



Ethno-racial Categories and Child Welfare Decisions: Exploring the Relationship with Poverty

Kofi Antwi-Boasiako, Bryn King, Tara Black, Barbara Fallon, Nico Trocmé & Deborah Goodman

Introduction

The Ontario Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect, 2013 (OIS-2013)¹ 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. In addition to collecting information about short term dispositions, information about the type of maltreatment allegation, ethno-racial status of the child, the functioning the caregiver(s) and household related risk factors is also documented by the worker. This information sheet examines the relationship of poverty and ethno-racial status to the decision to transfer an investigation to ongoing services and the decision to place a child in out-of-home care at the conclusion of a maltreatment-related investigation. The analyses presented in this information sheet were prepared by the authors with funding from a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Connection Grant.

A recent analysis² using data from the OIS-2013 and Census 2011 examined ethno-racial disparities in investigations and decision-making in Ontario. The findings indicate that compared to White children, Aboriginal children were more than twice as likely to be investigated, 41% more likely to be transferred to ongoing child welfare services, and 2.7 times as likely to be placed in out of home care. Compared to White children, Black children were 39% more likely to be investigated, 8% more likely to be transferred to ongoing services and 13% more likely to be placed in out of home care.

Income inequality and child poverty rates have been found to be positively and significantly correlated with child maltreatment rates.³ The relationship between race and poverty is complex. In one study conducted in the United States, the evidence of racial disparity with respect to child

¹ 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.

² Fallon, B., Black, T., Van Wert, M., King, B., Filippelli, J., Lee, B., & Moody, B. (2016). *Child maltreatment-related service decisions by ethno-racial categories in Ontario in 2013*. CWRP Information Sheet #176E. Toronto, ON: Canadian Child Welfare Research Portal.

³ Eckenrode, J., Smith, E. G., McCarthy, M. E., & Dineen, M. (2014). Income inequality and child maltreatment in the United States. *Pediatrics*, 133(3), 454-461. doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.1542/peds.2013-1707

maltreatment between Black and White children was not significant after accounting for poverty.⁴ In Canada, Black and White disparities in child welfare involvement are understudied, but research in the U.S. has documented that socio-demographic conditions, including and especially poverty, are significant drivers of racial differences in investigative child welfare decision-making.⁵ There is evidence that the disproportional representation of Black children in the U.S. child welfare system may be due in part to the fact that Black children are more likely to be poor.^{6,7}

There is a significant amount of literature documenting the impact of poverty on Aboriginal children in Canada. The child poverty rate for all children in Canada is 17% compared to 40% for Aboriginal children.⁸ The increases in child welfare placements for Aboriginal children can be attributed to systemic disadvantages in Aboriginal communities and the under-funding of First Nations child welfare services. Aboriginal children are in child welfare placements because their families are at greater risk due to social exclusion, poverty and poor housing.⁸

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 4,961 child protection investigations conducted during the fall of 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 118,011 maltreatment related investigations involving children 14 years of age and under.

Workers were asked to provide information about the child's ethno-racial category. Bivariate analyses were conducted to explore the relationship between children's ethno-racial categories, the decision to provide ongoing child welfare services, placement into out of home care, at least one caregiver risk factor (e.g., alcohol or drug abuse, mental health issues, few social supports), and proxy measures for poverty (i.e., household runs out of money for housing, food, and/or utilities in the last six months). An exploratory binary logistic regression was performed to

⁴ Drake, B., Lee, S. M., & Jonson-Reid, M. (2009). Race and child maltreatment reporting: Are blacks overrepresented? *Child & Youth Services Review, 31*, 309-316.

⁵ Putnam-Hornstein, E., Needell, B., King, B., & Johnson-Motoyama, M. (2013). Racial and ethnic disparities: A population-based examination of risk factors for involvement with child protective services. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 37*(1), 33-46. <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2012.08.005>

⁶ Fluke, J., Harden, B. J., Jenkins, M., & Ruehrdanz, A. (2010). *Research synthesis on child welfare: Disproportionality and disparities*. Washington, DC: The center for the study of social policy and the Annie E. Casey Foundation on behalf of the Alliance for Racial Equality in Child Welfare.

