

# Children home alone or inadequately supervised in Montreal and across Canada

Mónica Ruiz-Casares, Ph.D

Department of Psychiatry, McGill University  
Santé Mentale Jeunesse, CSSS de la Montagne

CRCF Seminar Series  
Montréal, March 31, 2010

# Home Alone

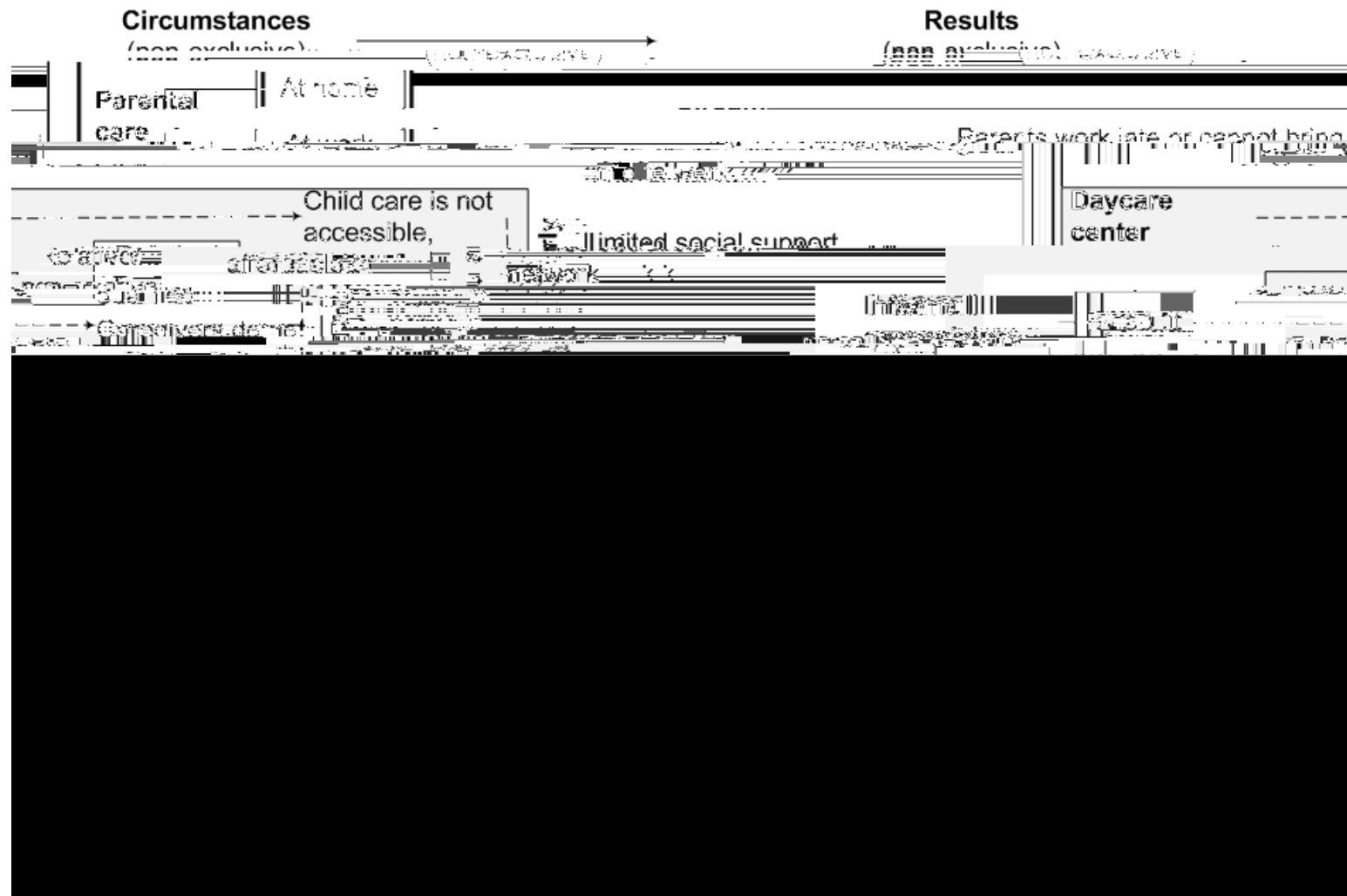


i feel happy because I have freedom to do whatever. And that includes going out and getting high. (...) Also my parents aren't around to abuse me. Which is good.



