

# The Maltreatment of Adolescents in Canada

## Information for Professionals

### The issue

Maltreatment of adolescents is a serious social problem. Despite the ability of some resilient youth to overcome hardship, maltreatment during adolescence is associated with significant immediate and long-lasting consequences. These include, but are not limited to:

- ▶ Associations with development of mental illness, particularly substance use disorders, mood and anxiety disorders, eating disorders, post-traumatic stress disorders, and conduct disorders. Social and cognitive difficulties are also associated with youth maltreatment.
- ▶ Associations with high school drop-out, which is related to decreased lifelong earning potential. Low socio-economic status has been linked to a number of risk factors impeding optimal health and well-being, as the stress of managing self and family life is greater for individuals with fewer financial resources.
- ▶ Associations with risk-taking behaviour and conflict with the criminal justice system.
- ▶ Associations with lower social support; fewer social contacts; social isolation.
- ▶ Associations with elevated rates of suicidal and life-threatening behaviour.

Clearly, the effects of maltreatment of youth involve suffering and thwarted development of potential. These consequences are expressed as a loss to society. For youth affected, their experience socializes them in the normalized use of violence and exploitation of others.

All adolescents are faced with the substantial tasks that are developmentally associated with emerging adulthood, which will determine the course of the rest of their lives. A devalued sense of self resulting from the experience of maltreatment places 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. This proportion (49%) of substantiation is similar to that in cases involving children (aged 12 and under). However, legislation provides youth with less protection against maltreatment than it does children. Differences in breadth of protection laws are related to age definitions of

<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).



children and youth, as child welfare mandates vary by jurisdiction. 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.

## 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

Of note is that 19% of substantiated cases of maltreatment documented in the CIS–2003 involved investigations of multiple categories 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 adolescents are currently being developed.

## What youth are at risk?

### Gender (aged 12–15)

Across the five categories of maltreatment, female youth aged 12–15 experience a higher proportion of substantiated maltreatment than do male youth of the same age group. Fifty-four percent of female youth had substantiated cases of physical abuse compared with 46% of male youth. Seventy-nine percent of female youth compared with 21% of male youth had substantiated cases of sexual abuse, and 52% of female youth compared with 48% of male youth had substantiated cases of neglect. Fifty-seven percent of female youth compared with 43% of male youth had substantiated cases of emotional maltreatment, and 51% of female youth compared with 49% of male youth had substantiated cases of exposure to domestic violence. In sum, the global

proportion of substantiated maltreatment for youth aged 12–15 reflects elevations in substantiated cases for female youth (54%) compared with male youth (46%).

It is unknown whether higher incidence of substantiated maltreatment of female youth aged 12–15 is representative of greater risk, or whether maltreatment of female youth of this age group is more likely than maltreatment of male youth to be reported to child protection services.

### 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**. Again, this finding may be related to the smaller number of youth reported to child welfare authorities, compared with children younger than 12.

## 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. The difference between substantiation rates across age categories (that is, ages 8–11 versus ages 12–15) is an increase of 17% of substantiated sexual abuse of female youth.

Given that youth between the ages of 16 and 18 are less protected by child welfare legislation, the finding that adolescent girls are more frequently sexually victimized as they age makes them particularly vulnerable.

### Emotional maltreatment

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

## 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. The categories of *neglect* and *exposure to domestic violence* are almost evenly distributed among male and female youth between the ages of 12 and 15:

- ▶ Fifty-two percent of substantiated cases of neglect involved female youth.
- ▶ Fifty-one percent of substantiated cases in which the primary abuse category was exposure to domestic violence 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 have been identified as factors associated with increased risk of one or more forms of maltreatment:

- ▶ 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 domestic violence and alcohol abuse

As a group, these familial 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 domestic 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 subsequent iterations 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 in 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 reprisal in self-reporting their experience of maltreatment, particularly if they are experiencing maltreatment 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.

## Professional practice

Most licensed health care providers are legally bound to report suspected cases of child and adolescent maltreatment. If you fear liability, report your concerns to child protection anonymously. If you are less than completely confident in your ability to provide care to an adolescent whom you suspect has experienced maltreatment, contact your licensing and/or regulating body for guidelines, supervision and information on codified ethics:

- ▶ [www.royalcollege.ca](http://www.royalcollege.ca) (physicians)
- ▶ [www.cpa.ca](http://www.cpa.ca) (psychologists)
- ▶ [www.casw-acts.ca](http://www.casw-acts.ca) (social workers)
- ▶ [www.cna-nurses.ca/cna](http://www.cna-nurses.ca/cna) (nurses)

## 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)