A troubled group? Adolescents in a Canadian child welfare sample

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: To examine factors associated with ongoing service and out of home placement for adolescents investigated by child welfare services in Canada.
Methods: Secondary analysis was conducted using data from the Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect, 2008 (CIS-2008), specifically examining a weighted sample of 58,641 adolescents (age 12–15). Descriptive comparisons between adolescents, school-age children and pre-school age children were conducted. After identifying significant bivariate relationships between ongoing service and out of home placement and youth, household, case, and service characteristics, logistic regressions were used to determine the degree to which these characteristics predicted the investigation being transferred to ongoing child welfare services or out of home placement.
Results: Internalizing functioning concerns of adolescents in the sample were the most important contributors to decisions to provide ongoing service. Aboriginal status of the child and parent functioning concerns were also important contributors to the decision to provide ongoing service to adolescents and their families. Youths' externalizing behaviors were the most important contributors to placing adolescents in out-of-home care.
Conclusions: The results provide important information for child welfare agencies hoping to better understand decision-making processes and service provision to adolescents.
Implications: Future research should seek to better understand why youth behaviors drive ongoing service and placement decisions.

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1. Introduction

Over 200,000 children will come into contact with the Canadian child welfare system every year and over a quarter of these children and their families will receive service as a result of an initial assessment (Trocmé et al., 2010a, 2010b). Services range from referrals to community services to out-of-home placement for children. The majority of provinces are mandated to conduct maltreatment related investigations involving children up to 16 years of age, with only a few provinces providing services to youth up to 19 years of age (Trocmé et al., 2010c, 2010d). Over the last two cycles of the Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (CIS-2003; CIS-2008), adolescents aged 12 to 15 have the lowest incidence of reported investigations among five different age groups (Trocmé et al., 2010c, 2010d).

Investigations of infants are not only more common, but also are generally considered more urgent both because of their vulnerability and because of stricter timelines in many provinces governing permanency placement decisions (Freeman, Levine, & Doueck, 1996; Tonmyr, Williams, Jack, & MacMillan, 2011). Risk factors that make

infants more likely to receive a substantiated decision include few social supports, caregiver's substance abuse, maternal mental health concerns, post-partum depression and pre-natal drug exposure (Kotch, Browne, Dufort, & Winsor, 1999; Leventhal et al., 1997; Scannapieco & Connell-Carrick, 2007). Analysis of the CIS-2008 found that among investigations involving infants, primary caregiver risk factors were the strongest predictor of the decision to transfer a case to ongoing services (Fallon et al., 2013).

Analysis of the CIS-2003 data for 0–15 year olds found that the decision to substantiate was consistent with the case's clinical characteristics such as severity of harm, parent risk factors, housing risk factors and police referrals (Trocmé, Knoke, Fallon, & MacLaurin, 2009). Case characteristics involving adolescents has been less studied. While the negative impacts of maltreatment on children have been well documented (Briere & Runtz, 1993; Crouch & Milner, 1993; Kolko, 2002), several studies have found that adolescent maltreatment has independent consequences above and beyond child maltreatment (Mersky, Topitzes, & Reynolds, 2012; Smith, Ireland, & Thornberry, 2005; Stewart, Livingston, & Dennison, 2008; Thompson et al., 2012). Analyses of the Chicago Longitudinal Study, a prospective study of 1539 underprivileged, minority youth showed strong connections between adolescent maltreatment and delinquency after controlling for prior victimization (Mersky et al., 2012). Other studies have found that children whose

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maltreatment trajectory started or extended into adolescence were more likely to offend as juveniles than children whose maltreatment occurred prior to, but not during, adolescence (Stewart et al., 2008), and that experiencing any substantiated maltreatment during adolescence increases the odds of arrest, general and violent offending, and illicit drug use in young adulthood, even controlling for socio-demographic characteristics and prior levels of problem behavior (Smith et al., 2005). Maltreatment during adolescence has also been found to have a significant effect on a broad range of outcomes in addition to delinquency: problem alcohol and drug use, risky sex behaviors, self-reported sexually transmitted disease diagnosis, and suicidal thoughts (Thompson et al., 2012; Thornberry, Henry, Ireland, & Smith, 2010).

Increased risk factors for placement in out of home care include behavioral problems and criminal behavior, which are also more likely to occur among youth (Berger, Bruch, James, Johnson, & Rubin, 2009; Doyle, 2007; James et al., 2006). One study of 5528 youth placed in a substitute care setting found that 23% of youth were placed in out-of-home care for reasons others than maltreatment; specifically child behavioral problems. The youth placed for behavioral problems were significantly more likely to live in congregate care facilities, experience placement instability, and more likely to experience at least one arrest (Ryan, 2012).

