

The Changing Face of Child Welfare Investigations in Ontario:

Ontario Incidence Studies of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (OIS 1993/1998)

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I ABSTRACT

The Changing Face of Child Welfare Investigations in Ontario: Ontario Incidence Studies of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (OIS 1993/1998) analyzes the changing profile of child welfare investigations in the province through a comparison between the *OIS 1993* and *OIS 1998*. These Ontario studies examine the incidence of reported child maltreatment and the characteristics of children and families investigated by the province's children's aid societies. Following a review of some of the recent changes that have been made to child welfare legislation, funding and procedures in Ontario, the *OIS 1993/1998* examines changes in the types and severity of investigated maltreatment, as well as the age and gender of investigated children, sources of referrals and outcomes of investigations.

Rates of substantiated maltreatment documented by the 1993 and 1998 Ontario incidence studies have doubled in the past five years. While increasing public awareness and changes in investigation procedures appear to account for part of this change, the increase also reflects a significant shift in the types of maltreatment being investigated and substantiated. Exposure to domestic violence has increased nine-fold and the proportion of neglect cases has more than doubled, while cases of sexual abuse are decreasing. A differentiated response is required to address the maltreatment-specific challenges underlying the child welfare caseload increases in Canada.

I RÉSUMÉ

The Changing Face of Child Welfare Investigations in Ontario: Ontario Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (OIS 1993/1998) fait l'analyse du profil changeant des évaluations de signalements en protection de l'enfance dans la province grâce à une comparaison entre l'*OIS 1993* et l'*OIS 1998*. Ces études ontariennes examinent l'incidence des mauvais traitements envers les enfants et les caractéristiques des enfants et des familles qui font l'objet d'évaluations de signalements de la part d'organisations provinciales d'aide à l'enfance. Suite à l'examen de quelques-unes des modifications récentes apportées à la législation en matière de protection de l'enfance, au financement et aux procédures en Ontario, l'*OIS 1993/1998* examine, pour chaque évaluation de signalement : les changements dans les types et dans la gravité des mauvais traitements, l'âge et le sexe des enfants, les sources de signalement et les résultats de l'évaluation.

Les taux de mauvais traitements corroborés dans les études ontariennes sur l'incidence de 1993 et de 1998 ont doublé au cours des cinq dernières années. Bien que la sensibilisation du public et les modifications dans les procédures d'évaluations des signalements semblent expliquer en partie ce changement, l'augmentation reflète aussi une modification importante au niveau des types de mauvais traitements évalués et corroborés. L'exposition à la violence conjugale a augmenté de neuf fois et la proportion des cas de négligence a plus que doublé, tandis que le nombre de cas d'abus sexuel est en baisse. Une réponse différenciée sera nécessaire pour faire face aux défis spécifiques à chaque type de mauvais traitement sous-jacent à la hausse des cas en protection de l'enfance au Canada.

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■ INTRODUCTION

The release of the *1998 Ontario Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (OIS 1998)*¹ provides a first opportunity to analyse the changing profile of child welfare investigations in the province through a comparison of the 1998 study with the 1993 *Ontario Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect*.² While both studies are limited to descriptions of investigation services that do not track service outcomes beyond the initial investigation, these studies nevertheless represent the most comprehensive source of information on children and families receiving child welfare services in Ontario. Following a review of some of the recent changes that have been made to child welfare legislation, funding and procedures in Ontario, this document examines changes in the types and severity of investigated maltreatment as well as the age and gender of investigated children, sources of reports and outcomes of investigations.

Approaches to child welfare services are changing in Ontario. From the mid 1970s to the mid 1990s, Ontario's child welfare system shifted from a service delivery system relying primarily on placing children in out-of-home care to a system relying increasingly on community-based family support services. In 1971, close to 18,000 children (6.1 per thousand children in the province) were placed in out-of-home care. During that same year, 29,000 families received child welfare services. By 1996, the number of children in care had dropped to 10,000 (3.7 per thousand children), while the number of families served had increased to over 128,000.³

In the wake of a series of inquests into the deaths of children who had been receiving child welfare services, the family support model came under criticism. In less than five years, the number of children in care has risen to over 16,000.⁴ While part of this increase can be attributed to an overall increase in the number of families receiving child welfare services, there is a growing sense that this dramatic change represents a shift away from a family centred model to an approach that places greater emphasis on immediate child safety. Comparison of data from the *OIS 1993* and the *OIS 1998* provides an opportunity to explore the nature of these changes.

1 Trocmé, N., Fallon, B., MacLaurin, B., Bartholomew, S., Ortiz, J., Thompson, J., Helfrich, W., & Daciuk, J. (2002). *The 1998 Ontario incidence study of reported child abuse and neglect (OIS 1998)*. Toronto: Centre of Excellence for Child Welfare, Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto.

2 Trocmé, N., McPhee, D., Tam, K.K., & Hay, T. (1994). *Ontario incidence study of reported child abuse and neglect (OIS 1993)*. Toronto: Institute for the Prevention of Child Abuse.

3 See Trocmé, N. (1991). Child welfare services. In D. Barnhorst, & L. Johnson (Eds.), *State of the child in Ontario*. Toronto: Oxford University Press; and Trocmé, N., Fallon, B., Nutter, B., MacLaurin, B., & Thompson, J. (1999). *Outcomes for child welfare services in Ontario*. Toronto: Bell Canada Child Welfare Research Unit, Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto.

4 See Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies' Web site: <http://www.oacas.org/resources/casstats.htm>

BACKGROUND

Child welfare services are delivered in Ontario through a provincially regulated system of children's aid societies⁵ (CASs). Each society is a private, non-profit organization that is responsible for child protection services within specific communities. Each CAS is operated by its own elected board of directors. Agencies are accountable to the Ministry of Community and Social Services for providing services as defined under the *Child and Family Services Amendment Act (Child Welfare Reform)*, 1999⁶ and accompanying regulations.

The 1984 *Child and Family Services Act*

When it was first introduced in 1984, the *Child and Family Services Act* (CFSA) marked an important shift in approaches to the provision of child welfare services. Replacing and harmonizing a number of pieces of legislation, the CFSA put greater emphasis on due process to ensure that the rights of all parties were taken into consideration. Consistent with the focus on family support services, the CFSA sought to balance the principles of “protection” and “best interests” with the principle of seeking where possible the “least intrusive intervention.” Relative to legislation in other jurisdictions, Ontario's CFSA was considered to represent a “legalistic and non-interventionist model,”⁷ in which family preservation shaped policy and practice. Children were to be placed in care only as a last resort.

Coroner's Inquests, Mortality Task Force and Panel of Experts

A series of high profile coroner's inquests into the deaths of children involved with child welfare services raised questions about the capacity of the province's child welfare system to adequately protect children at risk of maltreatment. A task force was established through the Officer of the Chief Coroner and the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies (OACAS) to review the circumstances of the children who died between January 1, 1994 and December 31, 1995.⁸ In early 1998, the Minister of Community and Social Services brought together a panel of experts to review the legislation.⁹

One of the core themes that arose from these various reviews was the need for amended legislation to place more emphasis on the primacy of child safety and well-being. Other recommendations included: the need for better information sharing; lowering the threshold for court ordered

5 At the time of the *OIS 1998* study, there were 54 children's aid societies registered with the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies. Four of these have since merged, reducing the membership number to 52.

