

Child Maltreatment Investigations Among Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Families in Canada

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This comparative analysis of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal families uses a 1998 Canadian study of child maltreatment cases to identify important differences: Aboriginal families face worse socioeconomic conditions, are more often investigated because of neglect, less often reported for physical or sexual abuse, and report higher rates of substance abuse. At every decision point in the cases, Aboriginal children are overrepresented: investigations are more likely to be substantiated, cases are more likely to be kept open for ongoing services, and children are more likely to be placed in out-of-home care. Findings suggest the development of neglect intervention programs that include poverty reduction and substance misuse components.

Keywords: *Canadian Aboriginal families; child maltreatment; child neglect intervention*

Aboriginal children, meaning children of Inuit, Métis, or First Nations ancestry, represent 40% of the 76,000 children and youth placed in out-of-home care in Canada (Farris-Manning & Zandstra, 2003). This is of particular concern as the vast majority of these children continue to be placed in non-Aboriginal out-of-home care where the preservation of cultural heritage, identity, and continuity of care are in question. Despite repeated calls for

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change and reform, the pathways leading to these children being removed from their families are poorly understood. The Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (CIS-98) offers a unique data source to investigate the reasons for, and circumstances of, child maltreatment referrals to child welfare services. This national study tracked child welfare investigations from the point of referral to the initial disposition, including decisions to substantiate the finding of maltreatment, place children in care and/or apply for a mandatory service court order (Trocmé, MacLaurin, et al., 2001). The study collected information on more than 7,600 reports of child protection, including more 1,000 investigations involving First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children. This article describes the experiences of these Aboriginal children and their families, comparing them to non-Aboriginal and visible minority children investigated by Canadian child welfare authorities.

CHILD WELFARE IN ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES IN CANADA

The misinterpretation of the conditions experienced by Aboriginal families coupled with the misapplication of Euro-Western values, social work pedagogy, and practice have resulted in inappropriate mass removals of Aboriginal children and their placement in predominantly non-Aboriginal homes (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples [RCAP], 1996; Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs, 2000). The devastating impacts of misinformed social work practice on Aboriginal communities and their children have been described as cultural genocide by some (Balfour, 2004) and poor practice by many (Armitage, 1993; Blackstock, 2003; MacDonald & Ladd, 2000). The following brief historical summary is intended to support proper cross-cultural interpretation of research findings.

First Nations and Inuit peoples sustained themselves as independent nations for millennia based on highly developed systems of knowing and being that cut across all contemporary academic disciplines (Muckle, 1998). They are diverse linguistically, culturally, socially, and historically; however, they share a commitment to an interdependent communal lifestyle that is guided by spiritual powers (RCAP, 1996).

Although initial contact with colonial powers was reasonably positive, this rapidly changed to policies of assimilation and elimination of Indians as the colonial powers sought to secure the best land and resources for their own benefit (RCAP, 1996). Canada anchored its assimilation policy in the forced removal of Aboriginal children aged 5 to 15 years from their families for placement in residential schools operated by Christian churches. The lived experience for children in the schools was often devastating, marked by significant numbers of deaths from disease, maltreatment, and universal oppression of culture and language (Milloy, 1999). The schools operated for more than 100 years in Canada with the last one closing in 1996.

The impacts of residential schools on First Nations communities were profound with the disruption of child-caring knowledge and the institutionalization of a pedagogy that dismissed the ability of First Nations adults to care for their children (RCAP, 1996). This pedagogy persisted as provincial and territorial governments moved in to provide child welfare services to on-reserve residents in the mid 1950s. Instead of acknowledging indigenous systems of care, social work imposed its own set of values and legislation (Armitage, 1999; RCAP, 1996).

The overall impact of provincial/territorial child welfare involvement with Aboriginal peoples has been profoundly discouraging. Social workers deprived of the information, skills, and resources to address the poverty, disempowerment, multi-generational grief, and loss of parenting knowledge defaulted to a practice of mass removals known as the "sixties scoop" (Aboriginal Justice Inquiry [AJI-CWI], 2001; Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs, 2002). In some cases, buses were hired to remove large numbers of children from reserves, often placing them with distant non-Aboriginal families (Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs, 2002). As the removals took place, there was very little effort by government to address the etiological drivers of child maltreatment, such as poverty, unemployment, and substandard housing conditions, or the lack of culturally based prevention services. There also was very little consideration of the influence of social workers' Euro-Western values and beliefs on their decision making and planning for Aboriginal children and families (Blackstock, 2003; Union of British Columbia Chiefs, 2002). These factors resulted in situations in which child removal

was relied on as the primary intervention in child maltreatment cases versus the intervention of last resort.

