

# Analysis: Results and Discussion

A total of 135 research projects that met the criteria were included in the audit.<sup>4</sup> These are listed in Appendix B. As well as identifying the title of the project, other key information is also listed to enable matching with publications arising from the audit, as listed in Appendix C. These include: the name of the key contact person, other investigators, current status (completed/ongoing), and project identification number.

Research questions addressed in this audit are described below under five key topics:

- Coverage;
- Research Infrastructure;
- Methodology;
- Productivity; and
- Findings.

## A. Coverage

### 1. Number of research projects examining each type of abuse or neglect

Researchers currently talk about five different types of child maltreatment: (a) sexual abuse; (b) physical abuse; (c) psychological maltreatment – including emotional abuse and psychological neglect; (d) physical neglect; and, more recently, (e) witnessing family violence. Respondents to the audit were asked to select which of these five types of maltreatment were addressed in their research. They could select either one type (if their project was exclusively focused on a particular form of abuse or neglect), or multiple types. If the research was generic or addressed the five forms of maltreatment, respondents could select all five (the number of projects assessing each type therefore sum to more than 100%). Of the 135 projects included in the audit, the total number of research projects for each maltreatment type is described in Table 1.

Maltreatment type(s):	Number of research projects:	
	<i>n</i>	%
Physical abuse	114	84.4
Sexual abuse	111	82.2
Psychological maltreatment	108	80.0
Neglect (physical)	106	78.5
Witnessing family violence	84	62.2
All 5 maltreatment types	73	54.1

In just over half of the research projects (54 per cent) all five maltreatment types were addressed. In the remaining 62 projects (46 per cent), either one type or, most commonly, a combination of two, three or four maltreatment types were addressed. The area that received the least attention was children's exposure to domestic or family violence.

The inclusion of all maltreatment types may be seen as a reflection of the maturity of the child protection research community in Australia. Internationally, child maltreatment research has

4 As of 12 July 2005, there were 141 completed submissions to the audit. Of these, two projects did not commence within the specified time frame and therefore were excluded, and 14 projects had one or more of the 'exclusion criteria' marked as 'yes' but were still submitted. Of these 14, just four projects were deemed unsuitable for inclusion within the audit and were removed. The remaining 10 projects had the (exclusion) criteria altered to reflect their correct status for inclusion. A final total of 135 suitable projects were included in the audit.

developed considerably over the past 40 years since the issues came to public recognition with the publication of the first paper on physical abuse in 1962 (Kempe, Silverman, Steele, Droegmueller and Silver 1962). In the past two decades in particular, extensive attention has been given to evaluating the prevalence and impact of childhood experiences of sexual abuse (Rind, Tromovitch and Bauserman 1998) and, to a lesser extent, physical abuse and physical neglect (Malinosky-Rummell and Hansen 1993). More recently, attention has been directed to understanding the nature, prevalence, and consequences of psychological maltreatment (Briere and Runtz 1990; O'Hagan 1995) and of witnessing family violence during childhood (Parkinson and Humphreys 1998).

At first glance, it appears that all types of maltreatment are being addressed in research on the prevention of child abuse and neglect. As we note later, however, when the content of the results and implications are analysed, a different picture can be seen, with some evidence of a greater focus on sexual abuse than other forms of abuse. This is consistent with a general societal prioritisation of issues concerning sexual abuse, compared with other maltreatment types (Higgins 2004). Given that respondents selected the maltreatment types that their research addressed, it may also be the case that the inclusion of all maltreatment types in more than half of the projects could reflect a failure on the part of respondents to adequately differentiate the maltreatment types that were addressed.

There is a growing body of evidence to show that maltreatment sub-types do not occur independently and that a significant proportion of maltreated individuals experience not only repeated episodes of one type of maltreatment, but are likely to be the victim of other forms of abuse or neglect (Higgins 2004; Higgins and McCabe 2000; McGee, Wolfe and Wilson 1997; Ney, Fung and Wickett 1994).