6 *Child and Family Services Amendment Act (Child Welfare Reform)*, R.S.O., 1999, c. C.11. Also available online: http://192.75.156.68/DBLaws/Statutes/English/90c11_e.htm

7 Barnhorst, R. F. (Ed.). (1986). *Child protection legislation: Recent Canadian reform*. Toronto: Carswell Publishing.

8 Ontario Child Mortality Task Force. (1997). Ontario Child Mortality Task Force Final Report. [Special edition]. *OACAS Journal*, July 1997.

9 Hatton, M., Campbell, G., Colantoni, H., Ferron, R., Huyer, D., MacMillan, H., Ortiz, T., & Trocmé, N. (1998). *Protecting vulnerable children: Report of the Panel of Experts on child protection* (Ministry of Community and Social Services No. 160303) Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario.

intervention; strengthening court orders; streamlining court procedures; adequate staffing and training for child protection service workers and affiliated professionals; and raising public and professional awareness through educational campaigns and information dissemination.

Child Welfare Reform

In response to growing pressure to improve child welfare services, the Ministry of Community and Social Services initiated a series of changes that included the introduction of a common risk assessment model,¹⁰ amendments to the CFSA and increased funding under a new funding framework.

Risk Assessment Model

One of the implementation issues raised by the various calls for improvements in the delivery of child welfare services in Ontario was the lack of standardized approaches to service, inherent in the highly decentralized service delivery model that had developed across the province. The Ministry of Community and Social Services introduced a common risk assessment model¹¹ to standardize the approach to many critical child protection decisions across the province. Implemented in 1998, the model included a standard set of service eligibility criteria, a safety assessment tool and a risk assessment tool.¹²

Amendments to the CFSA

The *Child and Family Services Amendment Act (Child Welfare Reform) 1999*, enacted on March 31, 2000, amended the CFSA in several key areas:

- the paramount purpose of the Act, to promote the safety, well-being and best interests of children, was clarified;
- the inclusion of neglect as grounds for intervention was made more explicit;
- the threshold for intervention in cases involving “risk of likely harm” was clarified;
- a 12-month timeline was established for decisions involving children in care under the age of six;
- the duty to report provisions were clarified; and
- the Act became subject to a mandatory review at least every five years.

New Funding Framework

A new funding framework for the provision of child welfare services was initiated in 1998, with a three-year phase-in period. Funding is provided on the basis of service volume data and benchmarked averages. While

10 Ministry of Community and Social Services. (2000). *Risk assessment model for child protection in Ontario*. (Revised 2000). Toronto: Queen’s Printer for Ontario.

11 Trocmé, N., Mertins-Kirkwood, B., McFadden, R., Alaggia, R., & Goodman, D. (1999). *Ontario Risk Assessment Model (ORAM): Final report*. (Revised 1999). Toronto: Bell Canada Child Welfare Research Unit, Centre for Applied Social Research, University of Toronto.

12 Ibid.

the new framework helped to rebalance regional funding inequities, its impact on practice will need to be monitored. The new framework provided an infusion of funds to support hiring new child welfare staff.¹³

Fewer Supports for Families Living in Poverty

The two Ontario incidence studies span a period of significant change for the vulnerable children and families served by child welfare authorities. Since 1993, Ontario has been transformed by changes in social assistance, health care and the economy and the total impact on children and families has yet to be evaluated.

Employment insurance benefits and social assistance payments were reduced through eligibility changes and rate cuts. In 1995, provincial social assistance to families was reduced by 21.6%.¹⁴ Other programs designed to contribute to the overall economic and social stability and well-being of families, such as recreational services and subsidized day care, were also restructured.¹⁵ Affordable housing for families needing supplemental assistance has remained a constant environmental stressor. Families with children represent the largest population group among the homeless.¹⁶

While employment rates have increased, much of the growth has been in low-paying jobs that are not sufficient to sustain a family.¹⁷ Increased marginalization of already disadvantaged groups has occurred as the poverty gap has increased.¹⁸ These factors affect the lives of many families and children and therefore must be considered as an important ecological context for child protection services.

OIS 1998 and Systemic Change

Many of these legislative, economic and social changes coincided with the planning and implementation of the *OIS 1998* study (although it should be noted that the *Child and Family Services Amendment Act* was not enacted until March 31, 2000). It is therefore difficult to judge the impact of these changes on the findings. The *OIS 1998* provides a snapshot of the province's child welfare service delivery system in the midst of change. A follow-up study will be needed to assess the full impact of child welfare reform.

13 In 1998/99, child welfare expenditures totaled \$408.3 million, \$552.9 million in 1999/2000 and \$749.9 million in 2000/2001. Implementation of the funding framework was phased in over three years. The additional funding allowed CASs to hire child protection staff, supervisors, children in care workers, address the need for staff training and implement new technology. Funding allocations for CASs are calculated according to their service volume and the benchmarked averages built into the framework. (Source: Ministry of Community and Social Services, *Guide to Child Welfare Funding Framework*, pp. 8–9 & 59–60).

14 National Council of Welfare. (2001). *Welfare incomes, 2000 and 2001*. Ottawa, ON: Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada.

15 See Canadian Council on Social Development. (2001) *The progress of Canada's children 2001*. Ottawa, ON: Renouf Publishing; and National Council of Welfare. (2000). *Child poverty profile 1998*. Ottawa, ON: Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada.

16 See Mayor's Action Task Force on Homelessness. (1999). *Report of the Mayor's Action Task Force on Homelessness. Taking responsibility for homelessness: An action plan for Toronto*. Toronto: Author; and Cooper, M. (2001). *Housing affordability: A children's issue*. (CPRN Discussion Paper No. F-11) Ottawa, ON: Canadian Policy Research Networks.

17 See Heisz, A.A., Jackson, A., & Picot, G. (2002). *Winners and losers in the labour market of the 1990s*. (No. 184). Ottawa, ON: Statistics Canada, Analytical Studies Branch – Research Paper Series; and Morissette, R. & Drolet, M. (2000). *To what extent are Canadians exposed to low-income?* (No. 146). Ottawa, ON: Statistics Canada, Analytical Studies Branch – Research Paper Series.

18 Morissette, R., Zhang, X., & Drolet, M. (2002). *The evolution of wealth inequality in Canada, 1984–1999*. (No. 187). Ottawa, ON: Statistics Canada, Analytical Studies Branch – Research Paper Series; and Yalnizyan, A. (1998). *The growing gap: A report on the growing inequity between the rich and poor in Canada*. Toronto: Centre for Social Justice.

METHODOLOGY¹⁹

The two Ontario incidence studies of reported child abuse and neglect collected information directly from child welfare workers about a provincially representative sample of children investigated because of suspected child abuse or neglect. The *OIS 1993* was a stand-alone study, while the *OIS 1998* was conducted in conjunction with the *Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (CIS)*.²⁰ The *OIS 1993* collected data from a sample of 2,447 child maltreatment investigations reported between March and June 1993 from a random sample of 15 child welfare agencies. The *OIS 1998* tracked child maltreatment investigations conducted between October 1 and December 31, 1998 in a random sample of 13 child welfare service areas,²¹ yielding a sample of 3,053 child investigations. Both studies excluded incidents that were not reported to a CAS, reported cases that were screened out before being fully investigated, new reports on cases that were already open and cases that were reported only to the police.

Statistical Analyses

Provincial estimates were calculated by applying annualization and regionalization weights that reflected the sampling strategies used by the two studies. Estimates for rates of maltreatment are presented both as annual incidence rates per 1,000 children in Ontario in 1993 or 1998, as well as estimated counts of investigated children. To control for changes in the child population, all 1993 and 1998 comparisons are based on incidence rates. Weighted estimates are based on a sample of 2,447 child maltreatment investigations in the *OIS 1993* and 3,053 child maltreatment investigations in the *OIS 1998*, yielding an overall weighted estimate of 44,900 investigations in 1993 and 64,800 investigations in 1998.

