

30 years of child welfare data collection reveals systemic inequities, racism and harm in Canada

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In 2007, the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada (the Caring Society) and the Assembly of First Nations filed a complaint

under the Canadian Human Rights Act, arguing that the Government of Canada's inequitable provision of child welfare and other services to 163,000 First Nations children was discriminatory on the grounds of race and national ethnic origin.

"Since Confederation, First Nations children have been separated from their families through state action—first through residential schools, then through the Sixties Scoop, and now through contemporary [child welfare](#)," says Cindy Blackstock (Ph.D., 2009), executive director of the Caring Society, who co-led the Human Rights complaint.

The case provided clear evidence that First Nations children on reserves and in the Yukon received significantly less government funding for [child](#) welfare and public services than other children across the country. It alleged that this funding gap was contributing to unnecessary child removals and other harms, with Canada-wide data revealing how First Nations children were being removed from their homes at disproportionate rates.

"It confirmed what First Nations people have known for a long time," says Blackstock. "That their children are being removed at overrepresented rates, for structural reasons largely beyond the ability of caregivers to influence on their own."

While these families were grappling with poverty, poor housing, caregiver [mental health issues](#), addictions, and domestic violence—"all things that flowed from Canada's abusive treatment towards First Nations children," notes Blackstock—the child welfare system was responding by taking their children away.

Building a foundation of truth

Behind the data evidencing the link between the inequities faced by First

Nations children and their over representation in child welfare is a remarkable 30-year research undertaking, which began with the first Ontario Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect in 1993 (OIS-1993), expanded to Canada-wide studies and continues today, with the OIS-2023 launching later this year.

"These data aren't everything, but they're certainly foundational to understanding how we can serve children and families in a more responsive way," says University of Toronto Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work Professor Barbara Fallon, who is also Canada Research Chair in Child Welfare and principal investigator of the OIS.

This foundational knowledge did not exist in the early 1990s, when Professor Nico Trocmé set out to research child abuse and neglect as part of his Ph.D., after spending several years on the frontline at a child welfare agency.

"I'd found that the public perceptions about these families versus my experience on the front line had little to do with one another," says Trocmé, who is currently director of the McGill University School of Social Work. "But whenever I tried to go get data, I couldn't. It literally did not exist."

After scouring annual reports of the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies, collecting and compiling data from child welfare agencies across Ontario into spreadsheets and trying to make sense of all the information, he realized the need for something more systematic.

Through his postdoctoral research project at U of T, he examined methodologies used in the United States, including survey tools and the use of administrative data, and applied it to Ontario—launching the inaugural OIS in 1993.

The data in this study told a different story from the shocking, high-profile physical and sexual abuse cases covered in media.

"The majority of situations we were documenting in Ontario had to do with neglect rather than physical or sexual abuse," says Trocmé. "And even with abuse, the issues had more to do with parents struggling to find ways to discipline their children rather than parents lashing out in anger."

Instead of [malicious intent](#), most cases revealed toxic combinations of struggling parents trying to raise children within a context of poverty, systemic racism, substance abuse and lack of support.

While these chronic cases are indeed serious—countless research studies show the dire impacts of trauma, extreme poverty and neglect on child development—the response needed can differ drastically from that required in more urgent situations where the risk to the child is more immediate.

When a child is in immediate danger, there is good reason to act quickly, with figurative "sirens blaring." But in cases where parents are doing their best, but struggling, the blaring sirens approach can do more harm than good. For example, it could destroy one of the few positive and supportive relationships that a parent might have with a teacher, pediatrician or nurse who called child services.

"The question is, 'why do we have a forensic system, when it doesn't really fit for the population coming to the attention of child welfare agencies?'" says Fallon, who stepped into the role of principal investigator after serving as project manager on the 1998 study. She notes that even though most of the families face chronic challenges—often stemming from intergenerational trauma, discrimination and severe gaps in health and [social support](#)—the system

responds as if they were urgent cases. "We have a mismatch between who gets referred and what we do."

Soon after the 1998 study was released, Fallon and Trocmé met child welfare and First Nations advocate, Cindy Blackstock at a conference. Blackstock asked if they had looked at compiling and segmenting data on First Nations children.

That question would lead to years of partnership among researchers and community leaders—along with many distressing answers.

Racism and inequality: Math as social justice

While it can be hard to see the forest for the trees on the frontline, the wide-angle view of these studies enables researchers, [community leaders](#) and policy makers to recognize problems and needs at a societal level.

