

# Objectives

The child protection systems in each state and territory in Australia are currently under considerable pressure, as are the child and family agencies that conduct early intervention and prevention programs to reduce the incidence and impact of child abuse and neglect. Nationally, the number of children who have been the subject of a notification has increased dramatically. For example, notifications nationally have risen from 107,134 in 1999-2000 to 219,384 in 2003-4 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2005). There is a number of explanations, such as changes in mandatory reporting, public campaigns and government reviews highlighting the problem of child maltreatment, and the changes in child protection systems focusing on the role of receiving, recording and investigating allegations of harm. The number of allegations of harm or risk of harm that are substantiated is also increasing (albeit at a lower rate than notifications), with a rise from 24,732 in 1999-2000 to 40,416 in 2002-2003 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2005).<sup>2</sup> What is clear is that child protection systems will not be able to cope with a continued increase in child protection notifications. We need to do better at prevention and early intervention.

A viable and effective approach to the protection of children and the prevention of harm across Australia requires these efforts to be informed by a broad, robust research base. We need to know which approaches work, which approaches used internationally are likely to be appropriate for Australia, and where our efforts should be best targeted. We also need to know where scarce research dollars should be directed for future research projects. In sum, a national child protection research agenda is needed.

Such an agenda needs to be based on a thorough analysis of the existing research. Before we move forward and set an agenda for future research priorities, it is timely to take stock of what research has already been conducted or is currently underway. The first step in the formation of a national research agenda in relation to the protection of children and the prevention of abuse and neglect is to catalogue the research that has currently been conducted. This will then allow us to answer questions such as:

- What have been the areas of focus?
- What are the gaps in research?
- What research is focused on child abuse prevention?
- Where has the funding for child protection research come from to date?
- What research has been conducted to show which programs or interventions are working – and should continue to receive funding?

A similar task has been performed in relation to research in the field of out-of-home care. Cashmore and Ainsworth (2004) published the results of their audit, in which they identified 94 projects completed or currently underway in Australia over a 10-year period. The audit highlighted key gaps such as national or multi-site projects; few replication studies; little research on forms of care other than foster care; and a lack of research on vulnerable subgroups within the out-of-home care population (e.g., Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children; children with culturally-diverse backgrounds; children with disabilities, complex behaviour problems, or other high-needs groups). The authors were able to suggest a number of key areas that could form the basis of priorities for future research (Cashmore and Ainsworth 2004).

The current audit will, alongside the audit of out-of-home care research, document research conducted over the past decade in Australia in the field of child abuse prevention, the protection of children, and the care of children subject to a child protection intervention.

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2 National data for 2003-4 were not available, as data for NSW were not available, which is the jurisdiction with the largest population and the largest number of child protection notifications and substantiations.

The aim of the audit was to identify all research that has been (or is being) conducted in Australia in the past 10 years in the field of child protection and early intervention. This audit was based on similar methodology as the audit of Australian out-of-home care research (Cashmore and Ainsworth 2004). It provides a thorough identification of research areas that have been covered, and the key messages emerging from this research as well as gaps and directions for future research.

This audit differs from previous audits that have been conducted by the National Child Protection Clearinghouse. These other audits have focused on child abuse prevention *programs* (Tomison 2000; Tomison and Poole 2000); the focus of this audit is on *research*. Of the 1814 prevention programs identified, 1357 (85% of the programs) included some form of rudimentary evaluation (e.g., measuring participant satisfaction); 435 (23.8%) had pre- and post-test data, but only 47 (2.6%) included a comparison group (Tomison and Poole 2000). Although the earlier audits indicated that agencies were increasingly incorporating evaluation into their program planning and delivery, only one quarter of programs incorporated independent external evaluation (Tomison and Poole 2000). Tomison (2000) also concluded that

“few ‘gold standard’ evaluations have been done in Australia... As a result, although policymakers’ expectations of what may be accomplished by evaluation continue to grow, evaluators (and service providers) have generally become much more conservative in their claims about the potential of evaluations to demonstrate ‘success’...” (p. 15).

The current audit of child protection research involved sending out a request to researchers asking them to complete a survey describing their past or current research studies. This involved contacting service agencies, research departments and universities via email and phone to identify relevant projects that have been – or are currently being – conducted, and asking the researcher to complete the online survey.

## The aims of the audit

The purpose of the audit is to bring together and disseminate information about research projects in child protection and early intervention research in Australia. In keeping with the aims of the audit of out-of-home care research (Cashmore and Ainsworth 2004), the specific aims were to:

- identify child protection and early intervention research conducted in Australia over the past decade;
- to assess gaps and identify duplication;
- to enable Australian child protection research to be placed within an international context; and
- identify priorities for future research.