

# Executive summary

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In 1999, the National Child Protection Clearinghouse, with the support of the National Council for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect, and the State and Territory government departments, undertook a *National Audit of Child Abuse Prevention Programs* operating across Australia. The intention was to provide an overview of child abuse prevention initiatives currently being undertaken nationally, to identify trends and any gaps in service provision, to identify programs from which service providers can learn, and thus avoid 'reinventing the wheel' with regard to program development, and to generate discussion of future directions in child abuse prevention. In this report an analysis of the results of the Audit is presented.

There are a number of significant, interrelated trends currently shaping child abuse prevention and child protection policies and practice in Australia: the focus on enhancing social capital and investing in communities; the concomitant development of programs designed to enhance child and family health and wellbeing (health promotion); the renewed popularity of early intervention prevention approaches, particularly those targeting the first three years of life; and a greater investment in secondary child and family support programs as part of the shift to a 'family support' approach to child protection.

Within the context of current government policies, the range and scope of child abuse prevention programs currently operating in Australia are identified and described, along with the types of groups or organisations involved in operating these programs. Finally, a number of trends in service provision are highlighted, with reference to previous Clearinghouse audits, and recommendations are made with regard to future directions in the development of prevention programs.

## *Audit process*

The Audit was designed with the intention of developing a comprehensive picture of the range of child abuse prevention programs currently operating across Australia. The target group for the Audit was comprised of researchers and practitioners in the government and non-government sectors from across the nation, who were directly involved in child abuse prevention, and/or those assumed to have an interest in child maltreatment and related areas. The criteria for inclusion in the Audit were: first, that any material submitted had to contain information with an explicit child abuse prevention focus (primary, secondary or tertiary levels), or have a health promotion focus where the prevention of child abuse and neglect was an outcome. Second, the material must describe a *program* of activity. Audit material that did not meet these criteria was kept for use as ancillary information.

Information on prevention programs and ancillary material was collected via a snowball sampling technique. The information resources of the Clearinghouse were used, in conjunction with assistance provided by the State and Territory government welfare departments and a number of non-government agencies and professional organisations, in order to develop as comprehensive a sample of prevention programs as possible. In addition to providing information about their own programs, these agencies actively

promoted the Audit (internally and externally), identified and referred the Clearinghouse to programs being run by other service providers, and provided access to extensive, State-based service provider mailing lists.

The program information required for the Audit was collected mostly via a short questionnaire developed by the Clearinghouse which was sent out to service providers. The latter were asked to briefly describe their program(s) and to provide information on the sections of the population and the form(s) of maltreatment targeted, key descriptor terms, the programs' theoretical or practical basis and details of any program evaluations undertaken.

### ***Classifying the programs***

Prevention programs were categorised according to program type, prevention type, geographical location, age range of the children or young people targeted by the program and on a number of special descriptors. The classifications were developed from typologies commonly used in the literature, the observation and assessment of current trends in prevention activity and pre-existing Clearinghouse classifications. The types of prevention programs included in the Audit were: Community education; Personal safety or Protective Behaviours; Family support; Child-focused programs; Child and Family Centres; and Offender programs.

### ***Overview of the programs***

As of 30 September 2000, 1244 separate entries had been included on the National Clearinghouse's Child Abuse Prevention Programs database, giving an effective response rate of 3.7 per cent. However, because program entries often contained information on more than one program being run by an agency, (for example, agencies may run *community education* and *family support* programs separately or in combination). For audit purposes (as per previous audits), the various programs were classified as separate items. Under this approach, the 1244 entries created a total of 1814 individual programs and an effective response rate of 5.3 per cent. The nature of the programs identified generally reflected the pattern found in previous audits of Clearinghouse Prevention Programs databases, with a predominance of family support and community education programs.

### ***Geographical distribution***

The distribution of the programs approximated the national population distribution (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2000), with a preponderance of programs across the Eastern seaboard and around the State/Territory capital cities, but also including a proportion of rural and remote programs. The lesser populated States/Territories (Australian Capital Territory, Northern Territory and Tasmania) were over-represented in the Audit, possibly as a function of smaller professional networks facilitating the distribution of the Audit material. Overall, given the geographical 'spread' of the programs that were collected, and the relative consistency of the proportions of the different program types across the nation, it appears that the Audit has been able to successfully capture a reasonably representative sample of current prevention program activity, and thus provides a generally good picture of the general trends evident in the field of child abuse prevention. It also suggests, as was also borne out by the policies and practices identified, that the State and Territories have adopted globally similar approaches to child abuse prevention initiatives.

