



**Québec Incidence Study of Children Investigated by Youth Protection Services  
in 2019  
(QIS-2019)**

**Executive Summary**

by

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# Contributions

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## FINANCING

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## SUGGESTED QUOTE

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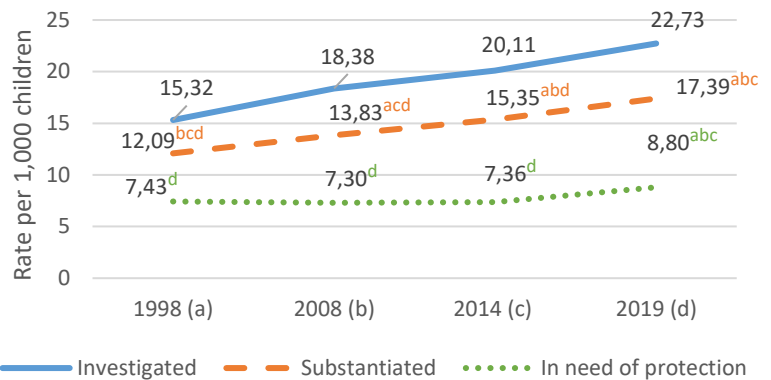
## Highlights

The rate of children investigated by Youth Protection (YP) services in Québec has been increasing steadily over the last 20 years (see Figure A). In 1998, 15 children per thousand were investigated by youth protection (YP) services in Quebec, increasing to 23 per thousand in 2019; representing an increase of 48%. Although the increase is generalized across all age groups, it is most marked among children aged 6 to 11. During the same period, substantiated investigations increased by 44%. The rate of investigations where children were found to be in need of protection – “compromission de la sécurité ou du développement” – remained stable from 1998 to 2014 and then showed a significant increase between 2014 and 2019.



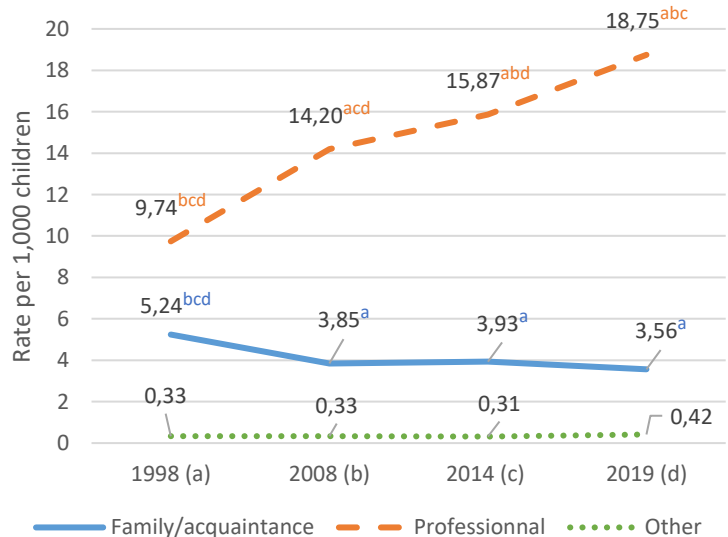
Figure B shows the increase in the rate of YP investigations by source of referral. The rate of children investigated who were reported by a family member or an acquaintance decreased from 5.2 per thousand in 1998 to 3.6 per thousand in 2019. In contrast, the rate of investigations reported by a professional nearly doubled, from 9.7 per thousand in 1998 to 18.8 per thousand in 2019.

**Figure A - Rates of children investigated by YP, substantiated, and found in need of protection**



- <sup>a</sup> Significant difference observed between 1998 and the target year ( $p < 0.01$ )
- <sup>b</sup> Significant difference observed between 2008 and the target year ( $p < 0.01$ )
- <sup>c</sup> Significant difference observed between 2014 and the target year ( $p < 0.01$ )
- <sup>d</sup> Significant difference observed between 2019 and the target year ( $p < 0.01$ )
- <sup>e</sup> Unlike the other rates presented, the overall rate of investigated children is not an estimate: it is based on the annual volume of investigated children in each of the participating facilities.

