

Highlights of Surveys on Worker Safety from Client Violence in Ontario Children's Aid Societies

An Independent Study by SPR Associates, July 2014

1. Introduction: This brief report is intended to provide an overview of results from a study of worker safety in Ontario Children's Aid Societies (CASs). Based on data from more than 5,800 surveys completed by CAS employees as well as results from an Organizational Survey of 34 CASs, the report is being provided to CASs and all CAS employees as feedback for those who participated in the surveys. This overview contains key findings and conclusions from the main report, as well as selected statistical charts which represent the main findings of the final study report. Overall conclusions regarding future directions are broadly noted. The full report will be available in late September, 2014.

The Project: The goal of the overall project was to provide the Ontario Child Welfare Sector with an independent review and study of worker safety in Ontario Children's Aid Societies. The review was implemented with guidance from a joint labour-management worker safety committee. Initial research for the project identified numerous best practices in worker safety in child protection. Nearly all of these best practices were examined in surveys of all Ontario CAS employees and CASs. Both surveys were highly successful in obtaining input regarding the extent to which CASs emulated these best practices. Relying mainly on on-line surveys, supplemented by selected telephone focus groups and in-person consultations, a great deal of information was collected.

Results were obtained from over 5,800 of Ontario's estimated 8,665 CAS employees, with additional input from 34 CASs, who provided an organizational perspective. Survey results focused on the scope of workplace violence and injuries, and the range and variability of programs which CASs had put in place to protect workers. Employees and CASs evaluated their safety programs and their role in protecting workers from violence, using many similar indicators, with several recurring themes: experience of extensive violence and related impacts; gaps in CAS efforts to ensure worker safety; more critical assessments of CAS efforts by employees than CASs as organizations; specific issues in safety for workers 'working alone'; variability in CAS safety performance as indicated by Performance Indicators (PIs) derived from the employee survey – with two CASs rated as performing very highly, most moderately, and seven rated as performing poorly.

What do we mean by violence? For purposes of this report, *violence* includes physical assault, attempted assault, threats, and verbal and written abuse – both recently experienced and as experienced over time, while working at the CAS. The study also examined secondary or "witness" trauma, where a worker may be distressed or harmed by an incident which does not *directly* affect them, for example, the awareness of the death of a child, or the injury of a co-worker. It should be noted that the report *focuses on violence encountered in the course of child protection work and does not address common workplace safety hazards (e.g. slip and fall) or violence from co-workers*. There is, however, some attention given to the issue of driving safety, since this is sometimes a factor in 'working alone' or transporting clients.

The Child Protection Challenge: The fact that child protection workers face a high rate of violence is no surprise, given the nature of the work of a Children's Aid Society. The core CAS workload is in *child protection*. Altogether, 55% of CAS employees reported having child protection caseloads. The child protection responsibilities that a CAS must fulfill involve working in emotionally charged and conflict-oriented situations with families – a CAS is in effect challenging a parent's fundamental rights around their own children. These situations can be expected to cause an emotional response from the client.

Child protection caseloads tend to be heavily comprised of families where abuse or neglect has occurred; many are victims of poverty and/or social disorder, with many parents having a criminal record and a record of past violence, substance abuse issues, and mental health issues. In some of these cases, the normal expected emotional response to CAS intervention can escalate into a violent response for a portion of clients.

Community Context: The work of child protection workers is also shaped by, and highly visible to, the communities in which they work. Communities vary in their composition (rural-urban, language, culture, etc.), thus creating different challenges for CASs and child protection workers. At the same time, the work of CASs and child protection workers may be closely scrutinized by the media or local authorities. Indeed, individual CAS agencies, and even individual child protection workers, may be exposed to negative or unwanted publicity. The burden of negative public perception of child welfare weighs heavily on CAS child protection staff; this point was articulated to the researchers during focus groups: *“I hate the way we are all portrayed as baby snatchers... we need to show them how we are there to help them through their current struggles and also to keep their children safe.”*

A Focus on the Employee Survey: In our analysis, emphasis is placed on findings from the Employee Survey because of the more detailed results obtained, with comparison of selected findings to results of the smaller CAS (Agency/Organization) Survey. Results from the two surveys are generally consistent as regards key patterns, with generally more modest input from CASs. In general, CAS views of safety programs were more positive than employee views.

