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Version Published Version/Final PDF

Citation (published version) Fallon, B., Trocme, N., MacLaurin, B., Sinha, A., & Helie, S. (2015). Provincial Comparisons in the Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect - 2008: Context for Variation in Findings. *International Journal of Child and Adolescent Resilience*, 3(1), 125-142.

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INVITED PAPER: Provincial Comparisons in the Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect - 2008: Context for Variation in Findings

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Abstract:

Objectives: This paper compares findings of five provincial incidence studies (British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario and Quebec) in order to investigate and explain variations in provincial findings with the hope of promoting future provincial comparisons.

Methods: The provincial incidence study reports were produced as part of the larger CIS-2008. The CIS-2008 is a third national study that captured information about children and their families reported for maltreatment by child protection services.

Results: The findings compared rates per 1,000 children. Some dimensions measured such as rates of substantiation and transfers to ongoing services and placement were similar across the provinces studied. Others, such as rates of maltreatment-related investigations, the classification of risk investigations, rates of substantiated neglect, emotional maltreatment and intimate partner violence differed more between the five provinces.

Conclusions: Socio-demographic differences, differences in screening and investigation procedures, clinical case practice differences and methodological differences were presented as possible sources of variation in the data across provinces. The results, however, are not evaluative as they do not present data that examine outcomes for children and their families.

Implications: While comparisons between provinces can now be made, further research on the impact of the differences in services to children and their families and the outcome of these services is still needed distinguishable from emotional resilience and dispositional traits. Empirical research on the nature of interpersonal resilience in challenged contexts is warranted. Intervention

Keywords:

Child maltreatment, child abuse, incidence.

Conflict of interest statement:

There are no conflicts of interest to declare.

Acknowledgements:

Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Aid to Research Workshops and Conferences Grant, The Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect, 2008: Provincial / First Nations Research Network Workshop, File number 646-2011-0130, Council Identification Number 126305

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Introduction

The CIS-2008 is the third national study to examine the incidence of reported child maltreatment and the characteristics of the children and families investigated by child protection services in Canada. Major findings from the CIS-2008 were made available to the public in the fall of 2010 (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2010) and can be retrieved online at www.cwrp.ca. In the CIS-2008 cycle, five provinces – British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario, and Quebec – provided support and funding for enriched samples to allow province-specific estimates. Stakeholders provided funding to support a First Nations CIS-2008 component, including the provinces of British Columbia, Manitoba, and Ontario, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada through the Public Health Agency of Canada, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. The Canadian Foundation for Innovation provided a grant to support the development of an integrated CIS database.

Table 1: Summary of Provincial Child Welfare Systems

	British Columbia	Alberta	Saskatchewan	Ontario	Quebec
Population					
Aboriginal child	55,250	58,620	50,595	64,325	27,520
Population in 2006 0-14 years old*	(8.1%)	(9.2%)	(26.9%)	(2.9%)	(2.2%)
Non-Aboriginal child	624,225	572,590	137,020	2,145,150	1,223,895
Population in 2006 0-14 years old*	(91.8%)	(90.7%)	(73.0%)	(97.0%)	(97.8%)
Total Child Population 2006 0-14 years old*	679,475	631,210	187,615	2,209,475	1,251,415
Poverty Reduction Plan as of 2008†	No	No	No	No	No
Percentage of persons under 18 in low income in 2008‡	15.2%	10.6%	20.2%	15.2%	15.3%
Administration					
Legislation	<i>Child, Family and Community Services Act</i>	<i>Child Youth and Family Enhancement Act</i>	<i>Child and Family Services Act</i>	<i>Child and Family Services Act</i>	<i>Youth Protection Act</i>
Age Served	Children under 19	Children under 18	Children under 16	Children under 16	Children under 18
Funding Ministry at time of CIS-2008	The Ministry of Children and Family Development, Child Protection Division	The Ministry of Children and Youth Services	The Ministry of Social Services	The Ministry of Children and Youth Services	The Ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux
Child Welfare Organizations as of 2008	76	55	20	47	19
First Nations / Urban Aboriginal Agencies as of 2008 ‡	9	18	17	6	6
Reporting, Screening & Investigations					
Legal Duty to Report for Professionals	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Legal Duty to Report for General Public	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Only situations of physical and sexual abuse
Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) Reporting		RCMP reports to CW every time they attend an IPV call	RCMP reports to CW every time they attend an IPV call in which children are involved		
Use of Screening Tool				Ontario Child Welfare Eligibility Spectrum	
Percent of Cases Screened Out					
Risk Investigations Legislated	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Length of Initial Investigation		42 days			
Use of Differential Response Model	Yes	Yes		Yes	
Specialized Investigation Units			Specialized Police & Social Services integrated units in Regina & Saskatoon to investigate cases of child sexual abuse		
Services					
Kinship Foster Care Payment	Kinship family may receive payments		Payments to kinship caregivers are less than those given to formal foster parents		

*The total Aboriginal identity population includes the Aboriginal groups (North American Indian, Métis and Inuit), multiple Aboriginal responses and Aboriginal responses not included elsewhere, in 2006. Source: Statistics Canada. Population by age groups, sex and Aboriginal identity groups, 2006 counts for both sexes, for Canada, provinces and territories - 20% sample data. Retrieved from <http://www12.statcan.ca/census-recensement/2006/dp-pd/hlt/97-558/pages/page.cfm?Lang=E&Geo=PR&Code=01&Table=2&Data=Count&Sex=1&Abor=1&StartRec=1&Sort=2&Display=Page>.

† Family Service Toronto. (2011). Revisiting family security in insecure times: 2011 report card on child and family poverty in Canada.

‡ Low income measures (LIMs), are relative measures of low income, set at 50% of adjusted median household income. These measures are categorized according to the number of persons present in the household, reflecting the economies of scale inherent in household size. The gap ratio is the difference between the low income threshold and the family (or household) income, expressed as a percentage of the low income threshold. For those with negative income, the gap ratio is set to 100. As a measure of depth of low income, the statistic takes the form of the average or the median of the gap ratio calculated over the population of individuals below the income line. Source: Statistics Canada. Table 202-0802 - Persons in low income families, annual, CANSIM (database).

