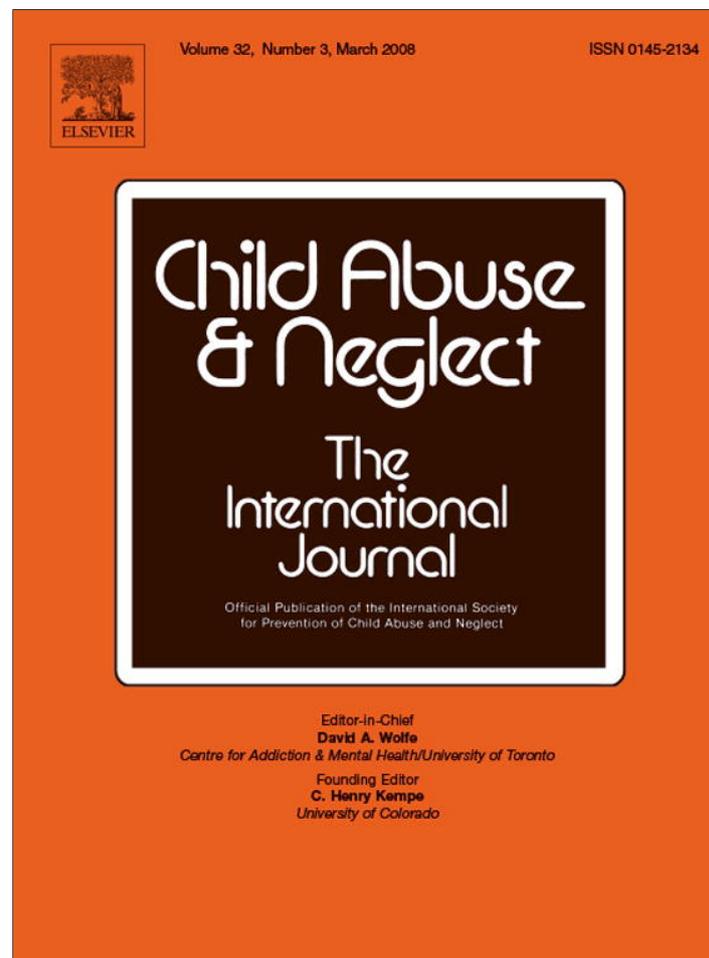


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The Canadian child welfare system response to exposure to domestic violence investigations[☆]

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Abstract

Objective: While child welfare policy and legislation reflects that children who are exposed to domestic violence are in need of protection because they are at risk of emotional and physical harm, little is known about the profile of families and children identified to the child welfare system and the system's response. The objective of this study was to examine the child welfare system's response to child maltreatment investigations substantiated for exposure to domestic violence (EDV).

Methods: This study is based on a secondary analysis of data collected in the 2003 Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (CIS-2003). Bivariate analyses were conducted on substantiated investigations. A binary logistic regression was also conducted to attempt to predict child welfare placements for investigations involving EDV.

Results: What emerges from this study is that the child welfare system's response to EDV largely depends on whether it occurs in isolation or with another substantiated form of child maltreatment. For example, children involved in substantiated investigations that involve EDV with another form of substantiated maltreatment are almost four times more likely than investigations involving only EDV to be placed in a child welfare setting (Adjusted Odds Ratio = 3.87, $p < .001$).

Conclusions: These findings suggest that the involvement of child welfare has not resulted in the widespread placement of children exposed to domestic violence. The Canadian child welfare system is substantiating EDV at a high rate but is concluding that these families do not require child protection services.

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Practice implications: There is debate in the literature about how the child welfare sector should respond to cases involving exposure to domestic violence. Contrary to conventional wisdom, this study finds that children who are the subject of investigations involving substantiated exposure to domestic violence are less likely to be removed from their home than children experiencing other forms of maltreatment. Strategies need to be developed to counter misperceptions about the intrusiveness of child welfare, and discussions need to take place about when it is appropriate for child welfare to become involved when children are exposed to domestic violence.