Statistics, Tables and Graphics: This highlights report includes overall findings and detailed statistics from several sections of the main report to convey the complete flavour of the main report. In these sections, survey question numbers are noted in places to allow (later) reference back to specific data drawn from the surveys. These references take the form “E#” for Employee Survey questions and “C#” for CAS Survey questions.

Performance Indicators: At certain points in the report, we discuss *Performance Indicators (PIs)*, which the researchers have constructed as 0% to 100% ratings for each topic area examined. For example, CAS scope of training, CAS use of technology, etc. These more or less 'grade' CASs performance as a whole, using survey data, where 0 is the 'worst' and 100 is the 'best'. Most employee PIs ranged in the area of 40% to 60%, as compared to CAS organizational self-ratings, with PIs usually in the 60%-80% range. For comparative purposes, we note that evaluations of various aspects of other Ontario social services and justice programs in recent years have typically produced PIs of 75%-85%. The PIs shown here apply to the CASs as a whole, however, some CASs show better performance than others, and a wide range of performance is noted within.

The Situation as of 2014: Our research assesses risks to workers as of early 2014 and also points to a link between protection of workers and the protection of children. This linkage is supported by a growing body of international research which indicates that violence to those protecting children reduces the quality of child protection generally. This factor – quality of child protection -- which is on a different plane than worker safety -- is also addressed within.¹

¹ This conclusion is based on evidence from numerous studies conducted in the US, UK and Australia. The impact of client violence in reducing the effectiveness of child protection, for example, through intimidation, is also seen in our surveys of child protection workers. Other factors noted include the impact of client violence on CAS staff turnover – reducing the pool of experience available to the CAS. For international discussions, see: Janet-Stanley and Chris-Goddard (2002), *In the Firing Line--Relationships, Power and Violence in Child Protection*, Wiley; and Littlefield (2014) who demonstrates the link between client violence and child deaths, using UK data from Serious Case Reviews (SCRs). Also, see a discussion of Baines' research in SPR's *Best Practices Report*, which describes how stress in child protection work can compromise protection of children.

2. Overall Survey Findings Regarding Extent of Violence, Injuries & Their Impacts

In a fashion consistent with international *comparisons*,² child protection was found in this study to be a profession experiencing very high rates of violence, often with profound *impacts*, as noted in the following comment:

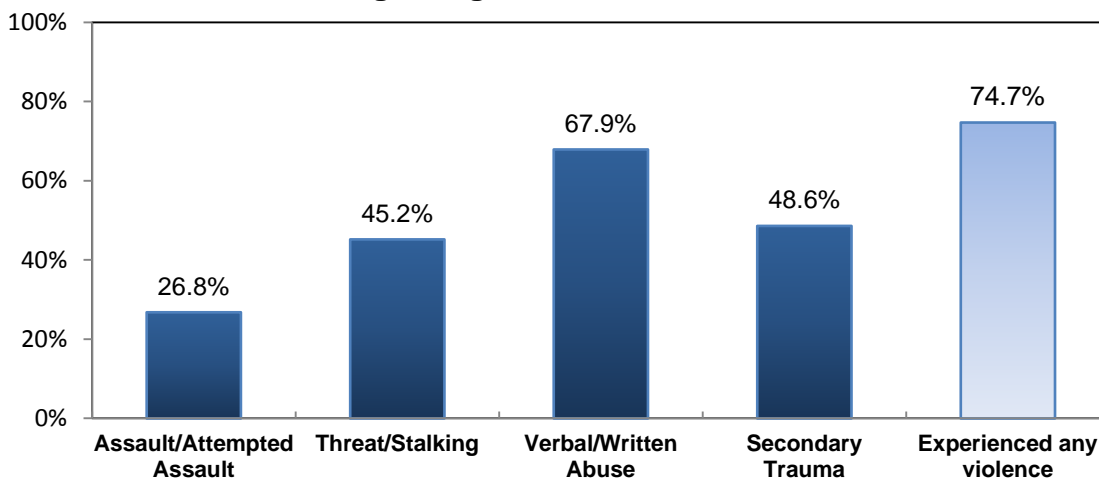
"As a worker, I feel dehumanized... I often drive home and check to make sure I am not followed. I do not use my married name professionally or on government issued documents, as police will use names and personal addresses on police reports, which are open to the public... I have to have an unlisted phone number; my cell phone number is blocked."

