



Ontario Association of
Children's Aid Societies



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2023 Pre-Budget Submission: One Community of Care

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The Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies (OACAS) is a provincial membership organization representing 47 of Ontario's 50 Children's Aid Societies and Indigenous Child and Family Well-Being Agencies, and two pre-mandated Indigenous agencies. We work with our members to ensure they have the necessary tools, educational opportunities, training, and conditions to fulfill their statutory mandate to deliver child protection services and achieve equitable outcomes for children, youth, and families across the province.

Alongside the Ministry of Children, Community, and Social Services (MCCSS), we are working towards an effective system that supports *all* children, youth, and families. Many intersecting service systems have a responsibility for the safety and well-being of children, youth, and families across Ontario. OACAS remains committed to working with MCCSS to advance systems-level thinking across ministries and with partners to bring positive change to the child welfare and broader child and family services system.

This is our third pre-budget submission during the COVID-19 pandemic, and we applaud the child welfare professionals across Ontario who have worked tirelessly over the last three years to ensure the safety and well-being of children, youth, and families. Their commitment to providing high-quality services and supports is commendable.

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken a toll on children, youth, families, and communities. This harm has disproportionately affected already marginalized groups, such as people with low or no incomes, people experiencing homelessness or unstable housing, racialized communities, newcomers, and people with disabilities. It has also impacted the human and community services sector, including child welfare professionals, which has reported increased rates of burnout, absenteeism, and mental health challenges at the staff level.

The pandemic continues to exacerbate social determinants of health that are inextricably linked to the child welfare sector (i.e., income, employment, education, physical environment, social supports, access to health services, etc.). We recognize that the provincial government has taken steps to strengthen the services and supports for vulnerable Ontarians, but further action is required. As we recover, we should not strive to return to normal. We must build better, resilient systems that adequately respond to the needs of all children, youth, and families.

This submission identifies four critical areas for action and details specific recommendations to improve the lives of Ontario children, youth, families, and communities.

Four Priority Areas for Action



Recommendation 1:

Take a cross-ministerial approach to the implementation of the child welfare redesign strategy and ensure the strategy is successful by investing in social infrastructure that delivers integrated, localized, and culturally safe supports and services to children, youth, and families.



Recommendation 2:

Invest in community-based supports that promote mental health and well-being alongside specialized mental health services so all children and youth have access to timely, quality care, including those with complex needs.



Recommendation 3:

Enhance services and supports to older youth and youth transitioning out of care.



Recommendation 4:

Develop a funding formula that prioritizes prevention, the advancement of reconciliation and equity, and improving outcomes.

Recommendation 1:

Take a cross-ministerial approach to the implementation of the child welfare redesign strategy and ensure the strategy is successful by investing in social infrastructure that delivers integrated, localized, and culturally safe supports and services to children, youth, and families.

Promoting the well-being and health of children, youth, and families so everyone can thrive and stay together demands strong community infrastructure. Community infrastructure can be defined as the “networks of spaces, facilities, institutions, and groups” that foster belonging and form the foundation of a safe, healthy neighborhood (Latham & Layton, 2019).

Community-based organizations and groups are an essential part of the social infrastructure of a given area or neighborhood. These organizations perform a range of functions—including providing food, mental health, and addictions support, childcare, homelessness prevention, and services and transitional housing for those fleeing gender-based and intimate partner violence. Each day, these organizations and their teams show up for seniors, peoples with disabilities, and marginalized communities affected by colonialism, racism, classism, sexism, able-ism, poverty, and other systems of power, privilege, and oppression.

As Ontarians recover from the pandemic, they now face record-high inflation rates and a soaring cost of living. With these realities come a range of challenges for children, youth, families, and the already fragile community-based organizations and social services they rely upon. While emergency pandemic programs were instrumental in bringing greater stability to community-based organizations delivering social

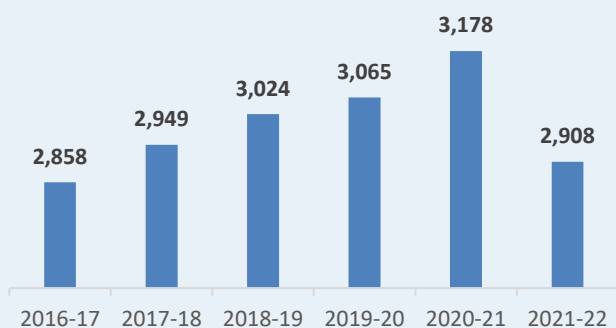
supports over the past two years, the toll of the pandemic and emerging challenges cannot be ignored. This sector needs continued investment and support.

