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The objective of this article is to describe the successes and challenges of a unique knowledge mobilization initiative that was funded through the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. This initiative focused on promoting knowledge mobilization by increasing the capacity of child welfare organizations in Ontario to conduct and use research. Building on existing knowledge mobilization models in Ontario, this initiative brought university-based researchers together with child welfare practitioners to use existing data sets from the Ontario Incidence Studies of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect. Overall, this knowledge mobilization initiative resulted in several positive outcomes. Along with the successes, the research team faced several challenges in implementing this initiative, which are described in detail.

Following a comprehensive review of the research on the effectiveness of child welfare policies and services, Sheila Kameran and Alfred Kahn (1976) concluded that most policy and practice decisions are based primarily on value judgments and assumptions. Almost 40 years later, despite repeated calls for systematic evaluation, services to maltreated children and their families continue to be driven primarily by values and assumptions regardless of evidence of service effectiveness. While conducting intervention outcome research is clearly necessary, it is important to mobilize existing knowledge and foster the capacity for managing and analyzing existing data within child welfare organizations. Thus the challenge is not only to do more research per se but to provide opportunities for child welfare organizations to use existing sources of data to answer questions about their clinical practices while developing their own research capacities.

According to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC, 2014),

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Knowledge mobilization is about ensuring that all citizens benefit from publicly funded research. It can take many forms, but the essential objective is to allow research knowledge to flow both within the academic world, and between academic researchers and the wider community. By moving research knowledge into society, knowledge mobilization increases its intellectual, economic, social and cultural impact.

With the goal of promoting knowledge mobilization, SSHRC developed a program focused on public outreach, granting funds to encourage researchers to find effective ways to disseminate, transfer, exchange, synthesize, and broker research findings to wider audiences (SSHRC, 2013). The objective of this article is to describe the successes and challenges of a unique knowledge mobilization initiative that was funded through this SSHRC program. This 2-year initiative began in 2011 and focused on promoting knowledge mobilization by increasing the capacity of child welfare organizations in Ontario to conduct and use research. Building on existing knowledge mobilization models in Ontario, this initiative brought university-based researchers together with child welfare practitioners to use existing data sets (Ontario Incidence Studies of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect [OIS]; Trocmé, Fallon, MacLaurin, Daciuk, Felstiner, & Black, et al, 2005). The OIS data sets are rich with information about children, families, child welfare workers, and organizations. Recognizing that child welfare practitioners are in an excellent position to pose research questions grounded in the context of practice, this initiative focused on increasing the accessibility of the OIS data sets to Ontario child welfare practitioners.

OIS

The OIS-2008 (Fallon et al., 2010) is the fourth provincial study to examine the incidence of reported child maltreatment and the characteristics of the children and families investigated by child protection services in Ontario. Findings from the OIS-1993 (Trocmé, McPhee, Tam, & Hay, 1994), OIS-1998 (Trocmé et al., 2002), OIS-2003 (Fallon et al., 2005), and OIS-2008 (Fallon et al., 2010) have provided much needed information to service providers, policy makers, and researchers seeking to better understand the children and families coming into contact with the Ontario child welfare system. These studies have assisted in better adapting child welfare policies to address the array of difficulties faced by the families and victims of maltreatment. Using a standard set of definitions, OIS-1993, OIS-1998, OIS-2003, and OIS-2008 provide the best available estimates of the incidence and characteristics of reported child maltreatment in Ontario over a 15-year period.