Background

Findings from the CIS-1998 (Trocmé et al, 2001), CIS-2003 (Trocmé et al., 2005), and CIS-2008 (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2010) have provided much needed information to service providers, policy makers and researchers seeking to better understand the children and families coming into contact with the child welfare system. CIS data also support provincial and territorial efforts to integrate their administrative systems to better learn from the diverse policies and programs that have been developed.

In Canada, most child abuse and neglect statistics are kept on a provincial or territorial basis. Differences among provincial and territorial definitions of maltreatment, and in methods for counting cases, make it impossible to aggregate or compare these statistics. This hinders the ability of governments and social service providers to improve policies and programs that address the needs of maltreated children. Although the CIS-2008 collected standardized information across all provinces and territories, these rates do not provide insight into service effectiveness, and contextual factors may impact each provincial incidence study report.

To contextualize comparisons of provincial and First Nations child welfare statistics, the CIS-2008 research team initiated the CIS-2008 Provincial / First Nations Research Network Workshop, with support from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. In October 2011, provincial and First Nations representatives were brought together with the research team and several graduate students at the University of Toronto to engage in a full day of comparative discussion surrounding possible explanations for the variation across provinces.

This paper provides an overview of the CIS-2008 research methods, and a presentation of the comparative findings. The discussion of the findings focuses on four possible areas to consider when looking at differences in rates across the oversampling provinces: socio-demographic factors, front end practice differences, clinical practice differences and study methodological differences. Table 1 shows a Summary of Provincial Child Welfare Systems, which presents key information about child welfare system and socio demographic factors for the five provinces under discussion.

Objectives

The specific objectives of this paper are to:

- Present direct comparisons of key findings contained in the five provincial incidence study major findings reports (British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario and Quebec);
- Provide context for variations in provincial findings, and generate hypotheses as to reasons for variation;
- Increase knowledge of the challenges and opportunities of potential provincial comparisons.

Methods

The CIS-2008 captured information about children and their families as they came into contact with child welfare sites over a three-month sampling period. A multi-stage sampling design was used, first to select a representative sample of 112 child welfare sites across Canada, and then to sample cases within these sites. Information was collected directly from the investigating workers at the conclusion of the investigation. The CIS-2008 sample of 15,980 investigations was used to derive estimates of the annual rates and characteristics of investigated children in Canada.

Maltreatment-related investigations that met the criteria for inclusion in the CIS included situations where there were concerns that a child may have already been abused or neglected as well as situations where there was no specific concern about past maltreatment but where the risk of future maltreatment was being assessed. The CIS-2008 definition of child maltreatment includes 32 forms of maltreatment subsumed under five categories of maltreatment: physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, emotional maltreatment, and exposure to intimate partner violence. The CIS-2008 is able to track up to three categories of maltreatment.

Most child welfare statutes require that professionals working with children and the general public report all situations where they have concerns of child maltreatment. The investigation phase is designed to determine whether the child was maltreated or not. The CIS uses a three-tiered classification system for investigated incidents of maltreatment¹, including “substantiated”, “suspected”, and “unfounded”. Due to the organization of information systems in Québec, two-tiered substantiation (substantiated/unfounded) was used in the province. The CIS-2008 also uses a three-tiered classification system for risk of future maltreatment investigations. Workers could respond “yes” if there was a significant risk, “no” there was not a significant risk, or that the risk of future maltreatment was “unknown”. These classifications can be mapped on to the substantiation decisions for maltreatment investigations (substantiated/yes, suspected/unknown, unfounded/no).

Several other service dispositions were measured by the CIS-2008. Workers were asked to indicate whether the case would be transferred to receive ongoing child welfare services at the conclusion of the initial investigation, what referrals were provided to families and children, if an informal or formal out-of-home placement occurred for the child, and if an application to child welfare court was considered or made.

Although every effort was made to make the CIS-2008 estimates as precise and reliable as possible, several methodological limitations inherent to the nature of the data collected must be taken into consideration:

- The CIS only tracks reports investigated by child welfare sites and does not include reports that were screened out, cases that were only investigated by the police and cases that were never reported;
- The study is based on the assessments provided by the investigating child welfare workers that could not be independently verified;

- The CIS tracks information during the first 30 days of case activity, however there are slight provincial and territorial differences in this length of time;
- The annual national counts are weighted estimates, and in some instances, sample sizes are too small to derive publishable estimates;
- The agency size correction included in the weights 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.
- 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.

The CIS-2008 data collection and data-handling protocols and procedures were reviewed and approved by McGill University, the University of Toronto, and the University of Calgary Ethics Committees. Written permission for participating in the data collection process was obtained from the Provincial/ Territorial Directors of Child Welfare as well as from each site administrator or directors. Where a participating site had an ethics review process, that site also evaluated the study.