The sixties scoop, coupled with a growing movement within First Nations and Aboriginal communities to stem the tide of children and youth being placed outside their communities, motivated the development of First Nations child and family service agencies (FNCFSA) to provide child welfare services to on-reserve residents. The number of FNCFSA expanded in the early 1990s when the federal government lifted a moratorium on the development of Aboriginal child agencies serving on-reserve residents and implemented a national funding formula known as Directive 20-1 Chapter 5, "the Directive." The Directive, although facilitating the development of over 100 FNCFSA serving on-reserve communities, has been broadly criticized for its emphasis on supporting child removal and placement versus allocating resources to community development and prevention resources (MacDonald & Ladd, 2000).

Parallel to the development of on-reserve agencies, off-reserve child welfare agencies have been established in a number of provinces. In some cases, First Nations child welfare agencies simply extend their mandates off-reserve, whereas other agencies are developed to meet the needs of Aboriginal peoples residing off-reserve. However, unlike on-reserve services, the off-reserve services are entirely funded by provincial/territorial governments.

As social workers became more involved with Aboriginal communities, they also became aware of the landscape of devastation faced by Aboriginal children and youth as a result of colonization. This includes disproportionately high rates of suicide, sexual abuse, incarceration, poverty, and unemployment and low rates of educational success (Anderson, 2003). In response to such risk factors, and likely related to the lack of funding support for culturally based prevention services, out-of-home placement of Aboriginal children by child welfare authorities has increased. Unfortunately, because of variations in provincial/territorial data collection systems, there are no reliable national statistics tracking the admissions of Aboriginal children in care off-reserve. However, data provided by the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development indicates that the number of on-reserve status Indian children in child welfare care increased by 71.5% between 1995 and 2001 (McKenzie, 2002). Overall, we estimate

that there may be as many as 3 times more Aboriginal children in the care of child welfare authorities now than were placed in residential schools at the height of those operations in the 1940s.

These distressing realities call for a renovation of existing child welfare pedagogy and practice and a movement to recognize, support, and legitimize Aboriginal systems of care. This will necessarily require active learning from past social work practice to detect, and respond to, the recurrence of colonial policies that negatively affect the safety and well-being of Aboriginal children and families. This will require that additional research and policy efforts be targeted to explore the causal factors underpinning the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in the child welfare system.

The CIS-98 offers a unique window into child welfare system responses to Aboriginal families in Canada. This article presents the first in a series of analyses comparing Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children investigated because of reported child maltreatment. In this article, we indicate the cultural affiliation of Aboriginal families who were investigated and present comparative profiles of Aboriginal, non-Aboriginal, and other minority families in terms of the primary forms of substantiated or suspected maltreatment, child functioning, household characteristics, and parent risk factors.

METHOD

The 1998 CIS is the first national study of investigated child abuse and neglect conducted in Canada. A sample of 7,672 reports of suspected child abuse or neglect was selected from a random national sample of 51 child welfare authorities, including three FNCFSA. Using a standard set of definitions, participating social workers reported the results of their investigations, details about the specific maltreatment incidents, and child and family characteristics (Trocmé, Fallon, Daciuk, Tourigny, & Billingsley, 2001). It is important to note that the study did not track unreported cases of maltreatment or cases investigated by police alone.

Comparable ethno-racial data were not collected in the Quebec portion of the CIS-98 ($n = 2,309$), and were missing on a further 10 cases, reducing the sample size to 5,353 cases of maltreatment in which parent Aboriginal status and visible minority classification

were known. Because ethno-racial classification was determined by ethno-racial status of one or both biological parents, 225 cases in which the child did not reside with a biological parent were excluded, leaving 5,128 cases. Unsubstantiated cases ($n = 1,969$) were excluded from the analysis, leaving a sample of 3,159 cases where maltreatment had been substantiated or remained suspected.