Statistical significance was calculated using WesVar PC, a statistical analysis software package for surveys using weighted estimates. Statistical significance of differences in incidence rates were calculated using a t-test for independent samples, controlling for the standard errors of the estimates.

Limitations

Some caution is required in interpreting the study findings:

- Ratings provided by investigating workers could not be independently confirmed, specifically for types and level of maltreatment. These are not observable events, rather judgments made by the worker at the end of the investigation period.
- The 1993 and 1998 Ontario incidence studies comparison documents incidents that were reported to a child welfare authority. Child maltreatment not reported, reported only to the police or made about cases already being served by a child welfare agency are not included in the data.

¹⁹ For a more detailed discussion of the study methodologies see Trocmé, N. et al (2002) and Trocmé, N. et al (1994).

²⁰ Trocmé, N., MacLaurin, B., Fallon, B., Daciuk, J., Billingsley, D., Tourigny, M., Mayer, M., Wright, J., Bater, K., Burford, G., Hornick, J., Sullivan, R., & McKenzie, B. (2001). *Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect*. Ottawa, ON: National Clearinghouse on Family Violence.

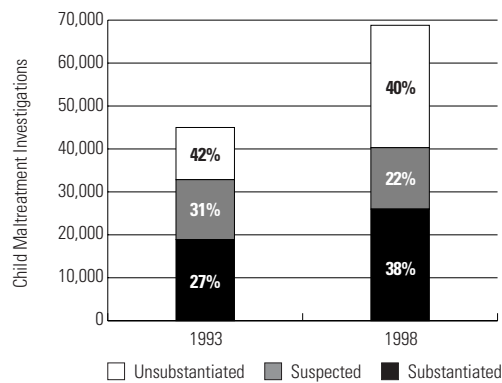
²¹ The 13 child welfare service areas in both studies included 15 CASs because some service areas include more than one agency.

- All analyses presented in this comparison document are adjusted to consider the study sampling designs and weighting methods. Comparisons between the statistics presented in the 1993 and 1998 OIS reports should not be made without using the appropriate statistical techniques that take into consideration the study designs.
- All analyses of investigations of substantiated maltreatment included investigations where the first, second or third form of maltreatment was substantiated. Most tables in the *OIS 1998*²² report are presented in terms of the primary form of maltreatment only. Therefore, the estimates for substantiated maltreatment in the figures and tables in the present report cannot be directly compared to the tables in the *OIS 1998*.

²² Trocmé, N. et al (2002).

CHILD MALTREATMENT INVESTIGATIONS

Figure 1
Child Maltreatment Investigations
by Level of Substantiation in Ontario,
1993/1998 (Weighted Estimates)²³



Source: Table 1

indicated that abuse or neglect did occur. A case was classified as suspected if there was not enough evidence to substantiate maltreatment but a suspicion remained that maltreatment had occurred. A case was classified as unsubstantiated if there was sufficient evidence to conclude that the child was not maltreated. It is important to note that most unsubstantiated investigations based on reports of suspected maltreatment were made in good faith out of a genuine concern for the child. Only 5% of investigations in 1998 were considered to have been false reports made with malicious intent.

The analyses in the subsequent section of this report focus on investigations of substantiated maltreatment.

Table 1
Child Maltreatment Investigations by Level of Substantiation in Ontario, 1993/1998

	1993		1998		Significance Level
	Number of Child Maltreatment Investigations	Rate per 1,000 Children	Number of Child Maltreatment Investigations	Rate per 1,000 Children	
Substantiated	12,300	5.6	24,400	10.3	p < .05
Suspected	13,700	6.2	14,300	6.1	ns
Unsubstantiated	18,900	8.6	26,100	11.1	ns
Total Investigations	44,900	20.5	64,800	27.5	ns

Note: Estimates rounded to nearest 100. Number of child maltreatment investigations based on a sample of 2,447 child maltreatment investigations in 1993 and 3,053 child maltreatment investigations in 1998. Significance tests compare the 1993 incidence rates to the 1998 incidence rates.

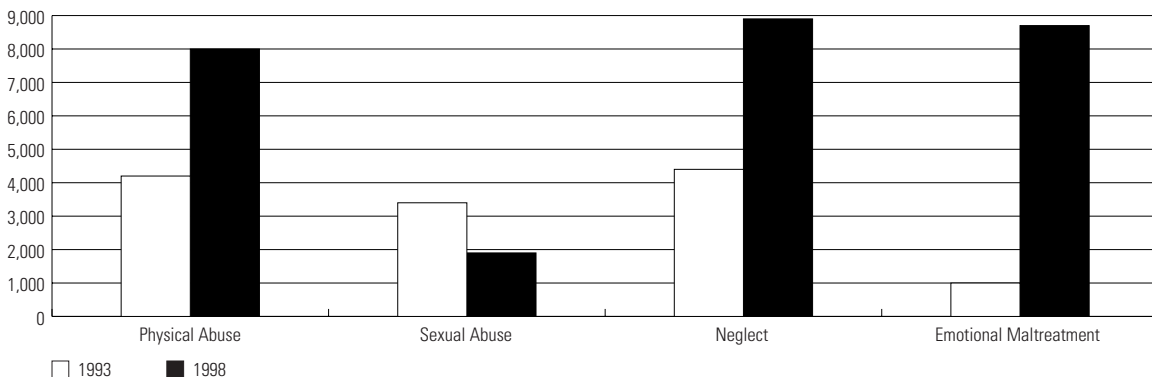
²³ Note: Weighted estimates based on a sample of 2,447 child maltreatment investigations in 1993 and 3,053 child maltreatment investigations in 1998.

FORMS OF SUBSTANTIATED MALTREATMENT

The *OIS 1993* classified investigations in terms of 17 possible forms of maltreatment, subsumed under four major categories: physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect and emotional maltreatment. A similar maltreatment classification system was used in the *OIS 1998*, with six new forms of maltreatment added to account for the scope of the larger national CIS. Both studies allowed for the documentation of up to three forms of maltreatment for each child maltreatment investigation. The primary form of maltreatment was the central concern of the investigation.

The increase in substantiated maltreatment documented by the *OIS 1993* and the *OIS 1998* varies considerably by form of maltreatment. The estimated number of substantiated investigations of emotional maltreatment increased nearly nine-fold, from 1,000 investigations in 1993 to 8,700 investigations in 1998. The estimated number of substantiated investigations of neglect and physical abuse nearly doubled while the estimated number of investigations of substantiated sexual abuse decreased 49%. Tables 2 to 5 provide a more detailed breakdown of the changes by specific form of maltreatment.