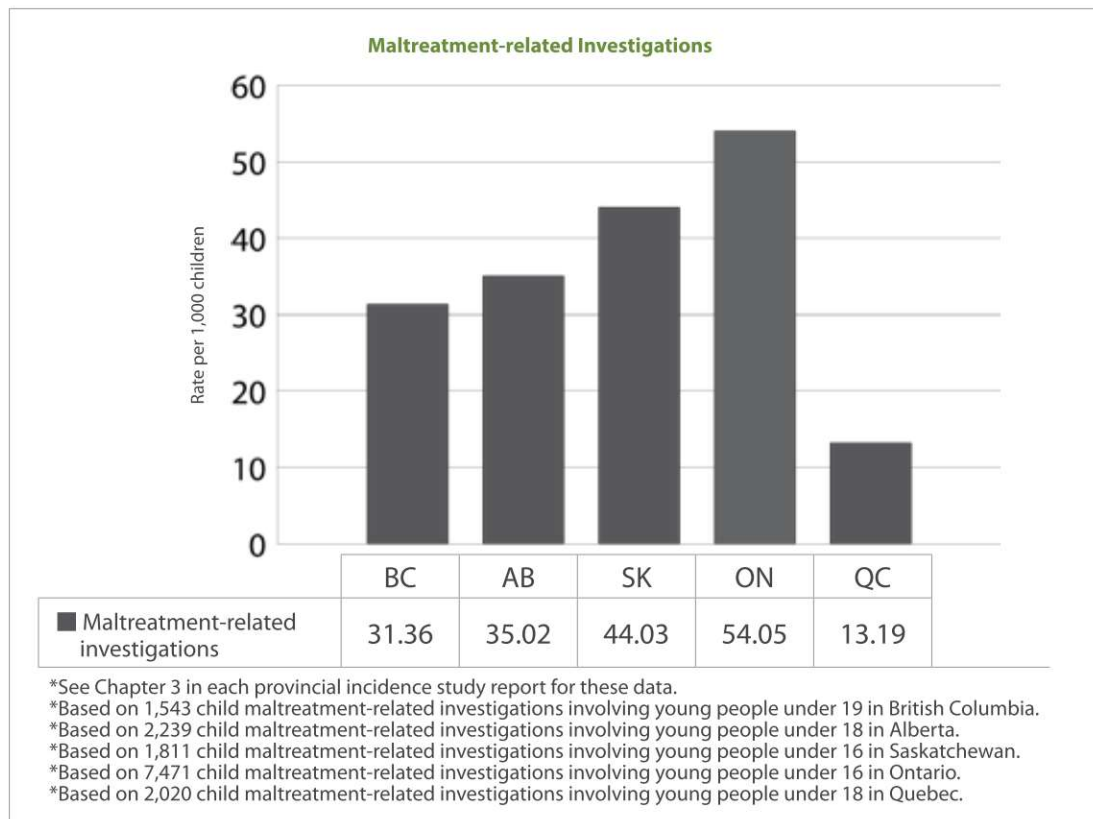
For additional details about study methods and weighting procedures please refer to the detailed Study Methods document (Fallon, Trocmé, MacLaurin, Sinha et al., 2012) available at http://cwrp.ca/sites/default/publications/en/CIS-2008_StudyMethods.pdf. The provincial incidence study reports were produced as part of the larger CIS-2008. During the preparation of these reports, the research team sought support from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada to initiate the CIS-2008 Provincial/ First Nations Research Network Workshop. Provincial and First Nations representatives, most of whom had existing relationships with the CIS-2008 research team, were invited to participate in a full day meeting in which provincial comparisons were presented and possible sources of variation were discussed. This paper was prepared using the written feedback from the representatives as well as the meeting minutes.

Results

The findings are presented in the form of figures, containing rates per 1,000 children¹. Figures compare the provinces of British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario, and Quebec, using the statistics presented in each provincial incidence study report. For Quebec,

¹ Rate calculations based on: Canada. Statistics Canada. Census of Canada, 2006: Age and Sex for Population, for Canada, Provinces, Territories, Census Divisions and Census Subdivisions, 2001. Census – 100% Data [computer file]. Ottawa: Ont.: Statistics Canada [producer and distributor], October 22, 2002 (95F0300XCB01006). Census data quality can be found at <http://www.statcan.ca/english/census96/dqindex.html>

Figure 1. Rate of Maltreatment-related Investigations (per 1,000 children in the population) in British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario & Quebec.



we used figures from Chapter 7 of the Quebec Incidence Study, comparing Quebec to the rest of Canada. The Quebec rates exclude investigations for 16 to 17 year olds, investigations on already open cases, and investigations where behavior problems are the only reason for investigation

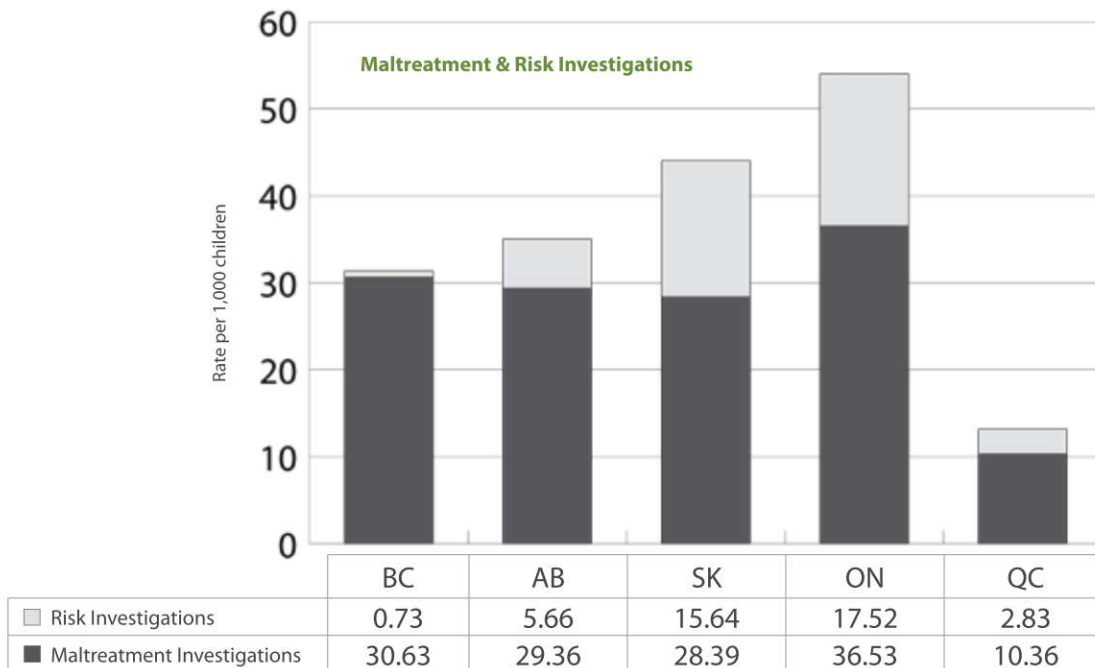
Figure 1 displays the rates of maltreatment-related investigations tracked by the CIS-2008. These rates ranged from a low of 13.19 per 1,000 children in Quebec to a high of 54.05 in Ontario.

Figure 2 displays the rates of maltreatment-related investigations tracked by the CIS-2008, separated by maltreatment and risk of future maltreatment investigations.

Ontario child welfare agencies conducted the most maltreatment investigations (36.53 per 1,000 children), and Quebec agencies conducted the fewest (10.36).

The rate of risk investigations varied a great deal across provinces. Few risk investigations were conducted in British Columbia, with 0.73 per 1,000 children; the highest rate of risk investigation was in Ontario, with 17.52 per 1,000 children. The proportion of

Figure 2. Rate of Maltreatment and Risk Investigations (per 1,000 children in the population) in British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario & Quebec.



*See Chapter 3 in each provincial incidence study report for these data.

*Based on 1,543 child maltreatment-related investigations involving young people under 19 in British Columbia.

*Based on 2,239 child maltreatment-related investigations involving young people under 18 in Alberta.

