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What do we know about physical and non-physical childhood maltreatment in Canada?

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Previous studies have found that child maltreatment is associated with poorer health and socioeconomic outcomes later in life (Afifi et al., 2014, 2016; Badley et al., 2019; Brennenstuhl & Fuller-Thomson, 2015; England-Mason et al., 2018; Fuller-Thomson et al., 2015; Martin et al., 2016; Meng & D’Arcy, 2016; Osland et al., 2018; Pinto Pereira et al., 2017). In Canada, national-level estimates have primarily focused on physical types of child maltreatment (e.g., physical abuse, sexual abuse), while less is known about non-physical types of maltreatment (e.g., emotional abuse, exposure to intimate partner violence, physical neglect¹). For example, findings from the 2012 Canadian Community Health Survey – Mental Health component (2012 CCHS – Mental Health) revealed that physical abuse was the most prevalent type of childhood maltreatment experienced (26%), followed by sexual abuse (10%), and exposure to intimate partner violence (7%) (Afifi et al., 2014). However, more recent results from the 2019 General Social Survey (GSS) – Canadians’ Safety revealed that 62% of respondents experienced “harsh parenting”² (e.g., spanking, emotional abuse, physical neglect), while 22% experienced physical abuse; 21% were exposed to physical violence committed by a parent or step-parent or guardian against another parent or guardian, caregiver, adult or child;³ and 6% experienced sexual abuse (Cotter, 2021). The differences in the prevalence of specific types of childhood maltreatment between the findings from the 2012 CCHS – Mental Health and 2019 GSS – Canadians’ Safety suggest that the exclusion of non-physical types of childhood maltreatment is a significant limitation of existing research, and more information is needed to reach a better understanding of child maltreatment in Canada.

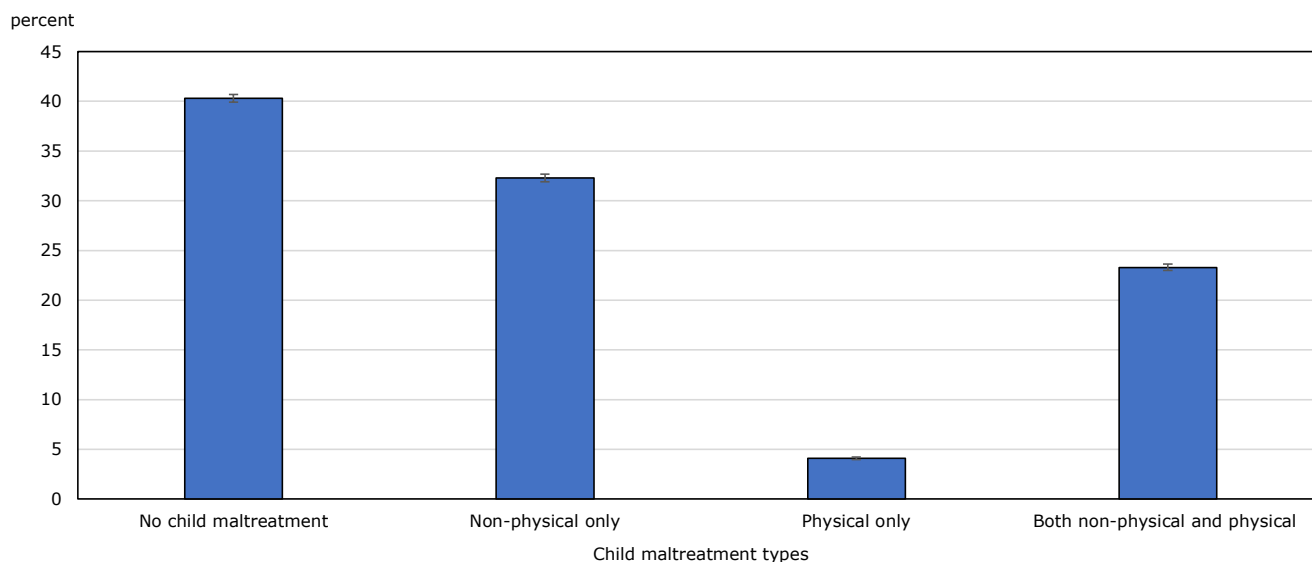
This analysis uses data from the 2018 Survey of Safety in Public and Private Spaces (SSPPS), which captures information on experiences of gender-based violence, feelings of safety in various places (e.g., at home, at work, online, in public), and abuse over the lifetime. The 2018 SSPPS employed retrospective reporting to collect information from individuals aged 15 years and older about their experiences of physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, exposure to intimate partner violence, and physical neglect before they were 15 years old (Statistics Canada, 2018).⁴ Using these data, this analysis examines the percentage of individuals living in Canada who reported experiencing no maltreatment, only non-physical types of maltreatment (e.g., emotional abuse, exposure to intimate partner violence