Figure 2
Forms of Substantiated Maltreatment in Ontario, 1993/1998



Source: Tables 2a–2d

Physical Abuse

The estimated number of substantiated investigations of physical abuse increased significantly, from 4,200 investigations in 1993 to 8,000 investigations in 1998. Most of these investigations involved physical abuse caused by inappropriate punishment. In 1998, 23% of all substantiated investigations of child maltreatment involved physical abuse due to inappropriate punishment. These statistics emphasize the importance of public education about appropriate forms of discipline. This is particularly significant with the potential for confusion that may result from interpretations of Section 43 of the *Criminal Code* of Canada that allows for the use of force against children “if the force does not exceed what is reasonable under the circumstance.”²⁴

24 *Criminal Code*, R.S., c. C-34, s. 43. Also available online: <http://laws.justice.gc.ca/en/C-46/38291.html#section-43>

Table 2a
Forms of Substantiated Physical Abuse in Ontario, 1993/1998

	1993		1998		Significance Level
	Number of Child Maltreatment Investigations	Rate per 1,000 Children	Number of Child Maltreatment Investigations	Rate per 1,000 Children	
Shaken Baby Syndrome	na	na	100	0.1	—
Inappropriate Punishment	3,300	1.8	5,700	2.4	ns
Other Physical Abuse	900	0.2	2,300	1.0	p < .05
Any Physical Abuse	4,200	1.9	8,000	3.4	p < .05
Note: Estimates rounded to the nearest 100. Rows may add up to more than total because of investigations involving multiple forms of maltreatment. Significance tests compare the 1993 incidence rate to the 1998 incidence rate. Number of child maltreatment investigations based on a sample of 648 substantiated child maltreatment investigations in 1993 and 1,113 substantiated child maltreatment investigations in 1998.					

Sexual Abuse

In sharp contrast, the estimated number of substantiated sexual abuse investigations decreased by 44%, from 3,400 investigations in 1993 to 1,900 investigations in 1998. This decrease is consistent with decreases reported across the United States.²⁵ Such a dramatic decrease requires careful analysis. While it could indicate that sexual abuse prevention programs and charging policies have acted to effectively deter sexual abusers, it is also possible that victims and their parents might be less willing to disclose and report abuse.

Table 2b
Forms of Substantiated Sexual Abuse in Ontario, 1993/1998

	1993		1998		Significance Level
	Number of Child Maltreatment Investigations	Rate per 1,000 Children	Number of Child Maltreatment Investigations	Rate per 1,000 Children	
Sexual Activity Attempted or Completed	900	0.4	1,000	0.4	ns
Touching/Fondling Genitals	2,100	0.9	1,100	0.5	p < .05
Exposure of Genitals	200	0.1	300	0.1	ns
Sexual Abuse: Other Sexual Activities	400	0.2	200	0.1	p < .05
Any Sexual Abuse	3,400	1.6	1,900	0.8	p < .05
Note: Estimates rounded to the nearest 100. Rows may add up to more than total because of investigations involving multiple forms of maltreatment. Significance tests compare the 1993 incidence rate to the 1998 incidence rate. Number of child maltreatment investigations based on a sample of 648 substantiated child maltreatment investigations in 1993 and 1,113 substantiated child maltreatment investigations in 1998.					

Neglect

Estimated numbers of substantiated neglect doubled in the five years intervening between the studies, from 4,400 investigations in 1993 to 8,900 investigations in 1998. Increases were noted for all forms of neglect, with statistically significant increases for child maltreatment investigations involving inadequate supervision, medical neglect and permitting maladaptive or criminal behaviour.

25 Jones, A. M., Finkelhor, D., & Kopiec, K. (2001). Why is sexual abuse declining? A survey of state child protection administrators. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 25, 1139–1158.

Table 2c
Forms of Substantiated Neglect in Ontario, 1993/1998

	1993		1998		Significance Level
	Number of Child Maltreatment Investigations	Rate per 1,000 Children	Number of Child Maltreatment Investigations	Rate per 1,000 Children	
Failure to Supervise	1,900	0.9	5,200	2.2	p < .05
Physical Neglect	1,500	0.7	1,800	0.8	ns
Medical Neglect	200	0.1	900	0.4	p < .05
Failure to Provide Treatment	200	0.1	200	0.1	ns
Permitting Maladaptive / Criminal Behaviour	100	0.0	900	0.4	p < .05
Abandonment	600	0.3	900	0.4	ns
Educational Neglect	200	0.1	400	0.2	ns
Any Neglect	4,400	2.0	8,900	3.8	p < .05

Note: Estimates rounded to the nearest 100. Rows may add up to more than total because of investigations involving multiple forms of maltreatment. Significance tests compare the 1993 incidence rate to the 1998 incidence rate. Number of child maltreatment investigations based on a sample of 648 substantiated child maltreatment investigations in 1993 and 1,113 substantiated child maltreatment investigations in 1998.

Emotional Maltreatment and Exposure to Domestic Violence

The most dramatic increase in the last five years has been with respect to investigations of emotional maltreatment. A nearly nine-fold increase brought the estimated number of substantiated investigations of emotional maltreatment from 1,000 investigations in 1993 to 8,700 investigations in 1998. Emotional maltreatment investigations went from being recorded for 8% of victims to 36% of victims.

It is important to note that this increase has been largely driven by investigations involving exposure to domestic violence, a category not specifically included in the 1993 study. Since 1993, six provinces (but not Ontario) have added exposure to domestic violence as a category of maltreatment requiring investigation. Although exposure to domestic violence is not included in Ontario's CFSA, the dramatic increase in domestic violence investigations requires the development of services and inter-agency protocols designed to meet the needs of these children without further compromising the victimized parent.

Table 2d
Forms of Substantiated Emotional Maltreatment in Ontario, 1993/1998

	1993		1998		Significance Level
	Number of Child Maltreatment Investigations	Rate per 1,000 Children	Number of Child Maltreatment Investigations	Rate per 1,000 Children	
Emotional Abuse	800	0.4	2,400	1.0	ns
Non-organic Failure to Thrive	—	0.0	—	0.0	ns
Emotional Neglect	100	0.1	1,100	0.5	*
Exposed to Domestic Violence*	—	—	5,900	2.5	—
Any Emotional Maltreatment	1,000	0.4	8,700	3.7	*

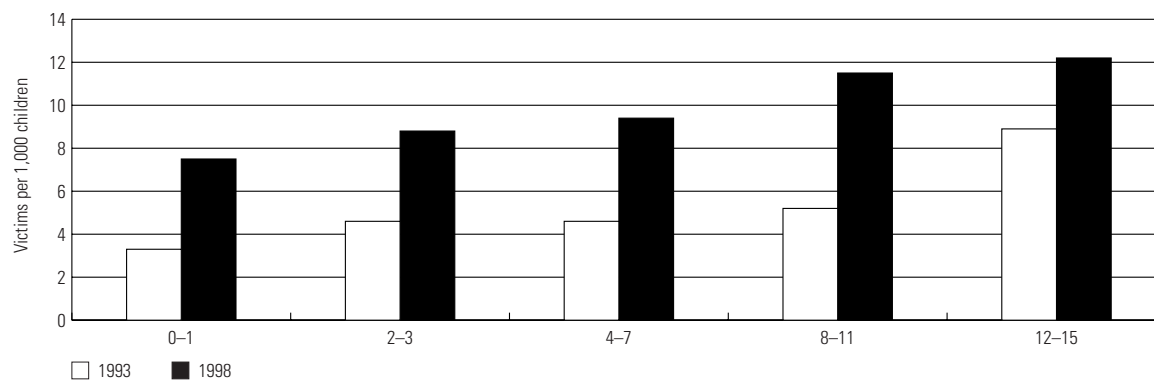
Note: Estimates rounded to the nearest 100. Rows may add up to more than total because of investigations involving multiple forms of maltreatment. Significance tests compare the 1993 incidence rate to the 1998 incidence rate. Number of child maltreatment investigations based on a sample of 648 substantiated child maltreatment investigations in 1993 and 1,113 substantiated child maltreatment investigations in 1998.

* Exposure to domestic violence was subsumed under an "other maltreatment" category in 1993, at which time an insufficient number of investigations were documented to allow for province-wide estimates to be calculated.

