



Police Involvement in Child Maltreatment Investigations in Ontario in 2018

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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 police involvement among investigations of maltreatment.

Police involvement was measured in two ways in the OIS-2018. First, police referral was identified based on whether the worker endorsed police as a referral source for the investigation. Second, workers described the level of police involvement related to each investigated type of maltreatment. The police involvement question had four response options: none, investigation, charges, and unknown. For the purposes of this analysis, this question was recoded into a binary variable of “police investigation” (investigation and charges) vs. “no police investigation” (none and unknown) for the primary maltreatment type. We then combined the two police involvement questions to derive a four category variable: no police involvement, police referral only, police investigation only, and police referral and police investigation. We compared these categories across child age, caregiver characteristics, and primary form of investigated maltreatment.

Findings

An estimated 158,476 children 0-17 years of age were investigated by a child welfare authority in Ontario in 2018 for a child maltreatment-related concern. For the purpose of this analysis, we excluded risk-only investigations and investigations of community caregivers and youth living independently,² which resulted in a final estimate of 97,185 investigations involving allegations or events of maltreatment. Among all investigations, 65.6% had no police involvement, 7.6% had

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 community caregiver is defined as anyone providing care to a child in an out-of-home setting (e.g., institutional setting).

a police referral only, 7.3% had a police investigation, and 19.6% had both a police referral and a police investigation.

Figure 1 presents child age comparisons of investigations where there was no police involvement, police referral only, police investigation only, and police referral and police investigation. Investigations involving young children aged 0-3 had the most police involvement at 46.9%. In investigations involving young children aged 0-3, 30% of were both initiated by police and there was a police investigation. Investigations involving school aged children (4-11) represented the group that had the least police involvement at 67.8%. Additionally, investigations involving adolescents (12-17) had higher involvement of police investigations only (8.6%) compared to younger children.

