

# The Intersection of Child Maltreatment & Behaviour Problems:

## Implications for Child Welfare Service Providers

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# The Issue

- Child maltreatment is a serious childhood adversity associated with health, mental health, educational, & developmental problems
  - E.g., depression, anxiety, sleep disturbance (Cicchetti & Toth, 2005)
- Children who have been abused or neglected are at risk of exhibiting behaviour problems at various points across the life course
  - Behaviours violate social norms, cause harm to others, & generate significant social & economic costs (Biglan et al., 2004)
- Mechanisms poorly understood

# The Issue

- Child welfare agencies are uniquely positioned to provide services to maltreated children & youth
- Significant number of children & youth involved in child welfare system exhibit behaviour problems
- As a service mandated to intervene with maltreated children, child welfare services have potential to prevent/alleviate behaviour problems

# Present Research

- The purpose of this research:
  - *To better understand the relationship between maltreatment and behaviour problems*
  - *To understand the potential intervening role of child welfare services in influencing this relationship*

# Present Research

- Objectives:
  1. Review and integrate theoretical perspectives
  2. Determine extent to which maltreated young people demonstrate behaviour problems, & understand the factors distinguishing maltreated children & youth with behaviour problems from those without these problems
  3. Identify the types of child welfare services provided to maltreated children with behaviour problems

# Theoretical Integration

- Purpose: to analyze & integrate relevant theoretical perspectives into a conceptual model that explains
  1. Why maltreatment is associated with behaviour problems
  2. How child welfare services can prevent & alleviate behavioural difficulties among children who have experienced abuse/neglect
- Utilize existing theory to develop a coherent & comprehensive understanding of these questions

# Theoretical Perspectives

- Six theoretical perspectives selected for analysis following a comprehensive review:
  1. Ecological model
  2. Transactional model
  3. Attachment theory
  4. Life course perspective
  5. Social learning perspective
  6. Social-biological models

# Analysis, Application, & Integration

- Each theory applied to understanding the association between maltreatment & behaviour problems, & the role of child welfare services in intervening
- Analysis revealed similarities & complementary nature of six perspectives
- Perspectives integrated into conceptual model with several key propositions



# Key Propositions

- Reciprocal relationship between maltreatment & behaviour problems
  - Challenging child behaviours elicit harsh parental responses, particularly among parents facing multiple stressors
  - Maltreatment results in behaviour problems under certain conditions (e.g., genetic vulnerability)
  - Reciprocal pattern escalates in the absence of protective factors & presence of cumulative risk

# Key Propositions

- Cumulative disadvantage
  - Children facing high levels of marginalization are at greater risk of experiencing serious enduring maltreatment, & likewise at greater risk of behaviour problems
  - Families living with high levels of disadvantage also more likely to be identified to child welfare system

# Key Propositions

- Child welfare services can be a turning point
  - Positive turning point, behavioural adaptation improves:
    - Secondary prevention of future maltreatment
    - Enhanced relationships
    - Fewer risks & more protective factors
  - Negative turning point, behaviour problems escalate:
    - Heightened stigma
    - Attachment disturbances

# Implications & Conclusions

- Relationship between maltreatment & behaviour problems is complex to understand & address
- Critical to integrate theoretical & empirical knowledge from across disciplines & levels of analysis (biological to systemic levels)
- Model is limited by breadth & lack of specificity

# OIS Analysis

## Purpose:

1. To determine the extent to which maltreated children & youth served by the child welfare system in Ontario, Canada display aggressive/criminal behaviour
2. To understand what distinguishes maltreated children with behaviour problems from those without these problems, by examining various dimensions of maltreatment & cumulative child & family risk

# Ontario Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect 2013 (OIS-2013)

## Site selection (n=17)

- Sampled from 46 child welfare organizations
- Simple random sampling

## Case selection (n=3,118)

- Opened Oct. 1 to Dec. 31; random sample in large agencies
- Family case count

## Identify investigated children (n=5,265)

- Investigated because of maltreatment concerns
- Excludes: >15, non-invest. siblings & other concerns