VICTIM AGE

Rates of substantiated maltreatment more than doubled for children under age 12 between the *OIS 1993* and the *OIS 1998*, while the increase was less pronounced for adolescents (Figure 3). Despite these changes, 12- to 15-year-olds remained the largest maltreated group. In 1998, 29% of maltreatment investigations concerned 12- to 15-year-olds.

Figure 3
Child Age in Substantiated Child Maltreatment Investigations in Ontario, 1993/1998



Source: Table 3

Table 3
Child Age in Substantiated Child Maltreatment Investigations in Ontario, 1993/1998

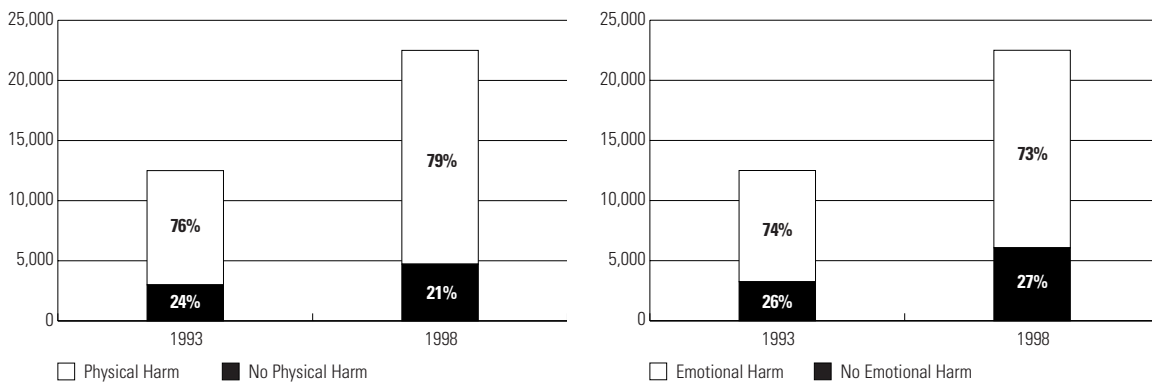
	1993		1998		Significance Level
	Number of Child Maltreatment Investigations	Rate per 1,000 Children	Number of Child Maltreatment Investigations	Rate per 1,000 Children	
0-1 years	1,000	3.3	2,200	7.7	p < .05
2-3 years	1,300	4.6	2,600	8.8	p < .05
4-7 years	2,600	4.6	5,700	9.4	ns
8-11 years	2,800	5.2	6,800	11.5	p < .05
12-15 years	4,700	8.9	7,000	12.2	ns
Total Substantiated maltreatment	12,300	5.6	24,400	10.3	p < .05

Note: Estimates rounded to the nearest 100. Rows may add up to more than total because of investigations involving multiple forms of maltreatment. Significance tests compare the 1993 incidence rate to the 1998 incidence rate. Number of child maltreatment investigations based on a sample of 648 substantiated child maltreatment investigations in 1993 and 1,113 substantiated child maltreatment investigations in 1998.

PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL HARM

The OIS 1993 and OIS 1998 tracked whether physical or emotional harm was documented during the investigation. The estimated number of children who suffered physical harm nearly doubled, from 3,000 children in 1993 to 5,100 children in 1998. While the increase in physically harmed children was significant, the actual proportion of investigations documenting an injury or other physical harm decreased from 24% in 1993 to 21% in 1998 (Figure 4).

Figure 4
Physical and Emotional Harm in Substantiated Child Maltreatment Investigations in Ontario, 1993/1998



Source: Table 4

Most child maltreatment investigations where physical harm was documented involved minor injuries, primarily bruises, cuts or scrapes, which did not require medical attention. Severe injuries, including broken bones and head trauma, were documented in less than 4% of substantiated investigations in 1998.²⁶

Table 4
Physical and Emotional Harm in Substantiated Child Maltreatment Investigations in Ontario, 1993/1998

	1993		1998		Significance Level
	Number of Child Maltreatment Investigations	Rate per 1,000 Children	Number of Child Maltreatment Investigations	Rate per 1,000 Children	
Any Physical Harm	3,000	1.4	5,100	2.2	p < .05
Any Emotional Harm	3,100	1.4	6,500	2.8	p < .05
Total Substantiated Maltreatment	12,300	5.6	24,400	10.3	p < .05

Note: Estimates rounded to the nearest 100. Rows may add up to more than total because of investigations involving multiple forms of maltreatment. Significance tests compare the 1993 incidence rate to the 1998 incidence rate. Number of child maltreatment investigations based on a sample of 648 substantiated child maltreatment investigations in 1993 and 1,113 substantiated child maltreatment investigations in 1998.

²⁶ See OIS 1998, Table 4-1(c).

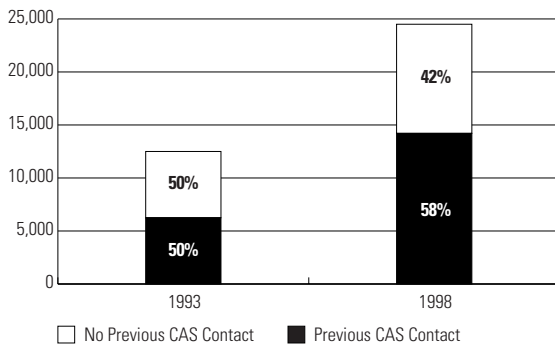
Emotional harm was documented in over a quarter of substantiated investigations both in 1993 and 1998. The number of emotionally harmed children more than doubled. Unlike physical harm that primarily involves minor injuries, nearly half of the investigations where emotional harm was noted were considered to be severe cases requiring some type of professional intervention (e.g., trauma counselling).²⁷

²⁷ See *OIS 1998*, Table 4-2.

■ RECURRENCE AND DURATION OF MALTREATMENT

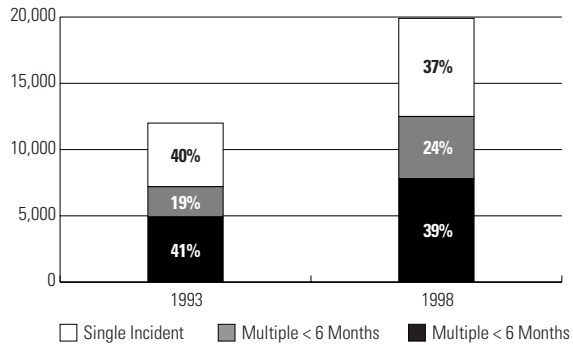
The number of child maltreatment investigations with families who had previously been involved with a children's aid society increased 129% from 6,200 in 1993 to 14,200 in 1998. Over half (58%) of substantiated child maltreatment investigations noted previous family contact with a children's aid society. While previous contact does not necessarily mean that the child had been maltreated (previous investigation may have been unsubstantiated or involved a sibling) this significant increase represents an important indicator to monitor the extent to which children are being effectively protected.

Figure 5a
Substantiated Child Maltreatment Investigations with Previous CAS contact in Ontario, 1993/1998



Source: Table 5

Figure 5b
Duration of Maltreatment in Substantiated Child Maltreatment Investigations in Ontario, 1993/1998



Source: Table 5

The number of child maltreatment investigations involving multiple incidents of maltreatment also increased, from 6,700 to 12,300. Two-thirds of victims in 1998 were subjected to multiple incidents of maltreatment, most of these occurring over a period of more than six months.