### ***Types of maltreatment***

Most programs in the Audit generally tend to focus on physical, emotional abuse and neglect. Sexual abuse (67 per cent) and domestic violence (66 per cent) are each identified as targets in two-thirds of all of the programs, while half of all programs

reported to address the full range of child maltreatment and domestic violence. The targeting of the various forms of child maltreatment and domestic violence in combination is taken as an indication that services were cognisant of the need for cross-sectoral work and an holistic approach to the prevention. There appears to be a growing number of agencies developing such programs, with much of the interest coming from the domestic violence sector, rather than the child and family welfare sector.

### ***Levels of prevention***

Half of all programs have a secondary prevention focus, although distinctions between primary, secondary and tertiary levels of prevention, while useful for research and administration purposes, do not always translate easily in practice. A high proportion of programs appear to address child maltreatment issues, or the potential for child maltreatment, across more than one level of prevention. Classification difficulties have been exacerbated by the failure of service providers to understand or use the public health classification, and the lack of a uniform definition of what constitutes each level of prevention. What one program defines as 'abuse' (therefore requiring tertiary prevention), another program may view as an early indication of a more serious problem (secondary prevention).

One-tenth of the programs have a health promotion focus; with all such programs being targeted at the primary and/or secondary level. The majority of the programs are either universal programs targeted at the whole population (primary) or secondary programs targeting 'at risk' groups. Approximately one-quarter of the health promotion programs used an early intervention philosophy or approach.

### ***The types of programs***

#### ***Community education programs***

As with previous prevention program audits, programs identified as having a community education focus (22.5 per cent of the sample, N=408) can be broadly classified into a number of types: large-scale media campaigns with a regional, State-wide or national focus; local information packages or resources; and training programs. It is clear that community education initiatives are being undertaken in substantial numbers across the nation, not only by governments and regional child protection interest groups, but by individual agencies, services and groups at the local community level. Two specific issues are identified for discussion.

First, it appears that a number of training programs and information packages of similar content have been developed independently by different communities. The unnecessary duplication of community education (and other prevention) resources could be reduced via the enhancement of interagency coordination and communication at the local, regional and State levels. Apart from the general benefits of developing professional relationships and sharing ideas, greater knowledge of pre-existing prevention programs already in operation and the increased collaborative development of programs, would reduce unnecessary program duplication and thus free up valuable resources that could be better employed in refining or developing new programs.

Second, previous analyses have suggested that the general community is broadly aware of child maltreatment, but that there is a need to provide information on specific aspects of child abuse and neglect. What appears to work best are programs that provide alternatives to inappropriate behaviour, and those campaigns that promote positive, healthy interactions and the valuing of children. Thus, one option for future work would be to further extend the health promotion approach, as applied to community education, such that messages of 'positive relating' and/or child empowering stories become 'mainstream' messages in the media.

### ***Personal safety and Protective Behaviours programs***

Personal safety and Protective Behaviours programs account for 10 per cent of the programs collected for the Audit. The programs are delivered in most schools, and a variety of other settings, across the nation; over two-thirds of the programs are based on the Protective Behaviours model. Personal safety and Protective Behaviours programs remain strongly utilised, school-based prevention programs, although their nature and usage has changed as a function of changing trends in prevention and recognition of the benefits of applying the programs' principles across a range of violence prevention initiatives. The development of a health promotion approach in schools, as exemplified by the trend towards multifaceted 'health education' programs, has meant that traditional, personal safety programs no longer drive schools' prevention strategies, but are maintained as vital components of an holistic approach to school-based prevention.

Yet at the same time, the range and usage of personal safety programs and concepts has extended through a general trend towards adapting personal safety and Protective Behaviours programs for specific target groups. Thus, what has traditionally been a universal, primary prevention program has been tailored for use as a secondary and/or tertiary prevention initiative. These changes have occurred in conjunction with a general expansion of the 'risk' situations incorporated into many programs and reflect, for example, greater acknowledgment of issues around domestic violence and other forms of societal violence (for example, harassment and bullying) and, in particular, children witnessing domestic violence.

### ***Family support programs***

Constituting the majority of programs in the Audit (as has been the case in previous audits [James 1994; Tomison 1997b]), family support programs can be characterised as secondary-level initiatives with a strong parent education focus, that often employ a home visiting component. Two trends are worthy of note.

First, it has been reported in previous audits and other publications that there was a strong increase in demand for child protection and family support services in the mid-to-late 1990s that effectively swamped the professional system. This in turn led to tertiary clients effectively reducing the opportunities the non-government sector had for working with 'at risk' families (secondary prevention). From the Audit it appears that although demands from the tertiary sector remains high, governments and agencies have attempted to re-focus on secondary prevention, funding and developing more services dedicated, predominantly, to working with 'at risk' families.