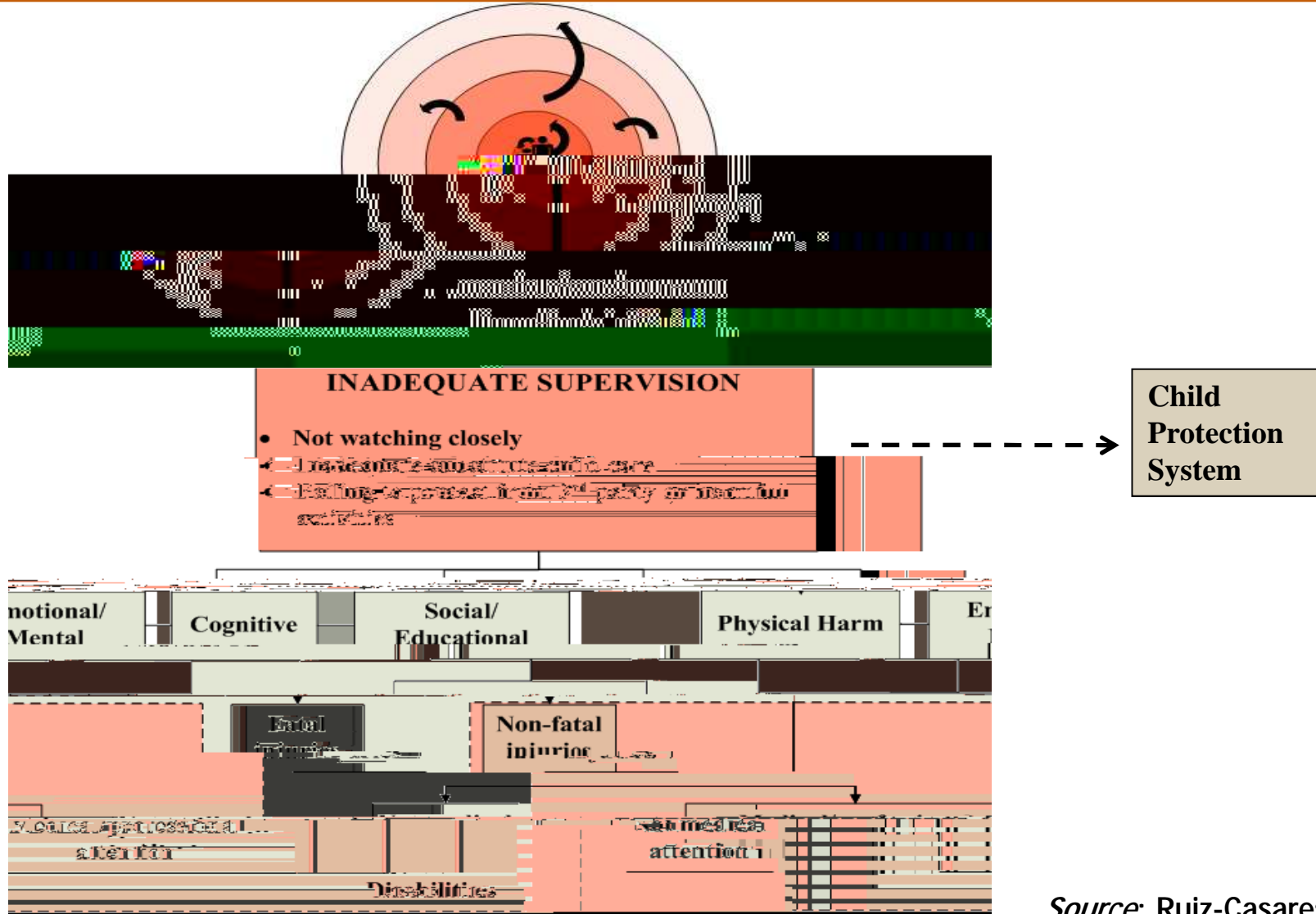


# Home alone: Circumstances & results



