



School Referrals for Child Maltreatment-Related Concerns to the Ontario Child Welfare System in 2018

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Introduction

The Ontario Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect 2018 (OIS-2018)¹ is the sixth 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 school-based referrals for child maltreatment-related concerns to the Ontario child welfare system in 2018. School closures during the COVID-19 pandemic are a source of concern given the isolation of children and families and the stress that economic instability, social isolation, and not having regular access to services creates for caregivers and children. In Quebec, there is already a noted 25 to 40 percent decrease in the number of cases reported to child protection services since the start of the COVID-19 crisis, which can be explained, at least in part, by reduced safeguarding measures in schools that usually facilitate detection.² To better appreciate the nature of the cases that are usually detected by schools and brought to the attention of child protection services, this Information Sheet describes school referrals to child welfare authorities in Ontario in 2018, including: the nature of the concern, functioning concerns for the primary caregiver, household context, household income source, child age categories, child functioning concerns, and referrals made to internal or external services at the conclusion of the investigation.

Findings

An estimated 158,476 children 0-17 years of age were referred for a child maltreatment-related concern to a child welfare authority in Ontario in 2018. Thirty-three percent of these investigations, or an estimated 51,894 child maltreatment-related investigations, were the result of a school referral. Twenty-five percent of investigations involving First Nations children were referred by a school source.

¹ Fallon, B., Filippelli, J., Lefebvre, R., Joh-Carnella, N., Trocmé, N., Black, T., ... Stoddart, J. (2020). Ontario Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect-2018 (OIS-2018). Toronto, ON: Child Welfare Research Portal.

² Gagnon, Katia. (2020, March 27). *Baisse «drastique» des signalements à la DPJ*. La Presse. <https://www.lapresse.ca/covid-19/202003/26/01-5266666-baisse-drastique-des-signalements-a-la-dpj.php>

Child maltreatment-related investigations referred by school personnel were most likely to be for a concern of physical abuse (39 percent of school-based investigations, or an estimated 20,171 investigations), followed by risk of future maltreatment (34 percent of school-based investigations, or an estimated 17,478 investigations) and neglect (13 percent of school-based investigations, or an estimated 6,965 investigations). In approximately one in five school-based investigations, or an estimated 11,154 investigations, the investigating worker either substantiated maltreatment or confirmed risk of future maltreatment for the child. See Table 1.

Over half of emotional maltreatment investigations referred by schools were substantiated, an estimated 1,359 investigations; nearly half of school-based investigations for exposure to intimate partner violence were substantiated, an estimated 1,381 investigations; and approximately one fifth of school-based investigations for physical and sexual abuse were substantiated, or an estimated 3,791 and 278 investigations, respectively. See Table 1.

Table 1.

Primary Concern and Substantiation of Concern in School-Based Child Maltreatment-Related Investigations in Ontario in 2018

| Primary Concern | Number of School-Based Investigations | Percent of School-Based Investigations | Number of Substantiated Investigations | Percent of Primary Concern Substantiated |
|--|--|---|---|---|
| Physical Abuse | 20,171 | 39% | 3,791 | 19% |
| Sexual Abuse | 1,584 | 3% | 278 | 18% |
| Neglect | 6,965 | 13% | 2,137 | 31% |
| Emotional Maltreatment | 2,491 | 5% | 1,359 | 55% |
| Exposure to Intimate Partner Violence | 3,205 | 6% | 1,381 | 43% |
| Risk of Future Maltreatment | 17,478 | 34% | 2,208 | 13% |
| Total School-Based Investigations | 51,894 | 100% | 11,154 | 21% |
| Based on a sample of 2,382 school-based investigations with information on the primary concern of the investigation. Percentages of school-based investigations are column percentages, and percentages of substantiation are row percentages. Some columns may not add to totals due to rounding. | | | | |

In 40 percent of school-based child maltreatment-related investigations conducted in Ontario in 2018 at least one primary caregiver risk factor was noted. The most frequently noted concerns were: few social supports (22 percent of school-based child maltreatment-related investigations, or an estimated 11,165 investigations); mental health issues (17 percent of school-based child maltreatment-related investigations, or an estimated 8,483 investigations); and victim of intimate partner violence (13 percent of school-based child maltreatment-related investigations, or an estimated 6,713 investigations). See Table 2.

Table 2.

