Twenty years of research and action for the well-being of children

Marie-Andrée Poirier, PhD,¹ Marie-Ève Clément, PhD,² Sarah Dufour, PhD,³ Jacques Moreau, PhD¹

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The rates of child maltreatment and family violence are such that these problems are increasingly recognized worldwide as significant public health problems.¹ In Canada, over the last 15 years, studies have allowed us to follow the development of indicators of child abuse and neglect. The most recent Canadian incidence study showed that 14 children in 1,000 were identified as victims following an evaluation of youth protection services in 2008; in Québec the rate was 11 children per 1,000 during the same period.^{2,3} These rates do not include children considered 'at risk', nor victims of coercive parental conduct who are not brought to the attention of the authorities. In these cases, data from population-based surveys reveal rates 10 to 20 times higher, depending on the types of violence reported.⁴

Alarming in its scale, child maltreatment leads to many, well-documented consequences, both physical and psychosocial.⁵ In spite of increased awareness, however, it remains difficult, even impossible, to determine its exact causes. Nowadays, theoretical models postulate that these various events have multiple, interrelated and cumulative causes.⁶ In this respect, ecological and transactional approaches suggest taking into consideration the mutual influence of a number of factors, including the characteristics of the child, the parents, the parent-child relationships, living conditions and the broader social environment.⁷

Recognition of the scope of the child maltreatment, its impacts and its etiological complexity has given rise, over the last several decades, to the adoption of a public health approach in order to grasp the problem as a whole. Public health has influenced a lot of research in the field of family violence, whether it be the definition and monitoring of the scope of the problem, the identification of its causes, the development and assessment of possible preventive actions or the implementation of preventive and curative interventions based on research results.^{8,9} Between 1992 and 2012, a team in Québec made up of researchers, clinicians and stakeholders worked to implement such an approach by creating GRAVE (*Groupe de recherche et d'action sur la victimisation des enfants*), a research and action group on child victimization.

GRAVE: Its history and the findings of its labours

GRAVE was created by Camil Bouchard (UQÀM) in 1992, thanks to the financial support of the *Conseil québécois de la recherche sociale*

(CQRS). Over the years, leadership of the team has been taken in turns by Gérard Malcuit (UQAM), Claire Chamberland and Marie-Andrée Poirier (Université de Montréal). For 20 years, the team benefited from many renewals of infrastructure financing through the grants programs of CQRS (which became FQRSC) and in 1998 it changed from a partnership team to a university institute team with the integration of its research program with the victimization branch of the Centre de recherche du Centre Jeunesse de Montréal – Institut universitaire (CJM-IU). GRAVE also maintains close links with the Direction de la santé publique Montréal-Centre in order to pursue another essential aspect of its mission, that being the promotion of the optimal development of children and the prevention of family violence and child victimization.

GRAVE's programming was organized around two principal axes: UNDERSTANDING and ACTING. The first axis integrated epidemiological and etiological research undertaken through at-risk and clinical population samplings in order to produce knowledge on the status and the developmental conditions of vulnerable children and on their victimization profile. The second axis brought together evaluative research aimed at producing knowledge on the implementation and effectiveness of practices, programs and social innovations aimed at promoting the optimal development of vulnerable children or victims and to counter the effects of the aftermaths resulting from victimization.

Overall, research undertaken by the team has allowed Québec and Canada to benefit from sound inquiries, financed in a regular manner, showing the magnitude and factors associated with the victimization of children that is seen in those followed by the protective services, or in the general population.¹⁰ This work has contributed significantly to current thinking on epidemiological issues in the study of victimization, such as the recurrence of maltreatment following a placement, as well as specific demonstrations of violence like corporal punishment, parental alienation and emotional maltreatment.^{11–13}

The ecological approach that underpins the work of GRAVE has also cleared the way for a constructivist reading of the