The term “multi-type maltreatment” can be used to describe the experience of those who have experienced abusive or neglectful behaviours in more than one of the five categories mentioned (Higgins and McCabe 2000). Children from “depriving” families experience the deprivation of parental/caregiver love and protection in multiple ways. In the past, researchers have typically examined each of the maltreatment sub-types in isolation, with little attempt to evaluate their coexistence or the long-term correlates of experiencing multiple types of maltreatment (Rosenberg 1987). In contrast, the findings from the current audit would suggest that research being done in the *prevention and early intervention fields* in Australia may be more holistic than research looking at the *long-term impact of abuse*. This reflects the reality that very often, parents' (or other adults') negative behaviours fall into more than one category of maltreatment, and so prevention efforts need to address the variety of ways in which children are at risk of harm.

## **2. Number of projects addressing different topics**

Table 2 provides a summary of the number of projects identified against each of the 18 topic categories on the audit form. Researchers were asked to nominate which type (or types) of abuse or neglect their research addressed (as described above). These are cross-tabulated against the research topic summary, to provide a comprehensive view of the range of topics and maltreatment types that have been covered.

The most important point is that there is no one topic, nor a single maltreatment type that has been ignored. The most frequent research output is in the form of policy analysis or government reports. At one level, this looks promising: it is important for the research community not only to generate empirical data, but to also use existing documents, policy statements and practices as a unit of analysis. On closer examination, however, much of the output here can be attributed to internal research reports generated by the state and territory governments responsible for the child protection systems in Australia. Relative to the expenditure on child protection and related services, this does not reflect a high level of research activity (38 projects over ten years across 8 states and territories).

The second most frequent topic is evaluation of prevention programs for children. In all, 35 research projects focused on evaluation of a program aimed at preventing one or more type of abuse or neglect. Almost half of the research projects (17 out of 35) were evaluations of prevention programs that addressed all five maltreatment types.

Another key focus of research activity is on the identification of risk factors for child maltreatment ( $n = 31$ ) and community or professional attitudes to child abuse and neglect ( $n = 31$ ). These are key

elements for understanding the causes of maltreatment, and the best ways to intervene. A thorough evidence-base in these two areas will position future activities in designing prevention programs, and addressing obstacles to implementation of prevention efforts.

The topics with the smallest number of respondents indicating their research addressed this issue are:

- child-focused programs within adult-oriented services (e.g., sexual assault, domestic violence or substance abuse services) ( $n = 9$ );
- community education programs ( $n = 8$ );
- treatment of adult offenders (e.g., perpetrators of child physical or sexual abuse) ( $n = 9$ ); and
- treatment of adolescent offenders ( $n = 7$ ).

It should be noted that in relation to program evaluation, the level of research may or may not be proportional to the size of the service sector or the number of programs addressing this issue. Any judgments about the number of research projects should therefore be judged within the context of the size of the service sector (e.g., the number of programs). However, another dimension is the importance of the issue, and the capacity of quality research to inform programs and services that are likely to have a significant impact on the incidence of child abuse and neglect.

The lack of research submitted to the audit on child-focused programs within adult-oriented services may mean that children are rendered invisible within many adult-focused services. An important area for future research is the capacity for those providing services for adults to be aware of the presence of children in the lives of their adult clients, to tailor specific child-focused services to address their needs, and to incorporate rigorous evaluation to document the efficacy of such services.

	Maltreatment Types Addressed						TOTAL
	Sexual Abuse	Physical Abuse	Psychological Abuse	Physical Neglect	Witnessing family violence	All maltreatment types	
<b>Program evaluation</b>							
Prevention programs for children	24	32	30	29	20	17	35
Tertiary intervention programs for child victims	18	16	17	15	14	12	20
Child-focused programs within adult-oriented services	8	7	7	7	6	6	9
Family support programs	19	26	26	25	18	18	28
Parent education programs	9	18	18	18	13	9	20
Community education programs	4	7	7	7	5	4	8
Statutory Child Protection Services	20	19	18	19	11	11	20
Specialist/innovative Child Protection Service programs	17	21	20	19	17	15	21
<b>Other Child Protection Research</b>							
Reporting abuse & neglect	18	16	13	15	9	9	18
Approaches to risk assessment	21	19	15	17	11	10	24
Identification of risk factors for child maltreatment	27	25	21	22	20	18	31
Community & professional attitudes to child abuse & neglect	25	24	21	22	18	15	31
Prevalence/incidence of abuse & neglect	15	16	14	14	10	7	21
Methodological/theoretical issues in the measurement or prevention	18	19	17	16	15	13	24
Treatment of adult offenders	9	4	4	4	3	3	9
Treatment of adolescent offenders	7	5	5	5	4	4	7
Customer service surveys of specific prevention programs or services	12	11	10	11	10	9	13
Policy analysis or government reports	36	35	33	33	26	24	38