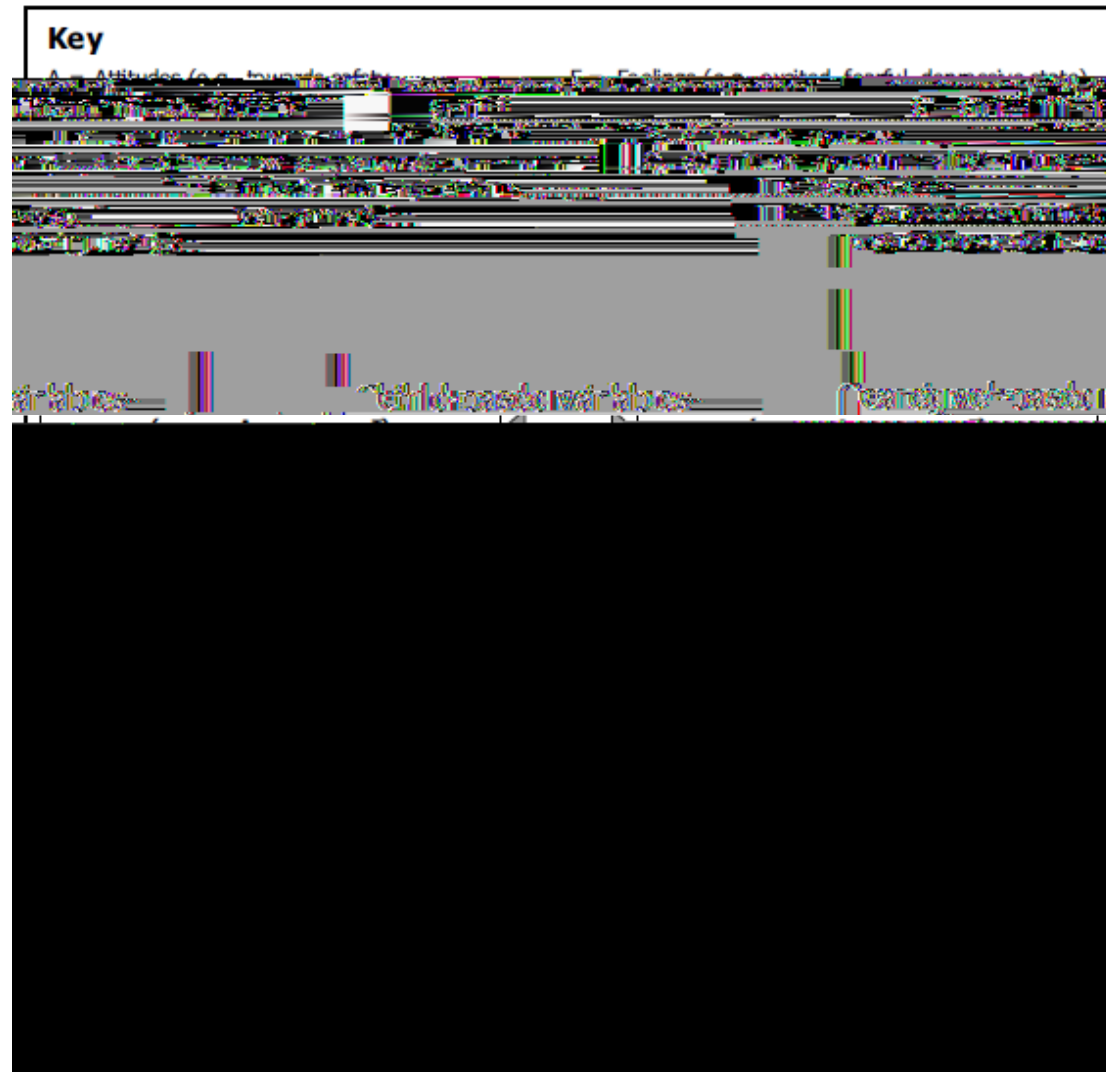
Source: Ruiz-Casares, M. & Heymann, J., 2009

