

Children's Exposure to Intimate Partner Violence as Child Maltreatment



What this research is about

Compared with the U.S. and Australia, Canada has the highest rate of child maltreatment investigations and substantiation (confirmed cases). In 2019, the most common type of substantiated child maltreatment in Canada was children's exposure to intimate partner violence (IPV). According to the Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (CIS), exposure to IPV involves situations where a child is exposed to violence between two intimate partners, at least one of whom is the child's caregiver. Exposure to IPV can take the form of direct witness of physical violence, indirect exposure to physical violence, or exposure to emotional violence. However, there is an ongoing debate about whether exposure to IPV is a form of child maltreatment. Specifically, it is questioned whether exposure alone can be considered maltreatment or whether it is necessary to demonstrate that a child has been harmed by that exposure.

Given that exposure to IPV comprises the largest proportion of substantiated child maltreatment cases in Canada, and there is a debate about exposure to IPV as a form of child maltreatment, this research looks at the types of investigations from 2008 to 2019 and compares IPV cases with other cases.

What the researchers did

The researchers analyzed data from two cycles of the CIS, specifically from 2008 and 2019. The CIS examines the rates and characteristics of investigated child maltreatment in Canada. It is the only source of nationally aggregated data on child maltreatment-related investigations. The information was collected directly from child welfare workers across the country. The researchers examined trends in the number and type of investigations, particularly those related to exposure to IPV, and compared

What you need to know

In 2019, cases of child maltreatment in Canada that were most likely to be substantiated (confirmed) involved children's exposure to intimate partner violence (IPV). This type of child maltreatment has detrimental effects on the development and wellbeing of children. This study examined data collected for the Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect in 2008 and 2019. Investigations involving children's exposure to IPV were six times more likely to be substantiated than other types of investigations. However, the majority of these cases were not transferred to receive ongoing child welfare services. This suggests a need to find a balance between IPV exposure-related cases that result in harm and cases that are better served by early referral to other sectors.

them with other types of maltreatment, such as physical abuse or neglect. They also used statistical models to see which child, caregiver, and household factors predicted whether cases were substantiated or transferred to ongoing child welfare services.

What the researchers found

The researchers found that from 2008 to 2019, investigations related to children's exposure to IPV increased from 6.84 to 9.50 investigations per 1,000 children in Canada. The rate of substantiation for cases of children's exposure to IPV also increased from 4.86 to 6.51 per 1,000 children. In fact, in 2019, exposure to IPV made up the largest proportion of substantiated child maltreatment cases in Canada, representing 35% of all cases. Notably, these cases

were six times more likely to be substantiated than other types of investigations.

Despite this relatively high substantiation rate, it did not appear to influence the decision to keep an investigation open for ongoing child welfare services. Cases of exposure to IPV were only 1.3 times more likely to be transferred to receive child welfare services compared with other types of investigations. Although cases of exposure to IPV were more likely to result in referrals to outside services, they were less likely to involve a child welfare court application or a placement in out-of-home care. The proportion of cases of exposure to IPV that were transferred to child welfare services fell behind other maltreatment types, including neglect and risk of maltreatment.

The findings of a high substantiation rate alongside a low transfer rate to child welfare services suggest that non-offending parents/caregivers may be re-victimized, first as victims of IPV and then as a subject of a child maltreatment investigation.

Compared with other types of maltreatment investigations, cases of exposure to IPV were more likely to involve young children aged 0–3 years, caregivers with alcohol problems, families with few social supports, and households whose income was mainly from full-time work. In contrast, these cases were less likely to involve children with at least one child functioning concern. Several factors influenced the decision to transfer a case to child welfare services. These factors included the child's age and ethnicity (e.g., being Indigenous); the presence of at least one child functioning concern; caregivers with alcohol/problems or mental health concerns; families with few social supports; caregivers running out of money for basic necessities; and housing concerns.

How you can use this research

This research shows the need to rethink how child welfare systems respond to cases of children exposed to IPV. Currently, many investigations result in substantiation but are not followed by ongoing support from child welfare services. A better approach might involve early referrals where trained screeners direct families to outside services, such as the Violence Against Women sector, before an investigation begins. These services could also be properly funded to deal with an increase in caseloads.

The study also highlights the important role police play in referring IPV cases to child welfare. As police are the top referrer for IPV cases in Canada, police could be trained to better assess which cases require a child welfare referral.

About the researchers

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Citation

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Research Snapshot by Patrick Chi Kai Lam

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