

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

number of interventions in this review, makes it impossible to comment on the utility of early childhood interventions as a general strategy to sustain improvements for children in the long-term” (p. 65).

However, they temper this conclusion by noting:

“Evaluation findings suggest that early childhood interventions can produce improvements across a wide range of outcome domains. There is also some limited evidence that early childhood interventions can produce potential returns in public investment” (p. 69).

Implications for Research

Researchers

Perhaps of most significance are the implications arising from the audit findings for researchers.

The primary limitation of the audit was the low number of responses compared with the amount of research identified in the literature search for publications. Published research is an under-estimation of research undertaken, as not all research is actually published. This suggests that the research identified in this audit may be a significant under-estimation of the amount of Australian research that has been or is being conducted in the field of child protection and prevention of child abuse and neglect.

One of the factors that may have contributed to the low response rate for the audit was the perception of what constitutes ‘research’. People may not identify their project as ‘research’, particularly case audits and program evaluations conducted by governments and non-government agencies responsible for service provision. Changing the later audit promotion material to remove the word ‘research’ and replace it with alternate descriptors resulted in additional responses to the audit.

The detailed review of audit projects showed that there were problems with self-selection (both in and out of the audit) and self-completion of the topic classification criteria leading to errors and misclassifications. The quality of responses to the audit and errors in completing the template suggest many people conducting program evaluations or other research are not adequately trained in, or ‘steeped’ in a research culture (further emphasised by the poorly tapped capacity to link with universities).

Some of the valuable contributions of this audit are that it highlights the need for education about what research is, and for the building of research capacity and the promotion of a research culture in agencies, government departments and others organisations implementing programs or services for the prevention of child abuse and neglect or the protection of children.

Research design

The research identified and reviewed in this audit was largely qualitative. Quantitative research was primarily non-experimental, descriptive and tended to rely on categorical data (or so it appeared as there was limited evidence of multivariate analyses being used). Research objectives tended to be exploratory rather than confirmatory (that is, researchers largely failed to undertake hypothesis testing). There was a heavy reliance on existing case records for data. Projects tended to be cross-sectional and retrospective. The qualitative research appeared to use adequate samples. However, there appeared to be an over-reliance on qualitative research designs in this field, and this is problematic, as qualitative research alone does not provide an adequate evidence base that can be generalised.

Research investigating child protection is a sensitive area in which it is often difficult to obtain participants. Even after obtaining access to an appropriate group of participants, there are still many methodological issues involved in research in this area. However, maltreated children are among