Figure 1: Age and Police Involvement

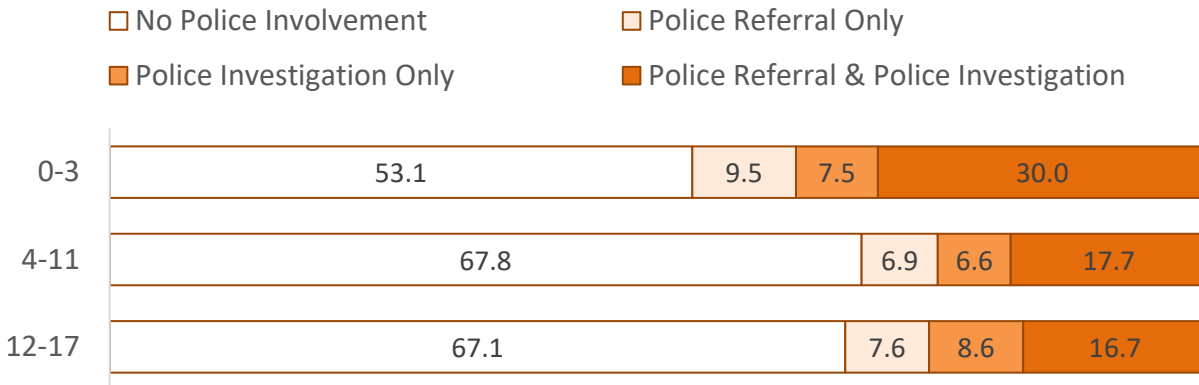


Figure 2: Caregiver Factors and Police Involvement

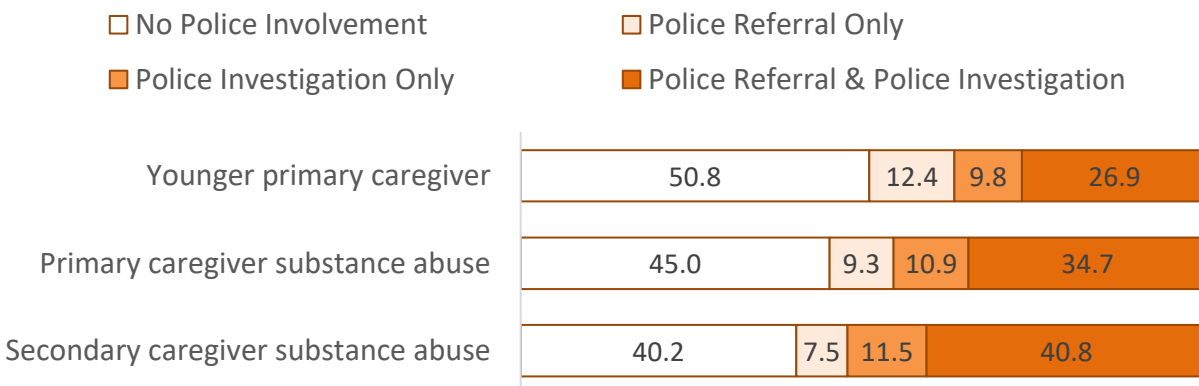


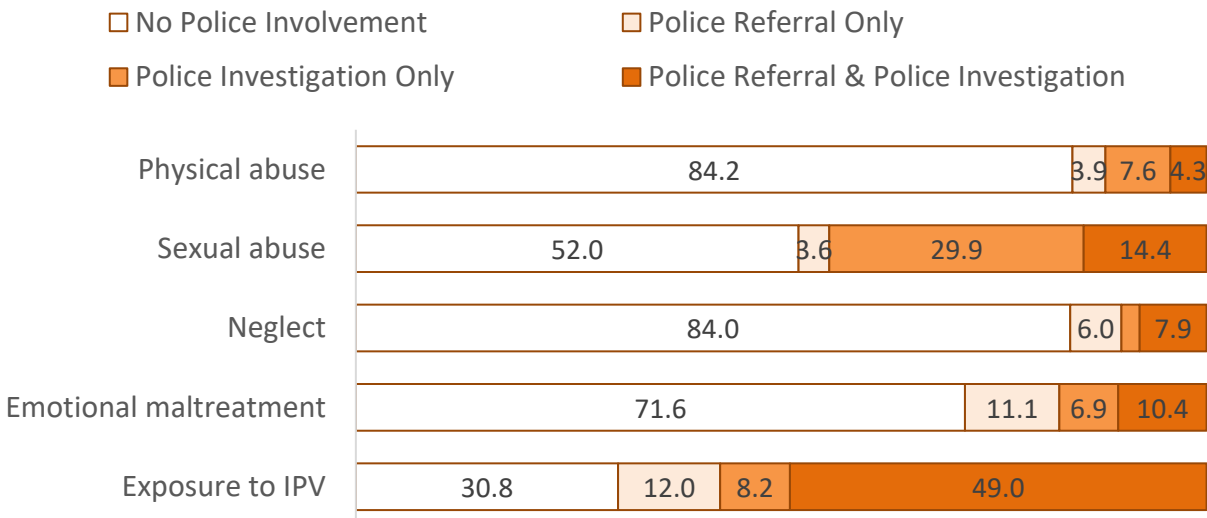
Figure 2 presents findings related to caregiver characteristics, which reflect the age of the primary caregiver and substance abuse for either caregiver. Approximately half of the investigations involving younger caregivers (under 25) had police involvement (49.2%). Investigations involving younger primary caregivers represented a higher than average proportion of cases where there was

a police referral only (12.4%) and where there was a police referral and a police investigation (26.9%). In contrast, only 29.3% of investigations involving caregivers 25 and older had any police involvement; notably, only 12.1% had both a police referral and a police investigation.

Primary and secondary caregiver risk factors appeared to be associated with higher police involvement for investigated families. In terms of primary caregivers, investigations where a worker noted that the primary caregiver had substance abuse issues had substantial involvement with police at 55%; 9.3% of cases involved a police referral only and 10.9% had a police investigation. It is particularly notable that among investigations involving primary caregivers with noted substance abuse issues, almost 35% had a police referral and a police investigation. Where primary caregiver substance abuse was not noted, only 26.7% had police involvement. Among risk factors associated with secondary caregivers, those with a noted substance abuse issue constituted the group with the most police involvement (59.8%); 40.8% of cases were referred by police and experienced a police investigation, 11.5% had a police investigation only, and 7.5% had a police referral only. In contrast, investigations where the secondary caregiver did not have a noted substance abuse issue, 27.6% had police involvement.

Figure 3 presents findings related to the primary investigation reasons (physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, emotional maltreatment and exposure to IPV). Among all investigation reasons, those initiated due to exposure to IPV had the most police contact (69.2%). Nearly half (49.0%) of the investigations where the primary focus was exposure to IPV were referred by and investigated by police. Similarly, nearly half of investigations (48%) with a primary focus of sexual abuse also involved the police, but a significant proportion involved investigations where there was also a police investigation but not a police referral. Investigations involving physical abuse, neglect, and emotional maltreatment had relatively little police involvement.

Figure 3: Investigation Reason and Police Involvement



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.

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.

For each risk investigation, workers determined whether the child was at risk of future maltreatment. The worker could decide that the child was at risk of future maltreatment (confirmed risk), that the child was not at risk of future maltreatment (unfounded risk), or that the future risk of maltreatment was unknown.

Workers were asked to provide information on various other aspects of their investigations, including the characteristics of the household, caregivers, and children; history of previous child welfare case openings; and short-term child welfare service dispositions, including transfers to ongoing services and referrals made to internal and external services.

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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