# Theoretical framework: Inadequate supervision & risk of harm



Source: Ruiz-Casares, 2009

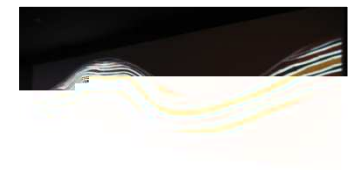
# Child-injury risk: Model of interactions



Source: Morrongiello, 2005

# Lack of Supervision across Canada: Children in the Welfare System

Ruiz-Casares, M. & Trocmé, N., *Supervisory Neglect and Risk of Harm: Evidence From the Canadian Child Welfare System*  
(under review)

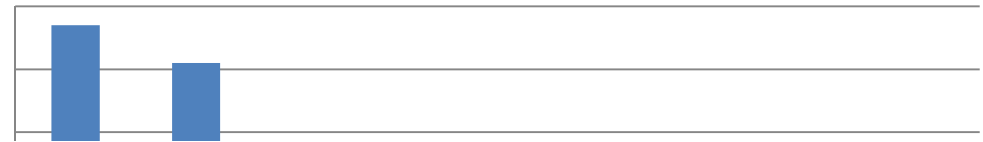




# The Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse & Neglect (2003)

- **Sample: 11,562 investigations outside of Québec, involving children 15 years**
  - Primary substantiated investigations, except domestic violence (n = 4,064)
- **Information from investigating workers**
  - Alleged maltreatment: physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, emotional maltreatment and exposure to domestic violence. (3 forms, 3 levels of substantiation)
  - Child info
  - Family & caregiver info
  - Investigation-related info
- **Harm & substantial risk of harm**

# Supervisory Neglect in the CIS-2003





# Supervisory Neglect in the CIS-2003

- Profile of cases:
  - Female-headed households (44%)
  - Younger caregivers (41%)
  - Moved once last year (20%)
  - Children: younger and fewer health, behavioral, or functional issues
  - Inadequate housing conditions (11%)
  - Occurred only once (36%)