1. Although physical neglect is recognized as a form of childhood maltreatment, it is also an indicator of low socioeconomic status (Afifi et al., 2015), which is a broader social structural issue and not a behavioural issue displayed by a parent, guardian or adult.
2. This terminology was initially used in the 2018 SSPPS to capture different types of physical and non-physical childhood maltreatment. The same questions were repeated on the 2019 GSS – Canadians’ Safety, but they were separated into two different sections capturing “lifetime experiences” and “childhood experiences.” The term “harsh parenting” has been used by the Canadian Centre for Justice and Community Safety Statistics (Cotter, 2021). The term “childhood maltreatment” is used in this study to be consistent with the literature and other government departments with expertise on this topic (e.g., the Public Health Agency of Canada).
3. To be consistent with previous GSS cycles in terms of how exposure to violence during childhood was measured, this estimate included exposure to only physical types of violence (personal communication, A. Cotter, Sept 9, 2022).
4. The 2018 SSPPS included individuals residing in the 10 provinces and 3 territories of Canada.

and/or physical neglect), only physical types of child maltreatment (e.g., physical and/or sexual abuse), or both non-physical and physical child maltreatment. Since children who are abused often experience multiple types of maltreatment, and the effects of non-physical maltreatment can be “just as severe and long-lasting” as the effects of physical types of maltreatment (Honor, 2012: 438), this study provides new information about the occurrence and co-occurrence of different types of child maltreatment. The findings provide new national-level information about the types of maltreatment individuals living in Canada experienced during childhood, with results disaggregated by sex at birth, age group and region of birth.⁵

Overall, about 6 in 10 individuals reported experiencing some type of child maltreatment before they were 15 years old (59.7%). Chart 1 below presents the different types of maltreatment experienced by respondents. Notably, nearly one-third of individuals reported experiencing only non-physical child maltreatment (32.3%), followed by over 2 in 10 who reported experiencing both non-physical and physical maltreatment (23.3%). Experiencing only physical maltreatment was the least prevalent type of child maltreatment reported (4.1%).

Chart 1
Self-reported types of child maltreatment in Canada, 2018 (n = 43,064)



Source: Statistics Canada, Survey of Safety in Public and Private Spaces, 2018.

Further examination of those who reported experiencing non-physical types of child maltreatment revealed that 98.7% of individuals experienced emotional abuse, 21.3% were exposed to intimate partner violence and 6.8% were neglected in childhood at least once before the age of 15.^{6,7,8}

5. Because of small sample sizes, New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island were aggregated together, and Nunavut, the Northwest Territories and Yukon were aggregated together. Individuals born outside Canada were also grouped together.
 6. The prevalence of different types of non-physical maltreatment is greater than 100% because some respondents experienced multiple types of this form of abuse (i.e., the categories are not mutually exclusive).
 7. The denominator is all respondents who reported experiencing any type of non-physical maltreatment.
 8. Among those who experienced physical maltreatment, 87% experienced physical abuse and 29% experienced sexual abuse.

To reach a better understanding of how child maltreatment may differ by demographic characteristics, results are disaggregated by sex at birth, age group and region of birth in Table 1. Generally, females (63.0%) were more likely to report experiencing child maltreatment than males (56.3%). However, sex differences varied by type of abuse. Females were more likely than males to report experiencing only non-physical maltreatment (34.7% and 29.9%, respectively), as well as both non-physical and physical maltreatment (24.7% and 21.8%, respectively). In contrast, males were more likely to report experiencing only physical maltreatment compared with females, although this difference was small (4.6% and 3.6%, respectively).

Table 1
Sociodemographic characteristics of Canadians who experienced maltreatment before the age of 15, by type of child maltreatment, 2018

