

Household Food Insecurity and Food Bank Referrals in Ontario in 2013

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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 examines household food insecurity and food bank referrals.

Food insecurity has been defined in Canada as the state within a household “when one or more members do not have access to the variety or quantity of food that they need due to lack of money” (Roshanafshar & Hawkins, 2015). 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 was the first time this question was asked in the OIS studies. This variable can act as a proxy indicator for food insecurity as defined above and allows us to examine this issue within a representative sample of child welfare investigations.

Findings

There were an estimated 125,281 maltreatment-related investigations conducted in Ontario in 2013. In 6% of investigations (an estimated 7,640), the worker identified that the household had run out of money for food within the past six months. In 13% of investigations (n=16,494), the investigating worker responded ‘unknown’ to this question. Please see Figure 1 for a visual representation of these findings.

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.

Figure 1.

Household ran out of money for food in the past 6 months in Ontario in 2013

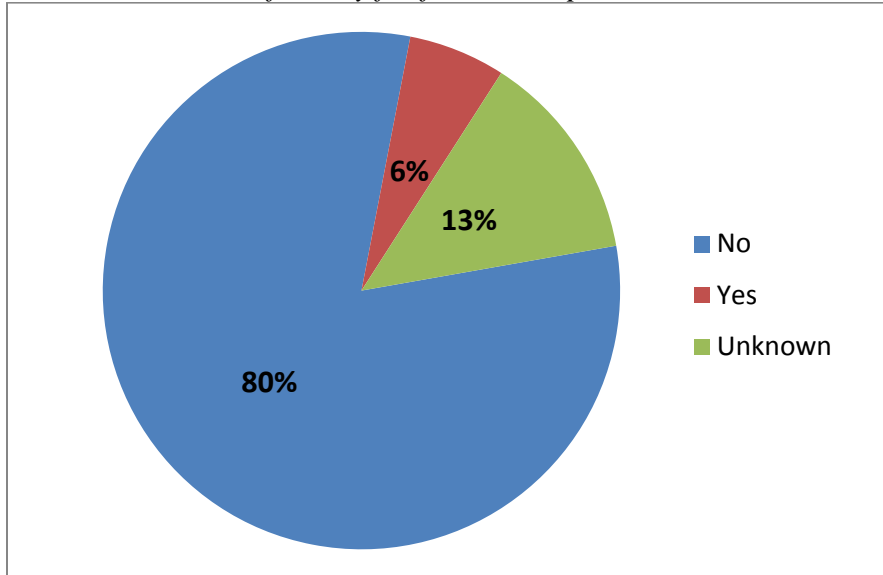


Table 1 presents whether the household ran out of money for food by the primary income source for the household. Not surprisingly, households supported by part-time employment, government and other benefits, unknown sources of income, and no source of income were more likely to run out of money for food compared to those households supported by full-time income. The highest proportion of household food insecurity reported by workers was for investigations with an unknown source of income. Please see Figure 2 for a visual representation of these findings.

Table 1.

Household ran out of money for food by primary household income source in maltreatment-related investigations in Ontario in 2013

Household Source of Income	Household Ran Out of Money for Food						Total	
	Yes		No		Unknown		#	%
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Full Time	1,605	3%	63,736	90%	5,313	8%	70,654	100%
Part-time (<30 hours/seasonal)	1,228	11%	8,166	76%	1,287	12%	10,681	100%
Social assistance, employment insurance or other benefits	4,161	12%	23,188	69%	6,277	19%	33,626	100%
Unknown source	251	17%	1,112	77%	-	-	1,451	100%
No source of income	396	6%	2,827	42%	3,529	52%	6,752	100%
Total	7,641	6%	99,029	80%	16,494	13%	123,164	100%

^Based on a sample of 5,193 child maltreatment-related investigations with information about household runs out of money for food. Percentages are row percentages, and may not add to 100% because of rounding.

- Estimates of less than 100 investigations are not shown, but are included in the total.

Figure 2.

Household ran out of money for food by primary household income source in maltreatment-related investigations in Ontario in 2013

