



False Allegations of Abuse and Neglect

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Introduction

The Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect-2008 (CIS-2008) is the third nation-wide study to examine the incidence of reported child maltreatment and the characteristics of children and families investigated by child welfare authorities in Canada. This Information Sheet examines false allegations of abuse and neglect.

Findings

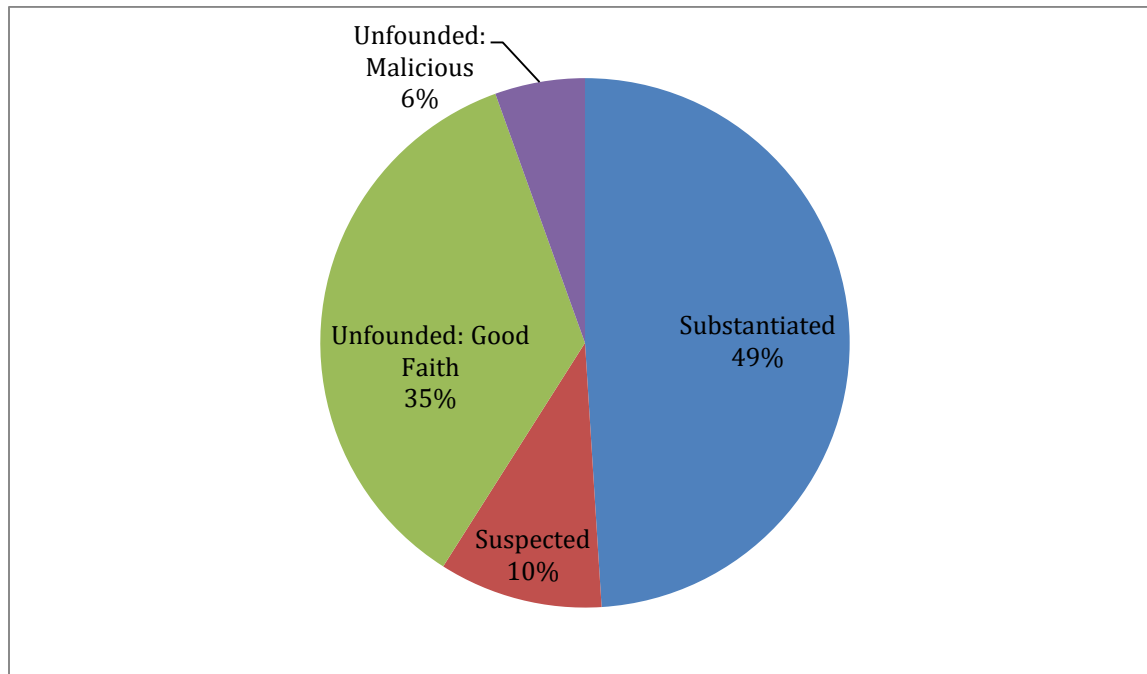
There were an estimated 235,842 maltreatment-related investigations conducted in Canada in 2008. An estimated 174,411 investigations were for an incident of maltreatment and an estimated 61,431 were risk-only investigations. At the end of the initial investigation, 49% of maltreatment investigations were substantiated (85,440 investigations) and in 20% of risk investigations, the worker determined there was a significant risk of future maltreatment (12,018 investigations).

Unsubstantiated allegations are more often made in good faith than as a malicious referral

Across Canada, professionals who work with children and the general public are required to report any suspected child abuse and neglect to child welfare authorities. According to the 2008 Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (CIS-2008), 40.6% of these reports prove to be unsubstantiated which is an increase from the CIS-1998 study where one-third of these cases were unsubstantiated. Unsubstantiated reports can stem from misinterpreted signs of abuse (e.g. a bruise from an injury at the playground), and other reports that were made in good faith. That said, on occasion reports made may be intentionally false and malicious.

