

# **Comparability of child protection data**

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# **Comparability of child protection data**

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare  
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### **Australian Institute of Health and Welfare**

Board Chair  
Professor Janice Reid

Director  
Dr Richard Madden

Any enquiries about or comments on this publication should be directed to:

Helen Moyle  
Australian Institute of Health and Welfare  
GPO Box 570  
Canberra ACT 2601

Phone: (02) 6244 1000

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# Preface

The Comparability of Child Protection Data Project was commissioned by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) on behalf of the National Child Protection and Support Services Data Group (NCPASS), which is a sub-group of the National Community Services Information Management Group (NCSIMG). The aim of the project was to map the similarities and differences in child protection data across jurisdictions and to make proposals for moving towards greater comparability of these data. The project was conducted by Rosemary Cant and Rick Downie of Social Systems and Evaluation. It commenced in August 1998 and was completed in April 1999 with the finalising of this report. NCPASS members subsequently conducted consultations in their respective jurisdictions, with executive staff responsible for child protection policy and information, on the recommendations contained in the report. Responses from personnel in the various jurisdictions were considered at an NCPASS meeting in July 1999 and a set of responses to the recommendations of the 'Comparability of Child Protection Data' report drawn up for presentation to the NCSIMG at its meeting on 3 September 1999. Part 1 of this publication contains the 'Comparability of Child Protection Data' report, which was written by Rosemary Cant and Rick Downie of Social Systems and Evaluation. The NCPASS report to the NCSIMG regarding the recommendations of the 'Comparability of Child Protection Data' report is contained in Part 2 of this publication.



**Part 1**  
**Comparability of child  
protection data**

**Report commissioned by National  
Child Protection and Support  
Services Data Group**



# Executive summary

In Australia, child protection is a State and Territory responsibility carried out by the respective community services departments. National data on the child protection activities of departments are collated by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) and published annually as the Child Welfare Series. Currently national child protection data comprise:

- child abuse and neglect notifications, investigations and substantiations;
- children on care and protection orders; and
- children in supported out-of-home overnight care.

Those familiar with the national data collection have been concerned for some time about the comparability of child protection data across Australia. As a result the National Child Protection and Support Services (NCPASS) Data Group commissioned this study to explore in detail the comparability across the States and Territories of child abuse and neglect data and of care and protection orders data. Comparability of national data is critical to the benchmarking of service outputs, outcomes and key performance indicators. It is also crucial in national reporting on child protection services.

The Comparability of Child Protection Data Project used a combination of document analysis and interviews with key personnel to examine the comparability of child protection data Australia-wide.

## Child protection

The authors found that there were significant differences across Australia in how child protection matters are defined and that these differences impact on comparability. However, once a matter has been defined as child protection, the way in which States and Territories respond is similar.

## Underlying differences

### **Different child protection legislation, policy and philosophies**

There is no clear definition about what constitutes child abuse and neglect in Australia. Child protection systems in each State and Territory operate under different legislation, policies and philosophies. These differences inevitably influence how departments use terms like 'abuse', 'notification' and 'substantiation'.

### **What is child protection and what is not?**

In recent years the definition of child abuse and neglect has broadened considerably with the growth in professional and public awareness about harm to children and, in Australia as well as overseas, it has gradually come to be replaced by the term 'child protection'. However, concern has been expressed in the literature that this broadening of the definition

has drawn more children and families into the net, exposing them to child protection investigations without necessarily increasing service provision to address their needs.

The decision by some States to specifically target their child protection responses to address maltreatment of children is one response to this situation. These States address other concerns about children under response categories like 'family support' or 'child and family concern'. As a result there is now an obvious difference between States as to what is included under 'child protection' services. Those States that differentiate their responses to concerns about children by targeting child protection responses to address maltreatment differ from those who do not. The former classify far fewer cases as child protection and consequently their rates for notifications, investigations and substantiations are considerably lower than those of other States and Territories.

### **Notifications counted at different points in the process**

Jurisdictions vary on the point at which they classify a contact as a notification for AIHW reporting. All States and Territories screen before instigating a child protection investigation. In some jurisdictions, however, notifications are caller defined and almost all contacts are categorised as notifications. In other jurisdictions the departments categorise a contact as a notification following initial screening based on the information provided by the caller and other inquiries. This difference in process has generally resulted in the former jurisdictions reporting much higher rates of notifications than others.

### **Child concern reports**

In an effort to improve comparability, the AIHW has begun to collect data on child concern reports. Currently four jurisdictions provide this data. However, the authors found that there were inconsistencies in the ways in which jurisdictions were using this concept. Until these inconsistencies are resolved their role in enhancing comparability is limited.

### **Substantiation and abuse types are used differently**

There are differences in the ways in which States and Territories use the concept of substantiation that probably impact on the comparability of reported data. Some jurisdictions say they substantiate an incident, others harm or risk of harm and still others a combination of the two. Two jurisdictions report 'at risk' separately from substantiation, the remainder do not.

