Child abuse and neglect statistics
Alister Lamont

In this resource sheet we present and discuss a snapshot of data describing child protection activity in Australia.

In Australia, state and territory governments have the statutory responsibility for protecting children from child abuse and neglect. Definitions of what constitutes child abuse and neglect vary across the different states and territories. It is therefore difficult to obtain consistent and comparable national statistics. (For more information on this, refer to NCPC Resource Sheet, Australian Legal Definitions: When is a Child in Need of Protection?)

Since 1990, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) has compiled annual national figures for child protection activity. When interpreting the national figures, different legislation, policies and procedures of each state and territory should be taken into account. The 2011 AIHW statistics can be found in Child Protection Australia 2009–10 <www.aihw.gov.au/publications/index.cfm/title/12223>.

How many reports are made to child protection services in Australia each year?

The most recent national figures from the AIHW indicate that in Australia, during 2009–10, there were 286,437 reports of suspected child abuse and neglect made to state and territory authorities, which is a significant decrease of 16% from the 339,454 reports made in 2008–09. This is the first decrease in notifications across Australia in the last 10 years. This decrease may largely be due to significant decreases in notifications in New South Wales, attributed to legislative changes in the NSW Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998, that included raising the reporting threshold from “risk of harm” to the new “risk of significant harm”.

Figure 1 illustrates the trends in total notifications recorded across Australia from 2000–01 to 2009–10. Table 1 contains the numbers plotted in Figure 1.

The figures show that the reporting of cases to child protection services has increased through to 2008–09. Although there was a significant decrease in notifications and substantiations in 2009–10 it is too early to determine whether this will be a continuing trend.

A child may be the subject of more than one notification—in 2009–10, the 286,437 notifications recorded during the financial year concerned 187,314 children. The number of children subject to a notification has increased by 16% in the last 5 years (161,930 to 187,314) in Australia (though there was a 10% drop from a high of 207,462 children in 2008–09). Nationally, notifications were most commonly made by members of the police force, followed by hospital/health centre staff, and school personnel (AIHW, 2011).

How many reports are investigated by child protection services in Australia each year?

The total number of finalised investigations decreased in 2009–10, with 131,689 finalised investigations recorded across Australia (AIHW, 2011). The 2009–10 figure is a decrease of 18.8% on the number of finalised investigations recorded in 2008–09 (162,259) (see Figure 1).
Figure 1. Total number of notifications, investigations and substantiations across Australia from 2000–01 to 2009–10, and total number of children on orders and in out-of-home care at 30 June 2000 to 2010

Table 1: Total number of notifications, investigations and substantiations across Australia from 2000–01 to 2009–10, and total number of children on orders and in out-of-home care at 30 June 2000 to 2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total notifications</th>
<th>Total finalised investigations</th>
<th>Total substantiations</th>
<th>Children on orders</th>
<th>Children in OOHC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2000–01</td>
<td>115,471</td>
<td>66,265</td>
<td>27,367</td>
<td>19,917</td>
<td>18,241</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001–02</td>
<td>137,938</td>
<td>80,371</td>
<td>30,473</td>
<td>20,557</td>
<td>18,880</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002–03</td>
<td>198,355</td>
<td>95,382</td>
<td>40,416</td>
<td>22,130</td>
<td>20,297</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003–04</td>
<td>219,384</td>
<td>(a)</td>
<td>(a)</td>
<td>21,795</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004–05</td>
<td>252,831</td>
<td>121,292</td>
<td>46,154</td>
<td>24,075 (c)</td>
<td>23,695</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005–06</td>
<td>266,745</td>
<td>137,829</td>
<td>55,921</td>
<td>26,215 (c)</td>
<td>25,454</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006–07</td>
<td>309,448</td>
<td>(b)</td>
<td>60,230</td>
<td>28,854 (c)</td>
<td>28,379</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007–08</td>
<td>317,526</td>
<td>148,824</td>
<td>55,120</td>
<td>32,642 (c)</td>
<td>31,166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008–09</td>
<td>339,454</td>
<td>162,259</td>
<td>54,621</td>
<td>35,409 (c)</td>
<td>34,069</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009–10</td>
<td>286,437</td>
<td>131,689</td>
<td>46,187</td>
<td>37,730 (c)</td>
<td>35,895</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: AIHW (2011)

Notes: (a) Due to the implementation of a new information management system, New South Wales could not provide data for investigations, substantiations or children on orders in 2003–04. (b) Due to the implementation of a new information management system, Queensland was unable to provide investigation data in 2006–07. (c) The data from Victoria for previous years were updated in 2009. This data may not be matched to data published in previous publications of Child Protection Australia.
How many confirmed cases of abuse and neglect are there in Australia each year?

