



# Service Recurrence Performance Indicators in Ontario Children’s Aid Societies: Contextual Considerations

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## Introduction

Children’s Aid Societies (CASs) collect information about the families and children they serve, including population demographics, service utilization statistics, and data about the functioning of children and families. The Ontario Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (OCANDS) is the first data system in Ontario to longitudinally track families throughout their involvement with the child welfare system. OCANDS was created as a data extraction and mapping tool to provide CASs with a mechanism to develop a better understanding of the services for children and their families, to track intervention outcomes, and to ultimately improve the quality of care.

OCANDS was contracted by the Ontario Association of Children’s Aid Societies (OACAS) to standardize agency-level data and to calculate service performance indicators (SPIs). This information sheet has two purposes: first to present aggregate data collected from a majority of agencies in Ontario on recurrence, and secondly to describe the reasons why we would expect variation between agencies serving diverse communities and other considerations in examining agency variation.

## Methodology

Service Performance Indicator #4 measures recurrence of verified recurrence in the 12-month period after a case is closed at the investigation stage. Service Performance Indicator #5 measures recurrence of verified investigation in the 12-month period after a case is closed from the ongoing services stage.

## Findings

### Verified service recurrence by fiscal year

As Tables 1 and 2 indicate, the rate of service recurrence for cases closed at investigation (i.e. SPI-4) and ongoing services (SPI-5) over the last four fiscal years indicates that recurrence rates are stable. Just over 15 percent of investigations that were closed recurred within 12 months in

2013/2014. Approximately 19 percent of investigations that were closed after receiving ongoing services recurred within 12 months in 2013/2014.

**Table 1:  
Service Recurrence SPI-4: 12-month: Investigations closed\***

		2010/2011	2011/2012	2012/2013	2013/2014
12 months	Verified Recurrence	16.48%	16.30%	15.61%	15.40%
Sample size	Number of agencies	32	32	33	30

**Table 2:  
Service Recurrence SPI-5: 12-month: Closed at ongoing services\***

		2010/2011	2011/2012	2012/2013	2013/2014
12 months	Verified Recurrence	19.63%	19.38%	18.82%	18.73%
Sample size	Number of agencies	32	32	33	30

\*Data as of February 28, 2016

## Potential sources of variation between organizations

While not presented in this Information Sheet, there is substantial variation in service recurrence rates ranging from a low of 9 percent to high of 32 percent. We have identified two sources of variation, which should be considered when assessing differences between agencies: (1) socio-demographic factors of the population of the community; and, (2) characteristics of the investigations in each agency.

### Socio-demographic factors of population

Child welfare agencies in Ontario serve diverse populations. Socio-demographic differences are risk factors that go beyond the mandate of child welfare including poverty rates and the proportion of Aboriginal families, many of whom live in particularly difficult conditions. Parents with fewer financial resources are faced with greater difficulties in providing safe environments, adequate clothing and nutrition, appropriate child care, and other assets, all of which foster healthy child development (Sinha et al., 2011). Parents with low income may also have more negative life experiences and fewer coping resources than others, and as a result they may be more vulnerable to mental health and substance use issues, which may in turn impact parenting (Kessler & Cleary, 1980; Mcleod & Kessler, 1990; Ross & Roberts, 1999). Research has established strong links between poverty and child maltreatment, particularly for child neglect (Drake & Pandey, 1996; Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996).

Ontario recurrence data reflect the complex relationship between poverty and child maltreatment. Analyses conducted utilizing 2006 census data found that the rate of recurrence for closed investigations (SPI-4) by agency was significantly associated with several socio-economic factors of the agencies catchment area: income, the proportion of Aboriginal population, and the proportion of lone parent families. Higher recurrence rates were associated with agencies serving a higher proportion of individuals with lower income, a greater proportion of the Aboriginal population, and a greater proportion of lone parent families.

There is also variation in the rate of investigation across agencies in the province. Rates of investigation range from 26.10 per thousand children (just over 2.5 % of children in the census area are investigated by the agency) to 100.91 per thousand children (almost 11% of children in the census area are investigated by the agency). Not surprisingly, higher rates of investigation are strongly correlated with higher recurrence rates, and the presence of socio-economic risk factors in the area served by the agency.

