

particular publication type, given that projects could have resulted in multiple publication outputs (e.g., two or three journal articles based on the one research project).

In addition to the publication outputs, respondents were also asked to list the total number of conference presentations made concerning the research. In total, respondents indicated that 194 conference presentations were made. These were counted separately from 'conference proceedings', which refer to papers in refereed or edited conference proceedings; however, examination of the details of the outputs revealed that some respondents listed as a 'conference paper' what appears to be an oral presentation only.

Table 15: Publication types - frequencies for completed projects

Publication type	Completed projects (n = 101)		All projects (n = 135)	
	Projects*	Output**	Projects*	Output**
Peer-reviewed journal articles	32	53	37	62
Conference Proceedings	23	42	26	47
Books/book-chapters	16	23	18	27
Government Reports	15	17	16	18
Other (university theses and other projects not within other categories)	10	12	11	13
NGO/Agency Reports	11	11	12	12

Note: Number of completed projects = 101, Number of projects underway = 34
 * refers to number of projects where publication type occurred
 ** refers to total output publications from projects

All publications identified from projects included in the audit are listed in Appendix C. These have not been significantly edited or had any exclusion criteria applied. The quality of this listing highlights the problematic nature of a self-report audit, as a number of these 'publications' appear to be conference presentations (rather than papers published in conference proceedings), or lack crucial details. As well as identifying the publication, a project identification number is also listed to enable matching publications with specific projects, as listed in Appendix B. This will be useful if readers wish to contact the researchers about a particular publication.

15. Projects addressing Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander issues

Respondents were asked to indicate whether their sample included Indigenous participants, non-Indigenous participants, or both. Five projects (3.7 per cent) were listed as having an Indigenous sample. Thirty-eight projects (28.1 per cent) were listed as having an exclusively non-Indigenous sample. Ninety-two projects (68.1 per cent) selected "both" (respondents did not have a choice to leave this question blank, as using an electronic pull-down menu on the audit required this field to be completed). Unless researchers had specifically excluded Indigenous people as part of their recruitment strategy, this is the option they would most likely select, even if their samples were unlikely to have included Indigenous people. This was a consequence of the method of answering the question using the online pull-down menu, which did not allow the respondent to leave the answer blank, which most likely inflated the number of respondents selecting the category 'both', even if Indigenous participants were not explicitly identified or included in their research design.

E. Findings: What we now know

Findings from Research

Respondents were asked to briefly summarise the key aims and objectives, results and implications of their research. Based on a qualitative analysis of these responses, project findings were grouped under six key headings:

- Statutory child protection services
- Prevention

- Intervention programs
- Risk factors
- Incidence
- Methodological issues

Where possible, a summary of major findings or implications for research, policy and practice are highlighted, with an emphasis on implications for gaps in our knowledge.

Statutory Child Protection Services

Trends in research

Statutory child protection service issues fell into five main areas: risk assessment models, child protection service structure, professional issues, mandatory reporting, and community attitudes. Research investigating child protection issues was the largest body of research identified through the review of audit respondents' description of their project objectives, design and findings.

1. Risk assessment

The frameworks and procedures for statutory child protection risk assessment, investigation and decision-making were the most common foci of researchers investigating child protection issues. Investigations included critical approaches to current statutory risk assessment frameworks, and the investigation of alternate assessment and decision-making frameworks. The underlying aim of these research projects was to improve accuracy in decision-making and to assess whether appropriate responses were made to clients and notifications.

2. Child protection service structure

The focus of research was to examine and evaluate policy and procedural frameworks guiding service provision. Studies examined existing practice and provided an evidence base for preferred practices or recommendations for practice change.

3. Professional issues

Researchers examined the specific problems, issues and factors that influenced practitioners (for example, personal history, exposure to workplace violence). The implications of this research were that further professional development and education in the areas identified are needed.

4. Mandatory reporting

Attitudes of non-child protection workers to mandatory reporting and factors that increase or decrease the likelihood of professionals to report were examined. Professionals largely supported mandatory reporting but lacked understanding about child protection actions and processes, and what happened after they made a report (for example, why were some notifications acted upon and others not). The implication of the findings from this body of research was the need for education and support for professionals such as those in the health, welfare and education sectors to better understand when they needed to make a report and information on how the child protection system responded to an improvement in child protection systems.

5. Community attitudes

Researchers examined the community attitudes towards what constitutes child abuse and neglect. Implications were for further community education. Several studies included victims' and children's assumptions as to what constitutes abuse. This has implications for approaches to child disclosure.

Trends in design

About two-thirds of the research studies were qualitative. Some used a mixed-methodology, but retained a qualitative orientation. The qualitative research designs were found to have appropriate sample sizes for the research undertaken. There were some quantitative designs, generally non-experimental with small sample sizes. In some cases, it appeared that the statistical analyses employed were inappropriate because (a) the sample size was inadequate to meet the statistical assumptions of the analysis employed, or (b) the analysis chosen was inappropriate to answer the

research question. Child protection service and other health and welfare service records were the predominant source of data, and qualitative interviews were often conducted in conjunction with case file analysis.

