



Children with Noted Physical Disabilities in Maltreatment-Related Investigations in Ontario in 2018

Peace Jack-Ackhigbe, Ann Fudge Schormans, Jean Samuel, Nicolette Joh-Carnella, Kate Allan,
Tara Black, & Barbara Fallon
April 2020

Introduction

The Ontario Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect 2018 (OIS-2018)¹ is the sixth provincial study to examine the incidence of reported child maltreatment and the characteristics of children and families investigated by child welfare authorities in Ontario. An estimated 158,476 child maltreatment-related investigations involving children aged 0-17 were conducted by child welfare authorities in 2018. Ten percent of these investigations (an estimated 16,178 investigations) involved a child with a noted disability, including physical and intellectual/developmental disabilities. This Information Sheet examines the profile of the estimated 2,067 child maltreatment-related investigations specifically involving children with noted physical disabilities investigated by Ontario child welfare authorities in 2018.

Children with disabilities are understood to be at greater risk of maltreatment than children without disabilities². Caregivers typically face significant challenges in accessing appropriate and accessible supports and services for their children with disabilities, particularly in a neoliberal context, requiring ongoing advocacy by caregivers³. Considered alongside the additional stressors brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic and the measures⁴ taken to control the spread of disease, children with disabilities and their families will have even less access to necessary supports and services and may be made even more vulnerable to maltreatment and child welfare involvement. To understand the nature of the cases involving children with disabilities that are brought to the

¹ Fallon, B., Filippelli, J., Lefebvre, R., Joh-Carnella, N., Trocmé, N., Black, T., ... Stoddart, J. (2020). Ontario Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect-2018 (OIS-2018). Toronto, ON: Child Welfare Research Portal.

² Jones, L., Bellis, M. A., Wood, S., Hughes, K., McCoy, E., Eckley, L., et al. (2012). Prevalence and risk of violence against children with disabilities: a systematic review and meta-analysis of observational studies. *Lancet*, 380, 899-907.

³ Tabatabai, A. (2020) Mother of a person: neoliberalism and narratives of parenting children with disabilities, *Disability & Society*, 35:1, 111-131, DOI: 10.1080/09687599.2019.1621739

⁴ American Psychological Association. (2020). *Advice for caregivers of children with disabilities in the era of COVID-19*. <https://www.apa.org/research/action/children-disabilities-covid-19>

attention of Ontario child welfare agencies, this Information Sheet describes child maltreatment-related investigations involving children with noted physical disabilities conducted in Ontario in 2018, including: the source of referral, the primary concern of the investigation, risk factors for the primary caregivers, transfers to ongoing child welfare services, referrals made to internal or external services, and reasons for not making referrals at the conclusion of the investigation.

Child maltreatment-related investigations represented in this Information Sheet include those in which investigating child welfare workers noted physical disabilities for the investigated children. Please see the Methodology section for more information on child functioning concerns in the OIS-2018.

Findings

Forty-one percent of investigations involving children with noted physical disabilities in Ontario in 2018 were referred by a school source (an estimated 855 investigations). Seventeen percent of these investigations were referred by police, and 10 percent of these investigations were referred by the child's parent (an estimated 361 and 202 investigations, respectively). See Table 1.

Table 1.

Referral Source in Child Maltreatment-Related Investigations Involving Children with Noted Physical Disabilities in Ontario in 2018

Referral Source	Estimate	Percent
<i>Non-Professional</i>		
Custodial or Non-Custodial Parent	202	10%
Child (Subject of Referral)	-	2%
Relative	-	3%
Neighbour/Friend	102	5%
<i>Professional</i>		
Community, Health, or Social Services	155	7%
Hospital (Any Personnel)	143	7%
School	855	41%
Other Child Welfare Service	-	3%
Day Care Centre	0	0%
Police	361	17%
Other	-	4%
<i>Anonymous</i>		
Anonymous	123	6%
Total	2,067	100%
Based on a sample of 98 investigations involving children with noted physical disabilities with information on the referral source. Percentages are column percentages. Columns may not add to totals because multiple referral sources could be noted.		

