

Ongoing Child Welfare Services and Referrals to Services by Primary Category of Substantiated Maltreatment 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 previous case openings by the primary category of substantiated maltreatment in Ontario in 2023.

Findings

Of the estimated 125,879 maltreatment-related investigations² conducted in Ontario in 2023, the investigating worker identified an estimated 96,158 investigations involving an incident of maltreatment and an estimated 29,721 risk-only investigations. At the end of the initial investigation, 44 percent of maltreatment investigations were substantiated (an estimated 41,887 investigations).

For each maltreatment-related investigation conducted in Ontario in 2023, the investigating child welfare worker was asked to indicate whether the case would be transferred to ongoing services at the conclusion of the initial investigation. Transfers to ongoing child welfare services varied by

¹ Fallon, B., Black, T., Lefebvre, R., Trocmé, N., Hélie, S., Crowe, A., Miller, M., Budau, K., Houston, E., King, B., Esposito, T., 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.

²A 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).

primary category of substantiated maltreatment. Overall, 33% of substantiated maltreatment investigations were transferred to ongoing child welfare services. Substantiated neglect investigations were most likely to stay open for ongoing child welfare services (46%), followed by sexual abuse (30%), exposure to intimate partner violence (29%), physical abuse (28%), and emotional maltreatment (26%). Please see Table 1.

Table 1.

Ongoing child welfare services by primary category of substantiated maltreatment in Ontario in 2023[^]

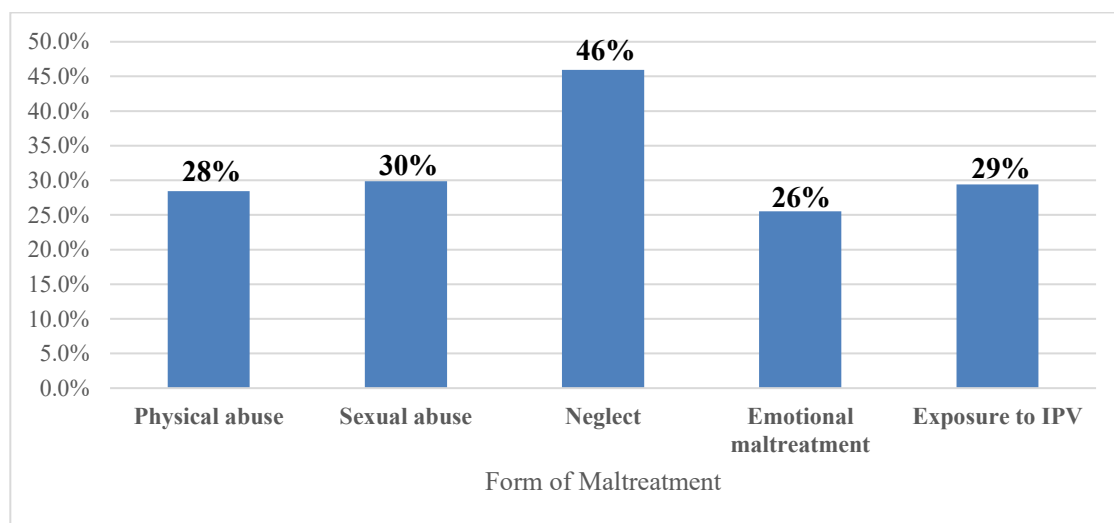
Primary Category of Maltreatment												
	Physical Abuse		Sexual Abuse		Neglect		Emotional Maltreatment		Exposure to IPV		Total	
Ongoing Services	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Yes	1,556	28	380	30	4,944	46	1,139	26	5,858	29	13,877	33
No	3,917	72	892	70	5,812	54	3,326	74	14,063	71	28,010	67
Total	5,473	100	1,272	100	10,756	100	4,465	100	19,922	100	41,887	100

[^]Based on a sample of 2,321 substantiated maltreatment investigations with information about transfers to ongoing services.

Please see Figure 1 for a visual representation of these findings.

