

# The Maltreatment of Adolescents in Canada

## Information for Canadians

### The issue

Abuse and neglect of youth is a serious social problem. Despite the ability of some youth to overcome the effects of maltreatment during adolescence, a history of abuse and/or neglect is associated with serious consequences, such as:

- ▶ Development of mental illness, especially disorders related to over-use of drugs and alcohol; depression; anxiety (especially as it relates to reminders of trauma); and eating disorders. Other difficulties encountered by youth with histories of maltreatment are related to their ability to trust and engage in relationships with others, as well as their ability to attend, concentrate and learn at school.
- ▶ Links with high school drop-out. High school drop-out is related to decreased lifelong earning potential. Poverty has been shown to heighten the risk of developing long-term health conditions and adding stress to daily functioning.
- ▶ Links to risk-taking behaviour and conflict with the law.
- ▶ Links to lower social support; fewer relationships; isolation.
- ▶ Links to heightened risk of suicide and life-threatening behaviour.

Clearly, the effects of maltreatment of youth involve immediate and long-term suffering. These consequences turn into a loss for society.

All youth are faced with the major tasks of growing into healthy adulthood. Healthy development is threatened by experiences of abuse and/or neglect,

and its lack puts youth at significant disadvantage (compared with non-maltreated peers) as they enter early adulthood.

### Background

The exact number of Canadian youth who are maltreated is unknown. However, *The Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect – 2003: Major Findings* (Trocmé, N., Fallon, B., MacLaurin, B., Daciuk, J., Felstiner, C., et al., 2005) states that of all reported maltreatment investigations that took place during the fall of 2003 in Canada, 24% involved youth aged 12–15.<sup>1</sup> Of these investigations, 49% were substantiated. In other words, almost half of the cases of suspected maltreatment (involving youth) that were reported to child protection services were found to have supporting evidence that maltreatment had occurred, as described by the investigating child welfare workers' professional opinion. Importantly, not every province and territory has maltreatment legislation for youth older than 15. This makes it more difficult to estimate incidence rates for youth between the ages of 16 and 19. Based on existing data from the *Canadian Incidence Study – 2003*, however, the authors observed an increase in substantiation rates among older youth.

<sup>1</sup>All Child Welfare Service areas were included in the CIS–2003 with the exception of Quebec. For information related to Quebec data extraction, see the Executive Summary (p. 1) of *The Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect – 2003: Major Findings* (Trocmé, N., Fallon, B., MacLaurin, B., Daciuk, J., Felstiner, C., et al., 2005).



## What is maltreatment?

The five primary categories of maltreatment are:

- (i) Physical abuse
- (ii) Sexual abuse
- (iii) Neglect
- (iv) Emotional maltreatment
- (v) Exposure to domestic violence

Nineteen percent of substantiated cases of maltreatment documented in the CIS–2003 involved investigations of more than one category of maltreatment. The most frequent co-occurring forms of maltreatment in children were neglect and emotional maltreatment. Plans for collecting information on the rate of substantiated cases of co-occurring maltreatment involving youth are currently under way.

## What youth are at risk?

### Gender (aged 12–15)

Across the five categories of maltreatment, female youth aged 12–15 experience higher rates of substantiated maltreatment than do male youth of the same age group.

### Age (12–15)

Across the five major kinds of maltreatment, both male and female youth experience higher rates of substantiated physical and sexual abuse than do children of any other age group.

## Maltreatment of youth by type

### Sexual abuse

- ▶ Seventy-nine percent of substantiated cases of sexual abuse involved female youth, whereas 21% involved male youth.
- ▶ The substantiation rate for females experiencing sexual abuse increases with age.

Given that youth between the ages of 16 and 18 are less protected by child welfare laws, the finding

that adolescent girls are more frequently sexually victimized as they age makes them particularly at risk.

### Emotional maltreatment

Among youth maltreatment reported to child welfare, emotional maltreatment is of greater risk to female youth (57% of substantiated cases) than male youth (43% of substantiated cases) between the ages of 12 and 15.