The total number of substantiations of notifications received across Australia also continued to decrease in 2009–10. There were 46,187 substantiations across Australia in 2009–10 which was a 15.4% decrease on the number of substantiations recorded in the previous financial year (54,621). This continues the trend of the number of substantiations decreasing since 2007–08 (see Table 2). It is also important to note however that recorded substantiations are an undercount of the actual number of substantiations made during the year as the number does not include substantiations of notifications that were made in the previous year (AIHW, 2011). The 46,187 substantiations recorded during the financial year concerned 31,295 children.

The last 3 years have seen the only decreases for total substantiations over the past 10 years. Not all jurisdictions recorded decreases in 2009–10. Western Australia, Victoria and the Northern Territory all recorded increases in total substantiations for 2009–10 (see Table 2). From the period 2000–01 to 2009–10 the total number of substantiations increased by approximately 69% (see Table 2). Although substantiations have decreased in the least 3 years (see Figure 1), further years’ data are necessary to determine whether the decrease will be a continuing pattern.

What are the most common types of child maltreatment?

Substantiations are categorised into one of four maltreatment types: physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse and neglect. Table 3 shows the breakdown of substantiations for the four different types of maltreatment in Australian states and territories. In New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania and the Australian Capital Territory emotional abuse was the most commonly substantiated maltreatment type. In Western Australia, and the Northern Territory neglect was the most commonly substantiated maltreatment type.

Table 2: Number of substantiations, states and territories, 2000–01 to 2009–10

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>NSW(a)</th>
<th>VIC</th>
<th>QLD</th>
<th>WA</th>
<th>SA</th>
<th>TAS(b)</th>
<th>ACT</th>
<th>NT</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2000–01</td>
<td>7,501</td>
<td>7,608</td>
<td>8,395</td>
<td>1,191</td>
<td>1,998</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>222</td>
<td>349</td>
<td>27,367</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001–02</td>
<td>8,606</td>
<td>7,687</td>
<td>10,036</td>
<td>1,187</td>
<td>2,230</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>349</td>
<td>30,473</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002–03</td>
<td>16,765</td>
<td>7,287</td>
<td>12,203</td>
<td>888</td>
<td>2,423</td>
<td>213</td>
<td>310</td>
<td>327</td>
<td>40,416</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003–04</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>7,412</td>
<td>17,473</td>
<td>968</td>
<td>2,490</td>
<td>427</td>
<td>630</td>
<td>527</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004–05</td>
<td>15,493</td>
<td>7,398</td>
<td>17,307</td>
<td>1,104</td>
<td>2,384</td>
<td>782</td>
<td>1,213</td>
<td>473</td>
<td>46,154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005–06</td>
<td>29,809</td>
<td>7,563</td>
<td>13,184</td>
<td>960</td>
<td>1,855</td>
<td>793</td>
<td>1,277</td>
<td>480</td>
<td>55,921</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006–07</td>
<td>37,094</td>
<td>6,828</td>
<td>10,108(c)</td>
<td>1,233</td>
<td>2,242</td>
<td>1,252(c)</td>
<td>852</td>
<td>621</td>
<td>60,230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007–08</td>
<td>34,135</td>
<td>6,365</td>
<td>8,028</td>
<td>1,464</td>
<td>2,331</td>
<td>1,214</td>
<td>827</td>
<td>756</td>
<td>55,120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008–09</td>
<td>34,078</td>
<td>6,344</td>
<td>7,315</td>
<td>1,523</td>
<td>2,419</td>
<td>1,188</td>
<td>896</td>
<td>858</td>
<td>54,621</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009–10</td>
<td>26,248(d)</td>
<td>6,603</td>
<td>6,922</td>
<td>1,652</td>
<td>1,815</td>
<td>963</td>
<td>741</td>
<td>1,243</td>
<td>46,187</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(a) The data for 2002–03 onwards should not be compared with previous years. New South Wales implemented a modification to the data system to support legislation and practice changes during 2002–03 which would make any comparison inaccurate. New South Wales was able to provide limited data for 2003–04 due to the introduction of a new client information system. (b) The increase in substantiations in Tasmania is considered to be in part due to increased application of the Tasmanian Risk Framework as well as greater adherence to the definition of “substantiation” published by the AIHW. (c) The decrease in substantiations in 2002–03 reflects the decrease in notifications in Western Australia. (d) The increase in substantiations in 2003–04 relates to the increase in notifications in the ACT. (e) Data relating to substantiations for Tasmania for 2005–06 and 2006–07 should be interpreted carefully due to the high proportion of investigations in process by 31 August. (f) Due to new service and data reporting arrangements, the Victorian child protection data for 2006–07 may not be fully comparable with previous years’ data. (g) 2006–07 data for Queensland was updated in 2008. Data is different to the interim data published in Child Protection Australia 2006–07. (h) 2006–07 substantiation figures for Queensland are affected by a change in recording practice. From March 2007, any new child protection concerns received by the department that relate to an open notification/investigation and assessment are recorded as an additional concern and linked to the open notification/investigation and assessment. Previously, any new child protection concerns received by the department were recorded as an additional notification. If an investigation relating to these notifications was substantiated, each notification was recorded as a separate substantiation. Because new concerns are now recorded as additional concerns and not notifications, only the original notification is counted as a substantiation, where the investigation outcome is substantiated. (i) The decrease in the number of substantiated investigations reflects a requirement of staff to substantiate emotional abuse or neglect only if there was, or is likely to be, significant harm and there was no one with parental responsibility willing and able to protect the child/young person. Recording an outcome of an appraisal as not substantiated does not exclude ongoing work with the child or young person. (j) NSW figures are not comparable with those of other jurisdictions due to a differential investigation response system that determines two levels of investigation.

