

Current data collections relating to family support services

This section outlines the existing data collections jurisdiction by jurisdiction, along with what plans are in place in those jurisdictions which do not currently collect information about family support services. At present, there are collections in place for New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia, the Northern Territory and some Commonwealth programs, with others planning for a data collection.

The type of collection varies—some are 6-monthly paper-based forms, some are ongoing; some are conducted by the funding department and some are conducted by the non-government sector; some collect from all funded agencies and some collect only from agencies receiving funds above a certain level. Where no collections exist, there are plans to commence collection of information, but mostly these are still in the early stages. In several jurisdictions, information systems are currently being redeveloped, and this may affect the detail and frequency with which data are collected.

The descriptions are high level, and do not cover specific details such as software used, processing arrangements, or the range of information produced from the systems. Some brief comments in relation to data dictionaries are included. More details about each data collection are contained in the State, Territory and Commonwealth summaries included as Appendixes to this report.

Assessing the quality of information provided is difficult, and jurisdictions were not specifically asked to comment on this aspect. A number of evaluations have been undertaken in various States and Territories and in Commonwealth programs, which have provided some evaluation of the quality of information obtained from the data collections. Generally, where data collections are managed by the department, the collection forms part of the service agreement or work or service plan, and regional/zone or local office staff are generally in close contact with agencies to ensure that information is accurate and timely. Where collections are external to the department, issues of quality are harder for departments to assess.

Excluded from the descriptions below are the purely 'contract management' or financial systems used by most jurisdictions to account for program funds. Most of these systems contain information about the service being funded, and may include, as well as financial payments and budget information, some information about the broad nature of the services provided by the agency, the target groups they service and the locations from which they operate. These items are, of course, of considerable interest and of value in obtaining a picture of family support services. Further discussion is included in the next section.

Existing data collections

New South Wales

Family Support Services Association (FSSA) data collection

At present, the Department of Community Services does not undertake a data collection in relation to the Community Services Grants Program. It does, however, fund the Family Support Services Association for their data collection, and receives aggregated information in relation to their clients and activities. This data collection, which is undertaken by a private consultancy firm, covers a 2-week census period each year.

Data are collected in relation to:

- service overview (staffing, resources, client numbers, etc.—completed by the service)
- completed family worker cases, client details (individual client information, including goals and outcomes—completed by the workers)
- group participants and clients receiving family worker services (questions relating to participation, client characteristics, assessment of services, a series of questions about how the person sees things, a series of questions relating to the social fabric of the person and their local community—completed by the clients)
- staff profile (position, specialisation, hours, characteristics, qualifications, experience of abuse or violence, length of experience, training—completed by service staff)
- volunteer profile (role, hours, characteristics, qualifications, experience of abuse or violence, length of experience, training—completed by volunteers)

Neighbourhood centres

Neighbourhood centres participate in data collections run every 2 years by the Local Government and Shires Association. The collection covers all activities of neighbourhood centres, including family support. The classification of service types, service users, user characteristics and activity codes are based on Department of Community Services, AIHW, ABS and the Board of Adult and Community Education classifications. Family support services are identified as a single service type. The code lists and definitions are an attachment to the data collection forms.

It should be noted that much of the data included in this collection is out of scope of this study. It has been included here, however, as some neighbourhood centres deliver family support programs themselves, rather than simply providing a venue, or a coordination function for other services.

Victoria

The Department of Human Services initially contracted an external agency to conduct the data collection. This arrangement has now ended. The department has spent considerable resources in consultation with the non-government sector in relation to a new data collection for the Family Support Program. The new collection is being implemented from 2000–2001, and will collect information on clients in accordance with new service plans. Information is

collected quarterly. The collection is part of a wide-ranging Information Management Strategy being implemented throughout the Community Care Division of the department.

The data collection is currently paper forms based, with the intention to move to an electronic collection in the near future. The information is collected in relation to both casework, and short service activities.

