



# Poverty and Ontario's Child Welfare Involved Population

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Barbara Fallon and Melissa Van Wert

## Introduction

The Ontario Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect, 2013 (OIS-2013)<sup>1</sup> 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 several indicators of socioeconomic hardship to provide a profile of poverty among the children, youth and families who are investigated by child welfare authorities in Ontario. Poverty is associated with child maltreatment and involvement in the child welfare system. Families living in poverty may experience a variety of hardships such as low or insufficient income, poor housing conditions, unemployment, and food insecurity.

## Findings<sup>2</sup>

Table 1 provides an overall snapshot of poverty among families investigated for a maltreatment related concern in Ontario in 2013. Results are presented for maltreatment and risk investigations separately.

Trends in primary and secondary caregiver income source are similar across maltreatment and risk investigations. Across all maltreatment related investigations, approximately one-quarter (25%) indicated the primary caregiver relied on social assistance as income, while approximately 7% received other benefits (e.g., Ontario Disability Support Program) and 2% received employment insurance. In an additional 12% of investigations, the primary caregiver had no source of income, and in 7% the income source was unknown. Considering these income sources as indicators of socioeconomic hardship (i.e., social assistance, other benefits, employment insurance, no income, unknown income), when taken as a whole over half of maltreatment related investigations (53%) in Ontario in 2013 involved a primary caregiver living in socioeconomic hardship.

Perhaps because many families were already connected to social assistance and other resources, investigating child welfare workers rarely referred families to services that address

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding. Estimates may not add up to totals due to missing data. Estimates under 100 are not reported because they are unreliable (as indicated by a dash).

socioeconomic hardship. In the vast majority of maltreatment-related investigations, workers did not make a referral to welfare/social assistance or to food banks (98% and 97% respectively).

Overall, 39% of investigations noted the family owned their home. Maltreatment investigations were more likely to note that the family owned their home compared to risk investigations (40% versus 32%). Conversely, risk investigations were more likely to note that the family lived with friends or family (9% versus 5%). Overall, almost one in 10 families involved in a maltreatment-related investigation (9%) lived in public housing.

Running out of money for basic necessities implies a serious degree of socioeconomic hardship. A relatively small proportion of investigations noted the family had run out of money for food (6%), housing (4%), or utilities (4%) in the past six months.

Table 1

*Indicators of poverty in child maltreatment-related investigations in Ontario in 2013*

	Maltreatment Investigations		Risk Investigations		All Investigations	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
<b>Primary Caregiver Income Source</b>						
Full time	34,491	36%	8,938	33%	43,429	35%
Part time	9,867	10%	2,302	8%	12,168	10%
Multiple jobs	932	1%	168	1%	1,100	1%
Seasonal	439	0%	-	-	439	0%
Employment insurance	1,914	2%	917	3%	2,832	2%
Social assistance	22,635	24%	7,785	28%	30,420	25%
Other benefits	6,803	7%	2,042	7%	8,846	7%
None	12,376	13%	2,913	11%	15,289	12%
Unknown	6,375	7%	2,266	8%	8,640	7%
<b>Total</b>	<b>95,832</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>27,330</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>123,163</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>Secondary Caregiver Income Source</b>						
Full time	38,493	40%	9,729	36%	48,222	39%
Part time	4,204	4%	786	3%	4,990	4%
Multiple jobs	331	0%	427	2%	759	1%
Seasonal	1,487	2%	235	1%	1,722	1%
Employment insurance	751	1%	406	1%	1,157	1%
Social assistance	6,257	7%	1,921	7%	8,178	7%
Other benefits	3,084	3%	959	4%	4,043	3%
None	2,178	2%	684	3%	2,862	2%
Unknown	6,196	6%	2,068	8%	8,263	7%
No second caregiver in the home	32,851	34%	10,116	37%	42,967	35%
<b>Total</b>	<b>95,832</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>27,330</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>123,163</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>Referral to Welfare/Social Assistance</b>						
Yes	1,463	2%	534	2%	1,996	2%
No	94,369	98%	26,797	98%	121,166	98%
<b>Total</b>	<b>95,832</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>27,330</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>123,163</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>Referral to Food Bank</b>						
Yes	2,756	3%	734	3%	3,490	3%
No	93,076	97%	26,596	97%	119,673	97%
<b>Total</b>	<b>95,832</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>27,330</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>123,163</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>Housing Type</b>						
Own home	38,811	40%	8,793	32%	47,605	39%
Rental	36,399	38%	11,567	42%	47,966	39%
Public housing	9,237	10%	2,195	8%	11,431	9%
Band housing	924	1%	289	1%	1,213	1%
Hotel	-	-	-	-	108	0%
Shelter	416	0%	372	1%	789	1%
Living with friends/family	4,553	5%	2,587	9%	7,140	6%
Unknown	5,079	5%	1,429	5%	6,508	5%
Other	318	0%	-	-	402	0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>95,832</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>27,330</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>123,163</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>Home Overcrowded</b>						
Yes	7,380	8%	1,917	7%	9,296	8%
No	85,621	89%	23,842	87%	109,463	89%
Unknown	2,831	3%	1,572	6%	4,403	4%
<b>Total</b>	<b>95,832</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>27,330</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>123,163</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 1 (continued)