We know that most families that come into contact with the child welfare system are not cases of extreme abuse or neglect. Instead, most caregivers are struggling to meet the basic needs of their family and most children and youth remain in the home while their caregivers receive the support they need.

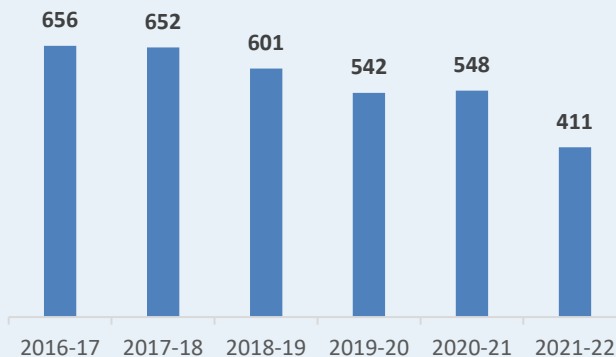
When it is unsafe for children or youth to live with their primary caregiver(s), agencies strive to keep them connected to their families and communities through kinship placements, which allow someone with a significant relationship with a young person to care for them. Kin can be biologically related, such as a grandparent or cousin, or can be someone with an emotional connection, like a family friend or a member of the community.

In 2021-22, thirty-eight non-Indigenous Children’s Aid Societies placed an average of 411 children and youth in kinship care placements per month (MCCSS). This marks a 25% decrease from 2020-21. That same year, an average of 2,908 children and youth were in kinship service, where children are placed with families but with less formal intervention than in a kinship care placement (MCCSS). This marks an 8% decrease from 2020-21.

Kinship Service Children and Youth: Monthly Average



Kinship Care Children and Youth: Monthly Average



Source: MCCSS. Q4 2021-22 Ministry Quarterly Report of 38 non-Indigenous agencies.

Research has consistently shown that children and youth feel safer and happier when extended kin networks are involved in their lives and that kin connections lead to improved outcomes for children and youth in care. Kinship placements are also a more cost-effective and sustainable care option compared to foster or out-of-home care. OACAS commends Ontario for taking additional steps to help provide vulnerable children and youth with stable, nurturing homes by investing over \$2.95 million to help support kinship service and customary caregivers, adoptive parents, and legal custody guardians. While this funding has helped to better prepare caregivers to welcome children and youth in their homes, there continues to be inadequate and inconsistent funding and resource supports for kinship services and family-based care.

Children and youth are typically connected with extended kin networks on an urgent basis. In other words, most caregivers have not anticipated or planned to care for a child or youth. Those who suddenly find themselves in the role of caregiver are often relatives who were planning for retirement or others who were not planning to care for children or youth. Regardless of circumstances, caregivers need help and specialized supports to help them navigate the complexity of unforeseen changes in their lives.

Kinship service caregivers need access to localized supports and services that will support the stable placement of a child or young person in their home. For instance, counselling, legal services, training relevant to their needs, mental health supports, daycare for children, educational supports designed to bridge learning gaps and promote academic success, housing, economic supports, food security, and so on. We also urge the Ontario government to consider mirroring financial reimbursements available to foster carers that cover the cost to care for a child or young person during an open protection case (i.e., mileage, seasonal allowances, medical/dental coverage, recreational allotment) as well as supports when permanency has been achieved or the file has been closed.

Children and youth have the right to be safe, cared for, nurtured, and maintain connections with their families and communities to ensure they grow up with a secure cultural identity. Economic status should not be a barrier.

It is also critical to support the human and community services sector to ensure the sustainability of the child welfare sector and successful implementation of the Ontario welfare redesign plan. The strategy acknowledges that robust social infrastructure is integral to healthy, caring

communities and that the well-being of children, youth, and families is contingent upon access to inclusive, timely, culturally appropriate, integrated localized supports and services. Investing in the human and community services sector will also promote the sustainability of the child welfare sector.