The OIS uses a multistage sampling design (Fallon et al., 2010). The first stage involves selecting a random, representative sample of child welfare organizations across Ontario for participation. Any organization that has the authority to conduct child protection investigations is eligible for inclusion. Next, cases from participating organizations are sampled over a 3-month period. Situations that are reported but screened out prior to a full investigation are not included in the sample nor are reports on already open cases. Finally, child-level investigations that meet study criteria are identified from the sampled cases. Children age 15 and under who are being investigated because of maltreatment-related concerns (i.e., investigation of possible past incidents of maltreatment or assessment of risk of future maltreatment) are included in the sample. In 2008 these sampling procedures yielded a final sample of 7,471 children investigated because of maltreatment-related concerns.
The primary data collection instrument for the OIS is the Maltreatment Assessment Form. This instrument is completed by child protection workers at the end of their initial investigations and measures 32 forms of maltreatment as well as risk of future maltreatment. This instrument provides a detailed clinical assessment of each family investigation, including an assessment of family composition, caregiver risk factors, poverty and transience, child functioning, and the severity and duration of maltreatment. It also includes questions about key service decisions typically made during the initial child protection investigation, including the decision to provide ongoing child welfare services, the decision to substantiate the case (i.e., the determination that the child or children indeed were maltreated), and the decision to place a child in out-of-home care. Participating workers were offered training and supporting materials to ensure that the Maltreatment Assessment Forms were completed correctly and consistently across the various participating agencies.

OIS data are weighted to derive provincial annual incidence estimates. Two sets of weights are applied, an annualization weight and a regionalization weight. These weights are developed based on annual agency statistics as well as U.S. Census Bureau child population data. With the weighting procedures applied, the estimated number of maltreatment-related investigations conducted in Ontario in 2008 is 128,748.

ONTARIO CHILD WELFARE

Child welfare legislation and services are organized in Canada at the provincial and territorial levels. Child welfare is a mandatory service, directed by provincial and territorial child welfare statutes. Although all child welfare systems share certain basic characteristics organized around investigating reports of alleged maltreatment, providing various types of counseling and supervision, and looking after children in out-of-home care, there is considerable variation in the organization of these service delivery systems.

Numerous developments in the early 2000s led to an evolving focus for child welfare in Ontario, Canada’s largest province. Ontario has a decentralized model for delivery of child welfare services. Child welfare authorities are mandated and funded by the Government of Ontario but are run by a community board of directors. The Ontario Child and Family Services Act (1990) underwent revisions in the years 2000 and 2006 that resulted in the following changes: increased funding to compensate for a lack of uniform and centralized child welfare services in Ontario, increased focus on responding to neglect and emotional maltreatment, a lower threshold for determining risk of harm to the child, and increased clarity in the requirements for the duty to report for professionals and the public.

These changes in legislation and policy initiated a new focus for child welfare in Ontario, which included an emphasis on prevention, early detection and intervention, and improved coordination among the three fields of child welfare, youth justice, and children’s mental health (Ministry of Children and Youth Services, 2005). Following this, new standards were developed in 2007 that increased the emphasis on customized responses and promoted a wider range of informal and formal supports for families in the system. In addition, a standardized risk assessment model was implemented as well as a differential response model. Since the inception of these models, the number of families referred to Ontario child welfare agencies has doubled, and the nature of the cases referred has changed considerably (Trocmé et al., 2005).
Prior to formally beginning the OIS-2008 knowledge mobilization initiative and applying for SSHRC funding, we piloted a similar knowledge mobilization strategy with one child welfare organization in Ontario after senior management approached the OIS research team and requested analyses concerning differential placement rates for geographic areas. A two-page fact sheet was developed that showed placement rates were similar for agencies from urban, mixed urban rural, and rural agencies, but at the end of the investigation, rural agencies were considering placement for the investigated child at twice the rate of urban agencies (Budau, Baraniuk, Fallon, & Black, 2009). This information was used by the agency in negotiations with government officials to demonstrate their population’s unique need for placement services. This informal partnership with one child welfare organization inspired researchers at the University of Toronto and McGill to apply for SSHRC funding to support a larger initiative focused on knowledge mobilization.

SSHRC-FUNDED OIS-2008 KNOWLEDGE MOBILIZATION INITIATIVE

The overall goal of the SSHRC-funded knowledge mobilization initiative was to provide a mechanism for child welfare authorities in Ontario to use existing OIS data sets to answer agency-directed research questions. Child welfare practitioners are faced with complex clinical questions regarding the children and families they serve on a daily basis. For instance, a child welfare worker may work with several caregivers who use physical force when disciplining their children. This worker may be interested in learning about the typical profile of families that employ physical discipline, including information about demographics and caregiver risk factors. This aggregate information may help the worker understand the complex factors that precipitate physical discipline and may also help the worker locate appropriate resources for these families, such as parenting classes. Child welfare workers are also faced with important questions about service decisions. At the end of their initial investigations, workers must decide whether to provide further services to the family, such as in-home respite or out-of-home placements. Decision making may improve if workers have access to information regarding the efficacy and outcomes of certain service decisions for certain types of cases. Child welfare practitioners need responses to their questions in a timely fashion (weeks or months, not years), so they make use of local expertise and information to avoid time-consuming and resource-intensive supplementary data collection procedures.

