



Intimate Partner Violence Investigations in Ontario in 2018

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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. This Information Sheet examines concerns about children's exposure to intimate partner violence (IPV) in Ontario in 2018. IPV during the COVID-19 pandemic is a source of concern given the isolation of children and families and the stress that economic instability, social isolation, and a lack of access to safety and services creates for caregivers and children. To better appreciate the nature of cases brought to the attention of child protection services, this Information Sheet describes investigations involving children's exposure to IPV in Ontario in 2018, including: the nature of the concern, substantiation decision, functioning concerns for the primary caregiver, child age categories, and referrals made to internal or external services at the conclusion of the investigation.

Findings

An estimated 158,476 children 0-17 years of age were referred for a child maltreatment-related concern to a child welfare authority in Ontario in 2018. Eighteen percent of these investigations, or an estimated 29,028 child maltreatment-related investigations, were focused on children's exposure to IPV. See Table 1.

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.

Table 1.

Primary Concern for Child Maltreatment-Related Investigations in Ontario in 2018

Primary Concern	Estimate	Percent
Physical Abuse	31,991	20%
Sexual Abuse	4,442	3%
Neglect	23,930	15%
Emotional Maltreatment	10,224	6%
Exposure to Intimate Partner Violence	29,028	18%
Risk of Future Maltreatment	58,861	37%
Total	158,476	100%

Based on a sample of 7,590 investigations with information on the primary concern of the investigation. Percentages are column percentages. Columns may not add to totals due to rounding.

Over half of investigations involving children's exposure to IPV were substantiated, an estimated 17,550 investigations; 30% were unfounded, and 9% remained suspected after the conclusion of the investigation. See Table 2.

Table 2.

Substantiation of Exposure to Intimate Partner Violence Investigations in Ontario in 2018

Substantiation	Estimate	Percent
Unfounded	8,837	30%
Suspected	2,641	9%
Substantiated	17,550	60%
Total Exposure to Intimate Partner Violence Investigations	29,028	100%

Based on a sample of 1,392 exposure to intimate partner violence investigations with information on the level of substantiation. Percentages are column percentages. Columns may not add to totals due to rounding.

Substantiated investigations involving children's exposure to IPV were primarily referred to child welfare authorities by the police (67% or an estimated 11,753 investigations); by a custodial or non-custodial parent (10% or an estimated 1,714 investigations); by community, health, or social services (8% or an estimated 1,433 investigations); or by schools (8% or an estimated 1,381 investigations). See Table 3.

Table 3.

Source of Referral in Substantiated Exposure to Intimate Partner Violence Investigations in Ontario in 2018

Referral Source	Estimate	Percent
<i>Non-Professional</i>		
Custodial or Non-Custodial Parent	1,714	10%
Child (Subject of Referral)	-	0%
Relative	334	2%
Neighbour/Friend	320	2%
<i>Professional</i>		
Community, Health or Social Services	1,433	8%
Hospital (Any Personnel)	663	4%
School	1,381	8%
Other Child Welfare Service	296	2%
Day Care Centre	0	0%
Police	11,753	67%
Other	172	1%
<i>Anonymous</i>		
Anonymous	225	1%
Total Substantiated Exposure to Intimate Partner Violence Investigations	17,550	100%
Based on a sample of 814 substantiated exposure to intimate partner violence investigations with information about the source of referral. Percentages are column percentages. Columns do not add to totals because investigating workers could identify more than one source of referral.		

In 96% of substantiated investigations involving children's exposure to IPV conducted in Ontario in 2018 at least one primary caregiver risk factor was noted. The most frequently noted concerns were: victim of IPV (88% of substantiated exposure to IPV investigations or an estimated 15,435 investigations), mental health issues (26% of substantiated exposure to IPV investigations or an estimated 4,546 investigations), perpetrator of IPV (25% of substantiated exposure to IPV investigations or an estimated 4,311 investigations), and few social supports (24% of substantiated exposure to IPV investigations or an estimated 4,257 investigations) See Table 4.

Table 4.

