

E I Q S u m m a r y

(Quebec Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse, Neglect, Abandonment and Serious Behaviour Problems)

The *Étude sur l'incidence et les caractéristiques des situations d'abus, de négligence, d'abandon et de troubles de comportement sérieux signalés à la Direction de la protection de la jeunesse au Québec (EIQ)* [Quebec Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse, Neglect, Abandonment and Serious Behaviour Problems] is the first study of its kind ever to be carried out in Quebec. Child and youth maltreatment represents an important concern in our society. Therefore it is absolutely vital to document the extent of the phenomenon, the nature of the various forms of maltreatment and the characteristics of the victims and perpetrators. Only then will regulators have the information they need to develop effective social policies and intervention programs to meet the needs of the families involved.

The EIQ followed on the heels of the 1997 *Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (CIS)* – the first ever national incidence study in Canada. CIS was carried out by teams of researchers across Canada and the data were then compiled to reflect a national picture. During the course of the study, the research team that gathered information for the province of Quebec recognized the need for a provincial incidence study and decided to initiate the EIQ.

The principle researchers who directed the EIQ are:

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- Micheline Mayer (*Institut de recherche pour le développement social des jeunes*– IRDS, and Centre Jeunesse de Montréal)
- John Wright (University of Montreal)

The research team worked with an advisory committee made up of four associate researchers:

- Camil Bouchard (Université du Québec à Montréal)

- Claire Chamberland (IRDS)
- Richard Cloutier (Université Laval)
- Chantal Lavergne (IRDS)

The study was carried out with the collaboration and support of 16 child protection agencies, represented by Thomas Lebeau, and with the Ministry of Health and Social Services MHSS, represented by May Clarkson.

OBJECTIVES

The EIQ was developed with four objectives in mind:

- to estimate the number of incidents of child maltreatment or serious behaviour problems reported every year to the Director of Youth Protection (DYP)
- to document the nature and severity of reported child abuse, neglect and behaviour problems
- to describe the characteristics of the children involved
- to describe the way DYP handled reported cases--from the initial report through the investigative stage--and to describe services DYP offered to clients

The EIQ is first and foremost a descriptive study. It does not attempt to explain the phenomenon of child maltreatment or to identify risk factors; instead, it provides a snapshot of how the referral process affects youth protection services in Quebec.

THE QUEBEC CONTEXT

Quebec's 1979 Child and Youth Protection Act (*Loi sur la protection de la jeunesse*--LPJ), governs the Quebec youth protection system. The act defines a set of situations that could pose a threat to a child's safety or development. The LPJ also defines the parameters of a professional's or a private citizen's obligation to report potentially problematic situations to the authorities. Rooted in the traditions of civil, rather than common law, the LPJ is unique in Canada; this is the main reason why researchers

believed a separate Quebec study of incidence reporting was essential to understand the Quebec situation.

The Quebec report processing system divides the DYP evaluation process into two stages. A case can be closed following the first stage if the situation does not fall under the reporting guidelines of the LPJ. In such a case, the report is not retained for subsequent evaluation. It is important to note that an unretained report does not necessarily imply a problem-free situation. In fact, unretained reports are often of particular interest to child protection professionals. EIQ researchers documented all reports registered by the DYP over a certain time period, whether or not they were retained.

Once a referral has been retained following the DYP evaluation, the report falls under one of three categories:

- the facts in the report are substantiated and compromise the child's safety or development (substantiated/SDC)
- the facts are substantiated but the child's safety or development is not compromised (substantiated/SDNC)
- the report is unfounded.

The EIQ team documented all the reports retained for evaluation, regardless of the outcome of the evaluation.

As opposed to other provincial child protection acts, the LPJ is concerned with the situation of children and teenagers with serious behaviour problems. Reports for serious behaviour problems represent a considerable portion of referrals reported to the DYP. The EIQ researchers documented them in the same way it did maltreatment reports. Unlike CIS, EIQ included reports not retained by DYP by adding serious behaviour problems to the list of indications that a problem might exist.

METHODOLOGY

The EIQ was based on referrals reported to the DYP between October 1 and December 31 1998. Sixteen of Quebec's 19 child protection agencies took part in the study by documenting the child maltreatment or serious behaviour problem referrals reported during that period.

In total, the EIQ analyzed 9,790 reports: 49.6 per cent were unretained and 50.4 per cent were retained for evaluation. Ultimately, 21.2 per cent of the retained reports were not found to be substantiated and 28.9 per cent were found to be substantiated but the child's safety or development was not compromised (facts substantiated/SDNC). Finally, 46.9 per cent were found to be substantiated and compromising the child's safety or development (facts substantiated /SDC).

For each unretained report, child protection agencies' social workers, who had beforehand attended a three-hour training session on data collection, filled out a survey form (Referral Treatment Reception Form *le formulaire de Réception et traitement des signalements/Social Emergency Service Form Urgence sociale (RTS/US)*). For each retained report, social workers filled out a different survey form (Evaluation-Orientation Form *le formulaire Évaluation/Orientation (É/O)*). The two survey forms provided information about the characteristics of each initial report, the child it involved, his/her living environment and the adults acting as caregivers. They also documented the serious behaviour and maltreatment problems.