		Maltreatment Investigations		Risk Investigations		All Investigations	
Number of Moves in Past 12 Months							
	0 moves	58,642	61%	15,627	57%	74,269	60%
	1 move	18,014	19%	5,933	22%	23,947	19%
	2 or more moves	4,325	5%	1,730	6%	6,055	5%
	Unknown	14,850	15%	4,041	15%	18,891	15%
<b>Total</b>		<b>95,832</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>27,330</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>123,163</b>	<b>100%</b>
Unsafe Housing Conditions							
	Yes	4,673	5%	718	3%	5,391	4%
	No	86,490	90%	25,022	92%	111,511	91%
	Unknown	4,670	5%	1,591	6%	6,261	5%
<b>Total</b>		<b>95,832</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>27,330</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>123,163</b>	<b>100%</b>
Ran Out of Money for Food in Past 6 Mo							
	Yes	5907	6%	1732	6%	7,640	6%
	No	77566	81%	21463	79%	99,029	80%
	Unknown	12359	13%	4135	15%	16,494	13%
<b>Total</b>		<b>95,832</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>27,330</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>123,163</b>	<b>100%</b>
Ran Out of Money for Housing in Past 6							
	Yes	3940	4%	908	3%	4,847	4%
	No	82138	86%	22507	82%	104,645	85%
	Unknown	9755	10%	3916	14%	13,670	11%
<b>Total</b>		<b>95,832</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>27,330</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>123,163</b>	<b>100%</b>
Ran Out of Money for Utilities in Past 6							
	Yes	4139	4%	733	3%	4,872	4%
	No	78792	82%	21878	80%	100,670	82%
	Unknown	12902	13%	4719	17%	17,621	14%
<b>Total</b>		<b>95,832</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>27,330</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>123,163</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 2 presents a comparison of two caregiver households and lone caregiver households on various poverty indicators. A larger proportion of investigations involving lone caregivers noted the primary caregiver received social assistance (36% versus 18%). Lone caregivers were also less likely to own their own home (23% versus 47%) and more likely to live in a rental (48% versus 34%), public housing (13% versus 7%), shelter (2% versus 0%), or with family/friends (7% versus 5%). Further, lone caregivers were less likely to have remained in the same residence in the past year and instead were more likely to have moved once (21% versus 19%) or two or more times (7% versus 4%). Lone caregiver households were also more likely than two caregiver households to run out of money for food (8% versus 5%), housing (5% versus 3%), or utilities (5% versus 3%). Taken together, these findings suggest that families headed by lone caregivers and investigated by child welfare services are generally more likely to live in socioeconomic hardship compared to their counterparts headed by two caregivers.