⁷ Pelton, L. (2015). The continuing role of material factors in child maltreatment and placement. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 41*, 30-39.

⁸ Brittain, M. & Blackstock, C. (2015). *First Nations child poverty: A literature review and analysis*. First Nations Children's Action Research and Education Service (FNCARES). Retrieved June 21, 2016 from https://fncaringsociety.com/sites/default/files/First%20Nations%20Child%20Poverty%20-%20A%20Literature%20Review%20and%20Analysis%202015_3.pdf

explain the relationship between poverty and ethno-racial status to the decisions to provide ongoing services and place the child in out of home care.

Study Limitations

As with any sample survey, estimates must be understood within the constraints of the survey instruments, the sampling design, and the estimation procedures used (see Methodology Chapter 2 of OIS-2013):

- the weights used to derive annual estimates include counts of children investigated more than once during the year, therefore the unit of analysis for the weighted estimates is a child investigation;
- the OIS tracks information during approximately the first 30 days of case activity; service outcomes such as out of home placements only include events that occurred during those first approximately 30 days
- the study does not track longer service decisions that occur beyond the initial investigation.
- the provincial counts presented in this report are weighted estimates. In some instances sample sizes are too small to derive publishable estimates.
- the OIS only tracks reports investigated by child welfare agencies 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 and could not be independently verified.

