



The Intersection of Child Welfare Investigations and Public Housing in Ontario

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Introduction

The Ontario Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect, 2013 (OIS-2013)¹ is the fifth 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 characteristics of investigations where a worker noted that the family lived in public housing.

Policy

The Ontario Government identified that child poverty is a major issue. In recognition of this issue, in 2008, the Ontario government released a strategy to reduce poverty called *Breaking the Cycle: Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy* (2008 OPRS). The strategy set out to reduce “the number of children living in poverty by 25 per cent over 5 years”². The strategy sought to target the most impoverished families in Ontario. Specifically, this meant that “low-income families will see the benefits of this strategy ... our target will be to move 90,000 kids out of poverty”³. The 2008 OPRS attempted to move these children and their families out of poverty through implementing various programs that ranged from school food programs to increasing child tax benefits to Ontarians.

In 2014, the Ontario Government released an updated version of its poverty reduction strategy entitled *Realizing Our Potential: Ontario Poverty Reduction Strategy (2014-2019)* (2014-2019 OPRS). This strategy renewed its commitment to reducing child poverty and expanded its focus onto other identified populations. The 2014-2019 Ontario Poverty Reduction Strategy⁴ made

¹ Fallon, B., Van Wert, M., Trocmé, N., MacLaurin, B., Sinha, V., Lefebvre, R., et al. (2015). *Ontario Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect-2013 (OIS-2013)*. Toronto, ON: Child Welfare Research Portal.

² Ontario Government. (2008). *Breaking the Cycle: Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy*. ON: Government Printing Office., p.1.

³ Ibid, p.2

⁴ Ontario Government. (2014). *Realizing Our Potential: Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy (2014-2019)*. ON: Government Printing Office.

several claims about making steady progress towards reducing child poverty by 25% that it announced previously as a goal in the OPRS 2008 report. While the 2014-2019 OPRS report outlined that the strategy did not reach their goal of reducing child poverty by 25%, they noted that “between 2008 and 2011, we lifted 47,000 children and their families out of poverty. We also prevented 61,000 children and their families from falling into poverty in 2011 alone, and prevented many others from falling into poverty over the course of the strategy.”⁵

Many studies conducted in Toronto, Canada have demonstrated a growth in poverty, especially among younger generations⁶. These claims are contradictory to the claims made by the 2014-2019 OPRS about the reduction in poverty created by the 2008 OPRS. This contradictory information informed the analysis conducted in this information sheet to explore how poverty has changed over time in the child welfare system using public housing as a proxy measure.

Various variables have been used as proxy measures of poverty, such as *housing instability*⁷, *frequently moving*⁸, *unemployment*⁹, *income* and *scarcity of resources*¹⁰. Using these proxy measures of poverty, many scholars have demonstrated a strong relationship between poverty and child maltreatment.

Findings

Of the estimated 125,281 maltreatment-related investigations¹¹ conducted in Ontario in 2013, there was public housing noted in an estimated 11,431 investigations (9%; a rate of 4.87 investigations per 1,000 children in Ontario). The number, proportion and rate of investigations with noted public housing has remained constant over time (with the exception of the proportionate increase from 1998 to 2003 due to the exponential increase in all investigations in Ontario – see Background Section). Please see Table 1 for these findings.

⁵ Ibid, p.3

⁶ For example, see Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce. (2015). Canadian Employment Quality Index. Toronto, ON: Benjamin, T.

⁷ Schumaker, K. (2012). An exploration of the relationship between poverty and child neglect in Canadian child welfare. Doctoral thesis. University of Toronto, Factor Inwentash Faculty of Social Work.

⁸ Warren, E. & Font, S. (2015). Housing insecurity, maternal stress, and child maltreatment: An application of the family stress model. *Social Service Review*. 89(1), 9-39.

⁹ Sidebotham, P., Heron, J., & Golding, J. (2002). Child maltreatment in the “Children of the Nineties”: Deprivation, class, and social networks in a UK sample. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 26(12), 1243-1259.

¹⁰ Berger, L. M. (2004). Income, family structure, and child maltreatment risk. *Children and Youth Services Review* 26(8): 725–748.

¹¹ Maltreatment-related investigations refer to both maltreatment and risk-only investigations.

Table 1.

Maltreatment-related investigations involving public housing in Ontario in 2013

OIS Cycle	Number of Investigations involving Public Housing	Percent of investigations involving Public Housing	Rate of Investigations involving Public Housing	Total Number of Investigations
OIS-1998	4,981	8%	2.11	64,658
OIS-2003	13,122	10%	5.49	128,108
OIS-2008	14,990	12%	6.29	128,748
OIS-2013	11,431	9%	4.87	125,281

These findings indicate that the rate of families in public housing being involved in a child-maltreatment related investigation has remained relatively stable over time. This is an indication that poverty remains an issue for families involved in the child welfare sector. Multivariate analyses are needed to further explore this relationship.

Background

From 1998 to 2003, the OIS found that rates of investigated maltreatment had doubled. This pattern may reflect changes in detection, reporting, and investigation practices rather than an increase in the number of children being abused and neglected. Four changes are particularly important to consider: increased reporting by professionals, increased reports of emotional maltreatment and exposure to intimate partner violence, more children investigated in each family, and increased substantiation rates. These changes are consistent with shifts in the context of Ontario child welfare.

Due to changes in investigation mandates and practices over the last 15 years, the OIS-2008 and OIS-2013 differed from previous cycles in that they tracked both risk-only investigations and maltreatment investigations. Risk-only investigations were 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).

Methodology

The OIS-2013 used a multi-stage sampling design to select a representative sample of 17 child welfare agencies in Ontario and then to select a sample of cases within these agencies. Information was collected directly from child protection workers on a representative sample of

5,265 child protection investigations conducted during a three-month sampling period in 2013. 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 2013 was 125,281.

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-two 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 (IPV) (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 investigation, including the characteristics of the household, caregivers, and child subject of the investigation, the history of previous child welfare case openings, and the short-term child welfare service dispositions.

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 estimates should also be noted. The agency size correction uses child population as a proxy for agency size; this does not account for variations in per capita investigation rates across agencies in the same strata. 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 reopened 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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