**Figure B — Rates of children investigated by referral source**

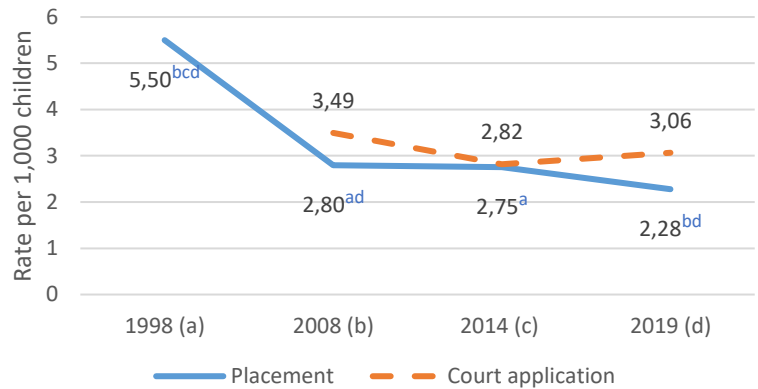


Placement in out-of-home care and court applications are two of the decisions that can be made by Quebec's YP services to protect a child during the investigation period. As shown in Figure C, the rate of investigated children placed in out-of-home decreased significantly between 1998 and 2019, from 5.5 per thousand to 2.3 per thousand children. In contrast, no significant change was noted in the rate of YP investigations leading to a court application.



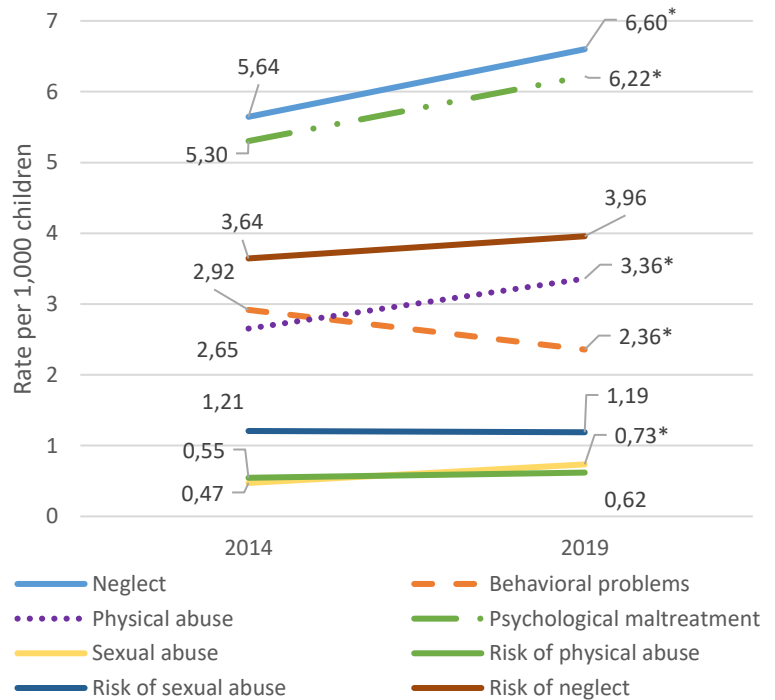
Figure D presents the changes between 2014 and 2019 in terms of rates of investigated children with substantiated concern by type of concern<sup>1</sup>. During that period rates of neglect and psychological maltreatment increased and were the two most common forms of substantiated investigations, involving in 2019 6.6 per thousand children and 6.2 per thousand children, respectively. Rates of physical and sexual abuse increased as well, whereas rates of serious behavioral problems decreased significantly, from 2.9 per thousand children to 2.4 per thousand. There was little change in rates of risk of maltreatment, regardless of whether the concerns were for physical or sexual abuse or neglect.

**Figure C — Changes in rates of investigated children with out-of-home placement and court application**



<sup>a</sup> Significant difference observed between 1998 and the target year ( $p < 0.01$ )  
<sup>b</sup> Significant difference observed between 2008 and the target year ( $p < 0.01$ )  
<sup>c</sup> Significant difference observed between 2014 and the target year ( $p < 0.01$ )  
<sup>d</sup> Significant difference observed between 2019 and the target year ( $p < 0.01$ )

**Figure D — Changes in rates of children investigated with substantiated concern by type of concern**



\* Significant difference observed between 2014 and 2019 ( $p < 0.01$ ).