*Based on 1,811 child maltreatment-related investigations involving young people under 16 in Saskatchewan.

*Based on 7,471 child maltreatment-related investigations involving young people under 16 in Ontario.

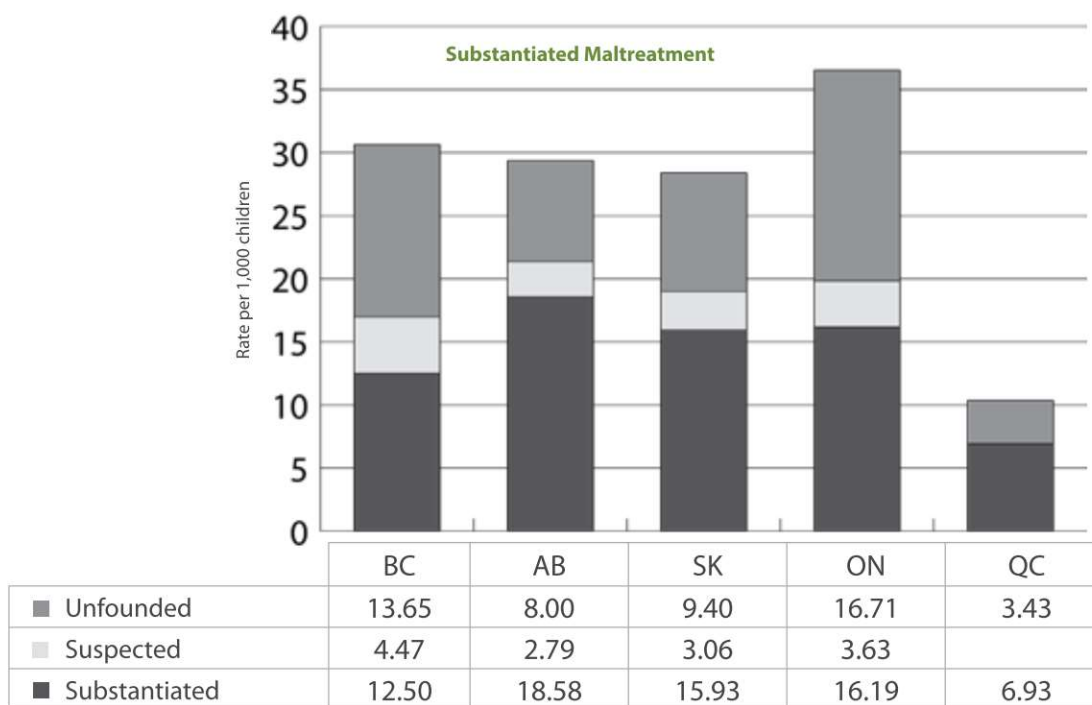
*Based on 2,020 child maltreatment-related investigations involving young people under 18 in Quebec.

risk and maltreatment investigations vary between provinces: 2% of investigations in British Columbia involved assessments of risk versus 98% of investigations focusing on incidents of maltreatment, while approximately one-third of investigations in Ontario (32%) and Saskatchewan (36%) were risk investigations.

Figure 3 presents the substantiation rates for maltreatment investigations in the CIS-2008. The rate of substantiation per 1,000 children varied from a low of 6.93 in Quebec to a high of 18.58 in Alberta. The proportion of substantiated investigations also varied: Quebec and Alberta had higher rates of substantiation (66% and 63% respectively) while Ontario and British Columbia had lower rates of substantiation and 41% respectively).

Rates of suspected maltreatment investigations were similar across British Columbia (4.47), Alberta (2.79), Saskatchewan (3.06), and Ontario (3.63). Rates of unfounded maltreatment investigations varied more, from a low of 3.43 per 1,000 children in Quebec to a high of 16.71 per 1,000 children in Ontario. In Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Quebec, the rate of substantiated investigations was much higher than the rate of unfounded investigations. In British Columbia and Ontario, there were much higher rates of unfounded maltreatment.

Figure 3. Rate of Maltreatment Substantiation (per 1,000 children in the population) in British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario & Quebec.



*See Chapter 3 in each provincial incidence study report for these data.

*Based on 1,481 child maltreatment-related investigations involving young people under 19 in British Columbia.

*Based on 1,852 child maltreatment-related investigations involving young people under 18 in Alberta.

*Based on 1,250 child maltreatment-related investigations involving young people under 16 in Saskatchewan.

*Based on 5,054 child maltreatment-related investigations involving young people under 16 in Ontario.

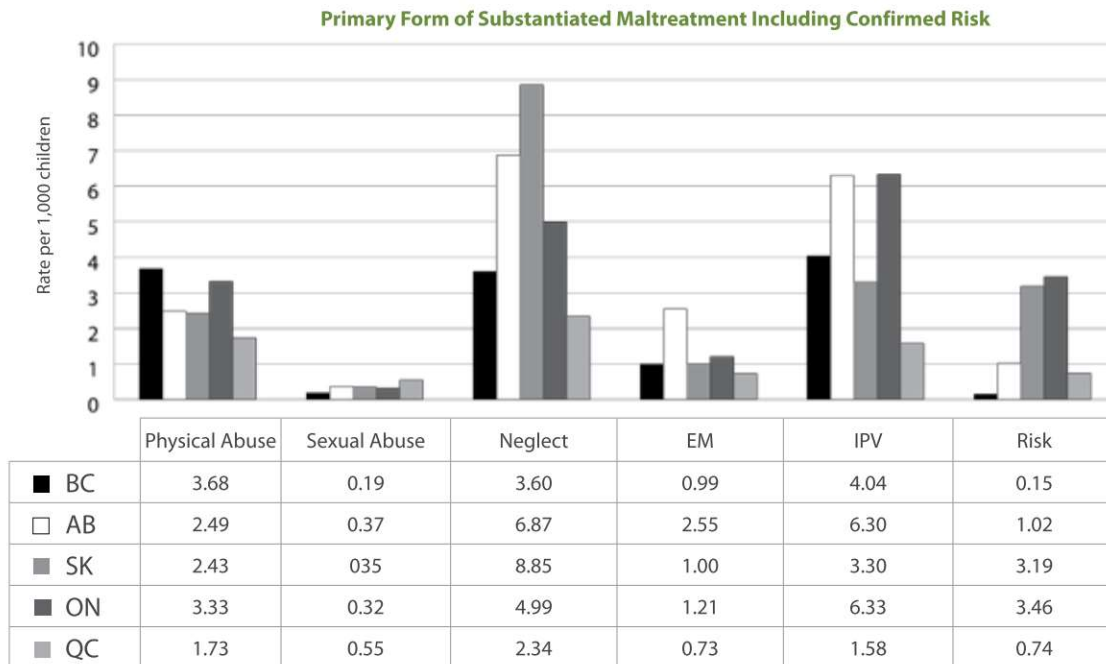
*Based on 1,587 child maltreatment-related investigations involving young people under 18 in Quebec.

