



Protecting our children

Compassion and care underpin the facts and statistics that help make life better for Australia's most vulnerable.

Children need to grow and develop in safe and secure environments. That's one of the fundamental tenets of any society. But how well does Australia do in this area? And where is there room for improvement?

Some information that can help to answer these sorts of questions can be found in the AIHW's [Child Protection data collection](#). Since 1990, the AIHW has been collecting data about the safety and security of vulnerable Australian children suspected of being abused, neglected or harmed, and those whose parents are unable to provide them with adequate care or protection. Findings from the data collection are published in an annual *Child Protection Australia* report.

The subject matter—child abuse and neglect—is, of course, highly sensitive and often emotional, and the same rigours and protocols around data collection confidentiality apply as they do for any AIHW project, says Michelle Quee of the Institute's Child Welfare Unit, who oversees the series. While the data in the *Child Protection Australia* report is presented in aggregated summaries to protect the confidentiality of individual children, since 2012-13, de-identified individual level data has been included in the underlying collection for nearly all jurisdictions. These data provide the AIHW with the opportunity to analyse and report on children's pathways through the system.

At the same time, Quee explains, the data is compiled in such a way that trends become clear through the pages of the report. This provides an evidence base that can help governments and organisations to develop or improve policies and practices to improve outcomes for at-risk children.

'We use this data a lot to better understand how situations are improving or otherwise for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children around the country,' says John Burton, Manager of Social Policy and Research for SNAICC—National Voice for our Children. 'And we quote quite a lot of it in our signature report that we put out every year called *Family Matters*.

'We've also worked closely with AIHW over a number of years and alongside the states and territories and Federal Government to improve relevant data systems and reporting so they offer better information about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, particularly those in contact with child protection systems.'

More generally, the type of information collected for the series has changed over time and as needed in response to the findings of various inquiries and perceived community expectations. 'For example, data development work currently underway for the collection is responding to recommendations made by the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, which concluded at the end of 2017,' Quee says.

The AIHW's *Child Protection Australia* report series includes a notable addition to its most recent, 2018-19, report: a chapter on permanency. Permanency refers to children transitioning from what are intended to be short-term out-of-home care living arrangements, such as with foster (or other) carers, into more permanent longer term living situations. For example, permanency outcomes can include reunification with family or other legally permanent placements with relatives, adoptive families or guardians.

'In proven cases of abuse where children end up in some sort of out-of-home care for their protection, this new chapter provides insights into long-term outcomes for those children,' Quee says.

As data for this new chapter builds over the coming years it will allow policymakers to see what patterns are emerging in relation to the stability of living arrangements for children and consider any changes that might be needed.

In 2018–2019:



170,200 children received child protection services in Australia



Emotional abuse was the most common type of abuse or neglect (**54%**); followed by **neglect (21%)**, **physical abuse (15%)**, and **sexual abuse (10%)**



A **higher proportion of girls (13%)** were subject to sexual abuse than **boys (6%)**



69,467 children were on **care and protection orders** and **44,900 children** were in **out-of-home care**



Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were almost **8 times as likely** as non-Indigenous children to have **received child protection services**

Note: Traditionally, child protection data have been perceived as a conservative estimate of the occurrence of child maltreatment. Child abuse and neglect often go undetected due to the private nature of the crime, the difficulties children experience in making disclosures and being believed, and a lack of evidence to substantiate the crime. The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2016) found that many victims may not disclose the abuse for many years, and some may never disclose at all. Child protection data only include 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.