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Feature Article Part 1:

Differential Response and Traditional Protection Investigation: a Comparison of Two Child Welfare Investigation Streams

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Introduction

Determining an appropriate threshold for which children and families should receive child welfare services has been widely debated in literature. Parental rights, family preservation, and safety of the child are some of the competing interests in the child welfare model that investigating workers must balance^{2,9}. Child welfare workers are faced with multiple child welfare orientations when determining the appropriate level of intrusiveness during child maltreatment investigations³.

Differential Response (DR) model is a flexible approach to child maltreatment investigations developed to provide a range of customized investigative streams incorporating family-centered and strengths-based practices⁴. DR models are an alternative to the Traditional Protection Investigation (INV), which provides a forensic approach to child welfare investigations despite the level of risk of a family. This model is less intrusive compared to INV and is intended for cases that do not present imminent risk to the child,^{5,7}. There is a high degree of jurisdictional variation in screening, intake and administration of DR models resulting in a

disparity of findings throughout child welfare research⁴. In an attempt to address these disparities, in 2002, the Alberta Response Model was created to provide flexible investigative streams to families based on the type and severity of child maltreatment^{1,8}. This Family Enhancement Program works as part of the Alberta Response Model to provide children and families with a DR investigation stream¹. High-risk cases are streamed to INV while low-risk families can be streamed to the Family Enhancement Program¹. This article creates a provincial profile of DR streamed investigations while comparing child, household, maltreatment characteristics and case factors associated with each child welfare investigative stream based on the Alberta Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect 2008 (AIS-2008)⁶.

Methods

This analysis is based on secondary analysis of the AIS-2008 dataset. The AIS-2008 is the second cycle of a provincial study that examines incidences of reported child abuse and neglect in Alberta for children 17 years and younger. This paper reports on findings based on a total weighted number of 26,957 child investigations that were