Figure 4 presents the rate of substantiated maltreatment-related investigations by primary reason for the investigation. The rate of substantiated physical abuse investigations was similar across provinces, ranging from 1.73 per 1,000 children in Quebec to 3.68 per 1,000 children in British Columbia. The proportion of substantiated physical abuse investigations ranged from 29% of substantiated investigations in British Columbia to 13% of substantiated investigations in Alberta and Saskatchewan.

The rate of substantiated sexual abuse investigations was similar across provinces, ranging from 0.19 per 1,000 children in British Columbia to 0.55 per 1,000 children in Quebec. The proportion of substantiated sexual abuse investigations varied from 7% of substantiated investigations in Quebec to 1% in British Columbia.

The incidence of neglect varied across provinces; whereas 2.34 substantiated neglect investigations occurred per 1,000 children in Quebec, in Saskatchewan, 8.85 substantiated neglect investigations occurred per 1,000 children. The proportion of substantiated

Figure 4. Primary Form of Maltreatment among Substantiated Maltreatment-Related Investigations (rate per 1,000 children in the population) in British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario & Quebec.



*See Chapter 4 in each provincial incidence study report for these data.

*Based on 683 child maltreatment-related investigations involving young people under 19 in British Columbia.

*Based on 1,205 child maltreatment-related investigations involving young people under 18 in Alberta.

*Based on 864 child maltreatment-related investigations involving young people under 16 in Saskatchewan.

*Based on 2,789 child maltreatment-related investigations involving young people under 16 in Ontario.

*Based on 1,163 child maltreatment-related investigations involving young people under 18 in Quebec.

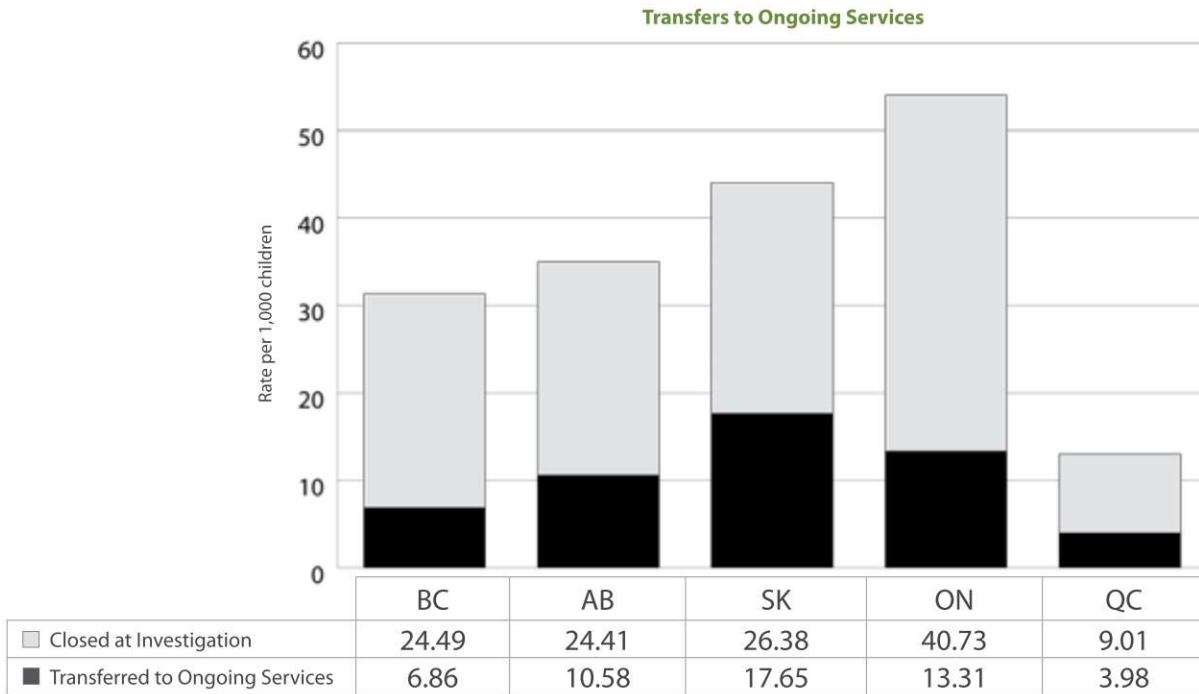
neglect investigations also varied. In Ontario, 25% of substantiated investigations involved substantiated neglect, compared to 46% in Saskatchewan.

The incidence of substantiated emotional maltreatment, exposure to intimate partner violence, and risk of future maltreatment varied across provinces. The rate of substantiated emotional maltreatment was lowest in Quebec (0.73) and highest in Alberta (2.55). The rate of substantiated exposure to intimate partner violence was lowest in Quebec (1.58) and highest in Ontario (6.33) and Alberta (6.30). British Columbia had the lowest rate of substantiated risk of future maltreatment (0.15) and Ontario had the highest (3.46). Proportions for substantiated emotional maltreatment investigations ranged from 5% of substantiated investigations in Saskatchewan to 13% in Alberta.

In British Columbia and Ontario, exposure to intimate partner violence was the most common substantiated concern. In Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Quebec, neglect was the most common substantiated concern.

Figure 5 displays the rates of transfers to ongoing child welfare services. Saskatchewan transferred investigations to ongoing services at the highest rate, 17.65 investigations per

Figure 5. Rate of Transfers to Ongoing Services (per 1,000 children in the population) among Maltreatment-related Investigations in British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario and Quebec.



