

Child Welfare Worker Characteristics in Ontario in 2023

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Introduction

The Ontario Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect, 2023 (OIS-2023)¹ is the seventh 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 the characteristics of child welfare workers investigating child maltreatment concerns in Ontario in 2023.

Findings

There were an estimated 125,879 maltreatment-related investigations² conducted in Ontario in 2023. Child welfare workers are mandated to conduct these maltreatment-related investigations, protect children who have been or are at risk of being abused and/or neglected by their caregivers, and to provide for their care and supervision when necessary. The following information sheet describes the worker characteristics of investigating child welfare workers in Ontario in 2023.

More than half of the maltreatment-related investigations (62.5%) were conducted by an intake worker (i.e., a worker whose primary role is to investigate maltreatment-related concerns), followed by workers in a combination role (i.e., intake and ongoing child protection services; 29.8%), ongoing child protection services role (4.7%), and other positions (3.1%).

¹ Fallon, B., Black, T., Lefebvre, R., Trocmé, N., Hélie, S., Crowe, A., Miller, M., Budau, K., Houston, E., King, B., Esposito, B., Fluke, J., Collin-Vézina, D., Parada, H., Provençal, J., Chhabra, N., Sawh, P., Chan, P., Chowdhury, R., ... Wilson, L. Ontario Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect-2023 (OIS-2023). Toronto, ON: Child Welfare Research Portal.

² A maltreatment-related investigation refers to both maltreatment and risk-only investigations. Risk-only investigations are 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).

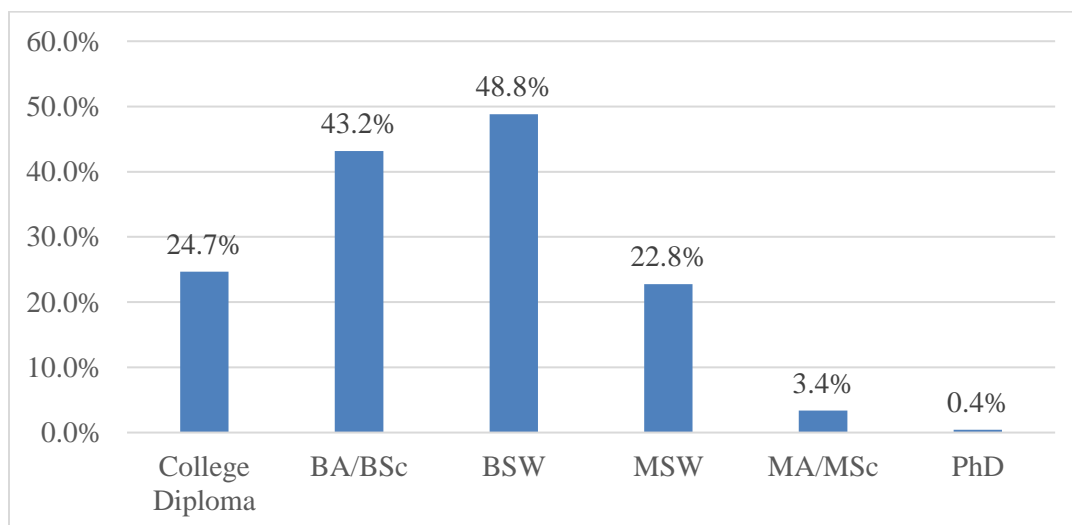
The majority of investigations (86.0%) were conducted by a worker who identified as female and spoke English as their first language (88.8%). See Table 1 for description of investigations' respective worker ethno-racial identity.

Table 1.
Investigations' respective worker ethno-racial identity

| Ethno-racial Identity | # | % |
|--|----------|----------|
| White | 77,077 | 68.9 |
| Black | 11,376 | 10.2 |
| Indigenous | 7,322 | 6.5 |
| Latin American | 683 | 0.6 |
| Arab | 481 | 0.4 |
| West Asian | 761 | 0.7 |
| South Asian | 5,057 | 4.5 |
| Chinese | 1,265 | 1.1 |
| Southeast Asian, Filipino, Japanese, Korean | 876 | 0.8 |
| Other (e.g., multiple ethno-racial identity categories selected) | 6,892 | 6.2 |

Almost half of maltreatment-related investigations conducted in Ontario, in 2023, were by a worker with a Bachelor of Social Work degree (48.8%) and 22.8% of investigations were conducted by a worker with a Master of Social Work degree. See Figure 1 for representation of workers' education.