Casework activities involve the collection of comprehensive information about the agency's intervention with the client, and covers items such as:

- agency location
- client characteristics—demographic and social
- case contact details including referrals, intake outcomes, reason for closure, etc.

Short service activities cover work where an activity does not proceed beyond intake; no formal assessment is done; telephone contact with no further appointment; crisis intervention; activities of 1–2 hours where few details are gained about the presenting person or family; one-off service activities where no further service is expected; and referrals which are deemed ineligible. Data items collected are:

- date of activity
- sex of person
- type of service (in person, telephone)
- duration of service
- service outcome
- use of professional interpreter

This data collection covers agencies funded under the Family Support Program. Strengthening Families currently has a separate data collection system as part of its evaluation. It is anticipated that the agencies funded under the Strengthening Families program will move to the Family Support Data Collection in 2001.

Statistical information is collected from Parentline, including number of calls; location of caller; sex of caller; age of child/ren; and issues raised.

Western Australia

The Department of Family and Children's Services has a number of integrated data collections which cover both departmental and funded services.

Departmental services

The departmental system, which is completed by individual workers in zones, produces the same statistical outputs as the collections for funded agencies in relation to family support services. This allows a seamless integration of information about these services, regardless of which sector provides the service. Other services, such as Parenting Services, have their own data systems which collect similar information to that for the non-government parenting services, although integration is more difficult. Some specialist departmental services use paper forms rather than the main system.

The department's Client and Community Services System (CCSS) is primarily a casework system. For family support services, the combination of appropriate 'service' and 'reasons'

fields provides the information in relation to the services within family support which are provided by departmental staff. Basically the system records a number of generic services such as mediation or counselling or advocacy, and, to find if they would fall within the domain of family support or another area such as crisis support, the service type is placed in a matrix with the reasons for contacting the department. Hence people who receive advocacy services when contacting for reasons such as a family problem or psychiatric issues would be counted as family support. If the reason for contact is financial problems, the service would be counted in another output area.

The department surveys its own customers on a regular basis, and has done so for several years. The survey is a large-scale 'market research' telephone collection which is outsourced to external consultants. It endeavours to contact each client with whom the department has had contact over the past 3 months (excluding child protection and domestic violence clients where it is not safe to contact). Questions include recall of the most recent contact, whether the consumer has noticed any difference in their circumstances, whether they learned anything from the contact, and whether the contact helped. Results are aggregated into the major output groups.

Similar surveys are undertaken from visitors to the department's parenting information centres. In addition, the department commissioned a wide range of research projects into particular family support services issues. These have been used as input to service development, planning and enhancement. Examples of projects include a review of the department's 'new directions' approach, which showed the department is in tune with international trends; a Family Week awareness survey; market research into parenting styles and attitudes; and a stocktake of Aboriginal parenting information materials.

Non-government services

The non-government data collection includes specific data items depending on the program—separate data collection forms exist for counselling, family support and neighbourhood houses, home visiting services and parenting services. A number of data items are common across all these data collection forms, which are obtained in paper format each 6 months. Data are entered to the Service Provision Management System (SPMS). Topics covered include:

- service availability (hours of operation, number of weeks of operation)
- service workload (number of contacts, number of cases, number of sessions)
- individual consumer characteristics
- referrals
- service provision (people involved and activities and hours for group activities)
- outcome measures (consumer feedback)
- quality indicator (consumer satisfaction with service)

Data items are tailored to the particular service type. The data collection forms are accompanied by detailed instructions and definitions.

In addition to these regular data collections, the department undertakes a survey of consumers. Bulk supplies of forms are provided to agencies each 6 months, and clients are requested to complete these forms either at the completion of a case, or within a period of 2 weeks. All forms are sent to the department for processing, and an *Agency Report* is

provided to the agency via the Zone Manager. Information from the *Agency Report* is transcribed to the data collection forms for input to the SPMS system.