Twenty-two forms of maltreatment subsumed under four categories (physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, and emotional maltreatment) were tracked by the CIS-98. This classification reflects a fairly broad definition of child maltreatment and includes several forms of maltreatment that are not specifically included in some provincial and territorial child welfare statutes. The CIS-98 tracked up to three forms of maltreatment for each child in the sample. The primary form was defined as the type of maltreatment considered to best characterize the major investigation. The results of investigations were classified as substantiated, suspected, or unsubstantiated based on the balance of evidence gathered during the investigation. The CIS-98 also collected information on key child and family characteristics. Ethno-racial data were collected for up to two parents in each family using the ethno-racial categories used by Statistics Canada in the 1996 Census (Long Questionnaire). For the purpose of this analysis, the 12 ethno-racial categories were collapsed into three groups: Aboriginal, non-Aboriginal "White," and Other Visible Minority (Black, Chinese, Latin American, Filipino, Korean, Arabic, South Asian, Southeast Asian, and Japanese). Data on Aboriginal heritage included three Aboriginal groupings—First Nations, Métis, and Inuit—as well as treaty status and whether the parent lived on a reserve. Separate Aboriginal data were not collected for the children. The Aboriginal status or Visible Minority classification of each investigated child (the unit of analysis) was determined by the status of the biological parent(s) who were living with the child. If either parent was Aboriginal, the child was classified as Aboriginal; if neither was Aboriginal, but one was from a Other Visible Minority, the child was classified as Other Visible Minority.

Because the CIS-98 was not originally designed to provide national estimates for Aboriginal children, the study cannot be used to derive precise estimates specific to these children. All

analyses presented in this article, therefore, use unweighted data and are not being treated as national estimates. Nonetheless, as the only source of comparative data available in Canada, the CIS-98 allows for important exploratory analyses. Chi-square tests of significance and, where appropriate, ANOVAs are used to determine the significance of differences between Aboriginal, non-Aboriginal, and Other Visible Minority groups in terms of child and parent characteristics, forms of maltreatment, and child welfare service response. The significance levels presented in this analysis should be interpreted with some caution because they were calculated for the unweighted data and may not retain significance if they were weighted

FINDINGS

Of investigated children in the CIS-98 sample, 16% were Aboriginal (833 of 5,128), with maltreatment being substantiated or remaining suspected for 74% (614) of Aboriginal children. Compared to non-Aboriginal and Other Visible Minority children, maltreatment was more often substantiated for Aboriginal children (38% for non-Aboriginals, 41% for Other Visible Minorities, and 50% for Aboriginal children) or remained suspected (24% for Aboriginal children vs. 21% for non-Aboriginals and 18% for Other Visible Minorities, $\chi^2 = 66.04$, $df = 4$, $p < .001$).

FIRST-NATION, MÉTIS, AND INUIT BACKGROUND

Table 1 provides a breakdown of Aboriginal status of the 614 cases of substantiated and suspected maltreatment involving Aboriginal children. Approximately two thirds (64%) of Aboriginal children were classified as First Nations, many of whom lived off-reserve, a distribution similar to the 1996 Census Canada estimates indicating that 69% (Statistics Canada, 1998) of Aboriginal children younger than age 16 were classified as "North American Indian."

FORMS OF MALTREATMENT

More than one half (59%) of the Aboriginal cases of substantiated or suspected maltreatment primarily involved some form of

TABLE 1
Aboriginal Status and Visible Minority Background for Cases of Substantiated and Suspected Maltreatment, 1998 CIS-98 (N = 3,159)

| <i>Ethno-racial Category</i> | <i># of Investigations</i> | <i>% of All Cases</i> | <i>% of Aboriginal Cases (excluding non-Aboriginals)</i> |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------|--|
| Aboriginal | 614 | 19% | |
| First Nations on-reserve | 120 | | 27% |
| First Nations status, off-reserve | 150 | | 34% |
| First Nations nonstatus, off-reserve | 14 | | 3% |
| Metis | 37 | | 8% |
| Inuit | 42 | | 10% |
| Other | 78 | | 18% |
| Unsure/no answer | 173 | | |
| Non-Aboriginal | 2,114 | 67% | |
| Other minority | 431 | 14% | |

NOTE: CIS = Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect.