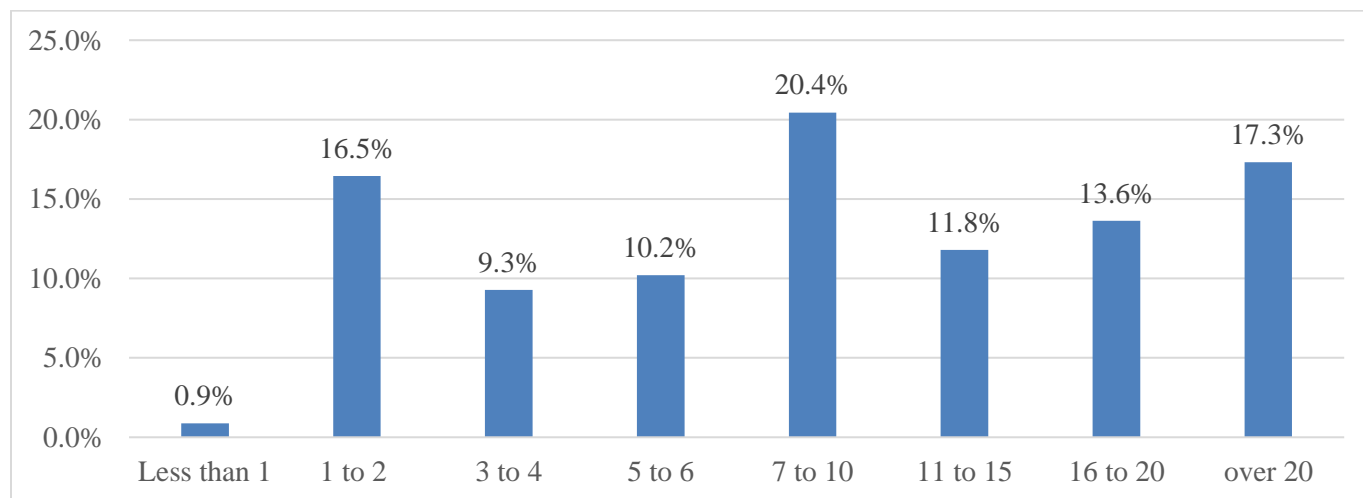
Figure 1
Investigations' respective worker education



Note. Proportions of education obtained do not add up to 100%, as workers may have a combination of educational diplomas/degrees.

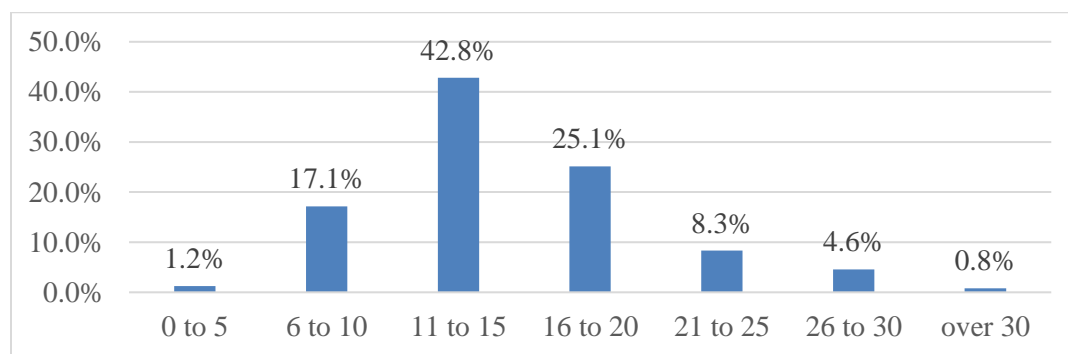
More than 61% of investigations were conducted by a worker with seven or more years of child welfare experience and just over 30% of investigations were conducted by a worker with 16 or more years of experience. See Figure 2 for representation of worker experience.

Figure 2
Investigations' respective worker years of experience



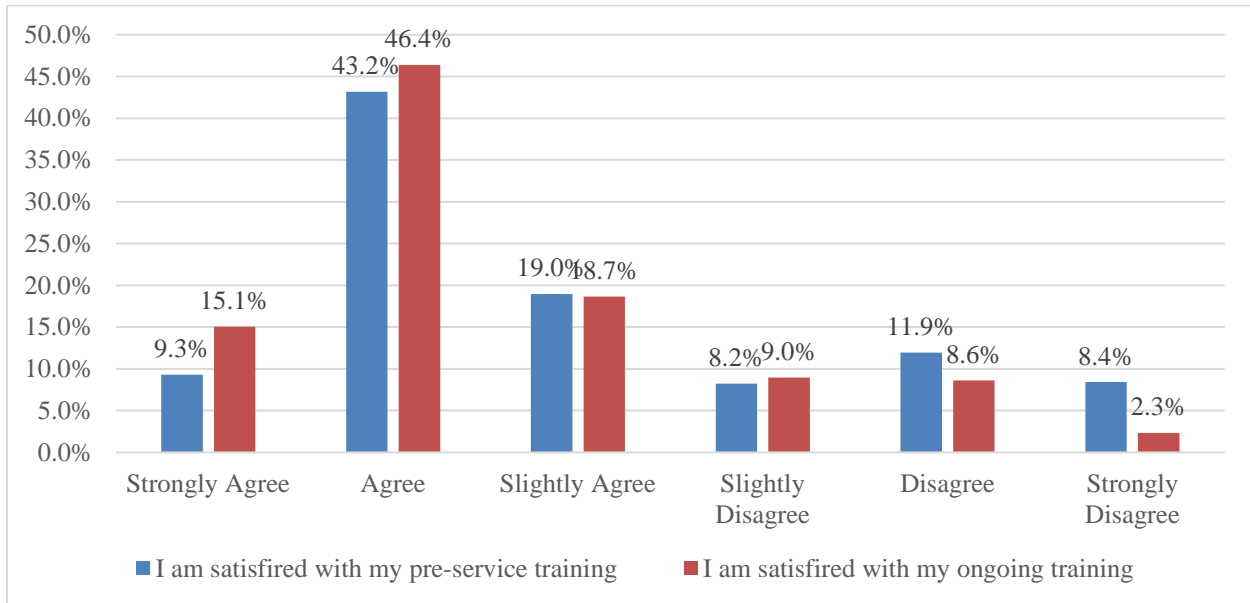
Workers who conducted maltreatment-related investigations in Ontario in 2023 were asked to indicate what their average caseload size was. Forty-three percent of investigations were conducted by a worker with an average caseload size of between 11 and 15 cases. A quarter of investigations (25.1%) were conducted by workers with between 16 and 20 cases. See Figure 3 for a representation of investigations' respective worker caseload size.