Author Affiliations

1. École de service social, Université de Montréal, Montréal (Québec)
2. Département de psychoéducation et de psychologie, Université du Québec en Outaouais, Saint-Jérôme (Québec)
3. École de psychoéducation, Université de Montréal, Montréal (Québec)

mistreatment phenomenon, meaning research approaches that seek an understanding of the point of view of the players in question (children, parents, stakeholders). In this sense, many works have allowed us to better understand the complex needs of victimized or at-risk children and their parents, as well as the family and environmental conditions that influence the exercise of the parental role.^{14,15} With respect to the exercising of the parental role, the work has, among other things, allowed us to make several findings regarding conditions that support parental involvement, life contexts and routes of fathers followed in youth protection, and the family-service needs coming from cultural minorities or recent immigration.^{16,17}

The findings arising from the work incorporated in the first axis of the GRAVE program have given us food for thought with regard to an integrated and comprehensive offer of service in response to the complex needs of vulnerable or maltreated children as well as their parents. Over the 20 years of GRAVE's history, researchers have carried out many social-innovation and practice-evaluation projects. In this respect, we should highlight the development of two projects that are inspired by the British reference framework on the analysis of children's needs. The Canadian project "Looking after Children" (CanLAC) has, for 10 years, been involved in addressing the developmental needs of children placed in care throughout Québec.¹⁸ For its part, the AIDES initiative (*Action intersectorielle pour le développement des enfants et leur sécurité*) proposes a model of cooperation among organizations in the health and social services network, offering services to children exposed to a number of risk factors, whether or not they are brought to the attention of the youth protection service.¹⁹

Over the last few years, the work of GRAVE suggests that services intended for at-risk and mistreated children have reached their limits. The findings of the team, in this regard, are numerous; such as the need for better alignment between prevention services and protection services.^{7,15} In youth protection, the organization of services, by specific form of maltreatment, must be reviewed since it alone does not suffice to identify the overall needs of families.²⁰ Fathers in great distress have few services to which they can be referred.²¹ Last, intervention for the protection of children in certain specific populations, such as parents with a borderline personality disorder and visible-minority families, presents multiple challenges which must be taken into account.^{17,22}

This special edition of the *Canadian Journal of Public Health* presents works led by team researchers who demonstrate the will of GRAVE to understand and to act on child situations that are upstream and downstream from the child victimization phenomenon.

In their article dealing with the epidemiology of family violence, Clément, Chamberland and Bouchard offer a portrait of violence towards children as gleaned from large-scale population studies carried out over the last number of years. Hélie and Trocmé, with the help of the Québec incidence study on assessed reports on youth protection in 2008 (ÉIQ-2008), detail the breadth and the characteristics of the children who were the subject of an evaluation under the youth protection act (*Loi de la protection de la jeunesse*). In their article, Dufour and Laverne tackle the phenomenon of the disproportionate

reporting to youth protection of children from racialized groups (or visible minorities) and the relative contribution of various territorial characteristics. Lebrun and collaborators reveal, for their part, the results of a systematic review of the literature on understanding the phenomenon of mistreatment in immigrant families. These works have been selected because they demonstrate the scope of the works carried out by GRAVE's researchers with regard to the epidemiology of child maltreatment and the new issues encountered in the understanding of this phenomenon.

This special issue also presents the results of the evaluation of various practices aimed at the optimal development and protection of children. Laverne, Turcotte and Morissette discussed the benefits of an initiative based on an inter-agency cooperation aimed at creating a mobilization for changing new and future substance-abusing mothers and their partners. Guay, Laurin, Bigras and Fournier looked at the effects of attending an education service (daycare and four-year-old nursery school) on child development and their differentiated effect on children from less-favoured and more-favoured milieus. Furthermore, Turcotte and Chamberland's article presents some thoughts on the effects of the MAP (mothers with power) initiative, a multi-target and multi-strategy action aimed at encouraging the social and professional insertion of young female heads of single-parent families with young children. Last, Clément et al. present the results of a study on the integration of community social-pediatric centres into the public and community social-services network, for children and families in vulnerable situations. This research that deals with social innovations for the optimal development of children was used because it illustrates, in an exemplary way, the vision that GRAVE has pursued over the course of its history... that is to say, interventions on behalf of children and families which focus on broader inter-sectoral cooperation.

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