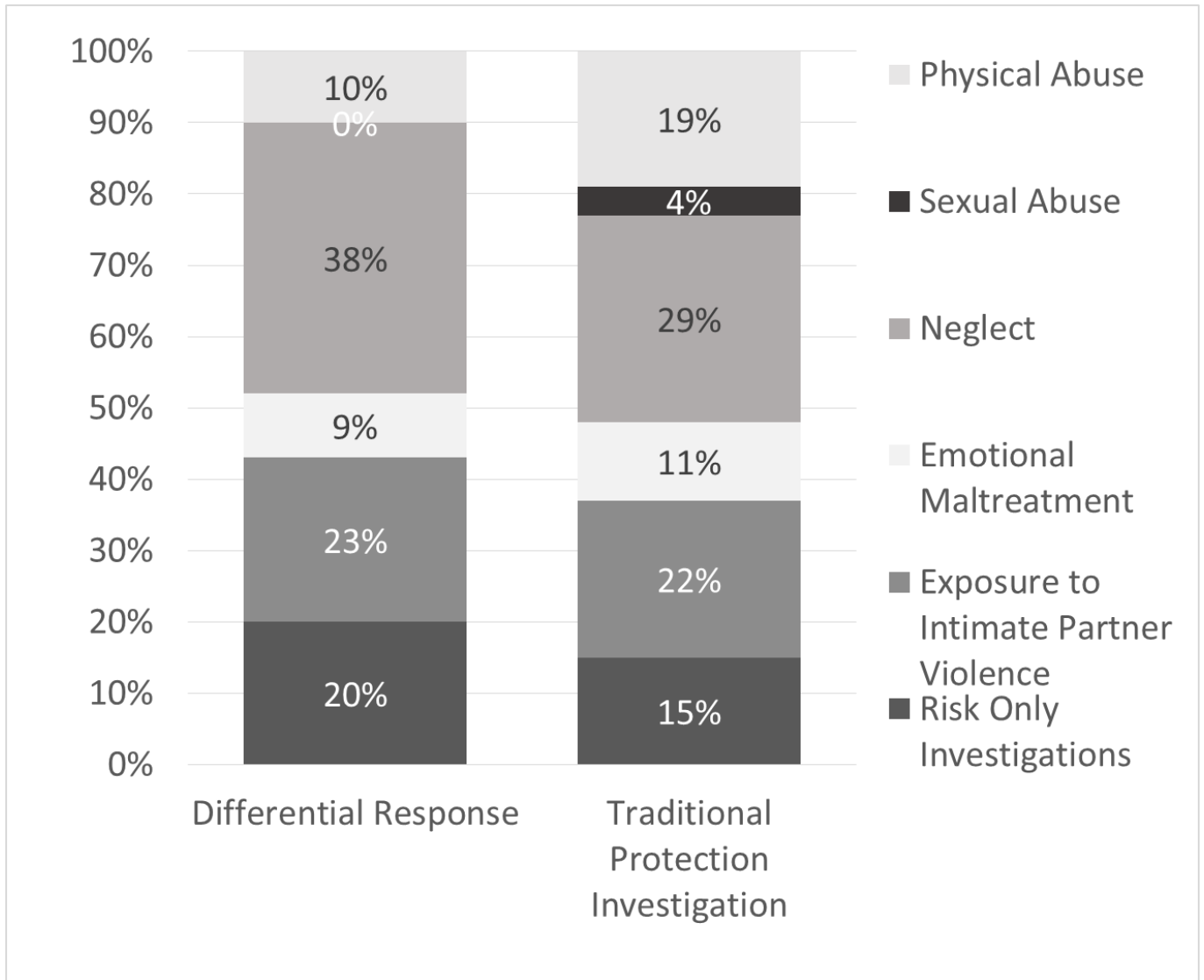


Figure 1:

Primary Categories of All Reported Child Maltreatment Incidents and Risk Investigations in Alberta in 2008 by Child Welfare Investigation Streams. Percentages of type of maltreatment includes total number of child investigations (n=26,957) streamed to differential response (n=6,666), and traditional protection investigation (n=20,291).

noted as either DR streamed investigations, or INV streamed investigations. A total of 6,666 child investigations noted use of DR model, while an additional 20,291 child investigations noted use of INV model. Select comparisons of child, household, case and maltreatment factors from two child welfare investigation streams are presented in this analysis. Bivariate analyses and Pearsons chi-squared test were used to compare each investigative stream and associated factors. For further information on methodology of the AIS-2008 refer to Chapter 2 of the full report ⁷.

Results

Figure 1 shows primary categories of all reported child maltreatment incidents and risk investigations streamed to DR and INV. Significant differences in child investigations were noted for children younger than 1 year old. Eleven percent of DR streamed investigations involved children who were less than 1 year old, and 8% of INV streamed investigations. Caseworkers were asked to report on nine caregiver risk factors, such as alcohol and/or drug abuse, cognitive impairment, and/or victim of intimate partner violence (IPV) [7]. There were no differences between the two investigative streams for caregiver risk factors.

A risk investigation refers to situations where a specific incident of maltreatment has not yet occurred, however circumstances indicate that there is a significant future risk of maltreatment [7]. DR child investigations more frequently noted risk investigations than INV child investigations. For DR investigations, neglect was noted most frequently (38%), followed by exposure to intimate partner violence (23%), physical abuse (10%), and emotional maltreatment (9%). Ten percent of DR investigations noted emotional harm requiring treatment, compared to 16% of INV investigations. One percent of DR investigations noted physical harm severe enough to require medical attention, and 2% of INV investigations. The percentage of DR child investigations resulting in a formal child welfare placement was significantly less (5%) than INV child investigations (10%). Twenty-five percent of DR investigations remained open for ongoing services compared to 32% of INV investigations. DR investigations less often resulted in an application

to child welfare court (4%), than INV streamed investigations (13%).

Discussion

This secondary data analysis examined 26,957 child maltreatment investigations from the AIS-2008 dataset. The purpose of this exploratory analysis was to provide a provincial profile of families who experience DR child maltreatment investigations, and INV child maltreatment investigations. DR investigations noted less harm, and severity than INV investigation, and more often resulted in less intrusive outcomes. DR investigations had lower percentages of outcome factors including out of home placement, ongoing service provision, and child welfare court applications for lower risk cases that would have otherwise been subject to INV approach. The availability of this alternative approach to investigations allows child welfare workers to provide a stream lined investigative stream that best meets the needs of families. Future research should examine long term outcomes of investigations streamed to DR and INV. Exploring long term outcomes will provide greater insight into the effectiveness of DR model child maltreatment investigations.

Limitations

While the AIS-2008 dataset provides a unique opportunity to examine the child welfare response to reported maltreatment in Alberta, a number of considerations for this secondary analysis must be made when interpreting these findings. The AIS-2008 dataset; 1) only tracked reports investigated by child intervention services and did not include reports that were screened out, only investigated by police, and never reported; 2) is based on the assessments provided by the investigating child intervention workers and could not be independently verified; 3) is weighted using annual estimates which included counts of children investigated more than once during the year, therefore the unit of analysis for the weighted estimates was a child investigation; 4) as weighted estimates provided some instances where sample sizes were too small to derive publishable estimates⁷.

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