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Keywords: Child welfare; Child abuse; Child protection; Domestic violence; Child maltreatment; Exposure to domestic violence

Introduction

The response of the service sector to women and children living in domestic violence situations has been the subject of debate since the issue was identified as a social problem in the early 1960s. It is estimated that 7% of Canadian women in a current, previous, or common-law relationship have experienced spousal violence in the past 5 years (Statistics Canada, 2005). In the United States, a national study found that 29% of women had experienced physical, sexual, or psychological intimate partner violence during their lifetime (Coker et al., 2002). Developing effective responses to domestic violence raises complex issues that go to the heart of gender and family relations (Jaffe, Crooks, & Wolfe, 2003). The question of the protection of children who are exposed to domestic violence has added another layer of challenges. The child welfare system has come under increasing pressure to intervene in situations of domestic violence. Child welfare policy and legislation has begun to reflect that children who are exposed to domestic violence are at risk of emotional and physical harm, and are in need of protection. While there is ample evidence that exposure to domestic violence affects children in many negative ways, little is known about the profile of families and children identified to the child welfare system, and the system's response.

Recent findings from the 2003 Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (CIS-2003) provide one of the most comprehensive sources of information. The CIS-2003 found that 28% of substantiated cases of child maltreatment involve exposure to domestic violence as the primary form of maltreatment. When compared to the CIS-1998, there is a 259% increase in the rate of investigated exposure to domestic violence, with substantiated cases increasing from 1.72 cases per 1000 children in 1998 to 6.17 in 2003 (Trocmé et al., 2005). Using the CIS-2003 data, this paper describes in detail the characteristics of the children and families identified to the child welfare system because of domestic violence, and examines the response of the child welfare system to these cases in comparison to the response to other forms of maltreatment. Based on the recent literature outlined below, the hypothesis is that child maltreatment investigations substantiated by the child welfare system for exposure to domestic violence will differ considerably from substantiated investigations identified for other forms of maltreatment even when controlling for child and family characteristics.

Previous research on exposure to domestic violence

There is a well-developed body of literature that examines the negative effects of exposure to domestic violence on children (e.g., Edleson, 1999; Fantuzzo & Mohr, 1999; Kitzmann, Gaylord, Holt, & Kenny, 2003; Margolin, 1998; Onyskiw, 2003; Rossman, 2001; Wolfe, Crooks, Lee, McIntyre-Smith, & Jaffe,

2003). Researchers and practitioners agree that there are significant risks to children's social, emotional and cognitive development when they are exposed to domestic violence (Graham-Bermann & Edleson, 2001; Jaffe, Wolfe, & Wilson, 1990). Two meta-analyses conducted in 2003 demonstrate that children's EDV was related to emotional and behavioural problems (Kitzmann et al., 2003; Wolfe et al., 2003). Exposure can result in internalizing (e.g., depression, low self-esteem, and withdrawal), or externalizing (e.g., rebellion, hyperactivity, and delinquency) behaviours (Fantuzzo & Mohr, 1999; Jaffe et al., 1990; Moore, Pepler, Mae, & Kates, 1989). However, there is evidence that not all children exposed to domestic violence experience these problems (Hughes, Graham-Bermann, & Gruber, 2001).

Some jurisdictions include exposure to domestic violence as a separate child maltreatment typology while others consider exposure to domestic violence as a form of neglect or emotional maltreatment. The range of service responses covers a broad spectrum. For example, the state of Minnesota changed its legislation to include exposure to domestic violence as a form of maltreatment. The intent was to train child welfare workers, to enhance perpetrator accountability, and to intervene early in situations of domestic violence. The unintended consequence was an unmanageable workload burden on the child welfare system, which resulted in the legislation being rescinded only months later (Edleson, 2001; Weithorn, 2001).

Victimized mothers fear that their children may be removed if the family comes into contact with child welfare services (Devoe & Smith, 2002). Indeed, there is some evidence in the literature that the child welfare system can be overly intrusive. For example, in a recent class action suit, New York City was found to be violating mothers' constitutional rights as a result of their interventions in cases of children exposed to domestic violence. A federal court judge ruled that removal of children from their mothers' custody solely due to the mothers' victimization was unconstitutional (Nicholson v. Williams, 2002).

More recent literature indicates that the child welfare system's response to cases involving exposure to domestic violence do not necessarily result in higher levels of intervention. Kohl, Edleson, English, and Barth (2005) used a nationally representative sample (the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-being) to examine families with and without domestic violence investigated for child maltreatment. The authors find that families with co-occurring domestic violence and child maltreatment have high levels of risk and are 10 times more likely to be placed into foster care than children in families with lower risk. Domestic violence alone though, is not strongly associated with whether the child had a child welfare placement or any other service decision made by the child welfare system. Similarly, Beeman, Hagemester, and Edleson (2001) examined cases in one state and found that families with evidence of domestic violence received fewer services but their children were no more likely to be placed in out-of-home placements than families with no known domestic violence present.

