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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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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,

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