Members have observed that community-based supports have become increasingly scant, splintered, and siloed. As a result, agencies are left to fill the gaps and have encountered fiscal pressures that undermine the sustainability of the sector. The child welfare system and professionals working on the frontline depend on a robust social infrastructure to support their efforts to ensure children, youth, and families have what they need to thrive and stay together.

Quite simply, ministries, child and family services system partners, community-based organizations, and people with lived and living experience all have a role to play in pivoting towards a system focused on early intervention and prevention. A successful child welfare system that ensures families stay together and delivers improved, equitable outcomes for youth must be bolstered by strong community infrastructure.

Provincial leadership is needed across ministries, sectors, and community-based organizations so there is a clear vision and path to strengthen social infrastructure and, in turn, ensure the successful implementation of the redesign strategy and improved outcomes for children, youth, and families.

OACAS recommends:

- The Ontario government convene a roundtable with child welfare and child and family services system partners, people with lived and living experience, and key provincial ministries (i.e., Health, Housing, Mental Health and Addictions, Education, Women’s Social and Economic Opportunity, and Children, Community, and Social Services) regarding the implementation of the Ontario child welfare redesign strategy.
 - We all have a role to play in pivoting towards a system focused on early intervention and prevention. It is essential to develop a coordinated, collaborative approach that cuts across partners, sectors, and ministries to advance system transformation and deliver improved, equitable outcomes for children and youth.
- The child protection system depends on robust social infrastructure across the province. Services for children, youth, and adults are needed in the areas of health, mental health and addictions, housing, gender-based and intimate partner violence, childcare and early education, and poverty mitigation. OACAS advocates that the government support sustainable, timely programs that offer integrated, evidence-informed, localized services that are culturally appropriate.
 - We echo our colleagues at the Ontario Association of Social Workers (OASW) on the critical need for a cross-ministerial effort to expand access to mental health and addictions services across systems. The issue of access to simple, barrier-free mental health supports or early intervention and

- prevention persists (Ontario Association of Social Workers, 2023).
- We also echo OASW's call to double Ontario Works (OW) and Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP). Adequate income to purchase food, secure safe housing, and so on is critical to the health and well-being of children, youth, and families (Ontario Association of Social Workers, 2023).
 - OACAS strongly urges the provincial government to invest in a cohesive, consistent, and equitable approach to kinship service, as it will allow children and youth to reach their potential in a safe, nurturing, and secure home environment.

Improved supports for kinship service and family-based care to support family unification and stability look like:

Daycare: Access to flexible and subsidized daycare options. Daycare provides critical support for children, as well as respite for kin caregivers. Daycare also offers an enriching environment for children who may have additional socialization needs due to previous circumstances of neglect and limited learning through play.

Start-up Supports: Often kin do not expect to become caregivers, and yet when they do, there is an immediate need to set up care for children and youth. Therefore, coverage for the purchase of bedroom furniture, cribs, car seats, clothes, baby gates, and safe feeding chairs is required as a one-time investment for kin families.

Legal Support: Often kin families require legal support and guidance. Access to timely pro bono legal support for kin families is essential as they may need expert help to navigate often unexpected caregiving circumstances.

Additional Supports: Providing care is often unexpected for kin families. As a result, they may need ongoing or additional supports toward clothing, recreation activities, camps, tutoring, educational supports, and youth mentoring programs to help their socialization and well-being.

Recommendation 2:

Invest in community-based supports that promote mental health and well-being alongside specialized mental health services so all children and youth have access to timely, quality care, including those with complex needs.

OACAS is pleased to work in partnership with MCCSS and families and caregivers to improve the everyday experiences and outcomes of children and youth across the province. High-quality services and supports are foundational to ensuring children and youth are safe and cared for. We commend MCCSS for their commitment to promoting high-quality care and responsiveness to the needs of agencies and families and caregivers—from the Quality Standards Framework to supporting first aid training to extending the moratorium on youth aging out of care. Agencies and child protection professionals remain committed to working alongside MCCSS and families and caregivers to meet the individualized needs of all children and young people, no matter how complex.