In 36 percent of investigations involving children with noted physical disabilities (an estimated 754 investigations), the investigating worker was primarily focused on assessing the risk of future maltreatment. Twenty-three percent of investigations were focused on neglect (an estimated 480 investigations), and another 21 percent of investigations were focused on a concern for physical abuse (an estimated 440 investigations). See Table 2.

Table 2.

Primary Concern in Child Maltreatment-Related Investigations Involving Children with Noted Physical Disabilities in Ontario in 2018

Primary Concern	Estimate	Percent
Physical Abuse	440	21%
Sexual Abuse	-	2%
Neglect	480	23%
Emotional Maltreatment	193	9%
Exposure to Intimate Partner Violence	167	8%
Risk of Future Maltreatment	754	36%
Total	2,067	100%
Based on a sample of 98 investigations involving children with noted physical disabilities with information on the primary concern of the investigation. Percentages are column percentages. Columns may not add to totals due to rounding.		

Fifty-six percent of investigations involving children with noted physical disabilities involved a primary caregiver for whom the investigating worker noted at least one risk factor. Workers endorsed few social supports for the primary caregiver in 31 percent of investigations involving children with noted physical disabilities (an estimated 628 investigations). Twenty-six percent of these investigations (an estimated 520 investigations) involved a primary caregiver with noted mental health issues, and in 24 percent of investigations involving children with noted physical disabilities (an estimated 476 investigations), the primary caregiver was noted to be a victim of intimate partner violence. See Table 3.

Table 3.

Primary Caregiver Risk Factors in Child Maltreatment-Related Investigations Involving Children with Noted Physical Disabilities in Ontario in 2018

Primary Caregiver Risk Factor	Estimate	Percent
Alcohol Abuse	138	7%
Drug/Solvent Abuse	124	6%
Cognitive Impairment	147	7%
Mental Health Issues	520	26%
Physical Health Issues	163	8%
Few Social Supports	628	31%
Victim of Intimate Partner Violence	476	24%
Perpetrator of Intimate Partner Violence	117	6%
History of Foster Care/Group Home	-	2%
At Least One Noted Primary Caregiver Risk Factor	1,135	56%
Total	2,020	100%
Based on a sample of 96 investigations involving children with noted physical disabilities with information on primary caregiver risk factors. Percentages are column percentages. Columns may not add to totals because multiple or no primary caregiver risk factors could be noted.		
This question was not applicable for one investigation involving a child with a noted physical disability in which the case was opened under a community caregiver and one investigation in which the youth was living independently. A community caregiver is defined as anyone providing care to a child in an out-of-home setting (e.g., institutional setting).		

Approximately three quarters of investigations involving children with noted physical disabilities were closed following the initial investigation (an estimated 1,571 investigations). The remaining 24 percent of cases (an estimated 496 investigations) were kept open for the family to receive ongoing child welfare services. See Table 4.

Table 4.

Transfers to Ongoing Services in Child Maltreatment-Related Investigations Involving Children with Physical Disabilities in Ontario in 2018

Case Opened for Ongoing Services	Estimate	Percent
Case to Stay Open for Ongoing Services	496	24%
Case to be Closed	1,571	76%
Total	2,067	100%
Based on a sample of 98 investigations involving children with noted physical disabilities with information on whether the case was opened for ongoing services. Percentages are column percentages.		

Investigating workers made referrals to internal or external services in 32 percent of investigations involving children with noted physical disabilities. The most frequently made referrals in these investigations were: parent education or support services (made in 12 percent of investigations or an estimated 250 investigations); family or parent counselling (made in 11 percent of investigations or an estimated 219 investigations); and psychiatric/mental health services (made in nine percent of investigations or an estimated 182 investigations). See Table 5.

Table 5.