While the definitions for the types of substantiated abuse are fairly similar, there is strong evidence that terms are used differently from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. In 1997-98, for example, the rate of substantiated emotional abuse in one jurisdiction was 22 times that in another; similarly, the rate of neglect in one jurisdiction was 22 times the rate in another jurisdiction. These differences are only partly accounted for by differences in substantiation rates.

## **Similarities in processes**

### **Screening and investigation**

Despite the differences in legislation, policy and philosophy the actual processes used to respond to a call expressing concern about a child are very similar. All jurisdictions screen the information that they receive from callers before deciding to instigate a child protection investigation. Once a decision is made to investigate, all jurisdictions use much the same



Screening:	not reported
Child protection intake:	reported for child protection
Investigation:	reported for child protection
Investigation decision:	reported for child protection
Services:	future reporting
Orders:	reported as care and protection orders

While the adoption of a generic reporting format with common counting points would not resolve differences in what States and Territories count as a 'child protection intake' or 'substantiated abuse or neglect', differences in how they count it would be eliminated. All jurisdictions should be able to adopt the generic framework without any major modifications to existing data collections, although detailed counting rules would need to be developed by NCPASS.

## Enhancements to the collection

Several enhancements to the collection are proposed in Chapter 3. These include:

1. Enhancing the existing data collection by adding new data items and counting rules based on agreed descriptors of harms/injuries and actions responsible data for substantiated child abuse and neglect.
2. Broadening aspects of the collection into a 'child welfare' or 'children in need' data collection of which the present child abuse and neglect collection would be a subset.
3. Increasing the use of computer routines to select some records and exclude others in ways that enable users to flexibly explore comparability issues.
4. Including information about supportive and therapeutic services (as well as information on out-of-home care and care and protection orders) in the collection.

The first and third strategies would enable comparison of what States and Territories are dealing with under the child protection banner. They would also allow some assessment of the severity of abuse and re-abuse in Australia. Strategy 1 in particular represents a practical and ongoing way of 'unpicking', or getting to the bottom of, the widely divergent rates of substantiation and types of abuse across Australia. Concern has been expressed that this option would narrowly focus the child protection discussion away from contextual issues and onto the harms/injuries associated with a particular incident. This risk could be minimised by careful definitions and by ensuring that the new data items supplement rather than replace existing data.

The second and fourth strategies would allow Australia-wide comparisons of referrals to community services departments about children and how departments manage these referrals. The intention of strategy 2 would be to report more fully at the national level about referrals received by relevant departments, not to broaden the collection to other departments and instrumentalities. Substantial work would be required to ensure that broadening the collection did not replace one set of comparability problems with another. Collection of data about the nature of intervention offered to children and families post-investigation (or family support assessment) would be a valuable adjunct to the existing child protection collection. At present data are only available on out-of-home care and care and protection orders.

None of these strategies could be implemented without full commitment from States and Territories, as they would require agreement on new definitions and Australia-wide

implementation. Most States and Territories would also need to make major changes to their information systems, which may prove to be a significant obstacle. On the other hand, none of the strategies would require change to existing legislation or policy and would be relatively impervious to future changes. The data gathered would be of substantial benefit to future policy making.

## Summary of recommendations

### Recommendation 1

That the problematic nature of terms like 'child protection', 'abuse', 'neglect', 'notification', 'harm', 'risk' and 'substantiation' be made clear in all publications reporting national child protection data.

### Recommendation 2

That for AIHW counting purposes an investigation should include, as a minimum, interviewing or sighting the subject child in all instances that it is practicable to do so, identifying harm or risk of harm to the child, determining an outcome and assessing protective needs.

### Recommendation 3

That AIHW cease to aggregate 'no investigation possible' and 'no action' when reporting investigation outcomes.

### Recommendation 4

That NCPASS redevelop the counting rules for care and protection orders to remove any ambiguity.

### Recommendation 5

That the various care and protection orders not be aggregated in any national child protection reports.

### Recommendation 6

That the stages of 'initial contact', 'initial examination of contact information' and 'further examination of contact information' be adopted as a generic framework for child protection processes Australia-wide and that the shortened terms used to describe each process be 'initial contact', 'screening' and 'investigation'.

### Recommendation 7

That a new counting point called 'child protection intakes' be adopted to replace 'notifications' in AIHW reporting and that child protection intakes be identified by each State and Territory after screening of initial contact information and based on counting rules developed by NCPASS.

### **Recommendation 8**

That States and Territories work towards adopting Option 4 (enhancing the collection) in the longer term, while implementing Option 1 (provision of clear explanatory notes and disclaimers) in the short term.

### **Recommendation 9**

That increased use be made of computer routines to explore similarities and differences between States and Territories in the way that they respond to concerns about children in general and child protection intakes in particular.

### **Recommendation 10**

That NCPASS consider ways in which data on intervention post-investigation could be incorporated into the national child protection data collection.

### **Recommendation 11**

That work commence on investigating the feasibility of working towards the adoption of core data items and values to record child protection across States and Territories.

### **Recommendation 12**

That a regular process of review occur to ensure that levels of comparability achieved are maintained, taking into account legislative and policy changes across Australia.