Table 2

*Lone caregiver status and indicators of poverty in Ontario in 2013*

		Two Caregiver Households		Lone Caregiver Households	
		#	%	#	%
Primary Caregiver Income Source					
	Full time	28,895	36%	14,534	34%
	Part time	9,074	11%	3,095	7%
	Multiple jobs	526	1%	573	1%
	Seasonal	199	0%	239	1%
	Employment insurance	1,896	2%	936	2%
	Social assistance	14,801	18%	15,619	36%
	Other benefits	5,234	7%	3,612	8%
	None	14,173	18%	1,115	3%
	Unknown	5,397	7%	3,243	8%
<b>Total</b>		<b>80,195</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>42,966</b>	<b>100%</b>
Referral to Welfare/Social Assistance					
	Yes	1,076	1%	921	2%
	No	79,119	99%	42,045	98%
<b>Total</b>		<b>80,195</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>42,966</b>	<b>100%</b>
Referral to Food Bank					
	Yes	1,649	2%	1,841	4%
	No	78,546	98%	41,125	96%
<b>Total</b>		<b>80,195</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>42,966</b>	<b>100%</b>
Housing Type					
	Own home	37,847	47%	9,757	23%
	Rental	27,487	34%	20,479	48%
	Public housing	5,772	7%	5,660	13%
	Band housing	827	1%	386	1%
	Hotel	-	-	-	-
	Shelter	133	0%	656	2%
	Living with friends/family	3,932	5%	3,209	7%
	Unknown	3,941	5%	2,567	6%
	Other	230	0%	173	0%
<b>Total</b>		<b>80,195</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>42,966</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 2 (continued)

		Two Caregiver Households		Lone Caregiver Households	
Home Overcrowded					
	Yes	6,336	8%	2,961	7%
	No	71,419	89%	38,045	89%
	Unknown	2,442	3%	1,961	5%
<b>Total</b>		<b>80,195</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>42,966</b>	<b>100%</b>
Number of Moves in Past 12 Months					
	0 moves	49,999	62%	24,270	56%
	1 move	14,985	19%	8,962	21%
	2 or more moves	3,258	4%	2,798	7%
	Unknown	11,954	15%	6,937	16%
<b>Total</b>		<b>80,195</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>42,966</b>	<b>100%</b>
Unsafe Housing Conditions					
	Yes	3,080	4%	2,310	5%
	No	73,686	92%	37,825	88%
	Unknown	3,430	4%	2,831	7%
<b>Total</b>		<b>80,195</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>42,966</b>	<b>100%</b>
Ran Out of Money for Food in Past 6 Mo					
	Yes	4,125	5%	3,514	8%
	No	66,147	82%	32,882	77%
	Unknown	9,923	12%	6,571	15%
<b>Total</b>		<b>80,195</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>42,966</b>	<b>100%</b>
Ran Out of Money for Housing in Past 6 Mo					
	Yes	2,727	3%	2,120	5%
	No	69,360	86%	35,285	82%
	Unknown	8,109	10%	5,562	13%
<b>Total</b>		<b>80,195</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>42,966</b>	<b>100%</b>
Ran Out of Money for Utilities in Past 6 Mo					
	Yes	2,724	3%	2,147	5%
	No	66,978	84%	33,692	78%
	Unknown	10,494	13%	7,128	17%
<b>Total</b>		<b>80,195</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>42,966</b>	<b>100%</b>

## Background

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.

Workers were asked to provide information about the maltreatment-related allegations and the characteristics of the investigated child and family. Workers also provided information on several short-term investigation outcomes including referrals to specialized services, ongoing child welfare services, and placement in out-of-home care.

The information collected included various indicators of socioeconomic status, including: income source for up to two caregivers (full time, part time, multiple jobs, seasonal, employment insurance, social assistance, other benefit, none, unknown), housing type (own home, rental, public housing, band housing, hotel, shelter, living with friends/family, unknown, other), home overcrowding (yes, no, unknown), housing transience (0, 1, 2 or more, or unknown moves in past 12 months), household ran out of money for food, housing or utilities (yes, no, unknown), unsafe housing conditions (yes, no, unknown), and referrals to welfare/social assistance, housing, or shelter service (yes or no).

Maltreatment investigations and risk of future maltreatment investigations were tracked separately. 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.

The present analysis included all maltreatment-related investigations (i.e., maltreatment and risk investigations, all substantiation levels) involving children age zero to 15 (unweighted n=5,265, weighted estimate=125,281).

## **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.

Investigating workers often did not know the status of a family in terms of indicators of socioeconomic hardship. While the OIS overall had an excellent item completion rate, relatively high rates of “unknown” responses were endorsed for the indicators examined in this brief report.

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 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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