Five Most Frequently Made Service Referrals in Child Maltreatment-Related Investigations Involving Children with Noted Physical Disabilities in Ontario in 2018

Service Referral	Estimate	Percent
Parent Education or Support Services	250	12%
Family or Parent Counselling	219	11%
Psychiatric/Mental Health Services	182	9%
Drug/Alcohol Counselling or Treatment	125	6%
Intimate Partner Violence Services	121	6%
At Least One Service Referral Made	658	32%
Total	2,067	100%
Based on a sample of 98 investigations involving children with noted physical disabilities with information on referrals made to internal or external services. Percentages are column percentages. Columns may not add to totals because multiple or no service referrals could be made.		

Service referrals were not made in 68 percent of investigations involving children with noted physical disabilities. The most frequently noted reason for a worker not making a referral was because the family was already receiving services (noted in 48 percent of these investigations or an estimated 991 investigations). In 20 percent of investigations involving children with noted physical disabilities (an estimated 413 investigations), the worker did not make a referral to services because they determined that services were not needed. See Table 6.

Table 6.

Reasons for Service Referrals Not Being Made in Child Maltreatment-Related Investigations Involving Children with Noted Physical Disabilities in Ontario in 2018

Reason for No Service Referral	Estimate	Percent
At Least One Service Referral Made	658	32%
No Service Referral Made	1,409	68%
Already Receiving Services	991	48%
Service Not Available in the Area	0	0%
Ineligible for Service	0	0%
Services Could Not Be Financed	0	0%
Service Determined Not to be Needed	413	20%
Refusal of Services	-	3%
There is an Extensive Waitlist for Services	0	0%
No Culturally Appropriate Services	0	0%
Total	2,067	100%
Based on a sample of 98 investigations involving children with noted physical disabilities with information on referrals made to internal or external services. Percentages are column percentages. Columns may not add to totals because multiple reasons for not making a referral could be noted.		

Methodology

The OIS-2018 used a multi-stage sampling design to select a representative sample of 18 child welfare agencies across Ontario and then to sample cases within these agencies. Information was collected directly from child protection workers on a representative sample of 7,590 child

protection investigations conducted during a three-month sampling period in 2018. 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 2018 was 158,476.

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-three 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 (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.

Workers were asked about concerns related to child functioning. Where applicable, the reference point for identifying these concerns was the previous six months. This information only documents problems that were known to investigating child welfare workers. Workers were asked to indicate problems that had been confirmed by a diagnosis, directly observed by the investigating worker or another worker, and/or disclosed by the caregiver or child, as well as issues that they suspected were problems but could not fully verify at the time of the investigation. The definition of a physical disability used in the study was: “the existence of a long-lasting condition that substantially limits one or more basic physical activities such as walking, climbing stairs, reaching, lifting, or carrying. This includes sensory disability conditions such as blindness, deafness, or a severe vision or hearing impairment that noticeably affects activities of daily living.”⁵

Workers were asked to provide information on various other aspects of their investigations, including the characteristics of the household, caregivers, and children who were the subject of the investigation as well as history of previous child welfare case openings and short-term child welfare service dispositions, including transfers to ongoing services and referrals to internal or external services.

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

⁵ Fallon, B., Filippelli, J., Lefebvre, R., Joh-Carnella, N., Trocmé, N., Black, T., ... Stoddart, J. (2020). Ontario Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect-2018 (OIS-2018). Toronto, ON: Child Welfare Research Portal.

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 the estimation method used to derive provincial annual estimates should also be noted. The agency size correction uses service volume as a proxy for agency size; this does not account for potential variation in investigations across agencies. 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: Jack-Ackhigbe, P., Fudge Schormans, A., Samuel, J., Joh-Carnella, N., Allan, K., Black, T. & Fallon, B. (2020). Children with Noted Physical Disabilities in Maltreatment-Related Investigations in Ontario in 2018. CWRP Information Sheet #199E. Toronto, ON: Canadian Child Welfare Research Portal.