

Previous Investigations 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 investigations 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 conclusion 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 there had been a previous investigation. The number of previous investigations varies by primary category of substantiated maltreatment. As shown in Table 1, in an estimated 10,007 investigations (24.4%), there had never been a previous investigation. Most substantiated maltreatment investigations in 2023 had at least one previous

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.

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).

investigation: sexual abuse (88%), neglect (83%), emotional maltreatment (82%), physical abuse (71%), and exposure to intimate partner violence (69%). Substantiated sexual abuse and substantiated emotional maltreatment investigations had the highest proportion of previous involvement with 57% having more than three previous investigations. Notably, in almost half of all substantiated maltreatment investigations (44%) conducted in Ontario in 2023, there were three or more previous investigations.

Table 1.

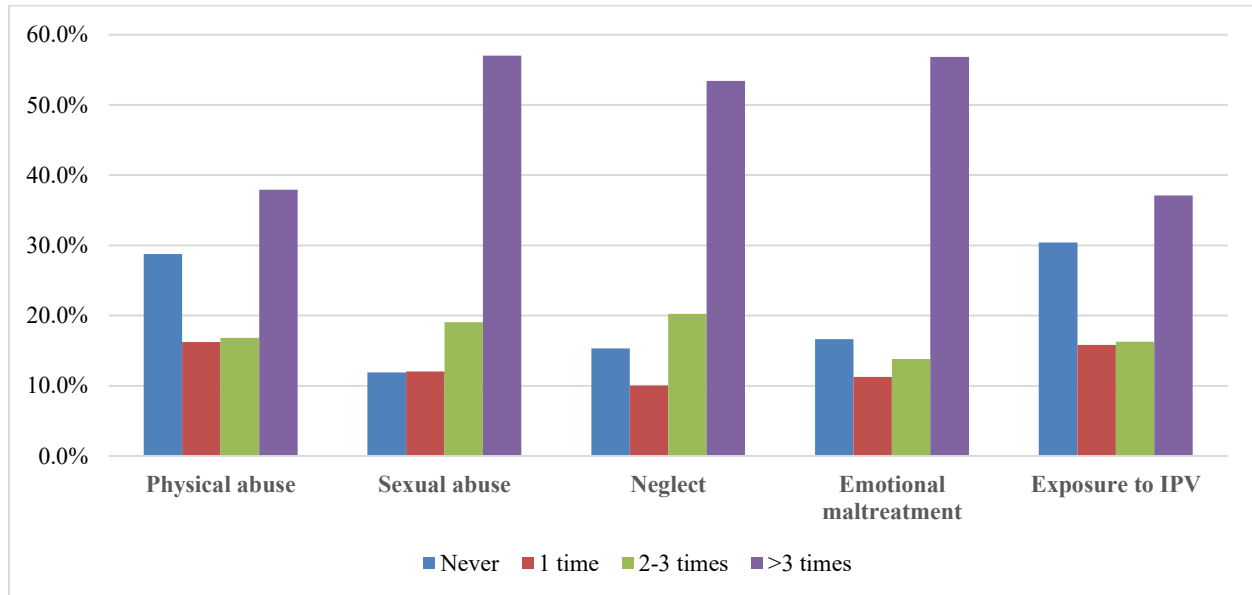
Previous investigations by primary category of substantiated maltreatment in Ontario in 2023[^]

Primary Category of Substantiated Maltreatment												
	Physical Abuse		Sexual Abuse		Neglect		Emotional Maltreatment		Exposure to IPV		Total	
Previous Case Openings	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Never	1,474	29	134	12	1,612	15	730	17	6,057	30	10,007	24
1 Time	830	16	136	12	1,057	10	493	11	3,155	16	5,671	14
2-3 Times	862	17	215	19	2,131	20	605	14	3,241	16	7,054	17
> 3 Times	1,941	38	643	57	5,624	53	2,491	57	7,388	37	18,087	44
Unknown	-	<1	0	0	106	1	-	1	-	<1	263	<1
Total	5,121	100	1,128	100	10,530	100	4,381	100	19,922	100	41,082	100
[^] Based on a sample of 2,287 substantiated maltreatment investigations with information about previous investigations. This question was not applicable for a sample of 34 substantiated community caregiver investigations. Percentages are column percentages. Columns may not add to totals because of rounding. “-” Estimates of less than 100 are not shown, but are included in the total.												