Using a random sample of one state's child maltreatment reports during a 1-year period, English, Edleson, and Herrick (2005) compared cases with and without domestic violence identified as an issue by the investigating worker or referral. The authors' conclusions are contrary to popular beliefs about the intrusive nature of child welfare services where domestic violence is identified. The data indicate that domestic violence is a significant issue in a high percentage of cases referred to child welfare services but their findings also reveal that a relatively small number of cases with domestic violence reach an intrusive level of service (e.g., child placement).

The findings of Kohl et al. (2005), and English et al. (2005) indicate that the child welfare system response for cases involving domestic violence may be less intrusive than otherwise understood. The studies bring large-scale findings to an area where mostly small-scale studies have been published to date. The present study examines the child welfare response to exposure to domestic violence using a

large-scale Canadian database of reported and investigated child maltreatment cases. The major purpose of this study is to determine how outcomes for children and their families who are investigated for this form of risk differ from other child welfare investigations. Based on previous research, it is hypothesized that the response to cases involving exposure to domestic violence are less intrusive than the response to cases involving other forms of maltreatment.

Methods

The present study is based on a secondary analysis of data collected in the 2003 Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (CIS-2003). The CIS-2003 (Trocmé et al., 2005) is the third child abuse and neglect incidence study to be conducted in Canada. The first cycle was completed in Ontario in 1993 (OIS-1993; Trocmé, McPhee, Tam, & Hay, 1994), the second and third cycles were Canada-wide studies completed in 1998 and 2003 with the Public Health Agency of Canada. The studies used a multi-stage sampling design. In 2003, a representative sample of 55 child welfare service areas was selected from 400 child welfare service areas in Canada. National estimates including Québec are excluded from this analysis because of incomplete or unavailable data. Recent implementation of a common information system for all children's services in Quebec made it infeasible to collect data from investigating workers. Information was collected from the database. Unfortunately, there was not sufficient correspondence between the database fields and the CIS-2003 data collection form. Estimates including Québec can be obtained from selected tables in the *CIS-2003 Major Findings* report. Data were collected directly from child protection workers about reports investigated in the 55 selected child welfare service areas between 1 October 2003 and 31 December 2003. Investigations were screened to ensure that they met the CIS-2003 definitions of maltreatment. The result is a dataset with 400 variables containing information on 11,562 child maltreatment investigations.

The information was collected using a three-page instrument. Data collected by this instrument included the following variables: type of abuse and/or neglect investigated (workers could select from 25 forms of maltreatment), level of substantiation, duration of maltreatment, physical and emotional harm to the child, functioning concerns for the children and their caregivers, income source, housing information, and information about short-term service dispositions. To ensure that cases involving multiple forms of maltreatment were tracked, every investigation could be classified for up to three forms of maltreatment. The ethics for the Canadian Incidence Study's data collection were approved by the University of Toronto's ethics review committee.

Analysis

Since the objective of this study was to examine the child welfare system's response to children who were reported for exposure to domestic violence, investigations were analyzed in the following categories: investigations involving only exposure to domestic violence, investigations involving exposure to domestic violence that co-occur with at least one other form of maltreatment (physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect and emotional maltreatment) and other forms of maltreatment either that occur in single or multiple forms. The analysis focused on the investigations that were substantiated by the investigating worker ($N=5660$). Substantiated maltreatment was defined as the investigating worker deeming that

the balance of evidence indicated that child maltreatment had occurred. Cases that involved missing information about any of the variables being explored (i.e., duration, emotional harm, placement, court, ongoing services, or previous openings) were removed from the dataset. This strategy yielded a final unweighted sample size of 5567 substantiated child maltreatment investigations.

The data were weighted to show the estimated numbers in the Canadian population. The sample was weighted using annualization and regionalization weights to derive national estimates. Annualization weights estimate the annual volume of cases investigated by each study site. Regionalization weights account for the non-proportional sampling design, which reflect the relative size of the population served by the selected agency. The final weighted estimate was 101,581 substantiated child maltreatment investigations.