Objectives

The specific objectives for the initiative included:

- improving service providers’ capacity to access and analyze service information data to inform service and policy decisions,
- integrating clinical expertise in service and policy decisions, and
- developing a joint research agenda that addresses high-priority knowledge gaps.
Strategies for Engaging the Child Welfare Sector

The OIS data sets (1993, 1998, 2003, and 2008) are housed at the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto. Through this initiative, representatives from child welfare organizations across Ontario were offered an opportunity to work with a research analyst from the University of Toronto to pose and refine research questions, analyze OIS data, and publish the results. Several strategies were employed to engage the child welfare sector in this process. While some strategies were quite successful, others failed at engaging the field. Each strategy is described in more detail next.

In-Person Initial Meeting

The initial strategy involved inviting child welfare practitioners to the University of Toronto for a full day-long meeting. The goals of the meeting included introducing the OIS methods, reviewing major findings, developing a research agenda for the child welfare sector, and beginning to identify key questions that could be addressed using the OIS data set. The strengths and limitations of the data set were reviewed in detail, and examples of research questions were offered as a beginning point. The intended outcomes of the meeting were to build relationships between researchers and child welfare practitioners as well as to identify representatives from child welfare agencies to work with research analysts. This meeting was successful in achieving these outcomes.

Facebook Page

Following the initial in-person meeting, a Facebook page was created to achieve several goals: continue to build relationships with the child welfare sector, identify pertinent research questions, and facilitate communication among researchers and child welfare practitioners. The Facebook page was advertised to the child welfare sector in several ways, including through the Canadian Child Welfare Research Portal and during presentations at the Ontario Association of Children’s Aid Societies (OACAS; a representative body for child welfare services). The intention was for child welfare practitioners to publicly post and discuss their research questions to connect with other practitioners with similar interests as well as a research analyst to discuss the feasibility of using OIS data to answer the questions. This was not a successful strategy for engaging the field. Many practitioners were unfamiliar with the Facebook platform at the time, and those who were familiar did not feel comfortable using their personal Facebook profiles for professional activities. As a result of this lack of success, alternative strategies that were not previously planned were developed and implemented with much better success.

Partnership with OACAS

The OACAS provides service in the areas of government relations, communications, information management, education, and training to advocate for the protection and well-being of children. Most child welfare organizations in Ontario are members of the OACAS. Although the University of Toronto researchers had existing relationships with OACAS, these relationships were strengthened to successfully engage the field in this initiative. Several meetings
occurred with OACAS to introduce the initiative, connect with agency directors, and identify key questions in the child welfare field that could be addressed with the OIS data set. In addition, the OACAS allocated time during a meeting of its members to generate a list of key research questions from the field. Based on this list, questions that could be answered with the OIS data set were identified and refined. Research analysts from the University of Toronto then worked collaboratively with representatives from the OACAS to produce 10 fact sheets based on these questions. Table 1 contains a complete list of fact sheets produced as part of this initiative.

**Partnership with Practice and Research Together**

An additional strategy for engaging the child welfare field involved building stronger relationships with Partnership With Practice and Research Together (PART), a Canadian membership-based research use organization. The core function of PART is to disseminate practice-relevant research findings to child welfare practitioners. PART members include child welfare organizations across the province. In discussions with PART representatives, researchers learned that child welfare practitioners frequently contacted PART to request research findings on particular topics relevant to their practice. At times, this process highlighted key gaps in the child welfare literature, as PART representatives were sometimes unable to locate research on the particular topic a member was interested in. Based on these interactions with child welfare practitioners, PART representatives generated several research questions that could be answered with OIS data. These questions not only addressed key gaps in the child welfare literature, but also responded to the interests expressed by child welfare practitioners in Ontario. As part of this initiative, research analysts worked with several PART representatives to produce fact sheets based on these questions from child welfare practitioners in the field (for a comprehensive list of fact sheets, please see Table 1).