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

Figure 1

Previous investigations by primary category of substantiated maltreatment in Ontario in 2023



For investigations where there was a previous child welfare investigation, Table 2 outlines the time that elapsed since the most recent previous investigation was closed. Among substantiated maltreatment investigations conducted in Ontario in 2023 that has a prior investigation, less than 12 months had passed since the previous investigation was closed in 59 percent of substantiated neglect investigations, 55 percent of substantiated emotional maltreatment investigations, 55 percent of substantiated physical abuse investigations, 54 percent of substantiated exposure to IPV investigations, and 39 substantiated percent of sexual abuse investigations. Substantiated emotional maltreatment and neglect investigations were the most likely to have had a previous investigation close within three months of the substantiated investigation conducted in 2023 (26% and 25%, respectively).

Table 2.

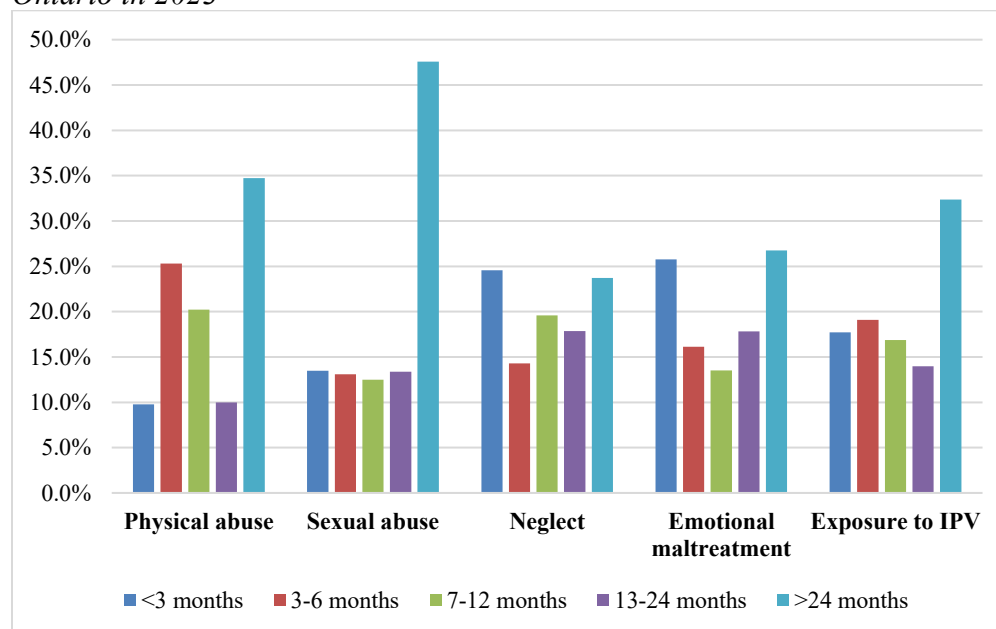
Time since previous investigation was closed by primary category of substantiated maltreatment in Ontario in 2023[^]

Primary Category of Substantiated Maltreatment												
	Physical Abuse		Sexual Abuse		Neglect		Emotional Maltreatment		Exposure to IPV		Total	
Time Since Previous Investigation Closure	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
< 3 Months	355	10	134	14	2,164	25	924	26	2,442	18	6,019	20
3-6 Months	919	25	130	13	1,259	14	579	16	2,629	19	5,516	18
7-12 Months	735	20	124	12	1,725	20	485	13	2,323	17	5,392	17
13-24 Months	362	10	133	13	1,574	18	640	18	1,926	14	4,635	15
> 24 Months	1,261	35	473	48	2,090	24	960	27	4,463	32	9,247	30
Total	3,632	100	994	100	8,812	100	3,588	100	13,783	100	30,809	100
[^] Based on a sample of 1,749 substantiated maltreatment investigations with information about time since previous investigation. This question was not applicable for a sample of 34 substantiated community caregiver investigations. Percentages are column percentages. Columns may not add to totals because of rounding.												

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

Figure 2

Time since case was previously closed 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 estimates 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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