A feature of the data collections is the concept of 'case equivalents'. This in effect converts activities of different types, such as group sessions, telephone counselling sessions, etc., to a single, comparable output measure. This allows for calculation of unit costs, for example. It is also designed to remove some of the difficulties inherent in comparing costs and performance of different service delivery models.

South Australia

Agencies funded under the Family Development Program are required to provide data at 6-monthly intervals, as part of the service agreement with the Department of Human Services.

Information collected includes:

- counselling and family support (clients, contact hours, etc.)
- groups/workshops (number held, participants, hours, etc.)
- information/referrals (hours, clients)
- volunteers (hours, numbers)
- issues/presenting problems during the reporting period which have impacted on service delivery and/or other relevant information (text description)
- individual clients receiving case managed service (aggregated counts by sex, age group, region, major presenting problem and referral source)

Information is collected on paper forms and aggregated to regional and State level by the department. Consultation was undertaken with agencies in relation to the data collection. Treasury requirements, including the need to account for funds, were major drivers of the collection. A simple way for agencies to report was discussed, and counts of clients/individuals receiving services and direct and indirect hours were considered to be the best measures of activities, and also practical for agencies to collect. Activities are compared against the output levels negotiated under the service agreement.

In addition to the 6-monthly activities data collection, quarterly financial information is provided to the department.

Data items are relatively straightforward, and no 'formal' data dictionary exists.

Northern Territory

Territory Health Services has a data collection system, primarily for child protection, which can be used by departmental staff for recording the family support cases they undertake. Due to the focus on children, only families with a child under 18 years of age can be recorded on the system. Non-case activities, such as parenting skills, information or referral, are not recorded. Services which have a strong element of family support as part of their overall service strategy, such as domestic violence services, problem gambling services, etc., are not recorded, even when these are provided by departmental staff.

The system, which is the same as that used in the Australian Capital Territory for child protection work, includes basic demographic characteristics of the child and other family members, as well as information on activities undertaken, and some outcome information.

Commonwealth

Family Relationships Services Program

There is a data collection system, FAMnet, in place. The system has been operational since early 1999, and collects information from services funded under the program on an ongoing basis. The data collection covers information about clients and activities engaged in by the clients of the service provider, as well as information about community education, training and other support activities. Service activities are categorised as 'Cases', 'Courses' or 'Support Activities'. Definitions of these are included in the data dictionary for the system.

The system contains a program management component which enables the department and agencies to manage contract arrangements, through online access to contract details, financial schedules, and electronic submission of financial data and accountability information. The system is Internet-based, with all information stored centrally. Service providers access the system through a secure browser-based interface.

Reports on service activities, client characteristics and performance measures can be obtained from the system, and further reports are constructed by the Department of Family and Community Services (FaCS) using a Crystal Reports tool.

The system has recently been transferred from the software developer to in-house management. Work continues on fine-tuning of the system, including the transfer of some data items from 'mandatory' to 'optional' status.

A comprehensive data dictionary forms part of the FAMnet system. The data dictionary is in two parts:

- Service Activity, covering information on the services provided to clients by service providers
- Supply Side, covering items concerned with the relationship between service providers and the department, such as contract and budget information, etc.

The data dictionary is updated as new items are added or items are amended. It is accessible directly from within the system via a 'Help' button, and can also be downloaded by individual system users.

Customer surveys and longitudinal studies

The department has a comprehensive and detailed program of customer surveys and longitudinal studies to provide information on a range of departmental programs. Key among these studies are the Customer Participation Survey; the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey (see the section on Planned Data Collections over the page); and the General Customer Survey.

The Customer Participation Survey involved a telephone survey of 2,027 recipients of social security payments for people of workforce age and covered areas which are related to family support, including participation in voluntary or community activities. Analysis of the data from this survey is continuing.

