

Police Involvement in Child Maltreatment-related Investigations 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 police involvement among child maltreatment-related investigations in Ontario in 2023.

Findings

Of the estimated 125,877 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.

Child welfare workers were asked to indicate police involvement among investigations. Police involvement was captured in two ways: 1) a maltreatment-related investigation could have been initiated based on a referral made by police to a child welfare authority; and 2) among maltreatment investigations, workers indicated the level of police involvement (i.e., police charges, police investigation, no involvement, or unknown involvement).

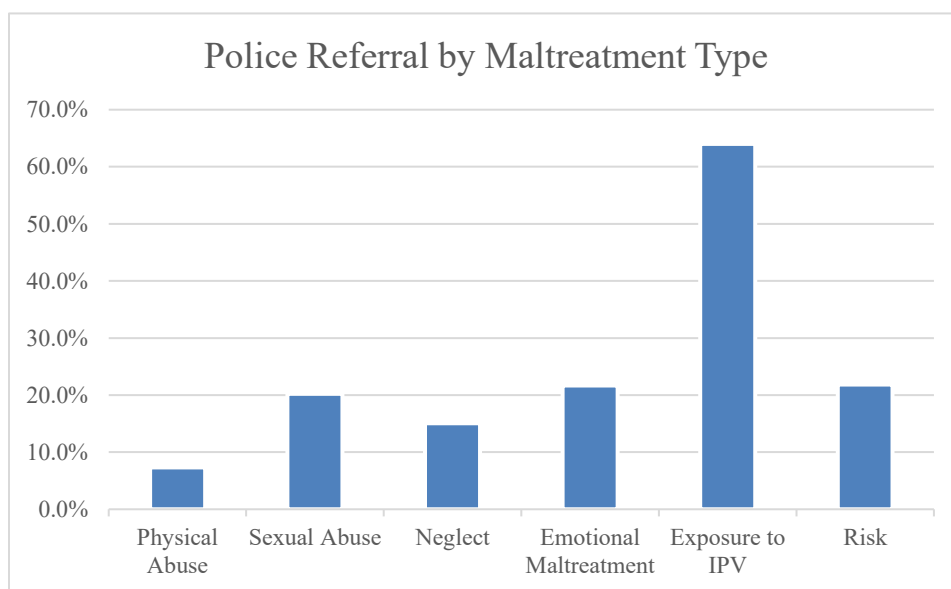
¹ Fallon, B., Black, T., Lefebvre, R., Trocmé, N., Hélie, S., Crowe, A., Miller, M., Budau, K., Houston, E., King, B., Esposito, T., Fluke, J., Collin-Vézina, D., Parada, H., Provençal, J., Chhabra, N., Sawh, P., Chan, P., Chowdhury, R., ... Wilson, L. Ontario Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse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

An estimated 34,970 child maltreatment-related investigations (28%) were referred to child welfare services by police. As visually represented in Figure 1, 64% of investigations for exposure to IPV were referred by police (an estimated 19,593 investigations), 22% of emotional maltreatment investigations came from police (an estimated 2,044 investigations), 20% of sexual abuse investigations were referred by police (an estimated 1,078 investigations), 15% of investigations for neglect came from police (an estimated 3,961 investigations), and 7% of physical abuse investigations were referred by police (an estimated 1,804 investigations). Furthermore, an estimated 6,490 risk of future maltreatment investigations (22%) were referred by police.

Figure 1

Police-referred investigations by primary maltreatment in Ontario in 2023



As referenced above, workers indicated the level of police involvement (i.e., police charges, police investigation, no involvement, or unknown involvement) among maltreatment investigations. Table 1 shows police involvement among substantiated maltreatment investigations. At the end of the initial investigation, 44 percent of maltreatment investigations were substantiated (an estimated 41,887 investigations).

An estimated 21,831 substantiated maltreatment cases (52%) involved some form of police involvement (e.g., investigation or charges laid) while 48% did not have police involvement. More specifically, 33% of all substantiated maltreatment investigations resulted in police charges being laid, and an additional 19% involved a police investigation only. Exposure to intimate partner violence and sexual abuse investigations were the most likely to involve police, at 80% and 75%, respectively. Police laid charges in the majority of substantiated exposure to IPV investigations (57%) , followed by sexual abuse (48%), physical abuse (16%), emotional maltreatment (11%), and neglect (5%). Please see Table 1.

Table 1

Police investigations and charging among substantiated maltreatment investigations

| | Primary Form of Substantiated Maltreatment | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---------------------------|--|-----|--------------|-----|---------|-----|------------------------|-----|-----------------|-----|--------|-----|
| | Physical abuse | | Sexual abuse | | Neglect | | Emotional maltreatment | | Exposure to IPV | | Total | |
| | # | % | # | % | # | % | # | % | # | % | # | % |
| No police involvement | 3,527 | 64 | 311 | 24 | 8,867 | 82 | 3,264 | 73 | 4,042 | 20 | 20,011 | 48 |
| Police investigation only | 1,081 | 20 | 343 | 27 | 1,394 | 13 | 692 | 16 | 4,602 | 23 | 8,112 | 19 |
| Charges laid | 865 | 16 | 611 | 48 | 488 | 5 | 509 | 11 | 11,246 | 57 | 13,719 | 33 |
| Unknown | 0 | 0 | - | 1 | - | <1 | 0 | 0 | - | <1 | - | <1 |
| Total | 5,473 | 100 | 1,272 | 100 | 10,756 | 100 | 4,465 | 100 | 19,921 | 100 | 41,887 | 100 |

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 form 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 referral source and level of police involvement among maltreatment investigations (i.e., police charges, police investigation, no involvement, or unknown involvement).

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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