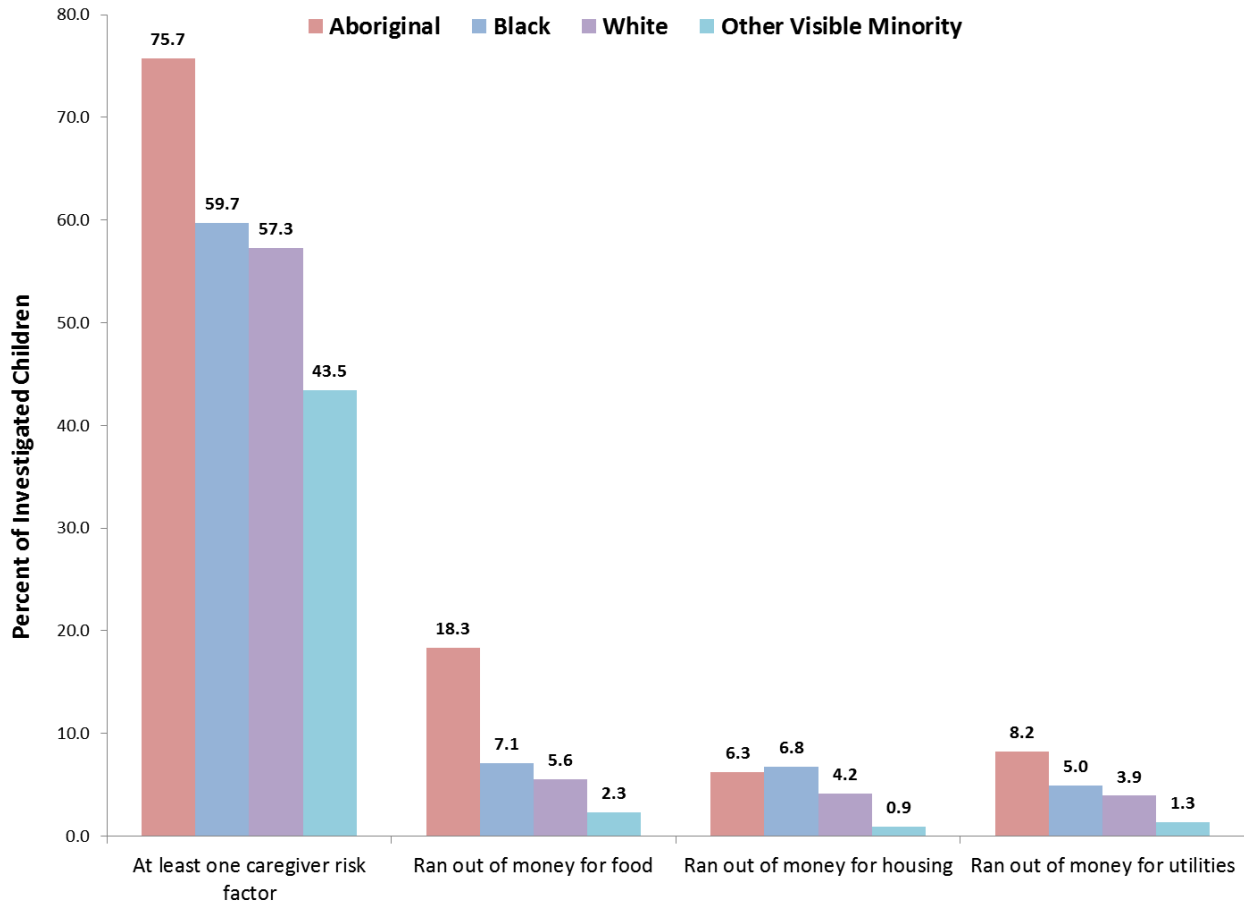
Findings

Of an estimated 118,011 maltreatment-related investigations of children under 15 with an identified ethno-racial category in Ontario in 2013, one-quarter were transferred to ongoing child welfare services and just under 4% were placed into out of home care during the course of the investigation. Among investigated children, 8% were Aboriginal, 9% were Black, 64% were White, and 19% were another visible minority.

Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of caregiver risk and poverty across the four ethno-racial categories. Aboriginal children were more likely to have a primary caregiver with at least one risk factor (76%) compared to other groups. Black and White children had a primary caregiver with at least one risk factor at similar rates (60% and 57%, respectively), while other visible minority children had a much lower rate (44%). Aboriginal children are more likely to live in difficult economic circumstances: in over 18% of investigations involving Aboriginal children, the worker documented that the household ran out of money for food. Seven percent of investigations involving Black children documented that the household had run out of money for food compared to 6% for investigations involving White children. Visible minority children are less likely than all other groups to experience the same economic challenges.

Figure 1.

Caregiver Risk and Poverty among Investigated Children by Ethno-Racial Category



Transfer to Ongoing Child Welfare Services and Placement in Out of Home Care

The decisions to transfer the investigation to ongoing child welfare services and place the child in out of home care are presented in Table 1. The model assessed the odds of a transfer or placement by comparing each of the ethno-racial groups to White children. **An odds ratio that is over 1 and is statistically significant means that the category is more likely to be transferred or placed than the reference group. These models test how these categories are related to the transfer or placement decision in the presence of the child’s ethno-racial group, caregiver risk factors and poverty.** Other visible minority children had significantly lower odds of a transfer to ongoing services compared to White children. At least one caregiver risk factor significantly increased the odds of a transfer fivefold and running out of money for food, housing, and utilities were all associated with approximately double the odds of a transfer. Indeed, caregiver risk and household poverty appear to be significant and meaningful drivers of the decision to transfer.

Table 1.

Logistic Regression Results: Transfer to Ongoing Child Welfare Services and Placement in Out of Home Care during the Investigation in Ontario in 2013

	Transferred to Ongoing CW Services	Placed into Out of Home Care
	Odds Ratio	Odds Ratio
Aboriginal (vs. White)	1.17	2.13***
Black (vs. White)	1.01	0.97
Other visible minority (vs. White)	0.62***	0.65
At least one caregiver risk factor	5.14***	2.21***
Ran out of money for food	1.78***	1.76*
Ran out of money for housing	2.01***	2.06*
Ran out of money for utilities	2.37***	2.16*

*significant at p<0.05; **significant at p<0.01; ***significant at p<.001

^Based on a sample of 4,961 child maltreatment-related investigations with information about child ethno-racial categories. Percentages are column percentages, and may not add to 100% because of rounding.

Aboriginal children were twice as likely to be placed in out of home care compared to White children, even after accounting for at least one caregiver risk factor and three measures of poverty. No other ethno-racial category was related to the decision to place a child in out of home care. As with transfers, caregiver risk and household poverty are significantly related to the decision to place a child, with at least one caregiver risk factor increasing the odds of placement more than twofold and running out of money for food, housing, and utilities all associated with approximately double the odds of a placement.

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