The General Customer Survey involves a sample of FaCS customers (pension, benefit and allowance recipients, people receiving family payments and holders of Health Care Cards), who are followed up each year to provide information on the impact of income support payments. Analysis of the data from the survey is ongoing.

Planned data collections

A number of jurisdictions, including those with existing collections, have plans to introduce or enhance existing collections. A brief summary is outlined below, and further details are contained in the Appendixes to this report.

New South Wales

Families First

As part of the Families First strategy, funding and performance agreements specify a comprehensive range of data items which services collect to provide information on activities and performance to the department. There is a range of items relating to the service (e.g. number of families by length of involvement, number of groups provided by type, etc) and demographic and social characteristics of parents using the service (e.g.. gender, ethnicity, age group, employment, family structure, etc.). In addition, items relate to social supports which the parent has, reasons for referral, child health issues, measure of parental and family functioning at start of program and after 6 months, and benefits for children and parents. Information on the volunteers providing home visiting services is also included (demographic and social indicators, numbers visited, reasons for termination of service, benefits for volunteer, supervision).

At present, the data items are the subject of a consultation project with funded services to assess the individual items.

An important part of the Families First strategy is a 15-year research consortium which will undertake a number of research projects, including full evaluation of the various aspects of the strategy. A longitudinal study of families receiving services will provide a rich picture of the effectiveness of the services, as well as an assessment of the way in which integration of services has improved outcomes for families.

Queensland

Data collected from agencies that provide family support is limited to financial information obtained through the service agreement process. Limited activity information is collected on a manual basis, along with occasional snapshots of particular activities and one-off evaluations.

The department is planning to commence automated data collection around the key outcome areas which will involve agencies providing information on activities, clients, service agreement performance indicators and contract management issues such as budgets.

Development of the pilots is currently in the early stages, with specifications being written prior to commencement of system design.

Western Australia

There are major plans to overhaul both the departmental and non-government information systems. This will involve capturing all departmental data electronically, and 'fitting' it into the three outcome groups, while still maintaining relevance to staff in zone offices. The separate data collections for parenting services, child protection, etc., will be integrated into a cohesive system.

The SPMS system for non-government agencies is being rewritten with provision for interlinking of service specifications, contract management, financial reporting, data collection, and reporting by the outcome groups. Electronic transmission of data from agencies to the department is under consideration, with provision for Internet transfer at a later stage. The system is being rewritten around existing service specifications and data collections.

Information from both systems will be put in a data warehouse, along with departmental financial and staff resources information to provide a complete picture of inputs, outputs and outcomes.

South Australia

In relation to data collections, the department is looking at reviewing the data set currently collected to ensure it is flexible enough for both large and small agencies, particularly in the area of measuring outcomes. A package of tools for measuring outcomes is considered necessary for agencies to implement performance measurement strategies in relation to this program.

Tasmania

There is currently no data collection in place in relation to the agencies funded under the Family Support or Personal and Family Counselling Services programs. The department is looking at developing a data collection system, and is engaged in identifying data items and outputs which are required for managing the funding programs.

The data collection will be generic, covering all services funded under the department's programs, rather than being specific to any one program.

The department is looking at options for the data collection, including 'off the shelf' products. A data warehousing model is favoured, as it will provide the greatest flexibility for providing information for operational management, program performance, and research and evaluation studies.

Funded agencies will be involved in the process of defining data items and collection methodologies. The Family Support Services Association advised that some agencies collect data on clients and activities, including name, address, relationships, ages of children, location of service, presenting issues, referral source and the like. Other agencies do not collect any information. An issue for small services is that any data collection effort is commensurate with the size of the agency and the amount of funding it receives.

Some issues in relation to the data collection include:

- existing collections which agencies may have

- information technology infrastructure and administrative systems in place within agencies
- sensitivity of certain data items such as turnover, volunteer information
- change management, and the need for collaborative processes so that all stakeholders are involved and aware of the proposed collection

The Health Advancement Output Group has some data collections in place, but these are mainly related to health surveillance services. The department collects and supplies information to meet health-related data sets in the ABS and AIHW collections.