Second, as part of the renewed valuing of child abuse prevention (as a function of neurobiological research; the recognition that a forensic child protection approach, in isolation, was not an effective means of preventing maltreatment; and evidence of the cost effectiveness of prevention programs), it is apparent that early intervention projects have (once again) become more salient as a result of the renewed focus on intervening in the early stages of life.

### ***Child-focused programs***

Child-focused programs account for 18 per cent of all programs in the analysis. The majority could be generally classified as: adolescent parent support programs (mainly for mothers); respite and substitute care services for children and families requiring 'time out' or emergency assistance (8 per cent of all programs; 10 per cent of child-focused programs); generalist support and counselling programs for 'at risk' and maltreated children and young people; school-based health promotion and resiliency programs; services for young people at risk of homelessness; and/or programs run in sexual assault centres or women's refuges for children who had witnessed domestic violence. Almost

half (43 per cent) of the child-focused programs are being run in combination with family support programs also offered within the host agency. However, to be considered 'child-focused', the programs had to maintain a philosophical and service provision focus predominantly on the maltreated or 'at risk' child.

### *Child and Family Centres*

Child and Family Centres are still a relatively new initiative, which was reflected, in their small numbers in the Audit and within the child welfare/family support system as a whole. Two-thirds of the programs are located in New South Wales and run by large non-government agencies, although the NSW Government has indicated its support for the concept by strongly investing in the development of the *Schools as Community Centres* project. Of the remaining programs, most are located in Western Australia and Queensland. Operating as a service 'hub', the centres are quite suited for operation in regional centres, and in rural and remote areas of Australia where services are less frequent and the agencies that are available need to be offer a range of services.

### *Offender programs*

The term 'offender program', is generally reserved for programs that address physical or sexual assaults, a convention that is adhered to in the Audit. Of the 47 offender programs, two-thirds of the programs target male perpetrators of domestic violence, with most of the programs incorporating a parent education component to inform fathers of the effect witnessing domestic violence has on children. The remaining third focus on sex offenders (convicted; and non-convicted, but referred by child protection services) and those at risk of sex offending. As part of the move to intervene early to break the pattern of offending, those at risk of offending are targeted in at least one-fifth of both the domestic violence and sexual abuse programs. There are also a number of secondary-level programs working with fathers at risk of abusing their children, offering anger management programs for boys (and to a much lesser extent, girls) who were aggressive or 'acting out', and family support programs for parents who have been incarcerated for criminal acts (not necessarily violent behaviour).

### *Special populations*

A number of special populations, programs or specific approaches to preventing maltreatment are identified for particular attention in the Audit. Four specific sections of the Australian population generally identified as being at greater risk of child abuse and neglect and, thus, specifically targeted for intervention (and analysis in the Audit), were: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (16 per cent of programs); people of non-English-speaking background (15 per cent); families where a parent or child is suffering from a physical or intellectual disability (17 per cent); and families where a parent or child is suffering from a mental disorder (9 per cent).

For all four special populations, it is apparent that while service providers may have reported targeting their programs to the groups or communities, the majority of the programs are actually generic programs that merely accept clients from a variety of backgrounds. A considerably smaller proportion of these programs - approximately 20–25 per cent - have actually been designed to cater specifically for the needs of these groups. That is, the service providers have enacted particular strategies to increase access to the service for these groups such as in the employment of staff, the design of the service, management structures and the method of service delivery.

For cultural groups who prefer to attend services that are managed and staffed by their own people, (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and some of the various Australian communities of non-English-speaking background), this is a particularly

serious issue. Without access to culturally appropriate services, the probability is that many children and families will not access the services they require, potentially exacerbating their problems and stresses. While it is clear that governments and non-government agencies are making efforts to meet these peoples' needs, the need to further promote the education and training of Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and non-English-speaking background workers, and to encourage the community's management of culturally appropriate support services, is just as clear.

For prevention programs developed to meet the needs of children residing with a parent living with a mental disorder, the issue appears to be first, to obtain access to one of a limited number of services, and then, to ensure funding is sufficient to allow the service to be used for as long as needed. Despite some small increases in the mental health sector's recognition of the needs of children with a mentally ill parent, greater service development appears to be required. Whereas, with regard to programs for families where a child or parent has a disability, the need for specific, tailored services appears to be less salient. What seems to be the paramount service delivery issue is the need to ensure the adequate funding of existing services so that children and families are able to access them for as long as is required.

### *Program evaluation*

There remains a general acceptance that 'scientific', methodologically rigorous evaluation should be an essential part of all prevention programs. However, the difficulties of conducting research in applied settings, a lack of agency resources and staff research expertise has meant that despite the vast number of program evaluations that have been performed on a variety of child abuse prevention programs, very few rigorous evaluations have been done in Australia or internationally. The majority of program evaluations are modest, internally focused studies that assess client satisfaction, document the services delivered, describe program implementation (for replication) and, if possible, the immediate effects of service provision.