**Webinars**

Several webinars were broadcast through the OACAS and PART to interested members. The webinars provided an overview of the OIS methods and major findings and offered examples of potential research questions that could be answered with OIS data. Participants were invited to work with a research analyst at the University of Toronto to develop and refine research questions with the goal of producing fact sheets for publication. While feedback regarding these webinars was positive, none of the participants contacted researchers about conducting analyses.

**Research Workshop**

A full-day research workshop was offered through the University of Toronto for any child welfare professional in Ontario who was interested in learning how to use the OIS data set. Participants included frontline protection workers, quality assurance personnel, and managers. The objectives of this workshop included increasing the capacity of child welfare practitioners to use administrative data, produce basic descriptive statistics, and interpret quantitative research findings. The OACAS was instrumental in recruiting agency representatives for this workshop and in facilitating communication between the research team and child welfare practitioners.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Source of Research Question</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Audience</th>
<th>Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A Profile of Customized and Traditional Investigations in Ontario in 2008</td>
<td>OACAS member meeting</td>
<td>Van Wert, M.; Lefebvre, R.; Fallon, B.; Trocmé, N.</td>
<td>General public</td>
<td>2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous Case Openings in Substantiated Child Maltreatment Investigations in Ontario in 2008</td>
<td>OACAS member meeting</td>
<td>Ma, J.; Smith, C.; Van Wert, M.; Fallon, B.</td>
<td>General public</td>
<td>2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OIS-2008: Examination of Investigations Referred to Child Welfare Authorities by Police</td>
<td>OACAS member meeting</td>
<td>Fallon, B.; Ma, J.; Smith, C.; Van Wert, M.</td>
<td>General public</td>
<td>2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OIS-2008: Contextual Factors to Consider when Interpreting Findings</td>
<td>OACAS member meeting</td>
<td>Van Wert, M.; Ma, J.; Smith, C.; Fallon, B.</td>
<td>General public</td>
<td>2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OIS-2008: Examination of Investigations Referred to Child Welfare Authorities by Schools</td>
<td>OACAS member meeting</td>
<td>Ma, J.; Van Wert, M.; Smith, C.; Fallon, B.</td>
<td>General public</td>
<td>2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maltreatment-Related Investigations Involving Primary Caregivers With a History of Being in Foster Care and/or Group Home Care in Ontario in 2008</td>
<td>PART representative</td>
<td>Brady, E.; Lefebvre, R.; Van Wert, M.; Fallon, B.</td>
<td>General public</td>
<td>2014</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The workshop was a great success. The SSHRC grant allowed travel funding for workshop participants, which made participation possible for many who otherwise would not have been able to attend. Frontline child welfare workers from across the province attended the workshop, including workers from urban and rural areas. The workshop content focused on the OIS methods as well as a step-by-step guide to analyzing OIS data. Although feedback was not formally gathered from participants, researchers received unsolicited positive responses from participating practitioners. All reported that the workshop stimulated their interest in research and allowed them to feel more comfortable working with statistical software and quantitative data in general. Agencies reported that this workshop helped to build capacity for analyses of the children and families they serve.

Findings From Agency-Directed Analyses

To provide an illustration of the types of research questions and analyses that were generated as part of this initiative, several examples are provided in this section. Full versions of all fact sheets are available on the Canadian Child Welfare Research Portal (http://cwrp.ca/), an open-access website offering comprehensive information about child welfare services in Canada.

After attending the in-person initial meeting (first strategy described previously), a frontline child protection worker from Jewish Family and Child Services of Toronto expressed interest in examining child welfare investigations in which a child custody/access dispute was occurring. This worker had a particular interest in high-conflict custody/access disputes and the negative impact of such disputes on children and families. Interest in this analysis stemmed from his work in this field and his interactions with families involved in high-conflict separations. Based on discussions with this worker as well as others in the child welfare sector, the research team learned that many in the field believe that malicious allegations about child abuse and neglect are frequently made by feuding parents during high-conflict custody/access disputes.