Figure 3
Investigations' respective worker caseload size



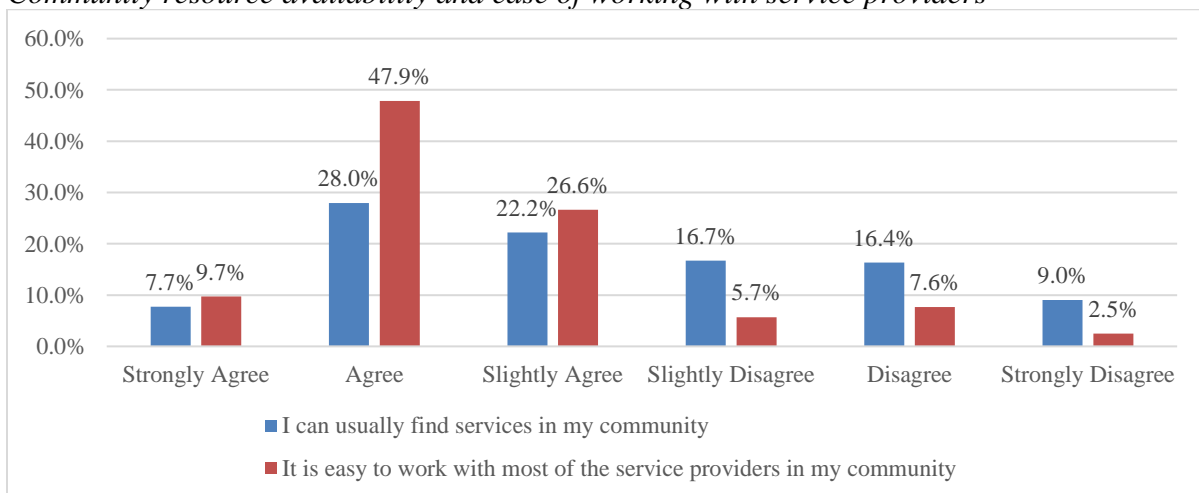
More than half of the maltreatment-related investigations in 2023 were conducted by workers who expressed satisfaction with their pre-service training (51%) and ongoing training (61%). See Figure 4 for full results regarding satisfaction with pre-service and ongoing training.

Figure 4
Investigations' respective worker satisfaction with training



Workers were asked to indicate whether they could usually find services in their community that could help keep children safe in their homes. Resource availability was an issue in approximately a quarter of investigations, as just over 25% of investigations were conducted by a worker who strongly disagreed or disagreed that they could find services in their community to keep children safe in their homes. Workers were also asked whether it was easy to work with most of the service providers in their community. The majority of workers (57.6%) either strongly agreed or agreed that it was easy to work with most of their community's service providers. See Figure 5 for perception of resource availability and ease of working with service providers.

Figure 5
Community resource availability and ease of working with service providers



Methodology

The OIS-2023 used a multi-stage sampling design to select a representative sample of 20 child welfare agencies in Ontario and then to select a sample of cases within these agencies. Information was collected directly from child welfare workers on a representative sample of 6,799 child protection investigations involving children 0-17 years of age that were conducted during a three-month sampling period in the fall of 2023. 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 2023 was 125,879.

For maltreatment investigations, information was collected regarding the primary category of maltreatment investigated as well as the level of substantiation for that maltreatment. 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 provide information on various other aspects of their investigation, including the characteristics of the household, caregivers, and child subject of the investigation; history of previous child welfare case openings; and short-term child welfare service dispositions (e.g., level of substantiation). Workers were also asked to provide information about their own characteristics (e.g., education, years of experience, case distribution) on a voluntary Worker Information Instrument. Worker information was collected for 89% of investigations. In the other 11% of investigations, the investigating worker did not complete their Worker Information Instrument. Some workers who completed their Worker Information Instrument left at least one question unanswered: missing data regarding worker characteristics ranged between 0.1% (caseload) and 13.2% (training satisfaction).

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 provincial estimated should also be noted. The agency size correction uses service volume as a proxy for agency size; this does not account for potential variations 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. Information based on child welfare worker characteristics has changed among cycles.

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