Primary Caregiver Risk Factors in School-Based Child Maltreatment-Related Investigations in Ontario in 2018

| Primary Caregiver Risk Factor | Estimate | Percent |
|--|-----------------|----------------|
| Alcohol Abuse | 1,603 | 3% |
| Drug/Solvent Abuse | 2,054 | 4% |
| Cognitive Impairment | 1,609 | 3% |
| Mental Health Issues | 8,483 | 17% |
| Physical Health Issues | 2,997 | 6% |
| Few Social Supports | 11,165 | 22% |
| Victim of Intimate Partner Violence | 6,713 | 13% |
| Perpetrator of Intimate Partner Violence | 1,730 | 3% |
| History of Foster Care/Group Home | 1,705 | 3% |
| At Least One Noted Primary Caregiver Risk Factor | 20,349 | 40% |
| Total School-Based Investigations | 50,851 | 100% |
| Based on a sample of 2,334 school-based investigations with information about primary caregiver risk factors. Percentages are column percentages. Columns may not add to totals because multiple or no caregiver risk factors could be noted. | | |
| This question was not applicable for a sample of 44 school-based investigations in which the case was opened under a community caregiver and four investigations in which the youth was living independently. A community caregiver is defined as anyone providing care to a child in an out-of-home setting (e.g., institutional setting). The estimated number of school-based community caregiver investigations is 960, and the estimated number of school-based investigations in which the youth was living independently is 82. | | |

Ninety-four percent of children investigated by child welfare authorities in Ontario in 2018 as a result of a referral from a school were living with at least one biological parent. Forty-two percent of school-based investigations (an estimated 21,326 investigations) involved children living with both of their biological parents, 30 percent (an estimated 15,411 investigations) involved children living with a lone biological parent, and 22 percent (an estimated 11,226 investigations) involved children living with two caregivers, one of whom was their biological parent (e.g., biological parent and parent’s partner, biological parent and grandparent, or biological parent and aunt or uncle). See Table 3.

Table 3.

Household Composition in School-Based Child Maltreatment-Related Investigations in Ontario in 2018

| Household Composition | Estimate | Percent |
|--|-----------------|----------------|
| Lone Biological Parent | 15,411 | 30% |
| Lone Foster or Adoptive Parent | 514 | 1% |
| Lone Other Caregiver | 531 | 1% |
| Two Biological Parents | 21,326 | 42% |
| Two Caregivers, One of Whom is a Biological Parent | 11,226 | 22% |
| Two Caregivers, At Least One of Whom is a Foster or Adoptive Parent | 886 | 2% |
| Two Other Caregivers | 957 | 2% |
| Total School-Based Investigations | 50,851 | 100% |
| Based on a sample of 2,334 school-based investigations with information about household composition. Percentages are column percentages. Columns may not add to totals because of rounding. | | |
| This question was not applicable for a sample of 44 school-based investigations in which the case was opened under a community caregiver and four investigations in which the youth was living independently. A community caregiver is defined as anyone providing care to a child in an out-of-home setting (e.g., institutional setting). The estimated number of school-based community caregiver investigations is 960, and the estimated number of school-based investigations in which the youth was living independently is 82. | | |

Most children investigated by Ontario child welfare agencies as a result of a school referral were living in households whose primary income was from full-time work (58 percent of school-based investigations, or an estimated 29,687 investigations). A further nineteen percent of these investigations, or an estimated 9,606 investigations, involved families whose primary income sources were social assistance, employment insurance, or another benefit. See Table 4.

Table 4.

Household Income Source in School-Based Child Maltreatment-Related Investigations in Ontario in 2018

| Household Income Source | Estimate | Percent |
|---|-----------------|----------------|
| Full-Time | 29,687 | 58% |
| Part-Time/Seasonal/Multiple Jobs | 4,991 | 10% |
| Social Assistance/Employment Insurance/Other Benefit | 9,606 | 19% |
| Unknown | 3,060 | 6% |
| None | 3,590 | 7% |
| Total School-Based Investigations | 50,934 | 100% |
| Based on a sample of 2,338 school-based investigations with information about household income source. Percentages are column percentages. Columns may not add to totals because of rounding. | | |
| This question was not applicable for a sample of 44 school-based investigations in which the case was opened under a community caregiver. A community caregiver is defined as anyone providing care to a child in an out-of-home setting (e.g., institutional setting). The estimated number of school-based community caregiver investigations is 960. | | |

Thirty-two percent of school-based child maltreatment-related investigations, or an estimated 16,681 investigations, involved children aged eight to eleven years old; 28 percent of these investigations (an estimated 14,383 investigations) involved children aged four to seven years old; and 23 percent of these investigations (an estimated 12,163 investigations) involved children aged twelve to fifteen years old. See Table 5. Investigated children younger than school age are likely investigated siblings.

Table 5.