<sup>1</sup> Due to the low frequency of children investigated for an abandonment concern, those cases have been included with the children investigated for a neglect concern.

## SYNTHESIS

This study provides a portrait of the evolution of the rates of children investigated by youth protection (YP) services in Québec over a period spanning more than two decades. The results show that the annual rate of children investigated **has been increasing** steadily. Although less pronounced, the rate of children found to be in need of protection has also increased. These findings are cause for concern, as they indicate that despite the prevention efforts deployed and the numerous reforms carried out over the 20 years covered by the study (both the legislative reforms of the Youth Protection Act and the reorganizations of social services), the rate of children in need of protection continues to rise.

This study cannot identify the factors behind the increase in children investigated and in children found to be in need of protection. However, some possible explanations can be put forward. Firstly, it is possible that existing "universal" preventive services are not adequately tailored to the specific needs of some of the most high-risk families in Québec (Esposito et al., 2023). Moreover, these families may be subjected to increased scrutiny from health, social, and educational services. Our results seem to confirm that inadequate services and increased scrutiny could partially explain these increases, since the rise in investigations is being driven by reports made by professionals, while other types of referrals are decreasing. Greater vigilance on the part of community professionals involved in child protection could be a positive trend as long as YP services have the resources to respond accordingly and provide appropriate services. However, this situation could give rise to concerns if the increase in referrals is driven by a lack of preventive services in the community, especially if YP services also lack adequate resources to respond to the needs of these families.

The characteristics that have **decreased** in frequency in the Québec population of children are: a) investigated children reported by relatives or acquaintances; b)

investigations leading to children being placed in out-of-home care; and c) children investigated for serious behavioral problems. With regard to the decrease in the rate of investigations leading to children being placed in out-of-home care, our results support those of previous Québec studies (Esposito et al., 2019a; Hélie and Esposito, 2024). As for the decrease in the number of children with serious behavioral problems, it should be noted that changes to the YPA in 2007 narrowed the grounds for intervention in these cases: investigations in these instances were limited to situations involving serious and ongoing behavior problems that affected the physical or psychological integrity of the young person (or others).

Overall, the results suggest that a growing number of situations are being brought to the attention of YP services in Québec, yet an increasing proportion of these situations are not being opened for ongoing services. In the same vein, several characteristics often associated with the complexity or **severity** of situations were found to be decreasing or stable over the period studied. More specifically, the rate of children investigated and placed in care decreased, while the rate of children investigated for multiple forms of maltreatment and the rate of children whose situation was referred to the courts remained stable.

At first glance, these findings stand in stark contrast to reports from the field that **situations** have **been worsening** for many years. There are several possible explanations for this apparent discrepancy. On the one hand, it is possible that the situations documented in 2019 are perceived as being more severe than before due to the greater presence of structural issues that are difficult to address in the context of YP services—such as social isolation, socioeconomic disadvantage, and problems accessing mental health services—rather than due to the greater severity of the situations themselves. It is also possible that YP workers may be less well-trained and less equipped than before to carry out their roles or that their workload may be

higher than before. This could lead YP workers to perceive their work as heavier or more difficult. However, further studies are needed to verify these hypotheses.

Many of the results of this study also highlight the importance of ensuring a proper **link** between "front-line" services, whose mission is to support families and prevent their difficulties from worsening, and YP services, which should only be called upon when these services are no longer sufficient or when the child's safety or development is at stake. This linkage must work in both directions, i.e., support and prevention services must report compromising situations to YP services, and the latter must withdraw from families' lives and refer them to front-line services as soon as the situation allows. The smooth operation of Québec's YP system relies heavily on this linkage, which, once updated, has the potential to reduce the number of vulnerable children served under the YPA. It is therefore imperative that decision-makers recognize this essential dynamic and invest in strategies to improve this collaboration, as recommended by the Special Commission on the Rights of the Child and Youth Protection, particularly regarding the need to strengthen preventive services and improve collaboration between front-line services and YP services.



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