TABLE 2
Primary Form of Maltreatment by Aboriginal Status for Substantiated or Suspected Maltreatment 1998 CIS-98 (in percentages)

| <i>Primary Form of Maltreatment</i> | <i>Aboriginal (n = 614)</i> | <i>Non-Aboriginal (n = 2,114)</i> | <i>Other Minority (n = 431)</i> |
|--|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Physical abuse, punishment | 8 | 22 | 35 |
| Physical abuse, other | 8 | 12 | 11 |
| Sexual abuse | 5 | 10 | 5 |
| Failure to supervise child at risk of physical harm | 41 | 17 | 19 |
| Physical neglect (failure to provide adequate physical care) | 7 | 5 | 4 |
| Other neglect (failure to supervise child at risk of sexual abuse, medical neglect, failure to provide treatment, educational neglect, emotional neglect, and abandonment) | 11 | 9 | 9 |
| Emotional maltreatment | 7 | 11 | 6 |
| Exposure to domestic violence | 9 | 14 | 13 |

$\chi^2 = 244.31, df = 8, p < .001$

NOTE: CIS = Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect.

neglect, whereas neglect was found in only half as many non-Aboriginal cases (Table 2). Most cases of neglect were categorized as failure to supervise or failure to protect resulting in either physical harm or risk of physical harm to the child. There was no differentiation between failure to protect and failure to supervise in

TABLE 3
Child Functioning by Aboriginal Status for Substantiated or Suspected Maltreatment
1998 CIS-98 (in percentages)

| <i>Child Functioning Concern</i> | <i>Aboriginal</i> (n = 614) | <i>Non-Aboriginal</i> (n = 2,114) | <i>Other</i> <i>Minority</i> (n = 431) |
|--|--------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--|
| Developmental disability | 2 | 3 | 3 |
| Health condition | 3 | 4 | 4 |
| Substance abuse-related birth defect*** | 7 | 2 | < 1 |
| Depression or anxiety*** | 9 | 12 | 6 |
| Self-harming behavior* | 5 | 4 | 2 |
| Behavior problem*** | 18 | 25 | 18 |
| Negative peer involvement | 11 | 11 | 8 |
| Violence toward others** | 7 | 9 | 4 |
| Substance abuse*** | 7 | 4 | 3 |
| Running away (multiple incidents) | 4 | 3 | 3 |
| Inappropriate sexual behavior | 3 | 4 | 2 |
| Special education class | 4 | 6 | 6 |
| Irregular school attendance*** | 15 | 10 | 6 |
| Criminal/YO involvement | 3 | 2 | 2 |
| One or more child function concern noted** | 44 | 46 | 37 |

NOTE: CIS = Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect; YO = SPELL OUT.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

CIS-98 primary form of maltreatment reporting categories. Therefore, it is not possible to determine what proportion of these cases were "failure to protect," which suggests a more conscious motivation to neglect a child's needs versus failure to supervise, which suggests a passive motivation.

Non-Aboriginal cases were much more likely to involve physical abuse, most notably punishment-related abuse that accounted for 35% of cases involving Other Visible Minority families, 22% of non-Aboriginal families, and only 8% of Aboriginal families. Sexual abuse was not noted as often in Aboriginal cases, a finding consistent with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services archived data at Cornell University indicating lower sexual and physical abuse rates for Indian and Alaskan Native children in the United States (Earle & Cross, 2001).

Table 3 presents child functioning ratings provided by the investigating social workers using a simple checklist of problems they had noted during their investigation. Overall, there are few significant differences between the Aboriginal, non-Aboriginal, and Other Visible Minority children. However, substance abuse-

TABLE 4: Household Characteristics by Aboriginal Status for Substantiated or Suspected Maltreatment 1998 CIS-98 (in percentages)

| <i>Household Characteristics</i> | <i>Aboriginal</i> (n = 614) | <i>Non-Aboriginal</i> (n = 2,114) | <i>Other</i> <i>Minority</i> (n = 431) |
|---|--------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--|
| Primary parents younger than 30 years of age*** | 48.2 | 34.3 | 29.3 |
| Single parent*** | 57 | 51 | 41 |
| Social assistance or other benefits*** | 59 | 38 | 33 |
| Public rental housing*** | 23 | 8 | 16 |
| One move within past 6 months*** | 24 | 24 | 18 |
| Two or more moves in past 6 months*** | 21 | 10 | 6 |
| Unsafe housing** | 9 | 6 | 4 |

NOTE: CIS = Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

related birth defects were noted more often for Aboriginal children at 7%, versus 2% for non-Aboriginal children and less than 1% for Other Visible Minority children.

