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Child-abuse incidence ripe for further study

42% of allegations unfounded, report says

BY DAN HAWALESHKA
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TORONTO – A study released yesterday by the Institute for the Prevention of Child Abuse took a few shaky, subjective, but much-needed steps toward understanding just how often child abuse occurs in Ontario.

Nico Trocmé, an assistant professor in the University of Toronto's faculty of social work, headed the study, titled *Ontario Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect.* He characterized the report as a "reflection of how much further we have to go" toward understanding the incidence of child abuse in Canada.

In an attempt to paint a comprehensive picture of just how many reports of child abuse actually turn out to be founded, 15 of Ontario's 54 Children's Aid Societies were randomly selected for the study; 2,447 children were investigated.

Based on these findings, Mr. Trocmé estimated that almost 47,000 child-maltreatment investigations were undertaken in Ontario in 1993. This represents, he said, an estimated incidence of 21 abuse investigations per 1,000 children in the province. He said that 42 per cent of the investigations found that the allegations of abuse were unfounded, 30 per cent were classified as suspected cases of abuse, and 27 per cent were substantiated.

Speaking to reporters yesterday at a news conference in Toronto, Mr. Trocmé said it was up to the individual aid worker's discretion to decide what constituted a substantiated case of abuse.

He said it was a "fairly subjective judgement."

Cases were designated as "suspected" if there was not enough evidence to substantiate maltreatment, but also not enough evidence to rule out the possibility.

As to whether the results from 15 aid societies could reliably be applied to the entire province, Mr. Trocmé said: "We just hoped that randomization turned out to be accurate."

The director of prevention and information services for the institute, Anne Telford, said just because more than two out of every five investigations turn out to be unfounded, social workers are not wasting their time.

"'Unfounded' sounds like these may be whimsical referrals but they're much more than that," she said, adding that a social worker's duty and obligation is to investigate reported cases.

Despite some of the handicaps, the study is seen as ground-breaking.

Robert Glossop, program and research director at the Ottawa-based Vanier Institute of the Family, said any study that tries to present a provincial overview is long overdue.

"It's what the statisticians would call more reliable and more robust information than we've had in the past," Mr. Glossop said in a telephone interview.

In the past, aid workers and policy makers had to content themselves with anecdotal evidence and studies of smaller populations, he added.

Among other findings:

- In 75 per cent of cases the alleged perpetrator of the abuse was either both parents, the mother, the father or the step-father.
- Police were involved in 23 per cent of the investigations and criminal charges were laid in at least 6 per cent of cases.
- Investigations involving older children were more likely to be substantiated.
- In the United States, the incidence of abuse investigations was estimated at 43 per 1,000 children, double the estimate for Ontario.

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