CAS employees from across the province collectively reported that, over the course of their careers, they have endured thousands of assaults and attempted assaults and tens of thousands of threats and instances of abuse.

Consistent with a wide range of prior research, child protection workers were found to experience a very high level of violence (assault/attempted assault, threats, stalking, and verbal or written abuse) -- levels which many researchers have suggested are only exceeded by the police.³

Nearly three-quarters (74.7%) of CAS employees reported that they had experienced violence during their careers (averaging 11 years), 26.8% reported experiencing assaults or attempted assaults; 45.2% experienced threats or stalking; and 67.9% experienced verbal or written abuse (see Display 1, below).

Display 1
Types of Violence Experienced by Employees
Since Beginning Work at their Current CAS



² See: *Best Practices in Worker Safety*, SPR, 2014. In particular, Newhill (2003 and 1995), and Liss (1994).

³ See: *Best Practices in Worker Safety*, SPR, 2014, Annex, Worker Safety Study Publications-Documents Inventory, April 7, 2014. In particular see: Newhill (2003 and 1995), and Liss (1994).

Assaults or attempted assaults were most likely to occur in the clients' homes (46%), followed by the CAS office (21%), with most perpetrated by family members (56.6%), or a child or youth (30.3%).

Some employees who faced assaults or other violence had to deal with multiple assailants (multiple assailants were reported by CAS employees for 4% of assaults and 8% of threats/abuse), weapons (reported for 9% of assaults and threats), threats to family members⁴ and other stresses.

Approximately one-third (32%) of child protection workers reported that they had experienced violence (assault/attempted assault, threats, stalking, and verbal or written abuse) while working alone. Physical assaults were common; however, psychological impacts (post-traumatic stress) were also very common.

In focus groups, many employees expressed concern that, in recent years, their role had become too much of a 'policing' role rather than a 'helping' role.

CAS reporting systems were found to record far fewer incidents of violence than were reported by workers in the surveys (this may reflect in part, cultural and organizational features of CASs, and gaps in information systems.⁵

Altogether, 11.6% of workers who experienced violence reported that afterwards, they were more hesitant about performing their child protection duties. This indicates that client violence reduces the ability of workers to provide the full range of services in the way that they would normally have been offered.⁶

3. Survey Findings regarding the extent of CAS protection of workers

The research indicated significant gaps and uneven implementation of health and safety practices applied by CASs to ensure the best possible worker protection. This was seen, for example, in the low rate of investigations of instances of violence; the low rates of worker training; and the limited number of hours of training provided on violence and safety (CAS employees reported an average of 1.9 hours annually, with many reporting that they received "none").

While no absolute standard exists, it is interesting to compare this level of training to that mandated by the Province of Saskatchewan, which is 1 day for all employees, and 1.5 days for employees engaged in direct contacts with clients.

Results from the Employee and CAS surveys showed that many common safety policies and standards, for example, those pertaining to the operation of Joint Health and Safety Committees, were absent or incomplete, in many of the CASs responding to the survey.

⁴ Threats to family members were not measured separately in the surveys, which always asked about 'threats to you and/or your family'.

⁵ A comparison of CAS survey estimates to worker survey estimates indicated that CASs were only aware of about half of the assaults experienced by child protection workers.

⁶ See footnote 2, particularly Janet-Stanley and Chris-Goddard (2002), *In the Firing Line--Relationships, Power and Violence in Child Protection*, Wiley; and Littlefield (2014)

4. Evaluations of CAS Safety Measures by CASs and Employees

As shown in Display 2, below, employee assessments in terms of safety were confirmed to a degree by a similar pattern of CAS reports (although CASs and managers generally had higher assessments of the quality of their worker safety programs).