## Substantiated (n=1,837)

- Weighted estimate = 43,067

# OIS Instruments

- OIS-2013 Maltreatment Assessment Form completed by investigating workers
- Each agency offered a training session and/or one-on-one research support
- Site researchers coordinated data collection & verified all instruments

# Measures

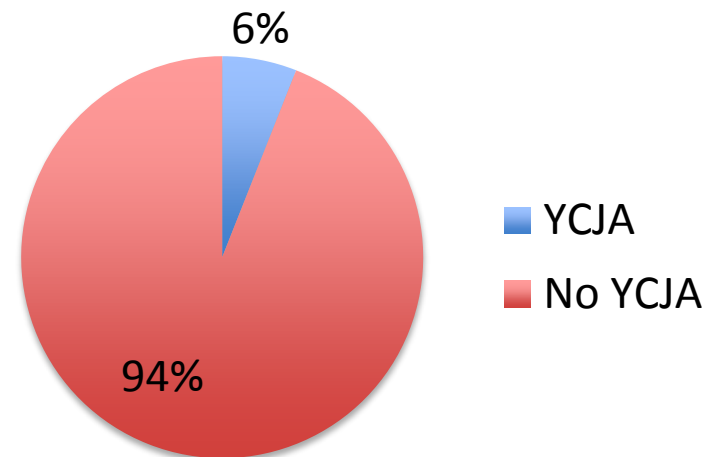
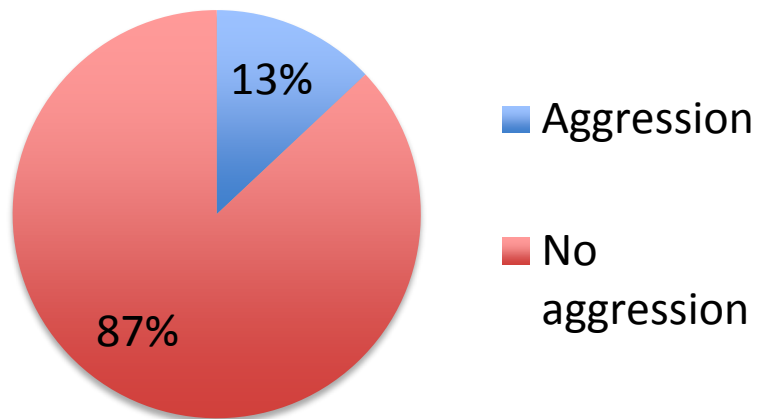
- Maltreatment dimensions
  - Typology
  - Co-occurrence
  - Frequency
  - Chronicity
- Cumulative child & family risk indices
  - Child risks (e.g., depression, running from home, disability)
  - Family risks (e.g., receipt of social assistance, parental substance abuse)



# Findings

**All Children 0-15**

**Youth 12-15**



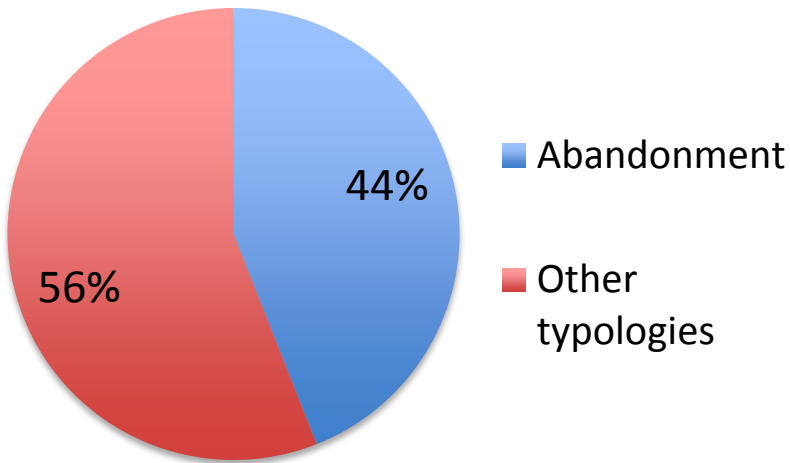
# Findings

- Maltreatment dimensions
  - Co-occurring
  - Severe, causing physical harm
  - Physical abuse, emotional maltreatment in childhood
  - Neglect in adolescence
- Cumulative child risk
  - Co-morbid mental health & developmental issues
- Cumulative family risk
  - Few differences