The 2008 Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (CIS-2008) is the only national study identifying intentionally false allegations of abuse and neglect reported to child protection agencies in Canada. Of the estimated 174,411 child maltreatment investigations (i.e. child abuse and neglect investigations, excluding risk-only investigations) conducted in 2008, 35% were unsubstantiated but reported in good faith (see figure 1), a rate consistent with previous analyses done using the CIS-1998 data and rates reported in other studies. Child protection workers believed that 6% of investigations were unsubstantiated, but were intentionally false allegations. These intentionally false allegations involved an estimated 9,370 children.

Figure 1.
Substantiation of reported maltreatment in Canada in 2008

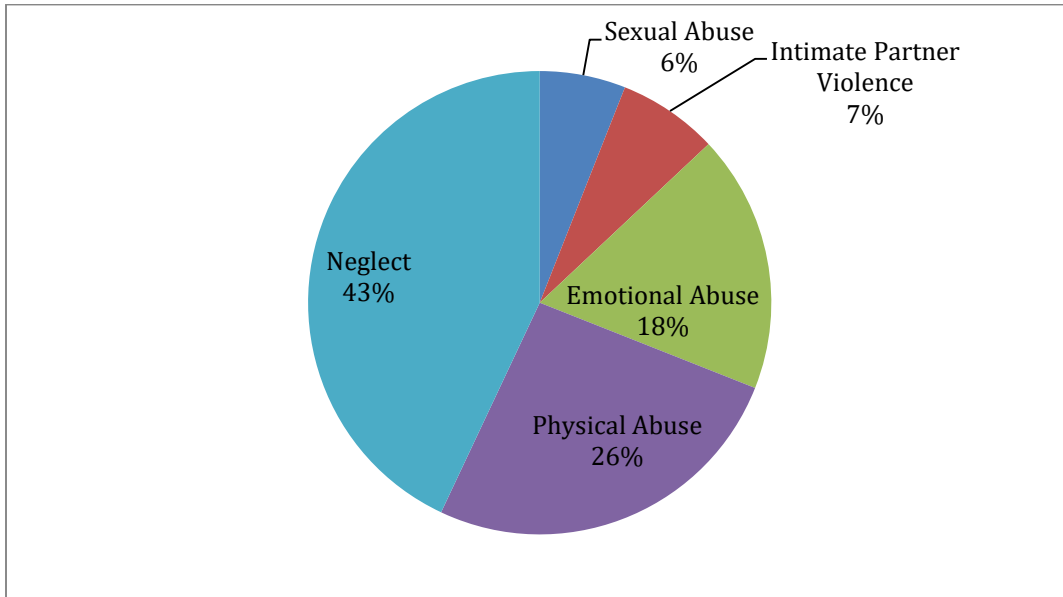


Intentionally malicious allegations of abuse and neglect are false reports, often made for the purpose of manipulating the legal system. Intentionally false allegations of abuse and neglect can also be made for the purpose of retribution against a former partner, neighbour, or relative in an attempt to cause them harm. In some cases, the individual who makes a malicious referral may be experiencing emotional or mental difficulty.

Neglect rather sexual abuse is the most frequent type of false allegation

Intentionally false reports of neglect are the most frequent type of false allegations made (see figure 2). Just over two-fifths (43%) of all false allegations were made because of alleged neglect. Only 6% of intentionally false allegations involved a report of sexual abuse, a significant decrease compared to the CIS-1998, in which 14% of all false allegations involved sexual abuse reports.