### 3. Changes in the focus over the 10 years (1995-2004)

To see whether there has been any 'developmental' shift in the focus of research across the 10 years covered by the audit, the number of projects commencing prior to 1995, as well as those projects that commenced between 1995 and 1997 were compared with those commencing recently (2001-2004). Projects where no commencement date was listed were excluded from this analysis. The total number of projects with a valid commencement date listed was 96 (71% of total sample). The cross-tabulations described in Table 2 were re-calculated for projects commenced prior and including 1997 ( $n = 28$ ; 29%), and again for projects that commenced between 2001 and 2004 ( $n = 40$ ; 42%).

Table 3 shows the breakdown of projects commenced prior and including 1997. Comparing the proportion of projects for each topic with those identified in Table 4 (which shows projects that commenced between 2001 and 2004), a number of similarities and differences can be identified.

Projects commencing recently (2001-2004) appear to have a slightly different focus: there were more projects focused on the evaluation of tertiary intervention programs, on child-focused programs within adult services, as well as family support, parent education and community education programs. In contrast, there were fewer projects commencing in 2001 or later evaluating the treatment of adult offenders compared with those projects commencing prior to 1997.

Table 3: Research commenced prior to and including 1997 (N = 28)							
	Maltreatment Types Addressed						TOTAL
	Sexual Abuse	Physical Abuse	Psychological Abuse	Physical Neglect	Witnessing family violence	All maltreatment types	
<b>Program evaluation</b>							
Prevention programs for children	5	6	5	5	3	3	6
Tertiary intervention programs for child victims	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Child-focused programs within adult-oriented services	2	1	0	1	0	0	2
Family support programs	1	3	3	3	2	1	3
Parent education programs	0	1	1	1	0	0	1
Community education programs	0	1	1	1	0	0	1
Statutory Child Protection Services	5	5	4	5	1	1	5
Specialist/innovative Child Protection Service programs	3	4	4	4	4	3	4
<b>Other Child Protection Research</b>							
Reporting abuse & neglect	7	6	3	5	2	2	7
Approaches to risk assessment	6	6	3	4	3	2	7
Identification of risk factors for child maltreatment	10	9	6	7	5	4	11
Community & professional attitudes to child abuse & neglect	7	6	3	5	3	2	8
Prevalence/incidence of abuse & neglect	5	6	5	4	3	2	7
Methodological/theoretical issues in measurement or prevention	5	6	5	3	3	2	7
Treatment of adult offenders	6	2	2	2	1	1	6
Treatment of adolescent offenders	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Customer service surveys of specific prevention programs or services	4	4	3	4	3	3	4
Policy analysis or government reports	5	4	3	3	2	1	5

#### *Audit responses compared with literature search results*

Table 5 provides a summary of the publications identified from the literature searches compared with those identified by those responding to the audit, using the same cross-tabulation of maltreatment types and topics. (The projects submitted to the audit often had more than one

Table 4: Research commenced between 2001 and 2004 (N = 40)