Primary Caregiver Risk Factors in Substantiated Exposure to Intimate Partner Violence Investigations in Ontario in 2018

Primary Caregiver Risk Factors	Estimate	Percent
Alcohol Abuse	2,234	13%
Drug/Solvent Abuse	1,154	7%
Cognitive Impairment	194	1%
Mental Health Issues	4,546	26%
Physical Health Issues	561	3%
Few Social Supports	4,257	24%
Victim of Intimate Partner Violence	15,435	88%
Perpetrator of Intimate Partner Violence	4,311	25%
History of Foster Care/Group Home	315	2%
At Least One Primary Caregiver Risk Factor	16,783	96%
Total Substantiated Exposure to Intimate Partner Violence Investigations	17,550	100%
Based on a sample of 814 substantiated exposure to intimate partner violence investigations with information about primary caregiver risk factors. Percentages are column percentages. Columns may not add to totals because investigating workers could identify multiple or no primary caregiver risk factors.		

Twenty-eight percent of substantiated investigations involving children's exposure to IPV, or an estimated 4,876 investigations, involved children aged eight to eleven years old; 27% of substantiated IPV investigations (an estimated 4,803 investigations) involved children aged four to seven years old; 20% (an estimated 3,429 investigations) involved children aged one to three years old; 17% involved children 12 to 15 years old; 5% involved children under one; and 3% involved 16 and 17 year olds. See Table 5.

Table 5.

Child Age in Substantiated Exposure to Intimate Partner Violence Investigations in Ontario in 2018

Child Age Category	Estimate	Percent
<1 Year	911	5%
1-3 Years	3,429	20%
4-7 Years	4,803	27%
8-11 Years	4,876	28%
12-15 Years	2,963	17%
16-17 Years	569	3%
Total Substantiated Exposure to Intimate Partner Violence Investigations	17,550	100%
Based on a sample of 814 substantiated exposure to intimate partner investigations with information about child age. Percentages are column percentages. Columns may not add to totals due to rounding.		

Investigating workers made referrals to internal or external services in over a half of substantiated investigations involving children’s exposure to IPV in Ontario in 2018. Referrals to intimate partner violence services were made in 32% of substantiated exposure to IPV investigations (an estimated 5,621 investigations); referrals to family or parent counselling were made in 27% of exposure to IPV investigations (an estimated 4,683 investigations); and referrals to parent education or support services were made in 10% of these investigations (an estimated 1,743 investigations). See Table 6.

Table 6.
Five Most Frequently Made Service Referrals in Substantiated Exposure to Intimate Partner Violence Investigations in Ontario in 2018

Type of Referral	Estimate	Percent
Intimate Partner Violence Services	5,621	32%
Family or Parent Counselling	4,683	27%
Parent Education or Support Services	1,743	10%
Psychiatric/Mental Health Services	1,576	9%
Child Victim Support Services	1,460	8%
At Least One Service Referral Made	9,860	56%
Total Substantiated Exposure to Intimate Partner Violence Investigations	17,550	100%
Based on a sample of 814 substantiated exposure to intimate partner violence investigations with information about service referrals. Percentages are column percentages. Percentages do not add to totals because investigating workers could identify more than one type of service referral.		

Conclusion

Exposure to intimate partner violence is the largest proportion of maltreatment investigations. During the COVID-19 pandemic, caregivers who experience violence and are isolated in their homes may not be able to access usual safety measures (e.g., typical community services). As outlined in this Information Sheet, exposure to IPV impacts children of all ages. As with most investigations, caregivers may also be experiencing a variety of other concerns which may be exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the measures taken to control the spread of disease.

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 caregiver risk factors. 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, as well as issues that they suspected were problems but could not fully verify at the time of the investigation.

Workers were asked to provide information on various other aspects of their investigations, including the characteristics of the household, caregivers, and children; history of previous child welfare case openings; and short-term child welfare service dispositions, including referrals made to internal and 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 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: Black, T., Fallon, B., Joh-Carnella, N., & Allan, K. (2020). Intimate Partner Violence Investigations in Ontario in 2018. CWRP Information Sheet #200E. Toronto, ON: Canadian Child Welfare Research Portal.