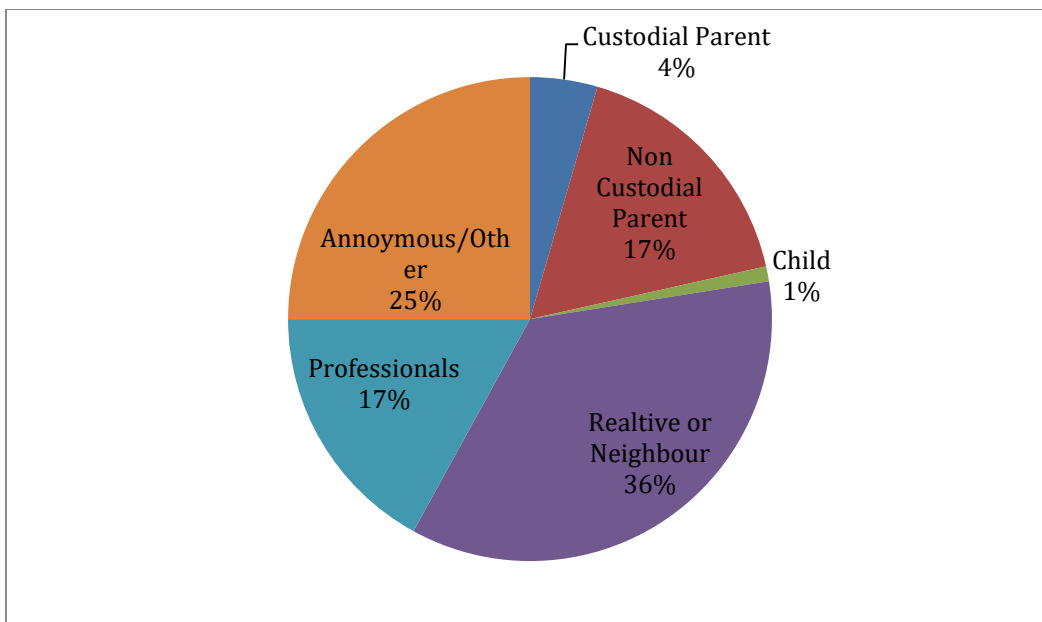
Figure 2.
Intentionally false allegations by maltreatment type in Canada in 2008



Sources of false allegations

Intentionally false allegations of abuse and neglect are most frequently reported by a relative or neighbor (36%), anonymous or other sources (25%), non-custodial parents (17%) and professionals (17%). Only 4% of intentionally false allegations are reported by custodial parents and only 1% by children themselves.

Figure 3.
Source of intentionally false reports in Canada in 2008

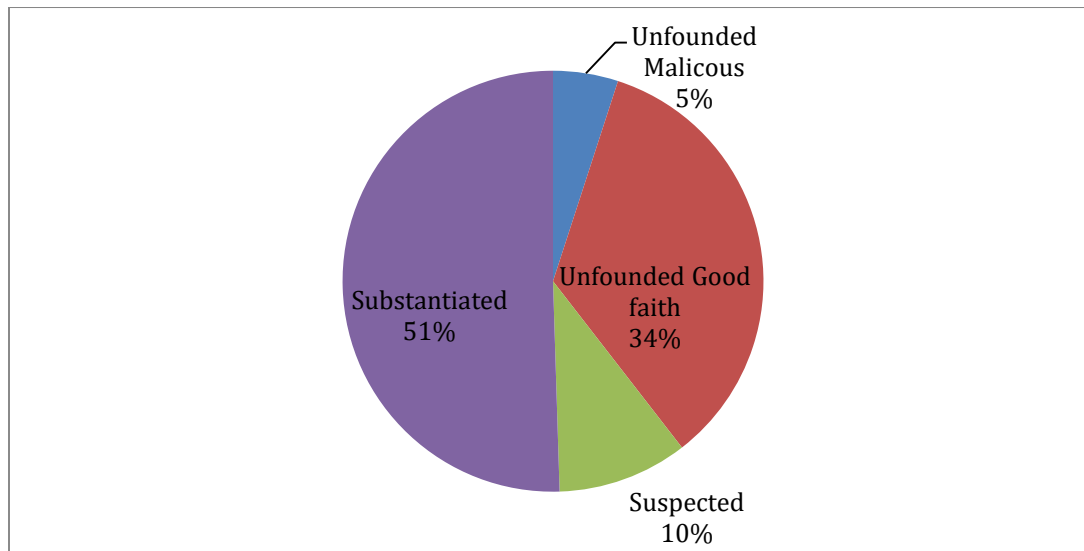


Rates of intentionally false allegations in custody or access disputes higher

A custody or access dispute creates an emotionally charged context, within which intentionally false allegations of maltreatment are more likely to occur. In the CIS-2008, approximately 22,000 of the estimated 174,411 investigations involved a custody or access dispute. Intentionally false allegations were made in only 5% of investigations not involving a custody or access dispute.