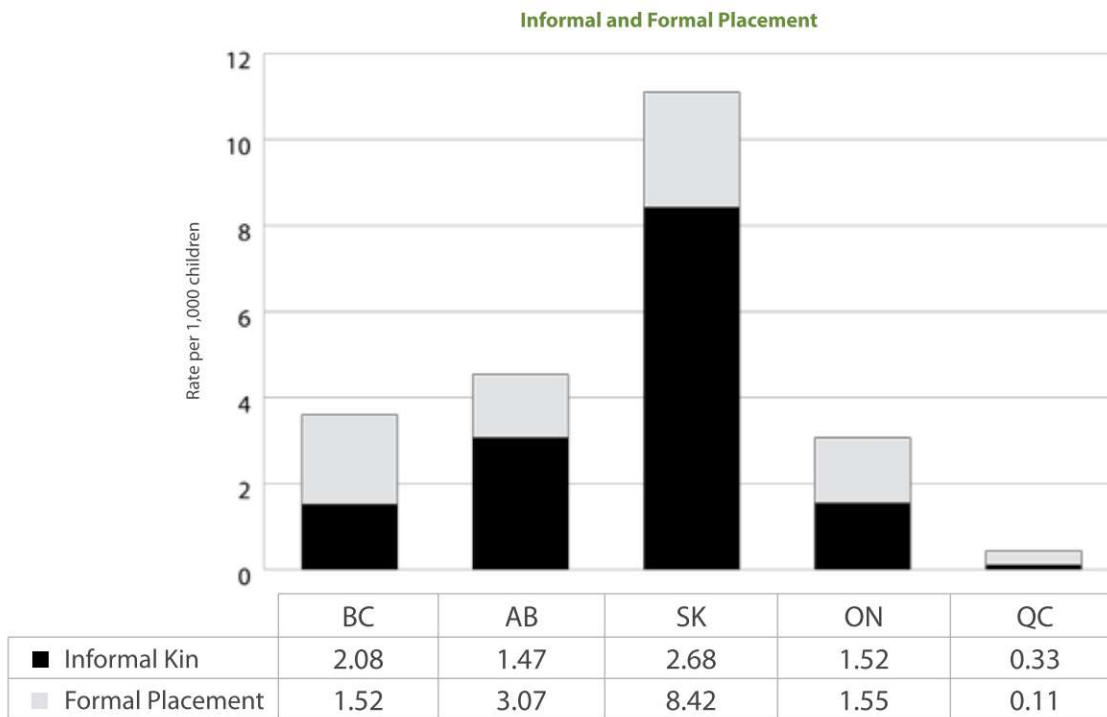
*See Chapter 3 in each provincial incidence study report for these data.
 *Based on 1,543 child maltreatment-related investigations involving young people under 19 in British Columbia.
 *Based on 2,239 child maltreatment-related investigations involving young people under 18 in Alberta.
 *Based on 1,811 child maltreatment-related investigations involving young people under 16 in Saskatchewan.
 *Based on 7,471 child maltreatment-related investigations involving young people under 16 in Ontario.
 *Based on 2,020 child maltreatment-related investigations involving young people under 18 in Quebec.

1,000 children, while Quebec transferred an estimated 3.98 investigations per 1,000 children to ongoing services. The proportion of cases transferred to ongoing services in each province presents a different picture. In Quebec, 69% of cases were transferred to ongoing services at the end of the initial investigation, compared to 40% of cases in Saskatchewan, 30% in Alberta, 25% in Ontario, and 22% in British Columbia.

Figure 6 displays the rates of informal and formal placements across Canada. Rates were similar across provinces for informal placements, ranging from 0.33 per 1,000 children in Quebec to 2.68 per 1,000 children in Saskatchewan. The rate of formal placement varied, from a low of 0.11 per 1,000 children in Quebec to 8.42 per 1,000 children in Saskatchewan. The proportion of cases in each province in which a placement occurred revealed a similar pattern. In Saskatchewan, 19% of maltreatment-related investigations resulted in a formal placement for the child, and 6% resulted in an informal placement. In Quebec, only 1% of maltreatment-related investigations resulted in a formal placement, and 3% resulted in an informal placement.

Figure 7 displays the history of previous investigations among maltreatment-related investigations across British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Ontario. Comparable

Figure 6. Informal and Formal Placements (rate per 1,000 children in the population) among Maltreatment-related Investigations in British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario and Quebec.



*See Chapter 3 in each provincial incidence study report for these data.

*Based on 1,543 child maltreatment-related investigations involving young people under 19 in British Columbia.

*Based on 2,239 child maltreatment-related investigations involving young people under 18 in Alberta.

*Based on 1,811 child maltreatment-related investigations involving young people under 16 in Saskatchewan.

*Based on 7,471 child maltreatment-related investigations involving young people under 16 in Ontario.

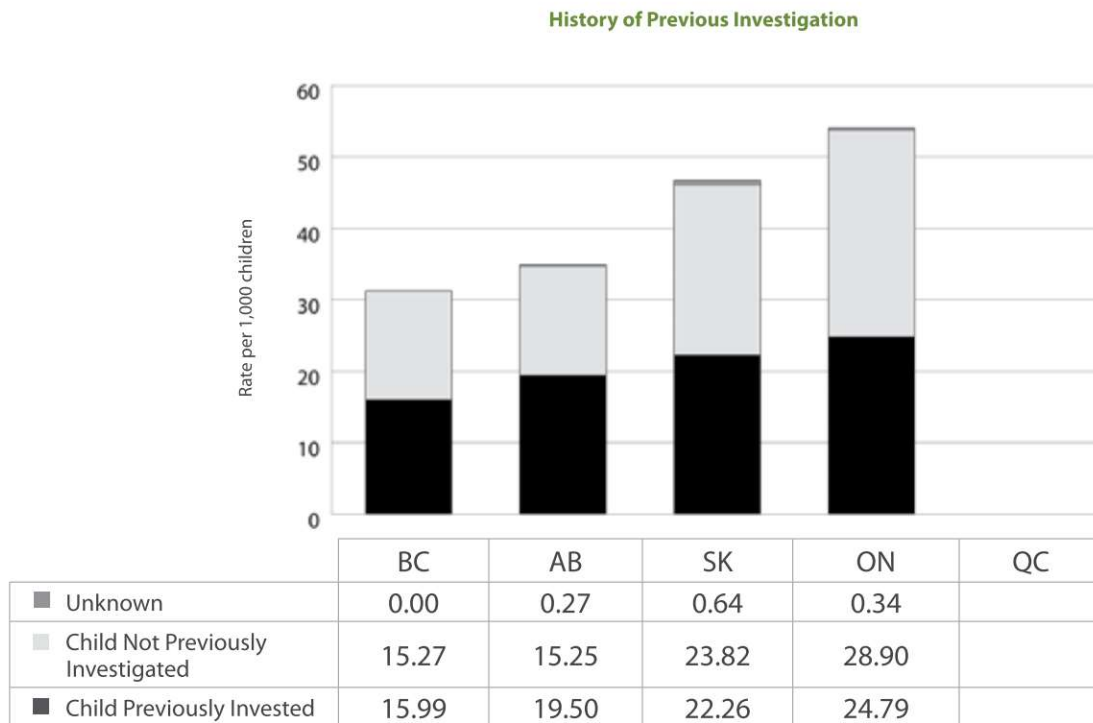
*Based on 2,020 child maltreatment-related investigations involving young people under 18 in Quebec.

