

Child Welfare Practices and Policies in Canada

Executive Summary



VAW Shelters and Child Welfare – A Tense Relationship

Child welfare and intimate partner violence (IPV) supports should go hand-in-hand, yet these two systems have historically had a tense and even antagonistic relationship.

56% of provincial/territorial member associations surveyed do not believe that child welfare understands the work that they do.

There is a perception that child welfare does not value the expertise and work that is done in the shelters.

This report seeks to:

- Evaluate and identify how current child welfare practices could change to lead to better outcomes for women fleeing violence, as well as their children
- Develop a collective advocacy strategy to address challenges related to how women's shelters – and the women and children who access them – work with child welfare and vice versa

This report summarises the key findings from a survey and focus group of WSC member provincial and territorial shelter and transition house associations:

- Survey of 9 provincial and 1 territorial member associations
- Focus group of 8 provincial and 2 territorial member associations
- Representing hundreds of shelters and transition houses for women fleeing violence



Gendered Policies & Practices in Child Welfare

Member shelter associations identified several child welfare policies and practices that unfairly penalize women/survivors of violence. This is clearest in the different ways that child welfare interacts with mothers and fathers.

Mothers

- Are perceived as the primary caregiver and are expected to report children's exposure to domestic violence even though they are victims themselves and not the perpetrator of violence. This puts the accountability on the mother rather than the perpetrator who is enacting the abuse.
- Example: the opening of case files in the mother's name, rather than the perpetrator's
- Mothers are sometimes expected to take action to protect their children by leaving a violent situation, as this is often believed to be the best option by those in child welfare.
- This ignores the challenges and risks of leaving including increased risk of femicide
- Their potential homelessness and increased vulnerability
- This makes invisible mothers' efforts to safeguard children within the home
- This stigmatization of mothers can be further exacerbated by such intersections as race, class, and ability
- Caseworkers can assume that the outcome will be the relationship ending, therefore they continue to focus on the mother alone

Fathers

- Fathers are often not seen in the role of care giver by child welfare
- Fathers are less likely to be engaged in services and programming by child welfare, with far fewer programs in existence, while mothers received the bulk of referrals
- Perpetrators of violence are often not held accountable for creating potentially harmful environments for children.
- With child welfare not adequately being able to support issues related to IPV, perpetrators are often dealt with through the criminal justice system, rather than through social services



56% of provincial/territorial member associations surveyed said that child welfare does **NOT** recognize in its policy and practice the dynamics of gender-based violence and abusive behaviour of offending partners

78% of provincial/territorial member associations surveyed said that there are **NO** steps to hold the abusive partner accountable in child welfare agency practices

Child Welfare Concerns as a Barrier to Seeking Support

Mothers often fear that their children could be taken away as a result of someone else's violence, making them hesitant to seek support. Fear of child welfare services impacts women's willingness to access other supports, including VAW shelters.

70% of member shelter associations said that women feared that if they came to a shelter, child welfare services would be called or would take their children away, even if this does not reflect common practice in shelters



One respondent indicated that women would minimize the impact of the violence they and their children experienced in order to avoid interactions with child welfare.

Although respondents indicated that shelters do not contact child protective services unless they see child abuse by the mother herself, the fear of child protective services still reduces the likelihood of survivors reaching out to shelters for support.

The well documented fear that women have toward child welfare can also be used against them by the perpetrator.

The reticence to reach out for support is even higher for women who are Indigenous, immigrants or refugees, or have mental health or substance use issues

Historically, the child welfare system in Canada has disproportionately removed Indigenous children from their families and communities

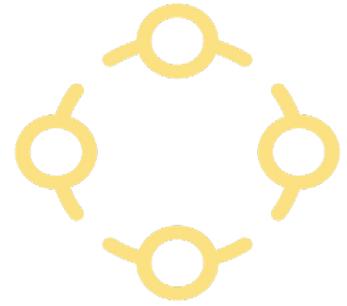
- First, Indigenous children were removed to residential schools
- Later, they were adopted away from their families through the Sixties Scoop.
- The rates of Indigenous children removed from their families were not reduced when these policies were changed
- 52.2% of children in care are Indigenous, yet only account for 7.7% of the child population in Canada (Census 2016)

In both the release of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) report and the report on the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG), calls to action were put forward to overhaul the child welfare system.



Recommendations for a Stronger Relationship

Whether they be formal or informal, strengthened collaborations are an important step toward better supports for women and their children. With greater opportunities for dialogue, there is a hope that both sides can better understand each other's work and what needs to be improved.



Cross-sectoral training is also an important step in growing knowledge and understanding, and relationships.

Where training has been undertaken by shelters, but funding was lost, these initiatives did not continue.

The Roadmap to the National Action Plan (NAP) includes several recommendations for improving child welfare systems, including:



- A review and overhaul of youth apprehension systems and child protective services
- Creating a child sexual violence and abuse action plan
- Ongoing, mandatory education and training for all legal and justice actors who work or could work with VAW/GBV survivors in their respective roles, as well as child welfare officers

The Roadmap to the NAP is also aligned with the TRC's Calls to Action and the MMIWG's Calls for Justice, both of which specifically call for an overhaul of the child welfare system:

- **5** Calls to Action in the TRC report
- **15** items in the MMIWG Calls to Justice
- All of these recommendations are costly and must be funded appropriately

Women's Shelters Canada brings together 15 provincial and territorial shelter organizations and supports the over 550 shelters across the country for women and children fleeing violence.

Read the full *Child Welfare Practices and Policies in Canada* report at www.endvaw.ca/child-welfare.

Learn more at www.endvaw.ca and on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram at [@endvawnetwork](https://www.instagram.com/endvawnetwork).