HOUSEHOLD CHARACTERISTICS

As indicated in Table 4, Aboriginal families fared slightly worse than their non-Aboriginal and Other Visible Minority counterparts on almost every household indicator. For example, 51% of non-Aboriginal families were headed by single parents compared with 57% of Aboriginal families in the sample. Of single parent families, 90% of Aboriginal families were headed by single mothers versus 86% of their non-Aboriginal counterparts. Social benefits were the main source of income for 59% of Aboriginal families in the sample compared with 38% of non-Aboriginal families. Aboriginal families in the sample were more likely to live in rental housing than their non-Aboriginal counterparts. Nearly one half (45%) of the Aboriginal families had moved in the past 6 months, with 21% having moved two times or more, double the rate noted for their non-Aboriginal counterparts.

PARENT FUNCTIONING

Investigating workers completed a brief checklist identifying parent functioning issues that they had noted during their investigation. One of the most striking differences between the groups was the high rate of maltreatment reported for the parents (51%

for Aboriginal parents compared to 31% for non-Aboriginal parents). Overall, more parent functioning challenges were noted for Aboriginal parents. More than 90% of Aboriginal parents were reported as experiencing at least one functioning concern, compared to 73% of non-Aboriginal parents and 66% of Other Visible Minority parents. Alcohol abuse was the most frequently reported problem, reported for 72% of Aboriginal parents as compared to 27% of the non-Aboriginal families and 15% of the Other Visible Minority families. Drug abuse was noted twice as often for Aboriginal parents as for non-Aboriginal parents. Criminal activity by the parent was reported in 21% of Aboriginal homes, whereas it was reported in 11% of non-Aboriginal homes. Differences were less marked but nevertheless statistically significant with respect to rates of parent mental illness, cognitive functioning, and physical health problems. There was no significant difference in lack of social supports between Aboriginal families (37%) and non-Aboriginal families (33%).

ONGOING CHILD WELFARE SERVICES

Ongoing services were provided in 55% of cases of substantiated or suspected maltreatment involving Aboriginal families, compared to 42% and 38%, respectively, for non-Aboriginal and Other Visible Minority families ($\chi^2 = 6.38$, $df = 2$, $p < .05$). In addition, more than two thirds (70%) of Aboriginal families had previously received child welfare services, as compared to 49% of non-Aboriginal and 32% of Other Visible Minority families ($\chi^2 = 30.74$, $df = 2$, $p < .001$). In cases involving Aboriginal children, more than one fourth (29%) of the children were placed in some type of out-of-home care, either through a formal child welfare placement (13%) or an informal placement, such as going to live with a relative (16%). In contrast, only 7% of non-Aboriginal children were formally placed in child welfare care and even fewer (5%) moved to an informal placement ($\chi^2 = 8.86$, $df = 2$, $p < .01$).

DISCUSSION

Comparing Aboriginal, non-Aboriginal, and Other Visible Minority families reported to Canadian child welfare authorities reveals important differences, in terms of the backgrounds of the

children and families being investigated and in the way child welfare authorities respond to these needs. The difference in the service response is apparent from the outset given the disproportionate number of Aboriginal children investigated. Of investigated children in the CIS-98 sample, 16% were Aboriginal, yet according to the 1996 Statistics Canada Census figures, 5% of Canadians 15 years of age and younger were classified as Aboriginal. Although the 16% figure is not a precise national estimate because the study was not originally designed to provide national estimates specific to Aboriginal children, it is the best available estimate at this time. When reported, cases of maltreatment involving Aboriginal children were also significantly more likely to be substantiated or remain suspected, their families were much more likely to have been previously reported to child welfare authorities, and they were more likely to be placed in out-of-home care. The systematic overrepresentation of Aboriginal children at all service levels in the CIS-98 is consistent with child welfare placement data from a number of jurisdictions. In British Columbia, for example, 87% of the Aboriginal children in care are First Nations (status and nonstatus) (Ministry for Child and Family Development, 2002). Similar figures are reported in Manitoba, where First Nations children are overrepresented among other Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children in the child welfare system (AJI-CWI, 2001).

