

Children in Out-of-Home Care in Canada: Insights from Administrative Data



What this research is about

Child welfare laws in Canada are enacted and applied by provincial and territorial government departments and local child welfare agencies. In 2019, a federal act affirmed that First Nations, Métis, and Inuit governments have the right to govern Indigenous child welfare in their communities. Collecting data on children and youth in the child welfare system is an important part of measuring family outcomes and population trends. It also allows the study of issues underlying social and health inequities.

This study estimated the number of children in out-of-home care in Canada using administrative data.

What the researchers did

The researchers used data from the Canadian Child Welfare Information System (CCWIS) to examine the population of children and youth up to 25 years of age in out-of-home care. The CCWIS is a national database containing public, customized, and de-identified record-level data from the provinces and territories, as well as information from Indigenous Services Canada (ISC). The timeframe was for the 2013/2014 to 2021/2022 fiscal years. Data included information on the jurisdiction, year, sex/gender, age group, and placement type. In this study, placement type referred to foster homes, kinship homes, group care, or other types of placement. Foster and kinship placement were recognized as types of family-based care.

Out-of-home care among children was measured using frequencies, percentages, and rates per 1,000. The researchers then compared the rates by jurisdiction, year, sex/gender, age group, and placement type against the overall national rate, estimated with and without using the ISC data.

What you need to know

Demographic, clinical, and legal information routinely collected by child welfare services is an important source of data to understand population trends and drivers of public health and social inequities.

In this study, data on children in out-of-home care from each province and territory between 2013 and 2022 were examined. As of March 31, 2022, an estimated 61,104 children were in out-of-home care. The national rate was 8.24 children per 1,000. The number increased to 70,434 with the inclusion of data from Indigenous Services Canada, though this number is likely an overestimate due to some double counting. Ontario and Nova Scotia had the lowest rates, and Manitoba and Nunavut had the highest. Foster care was the most common, although kinship placements had increased over the years. Rates were highest among males and children aged 1 to 3 and 16 to 17.

What the researchers found

As of the 2021/2022 fiscal year, an estimated 61,104 children were in out-of-home care. Nationally, 8.24 children per 1,000 were in out-of-home care. When data from ISC were included, the national rate rose to 9.5 per 1,000, or 70,434 children.

Rates of out-of-home care varied across the provinces. Ontario and Nova Scotia had the lowest rates, at 2.72 and 5.98 per 1,000 children. Manitoba and Nunavut had the highest rates at 5.98 and 20.60. The rates in Yukon, Saskatchewan, the Northwest Territories, Nunavut, and Manitoba were two to three

times higher than the national average, and lower in New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Ontario.

Males were more likely to be in out-of-home care than females, at 52.4%. Children aged between 12 and 15 accounted for the largest share at 23.3%. As of 2021/2022, 84.7% of all out-of-home care children were below the age of 16. Rates were highest for children aged 1 to 3 and 16 to 17.

As of 2021/2022, family-based care accounted for 84.3% of all out-of-home care placements, with most being foster care. Group care accounted for 11.3%. Between 2017/2018 and 2021/2022, the number of foster care placements decreased, while that of kinship placements increased.

Overall, the national rate estimated using data from CCWIS was similar to previous estimates. With the inclusion of data from ISC, the results differ, indicating a possible rise in out-of-home care. This was a slightly different pattern than was found in analyses of census data, which showed a decrease between 2016 and 2021. It is possible that previous rates of out-of-home care based on administrative data were underestimated.

How you can use this research

Data from CCWIS could be used to support the Truth and Reconciliation Act's second Call to Action. This Call to Action seeks to reduce the number of Indigenous children in out-of-home care. Developing national data about children and youth in out-of-home care could help monitor population changes over time. Improving data governance, data sharing, and database coverage could sustain better monitoring practices, track child and family outcomes, and help inform policies and interventions.

About the researchers

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Research Snapshot by Erika Cao

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