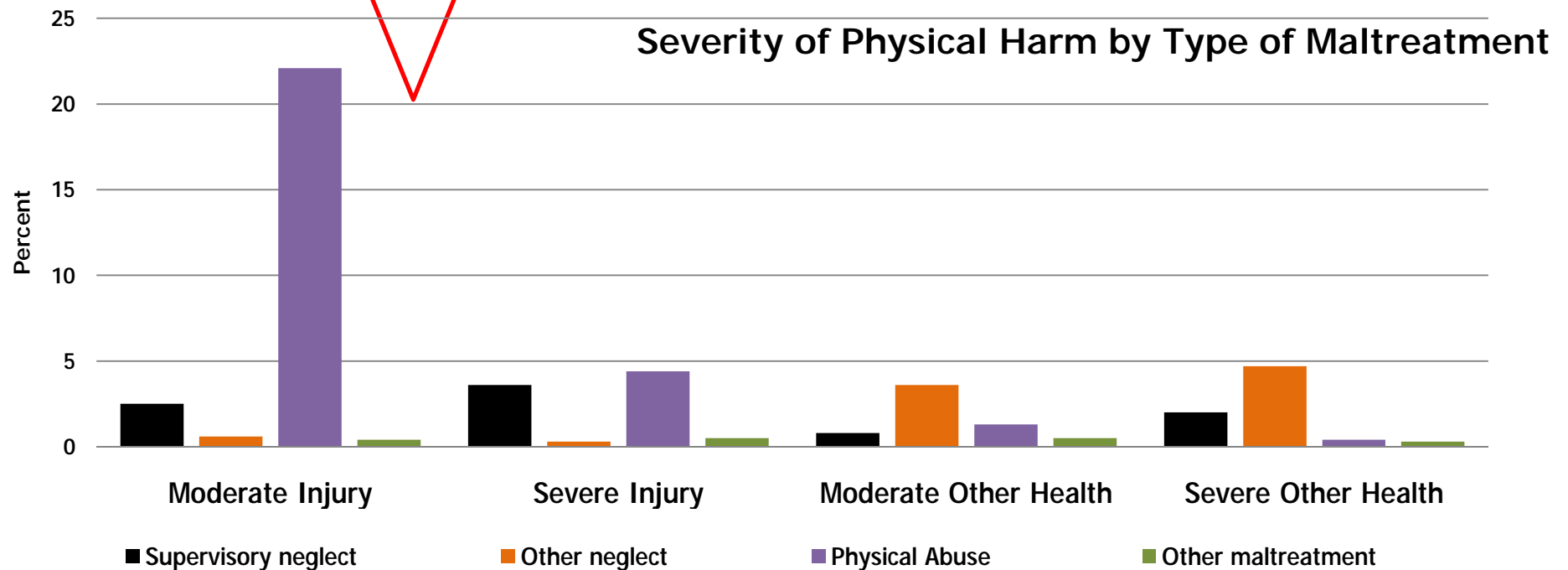
# Harm in Supervisory Neglect Cases

## • Physical Harm

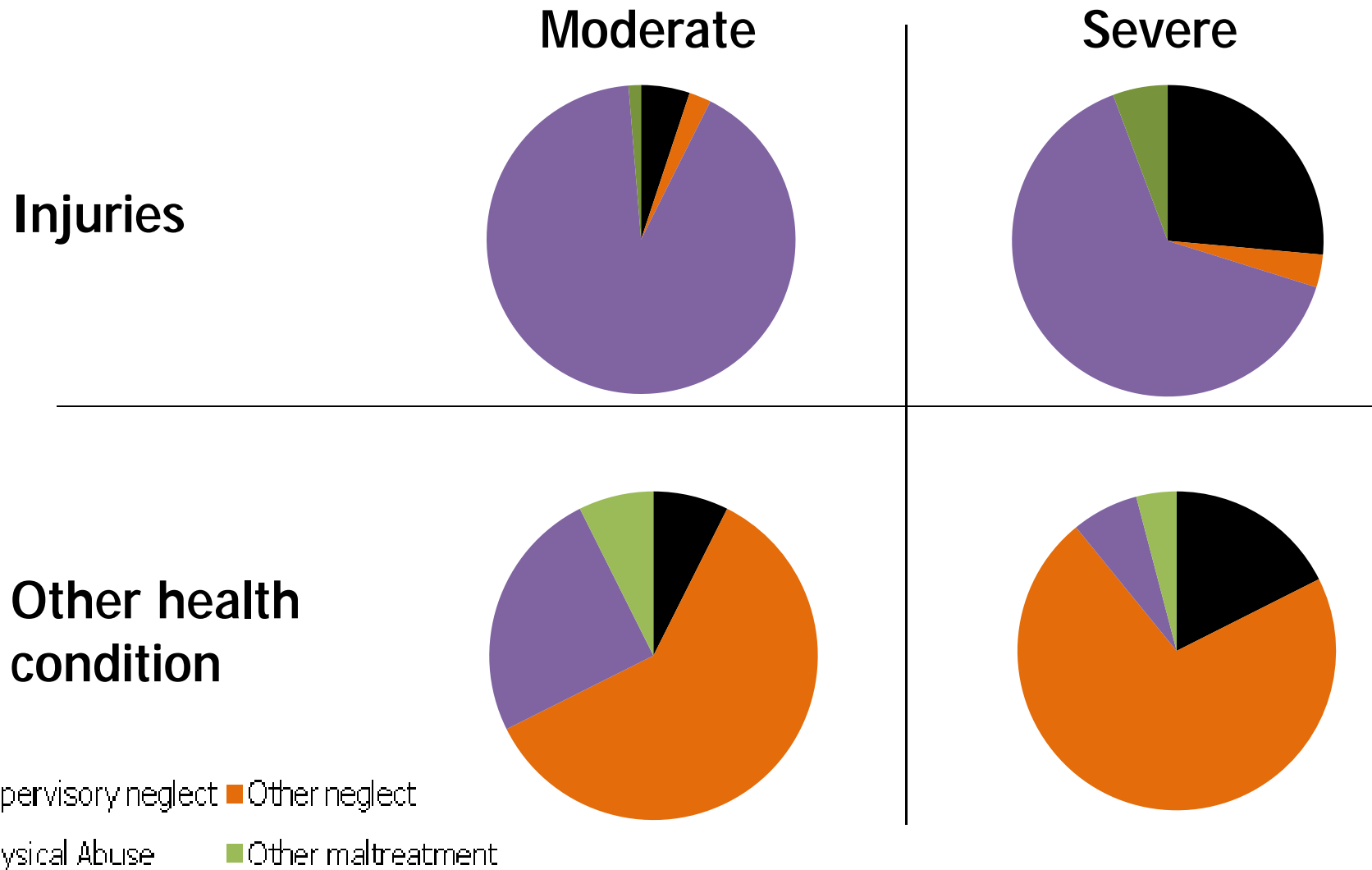
- 91.4% No harm
- 5.9% medical treatment
- 31.8% Health/safety endangered