Table 5
Duration and Recurrence of Maltreatment in Substantiated Child Maltreatment Investigations in Ontario, 1993/1998

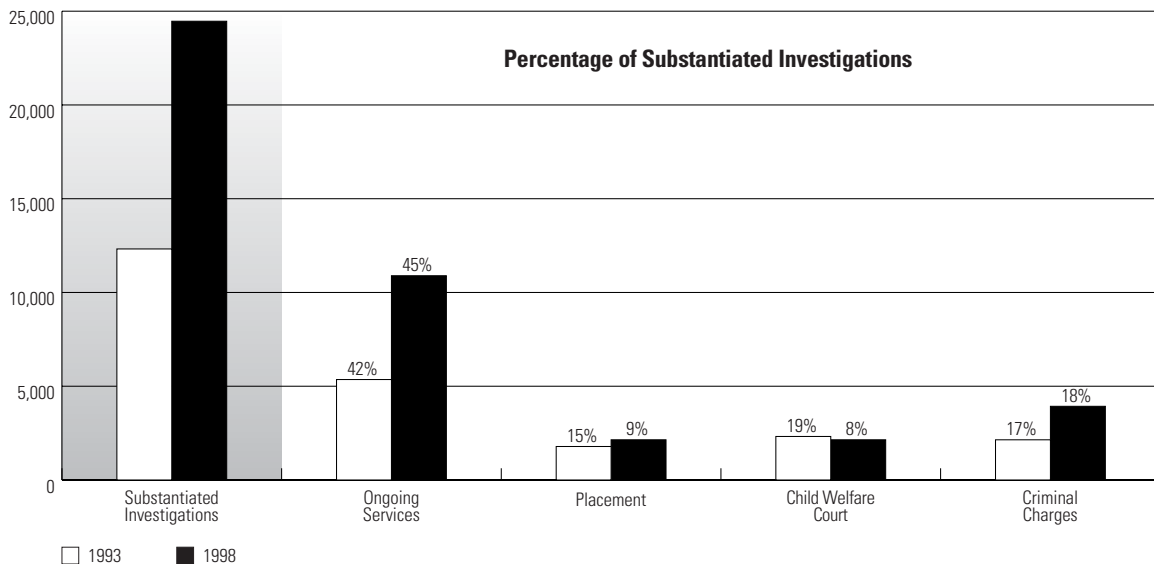
	1993		1998		Significance Level
	Number of Child Maltreatment Investigations	Rate per 1,000 Children	Number of Child Maltreatment Investigations	Rate per 1,000 Children	
Previous CAS Contact	6,200	2.8	14,200	6.0	p < .05
Duration of Maltreatment					
Single Incident	4,600	2.1	7,600	3.2	ns
Multiple Incidents: < 6 Months	2,100	1.0	4,700	2.0	p < .05
Multiple Incidents: > 6 Months	4,600	2.1	7,700	3.3	ns
Total Substantiated Maltreatment	12,300	5.6	24,400	10.3	p < .05

Note: Estimates rounded to the nearest 100. Due to missing data on duration of maltreatment, rows add up to less than the total number of substantiated investigations. Significance tests compare the 1993 incidence rate to the 1998 incidence rate. Number of child maltreatment investigations based on a sample of 648 substantiated child maltreatment investigations in 1993 and 1,113 substantiated child maltreatment investigations in 1998.

OUTCOMES OF INVESTIGATIONS

Between 1993 and 1998, the number of child maltreatment investigations that received ongoing services beyond the initial investigation doubled, rising from 5,200 to 10,900. By 1998, a little under half (45%) of all substantiated investigations were kept open for service. The *OIS 1993* and *OIS 1998* also tracked placement and court activities that occurred during the investigations. It should be noted that these do not include placement and court activities that took place *after* the completion of the investigation.

Figure 6
Investigation Outcomes for Substantiated Child Maltreatment Investigations in Ontario, 1993/1998



Source: Table 6

As shown in Figure 6 and Table 6, there was little change from 1993 to 1998 in the number of child maltreatment investigations that resulted in a placement in care or an application to child welfare court. Given the dramatic increase in investigations of substantiated maltreatment, this means that the proportion of substantiated investigations resulting in placement or application to child welfare court actually decreased, from 15% to 9% and from 19% to 8% respectively. It is important to note that since 1998, the rate of placement in care has increased dramatically. After a period of relative stability in admissions to care, the number of children in care has increased from an average of 10,000 on any given day, to over 16,000.²⁸

The number of investigations leading to criminal charges nearly doubled between 1993 and 1998. In 1998, criminal charges were laid in an estimated 4,000 investigations of substantiated maltreatment, primarily involving physical and sexual abuse.

²⁸ See Trocmé, N. et al (1999); and Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies' Web site: <http://www.oacas.org/resources/casstats.htm>

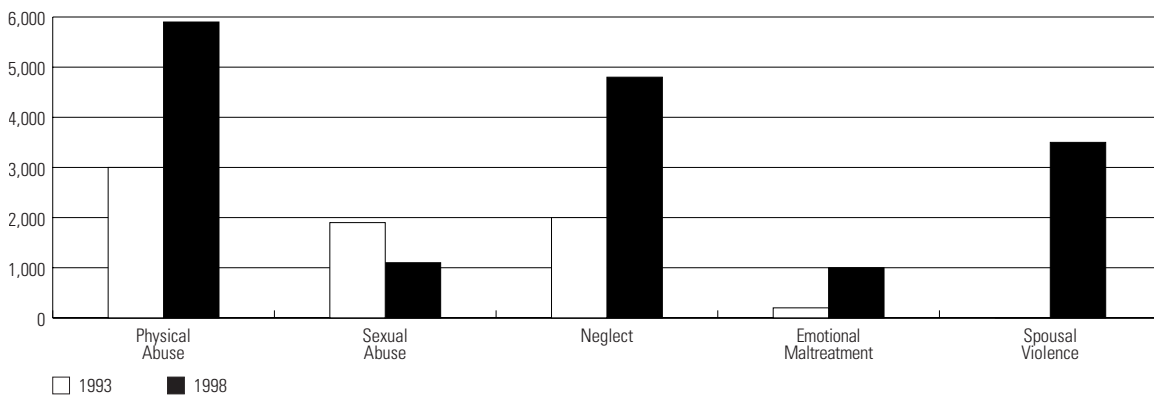
Table 6
Investigation Outcomes for Substantiated Maltreatment in Child Maltreatment Investigations in Ontario, 1993/1998

	1993		1998		Significance Level
	Number of Child Maltreatment Investigations	Rate per 1,000 Children	Number of Child Maltreatment Investigations	Rate per 1,000 Children	
Case to Stay Open for Ongoing Services	5,200	2.4	10,900	4.6	p < .05
Child Welfare Placement	1,800	0.8	2,200	0.9	ns
Child Welfare Court Application	2,300	1.1	2,000	0.9	ns
Police Investigation	5,000	2.3	6,200	2.6	ns
Charges Laid	2,100	1.0	4,000	1.7	p < .05
Total Substantiated Investigations	12,300	5.6	24,400	10.3	p < .05
<p>Note: Estimates rounded to the nearest 100. Rows may add up to more than total because of investigations involving multiple forms of maltreatment. Significance tests compare the 1993 incidence rate to the 1998 incidence rate. Number of child maltreatment investigations based on a sample of 648 substantiated child maltreatment investigations in 1993 and 1,113 substantiated child maltreatment investigations in 1998.</p>					