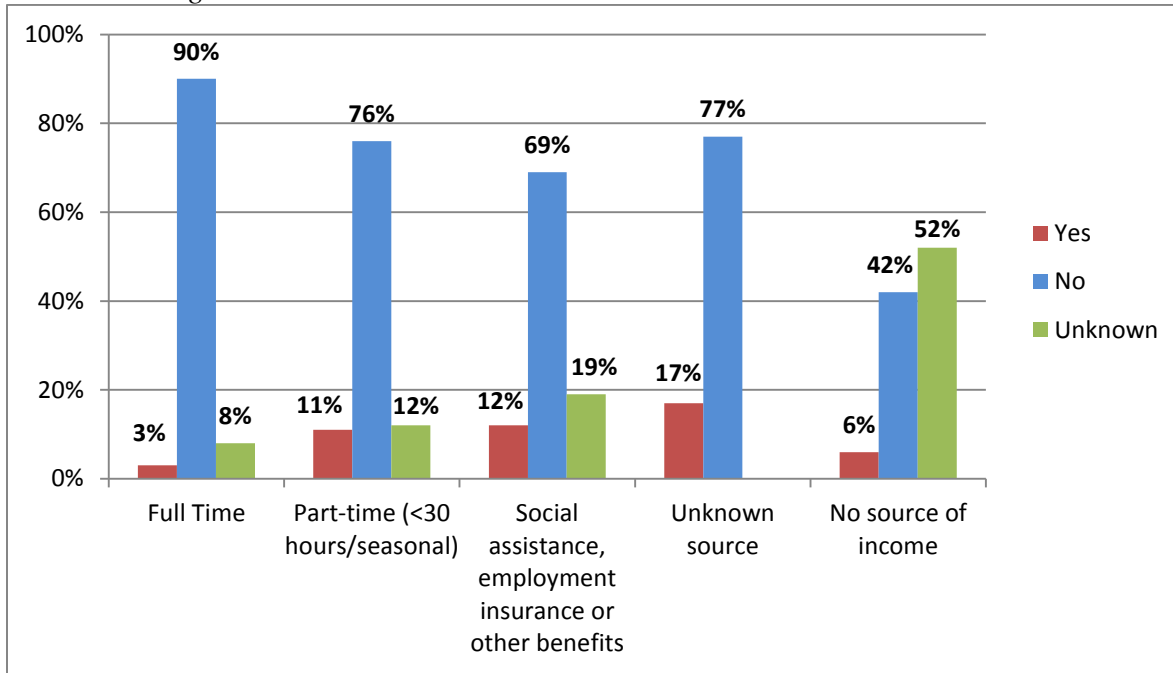


Table 2 displays whether the household ran out of money for food by the geographic location of the investigating child protection agency. In 8% of investigations conducted by a rural child protection agency, the worker noted that the household ran out of money for food. This is compared to 5% of investigations conducted by an urban child protection agency.

Table 2.

Household ran out of money for food by geographic location of the investigating child protection agency in maltreatment-related investigations in Ontario in 2013

	Household Ran Out of Money for Food						Total	
	Yes		No		Unknown			
Geographic Location of Agency	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Urban	3,735	5%	60,774	81%	10,088	14%	74,597	100%
Rural	3,904	8%	38,255	79%	6,406	13%	48,565	100%
Total	7,639	6%	99,029	80%	16,494	13%	123,162	100%

^Based on a sample of 5,192 child maltreatment-related investigations with information about household runs out of money for food and child protection agency geography. Percentages are row percentages, and may not add to 100% because of rounding.

Workers were asked to indicate whether they made a referral to either a service internal or external to child welfare. A food bank referral was one of the types of referrals workers could indicate. Table 3 displays food bank referrals made by whether the household ran out of money for food. In 31% of investigations where the worker noted that the household had run out of money for food, a referral to a food bank was made.

Table 3.

Food bank referrals by whether the household ran out of money for food in maltreatment-related investigations in Ontario in 2013

	Household Ran Out of Money for Food						Total	
	Yes		No		Unknown			
Food Bank Referral Made	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Yes	2,379	31%	850	1%	261	2%	3,490	3%
No	5,260	69%	98,179	99%	16,233	98%	119,672	97%
Total	7,639	100%	99,029	100%	16,494	100%	123,162	100%

^Based on a sample of 5,192 child maltreatment-related investigations with information about household runs out of money for food and food bank referrals. Percentages are row percentages, and may not add to 100% because of rounding.

Summary

Household food insecurity was noted by workers in 6% of maltreatment-related investigations. A sizeable proportion of households not supported by full-time income experienced difficulties providing food for the family. When comparing urban to rural child protection agencies, household food insecurity was more often noted by workers conducting investigations in rural agencies. In about one third of investigations with noted food insecurity concerns, a food bank referral was made.

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 indicate whether the household had run out of money for food in the last six months and could indicate yes, no or unknown.

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.

Workers were asked to provide information on various other aspects of their investigation, including the characteristics of the household, caregivers, and child subject of the investigation, the history of previous child welfare case openings, and the short-term child welfare service dispositions.

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

Roshanafshar, S., & Hawkins, E. (2015). Food insecurity in Canada. Retrieved from:
<http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/82-624-x/2015001/article/14138-eng.htm#n1>

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