Prevention

Trends in research

Research focused on three main areas:

- parental intervention programs;
- children's service programs; and
- family support and home visiting programs.

General trends found among the studies were the need for:

- adequate training for program workers;
- further longitudinal studies to assess the long-term impact of programs; and
- continued follow-up sessions of program support to refresh parents, families and children and also to assess their progress.

Trends in design

Most designs were cross-sectional but a small number of longitudinal studies (covering the short-to-medium term) were included. The longitudinal studies ranged from six months to three years following the implementation of the tested program. Medium to large sample sizes were used. Most data collected were mixed methodology or purely qualitative in design. Few researchers used control groups, and if control groups were included, the designs were quasi-experimental, not randomised control studies, and researchers tended to select participants from program wait lists. Interviews with program participants and workers were a common source of data.

Intervention Programs

Trends in research

There were 17 projects with sufficient information to enable a determination in relation to research findings and design, three of which were ongoing. The submitted studies largely involved researchers evaluating therapeutic intervention programs. Evaluations indicated that the impact of the therapeutic interventions were all largely positive (this is consistent with a positive bias observed in published evaluations). Research into intervention programs fell into four areas: services, domestic and family violence, victims of child sexual abuse, and perpetrators of child sexual abuse.

1. Services

Examples of those evaluated were: parent education, family reunification, family support, high risk families, family support and substance abuse, family decision making, and family preservation. For child protection service clients, evaluations tended to focus on the efficacy of the programs for preventing the child experiencing further harm, this was operationalised through notifications.

2. Domestic and family violence

The focus on families where domestic violence was an identified problem included those targeted at mothers designed to prevent violence and those targeted at ameliorating the effects of witnessing violence on children.

3. Victims of child sexual abuse

There were several studies evaluating the efficacy of treatment programs for child victims of sexual abuse. Evaluations with exploratory qualitative designs were being used as a form of critical reflection on practice.

4. Perpetrators of child sexual abuse

These studies included interventions that focussed upon both adult and juvenile offenders of child sexual abuse.

Trends in design:

Most studies used mixed-method and qualitative designs with small to medium sized samples. There was only one randomised control study; this was also the only purely quantitative research design. Child protection service records were employed as a source of data and as the means of identifying a sample in several studies. The remaining studies focused on children and families with high-risk backgrounds and on offenders.

Risk Factors

Trends in research

A limited body of research examined offender characteristics and factors that increased the likelihood of a child experiencing abuse or neglect (that is, risk *factors* - not approaches to risk *assessment*). However, the research available examined:

- juvenile offenders;
- adult sex offenders' history of child sexual assault;
- bullying; and
- substance abuse.

One study examined factors related to organisational safety. A few studies looked at the risk factors for maltreatment chronicity and recidivism. These studies examined both child protection service assessments and service provision. Across the samples key findings related to the volume of abuse and chronicity as predictors of maltreatment (past abuse predicted future abuse). The specific nature of the research—combined often with a lack of details about the results – makes it difficult to summarise the key findings.

Trends in design

Several studies were still ongoing at the point of submission to the audit and/or inadequately described to make a determination of their methodology. Case files were found to be a common source of data. The studies were largely quantitative and mixed methodology designs predominantly with moderate sample sizes. The qualitative designs also comprised moderate to large samples (for qualitative research designs). Respondents tended to focus on describing the factors they were trying to predict (e.g., offending behaviour), rather than the results that they found in terms of key risk and protective factors. Therefore, it is not possible to identify which specific risk or protective factors have been researched to a greater degree than others, or to identify possible gaps. When developing research priorities for future research, it would be useful if risk and protective factors were considered within a developmental-ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner 1979).

Risk and protective factors can be used to predict both the likelihood of maltreatment occurring and the likelihood of adverse effects for the child as a consequence of child maltreatment. The balance of protective factors is believed to explain the range of different outcomes observed (Cicchetti and Howes 1991) and helps explain why the same incident can affect different children in remarkably different ways and why not all children who have been maltreated will be observably harmed.

When developing research priorities for future research, it would be useful if risk and protective factors were considered within a developmental-ecological perspective. The developmental-ecological theory is recommended as the underpinning theory for future research into child maltreatment by the US National Research Council (1993). Ecological models can be applied to research into both cause and consequences of child maltreatment. An ecological perspective takes into account all victimisation experiences rather than focusing on the impact of one specific type of child abuse or neglect (Briere and Runtz 1989). The ecological model has four levels: (a) the macro-system (cultural beliefs and values), (b) the exo-system (neighbourhood and community settings), (c) the micro-system (family environment) and (d) development (the individual's own developmental adaptation) (Lynch and Cicchetti 1998). The developmental stage of the child is now considered very important in research into child maltreatment, and has implications for a range of issues including determining if an adult action fits within the realm of child maltreatment. For example,

shaking a 7-year-old child by the shoulders is a vastly different level of abuse to the same action on a 7-month-old (Bromfield 2005).