## • Mental/Emotional Harm

- 83.8% No harm
- 14.7% medical treatment
- 25.9% no signs, harm probable



# Physical Harm by Type of Maltreatment



## Context

- Housing
- Not moved

# Child Welfare System ResH'NI Ax(I (A



# Limitations

- 

—

# Implications for policy, practice, & research

- Develop clear guidelines for assessment of Supervisory Neglect
- Alternative or differential response for low-risk cases.
  -



# Study overview

- **Setting & participants**

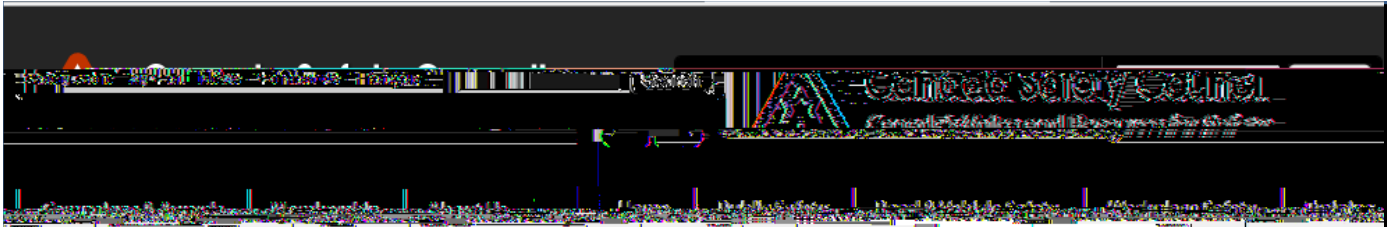
- Quebec context—*Gardiens avertis*

- 42 children in multicultural public school in Montreal

- 12-14 years

- 69% female

- 38% born outside of t0=HHHGxGxG4SHHHHGxGxGc M!mbj• J!



Babysitters' Training Course

Training Courses

ons take part by offering the program across Canada. Some examples  
Boards, Child Care Centres, City Recreation Departments, Native  
City Safety Councils, Canadian Forces Bases, Student Employment

Home → Training

Babysitters

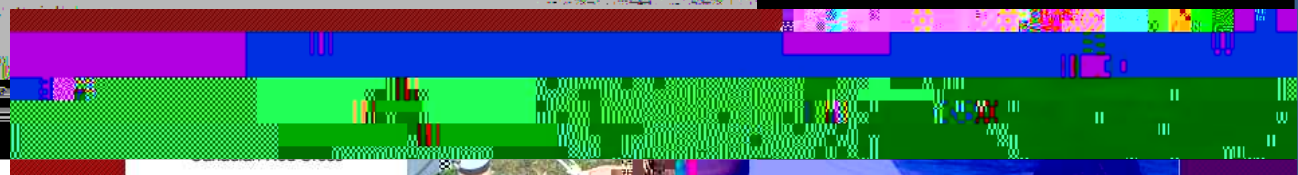
Homebased Training Program

Professional Driver Improvement Courses

Many organizations include School Bands, Commu

55 Alive Driver Refresher Course

Babysitters' Training



Facebook logo

Canada's Safety Skills

Homebased Training Program

Professional Driver Improvement Courses

Many organizations include School Bands, Commu

# Home alone: When & how

- 90% spend time in self-care
- Great variation
  - Frequency
  - Duration
  - Conditions (time of day or week, alone or with sibs)
  - Age & process to begin self-care
    -