	Total (any type of maltreatment)			Non-physical maltreatment only			Physical maltreatment only			Both types of maltreatment		
	percent	95% confidence interval		percent	95% confidence interval		percent	95% confidence interval		percent	95% confidence interval	
		from	to		from	to		from	to		from	to
Sex												
Males	56.3	55.1	57.4	29.9	28.8	31.0	4.6	4.2	5.1	21.8	20.8	22.7
Females	63.0	62.0	64.1	34.7	33.7	35.8	3.6	3.2	4.0	24.7	23.8	25.6
Age group												
15 to 29 years	64.7	62.5	66.8	43.1	40.8	45.4	1.9	1.4	2.5	19.7	17.9	21.4
30 to 39 years	62.9	61.2	64.7	36.8	34.9	38.6	3.2	2.5	3.9	22.9	21.3	24.5
40 to 49 years	63.3	61.6	64.9	30.6	28.9	32.3	4.6	3.8	5.4	28.0	26.4	29.6
50 to 59 years	58.9	57.3	60.5	27.7	26.2	29.2	4.3	3.7	4.9	26.9	25.4	28.4
60 to 69 years	55.6	54.1	57.0	24.2	22.9	25.4	6.1	5.4	6.8	25.3	24.0	26.6
70 to 79 years	50.9	49.0	52.8	25.3	23.6	27.0	6.4	5.5	7.4	19.2	17.6	20.7
80 years and older	42.3	39.1	45.6	23.0	20.4	25.5	4.9	3.7	6.1	14.4	12.0	16.9
Region of birth												
Atlantic provinces	55.7	54.0	57.3	30.4	28.9	32.0	4.3	3.6	4.9	21.0	19.6	22.4
Quebec	55.9	54.2	57.5	29.9	28.4	31.3	5.1	4.5	5.7	20.9	19.8	22.1
Ontario	64.7	62.8	66.5	36.5	34.6	38.4	3.4	2.9	4.1	24.8	23.3	26.4
Manitoba	62.8	60.4	65.2	33.4	31.0	36.0	3.6	2.8	4.5	25.8	23.6	28.2
Saskatchewan	61.1	58.9	63.3	33.6	31.4	35.9	4.4	3.6	5.2	23.1	21.3	25.1
Alberta	67.5	65.3	69.7	37.7	35.5	40.1	3.6	2.8	4.7	26.2	24.1	28.3
British Columbia	69.5	67.2	71.8	37.6	35.2	40.0	3.1	2.4	4.1	28.8	26.7	30.9
Territories	60.7	51.2	70.2	31.4	23.5	40.6	3.8	2.5	5.8	25.5	19.5	32.7
Outside of Canada	53.4	51.7	55.1	27.3	25.7	29.0	4.4	3.7	5.1	21.7	20.3	23.1

Source: Statistics Canada, Survey of Safety in Public and Private Spaces, 2018.

Similar to previous research examining physical abuse in childhood by birth cohort (Hango, 2017), the results show that younger individuals were less likely to report experiencing only physical maltreatment compared with most older age groups. For example, 1.9% of those aged 15 to 29 reported experiencing only physical maltreatment compared with about 6% of those aged 60 to 69 and 70 to 79. However, younger individuals were more likely to report only non-physical maltreatment compared with older individuals. Over 4 in 10 individuals aged 15 to 29 reported they experienced only non-physical maltreatment before the age of 15 (43.1%) compared with about one-quarter of those aged 60 to 69 (24.2%) and 70 to 79 (25.3%). Across age groups, the highest proportions of individuals who experienced both physical and non-physical types of maltreatment were in the middle age groups—28.0% of those aged 40 to 49 and 26.9% of those aged 50 to 59.

Results for region of birth⁹ indicated that, overall, individuals born outside of Canada represented the lowest proportion of individuals who reported experiencing any type of child maltreatment (53.4%). Among individuals born in Canada, rates of experiencing any type of maltreatment before the age of 15 ranged between 55.7% for those born in the Atlantic provinces to 69.5% for those born in British Columbia. With the exception of the Atlantic provinces and Quebec, more than 6 in 10 individuals across all regions reported experiencing some type of child maltreatment.

Across regions of birth, the greatest variation was observed for those who experienced only non-physical maltreatment, and both physical and non-physical maltreatment. Among those born in Canada, individuals born in Quebec represented the lowest proportion of those who reported experiencing only non-physical maltreatment (29.9%), while those born in Alberta represented the highest proportion (37.7%); a lower proportion of individuals born outside Canada reported this type of maltreatment (27.3%). Generally, lower proportions of individuals reported experiencing both types of child maltreatment compared with only non-physical maltreatment across all regions. Among the Canadian-born population, between 20.9% (Quebec) and 28.8% (British Columbia) reported experiencing both physical and non-physical maltreatment, with just over 2 in 10 individuals born outside Canada reporting this type of abuse (21.7%).

Lastly, less variation was observed across regions of birth for those who experienced only physical maltreatment, with all regions in Canada ranging between 3.1% (British Columbia) and 5.1% (Quebec). A similar proportion of individuals born outside Canada reported experiencing only physical maltreatment before the age of 15 (4.4%).

In summary, over half of Canadians reported experiencing only non-physical maltreatment or both physical and non-physical maltreatment before the age of 15. These results indicate that the measurement of non-physical types of maltreatment is important for obtaining a more comprehensive understanding of child maltreatment in Canada. Moreover, the extent to which individuals reported experiencing different types of child maltreatment differed by sociodemographic characteristics such as sex at birth and age group, suggesting that some groups may be at greater risk of experiencing certain types of child maltreatment.

9. Region of birth may not be where the maltreatment occurred, but it is a better measure than where the respondent lived when they completed the survey.

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