E/O survey forms (those used for retained reports) were designed to document, in detail, up to three types of maltreatment or serious behaviour problem. The social workers used their clinical judgment to prioritize the problems. The survey included six categories of maltreatment:

- physical abuse
- sexual abuse
- neglect
- abandonment
- psychological maltreatment

- other forms of maltreatment

The forms also listed 13 categories of serious behaviour problems. Moreover, for each problem the social worker identified, he or she had to clinically judge to what extent the problem was substantiated. The social workers had to choose from among the following three judgments: substantiated, suspected or unfounded. The addition of the “suspected” category allowed social workers to register instances in which they encountered “grey areas” during the evaluation process. This reflected the fact that social workers sometimes have difficulty assessing whether or not a problem is substantiated.

EIQ improved upon the analyses carried out by the Ministry of Health and Social Services in several areas: the nature of maltreatment and serious behaviour problems, the juxtaposition of these problems and other, related factors, and the practices in protection services.

RESULTS

GLOBAL PICTURE

The child welfare related problems reported, in order of frequency, are as follows:

- neglect (12.6 per 1000)
- serious behaviour problems (11 per 1000)
- physical abuse (4.8 per 1000)
- psychological maltreatment (4.5 per 1000)
- sexual abuse (3.0 per 1000)
- abandonment (1 per 1000)

Reports of neglect were also most frequently substantiated when referrals were retained (7.3 per 1000). However, once the evaluation was completed, reports for serious behaviour problems were the most frequent when the facts were substantiated (5.2 per 1000).

Girls were most frequently reported for neglect, followed by serious behaviour problems, whereas boys were most often reported for serious behaviour problems, followed by neglect. Girls were more often reported for sexual abuse than boys were, however the latter were more frequently reported for physical abuse. On the whole, reports concerning boys were more frequently substantiated/SDC; those concerning girls were more often unfounded.

The rates of children reported for neglect and psychological maltreatment decreased as they aged whereas the rates of youth reported for serious behaviour problems increased considerably as they aged. On the whole, adolescents were over-represented relative to the proportion they represent of the population of Quebec. When their referral was retained, adolescents were also over-represented in cases where the facts were substantiated and their safety and development were compromised.

Close to one third of the reports retained for evaluation involved more than one problem. Furthermore, 21 per cent of the children named in a report had been named in at least one other report within the previous 12 months. Among the reports found to be substantiated and compromising, close to one quarter of the reports concerned a child who had previously been involved with protection services.

CLINICAL PICTURE OF PROBLEMS AND CHILDREN

When EIQ separately analyzed each substantiated problem, it uncovered the following:

- situations of abusive physical punishment were the most frequently reported in cases of substantiated physical abuse (63 per cent)
- situations of sexual abuse referred to touching/fondling in most cases (64 per cent)
- failure to supervise or protect that did, or could have, led to physical harm was the most frequent form of neglect (26 per cent) closely followed by educational neglect (25 per cent)

- the most frequent forms of abandonment were refusal to ensure childcare or child expelled from home (46 per cent) and parental absence (40 per cent)
- psychological maltreatment was mostly characterized by an exposure to conjugal violence (46 per cent)
- the serious behaviour problems reported to protection services were predominantly related to parent/child relational problems (40 per cent) as well as problems at school (20 per cent)

For all problems documented (except for sexual abuse and serious behaviour problems), the biological mother and father were most often identified as the perpetrators. The father was most often identified as the perpetrator of physical abuse, whereas the mother was most often identified for other problems. In cases of sexual abuse, relatives (27 per cent) were often identified as perpetrators, as well as “another” person (28 per cent).

On the whole, between 43 and 76 per cent of maltreatment or serious behaviour problem cases reported to protection services describe situations that had been going on for more than six months. Referrals for sexual abuse more frequently described single occurrences (31 per cent) than reports for other problems. Psychological maltreatment (76 per cent) and serious behaviour problems (70 per cent) were most frequently reported as situations that had persisted for more than six months.

About one third of child victims of neglect lived with at least one parent who was him/herself a victim of maltreatment during his/her childhood--27 per cent for child victims of physical abuse and 26 per cent for child victims of sexual abuse. These few figures reflect the disturbing issue of intergenerational reproduction of maltreatment.

DYP social workers did not identify any clinical problem (known or suspected) for 60 per cent of the children whose report was retained. Children whose report was substantiated by facts that compromised his/her safety or development presented with one or more problems (known or suspected) in more than half the cases. Although their reports ended in a closed case, children for whom the report was unfounded still presented with one or more problems (known or suspected) in more than a quarter of the cases (27 per cent).

This indicates that these children might have been experiencing troublesome situations. The problems most frequently identified by DYP social workers were learning difficulties and attention deficit/ hyperactivity.

