



False allegations of abuse and neglect¹

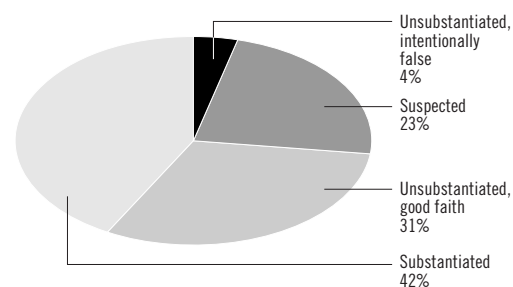
Theresa Knott, Nico Trocmé, and Nick Bala

Good faith unsubstantiated allegations are more common than false allegations

In most jurisdictions across Canada, professionals working with children and the public are required to report suspected child abuse and neglect to local child welfare authorities. One-third of these cases, after investigation, prove to be unsubstantiated. For example, bruises resulting from a playground injury may be misinterpreted as suspicious injuries requiring a report. In most cases, unsubstantiated reports of child abuse and neglect are made in good faith. Occasionally, though, unsubstantiated reports may be intentionally false.

The 1998 Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (CIS-1998) is the first national study to track intentionally false allegations of abuse and neglect reported to child welfare agencies in Canada.² Of the estimated 135,573 investigations conducted in 1998, 31% were unsubstantiated but reported in good faith, a rate consistent with estimates reported in other studies.^{3,4} Child protection workers considered that another 4% of investigations were also unsubstantiated, but were intentionally false allegations. These intentionally false reports involved an estimated 5,300 children (see Table 8-2(a) in Trocmé et al., 2001).

Figure 1: Substantiation of reported maltreatment



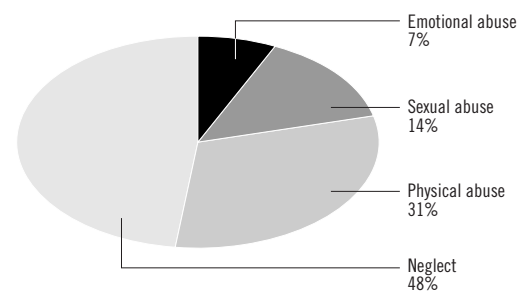
Source: CIS-1998

Intentionally false allegations of abuse and neglect are fabricated reports, often made for the purpose of retribution against a former partner, neighbour, or relative or an attempt to manipulate the legal system. In some cases, the person who makes an intentionally false allegation may be experiencing an emotional disturbance.

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

Intentionally false reports of neglect are the most frequent type of false allegation made. Nearly half (48%) of all false allegations were made because of alleged neglect. Only 14% of intentionally false allegations involved a report of sexual abuse.

Figure 2: Intentionally false allegations by type of maltreatment

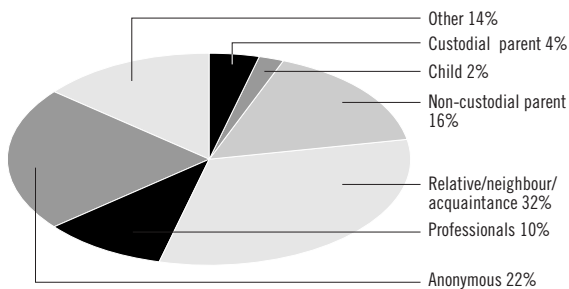


Source: CIS-1998

Sources of false allegations

Intentionally false allegations of abuse and neglect are most frequently reported by relatives, neighbours and acquaintances (32%), anonymous sources (22%), and non-custodial parents, mostly fathers (16%). Only 4% of intentionally false allegations are reported by custodial parents (mostly mothers) and only 2% are reported by children.

Figure 3: Source of intentionally false reports

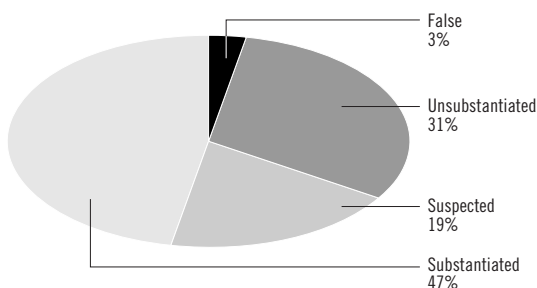


Source: CIS-1998

Rates of intentionally false allegations in custody or access disputes higher

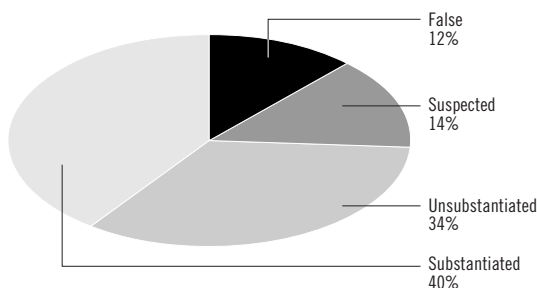
A custody or access dispute creates an emotionally charged context, within which intentionally false allegations of maltreatment are more likely to occur. In the CIS-1998, approximately 15,000 of the estimated 135,573 investigations involved a custody or access dispute (see Table 7-10(b) in Trocmé et al., 2001). Intentionally false allegations were made in 12% of these. In contrast, intentionally false allegations were made in only 3% of investigations not involving a custody or access dispute.

Figure 4: Rates of substantiation in investigations with no custody dispute



Source: CIS-1998

Figure 5: Rates of substantiation in investigations with custody disputes



Source: CIS-1998

When examining cases involving a custody or access dispute, non-custodial fathers were responsible for 43% of all intentionally false allegations documented in the CIS-1998, and custodial mothers were responsible for 14% of false allegations. It is important, however, to appreciate that even in the context of parental separation, most unfounded allegations are a result of reports that are made in good faith. In this situation, miscommunication and honest misunderstandings may contribute to the making of unfounded allegations. Further, even in the context of parental separation, 40% of reports are substantiated and 14% remain suspected.

Intentionally false allegations of abuse and neglect are serious issues confronting child protection services, the legal system, and families. The number of unsubstantiated allegations of maltreatment occurring in the context of parental separation raises important questions regarding the efficacy of existing screening procedures. Improved interview and assessment strategies in addition to specialized training to assist child protection workers in detecting fabricated maltreatment reports may prove beneficial in addressing this problem. Early intervention and accessible counselling programs for families during parental separation may assist in reducing the number of intentionally false allegations.

1. This information sheet is based on the peer-reviewed article, Trocmé, N. & Bala, N. (In press). False allegations of abuse when parents separate: Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect—1998. *Child Abuse & Neglect*.
2. Trocmé N., MacLaurin, B., Fallon, B., Daciuk, J., Billingsley, D., Tourigny, M. et al. (2001). *Canadian incidence study of reported child abuse and neglect: Final report*. Ottawa, Ontario: Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada, 2001.
3. Bala, N. & Schuman, J. (2000). Allegations of sexual abuse when parents have separated. *Canadian Family Law Quarterly*, 17, 191–241.
4. Oates, K., Jones, D., Denson, D., Sirotnak, A., Gary, N., & Krugman, R. (2000). Erroneous concerns about child sexual abuse. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 24(1), 149–157.

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