SOURCE OF REFERRALS

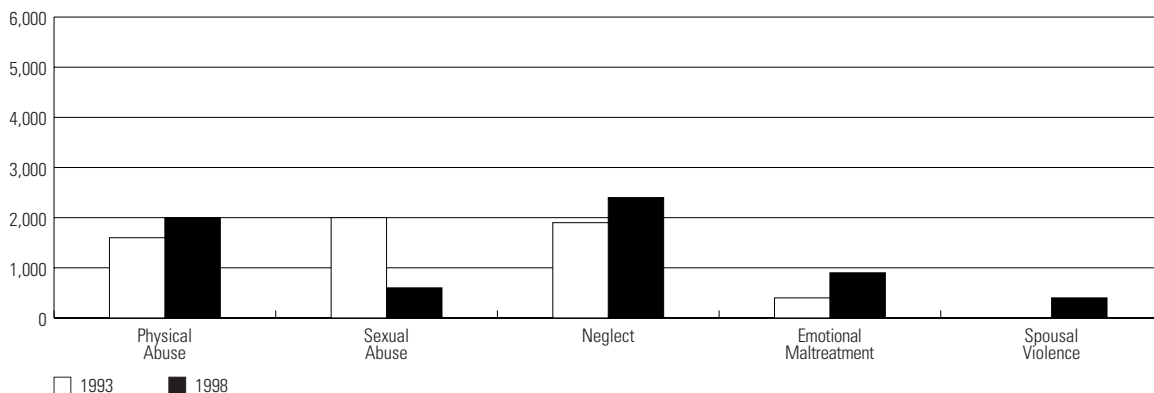
Figures 7a and 7b examine the relationship between the major forms of substantiated maltreatment and sources of referrals. Professional referrals are compared with referrals from parents, relatives, family acquaintances and children as self-referrals. Professionals accounted for referrals in over 80% of substantiated investigations of exposure to domestic violence. In investigations of sexual abuse, reports from both professionals and other sources decreased significantly. Referrals of sexual abuse from parents, children, relatives and family acquaintances decreased by 70%.

Figures 7a
Reports from Professionals in Substantiated Child Maltreatment Investigations in Ontario, 1993/1998



Source: OIS 1998, Table 8-1

Figures 7b
Reports from Family, Relatives or Acquaintances in Substantiated Child Maltreatment Investigations in Ontario, 1993/1998



Source: OIS 1998, Table 8-1

Note: Estimates rounded to the nearest 100. Number of child maltreatment investigations based on a sample of 648 substantiated child maltreatment investigations in 1993 and 1,113 substantiated child maltreatment investigations in 1998. Exposure to domestic violence was subsumed under an "other maltreatment" category in 1993, at which time an insufficient number of investigations were documented to allow for province-wide estimates to be calculated.

■ WHY ARE CHILD WELFARE CASELOADS INCREASING?

Understanding the changing face of child welfare investigations is an important first step in assessing the impact of changes to child welfare services, legislation, policies and procedures in Ontario. Does the increased number of domestic violence-related cases mean that professionals and the public are beginning to recognize an underreported problem? Or does it indicate that domestic violence is a growing problem in Ontario? Is the decrease in reported child sexual abuse as a result of the success of prevention programs and a focused criminal charging strategy? Or is it evidence that children have become increasingly reluctant to disclose sexual abuse because the child welfare and criminal justice response is too aggressive? Findings from the 1993 and 1998 Ontario incidence studies offer some possible explanations, although further analyses and, more importantly, ongoing tracking of this type of data, will be required before the full impact of these findings can be understood.

Why are Caseloads Increasing?

Between 1993 and 1998, the Ontario incidence studies tracked a 44% increase in the estimated number of maltreatment investigations and a doubling of the estimated number of substantiated investigations. Three primary reasons can be proposed to explain such an increase: (1) an actual increase in the number of children being abused or neglected, (2) improved detection and reporting leading to more cases being reported to CASs, and (3) lowering the investigation threshold, leading to more reports being followed through on and more investigations being substantiated. Our analysis indicates that a combination of the three factors is likely to be at play, with changes in professionals' responses to neglect and domestic violence being a central factor.

Increase in the Number of Maltreated Children

The most troubling possible explanation for increasing child welfare caseloads is that despite intervention and prevention efforts, more children are being abused and neglected than before. There is no simple way to test this explanation by using statistics on reported child maltreatment since, by definition, these statistics do not track unreported cases. While some attempts have been made to track unreported cases in the United States²⁹ and in Quebec,³⁰ similar surveys have not been conducted in Ontario.³¹ Without direct evidence of an increase in maltreatment, researchers typically look for changes in other indicators that are known to be associated with rates of maltreatment. Low income, poor housing and lack of social supports are three of the key factors that have been shown to be associated with higher rates of maltreatment in some neighbourhoods.³² The changes in the income support programs and decreased availability of social

29 Straus MA, & Gelles RJ (1999). *Physical violence in American families: Risk factors and adaptations to violence in 18,145 families*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.

30 Lavallée C, Clarkson M, & Chénard L. *Conduites à caractère violent dans la résolution de conflits entre proches*. (1996). Montreal, QC: Ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux, gouvernement du Québec.

31 Furthermore, changes in abusive or neglectful behaviours as reported by parents in anonymous surveys are complicated to interpret, given the possibility that self-disclosure may be influenced by changing public attitudes about the appropriateness of various parenting techniques.

32 See for example Drake, B., & Pandey, S. (1996). Understanding the relationship between neighbourhood poverty and specific types of child maltreatment. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 20, (11), 1003–1018; and Garbarino, J., & Sherman, D. (1980). High-risk neighbourhoods and high-risk families: The human ecology of child maltreatment. *Child Development*, 51, (1): 188–198.

housing in Ontario between 1993 and 1998 lend some support to the argument that poor families are under more stress than ever before and may be experiencing more parenting difficulties.

Improved Detection and Reporting

Improved detection and reporting are the factors that most researchers have favoured in explaining increases in rates of investigated maltreatment. Child welfare caseloads have increased fourfold in Ontario over the last 30 years.³³ Such a long-term increase cannot be attributed to a corresponding 30-year deterioration in conditions for families in Ontario. Mandatory reporting laws, growing public awareness and training for professionals who come into contact with children are generally attributed to the overall increase in reported child maltreatment.

Two particular findings from the *OIS 1993* and *OIS 1998* comparison lend significant weight to the improved detection and reporting explanation. The first is that the increase in caseloads is primarily driven by increases in reports made by professionals, while there has been little change in the numbers of reports made by family members, neighbours and acquaintances. If the overall number of maltreated children has increased dramatically, one would expect that reports from families, neighbours and acquaintances would have increased to the same degree as reports from professionals.

The second relevant finding is that the increase in investigations is driven in large part by investigations of neglect and exposure to domestic violence, two types of maltreatment that have drawn attention in the latter half of the decade. Particular attention has been given recently to child neglect in Ontario, as reflected in the changes that were made to the CFSA³⁴ and by the introduction of neglect-specific eligibility standards in the provincial risk assessment model. As with the recognition of sexual abuse in the 1980s, there is growing awareness of the harmful effects on children of exposure to domestic violence.³⁵ Although this form of maltreatment is not specifically addressed in the CFSA, a number of organizations have adopted policies of systematically reporting these cases to the CAS. It is noteworthy that nearly all the investigations involving domestic violence tracked in the *OIS 1998* were reported by professionals.