# Activities while home alone

# Household responsibilities

- **Reasons**
  - Gratitude
  - Shared responsibility
  - Avoid parental anger
  - Free parents to do other activities/rest
- **Tasks**
  - Laundry
  - Clean/arrange their room
  - Wash dishes
  - Dust/vacuum clean/sweep
  - Clean bathroom
  - Take garbage out
  - Look after/assist younger children & pets



**“When our parents are there, we cannot watch the programs that we want—like very violent programs; we can watch them when they are not there ... or we cannot**



# Risks & opportunities of self-care

	<b>Risks</b>	<b>Opportunities</b>
<b>Education</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Disruption of education/homework</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Learn practical skills &amp; develop self-sufficiency</li></ul>
<b>Physical Wellbeing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Exposure to possible injuries &amp; abuses from strangers</li><li>• Inadequate food</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Protection against abuses from strangers (indoors).</li></ul>
<b>Psychological Wellbeing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Feelings of loneliness, boredom &amp; fear</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Independence, patience, &amp; sense of responsibility</li></ul>
<b>Behavior</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Exposure to negative peer influence</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Assist siblings with homework</li></ul>
<b>Economic &amp; Labor</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Property loss/damage (fire, gas, theft)</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Help with domestic tasks (respite &amp; unpaid care assistance)</li><li>• Allows other household members to work</li></ul>

# Children's emotions

+

- Independence
- Patience
- Responsibility
- Self-sufficiency
- Self-knowledge

-

- Loneliness
- Boredom
- Fear

**“When it's dark/night, it's scary! (...) I put  
music; I turn everything on**

**“Before, my mother used to work at a hospital from 3:00pm till midnight (...). I was with my two half-brothers so we stayed all alone. My step-father was at work—he works late sometimes. We had to stay... sometimes to calm down we played the Nintendo or something else or we told each other jokes or we farted like crazy.”**

**12-year old boy**



# Safety concerns

- **Object**
  - Property
    - Environmental hazards
    - Theft
  - Physical health
    - Kidnapping
    - Harassment/rape
- **Coping & Protection**
  - Safety lock, response to phone, etc
  - Cooking vs. buying food
  - Alone vs. with friends

**“I live in an apartment so there are often false fire alarms; I do not like that. It has happened twice and I was all alone. (...) I am obliged to leave, and besides I had a hamster before, so I had to take him out too.”**

**13-year old girl**

---

# Summary of results

- **Associated factors**
  - Age
  - Family structure & limited support network
- **Outcomes**
  - Household work
  - Healthy immigrant effect
  - Weaknesses & strengths
- **Limitations**
  - Children's views & self-selection
  - Moderating factors



# Implications for research & practice

- Implications for service delivery

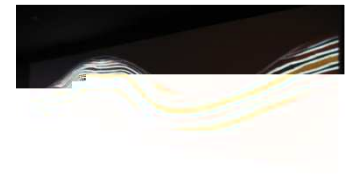
—

# Home Alone Survey

- **Anonymous, self-administered by school children (12-13 years)**
- **Content**
  - Demographics (individual, family, neighbourhood)
  - Experiences of child care & home alone
  - Feelings/satisfaction with home alone
  - Strengths & Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)
  - Supporting children home alone
- **Ethical & methodological challenges**