Child Age in School-Based Child Maltreatment-Related Investigations in Ontario in 2018

| Child Age Category | Estimate | Percent |
|---|-----------------|----------------|
| <1 Year | 1,179 | 2% |
| 1-3 Years | 3,528 | 7% |
| 4-7 Years | 14,383 | 28% |
| 8-11 Years | 16,681 | 32% |
| 12-15 Years | 12,163 | 23% |
| 16-17 Years | 3,962 | 8% |
| Total School-Based Investigations | 51,894 | 100% |
| Based on a sample of 2,382 school-based investigations with information about child age. Percentages are column percentages. Columns may not add to totals because of rounding. | | |

Forty percent of child maltreatment-related investigations referred by school personnel involved children with at least one child functioning concern noted by the investigating worker. Academic or learning difficulties were most frequently noted (20 percent of school-based investigations, or an estimated 10,239 investigations), followed by aggression or conduct issues (14 percent of school-based investigations, or an estimated 7,287 investigations) and depression, anxiety, or withdrawal (14 percent of school-based investigations, or an estimated 7,185 investigations). In 13 percent of school-based investigations (an estimated 6,872 investigations), the investigating worker noted Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder for the child, and in 12 percent of these investigations (an estimated 6,349 investigations) the worker noted an intellectual or developmental disability. See Table 6.

Table 6.

Five Most Frequently Noted Child Functioning Concerns in School-Based Child Maltreatment-Related Investigations in Ontario in 2018

| Child Functioning Concern | Estimate | Percent |
|--|-----------------|----------------|
| Academic/Learning Difficulties | 10,239 | 20% |
| Aggression/Conduct Issues | 7,287 | 14% |
| Depression/Anxiety/Withdrawal | 7,185 | 14% |
| Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder | 6,872 | 13% |
| Intellectual/Developmental Disability | 6,349 | 12% |
| At Least One Noted Child Functioning Concern | 20,971 | 40% |
| Total School-Based Investigations | 51,894 | 100% |
| Based on a sample of 2,382 investigations with information about child functioning concerns. Percentages are column percentages. Columns may not add to totals because multiple or no child functioning concerns could be noted. | | |

Investigating workers made referrals to internal or external services in over a third of school-based referrals to Ontario child welfare agencies in 2018. Referrals to parent education or support services were made in 15 percent of school-based investigations (an estimated 7,542 investigations); referrals to family or parent counselling were made in 13 percent of school-based investigations (an estimated 6,689 investigations); and referrals to psychiatric or mental health services were made in 10 percent of these investigations (an estimated 5,011 investigations). See Table 7.

Table 7.

Five Most Frequently Made Service Referrals in School-Based Child Maltreatment-Related Investigations in Ontario in 2018

| Service Referral | Estimate | Percent |
|--|-----------------|----------------|
| Parent Education or Support Services | 7,542 | 15% |
| Family or Parent Counselling | 6,689 | 13% |
| Psychiatric/Mental Health Services | 5,011 | 10% |
| Medical or Dental Services | 1,491 | 3% |
| Cultural Services | 1,475 | 3% |
| At Least One Service Referral Made | 17,994 | 35% |
| Total School-Based Investigations | 51,894 | 100% |
| Based on a sample of 2,382 investigations with information about referrals to services. Percentages are column percentages. Columns do not add to totals because multiple or no service referrals could be made. | | |

Conclusion

As the community service that sees children on the most regular basis, schools are in important vantage points for identifying and responding to suspected child maltreatment and to particular forms of maltreatment, such as physical abuse. There is evidence that children who are maltreated do not perform as well academically compared to their peers.³ A school closure of several weeks could have a potentially devastating impact on these children’s motivation, progress, and learning, both academically and socially. Child welfare-involved children and families experience increased household, caregiver, and child risk factors, and these stressors can be particularly exacerbated by the deleterious impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the measures taken to control the spread of disease.

Methodology

The OIS-2018 used a multi-stage sampling design to select a representative sample of 18 child welfare agencies across Ontario and then to sample cases within these agencies. Information was collected directly from child protection workers on a representative sample of 7,590 child protection investigations conducted during a three-month sampling period in 2018. This sample was weighted to reflect provincial annual estimates. After two weighting procedures were applied

³ Crozier, J.C. et Barth, R.P. (2005). Cognitive and academic functioning in maltreated children. *Children and Schools*, 27, 197-206.

to the data, the estimated number of maltreatment-related investigations (i.e., maltreatment and risk-only investigations) conducted in Ontario in 2018 was 158,476.

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-three 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 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 about concerns related to caregiver risk factors and child functioning concerns. Where applicable, the reference point for identifying these concerns was the previous six months. This information only documents problems that were known to investigating child welfare workers. Workers were asked to indicate problems that had been confirmed by a diagnosis, directly observed by the investigating worker or another worker, and/or disclosed by the caregiver or child, as well as issues that they suspected were problems but could not fully verify at the time of the investigation.

Workers were asked to provide information on various other aspects of their investigations, including the characteristics of the household, caregivers, and children; history of previous child welfare case openings; and short-term child welfare service dispositions, including referrals made to internal and external services.

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 the estimation method used to derive provincial annual estimates should also be noted. The agency size correction uses service volume as a proxy for agency size; this does not account for potential variation in investigations across agencies. 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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