Member agencies have reported increasingly complex mental health needs among the children and youth they support. Complex mental health care and services have been described as inadequate and insufficient. As a result, an already vulnerable population is increasingly underserved. Indigenous and equity-deserving children and young people face even greater challenges when seeking care. This has meant children, youth, and families are turning to emergency services and child welfare agencies as a last resort.

While the Ontario government has taken important steps to improve access to mental health and addictions supports and services across the province through the *Roadmap to Wellness*, critical gaps remain for this vulnerable group. Namely, the issue of timely access to adequate supports, services, and programming. We urge the Ontario government to engage in cross-ministerial partnerships to facilitate greater collaboration and coordination across the network of organizations supporting children and youth with complex mental health needs. This will promote the health and well-being of children and youth in out-of-home care and bring much needed relief to emergency services and agencies, as well as caregivers and families.

OACAS recommends:

- The Complex Special Needs Collaboration Table produced a report at the ministry's request. *Compassionate, Cooperative and Coordinated: Evolving Ontario's Complex Mental Health Needs System of Care* was submitted in 2022. We ask that MCCSS and MOH engage OACAS alongside agencies, kin, children, youth, and families so we can work together to implement the report's recommendations in the next fiscal year.

Recommendation 3:

Enhance services and supports to older youth and youth transitioning out of care.

The poor outcomes for youth from child welfare are [well documented](#). They include higher rates of academic underachievement, unemployment, homelessness, criminal justice involvement, vulnerability to human trafficking, early parenthood, and reliance on social assistance. These pre-existing risks and challenges for youth in and from care have been compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, inflation, and rising cost of living.

Investments in their safety and well-being are more necessary than ever to ensure they do not fall further behind their peers. Their physical and mental health, developmental maturity, educational success, and employment opportunities require unique consideration. Youth from the child welfare system have consistently articulated their concerns and named their demands for a successful transition from the child welfare system. They include:

- **Investments in well-being that address the social determinants of health:** Free/affordable housing, access to public transit, health and dental benefits, employment assistance (such as job finding help, career counselling, and livable wages), cultural services and supports, and childcare for dependent children. This also includes consideration for the needs of diverse populations and identities, including youth who are

disproportionately represented in the child welfare system.

- **Better preparation for adulthood and independence:** Financial literacy, household management skills, access to mentors, and financial supports.
- **Mental health supports and programming:** Accessible and free therapy, mental health resources, and rehabilitation supports and services.

OACAS recognizes the government outlined key investments and actions in the 2022 Ontario Economic Outlook and Fiscal Review designed to support young people in Ontario as they prepare to enter the workforce. We welcome the expansion of the Dual Credit Program and the government's additional investment in the Skills Development Fund, which reflects a focus on vulnerable youth. These actions will potentially benefit youth exiting care, especially when it comes to education and career planning.

OACAS also acknowledges that Ontario has committed to expanding frontline child and youth community mental health services for all ages through the *Roadmap to Wellness*. While these steps are encouraging, youth from the child welfare system have distinct needs. OACAS calls on Ontario to collaborate with first voice advocates from across the province, with diverse perspectives and experiences to ensure there is adequate programming and services that reflect the full scope and range of their needs.

Ontario must also ensure that the supports available to youth reflect the challenging fiscal realities. Given the cost of living and record-setting inflation rates, it is impossible for youth to support themselves. As a result, agencies are providing additional financial support to the existing Continued Care and Support for Youth (CCSY) monthly allowances. We urge the province to increase the CCSY to reflect the fiscal realities youth face and fully fund the allowance.

The government must support agencies and older youth and youth aging out of care they serve by investing in services and programming designed to prepare youth for adulthood and their transition from the child welfare system. This is of particular importance as the moratorium the Ontario government announced in 2020 is ending. The Ontario government must ensure there is a comprehensive and equitable framework to support youth as they transition out of the care of child welfare agencies, so they feel ready and better prepared.

