



# Placement decisions and disparities among Aboriginal children: Further analysis of the Canadian incidence study of reported child abuse and neglect part A: Comparisons of the 1998 and 2003 surveys

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This paper is written in memory of Len Dalglish who was a passionate advocate of ethical and effective decision-making for vulnerable populations.

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** Fluke et al. (2010) analyzed Canadian Incidence Study on Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (CIS) data collected in 1998 to explore the influence of clinical and organizational characteristics on the decision to place Aboriginal children in an out-of-home placement at the conclusion of a child maltreatment investigation. This study explores this same question using CIS data collected in 2003 which included a larger sample of Aboriginal children and First Nations child and family service agencies.

**Methods:** The decision to place a child in an out-of-home placement was examined using data from the *Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect-2003* and a reanalysis of CIS-1998 data (Fluke et al., 2010). The CIS-2003 dataset includes information on nearly 12,000 child maltreatment investigations from the time of report to case disposition. The CIS-2003 also captures information on the characteristics of investigating workers and the child welfare organizations for which they work. Multi-level statistical models were developed to analyze the influence of clinical and organizational variables using MPlus software. MPlus allows the use of dichotomous outcome variables, which are more reflective of decision-making in child welfare and facilitates the specific case of the logistic link function for binary outcome variables under maximum likelihood estimation.

**Results:** Final models revealed the proportion of investigations conducted by the child welfare agency involving Aboriginal children was a key single agency level predictor of the placement decision. Specifically, the higher the proportion of investigations of Aboriginal children, the more likely placement was to occur. Contrary to the findings in the first paper (Fluke et al., 2010), individual Aboriginal status also remained significant in the final model at the first level.

**Conclusions:** Further analysis needs to be conducted to further understand individual and organizational level variables that may influence decisions regarding placement of Aboriginal children. There is also a need for research that is sensitive to differences among, and between, Métis, First Nations and Inuit communities. Results are not generalizable to Québec because data from this province were excluded.

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## Introduction

The Auditor General of Canada (2008) estimates that First Nations children are more likely to be placed in “out-of-home” placements than non-Aboriginal children. Despite the striking overrepresentation there are few studies on the factors driving the overrepresentation to inform policy and practice. This paper builds on the work of Fluke, Chabot, Fallon, MacLaurin, and Blackstock (2010), which examined the contribution of organizational factors to out-of-home placement using data from the 1998 cycle of the *Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect* (CIS-1998) (Trocmé et al., 2001). Fluke et al. (2010) found that the single agency level factor contributing to the decision to place a child in an out-of-home placement was the proportion of Aboriginal children investigated by the agency. The higher the proportion of Aboriginal children investigated by the agency the more likely a child was to be placed in an out-of-home placement. Notably absent was the direct contribution of the Aboriginal status of the child (Fluke et al., 2010). This lack of a statistically significant relationship between the child’s Aboriginal status and placement when controlling for the clinical concerns of the investigation, is consistent with findings from another analysis of the CIS-1998 study (Trocmé, Knoke, & Blackstock, 2004). The purpose of this paper is to examine whether these same findings emerge in an analysis of the CIS-2003 data.

The previous paper (Fluke et al., 2010) and the current analysis utilize the *Decision Making Ecology* (DME). Child welfare research suggests that placement decision factors influencing action thresholds can be described as part of the decision making process which includes characteristics of the case worker, the agency, as well as other external factors (Baumann, Dalglish, Fluke & Kern, 2011; Baumann, Kern, & Fluke, 1997; Dalglish, 1988). As shown in Fig. 1, these factors can be operationalized using a multi-level model. DME disparities such as those found by race in placement decisions may result from interactions with non-case related components such as worker or agency characteristics. These non-case related components are reflected in the form of individual or group thresholds for taking action. If disparities persist when controlling for other factors such as poverty, it may be possible to isolate sources or levels within the DME that are associated with disparities in placement decision making.

## Literature review

*Overrepresentation of Aboriginal Children in Canadian Child Welfare.* Compared to non-Aboriginal children, Aboriginal children have a well-documented higher likelihood to be present across all child welfare decision making points including reports, substantiation, and out-of-home placement (Auditor General of Canada, 2008; Blackstock, Prakash, Loxley & Wein, 2005; McKenzie, 1997; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996; Trocmé et al., 2004). There are three major cultural groups of Aboriginal peoples recognized in the Canadian Constitution: the Metis peoples, the Inuit and First Nations. There is rich linguistic and cultural diversity among these groups; for example, there are over 600 First Nations in Canada speaking at least 50 different languages (Blackstock et al., 2005). Analysis based on national census data noted that while 6% of children in Canada were Aboriginal in 2008, Aboriginal children made up 22% of substantiated reports of child maltreatment (Trocmé et al., 2010).

The most reliable source of data on Aboriginal children in the Canadian child welfare system comes from the CIS (Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC, 2010; Trocmé et al., 2005, 2001). This cross sectional study conducted in five-year cycles collects data on child welfare reports to the point of case disposition. CIS has collected disaggregated data on Aboriginal children from the inception of the study to better detect differences among the three major Aboriginal cultural groups in Canada (First Nations, Métis and Inuit). In 2003, 17% of substantiated investigations involving Aboriginal children resulted in a formal out-of-home placement, compared to 6% of non-Aboriginal children. An additional 11% of Aboriginal children were placed in an informal out-of-home placement (kinship care) while 4% of non-Aboriginal children were placed informally

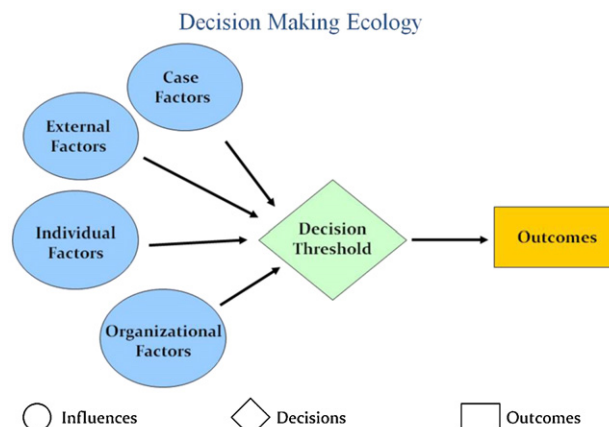


Fig. 1. Decision making ecology.

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