

Child Protection Australia 2006–07

“The number of children requiring protection continued to rise in 2006–07”

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare

In Australia, child protection is a state and territory government responsibility, and child safety and wellbeing issues are increasingly being recognised by governments as a core policy area. Community awareness of child protection issues has also been increasing, particularly in light of a number of inquiries into child protection services that have generated media and public interest in this area.

Child Protection Australia is published annually by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) to inform both governments and the community on the activity of departments responsible for child protection across Australia. This article summarises key findings from the latest report in the series, *Child Protection Australia 2006–07*.

The child protection process

Although there are differences between states and territories that affect the comparability of child protection data, the main stages of the process are broadly similar across jurisdictions.

Incidents or suspected cases of child abuse and neglect are usually reported to government departments. Reports most frequently come from health or welfare professionals, teachers or the police (who, in some jurisdictions, are mandated to report such matters).

Reports of suspected abuse or neglect can lead to the matter being dealt with as a family support issue (whereupon services or information will be provided) or as a child protection notification. Departments then determine if a notification requires an investigation or is better dealt with by other means, such as referral to other organisations or family support services. If an investigation is carried out, the outcome can be a substantiation, meaning that the investigating authority concludes that the child has been, is being or is likely to be abused, neglected or otherwise harmed. Substantiations can (but do not always) lead to a child being placed on a care and protection order and/or in out-of-home care. In some jurisdictions, children can also be placed on a care and protection order or in out-of-home care for other reasons, such as when the parent(s) are unable to care for a child due to illness, disability, incarceration or death.

Main findings of *Child Protection Australia 2006–07*

Over the last few years, what is defined as child abuse or neglect has widened in some jurisdictions (e.g., in Tasmania, legislation defining “a child in need of protection” was amended in 2004 to include children affected by domestic violence). Broader definitions of what legally constitutes “a child in need of protection” may have led to an increase in notifications, investigations and substantiations. A rise in the number of children requiring protection, a greater community awareness of child abuse and neglect issues, and changes in child protection policies and practices may also be contributing factors to such increases.

On the other hand, many jurisdictions have introduced alternative responses (e.g. family support services) for the less serious incidents, which assist in containing the rise in the number of notifications, investigations and substantiations.

With the many differences in the way each state or territory handles and reports child protection issues, one must interpret relevant statistical information with caution. But, on balance, the evidence in *Child Protection Australia 2006–07* suggests that, nationally, substantiations and the number and rates of children under care and protection orders and children in out-of-home care are rising. Despite data limitations, the available evidence shows very clearly that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are over-represented in all of these areas.

Notifications, investigations and substantiations

As noted above, the numbers of notifications of child abuse or neglect, and subsequent investigations and substantiations, are on the rise in Australia.

- The number of child protection notifications increased by more than 50% over the last five years, from 198,355 in 2002–03 to 309,517 in 2006–07. However, it should be noted that increases are not uniform across the states and territories, and the percentage increase is somewhat driven by the contribution of larger jurisdictions.
- The number of substantiations of notifications increased for most jurisdictions over the last five years. Nationally, the number increased by 45% from 40,416 in 2002–03 to 58,563 in 2006–07.
- Rates of children aged 0–16 years who were the subject of a substantiation of a notification received in 2006–07 varied considerably across jurisdictions (from 2.4 to 9.3 per 1,000 children), reflecting differences in policy and practice.
- Although the quality of the data on Indigenous status varies between states and territories, overall, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were approximately 5 times more likely to be the subject of a substantiation as non-Indigenous children.

Children on care and protection orders

The number of children under care and protection orders continues to rise nationally. However, there are substantial differences between the states and territories.

- The number of children under care and protection orders rose by 87% from 15,718 at 30 June 1997 to 29,406 at 30 June 2007.
- The rates of children on care and protection orders in Australia increased from 3.3 per 1,000 at 30 June 1997 to 6.0 per 1,000 at 30 June 2007.
- At 30 June 2007, the rates of children aged 0–17 years per 1,000 on care and protection orders varied across jurisdictions. Victoria, Western Australia and South Australia were at the low end of the range (5.2, 5.2 and 5.4 per 1,000 children respectively), while Tasmania and the Australian Capital Territory were at the higher end (7.6 and 7.5 per 1,000 children respectively).
- Across Australia, the rates of Indigenous children on care and protection orders were more than 7 times higher than the rates for other children.

Children in out-of-home care

The number of children in out-of-home care at 30 June has risen each year over the last 11 years.

- The numbers in out-of-home care rose by 102% from 14,078 at 30 June 1997 to 28,441 at 30 June 2007, with an increase of 12% in the past year (30 June 2006 to 30 June 2007).
- The rate of children in out-of-home care in Australia increased from 3.0 per 1,000 at 30 June 1997 to 5.8 per 1,000 at 30 June 2007.
- At 30 June 2007, the rates of children in out-of-home care ranged from 4.3 per 1,000 in Victoria to 7.3 per 1,000 in New South Wales. Across Australia, 50% of children in care were in foster care, 44% were in relative or kinship care and only 4% were in residential care.
- The rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care was over 8 times the rate of other children.

In the future, it is hoped that new developments in the data, such as the ability to determine the pathways of children through child protection services, will enable the *Child Protection Australia* series to contain even more information of both policy and public interest.

Child Protection Australia 2006–07 was released on 23 January 2008 and is available as a free download from the AIHW website: www.aihw.gov.au

Child Protection Australia is prepared by the [Children, Youth and Families Unit at the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare](#). For more information about the report or the child protection data, contact Cynthia Kim, Head of the Children, Youth and Families Unit at the AIHW (02 6244 1213).