OACAS recommends:

- The government, as the moratorium ends, develop a new framework that considers the full scope of supports and services young people from the child welfare system need to thrive and smoothly transition out of the care of agencies. There are young people right now who will suffer the consequences of inaction.
- Ontario increase the monthly allowance youth receive through the CCSY so it reflects the challenging fiscal realities youth face and fully fund the monthly allotment.
- Increase investment in Targeted Subsidies to better support children,

youth, and families.

Youth Transitioning from Care

In Ontario's child welfare system, youth formally leave care at the age of eighteen (18). However, they have the option of accessing ongoing supports until they turn twenty-one (21).*

As of March 31, 2022, there were:

- 825 19-year-olds receiving services and supports
- 2,445 20-year-olds and over receiving services and supports

** Important note: Children's Aid Societies and Indigenous Child and Family Well-Being Agencies have continued to provide services and supports to youth whose care arrangements were scheduled to expire during the COVID-19 pandemic. Includes youth with the following status or agreement: Continued Care and Support for Youth (CCSY), Stay Home for School Youth, Voluntary Youth Services Agreement (VYSA), Extended Society Care, Temporary Care Agreement, and Temporary Care and Custody.*

Source: MCCSS. Q4 2021-22 Ministry Quarterly Report of 38 non-Indigenous agencies. Includes youth receiving Continued Care and Support for Youth (CCSY), Voluntary Youth Services Agreement (VYSA), and Extended Society Care.

Recommendation 4:

Develop a funding formula that prioritizes prevention, the advancement of reconciliation and equity, and improving outcomes.

The way funding is distributed across agencies must change. The funding formula for child welfare does not align with the principles and objectives of the redesign strategy nor promote sustainability within the sector. Quite simply, the funding formula does not distribute funding equitably across agencies. This means that the quality of care and services varies across the province by postal code. This allows service gaps driving disparities in outcomes to persist. Marginalized communities continue to face risks, harm, and poor outcomes. OACAS urges the province to amend the funding formula and ensure it:

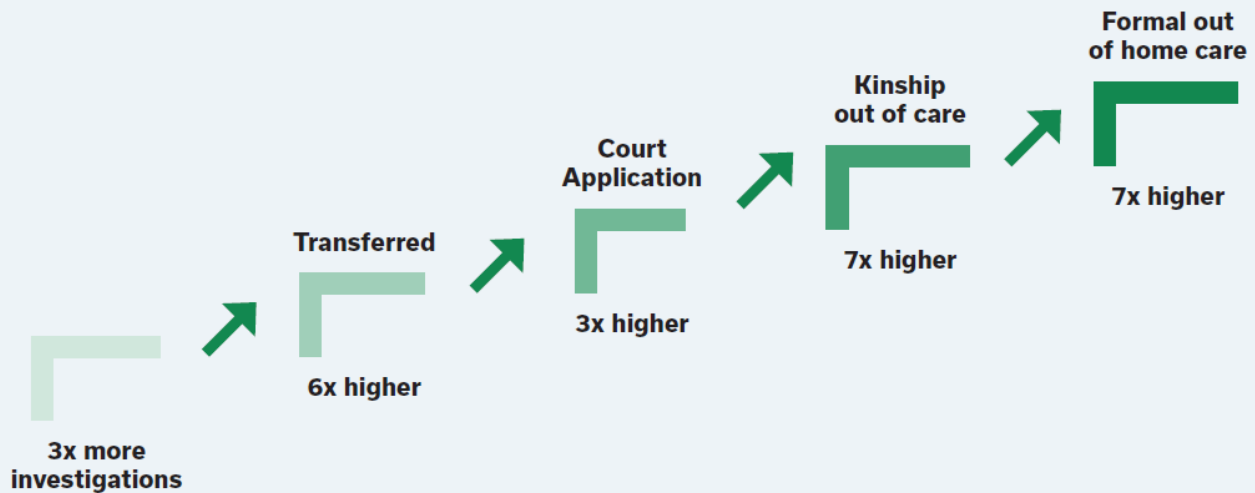
- Better aligns with service principles, including reducing weighting of factors such as children in care and focus instead on factors such as protection cases screened and permanency;
- Offers agencies a clear mandate to direct funding to areas of early intervention and prevention as well as reconciliation, equity, diversity, and inclusion;

- In the long-term, factor in outcomes-based metrics by furnishing a portion of funding based on achievement of outcomes, like the funding formula for Ontario hospitals; and,
- Address funding pressures faced by smaller and rural agencies by better recognizing the core operating costs of these agencies given the typically larger geographic areas they serve.