Australian Capital Territory

There is currently no data collection in place. The department is working on developing a data collection system, and is engaged in identifying data items and outputs which are required for managing the funding program.

The data collection will be generic, covering all services funded under the department's programs, rather than specific to family support services.

The process being followed is to discuss data collection issues with service providers, including what data they currently collect, how it is collected and the impact of new collections on the agency. To date, responses from the sector have been supportive of the approach.

The data collection plans centre on quantitative and qualitative performance indicators. The quantitative indicators are in the nature of non-negotiable targets, covering hours of operation, service capacity, service activity data and client profile data. A further set of negotiable indicators, including intensive support clients, volunteer hours, support hours and more detailed information relating to activities and clients, is included. The qualitative indicators cover the non-negotiable areas of quality, including client feedback, client outcomes, access, appropriateness and service system development. A further set of negotiable indicators, covering client, staff and referring agency satisfaction, unmet needs and efficiency, is included.

The department's main focus in the early stages of the data collection project is to get some idea of the numbers of clients seen by agencies, and to obtain some performance and budgetary information.

It is planned to implement the basic client profile and service activity data by May 2001. These timeframes will be subject to review depending on the development process.

Some issues in relation to the data collection include:

- existing collections which agencies may have
- information technology infrastructure and administrative systems in place within agencies
- nature of the collection—a system is the aim, but a paper forms collection may be more feasible
- possibility of linked client records with an online system, especially for referrals
- sensitivity of certain data items such as turnover, volunteer information
- policy issues—the department is keen to resist the notion that data collection will in any sense drive policy or service delivery decisions

- change management, and the need for collaborative processes so that all stakeholders are involved and aware of the proposed collection

Northern Territory

There is currently no data collection in place for non-government agencies, other than financial acquittal of funds.

There is a new Territory-wide system in development to monitor funded agencies' budgets, income and expenditure and contract arrangements. This system will be implemented in 2001.

Plans exist to gather information from funded agencies, but the main efforts to date have been focussed on getting consistency with the child protection reporting requirements, and on development of new service agreements. Regular data collection on clients, activities and outcomes will be considered as part of the new service agreements with funded agencies.

The process will involve discussion of data collection issues with service providers, including what data they currently collect, how it is collected and the impact of any new collections on the agency.

Commonwealth

Parenting Program

Some data are collected about the Good Beginnings program, particularly in relation to costings and outcomes, as input to evaluations. Good Beginnings Australia is developing a new database to enable it to report more accurately on the program's outcomes. The 2-year evaluation of Good Beginnings revealed inadequacies in its existing database. The department has not developed particular data collection forms, but relies on the funding agreement as the means by which program information is obtained.

Other funded services

As part of the review of the agencies funded by the former Department of Health and Family Services, a new data collection system is planned, along with new service agreements to bring funding into line with other Commonwealth funding programs.

Longitudinal study of Australian children

Information from this study will address a major gap in knowledge and information about early childhood experiences and their impact on education, health, employment, crime and social problems. The study will complement the HILDA Survey and other studies being undertaken by the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) and the Australian National University (ANU) (see below). \$6.1 million has been committed over 4 years to the study under the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy.

Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey

The HILDA Survey is a long-term panel survey focussing on the links between labour market, income dynamics and family structures, as well as retirement issues. Although primarily related to economic determinants of behaviour, there is an inter-related objective relating to family dynamics, focussing on separation/divorce and social/economic status and on links between income support and family formation and breakdown. The survey is currently in the late stages of design, and an organisation has been contracted to finalise the design and commence implementation. The survey will provide valuable information in the area of family support, especially due to the planned linkages with the anticipated AIFS Australian Family Panel Survey, and the ANU Negotiating the Life Course Survey.