"So often in child welfare, we codify the wrongdoing at the level of the parent," says Blackstock, who is also now a professor at McGill's School of Social Work. "And I will hold parents' feet to the fire for things they can change. But in so many of these cases, it's actually things beyond their control. This type of data allows us to push for change at those systemic levels often held within government policies and legislation."

Since the inaugural OIS in 1993, a committed group of university researchers and community partners has produced a new Ontario study every five years, with this year's upcoming report marking the seventh release. They have also built on the provincial initiative to produce Canada-wide studies (in 1998, 2003, 2008 and 2019) and First Nations studies (2008 and 2019), as well as collaborating on various provincial-level studies and community reports. (You can read the reports on the Canadian Child Welfare Research Portal [here.](#))

By compiling and analyzing hundreds of thousands of child maltreatment investigations across the province and country, the team has revealed hard truths related to racism and deep inequalities for First Nations as well as for Black, Latin American and other racialized communities.

Not only are families in these communities much more likely to be investigated by child welfare agencies, their children are also removed at disproportionately higher rates than in investigations involving white families.

The studies also show how these disparities are getting worse. Across Canada in 2008, First Nations families were four times more likely to be investigated and almost 12 times more likely to have their children removed from the home at the conclusion of a child maltreatment related investigation than non-Indigenous families in sampled agencies. In 2019, a First Nations child was a staggering 17 times more likely to be placed in care.

"Through that data we see what happens when you wait," says Blackstock, frustrated at seeing the suffering increase as the legal battle with the Canadian Government continues.

Even though the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal upheld the complaint in 2016 and ordered the Canadian Government to cease its discriminatory conduct, it has since issued a further 23 procedural and non-compliance orders in response to the government's slow pace in addressing the discrimination. The case is ongoing.

For Nicole Bonnie, chief executive officer of the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies (OACAS), the hard truths revealed by the OIS research is a necessary step to addressing injustice.

She collaborated with the OIS team on [a recent report](#) developed in

partnership with One Vision One Voice, an OACAS-funded African Canadian community program addressing overrepresentation and disparities in the child welfare system.

Their analysis of OIS data found that Black families are over twice as likely to be investigated than white families, and two and a half times as likely to have their children removed.

"We can't make it better and reconcile the harms until we really grapple with the truth of the data," says Bonnie. "Now that we see how real it is through facts and figures, we have to do something about it. We can do less debating of the truth and take action to improve outcomes."

In the meantime, Fallon and her colleagues continue to compile and crunch the numbers.

"For me, part of a program of social justice is making sure my error terms in our estimates are low, to ensure the highest quality data," says Fallon, who recognizes the value of this primary data collection and analysis in uncovering myths and laying the groundwork for advocacy, noting that the studies have informed numerous doctoral dissertations in addition to the major reports.

Despite the insights gleaned over the past 30 years, Fallon does not anticipate dramatic changes in this year's OIS-2023, which will capture the aftermath of the COVID-19 years.

"We need to do more to address disparities in order to reduce the marked overrepresentation patterns for Black, First Nations and Latin American children."

Making it better: From truth to reconciliation

As disturbing as the statistics are, the stories behind them are heart-wrenching.

"You have to remember that data represent children and families," says Fallon. "That's a child and a parent who are really struggling and can be very symptomatic of what is structural inequity, that I think we, as Canadian citizens, have the power to change."

This change could be on its way.

As a result of longstanding advocacy, supported by ongoing primary data collection and analysis, First Nations and Black community organizations are gaining resources and influence to support families in culturally connected ways.

One example is the Dnaagdawenmag Binnoojiiyag Child & Family Services, a First Nations-led organization in Ontario that is taking over First Nations, Inuit and Métis files from five child welfare agencies in its jurisdiction.

"We have the theory that if we design child and family services in a wholistic way, using an Indigenous lens, based on our traditional values, with cultural supports and a cultural foundation, we will have much better outcomes than what the mainstream child welfare system has had for our people," says Amber Crowe, executive director at Dnaagdawenmag Binnoojiiyag Child & Family Services.

Having partnered with Fallon and the OIS team on First Nations child welfare research, she plans to collaborate on further research examining outcomes in the cases transferred to her organization from mainstream Children's Aid Societies.

"A wholistic service model means one that addresses the mind, body,

spirit and emotion as it relates to the safety and well-being of not only the child, but also the family and the community and the [nation](#)," she explains. "And all of those things are interrelated, interconnected and interdependent."

For the many families suffering from complex and devastating societal harms, this caring, nuanced and connected approach could provide the help they most need.

Provided by University of Toronto

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