

# ABORIGINAL AND NON-ABORIGINAL CHILDREN IN CHILD PROTECTION SERVICES



This fact sheet summarizes research findings exploring the differences between First Nations, Inuit, Métis and non-Aboriginal children served by the child welfare system in Canada. Aboriginal children<sup>1</sup> have been highly over-represented in child protection services for over four decades<sup>2</sup>. Tragically, this over-representation has increased where more than three times the number of Aboriginal children are placed in state care today than at the height of residential school operations (Blackstock, 2003).

The main reason why Aboriginal children enter the child protection system is “neglect.” This category can include physical neglect (failure to provide necessities like adequate food, clothing and hygiene), failure to supervise a child at risk of physical harm, or other issues such as educational, medical, or emotional neglect. However, the “neglect” of Aboriginal children is often an expression of structural factors, such as poverty, and beyond parents’ control.

<sup>1</sup> ‘Aboriginal’ in this fact sheet refers to First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples. First Nations will sometimes be subdivided by Indian Act status (status/non-status) or by residence on/off reserve. Comparisons in this information sheet are usually between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, but some are between First Nations and non-Aboriginals or among Aboriginal groups.

<sup>2</sup> The primary source of data for this fact sheet is derived from the 2003 Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect. While First Nations, Métis and Inuit people are included in this study, there is an overrepresentation of First Nations children in the welfare system.



## Over-Representation of Aboriginal Children in Child Protection Services

Although the absence of a national child welfare data system makes it impossible to precisely quantify the over-representation of Aboriginal children receiving child protection services, available information suggests that overrepresentation increases at every stage of intervention in the child welfare system.

- The 2003 Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (CIS-2003) found that Aboriginal children were 2.5 times as likely to have a “substantiated” report of maltreatment in the child welfare system, an overall population rate of 49 per 1000 children in comparison to 19.8 per 1000 non-Aboriginal children (Trocmé et al., 2005).
- The CIS-1998 found that although only five percent of children in Canada were Aboriginal, Aboriginal children comprised 17% of children reported to child welfare, 22% of substantiated reports of maltreatment, and 25% of the children admitted to care (Blackstock, Trocmé & Bennett, 2004). This staged increase was also found in CIS-2003.

Most alarming is that large numbers of Aboriginal children receive the most intensive child welfare intervention: removal from the home and placement in care. These apprehensions appear to be increasing, at least for First Nations children.

- A study of 3 sample provinces found 10.23% of status First Nations children in out-of-home care, versus 3.31% of Métis children and 0.67% of other children (Blackstock et al., 2005). Another study found that Aboriginal children represent 40% of the children

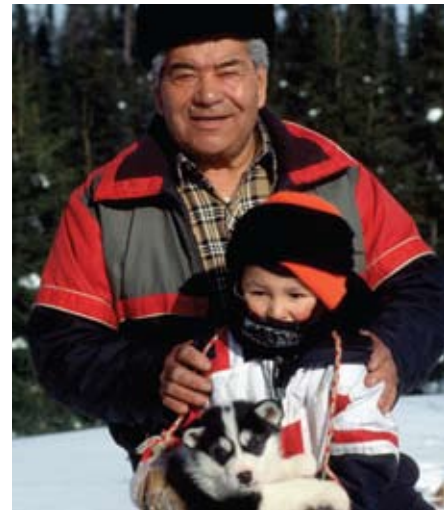
in out-of-home care in Canada (Farris-Manning & Zandstra, 2003). There are 3 times as many Aboriginal children in child welfare care today than were in residential schools at their peak (Blackstock, 2003).

- A study of the federal government’s own data found a 71.5% increase in out-of-home placements for First Nations children on reserve between 1995 and 2001 (McKenzie, 2002).

## Different Types of Child Maltreatment: Aboriginal Children and Neglect

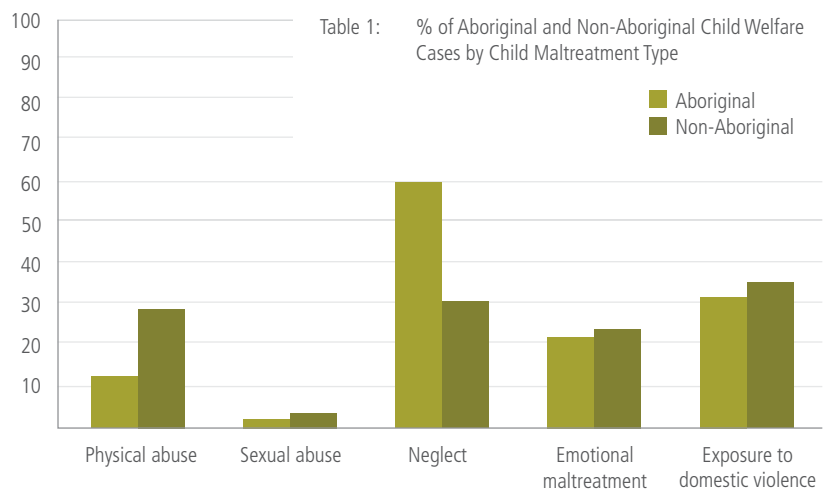
CIS-2003 collected data on the characteristics of children and families coming to the attention of the child welfare system during a three month period in 2003 due to reports of child abuse or neglect. CIS results found that 60% of Aboriginal children in the child welfare system had maltreatment substantiated due to neglect, compared to 30% of non-Aboriginal children (Table 1).

Considering population size, Aboriginal children in Canada were 5 times more likely to be substantiated for neglect than non-Aboriginal children (Trocmé et al,



2005). In contrast, maltreatment of non-Aboriginal children is most often in the categories of domestic violence, physical abuse or neglect, each occurring in about a third of cases (Trocmé et al, 2006).

Comparison between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children themselves in CIS-2003 showed some differences, such as slightly lower rates of physical harm among Aboriginal children and higher child functioning concerns. However, these differences do not account for the over-representation of Aboriginal children in child protection services (Trocmé et al., 2005).



(Numbers may add up to more than 100 due to multiple maltreatment. Source: Trocme et al., 2005)

## Unpacking the 'Neglect' of Aboriginal Children: Poverty, Housing, Substance Misuse

Researchers examining neglect in Aboriginal families found that the over representation of Aboriginal children is driven primarily by 3 structural risk factors: poverty, inadequate housing and substance misuse (Trocmé et al., 2005; Trocmé et al., 2006). Compared to non-Aboriginal families in the child protection system, the Aboriginal families were:

- Twice as likely to survive on social benefits, and far less likely to have full time employment;
- 2-3 times more likely to live in public housing or housing that is unsafe or overcrowded. Except on reserve, Aboriginal families were much more likely to have moved more than once in the past year; and,
- Several times more likely to have substance misuse issues in the family.

These factors are intimately connected to the overall socio-economic situation of Aboriginal people, and are largely outside the parents' direct control. Child protection agencies operating at the individual and family level can only scratch the surface of these structural risks. Investments in equitable, culturally-based child welfare programs targeting structural risk coupled with sustainable, Aboriginal-driven socio-economic development hold the most promise.





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NATIONAL COLLABORATING CENTRE  
FOR ABORIGINAL HEALTH  
CENTRE DE COLLABORATION NATIONALE  
DE LA SANTÉ AUTOCHTONE

FOR MORE INFORMATION:  
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN BRITISH COLUMBIA  
3333 UNIVERSITY WAY, PRINCE GEORGE, BC V2N 4Z9

1 250 960 5250  
NCCAHA@UNBC.CA  
WWW.NCCAHA.CA