A series of χ^2 analyses were conducted using the sampling weight in SPSS, Version 15. The sampling weight maintains the influence of the final CIS weight while reducing the actual number of cases to the original sample size. This weight is used to avoid inflating the significance of statistics as a result of the high number of cases. There is debate in the literature about using weights when analyzing social surveys. The work concerning weighting in regression modeling is open-ended (Gelman, 2007). Therefore, the unweighted and weighted binary logistic regression is provided. The weighted binary logistic regression predicting child welfare placement was conducted using the sampling weight in SPSS, Version 15. The cut-off value for the logistic regression was manually changed from 0.5 to 0.1 since the percent of child investigations involving a child welfare placement in the bivariate analyses is almost 10%.

Results

Over one third of substantiated child maltreatment investigations in Canada, excluding Québec, in 2003 involved some form of exposure to domestic violence (34%); 25% of substantiated child maltreatment investigations involved exposure to domestic violence and 9% of substantiated child maltreatment investigations involved exposure to domestic violence co-occurring with another form of maltreatment. The other maltreatment category includes single and multiple forms of substantiated cases of maltreatment listed in Table 1. That is, the category includes cases involving only physical abuse, only sexual abuse, only neglect, only emotional maltreatment, and all combinations of these four forms.

Table 2 describes the child maltreatment investigation characteristics. Forty-four percent of exposure to domestic violence cases had never been opened before compared to 33% for co-occurring exposure to domestic violence cases and 35% for other forms of maltreatment. Chi-square analysis revealed a significant difference in the percentage of cases that have been opened for the first time by maltreatment type, $\chi^2(3, N=5567) = 110.54, p < .001$. For the cases involving co-occurring cases, there are at least two forms of maltreatment, therefore, two responses for duration pertaining to each type. The duration of the exposure to domestic violence was used for the co-occurring cases. Approximately one third of domestic violence only cases (36%) and other child maltreatment cases (33%) involved chronic maltreatment (multiple incidents over more than 6 months). In contrast, 62% of co-occurring cases of exposure to domestic violence were multiple incidents over more than 6 months, $\chi^2(3, N=5567) = 218.04, p < .001$.

Signs of mental or emotional harm were noted in only 12% of substantiated investigations involving exposure to domestic violence. In contrast, emotional harm is more frequent in both cases of co-occurring

Table 1

Types of estimated substantiated child maltreatment investigations in Canada, excluding Quebec, in 2003

	Sample		
	Unweighted	Estimated number of investigations	Percentage (%)
Type of child maltreatment			
Exposure to domestic violence only	1,336	24,906	25
Co-occurring exposure to domestic violence	564	9,298	9
Other maltreatment			
Physical abuse only	932	18,137	27
Sexual abuse only	120	2,493	4
Neglect only	1,416	25,235	37
Emotional maltreatment only	606	11,235	16
Physical and sexual abuse	–	122	0
Physical abuse and neglect	96	1,822	3
Physical abuse and emotional maltreatment	168	3,259	5
Sexual abuse and neglect	27	333	0
Sexual abuse and emotional maltreatment	–	111	0
Neglect and emotional maltreatment	254	3,888	6
Physical abuse, sexual abuse and neglect	–	–	0
Physical abuse, sexual abuse and emotional maltreatment	–	–	0
Physical abuse, neglect and emotional maltreatment	30	675	1
Sexual abuse, neglect and emotional maltreatment	–	–	0
	3,667	68,181	66
Total ^a	5,567	101,581	100

^a Columns do not add up to total because low frequency estimates are not reported but are included in the total.

exposure to domestic violence (31%), and other forms of maltreatment (22%), $\chi^2(1, N = 5567) = 108.28$, $p < .001$. There were too few cases involving physical harm and EDV to include in the analysis (less than 10 unweighted cases). Victims of exposure to domestic violence are younger compared to other forms of maltreatment. One third (33%) of the maltreatment investigations of exposure to domestic violence involved children under the age of 3, and 60% of investigations involving exposure to domestic violence were under the age of 7. Investigations involving exposure to domestic violence and co-occurring domestic violence were less likely to involve older children (ages 12–15 years) than other maltreatment, $\chi^2(4, N = 5567) = 221.88$, $p < .001$.