While awaiting an updated funding formula, the sector will continue to prioritize reconciliation, equity, diversity, and inclusion to deliver improved outcomes for all children, youth, and families. There is much work to be done to address issues of disproportionality and disparity for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children, youth, and families. Many children, youth, and families continue to be served off-reserve by both non-Indigenous children's aid societies and Indigenous Child and Family Well-Being Agencies. These organizations need adequate funding to provide accessible, culturally appropriate services and supports. Support is also needed to meet the needs of 2SLGBTQ+ children and youth.

Overrepresentation builds across the investigation cycle

Rate of First Nations child investigations involving than the rate of child investigations involving non-First Nations children



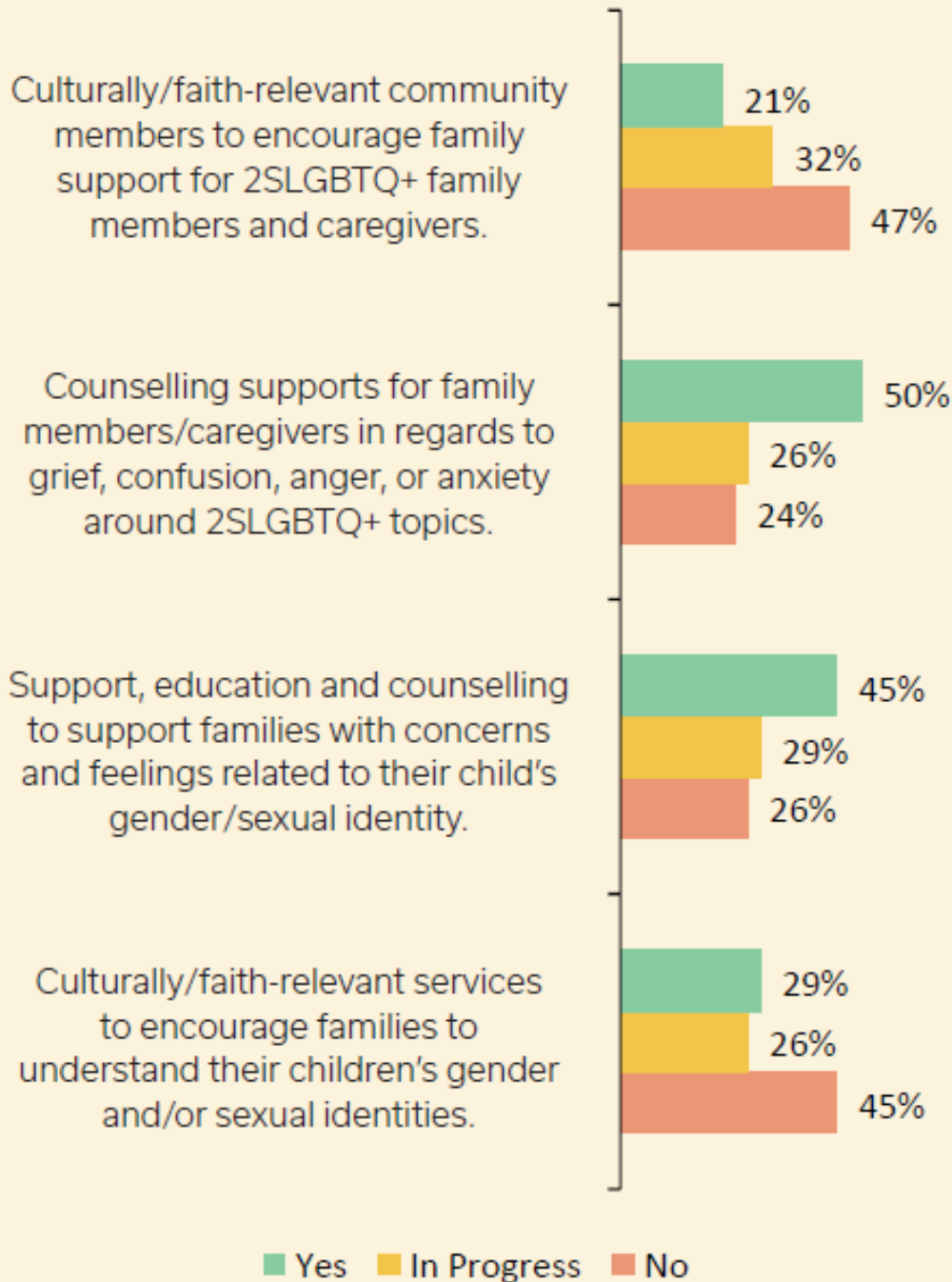
Source: Crowe, A., Schiffer, J., Fallon, B. *Understanding the Overrepresentation of First Nations Children in Ontario's Child Welfare System* (2020).