Note: Data may include unborn children

Source: AIHW, 2011, p. 19; AIHW, 2005, p. 18
The maltreatment types most commonly substantiated across Australia were emotional abuse and child neglect (see Figure 2). Emotionally abusive behaviours include verbally abusing, terrorising, scapegoating, isolating, rejecting, and ignoring. Children who witness domestic violence are also typically categorised as having experienced emotional abuse. The high proportion of substantiations of emotional abuse is a relatively new phenomenon (AIHW, 2011). The inclusion of children who have witnessed domestic violence is likely to be one of the key reasons for the high rates of substantiated emotional abuse (Holzer & Bromfield, 2008).

Neglect refers to the failure (usually by the parent) to provide for a child’s basic needs, including failure to provide adequate food, shelter, clothing, supervision, hygiene or medical attention. The high rates of neglect are consistent with the disadvantaged socio-economic conditions prevalent in many families referred to child protection services (Becket, 2003).

Neglect refers to the failure (usually by the parent) to provide for a child’s basic needs, including failure to provide adequate food, shelter, clothing, supervision, hygiene or medical attention. The high rates of neglect are consistent with the disadvantaged socio-economic conditions prevalent in many families referred to child protection services (Becket, 2003).

Some children who are found to have suffered abuse and neglect are removed from their homes by child protection authorities and placed in out-of-home care.
of-home care. Nationally, the number of children in out-of-home care has risen each year from 2000 to 2010. There were 35,895 children in out-of-home care on 30 June 2010. In all jurisdictions the total number of children residing in an out-of-home care placement was higher at 30 June 2010 when compared with 30 June 2009. However the number of children admitted into out-of-home care decreased by 6% from 12,833 in 2008–09 to 12,002 in 2009–10. Almost one-third (30%) of children in out-of-home care were aged 10–14 years. A further 30% were aged 5–9 years, 25% were aged less than 5 years and 15% were aged 15–17 years.