Child welfare services

Table 3 describes the child welfare services involved. Cases remained open for ongoing service less often (36%) for substantiated investigations involving exposure to domestic violence compared to 45% of substantiated investigations involving other forms of maltreatment, and 67% of cases involving co-occurring exposure to domestic violence, $\chi^2(1, N = 5567) = 141.32$, $p < .001$. Children were placed in out-of-home care in only 2% of investigations involving substantiated exposure to domestic violence compared to 10% for cases of co-occurring exposure to domes-

Table 2
 Characteristics of estimated child maltreatment investigations in Canada, excluding Quebec, in 2003

	Type of child maltreatment investigation						Total	χ^2	
	Exposure to domestic violence only		Co-occurring exposure to domestic violence		Other maltreatment				
Duration									
Single incident	37%	9,158	11%	992	33%	22,080	32%	32,230	218.04***
Less than 6 months	13%	3,155	13%	1,204	19%	12,930	17%	17,289	
More than 6 months	36%	8,885	62%	5,760	33%	22,193	36%	36,838	
Unknown	15%	3,708	14%	1,342	15%	10,174	15%	15,224	
Case previously opened									
Never	44%	11,051	33%	3,076	35%	23,514	37%	37,641	110.652***
Once	25%	6,212	9%	1,783	19%	12,943	21%	20,938	
Two to three times	16%	4,086	21%	1,975	21%	14,060	20%	20,121	
More than three times	13%	3,268	25%	2,306	24%	15,994	21%	21,568	
Unknown	1%	289	2%	158	1%	866	1%	1,313	
Emotional harm									
No emotional harm	88%	22,000	69%	6,388	78%	52,453	80%	80,841	108.28***
Signs of mental or emotional harm	12%	2,906	31%	2,910	22%	14,924	20%	20,740	
Age of victim									
<1 year	11%	2,754	7%	620	5%	3,474	7%	6,848	221.88***
1–3 years	22%	5,508	16%	1,527	13%	8,508	15%	15,542	
4–7 years	27%	6,720	29%	2,709	23%	15,149	24%	24,578	
8–11 years	25%	6,225	26%	2,391	30%	20,458	29%	29,074	
12–15 years	15%	3,699	22%	2,052	29%	19,788	25%	25,539	
Total	100%	24,906	100%	9,299	100%	67,377	100%	101,581	

*** $p < .001$.

Table 3
Child welfare services by estimated substantiated child maltreatment investigations in Canada, excluding Quebec, in 2003

	Type of child maltreatment investigation						Total	χ^2	
	Exposure to domestic violence only		Co-occurring exposure to domestic violence		Other child maltreatment				
Ongoing child welfare services									
Case to be closed	64%	15,898	33%	3,084	56%	37,407	56%	56,389	141.32***
Case to stay open	36%	9,008	67%	6,215	45%	29,970	45%	45,193	
Out-of-home placement									
No placement required	95%	23,702	81%	7,550	79%	53,019	83%	84,271	229.34***
Placement considered	1%	360	6%	562	5%	3,046	4%	3,968	
Informal kinship care	2%	376	3%	298	7%	4,559	5%	5,233	
Child welfare placement	2%	468	10%	887	10%	6,751	8%	8,106	
Child welfare court									
No court considered	96%	23,830	75%	6,970	85%	57,033	87%	87,833	171.01***
Application considered	3%	676	11%	1,005	7%	4,921	7%	6,602	
Application made	2%	399	14%	1,322	8%	5,423	7%	7,144	
Total child investigations	100%	24,906	100%	9,297	100%	67,377	100%	101,581	

*** $p < .001$.

Table 4
Logistic regression predicting child welfare placement using weighted data

	<i>B</i>	S.E.	Odds ratio
Block 1 (child)			
Emotional harm	0.987	0.12	2.68***
Any child functioning concern	0.185	0.13	1.20
Only domestic violence (reference)			(**)
Co-occurring domestic violence	1.354	0.26	3.87***
Other substantiated maltreatment	1.629	0.21	5.10***
Single incident (reference)			(**)
Less than 6 months	0.301	0.17	1.35
More than 6 months	0.547	0.14	1.73***
Unknown	0.775	0.17	2.17***
Age	−0.012	0.01	0.99
Nagelkerke $R^2 = .107$			
Block 2 (family)			
No moves (reference)			(***)
One move	−0.007	0.16	0.99
Two or more moves	0.888	0.14	2.431***
Unknown moves	0.446	0.13	1.56***
Female caregiver mental health issues	0.693	0.11	2.00***
Female caregiver few social support	0.084	0.12	1.09
Male caregiver alcohol abuse	0.079	0.14	1.08
Male caregiver few social supports	0.068	0.14	1.07
No previous openings (reference)			(**)
One previous opening	0.389	0.12	1.47***
Two or more previous openings	0.459	0.43	1.58
Nagelkerke $R^2 = .055$			

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

tic violence, and 10% for cases of other forms of maltreatment, $\chi^2 (3, N = 5567) = 229.34$, $p < .001$. Applications were made to child welfare court in only 2% of substantiated investigations involving exposure to domestic violence compared to 8% for other forms of maltreatment, and 14% for co-occurring cases of exposure to domestic violence, $\chi^2 (2, N = 5567) = 171.01$, $p < .001$.