Display 2
Employee and CAS Ratings of CAS's Overall Safety Features

	Workers (PI)	CASs (PI)
Manages risks from clients (E72)	57.4%	75.8%
CAS's assessing/managing of environmental/ Community risks (E77) (C90)	48.1	68.9
Safety of CAS office design/layout	54.9	59.6
Safety technology for workers in the field	46.1	59.6
Information provided to clients	51.1	73.5
Incident reporting process	51.1	69.9
Availability/quality of psychosocial supports	56.9	*
How CAS addresses overall protection of worker safety (E63a) (C61a)	58.0	81.6
How CAS supports JHSC's work to protect worker safety (E63b) (C61b)	59.8	86.8
How supervisor protects employees from physical assault (E64a) (C62a)	66.8	83.8
How supervisor protects employees from abuse/threats (E64b) (C62b)	64.3	80.3
How supervisor protects employees from secondary trauma (E64c) (C62c)	62.2	72.1
Police response when CAS workers require assistance (E97)	59.6	72.8
Effectiveness of worker safety training (E69) (C78)	46.7	64.7

* = Question not asked in the CAS Organization Survey.

CAS organizational survey responses illustrated a limited awareness of the violence experienced by workers, suggesting a difference of opinion between management and workers in most CASs. This was particularly evident in the smaller numbers of assaults recorded by CASs as compared to the number of assaults reported by workers in this survey.

CAS supervisors appeared to be a point of particular strength in the eyes of employees, indicating that they could play a prominent role in the future development of safety programs.

5. Evaluations of Safety Practices and Lone Worker Protection

When employees and CASs were asked to describe the availability of safety policies and procedures, a wide range of responses were received. Many of these assessments related to field work and working alone. Generally, these responses showed CASs to be of the view that more procedures and policies were in place, with workers reporting less policies and programs in place.

Overall, a number of gaps in safety provisions were noted (see Display 3, below), suggesting a need for more standards and more uniform performance by CASs. For example, employees reported significant gaps in procedures for back-up, working alone, when to leave an unsafe situation, and the process for reporting assaults/threats. CASs reported that more procedures were in place, but many gaps also existed. In particular, fewer than 25% of workers indicated that the CAS had a policy on working alone. As well, focus groups suggested many lapses in the use of JHSCs and the involvement of workers in program development.

Display 3
Employee and CAS Reports Regarding Safety Practices
and Lone Worker Protection

Current practices/policies in place	% of workers indicating 'Yes'	% of CASs indicating 'Yes'
CAS office is designed for safety (E73) (C83)	38.3%**	97.1%
CAS office has security guards (C85)	*	11.8
CAS has procedure for assessing clients who pose high risk (E71)(C80)	60.4	76.5
CAS has procedure for assessing risks in the community(E76) (C88)	60.4	76.5
CAS has procedure for reporting when workers in the field (E78)(C91A)	43.5	68.6
CAS has procedure for calling for back-up (E78) (C91B)	29.6	60.0
CAS has procedure on working alone (E78) (C91C)	24.7	51.4
CAS has procedure for when to leave an unsafe situation (E78)(C91D)	29.2	51.4
CAS permits co-teaming whenever needed (C92)	*	87.9
CAS has check-in system after hours (C93)	*	78.8
CAS provides information regarding role of the CAS (E82) (C98)	35.4	93.9
CAS has a system for reporting assaults/abuse/threats (E86) (C103)	25.5	91.2
CAS has protocol for capturing near misses for workers (E87) (C105)	19.9	52.9

* Question not asked in the Employee (Worker) Survey.