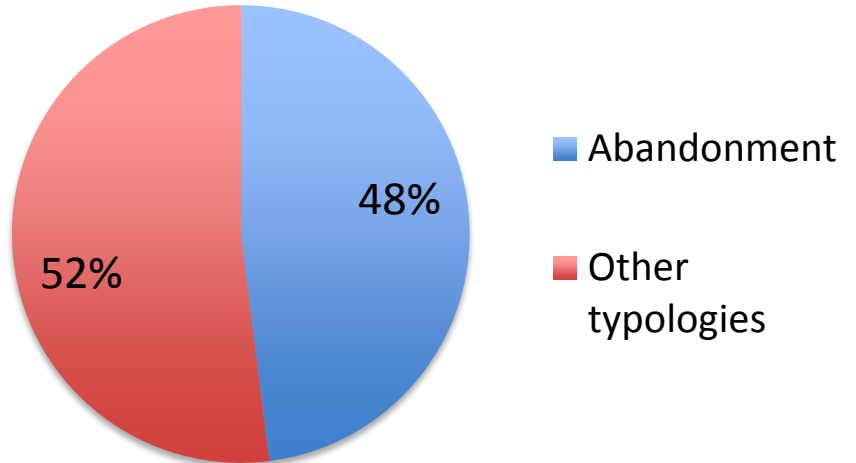
# Findings

- A closer look at neglect in adolescence

**All substantiated neglect investigations of youth with aggression**



**All substantiated neglect investigations of justice-system involved youth**



# Implications & Conclusions

- Maltreated children & youth who display aggressive/criminal behaviour are a unique high-needs subpopulation served by child welfare system
- Abandonment in adolescence may be a result of these high-needs

# OIS Analysis

## Purpose:

- Provide a picture of how child welfare service providers respond upon identifying aggressive/criminal behaviours
  - Examining a broad range of supportive & protective services, including referrals, ongoing, & placement
  - Examining both young children with early aggression & older children & youth exhibiting aggressive/criminal behaviours
- OIS-2013 data analyzed, substantiated, 4 years & older (n=1,446)

# Findings

- Child welfare workers act as gateway service providers
  - Maltreated young people with aggressive & criminal behaviour problems were more likely to receive referrals to certain specialized providers (e.g., in-home counseling services, psychological or psychiatric services)
  - Attention to specific needs of maltreated children & youth

# Findings

- Young children with aggression no more likely to receive ongoing child welfare services
  - Young children who demonstrate early aggressive behaviour are at significant risk of continued behaviour problems
  - Missed opportunity for early intervention

# Findings

- Behaviour problems common at the point of entry into care, particularly in restrictive settings
  - 40% of children over the age of four who entered placements exhibited aggression, & 100% of young people who entered group homes displayed aggression
  - 1 in 5 youth entering care was involved in justice system, & almost half of young people who entered group homes was YCJA involved
  - Aggressive behaviour in adolescence associated with increased odds of placement



# Implications & Conclusions

- Timely & effective services are needed for children displaying early aggression & older adolescents
- Behavioural assessments at point of the initial investigation can inform placement decisions

# Limitations of OIS Analyses

- Information collected at conclusion of initial investigation
- Clinical assessments not independently verified
- Cross-sectional
- Not designed to evaluate outcomes

# Discussion & Conclusion

- This research contributes to small body of Canadian literature
- Behaviour problems associated with extreme & injurious forms of maltreatment, co-morbid mental health & developmental problems, & abandonment
- Vulnerable group is at risk of separation & more likely to be placed in restrictive out-of-home settings despite lack of evidence
- Social workers, together with other professionals, can contribute to improving developmental outcomes for this vulnerable group through research, policy, & practice

Thank you

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