OACAS recognizes that the Ontario government is taking action to address the overrepresentation of Indigenous children and youth in care through amendments to Ontario's *Child, Youth and Family Services Act*. Through these amendments, we hope access to customary care arrangements will be enhanced and that there will be improved access to culturally appropriate prevention and early intervention services that embody Indigenous cultures, heritages, traditions, and ways of knowing and being for all First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children, youth, and their families.

2SLGBTQ+ children and youth have faced increased social isolation and a heightened risk of self-harm or suicide and are often living in homes with little to no family or peer support. Sector

research has highlighted the need for gender-affirming health care and services that affirm a child or youth's sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression (SOGIE). OACAS welcomes Ontario's investment of more than \$800,000 to develop new services and supports that respond to the distinct needs of 2SLGBTQ+ child, youth, and families in the child welfare system. Continued resources and investments are needed for children's aid societies and Indigenous Child and Family Well-Being Agencies to integrate critical data frameworks that inform, manage, and improve service delivery for 2SLGBTQ+ families.

Does your agency provide the following as part of its services to families?

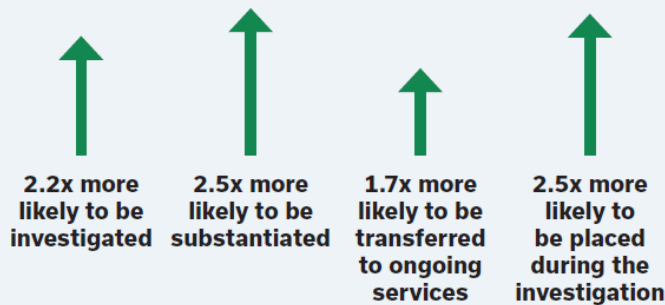


Source: Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies. *Ontario Child Welfare LGBT2SQ+ Organizational Self-Assessment: Provincial Report*. February 2021.

We commend the government’s decision to fund the One Vision One Voice (OVOV) program on an ongoing basis and to prioritize dismantling anti-Black racism and addressing the overrepresentation of African Canadians in child welfare. The Ontario child welfare sector is committed to implementing the Race Equity Practices and supporting initiatives that promote better outcomes for Black children, youth, and families. We trust the government will continue to support OVOV and recognize there is a need to mirror this approach for other marginalized communities serviced by child welfare, including First Nations, Inuit, and Métis, and 2SLGBTQ+.

Why now is the time to invest in Reconciliation, equity, diversity, and inclusion supports in child welfare:

Compared to white children, Black children in Ontario were:



Source: Bonnie, N., Facey, K., Fallon, B. *Understanding the Over-representation of Black children in Ontario welfare services* (2020).

OACAS recommends:

- The government urgently develop a funding formula that addresses funding pressures, prioritizes prevention and early intervention, and creates a sustainable child welfare system that delivers equitable outcomes for children, youth, and families.
- Take a consistent, funded approach to reconciliation and equity, diversity, and inclusion to improve services and supports that integrate accountability measures that centre reconciliation and equitable practices into all aspects of child welfare work and directly link them to improved outcomes.
- Collaborate with OACAS, the child welfare sector, and broader child and family services partners on the 5-year review of the *Child and Family Services Act* to ensure the sector can continue to prioritize admission prevention and early intervention and provide meaningful feedback on child welfare assessment tools and provisions to align with redesign and system transformation.

Sources:

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