	Maltreatment Types Addressed						TOTAL
	Sexual Abuse	Physical Abuse	Psychological Abuse	Physical Neglect	Witnessing family violence	All maltreatment types	
<b>Program evaluation</b>							
Prevention programs for children	4	9	9	9	7	4	10
Tertiary intervention programs for child victims	4	3	4	2	4	2	6
Child-focused programs within adult-oriented services	4	4	5	4	4	4	5
Family support programs	6	8	9	8	5	5	10
Parent education programs	3	9	9	9	7	3	11
Community education programs	2	4	4	4	3	2	5
Statutory Child Protection Services	4	4	4	4	3	3	4
Specialist/innovative Child Protection Service programs	2	3	3	3	3	2	3
<b>Other Child Protection Research</b>							
Reporting abuse & neglect	6	5	5	5	4	4	6
Approaches to risk assessment	6	5	5	5	3	3	7
Identification of risk factors for child maltreatment	7	6	6	6	6	6	7
Community & professional attitudes to child abuse & neglect	12	12	13	12	10	9	14
Prevalence/incidence of abuse & neglect	5	3	4	4	4	3	6
Methodological/theoretical issues in measurement or prevention	6	5	5	5	5	5	6
Treatment of adult offenders	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Treatment of adolescent offenders	3	2	2	2	2	2	3
Customer service surveys of specific prevention programs or services	5	4	4	4	4	4	5
Policy analysis or government report	7	6	6	6	5	5	7

publication associated with them; however, it is not known whether each publication identified in this literature search is related to a discrete project, or whether there are multiple publications arising from some projects.). Comparing the results shown in Table 2 (audit response) and Table 5 (literature search), proportionately, publications identified in the literature search were more often focused on statutory child protection services, community and professional attitudes to child abuse and neglect; and policy analysis or government reports. The proportion of publications from the literature focused on parent education programs was lower than in audit responses, suggesting that studies in this area may be primarily for in-house use and that publishing in academic journals is not a high priority for service delivery organisations.

**Table 5: Types of research publications from literature search by type of maltreatment (N = 353)**

	Maltreatment Types Addressed						TOTAL
	Sexual Abuse	Physical Abuse	Psychological Abuse	Physical Neglect	Witnessing family violence	All maltreatment types	
<b>Program evaluation</b>							
Prevention programs for children	19	13	13	14	13	13	20
Tertiary intervention programs for child victims	26	13	16	10	13	10	30
Child-focused programs within adult-oriented services	10	9	7	7	11	7	13
Family support programs	34	33	32	32	34	32	36
Parent education programs	6	6	6	6	6	6	6
Community education programs	13	12	12	12	12	12	13
Statutory Child Protection Services	79	76	74	74	74	74	82
Specialist/innovative Child Protection Service programs	14	15	14	15	16	14	17
<b>Other Child Protection Research</b>							
Reporting abuse & neglect	29	24	24	24	24	24	30
Approaches to risk assessment	22	19	19	19	20	19	23
Identification of risk factors for child maltreatment	45	41	38	39	39	38	48
Community & professional attitudes to child abuse & neglect	56	45	42	42	42	42	61
Prevalence/incidence of abuse & neglect	33	26	25	25	25	25	34
Methodological/theoretical issues in measurement or prevention	30	29	28	28	30	28	35
Treatment of adult offenders	11	2	2	2	3	2	11
Treatment of adolescent offenders	8	2	2	2	2	2	8
Customer service surveys of specific prevention programs or services	19	15	15	15	15	15	19
Policy analysis or government reports	65	49	49	49	51	49	67

## B. Research infrastructure and funding

### 4. Geographic breakdown of location of research

Table 6 provides a state-by-state breakdown of the location of each research project and clearly indicates that Queensland was the state with the greatest number of respondents to the audit, especially from government departments. One possible explanation for this is that it reflects a serious commitment to child protection research by a state that has come under criticism from internal reviews (such as the Crime and Misconduct Commission (CMC) report), and has undergone significant restructuring. The audit data did not, however, provide us with evidence of whether or not the CMC has affected the level of child protection research. Of the 54 Queensland-based projects, 15 were listed as commencing prior to 2003 (when the CMC was underway) and four projects as starting in 2003-4, with an additional 11 ongoing projects without a listed commencement date. Thirty-five audit entries were missing significant details, including commencement dates, so it is not possible to conclude that the CMC has driven significantly more child protection research in Queensland.

It was not within the scope of the audit to investigate, but based on the descriptions provided in their responses, a number of audit entries also appear to be policy or service system reform documents *per se*, rather than *research analysis* of policies or government reports.

Queensland is the only state with a department exclusively focused on child safety. All other states or territories have their child protection functions located within a broader department of human or community services (Bromfield and Higgins 2005). Although this may have influenced the results, it could