

Case and caseworker factors – Do they impact the substantiation decision in sexual abuse investigations

Child sexual abuse

Child protection

Workforce practice

Lyons, O., Fallon, B., King, B., & Collin-Vézina, D. (2026). Case and caseworker factors – Do they impact the substantiation decision in sexual abuse investigations. *Child Protection and Practice*, 10, 100331. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chipro.2026.100331>

Context: The study investigates how case and caseworker characteristics influence the decision to substantiate child sexual abuse (CSA). Using a representative sample of CSA investigations from the Ontario Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (OIS), the researchers applied the Decision-Making Ecology (DME) framework to analyse the clinical and organisational drivers behind these high-stakes decisions.

Key findings:

- **Low overall substantiation rate:** Only 29.7 per cent of investigated CSA cases were substantiated, while 64.3 per cent were concluded as unfounded for CSA.
- **Child functioning concerns were significantly more prevalent in substantiated cases:** This includes depression, anxiety, or withdrawal (34.5 %), suicidal thoughts (18.1%), and self-harming behaviour (15.5%).
- **Abuse and investigation characteristics:** Substantiation rates were significantly higher for contact-type sexual abuse (74.6% of substantiated cases) and investigations involving police charges (49.6%) or police investigations (33.8%).
- **The caseload barrier:** Caseworker workload was a major non-case predictor; investigators with a lower monthly caseload (10 cases or less) were significantly more likely to substantiate CSA compared to those with higher caseloads.

Summary: The study concludes that CSA substantiation is a highly complex decision-making process shaped by a combination of clinical evidence and structural caseworker constraints, with worker caseload size emerging as a key factor. Findings demonstrate that lower caseloads are associated with higher substantiation rates, particularly in complex, non-disclosure cases. The association may indicate that lower caseloads provide greater capacity for comprehensive investigation, although the study does not establish causation. Conversely, high caseloads present a significant operational challenge in Ontario, where over 40 per cent of investigators carry more than 16 cases, exceeding established standards.

With us, not against us: a systemic inquiry to learn from the experiences of children who entered the criminal justice system before 14

Youth justice

Cross-over youth

System reform

Commission for Children and Young People. (2026). *With us, not against us: A systemic inquiry to learn from the experiences of children who entered the criminal justice system before 14*. Victorian Government. <https://apo.org.au/node/335294>

Key takeaway: The report "With us, not against us" is a systemic inquiry by the Commission for Children and Young People into the experiences of children in Victoria who entered the criminal justice system before the age of 14. It argues that early criminalisation is ineffective, harmful, and costly, often punishing children for behaviours that are symptoms of trauma and unmet needs. The report calls for a shift from punitive responses toward a whole-of-system approach grounded in prevention, early intervention, and therapeutic support.

This report was prepared during rapid policy and legislation shifts, while Victoria raised the minimum age of criminal responsibility to 12, the government reversed its commitment to further raise it to 14.

Key findings:

- **Cumulative adversity:** All 26 children in the inquiry's targeted file review were known to Child Protection, and their school absence averaged 79 per cent since 2022. Family violence was the most common child safety concern among all reports.
- **Disproportionate impact:** Boys, Aboriginal children (27% of the file review cohort), and children from multicultural backgrounds (42%) are heavily overrepresented. 88 per cent of the children lived with disability.
- **Ineffective and harmful:** Early system contact fails to rehabilitate, with 75 per cent of the reviewed cohort allegedly reoffended after turning 14. Detention is extremely costly (\$7,304 per day in Victoria) and subjects children to severe trauma through behavioural isolations and lockdowns.

Summary: The Commission advocates for a complete shift from punitive adult-style responses toward prevention and therapeutic care. To achieve this, it recommends: Raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility to 14 without exceptions and removing children under 14 from the custodial system; Scoping an alternative first responder model to prevent initial police contact; Funding place-based youth hubs and formalising service coordination in primary schools to keep vulnerable children engaged.