rates are not available in the major findings report for the Quebec incidence study. In British Columbia and Alberta, the rate of investigations involving children who had been previously investigated was higher than the rate of investigations involving children who had not been previously investigated. In Saskatchewan and Ontario, the rate of children not previously investigated was higher. When examining the proportion of cases within provinces, there was little variance across the four provinces, differing only from 56% of all maltreatment-related investigations identifying that the child had been previously investigated in Alberta to 46% in Ontario.

Discussion

There is variation in the rate of maltreatment-related investigations across provinces which likely reflects a range of factors, including socio-demographic differences, front-end procedural differences, clinical practice differences and methodological differences. These potential contributions to the variation in provincial rates are discussed in the following section.

Figure 7. History of Previous Investigations (rate per 1,000 children in the population) among Maltreatment-related Investigations in British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario and Quebec.



*See Chapter 3 in each provincial incidence study report for these data.

*Based on 1,543 child maltreatment-related investigations involving young people under 19 in British Columbia.

*Based on 2,239 child maltreatment-related investigations involving young people under 18 in Alberta.

*Based on 1,811 child maltreatment-related investigations involving young people under 16 in Saskatchewan.

*Based on 7,471 child maltreatment-related investigations involving young people under 16 in Ontario.

*Comparable rates are unavailable in Quebec report.

Socio-Demographic Differences

Socio-demographic differences are risk factors that go beyond the mandate of child welfare including poverty rates and the proportion of Aboriginal families (Aboriginal identity population in Canada includes First Nations people and other groups, e.g., Métis and Inuit people), many of whom live in particularly difficult conditions.

First Nations children and families struggle with poor economic living conditions in Canada, which poses challenges for child welfare agencies (Sinha et al., 2011). Parents with fewer financial resources are faced with greater difficulties in providing safe environments, adequate clothing and nutrition, appropriate childcare, and other assets, all of which foster healthy child development (Sinha et al., 2011). These parents may have more negative life experiences and fewer coping resources than others, and so may be more vulnerable to mental health and substance use issues, which may impact parenting (Kessler & Cleary,

1980; Mcleod & Kessler, 1990; Ross & Roberts, 1999). Research has established strong links between poverty and child maltreatment, particularly for child neglect (Drake & Pandey, 1996; Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996). For First Nations children and families, the risks associated with poor socioeconomic conditions may also be compounded by the intergenerational impact of colonial policies, which dislocated entire communities, suppressed languages and cultures, disrupted community support systems, and separated generations of children and their families (Sinha et al., 2011). These specific challenges appear to be related to the overrepresentation First Nations children, as they are significantly more likely to be investigated by child welfare authorities than are non- Aboriginal children (Sinha et al., 2011).

In Saskatchewan, Aboriginal children represent 27% of the total child population. In Alberta and British Columbia, Aboriginal children represent 9% and 8% of the respective child populations. Aboriginal children represent a significantly lower proportion of the child populations in Ontario (3%) and Quebec (2%) (see Table 1). The proportion of Aboriginal children living in the province may explain some of the variation across provinces. For instance, the rates of neglect are highest in Saskatchewan and Alberta, and British Columbia and Alberta have higher rates of placement than Ontario and Quebec.

Additionally, the rate of transfers to ongoing services and placement is highest in Saskatchewan. This may be an indication of the need for additional community resources necessary to address the complex issues that First Nations children and families face. Further, there is a higher proportion of persons under 18 living in low income families in Saskatchewan (20.2%) than other oversampling provinces. Alberta has the lowest rate of persons under 18 living in low-income families (10.6%) and Quebec is the only province with a poverty reduction plan (see Table 1). Understanding more about the socio-demographic differences and their impact on child maltreatment and the services provided to families and children are an area of research requiring additional study. While these factors may help to explain differences in rates, one must nevertheless examine the extent to which changes in policies, resources and services are required to address structural issues that go beyond the scope of child welfare mandates.

Differences in Investigation and Opening Procedures

There are front-end differences in the way cases are identified by the five provinces.

The age of children eligible for investigation varies between the provinces. British Columbia investigates children up to 19 years of age, Alberta and Quebec up to 18 years of age and Saskatchewan and Ontario up to 16 years of age. The CIS-2008 Major Findings Report uses the maximum provincial age served (15 years of age) for analyses. For provinces with legislation that extends beyond 15 years of age, all children investigated were included in the provincial reports and in the tables for this paper. Quebec data in this document were obtained from the Quebec-Rest of Canada comparison section in the major findings report for the Quebec incidence study. This section of the paper only includes children 0 to 15.

The CIS only tracks cases that have been investigated and therefore variations in screening procedures can significantly affect the rate of reports that are counted by the CIS

as investigations. Each of the provinces represented in this study has a different screening procedure for investigations. It may be that the screening practices in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Quebec – the provinces with the lowest rates of unsubstantiated cases – result in more unsubstantiated allegations being screened out prior to a full investigation.

Risk investigations appear to vary across provinces more than maltreatment investigations. This accounts for some of the overall differences in maltreatment-related investigation rates. Each province has child welfare legislation that determines when the state can investigate concerns of child maltreatment, and all legislation provides for situations where there is potential “risk of harm” present for the child. In the CIS-2008, “risk of future maltreatment” investigations were tracked, a concept that is distinct from “risk of harm”. The low rate of risk investigations in British Columbia, Alberta, and Quebec may be explained by different provincial legislation. Legislation in British Columbia does not allow for investigations in which the worker is only assessing risk of future maltreatment. In Alberta, the investigation structure changed between 2003 and 2008 such that the length of the initial investigation was extended to 42 days. Within the initial investigation period, child welfare workers in Alberta may have more time to understand family situations and to identify maltreatment concerns, even if the investigation began as a risk assessment. In the most recent set of legislative changes in Quebec, risk of maltreatment was included within each of the maltreatment typologies, for instance, risk of sexual abuse is now built in to the sexual abuse category.