In the first longitudinal study looking at Canadian child welfare data, Esposito et al. (2013) found that children aged 10 to 17 years were more likely to be placed as a result of a combination of behavioral problems, police reporting, the number of times they had been subject to a child welfare investigation and the level of neighborhood socioeconomic disadvantage (Esposito et al., 2013).

It has been suggested that because adolescents will often come to the attention of child welfare services as a result of externalizing behaviors such as drug and alcohol use or mental health concerns, underlying maltreatment may be overlooked (Levine Powers & Eckenrode, 1988; Moran, Vuchinich, & Hall, 2004). However, there has been little research to confirm these claims. In order to better understand the differences between the child welfare responses to adolescents, this study will examine the profiles of adolescents that come into contact with the Canadian child welfare system and the decisions made after initial assessments, including the decision to place youth in out of home care.

The present analysis will use the Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect, 2008 (CIS-2008) to examine the profile of adolescents reported and investigated by child welfare workers across Canada in a representative sample of child welfare investigations and then to determine what characteristics predict child welfare service provision and out-of-home placement. Given that there is little Canadian research in this area, this analysis is exploratory in nature and examines a wide range of variables collected as part of the CIS-2008. The specific objectives of this analysis are to:

(1) Compare the characteristics (youth, household, case, and service) of maltreatment related investigations of pre-school (0–5), school-age children (6–11) and adolescents (12–15) in Canada in 2008.
(2) Describe factors associated with service provision and out-of-home placement for adolescents using bivariate data.
(3) Determine which characteristics for adolescents impact the decision to transfer a case to ongoing child welfare services or to place in out-of-home care using multivariate models.

Both service provision and placement decisions are important steps in addressing the needs of adolescents and their families. There have been few studies to look at the profile and child welfare service response to adolescents after initial investigations, and thus this analysis will seek to build the research base in this important area of study.

2. Methods

The profile of adolescents and the initial service responses were obtained by using the third cycle of the Canadian Incidence Study on Child Abuse and Neglect (CIS-2008) (Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC), 2010). The primary objective of the CIS-2008 was to produce national estimates on the incidence and characteristics of child maltreatment in Canada. Information on child maltreatment investigations was collected directly from child welfare workers in every province and territory in the fall of 2008.

2.1. Sample

The sampling process covered three stages (Trocmé et al., 2010a, 2010b); first, a representative sample of 112 child welfare sites was selected out of the 412 child welfare organizations identified across Canada. To ensure that the sample of sites covered Canada's regional variety and subpopulations, stratification along provinces and territories was applied; provinces inhabited by a large population were further stratified by size of the organization and by region. Separate strata were developed for Aboriginal organizations. Within the study sites case openings during the three-month period from October 1, 2008 to December 31, 2008 were sampled, and, in a final step, child investigations that met the study criteria were identified. This process yielded a total sample of 15,980 child maltreatment investigations of children under the age of 16 years with a mean of 7.4 years. The total weighted sample used in most of the analyses was 58,641 children aged 0–15. As one small agency did not screen in any referrals in the three month period, the sample on the agency level is reduced to n = 111. Due to later recruitment, two sites collected data from December 1, 2008 to February 28, 2009, and one site collected data from January 1, 2009 to March 31, 2009. Cases from these three sites represent only 4% of all sampled cases. This different collection period is unlikely to bias the overall results.

2.2. Measures

Information on key clinical variables was collected using a three page instrument. Questions were asked about the type of abuse and neglect investigated; the level of substantiation, duration and severity of maltreatment; child and caregiver functioning concerns; the family's socio-economic situation and short-term service dispositions. Data gathered covered the time period from case opening upon completion of the initial investigation, usually within two months of receiving the initial report. For the dependent variables employed in the multivariate analyses, data similarly included only placement or service decisions made within the approximate two-month period from the report being received to the completion of the child protection evaluation. See Table 1 for a description of all variables used in the analyses.

2.3. Ethics

Ethics approval was obtained for the initial data collection of the CIS-2008 from McGill University, the University of Toronto and the University of Calgary. Permission was also obtained from all of the participating child welfare agencies and an advisory committee oversaw the First Nations component of the CIS-2008. A separate ethics approval was obtained from the REB-I McGill ethics office for the purpose of these secondary analyses.

2.4. Statistical analysis

All analyses were conducted using SPSS Statistics version 21. Several variables were selected in order to examine the profile of adolescents investigated by child welfare workers in Canada and decisions regarding these investigations. Bivariate analyses were conducted to examine investigated forms of child maltreatment, reported child and parent functioning concerns, household characteristics and selected service outcomes including ongoing service and out of home placement for three age groups of children: 0–5 year olds (infants/pre-school age