### Physical abuse

- ▶ Among those reported to child welfare, female youth aged 12–15 are at greater risk of experiencing physical abuse than are male youth.
- ▶ Female youth were the subjects of 54% of substantiated cases, compared with 46% of their age-graded male peers.

### Neglect and exposure to domestic violence

For some forms of maltreatment, gender differences in rates of substantiation are relatively similar. Among male and female youth between the ages of 12 and 15:

- ▶ Fifty-two percent of substantiated cases of neglect involved female youth.

## Family characteristics of maltreated youth

In the development of services for prevention and support, increasing interest has been generated towards understanding what circumstances place some families at greater risk of maltreatment than others. Among substantiated cases across all ages (children *and* youth), the following family characteristics are linked with increased risk:

- ▶ Having more than one child or youth in the home
- ▶ Parental full-time employment
- ▶ Rental housing

- ▶ Moving within the past year
- ▶ Parental social isolation, parental history of violence and alcohol abuse

As a group, these risk factors are not surprising. Being a parent who works full time to raise more than one child or adolescent is stressful, as is moving, non-permanent housing and social isolation. A personal history of violence and current alcohol use disorder are two additional life circumstances that can make daily functioning unmanageable; parents in these situations are more likely than others to require support in providing nurturing environments for their children and youth.

## The role of the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC)

PHAC's mandate is to promote and protect the health of Canadians through leadership, partnership, innovation and action in public health. The Injury and Child Maltreatment Section (ICMS) of the Health Surveillance and Epidemiology Division is dedicated to supporting the Canadian Incidence Study (CIS) principal investigator and study team, as well as other key collaborators across Canada, in the development of later versions of the CIS. The next CIS data collection period is planned for 2008, at which time information will become available to answer questions about maltreatment of youth, which is currently unknown at a national level.

## What can you do? Encourage youth to talk!

Unfortunately, there are many circumstances in which youth fear stigma or consequences of further maltreatment when contemplating self-reporting their experience of maltreatment, particularly if they are being maltreated by their

caregivers. Consequently, maltreatment of youth remains a largely hidden social problem. All Canadians — adults and youth themselves — have a role in raising public awareness. Your involvement makes a difference!

Although it is called "Kids Help Phone," youth are welcome to call and talk to the counsellors that staff the telephone lines. They can help steer youth towards resources in their community and be there for support during hard or confusing times. The toll-free number is 1-800-668-6868.

## Citizens

If you are ever aware of a situation in which an adolescent is at risk or in danger, call the Child Protection Services in your area. If you are unsure whether the circumstances that concern you warrant investigation, rest assured that child protection workers are well-trained in risk assessment.

Information on how to report suspected cases of child maltreatment, how to contact provincial/territorial ministries responsible for children's services, and local resources for children and parents can be accessed at:

[www.cecw-cepb.ca](http://www.cecw-cepb.ca)

If it is an emergency call 9-1-1.

## Need more info?

- ▶ [www.kidshelpphone.ca/en/home.asp](http://www.kidshelpphone.ca/en/home.asp)  
(Kids Help Phone)
- ▶ [www.cwlc.ca](http://www.cwlc.ca)  
(Child Welfare League of Canada)
- ▶ [www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/cm-vee/csca-ecve/pdf/childabuse\\_final\\_e.pdf](http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/cm-vee/csca-ecve/pdf/childabuse_final_e.pdf) (Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect – 2003)
- ▶ [www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/dca-dea/allchildren\\_touslesenfants/centres\\_main\\_e.html](http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/dca-dea/allchildren_touslesenfants/centres_main_e.html)  
(Centres of Excellence for Children's Well-Being)
- ▶ [www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/ncfv-cnivf/familyviolence/html/nfntsnegl\\_e.html](http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/ncfv-cnivf/familyviolence/html/nfntsnegl_e.html)  
(National Clearinghouse on Family Violence)