Program evaluations are fundamentally designed to assist with the planning of future programs and/or to improve pre-existing programs. It is contended that each evaluation should therefore be tailored to fulfil the specific purpose for which it is required and to meet the needs of the various stakeholders involved. This then, is an argument for 'greater pluralism' in evaluation where techniques must be broad enough to enable an assessment of effectiveness across the range of available programs and to ensure the variety of service providers are able to derive full benefits from an appropriate, relevant and action-linked evaluation.

Under such an approach, the research question, and the level of explanation required, determines the methodologies and research tools used and the degree of experimental rigour that is desired and/or possible. This has facilitated a general, progressive shift away from traditional experimental and quasi-experimental evaluation designs to a greater emphasis on qualitative and action research methodologies.

### *The Audit*

Over the past six years, previous Clearinghouse audits have identified a general trend towards greater involvement in program evaluations by service providers, and greater attempts to incorporate a degree of experimental rigour in evaluations. Both these trends appear to have strengthened in the National Audit. The majority of programs (85 per cent) have conducted at least some basic form of evaluation. The most common form of evaluation remains an internal evaluation (that is, conducted by agency staff themselves) (77 per cent of programs), based on participant attendance and satisfaction (75 per cent of programs). Almost one-quarter of service providers (24 per cent of

programs) have incorporated a pre/post test comparison in their evaluation, although only 2.6 per cent of programs have undertaken a proper quasi-experimental design that incorporates both a comparison group and a pre/post test design. The majority of the latter are conducted predominantly for family support and child-focused programs. Not surprisingly, it is the larger non-government service provider agencies, government services (such as hospitals, regional health services or the State education department), and university-supported projects, that have more success at developing outcome evaluation designs that approach methodological rigour. These agencies either have the resources and staff expertise to undertake such an evaluation, or are able to fund an independent evaluation by external consultants.

Overall, it is concluded that to promote evaluation best practice in applied settings (real world) requires acknowledgment of the circumstances of the average service provider – the availability of physical and professional resources; consideration of the appropriateness and limitations of empirical studies; and a willingness to explore the variety of evaluation methods and techniques currently available in order to find those best suited for the purposes of the evaluation. Further, it is by having an understanding of the benefits that may be attained for program development via evaluation and, in particular, by the adoption of a developmental sequencing of program evaluations, that enables service providers to build a picture of a program's success incrementally.

### *Conclusions*

The success or failure of an audit is predicated on the ability to identify, access and collect information on current programs as comprehensively as possible. In spite of a number of sampling limitations, given the size and breadth of the Audit database and the geographical distribution, it is contended that the issues and trends that have been identified are likely to reflect the trends in child abuse prevention activity currently occurring across the nation. The findings of the Audit provide evidence of the development of a strong foundation of child abuse prevention activity across the nation. Importantly, the development and operation of prevention initiatives was associated not only with large government departments or non-government agencies, but with 'grass roots' community groups or small agencies.

An assessment of the range and type of programs currently in operation enabled the identification of a number of specific program models that have been widely adopted (albeit with local modifications) across and within the States and Territories. Such programs included the NAPCAN community education programs, Protective Behaviours, volunteer-based home visitation and Triple P parent education programs. It was also apparent that substantial progress has been made in the creation of new programs and the modification of concepts and programs developed overseas for Australian conditions. As a result there is a vast range of innovative programs available for service providers to access and assess when planning to develop or to run a child abuse prevention program. The Audit also reflects the volatility of the child abuse prevention field and the rapidly changing nature of service provision, identifying some clear policy and service delivery trends. Finally, there is also some evidence of the professional recognition of the benefits of interagency and cross-sectoral collaborations in the prevention of a variety of social ills, including child maltreatment.

Clearly, the development of national and State child abuse prevention policies or strategies requires governments to maintain a grasp on the current state of prevention activity and to learn from what has already been achieved in order to build more effective initiatives. Similarly, at the service provision level, the coordination and collaboration between agencies and sectors in the development, and the provision of

prevention programs, requires an understanding of current directions in prevention, and knowledge of existing service models and programs that have already demonstrated their effectiveness.

The National Child Protection Clearinghouse is attempting to facilitate service providers' access to existing prevention programs from across the nation, via the production of this report which highlights current prevention activity and via the creation of the Child Abuse Prevention Programs database, which provides detailed information on all programs included in the Audit. The Clearinghouse is currently giving consideration to undertaking further National Audits of child abuse prevention programs as a means of monitoring progress and of identifying changes, issues and trends in child abuse prevention across Australia.