Incidence

Incidence and prevalence studies are used to investigate the extent to which phenomena occur. In general, a prevalence study investigates how many people in a population have ever experienced maltreatment and reflects this as a proportion of the sample, whereas an incidence study investigates the number of incidents of maltreatment in a specific time interval. The studies in the audit that examined the extent of maltreatment in specific samples were all incidence studies. The lack of prevalence research in Australia is a major problem in understanding the true extent of the problem, and factors likely to be associated both with the occurrence of maltreatment (or specific abuse or neglect types), which is necessary information for developing accurate prevention programs – and its impact on individuals' lives.

Trends in research

Most studies focused on recurrent maltreatment and re-notifications to child protection services. There was only a very small body of incidence research in the audit (6 studies).

Incidence research indicated some key issues:

- Recurrence was highly concentrated in a minority of families, and children in larger families were more likely to experience chronic maltreatment than children in smaller families.
- There was a need for services to be available/accessible to families already notified to prevent maltreatment recurrence.
- The families in these studies averaged 3-4 notifications to a child protection service.
- The majority of children subject to multiple notifications had experienced multiple instances of maltreatment over a long period of time.
- There was a need to improve upon the information gap in reporting; it is not possible to make sound policy without reliable facts.

Trends in design

Research was largely based on the recorded prevalence of maltreatment recurrence in existing cases for children and families who had already been the subject of notifications to statutory child protection services. Sample sizes were generally large and researchers employed quantitative research designs to analyse their data.

Methodological Issues

Only one project examined methodological issues. The lack of research in this area is a serious deficit in the field.

Trends in research

In this study, the researcher examined whether respondents are best classified according to their experience of separate maltreatment types (sexual abuse, physical abuse, psychological maltreatment, neglect, and witnessing family violence). The best cluster analysis solution grouped individuals according to the degree to which respondents reported having experienced maltreating behaviours: low, moderate, or high frequency, based on a number of items ranging in severity. Individuals classified into the high maltreatment frequency cluster had significantly more adjustment problems than those in both the moderate and the low maltreatment clusters, suggesting that it may be more meaningful to talk about the degree of maltreatment (frequency and/or severity), rather than about the type.

Summary: Research and Design Trends

The detailed project descriptions suggest that Australian researchers investigating child maltreatment and child protection issues have largely operationalised 'maltreatment' in terms of the

notifications and substantiations recorded by statutory child protection services. Consistent with this trend, there was a heavy reliance on case records as a source of data. Research that investigated a single maltreatment sub-type or specific combination of sub-types tended to focus on child sexual abuse and family violence; there was a lack of research investigating issues specifically associated with child physical abuse, psychological maltreatment or neglect. Although there were one or two exceptions, generally there was a lack of research on specific cultural groups or cultural issues, particularly in Indigenous communities (where there were only two projects).

In order to review the research and design trends in the audit projects, projects were reviewed within each of the topic areas selected by the audit respondents. The audit included only those projects that respondents had identified as having met the selection criteria. However, in reviewing the detailed project descriptions it became apparent that respondents experienced some confusion about what constitutes 'research' and in effectively applying keywords to describe their research. There were several projects that at face value do not appear to meet the audit criteria (for example, literature reviews that did not include analysis of any data) – these anomalies were not apparent when viewing summary information such as that provided in Table 2. Since the respondents were given explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria, the audit responses are included as submitted; however, the validity of the categorisations assigned by some respondents may be questionable. A more rigorous approach—and a much more time-consuming and expensive alternative—would have been to have respondents submit documentation (project descriptions; research output, etc.) to the audit, and to have the audit team interview the researcher(s) and be responsible for categorising and entering data on the project.

The detailed review also showed that not all respondents appropriately classified their projects using the 'areas of research' categories provided (i.e., prevention programs for children, tertiary intervention programs for child victims, and so on). Although some projects clearly fell into multiple classification fields, there were many for which there was no clear link between the information provided in the description of the methodology and results and the particular classification fields selected for the project. This may lead to inaccurate estimates of the amount of research conducted in particular topic areas.

A key implication of the current audit is the need for agreed definitions of what constitutes 'research' in the child and family welfare sector. Research encompasses a variety of disciplines and utilises multiple analytic methods – both qualitative and quantitative. It involves systematically gathering data to investigate questions about the effectiveness of programs and processes or client outcomes.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The project descriptions provided in the audit were generally brief (and in some cases there was no description provided). It is difficult to assess research quality without looking at each of the project reports/publications in detail. The information provided precluded a critical review of the audit projects from being undertaken. The audit provides a general overview of trends in research.

A critical review of the identified research may need to be undertaken to determine the implications of the present body of research for policy and practice (taking into account the way in which design issues influence the reliability and validity of the evidence base). Based on the information provided, it was beyond the scope of this audit to identify implications for policy and practice emerging from Australian child protection and child maltreatment research.

The findings of this audit—in terms of the amount and quality of the research, and its ability to form a useful base for policy and practice—are consistent with the conclusions drawn by others who have reviewed the efficacy of early intervention research. In their report, Wise, da Silva, Webster and Sanson (forthcoming) conclude:

“While this review provides a basis for estimating likely future benefits of early childhood interventions, it is not a comprehensive study. The dearth of evaluation data on interventions generally, and missing data on the restricted and unrepresentative