# Home alone across Canada: Children's perspectives

In collaboration with Kids Help Phone/Jeunesse J'écoute &  
McGill/FRSQ Advisors





# Experiences Home Alone

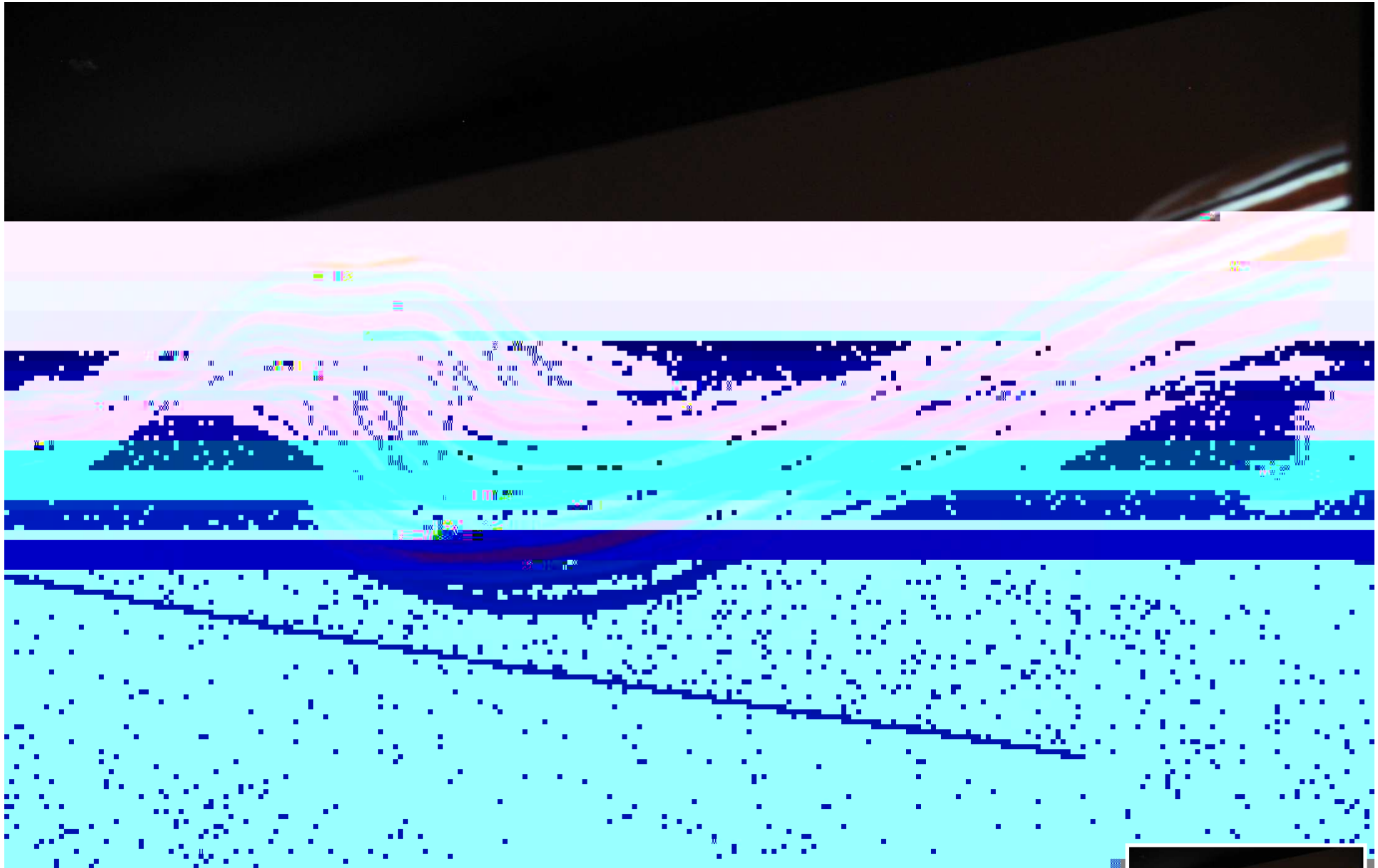
- 4% never home alone
- 1 in 4 home alone since <11 years
- Reasons:
  - Mother (or father) began work outside home
  - Parents were going out
  - Nobody to care for them
- Decision:
  - 41% parents, 37% negotiated, 22% child
  - 15% discuss safety issues with caretakers
- Satisfaction:
  - 37% enjoy being home alone
  - 23% feel lonely or bored

# Ethical & Methodological Challenges

- **Ethics**
    - Anonymity
    - Informed consent & assent
    - Voluntary participation
    - Support
  - **Methodology**
    - Tool capabilities & limitations
    - Sampling hard-to-reach & hidden population
-

## Some Questions to Examine

1. How do individual, family, & environmental factors protect or expose children to harm while home alone?
2. What factors seem to be associated with child satisfaction/coping with self-care?
3. How do children cope with unexpected events, unsatisfied needs, & positive/negative emotions?
4. What can we learn from children's own recommendations to other children?



Contact: [monica.ruizcasares@mail.mcgill.ca](mailto:monica.ruizcasares@mail.mcgill.ca)