Figure 1

Provision of Ongoing Child Welfare Services by Primary Category of Substantiated Maltreatment in Ontario in 2023



Workers were also asked to indicate whether they made a referral to an internal or external service for any family member. These findings are shown in Table 2. In the majority of substantiated maltreatment investigations (59%), a referral to services was made by the investigating worker. Investigations where the primary category of substantiated maltreatment was exposure to intimate partner violence were most likely to be referred for services (66%), followed by physical abuse (59%), sexual abuse (55%), neglect (51%), and emotional maltreatment (49%).

Table 2.

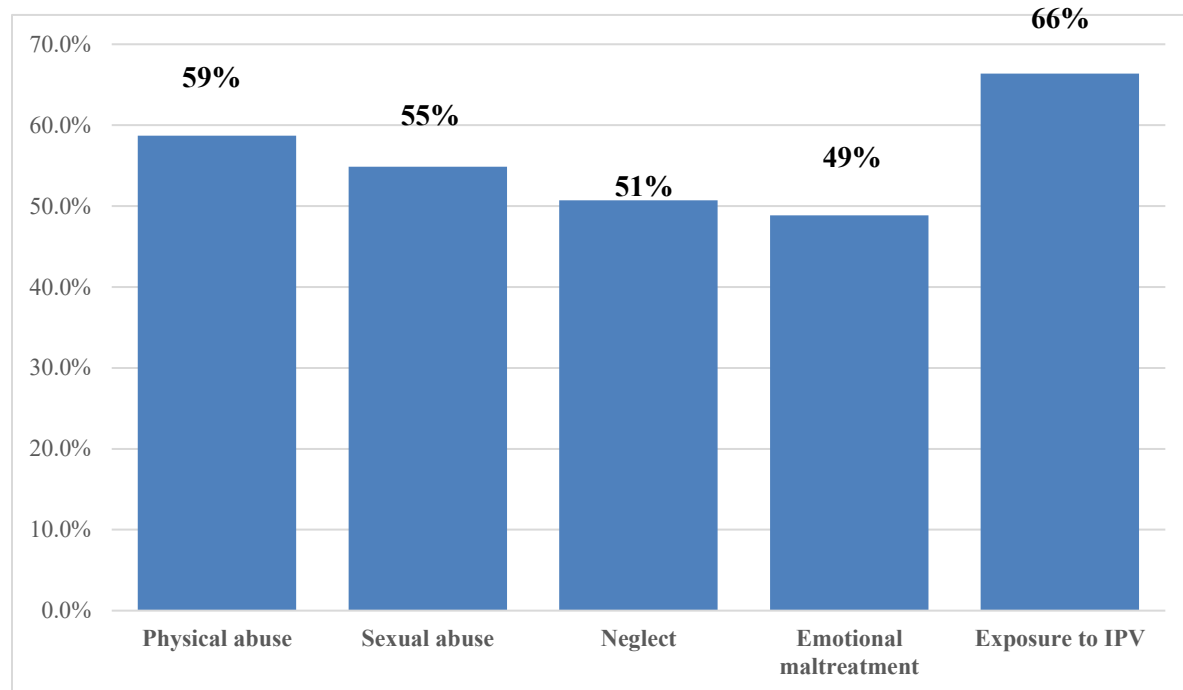
Referrals to services by primary category of substantiated maltreatment in Ontario in 2023[^]

Primary Category of Maltreatment												
	Physical Abuse		Sexual Abuse		Neglect		Emotional Maltreatment		Exposure to IPV		Total	
Service Referral	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Yes	3,213	59	698	55	5,455	51	2,180	49	13,222	66	24,768	59
No	2,260	41	574	45	5,301	49	2,284	51	6,700	34	17,119	41
Total	5,473	100	1,272	100	10,756	100	4,464	100	19,922	100	41,887	100
[^] Based on a sample of 2,321 substantiated maltreatment investigations with information the primary category of maltreatment and referrals to services.												

Please see Figure 2 for a visual representation of these findings.

Figure 2

Referrals to services by primary category of substantiated maltreatment in Ontario in 2023



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).

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. 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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