To verify the significant bivariate relationships, a binary logistic regression was conducted on the weighted sample (see Table 4; the unweighted regression is available from the author). The outcome variable was whether or not the investigation resulted in a child welfare placement. Groups were collapsed for the child welfare placement variable depicted in Table 3. No child welfare placement, placement considered and informal kinship care became no child welfare placement. The initial hypothesis was supported. When controlling for other case and family characteristics, child welfare investigations involving only exposure to domestic violence are less likely than the other investigations to result in a child welfare placement (Adjusted Odds Ratio for other child maltreatment = 5.10, $p < .001$).

Discussion

The CIS-2003 documented the characteristics of families and children who are exposed to domestic violence and provided comprehensive data about the child welfare response to this situation. While there is evidence that children of battered women have been removed because of exposure to domestic violence (e.g., [Nicholson v. Williams, 2002](#)), what emerges from this study is that the child welfare system's response to cases involving exposure to domestic violence largely depends on whether it occurs in isolation or with another form of child maltreatment. This is consistent with the findings from [Kohl et al. \(2005\)](#) and [English et al. \(2005\)](#). Further, children and maternal caregivers who are subject to investigations involving substantiated exposure to domestic violence are less symptomatic than children and maternal caregivers of investigations involving other forms of maltreatment.

Whether children and females caregivers are less symptomatic because exposure to domestic violence is less detrimental to its victims, or whether the focus of the child welfare's systems response to these investigations places more emphasis on substantiation rather than assessment cannot be determined by this study and requires further investigation. Investigations involving substantiated exposure to domestic violence have the lowest rate of provision of ongoing child welfare services (i.e., keeping the case open for service). The child welfare system is called to investigate and render a decision about the validity of the allegation of maltreatment in cases of exposure to domestic violence but generally it tends not to engage the family further, choosing to close the case in 64% of cases that involve exposure to domestic violence.

Children who are the subject of investigations involving substantiated exposure to domestic violence are less likely to be removed from their home than children experiencing other forms of maltreatment. [Kohl et al. \(2005\)](#), and [English et al. \(2005\)](#) also supports the finding that child welfare placement is less frequent for children involved in investigations for exposure to domestic violence. Indeed only 2% of children are placed in a formal child welfare setting. Concomitantly, these investigations involve the least number of court applications.

The response of the child welfare system for children who are the subject of an investigation involving both substantiated exposure to domestic violence and another form of substantiated maltreatment involves more resources. Investigations involving co-occurring exposure to domestic violence are more likely to have an application to child welfare court, more likely to be provided with ongoing services and have a placement rate as high as investigations involving other forms of maltreatment. The functioning of children and their caregivers for these investigations are also more concerning. Whether workers spent more time documenting the functioning needs of children and caregivers in investigations involving more traditional forms of maltreatment or whether these families are actually more troubled requires further analysis.

Limitations

There are limitations in the design of the CIS study. The study did not track (1) incidents that were not reported to child welfare authorities, (2) reported cases that were screened out by child welfare services before being fully investigated, (3) new reports on cases already open by child welfare services, or (4) cases that were only investigated by the police. The conclusions made about the investigation represented in the dataset usually reflect a time period of 30 days from the initial referral (i.e., conclusions at the time of the first major assessment). Child functioning issues, caregiver functioning problems and other key

risk factors may not be known to the investigating worker at the time the data collection instrument was completed.

Conclusions

This study examined the profile of children and families who were the subject of a substantiated investigations involving exposure to domestic violence, exposure to domestic violence that co-occurs with another form of maltreatment, and other forms of maltreatment. This study supports recent findings (e.g., English et al., 2005; Kohl et al., 2005). Investigations involving exposure to domestic violence were less likely to receive services than investigations involving co-occurring maltreatment. These findings suggest that the involvement of child welfare has not resulted in the widespread placement of children exposed to domestic violence during the investigation. The Canadian child welfare system is substantiating exposure to domestic violence but is concluding that these families do not require child welfare services. The analysis is limited to bivariate analyses only; therefore, the next step in formulating future responses is to complete multivariate analyses in order to better understand the current response.

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