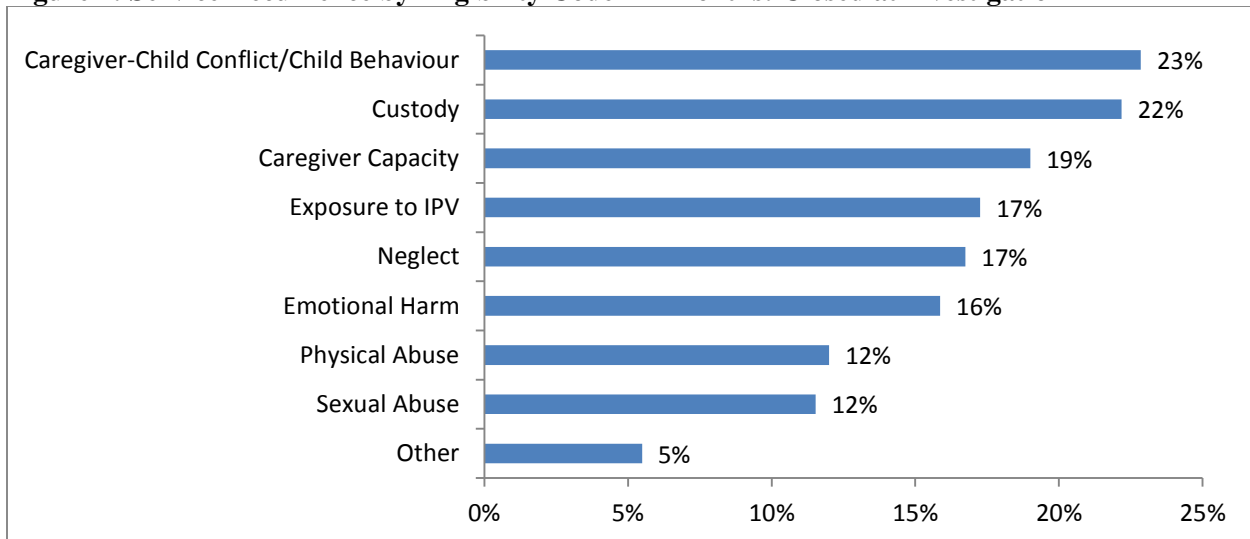
## Investigation characteristics

### *Investigation by eligibility code*

In Ontario, cases are screened with the aid of an *Eligibility Spectrum* to help determine whether an investigation is warranted. Evidence gathered from OCANDS suggests that there are differences in recurrence patterns (SPI-4) by Eligibility Code. Investigations involve the assessment of a broad range of child maltreatment, family functioning and well-being issues. Trocmé, Kyte, Sinha, and Fallon (2014) proposed a framework for understanding children and families identified to the child protection system; those in need of urgent protection which include investigations in which there is an acute threat to child safety (e.g., sexual abuse, physical abuse) and chronic need investigations where child development and well-being are at risk as a result of ongoing family challenges (e.g., caregiver capacity).

When we apply this understanding to recurrence data (Figure 1), caregiver concerns, particularly *Caregiver-Child Conflict/ Child Behaviour* and *Caregiver Capacity* are among the types of investigations closed with the highest proportion of recurrence. Complex and chronic family issues (e.g., caregiver mental health, addictions, child-caregiver relationship issues) may be more difficult for the child welfare system address in isolation. Investigations involving urgent protection issues have much lower rates of recurrence than those that reflect chronic need.

**Figure 1: Service Recurrence by Eligibility Code- 12-months: Closed at investigation**



Source: OCANDS SPI-4 (2012-2013 data, n=33 agencies)

## Methodological considerations of service recurrence

For both SPIs, verified recurrence describes cases where a verified investigation occurred in the 12-month period following the case closure. **It is important to note that the rate of recurrence is not equivalent to the rate of re-victimization.** A verification decision can mean that the family requires service, *or* the child was in fact victimized. Moreover, the verification of the presence of risk factors does not necessarily mean that a maltreatment incident occurred.

The basic calculations of SPIs should be considered when exploring variations in recurrence rates across the province. For instance, the calculation of service recurrence can be simplified as  $\% \text{ recurrence} = (X/Y) \times 100$ , where Y= all cases closed at investigation during the time frame, and X=cases from the denominator that were reopened within x months of case closure where the allegations of maltreatment were verified. Thus, any changes in smaller numerators (X) or smaller denominators (Y) over time may appear more dramatic as they will translate into large changes in subsequent calculations of recurrence percentages.

## References

- Baumann, D.J., Dalgleish, L., Fluke, J., & Kern, H. (2011). *The decision-making ecology*. Washington, DC: American Humane Association.
- Trocmé, N., Kyte, A., Sinha, V., & Fallon, B. (2014). Urgent protection versus chronic need: Clarifying the dual mandate of child welfare services across Canada. *Social Sciences*, 3, 483-498.