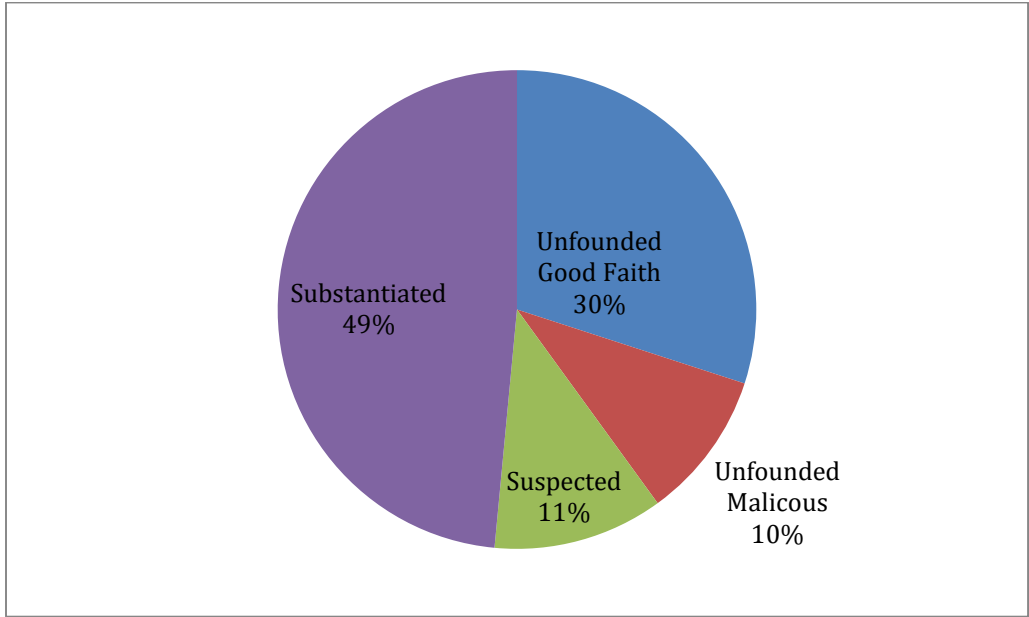
Figure 4.

Rates of substantiation in investigations with no custody dispute in Canada in 2008



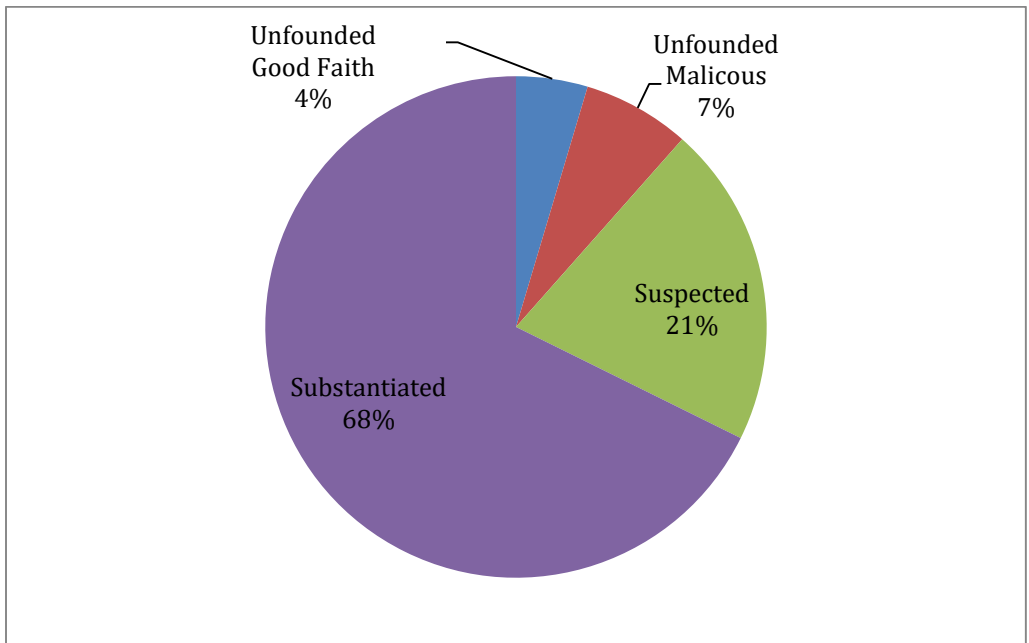
When examining cases involving a custody or access dispute, however, about 10% of reports investigated were intentionally false allegations. Non-custodial parents were responsible for 52.5% of all intentionally false allegations involving a custody dispute documented in the CIS-2008. It is important, however, to acknowledge that even in the context of parental separation, most unfounded allegations are a result of reports that are made in good faith. Further, even in the context of custody dispute, 49% of reports are substantiated, and 11% remain suspected.