Like rates of maltreatment investigations, the rates of substantiated maltreatment, transfers to ongoing services and placement do not vary as much as the rate of maltreatment-related investigations. This suggests that variations in screening practices may influence overall investigation rates. As children and families become increasingly engaged with the spectrum of child welfare services available, those that are more intensely involved with these services may have more similarities than all of the children and families reported to child welfare authorities. Variations in front-end policies and practices, such as screening procedures, likely do not impact rates of transfers to ongoing services and out-of-home child welfare placements as much as rates of all investigations. The level of resources in a community may greatly influence the placement rate. In jurisdictions where the only available service a worker can provide to a family in need is placement, the placement rates will likely be higher, compared to jurisdictions with a wider range of services available.

In Ontario, investigations in which the worker determines a child is in need of protection are eligible for ongoing child protection services. All other cases are closed or provided with non-protection services or a community link service. When a case is closed, the child protection worker considers if services or resources in the community will prevent or reduce risk of future maltreatment to the child. If so, the child and family are provided with information about, or referred to appropriate resources.

Clinical Practice Differences

Responding to cases of child physical abuse and sexual abuse may be considered a core function of most child welfare systems. This is consistent with the findings, which showed that rates of substantiated physical and sexual abuse did not vary a great deal across

provinces. These maltreatment types may be least influenced by differences in legislation and front line practices. Alternatively, rates of substantiated neglect, emotional maltreatment, exposure to intimate partner violence, and risk of future maltreatment were more variable across provinces.

There is variation in the legislation across provinces with regards to exposure to intimate partner violence. Legislation in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Quebec defines what constitutes exposure to intimate partner violence, while neither British Columbia nor Ontario explicitly outlines domestic violence as a form of maltreatment in their legislation.

The finding that the highest rate of substantiated exposure to intimate partner violence is in Ontario, a province that does not explicitly outline this as a form of maltreatment in legislation, illustrates that there are sometimes differences between child welfare legislation and practice. In addition, all referrals to child welfare agencies in Ontario are universally screened for the presence of intimate partner violence. The role of the child welfare agency in Ontario is to assess whether adult behaviour or victimization has a direct or observable impact on a child's safety and wellbeing, to assess whether the child has either been harmed or is at risk of being abused physically, sexually, emotionally or neglected because of intimate partner violence, and to intervene where appropriate.

Rates of exposure to intimate partner violence were almost equally high in Ontario and Alberta. In Alberta, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police services submit a report to child protection agencies, including First Nations agencies, each time an intimate partner violence report is attended. Calgary and Edmonton Police Services also have protocols for reporting intimate partner violence. Alberta child welfare agencies also use an intimate partner violence screening tool in the investigation process, which may heighten worker awareness. At the time of the study, child welfare agencies in Saskatchewan did not utilize a screening tool for intimate partner violence.

Quebec's child welfare system appears to differ the most in its structure and function as compared to the other provinces described in this paper. This variation may be due to the extensive network of prevention services in Quebec, the more comprehensive screening process, and/ or the network of preventative and voluntary services developed as alternatives to child welfare.

Quebec may also be distinct as a result of two important differences in the case inclusion criteria used by the CIS and investigation procedures followed in Quebec: (1) Youth Protection regulations in Quebec require separate reporting and investigation of any new allegations involving already open cases, while the CIS excludes such cases from its investigation count; and (2) The Youth Protection Act has a reserved section for cases involving youth with behaviour problems ("troubles de comportement"); investigations where a behaviour problem was the only noted concern were not included in the CIS investigation count for Quebec. Other provinces may encounter cases in which the only concern is a child or youth behavioural problem, yet the child welfare systems in these provinces may code these cases as maltreatment-related investigations because there is no option to code them as behavioural cases only.

The Quebec child welfare system is also unique in that the legislation defines neglect as

a failure to meet a child's basic physical needs, and requires the child welfare system to take into account the caregiver's resources. For cases of neglect in Quebec, the first line response is through preventative services offered outside of the child protection system. The Youth Protection Act of Quebec states that every decision made under the Act must aim at keeping the child in the family environment. Cultural factors may also influence placement rates.

Methodological differences

These refer to differences in the way activities are counted, but do not appear to be differences in the actual services delivered. One of the study's major limitations is that the CIS cannot control for differences in screening practices.

Although participating investigating workers are trained to complete the data collection instrument using the study's procedures and definitions, the assessment of the child and family is still made within the context of a unique provincial system. Systems may require workers to document or count procedures differently than other jurisdictions resulting in an overestimate or underestimate of certain events. The data collected from the CIS also does not provide information about the length of placements which is an important consideration when examining the placement decision.

Implications

The public release of the British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario and Quebec incidence studies conducted in 2008 represents a unique opportunity in Canadian child welfare history. The CIS Research team received funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada to develop a document with officials from the oversampling provinces and First Nations representatives that would compare key figures from the reports and provide some information as to the potential sources of variation. Clearly there is a great deal of variation in rates of maltreatment-related investigations, the classification of risk investigations, rates of substantiated neglect, emotional maltreatment and intimate partner violence. There is less variation in the rates of substantiation, transfers to ongoing services and placement.

Four potential sources of variation were reviewed and explored: socio-demographic differences, differences in screening and investigation procedures, clinical case practice differences and methodological differences. Although child welfare legislation is similar across provinces, the proportion of Aboriginal children and the percentage of persons under 18 living in poverty, and whether or not there is a poverty reduction plan in place (see Table 1), likely explains some of the differences in rates of investigation. Rates of substantiated physical and sexual abuse vary less than rates of neglect, emotional maltreatment and intimate partner violence, which may be an indicator of differences in the understanding of their effect on children and/or provincial and agency mandates.

Finally, the data are not evaluative. It is impossible to infer that a higher or lower rate of investigation is more desirable without data that examines outcomes for families and children. Further research is needed to understand the impact of these variations on services to children and families.

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