Response Model that differentiates high risk from low-risk families in need of support services, has been linked to a 20% decrease in children and youth in care between 2007 and 2016²³. In order for such an analysis to be made, one would need to compare trends across provinces and analyse any policy or reporting shifts, which is beyond the scope of the current information sheet.

Provincial differences in rates of children in out-of-home care

Table 1 also shows that rates per 1,000 of children in out-of-home care vary considerably between different provinces and territories in Canada, ranging from 3.8 per 1,000 in Prince Edward Island to 33.2 per 1,000 in Manitoba, when informal kinship care is excluded from the counts. Differences between these rates must be interpreted with caution because of the variations in definitions of different types of placement and reporting methods across jurisdictions. However, differences in rates per 1,000 do not seem to be explained solely by variations in reporting. For instance, Prince Edward Island and Northwest Territories, which include similar placement options in their estimates have a five-fold difference in rates of children in out-of-home care.

One of the factors that influences variations between provinces in rates per 1,000 of children in out-of-home care is the relative size of the Indigenous population within these jurisdictions. Provinces and territories with a child population that is over 25% Indigenous – i.e., Manitoba, Nunavut, Northwest Territories, Saskatchewan, and Yukon – have a higher rate of children in out-of-home care. This is consistent with findings that Indigenous children are systematically overrepresented in the child welfare system²⁴. According to Census data, in 2016, First Nations children aged 0 to 14 living on reserve (106,445) made up 1.8% of the total population of children

aged 0 to 14 in Canada (5,817,050)⁸. By contrast, the latest reported number of First Nations children in care on reserve at year end was of 9,078⁷, which represents 16.7% of the total number of children in formal care at year end in 2019 calculated in this report. This implies that the proportion of First Nations children on reserve is around 9 times greater than what is to be expected based on their presence in the child population at a national level.

Such findings have been tied back to the continuous discrimination of Indigenous families through colonial policies and practices and the persistent underfunding of prevention and other essential services on-reserve²⁵. This ultimately contributes to the disproportionate presence of chronic challenges, such as poverty and inadequate housing, that put First Nations, Métis, and Inuit families at increased risk of coming into contact with the child protection system^{24,25,26}.

Conclusion

The national-level count of children in out-of-home care in Canada has not increased – rather, it might be decreasing in recent years. Further research on provincial and national trends in child welfare placements will be needed to confirm a potential decrease in numbers, and to determine whether it could be the result of changes in reporting methods, changes in prevention services or placement policies that introduce a broader range of less formal out-of-home care options, or changes in socio-economic conditions and related risk factors. Further examination of the dramatic variation in rates per 1,000 of children in out-of-home care is also warranted. Although part of this variation might be due to differences in reporting methods, it also seems to be driven by the overrepresentation of Indigenous children in the child welfare system. Ultimately, difficulty in reporting and interpreting estimates of children in care in Canada highlights the need for systematic and coordinated reporting methods that include more detailed information on the placement types included, as well as consistent reporting of the proportion of Indigenous children in care.

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