

Mental or Emotional Harm by Primary Form of Substantiated Maltreatment in Ontario in 2018

Laura Davidson, Nicolette Joh-Carnella, and Bryn King
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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 mental or emotional harm to the child by primary form of substantiated maltreatment in Ontario in 2018.

Findings

In an estimated 158,476 maltreatment-related investigations² in Ontario in 2018, the investigating worker identified an estimated 99,615 investigations involving an incident of maltreatment and an estimated 58,861 risk-only investigations. At the end of the initial investigation, 40 percent of maltreatment investigations were substantiated (an estimated 40,220 investigations)

In 63 percent of all substantiated maltreatment investigations there was no mental or emotional harm documented. As shown in Table 1, rates of emotional harm varied by primary form of substantiated maltreatment. Mental or emotional harm was identified in 63 percent of substantiated emotional maltreatment investigations. Other forms of maltreatment had lower rates of emotional harm documented by investigating child welfare workers: 57 percent in substantiated sexual abuse investigations, 37 percent in substantiated exposure intimate partner violence (IPV) investigations, 27 percent in substantiated physical abuse investigations, and 25 percent in substantiated neglect investigations. In all substantiated sexual abuse investigations where mental or emotional harm was noted to the child, the harm was severe enough to require treatment. Please see Figure 1 for a visual representation of these findings.

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 A “maltreatment-related investigations” refers to both maltreatment and risk investigations of all substantiation levels.

Table 1.

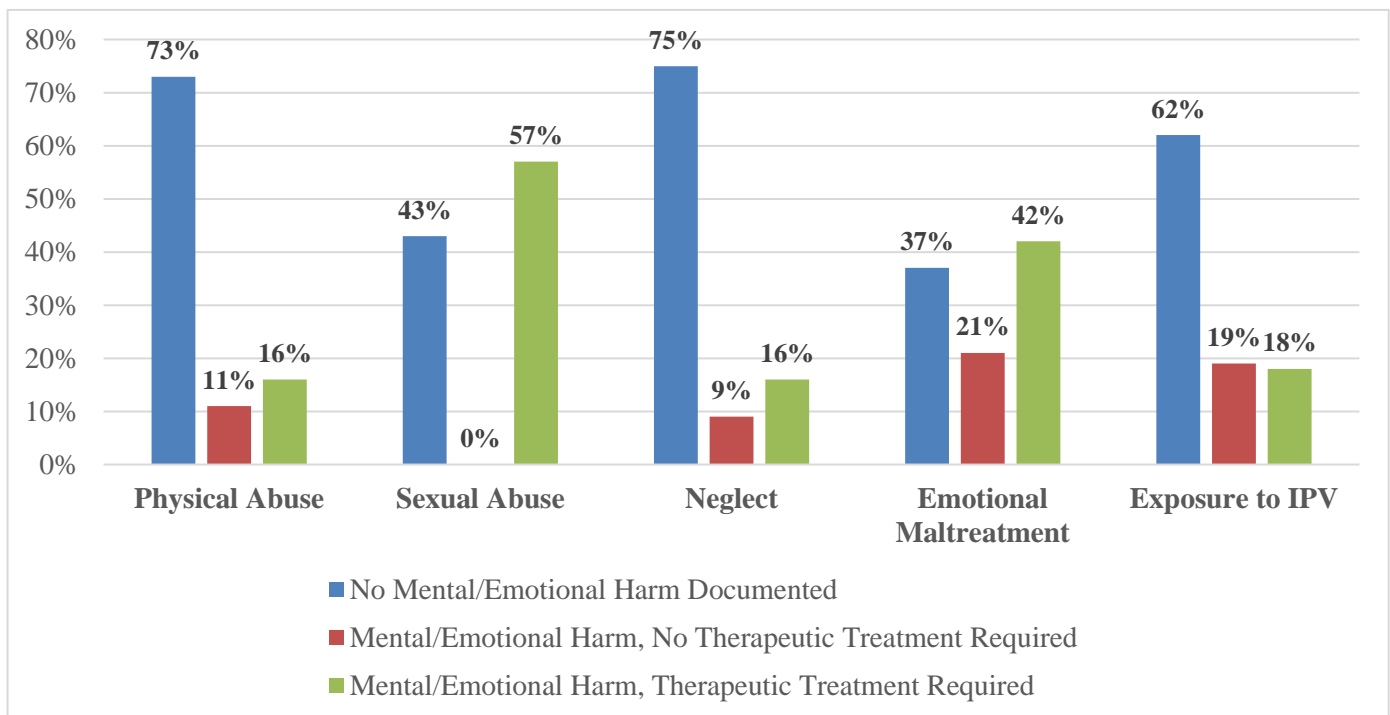
Mental or Emotional Harm and Treatment Required by Primary Form of Substantiated Maltreatment in Ontario in 2018

	Primary Form of Maltreatment										Total	
	Physical Abuse		Sexual Abuse		Neglect		Emotional Maltreatment		Exposure to IPV			
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
No Mental/Emotional Harm Documented	5,501	73	533	43	6,604	75	1,863	37	10,955	62	25,456	63
Mental/Emotional Harm, No Therapeutic Treatment Required	822	11	0	0	804	9	1,047	21	3,370	19	6,043	15
Mental/Emotional Harm, Therapeutic Treatment Required	1,245	16	709	57	1,429	16	2,114	42	3,224	18	8,721	22
Total	7,568	100	1,242	100	8,837	100	5,024	100	17,549	100	40,220	100

Based on a sample of 1,918 substantiated child maltreatment-related investigations with information about the primary form of maltreatment and mental or emotional harm. Percentages are column percentages. Columns may not add to totals because of rounding.

Figure 1.

Mental or Emotional Harm and Treatment Required by Primary Form of Substantiated Maltreatment in Ontario in 2018



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.

Workers could indicate whether an investigation involved an allegation related to an event of maltreatment or a concern about circumstances presenting a future risk of maltreatment. 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.

Workers were asked to indicate whether the child was demonstrating signs of mental or emotional harm (e.g., nightmares, bed wetting, or social withdrawal) as a result of the suspected or substantiated maltreatment incident(s). If the worker indicated that the child had been emotionally harmed, workers were asked whether the child required therapeutic treatment to manage the symptoms of the harm.

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; history of previous child welfare case openings; and 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 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.

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