The worker communicated with a research analyst via e-mail and telephone to develop and refine his research question, and he also visited the University of Toronto to work with the analyst to produce univariate and bivariate descriptive statistics. An additional faculty member was invited to engage in this process because his research interests also focus on high-conflict custody disputes. On visiting the university, the frontline child protection worker was able to participate in conducting analyses to answer his research question while also creating connections with another faculty member in this specific field. After conducting the analysis, the frontline child protection worker wrote a fact sheet based on the results in collaboration with the analyst as well as several faculty members from the University of Toronto and McGill (Theoduloz, Lefebvre, Saini, & Trocmé, 2014).

The findings indicated that a child custody/access dispute was identified in an estimated 17,190 maltreatment-related investigations in Ontario in 2008, representing 13% of all such investigations. In 10% of maltreatment investigations involving a child custody/access dispute, the referral was determined to be malicious. This is compared to only 6% of maltreatment investigations that did not involve a child custody/access dispute. While there is a higher percentage of malicious referrals among families involved in custody/access disputes, 90% of investigations involving a custody/access dispute were not triggered by malicious referrals. This is important information for the child welfare sector and illustrates that relying on assumptions and value judgments can lead to biased perceptions about practice.
Additional fact sheets were developed as a result of the partnership with OACAS (the third strategy). For example, several executive directors of children’s aid societies were interested in learning if and how unfounded investigations differed from substantiated investigations. According to the OIS standard definitions, an investigation was classified as unfounded if the balance of evidence indicated that child abuse or neglect had not occurred. An investigation was classified as substantiated if the balance of evidence indicated that abuse or neglect had occurred. This research question stemmed from the perception that even when maltreatment had not occurred, the families investigated by the child welfare system were often in need of social services of some kind to address issues such as family poverty, parent or child mental health concerns, or substance use issues. Based on this research interest, several analysts examined unfounded maltreatment investigations using OIS-2008 data (Lefebvre, Van Wert, Fallon, & Trocmé, 2012a).

The findings of this analysis suggest that while more concerns tend to be noted in substantiated investigations, several important concerns were identified in unfounded maltreatment investigations. For instance, primary caregivers were identified as victims of domestic violence in about half (46%) of substantiated investigations and 15% of unfounded investigations. Further, primary caregivers were identified as having few social supports in 36% of substantiated investigations and 18% of unfounded investigations. Interestingly, while much less likely to be referred to ongoing child welfare services following the initial investigation, 7% of unfounded investigations were transferred to ongoing services. This implies that in 7% of unfounded investigations, maltreatment had not occurred, but the child welfare agency still provided ongoing child welfare services to address family needs. This is consistent with the initial hypothesis generated by the executive directors during the OACAS members meeting and offers important information for the field. Perhaps these families would be better served through other social service systems outside the child welfare system if in fact maltreatment has not occurred.

Successes and Challenges

Overall, this knowledge mobilization initiative had several positive outcomes. As a result of this initiative, new relationships and partnerships were built between the university researchers and child welfare professionals, and existing relationships were strengthened. Positive feedback was garnered from many practitioners as well as the research team. Fifteen fact sheets were produced, all directed by research questions from the field, and all published on the Canadian Child Welfare Research Portal, which had 104,024 visits and 262,409 page views between September 2012 and September 2013. Data collection for the next cycle of the study (OIS-2013) began as the grant was concluding. Agencies that participated in the knowledge mobilization initiative that were selected for the OIS-2013 were noticeably more supportive of data collection efforts because they had used the data for specific questions about their services.