Figure 5.
Rates of substantiation with custody dispute in Canada in 2008



It is interesting to note the patterns of substantiation for cases in which the child protection worker reported lacking the knowledge to identify if it was or was not a custody dispute. Although this represents only about 3,600 children of the estimated 174,411 investigations made in 2008 (about 2%), about 7% of these were intentionally false allegations.

Figure 6.
Rates of substantiation where custody dispute is unknown in Canada in 2008



Child protection services continue to contend with malicious referrals of abuse and neglect. Given the increase in false allegations since the CIS-1998, there is a continued need to examine the efficacy of screening procedures. Interview and assessment strategies need development to assist child protection workers in detecting fabricated reports. Additional early intervention programs and support for families during parental separation may also assist in reducing the number of malicious referrals.

Background

Responsibility for protecting and supporting children at risk of abuse and neglect falls under the jurisdiction of the 13 Canadian provinces and territories and a system of Aboriginal child welfare agencies which have increasing responsibility for protecting and supporting Aboriginal children. Because of variations in the types of situations that each jurisdiction includes under its child welfare mandate as well as differences in the way service statistics are kept, it is difficult to obtain a nation-wide profile of the children and families receiving child welfare services. The Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (CIS) is designed to provide such a profile by collecting information on a periodic basis from every jurisdiction using a standardized set of definitions. With core funding from the Public Health Agency of Canada and in-kind and financial support from a consortium of federal, provincial, territorial, Aboriginal and academic stakeholders, the CIS-2008 is the third nation-wide study of the incidence and characteristics of investigated child abuse and neglect across Canada.

Methodology

The CIS-2008 used a multi-stage sampling design to select a representative sample of 112 child welfare agencies in Canada and then to select a sample of cases within these agencies. Information was collected directly from child welfare workers on a representative sample of 15,980 child protection investigations conducted during a three-month sampling period in the fall of 2008. This sample was weighted to reflect provincial annual estimates.

For maltreatment investigations, information was collected regarding the primary form of maltreatment investigated as well as the level of substantiation for that maltreatment. 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 (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 form of maltreatment listed, workers assigned a level of substantiation. Maltreatment could be substantiated (i.e., the balance of evidence indicated that the maltreatment had occurred), suspected (i.e., the maltreatment could neither be confirmed nor ruled out), or unfounded (i.e., the balance of evidence indicated that the maltreatment had not occurred).

For each risk investigation, workers determined whether the child was at significant risk of future maltreatment. The worker could decide that the child was at significant risk of future maltreatment

(confirmed risk), that the child was not at significant risk of future maltreatment (unfounded risk), or that the future risk of maltreatment was unknown.

A detailed presentation of the study methodology and of the definitions of each variable is available at <http://cwrp.ca/publications/cis-2008-study-methods>.

Limitations

The CIS 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 CIS 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 estimated 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 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 CIS 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 CIS-2008 was the first to explicitly track risk-only investigations. In addition, readers are cautioned to avoid making direct comparisons with provincial and First Nations oversampling reports because of differences in the way national and oversampling estimates are derived.

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