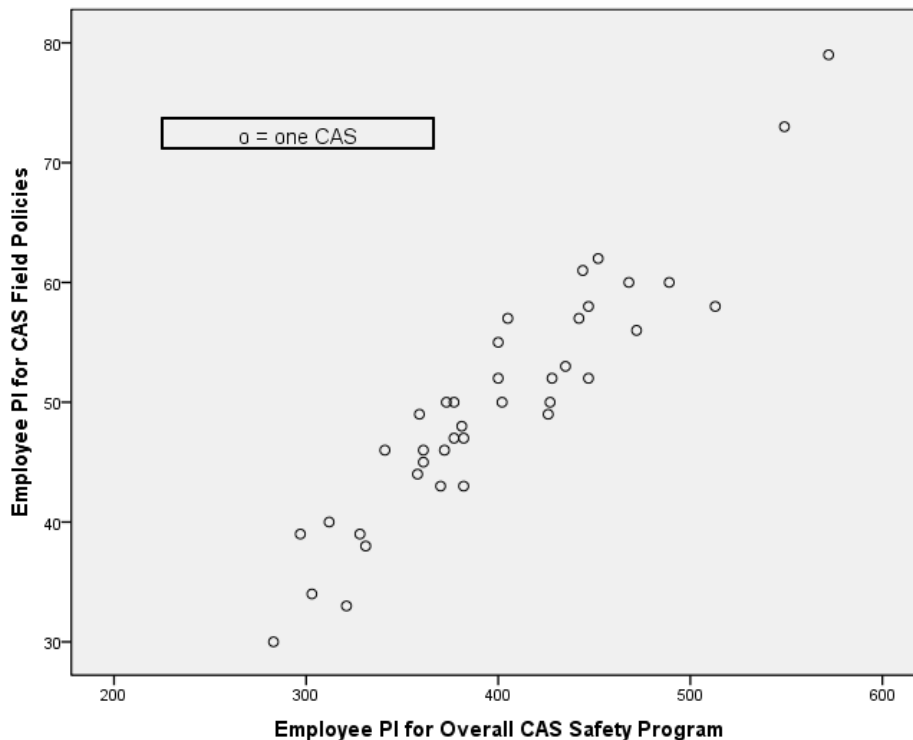
** Another 46.3% indicated that office design considered safety "to some extent."

6. Variations in Effectiveness of Safety Programs Across CASs

Employee ratings of CAS safety programs were summarized in the form of Performance Indicators for two aspects of CAS safety programs: (1) overall safety program performance; and (2) field procedures/policies. These ratings were scaled from 0 to 100, where '0' was 'Poor' and '100' was 'Excellent'.

CAS employee and organizational surveys indicated that CASs were highly variable in the policies and programs they maintained, with some providing higher levels of worker protection and many providing low levels of worker protection, including omission in some CASs of certain steps required by the OHS Act. Display 4 shows the extraordinary variability of CAS safety practices. Overall, only two CASs were rated very highly on both PIs, with seven rated poorly on both, and the rest "all over the map". No indications were seen to suggest that the CASs performed to a single standard.⁷

Display 4
Overall Safety Program Performance as assessed by employees,
Compared to Employee Assessments of the Strength of Field Policies
(Procedures for Working Alone etc.)



⁷Based on comparisons of PIs for 5,800+ employees and 34 CASs.

7. Overall Conclusions & Recommendations

Conclusions: Ontario child protection workers are frequently exposed to a wide spectrum of violence, ranging from physical assaults and attempted assaults to threats, verbal and written abuse, similarly to research on child protection in US, UK and Australia. (See footnotes above) A particular theme of interest is the variation in ratings of CAS's safety performance between employees and CASs. Generally, CASs rated their own efforts as far more effective than did employees. Another theme of importance was that the range of protection services was highly variable across CASs, indicating uneven efforts to provide effective protection to workers. Generally the sector response to the issue of worker safety was low.

These findings point to the need for a strong, provincially-coordinated set of standards, touching on the genesis of violence in child protection and all aspects of how CASs manage client violence and how they can improve worker protection, for example, more refined policies and practices on working alone. The report recommends remedies to these issues be developed by the OACAS and individual CASs, in collaboration with the bargaining units for CAS employees, and with support from the Ministry.

Recommendations: Forty-six recommendations are presented in the final report, to be released in late September, 2014, aimed at aiding implementation of these new standards. Some of the recommendations centre on the role of the Ministry Children and Youth Services in providing leadership for CASs' responses to client violence and related workplace health and safety issues.