Along with these successes, the research team faced several challenges in implementing this initiative. The Facebook page did not elicit a positive response from the field and did not result in increased engagement, nor did it facilitate communication among researchers and child welfare practitioners. Fortunately, the researchers had existing and long-established positive relationships with organizations such as OACAS and PART, as well as individual child welfare agencies. Without these existing relationships, engaging the child welfare sector in this initiative would have been an insurmountable challenge. Evidence of this is found in the list of fact sheets...
produced as a part of this initiative. Ten were developed based on the meeting of OACAS members. Another two were authored by practitioners who were partners with researchers at the University of Toronto and McGill on various projects for more than 10 years. There is a foundation of collegiality and mutual respect between the researchers and these community partners, and this foundation supported this initiative and several other research endeavors. The partner organizations and individual practitioners were confident that the knowledge mobilization initiative would benefit the field because of past positive experiences with researchers, which perhaps made them more willing to participate.

Child welfare professionals are often faced with complex and challenging cases. Even if the interest in and commitment to research is present, the everyday demands of child welfare work can act as barriers to participating in knowledge mobilization initiatives. Although existing relationships with several child protection workers, managers, and executive directors facilitated breaking these barriers, the burden of participating hindered progress in several situations. In fact, several frontline child welfare professionals developed research questions and expressed interest in conducting analyses of the OIS data but were unable to fully participate in the initiative and complete a fact sheet. In one situation, a frontline child protection worker requested time off to participate in the initiative, but her employer would not grant this time off. Already working overtime hours and facing other demands, she could not afford to participate in this initiative. In other situations, interested child protection workers were employed under short-term contracts, and prior to fully engaging with the initiative, they had moved on to other positions.

It was far easier for child welfare practitioners in the Greater Toronto Area to participate in this initiative. Even with funding to support practitioners’ travel from organizations that were geographically remote as well as technological tools such as video conferencing, all practitioners who completed fact sheets were from Toronto. While several remote practitioners attended the in-person research workshop and participated in the webinars, none were able to complete a fact sheet. For this reason, forming a partnership with OACAS and PART was crucial because these organizations represent the province and, therefore, identified research questions that were important to practitioners outside Toronto.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Through this project, a focused knowledge mobilization strategy was implemented that brought together clinicians, managers, and researchers in the Ontario child welfare field to use existing data. Collaboration occurred between the OIS-2008 research team and the OACAS, PART, and child welfare agencies across the province. Data from the OIS were used to answer agency-directed questions about families and children investigated by the Ontario child welfare system. Mutual learning occurred throughout the process of planning, producing, disseminating, and applying existing and new research in decision making. This initiative promoted a culture of knowledge exchange that has laid the groundwork for more complex research initiatives. Over time and multiple iterations, the research to practice feedback loop can expand to accommodate more complex and rigorous research.

The key measure of success for this initiative will be the extent to which the question of evidence is consistently posed, reposed, and understood in an agency context. For example,
when a manager expresses concern about the high number of teenagers with substance abuse issues on agency caseloads, the first response should be to seek information about how frequently the problem is identified at a provincial level and what other case factors (e.g., maltreatment type, caregiver functioning concerns) are associated with teenagers identified with substance abuse issues. Too often, the first response in a situation such as this is to discuss available clinical training programs that focus on working with teenagers who abuse substances. The perception that teen substance abuse is a common problem that clients of child welfare struggle with may be correct, and indeed a clinical training program may be beneficial. However, it is impossible to know if it is in fact a common problem without knowledge of the proportion of clients struggling with substance abuse at a particular agency and in the larger context of child welfare. Perhaps other issues occur more commonly among child welfare clients, and the limited funding available to child welfare services should be directed at training workers in these more pertinent areas. Implementing a clinical training program is a resource-intensive initiative, whereas analyzing existing data to determine the most pertinent issues for child welfare clients in a given agency and the province as a whole is an inexpensive, fast, and easy way to determine where to direct the scarce resources available in child welfare for clinical training programs.

The full impact of this knowledge mobilization initiative will best be realized by linking it to similar initiatives to support information sharing and comparative analyses. These linkages will build on the research team’s involvement in a number of provincial and national knowledge mobilization and performance-based management initiatives. In a field where policy decisions are driven more often than not by high-profile tragedies, knowledge mobilization initiatives can shift the focus to the broader context of practice and inform the development of new and effective service delivery models.

REFERENCES