Lower Investigation and Substantiation Threshold

A third possible reason for the overall caseload increase is that investigation and substantiation standards may have changed. According to this argument, reports that would not have been investigated in 1993 may be more likely to be investigated in 1998. Likewise, investigations that were considered unsubstantiated in 1993 may be more likely to be substantiated in 1998. Such a change would reflect a lowering in the threshold for investigation and substantiation. The increase in substantiation rates from 27% to 38% would certainly support this argument. Such a change is consistent with changes to the CFSA, including

33 Trocmé, N. et al (1999).

34 See the Background section of this report for a summary of these changes.

35 See for example Henning, K., Leitenberg, H., Coffey, P., Turner, T., & Bennett, R.T. (1996). Long-term psychological and social impact of witnessing physical conflict between parents. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 11, 35–51; Hughes, H., & Luke, D. (1998). Heterogeneity in adjustment among children of battered women. In G. W. Holden, R. Geffner, & E. N. Jouriles (Eds.), *Children exposed to marital violence*. (pp. 185–221). Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association; and Silvern, L., Karyl, J., Waelde, L., Hodges, W.F., Starek, J., Heidt, E., & Min, K. (1995). Retrospective reports of parental partner abuse: Relationships to depression, trauma symptoms and self-esteem among college students. *Journal of Family Violence*, 10, 177–202.

(1) lowering the threshold for finding a child in need of protection from “substantial risk” of harm to “significant likelihood” of harm, and (2) adding specific reference to chronic patterns of neglect as grounds for intervention. The introduction of a new funding formula and of the standardized province-wide risk assessment model may also have led to shifts in investigation and substantiation standards.³⁶

A number of other findings, however, point to a more complex set of factors. If the increase in substantiated investigations were due only to a lower intervention threshold, one would expect that the increase would be primarily driven by an influx of less severe cases. In fact, the number of investigations involving physical harm and the number of investigations involving emotional harm have both increased significantly.³⁷ Two other key indicators fail to support the lower threshold argument. First, the proportion of re-opened cases has increased; in other words, more families are becoming re-involved with the child welfare system, an indication that rates of recidivism may be increasing and child maltreatment may be becoming more severe rather than less. Second, the police are laying criminal charges in a larger proportion of child welfare investigations, another indication of the increasing severity of child maltreatment.

More Children and Families Needing Help

In summary, the increases in investigated and substantiated child maltreatment appear to reflect a number of factors, including: (1) growing awareness among professionals of the negative effects of child neglect and exposure to domestic violence; (2) parallel shifts in substantiation standards that include a broader spectrum of maltreatment investigations; and (3) increased stress experienced by families living in poverty. Regardless of the cause, however, this increase brings to public attention a larger number of children whose protection and well-being require services and supports that CASs are unlikely to be able to meet on their own.

Why are Sexual Abuse Cases Decreasing?

In contrast to the increase in rates of substantiated physical abuse, neglect and exposure to domestic violence, the *OIS 1998* has documented a significant decrease in rates of sexual abuse. A similar decline has been noted in the United States where rates of substantiated sexual abuse have dropped by an average of 39% between 1992 and 1999.³⁸ The scope and consistency of this decrease requires careful analysis of the factors causing the decrease. The decrease could be caused by an actual decrease in the sexual victimization of children. Such a decrease would be an encouraging result after 25 years of public awareness campaigns, prevention programs and an aggressive criminal charging policy. An equally likely explanation, however, is that the decrease can be attributed to a growing reluctance on the part of victims to disclose abuse or hesitancy on the part of the non-offending parent(s) to make a report.

Untangling the explanation for the decrease in sexual abuse investigations has critical service and policy implications. An actual decrease in victimization would be an important affirmation of the effectiveness of our response to sexual abuse. However, increased reluctance to disclose and report

³⁶ See the Background section of this report for a summary of these changes.

³⁷ As shown in Figure 4, while the number of physical harm investigations has increased, the proportion of investigations involving harm has decreased slightly from 24% to 21%, a statistically insignificant decrease.

³⁸ Jones, A.M., Finkelhor, D., & Kopiec, K. (2001). Why is sexual abuse declining? A survey of state child protection administrators. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 25, 1139–1158.

would lead to the opposite conclusion, namely that stigmatization of the offender and criminal charging policies may be contributing to the suppression of child sexual abuse reports.

Because of the urgency of this question, a number of research groups are engaged in the analysis of the decrease in sexual abuse investigations.³⁹ The decrease documented in Ontario by the *OIS 1998* appears to be driven primarily by a decrease in investigations involving sexual touching and fondling, whereas the number of investigations involving intercourse or attempted intercourse has remained the same. Further analyses of these changes are underway to support efforts at understanding this important trend.

³⁹ Jones, L., & Finkelhor, D. (2001). *The decline in child sexual abuse cases*. Washington, D.C.: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice. (See Table 2b of this report for a comparison with the decline in

■ CONCLUSION

Child welfare caseloads are increasing across Ontario. Underlying the overall caseload increase is a significant shift in the types of maltreatment being investigated and substantiated. Exposure to domestic violence has increased nearly nine-fold and the proportion of neglect investigations has more than doubled, while investigations of sexual abuse are decreasing. The two Ontario incidence studies only provide partial explanations for the changes that have occurred between 1993 and 1998; however, the findings from these two snapshots point to two sets of issues: (1) the importance of a differential response that takes into greater consideration the issues specific to different forms for maltreatment, and (2) greater consideration needs to be given to the services and supports that can be effectively provided, beyond reporting to CASs.

A differential service response⁴⁰ is required. In response to the growing recognition and reporting of exposure to domestic violence, child welfare agencies need to develop services tailored to the complex needs of these families and intervention strategies that do not further victimize mothers caught in violent relationships. Long hidden by service statistics that focused primarily on documenting abuse, child neglect has only recently emerged as a service priority in Ontario. The chronic nature of neglect and its negative long-term effects on child emotional and cognitive development require service and support strategies that go beyond short-term protection of child safety. The large proportion of physical abuse investigations involving inappropriate punishment raises questions about the need for broad-based public education strategies aimed at encouraging more effective parenting strategies. The decrease in sexual abuse needs to be examined carefully. Is the decrease the positive outcome of the unique prevention efforts made for this type of maltreatment or is it the result of child welfare and criminal justice systems that have not been responsive enough to the needs of sexually abused children? The development of effective practice and policy responses hinges on pursuing these questions further and responding to each form of maltreatment on its own terms.

Notwithstanding the importance of developing maltreatment specific services, the overall increase in child welfare caseloads brings to public attention a growing number of children whose protection and well-being require services and supports that CASs are unlikely to be able to provide in isolation. Exposure to domestic violence is a case in point. Increased awareness of the problem leading to more reports to CASs is only a solution if CAS investigations lead to effective services. Unfortunately, there is little indication that reports to CASs are leading to such a response. Documentation of the effectiveness of CAS services in Ontario continues to be limited.⁴¹ Relevant indicators available through the Ontario incidence studies of reported child abuse and neglect are not encouraging: less than half of all substantiated child maltreatment investigations and less than a third of all investigated

⁴⁰ For further discussion see Waldfogel, J. (1998). *Differential response: A new paradigm for child protection*. In J. Waldfogel (Ed.), *The future of child protection: How to break the cycle of abuse and neglect*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

⁴¹ While the province is planning to develop an outcome tracking system, currently there is no province-wide system for tracking outcomes for children receiving CAS services. Basic indicators (such as rates of recidivism, average number of out-of-home placements and educational achievements) for children in care are not currently being tracked.

investigations received ongoing services in 1998, while the proportion of substantiated investigations that had previous CAS contact increased from 50% in 1993 to 58% in 1998. Faced with rapidly increasing caseloads, a dramatic increase in the number of children placed in out-of-home care and limited capacity to provide services to all the children and families who need them, it is increasingly clear that we need to expand child welfare reform beyond CASs to include the development of better integrated community-based models of services and supports.

■ NOTES



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