Most children who were removed from their homes were placed in home-based care (94%). Home-based care is where placement is in the home of a carer. There are three categories of home-based care:

- **foster care**—where care is provided in the private home of a substitute family that receives payment that is intended to cover the child’s living expenses;
- **relative/kinship care**—where the caregiver is a family member or a person with a pre-existing relationship with the child; and
- **other home-based care**—care in private homes that does not fit into the above categories.

Of those children in home-based care, 49.1% were in foster care, 48.5% were in relative/kinship care, and 2.2% were in some other type of home-based care.

A small proportion of children (5%) removed from their homes were placed in residential care, where staff were paid to care for them. Children in residential care were considerably older than children in home-based care.

The limitations of child protection statistics as an indicator for child maltreatment incidence

Traditionally, child protection data have been perceived as a conservative estimate of the occurrence of child maltreatment (Bromfield & Higgins, 2004). Child abuse and neglect often goes undetected due to the private nature of the crime, the difficulties children experience in making disclosures and being believed, and lack of evidence to substantiate the crime (Irenyi, 2007). Child protection data only includes those cases of abuse and neglect that were detected and reported and are therefore likely to be an underestimation of the number of children abused or neglected.

In addition to the under-reporting of abuse and neglect, system issues may also contribute to the underestimation of the number who are abused or neglected. Child protection data exclude cases where the abuse or neglect was not perpetrated by the parent and the parent is protecting the child (e.g., child sexually abused by a non-family member who lives in the community) (Bromfield & Higgins, 2004). These cases are generally considered to be a police not a child protection matter.

Child protection data also include cases in which children were not abused or neglected:

- child protection data include cases in which the state became involved to protect children who were at risk of being abused or neglected, but had not yet experienced any maltreatment (e.g., mother’s new partner is a known child sex offender) (Bromfield & Higgins, 2004).

The total number of notifications and substantiations reported by child protection services in any given year will also include some children who are reported to child protection services more than once in a 12 month period. Each new notification or substantiation does not necessarily represent a different child (AIHW, 2010).

Finally, it is worth noting that child protection data reflect only those families reported to child protection services. Economically disadvantaged families are more likely to come in contact with, and therefore under the scrutiny of, public authorities. This means that it is more likely that abuse and neglect will be identified in economically disadvantaged families if it is present (Beckett, 2003).

Other countries such as Canada, the US and the UK have undertaken national prevalence or incidence studies to enable more accurate estimates of how much abuse and neglect occurs in the community. "Prevalence" refers to the total number of children who have experienced abuse or neglect at some point in their childhood. "Incidence" refers to the total number of children who experienced abuse or neglect during a specified time period. Such information is usually collected via a large survey of the population.
based care, with 40% aged between 10–14 years and a further 45.7% aged between 15–17 years. At 30 June 2010, there were 11,468 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care. The national rate of Indigenous children in out-of-home care was almost 10 times the rate for other children.

For a more detailed discussion on children in out of home care see the NCPC Resource Sheet, Children in Care.

Who makes reports to child protection authorities?

Anyone who suspects that a child is being abused and/or neglected or is at risk of being abused and/or neglected may make a report to child protection authorities. Each state and territory has its own legislation stipulating those people who are mandated by law to report suspected cases of child abuse or neglect. The requirements vary between each state/territory. Mandatory reporting requirements are outlined in the NCPC Resource Sheet, Mandatory Reporting of Child Abuse.

The most recent AIHW statistics show that notifications most commonly came from police, hospitals and health centres, and school personnel.

Do child protection statistics tell us how many children are abused or neglected in Australia?

Child protection statistics tells us how many children come into contact with child protection services. It is the only data routinely collected in Australia that give an idea of the number of children experiencing child abuse and neglect. However there are several problems (see box inset for a discussion) with these data that result in some children who:

- have been abused or neglected not being included in child protection statistics; and
- have not been abused or neglect being included in child protection statistics.

Child protection statistics are the best available indicator of the extent of the problem of child abuse and neglect in Australia, but they do not tell us how many children in the community have been abused or neglected.

References


Additional Clearinghouse readings and research


Author

Alister Lamont is a Research Officer for the National Child Protection Clearinghouse at the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

Acknowledgement

The author acknowledges the work of Dr Leah Bromfield, Briony Horsfall and Mel Irenyi on previous versions of this Resource Sheet.