FAMILY PICTURE

On the whole, children whose report was retained for evaluation (whether or not their report was substantiated or their safety was being compromised), were characterized by the fact that they lived in their original family and were being raised by their biological parents. These families typically had not moved over the previous 12 months (although one third of the families had moved at least once), had relatively low incomes, were tenants, and tended to keep safe homes. It was noted, however, that families about whom the report was substantiated and that compromised their child's safety or development usually had a low income and more often lived in unsafe homes.

In cases where a child's report was retained, their primary caregiver had relatively little schooling. This was even more prevalent in cases where the facts reported were substantiated and compromised the child's safety or development. In cases where a child's report was substantiated, the primary caregiver collaborated less adequately with protection services, more frequently had a background of maltreatment in his/her childhood and had a greater number of problems (known or suspected).

On average, children whose report was substantiated enjoyed 2.5 factors of protection. These protection factors included the presence of a parent who: emotionally supported the child, believed the child, or acted to protect the child following the referral. The fourth protection factor was related to the fact that the maltreating person did not live with the child. The number of protection factors varied according to the problem: children experiencing a problem of sexual abuse (substantiated or suspected) were those with the most protection factors (3.5 on average), whereas those experiencing neglect (substantiated or suspected) were those with the least protection factors (2.2 on average).

Besides two main caregivers, a significant adult can also play a positive role in a child's development. Twenty-seven per cent of children whose report was retained had such a

relationship. However, more than half of them (55 per cent) did not have a significant adult in their lives.

PICTURE OF THE SERVICES AND COURSE OF THE REPORTS

- Out of the 9,790 referrals received during the study period, 49.6 per cent were not retained for evaluation and 50.4 per cent were retained. Ultimately, 21.2 per cent were not substantiated, 28.9 per cent were substantiated, but the child's safety or development were not compromised (facts substantiated/SDNC) and 46.9 per cent were substantiated and compromised the child's safety or development (facts substantiated/SDC).
- School and the mother were the two most frequent sources of reporting. However, few of these reports were retained. On the whole, reports from formal sources (particularly those coming from child protection agencies) showed the highest retention rates.
- In general, services were more often required in cases where reports were retained than in cases where they were not retained. However, even in cases where they were not retained, social workers indicated that services were required for parents 68 per cent of the time and for children 61 per cent of the time. Furthermore, for reports with an unfounded outcome following evaluation, 72 per cent of parents and 55 per cent of children had service needs.
- Whether or not the reports were retained, substantiated or not, substantiated/SDNC or substantiated/SDC, the greatest need identified in children as well as in parents, was a need for psychosocial services.
- Twenty-eight percent of all reports retained were labelled "immediate" intervention priority.
- More than one third of the reports retained led to out-of-home care for the child before the end of the E/O stage--57 per cent for children whose report was substantiated/SDC. This statistic indicates the extremely serious nature of the situations some of the children are going through.
- Following the evaluation, close to half the reports found to be substantiated/SDC were the subject of a court application and close to half were placed in out-of-home care.

- The reports found to be substantiated/SDC involved a police complaint in 17 per cent of cases, and among them criminal charges were laid in more than half the cases.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Although the EIQ took place during the fall (a time when referrals from school tend to be over-represented), its results are in many ways comparable to those from the Ministry of Health and Social Services for 1998-1999. In short, the EIQ provides an appreciable Québécois representativeness. Furthermore, from a methodological standpoint the EIQ was more comprehensive than CIS in that it documented retained and unretained reports alike, took serious behaviour problems into consideration and was able to document up to three different problems per report. Naturally, the possibility of establishing regional comparisons also gives the EIQ a particular status within Quebec. The issue of regional differences with regard to the rates of children reported obviously raises the question of whether or not certain risk factors such as social and economical poverty are more apparent in certain regions.

EIQ led to disturbing observations about the incidence of child maltreatment and serious behaviour problems. It also underlined the importance of the role of the family unit in detecting problematic situations and the role of school as a partner of child protection agencies. Indeed, the family unit represents the main source of reporting: 30 per cent of unretained reports and 22 per cent of retained reports come either from the father, the mother or the child her/himself. Furthermore, the parents' level of cooperation with protection services is usually significant. After the family unit, school constitutes the main source of reporting with close to one report out of five (19 per cent). When DYP social workers need a personalized reference they turn to schools in 17 per cent of cases. In 18 per cent of cases in which the child's report was retained and where they presented a known or suspected problem according to the social worker in charge of their case, their problems were related to learning difficulties. In 13 per cent of cases, problems were related to attention deficit disorder or hyperactivity. Finally, in cases of substantiated problems, 20 per cent of the serious behaviour problems were school related or school absenteeism. Twenty-five per cent of neglected children were reported for educational

neglect. All in all, family and school seem to have been strategic partners with regard to reporting problems to the DYP.

The EIQ provides a picture of the extent and the nature of child maltreatment and serious behaviour problems reported to the DYP and also a picture of the families and the services offered following a referral. It also raises a multitude of questions that will only be answered in future studies. Some will focus on the characteristics of problems considered in isolation. Others will focus on factors such as: different decisions occurring after a report, the question of out-of-home placement, the use of incidence rates to validate indications of deprivation, the characteristics of reports made by the parents and the phenomenon of recurrent referrals in the system of child protection.