Comparing cases of maltreatment involving Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children reveals a number of differences that may be associated with the overrepresentation of Aboriginal families. Cases of substantiated or suspected maltreatment involving Aboriginal children were more likely to involve neglect and, in particular, supervision issues, rather than physical or sexual abuse. Proxy indicators of poverty indicate that Aboriginal families receive social assistance more frequently, reside more often in public housing, and move more often than non-Aboriginal and Other Visible Minority families. Aboriginal households are significantly more likely to be led by single parents, typically women. Aboriginal parents struggle with higher rates of alcohol and drug abuse, criminal activity, and cognitive impairment when compared with their non-Aboriginal and Other Visible Minority counterparts.

These findings are consistent with a number of other studies examining the economic and social disadvantages faced by Aboriginal families in Canada. Poverty rates for Aboriginal children remain significantly higher even when contrasted with poverty rates for other marginalized groups, such as Other Visible Minority children at 42.7% and children with disabilities at 23% (Canadian Council on Social Development, 2003 **NOT IN REFS - PROVIDE REF OR DELETE TEXT CITE**). Campaign 2000 (2003) found that the average annual income for an Aboriginal worker was \$21,485 versus \$31,757 for non-Aboriginal workers in Canada and \$27,149 for Other Visible Minority workers. Inadequate housing contributes even further to the challenges faced by many Aboriginal families in Canada. Although the CIS-98 did not show dramatic differences in terms of the safety of housing conditions, other studies have found that Aboriginal families are much more likely to live in overcrowded and inadequate housing (Hagey, Larocque, & McBride, 1989).

The high rates of parent functioning problems noted in the CIS-98 are consistent with statistics collected from a number of different sources. The Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (2003) noted that 62% of First Nations people, aged 15 years and older, report that alcohol abuse is a problem in their community, while 48% report drug abuse as a concern. There is also significant documentation on the overrepresentation of Aboriginal peoples in the corrections system. For example, Foran (1995) found that although Aboriginal adults constitute 3% of the population, they compose 17% of men and 26% of women who are incarcerated. In considering the personal difficulties facing these parents, it is important to understand these challenges in relationship to the difficult economic and living conditions they experience and the impact of residential schools. In separating children from parental and community systems of parenting, residential schools have had a negative impact on traditions of caring and knowledge of parenting (Earle & Cross, 2001).

In contrast to the higher rates of parent functioning problems documented in Aboriginal families referred to the child welfare system, differences in levels of child functioning did not follow a similar pattern. In fact, for a number of key child functioning issues—behavior problems, violence toward others, and depression or anxiety—more problems were noted for non-Aboriginal

children than for Aboriginal children. The overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in care is less easily explained if one considers identifiable concerns at the level of the child.

The picture emerging from comparing Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal families reported to Canadian child welfare authorities is a complex one. Although the Aboriginal families in the CIS-98 sample live in poorer socioeconomic conditions and involve parents with more functioning problems, their children are not exhibiting as many difficulties. A fuller understanding of the mechanisms leading to the overrepresentation of Aboriginal families in the Canadian child welfare system is clearly indicated.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite numerous calls to develop alternative ways to support and help Aboriginal children within their families and communities, the number of Aboriginal children entering the Canadian child welfare system continues to climb. Findings from the CIS-98 confirm that this pattern of overrepresentation is pervasive: from the first call to the child welfare authorities to the decision to place children in out-of-home care. Our descriptive analysis of child maltreatment cases indicates some of the possible explanations for this overrepresentation: poverty, unstable housing, and alcohol abuse complicated by the experience of colonization. However, the current study also points to some puzzling findings. Aboriginal children reported to child welfare authorities do not appear to have more health, cognitive, behavioral, or emotional problems than non-Aboriginal children, even though they are being admitted into out-of-home care at a higher rate.

Of particular interest is the disproportionate representation of neglect as the primary form of child maltreatment for Aboriginal families. This suggests that targeted investment in culturally based community development and prevention programs, which focus on the eradication of child neglect, may substantially reduce future incidents of maltreatment.

The current study demonstrates the importance of further research and data collection on the experience of Aboriginal children and families in child maltreatment investigations to inform social work policy and practice. It debunks the perception that the experience of Aboriginal and Other Visible Minority children and

families coming into contact with the child welfare system is the same. It also calls for more research on the experiences of Aboriginal children and families when the child has been admitted to care or a family service file has been opened.

A second cycle of the CIS was completed in 2003 that includes a larger sample of First Nations and Aboriginal child and family services agencies. The inclusion of greater numbers of Aboriginal children in studies such as the CIS-98 provides a stronger foundation for informing progressive policy and practice in future.

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