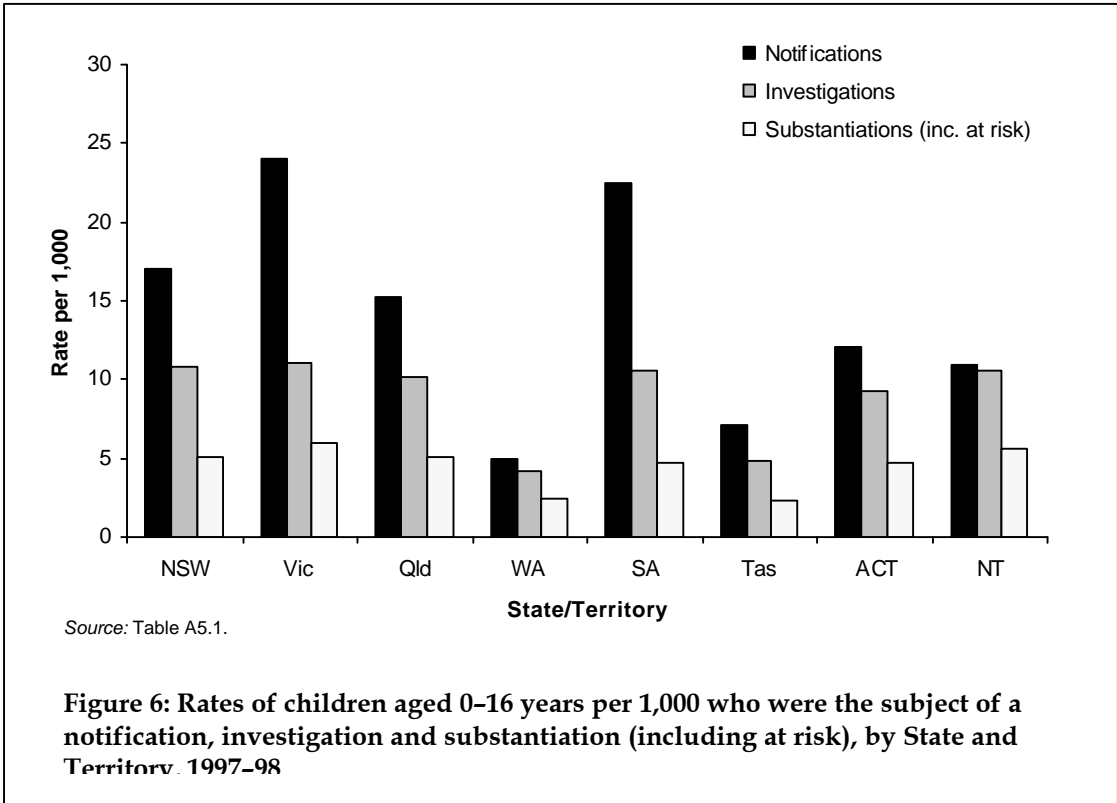


3 Strategies to enhance comparability

3.1 Overview

This chapter discusses strategies that may lead to greater comparability of child protection data across States and Territories. A uniform framework within which the child protection processes in each jurisdiction can be studied from a data comparability perspective is proposed, along with suggestions for enhancements to the collection.

In the previous chapter, the major child protection processes were discussed highlighting similarities and differences between different States and Territories. Bar graphs were presented showing rates per 1,000 for children who were the subject of notifications, investigations and substantiations. Figure 6 brings these bar graphs together, reinforcing the view that jurisdictions are least comparable at the point of notification and superficially most comparable at the point of substantiation. A generic reporting format is proposed to improve comparability at the front end, i.e. what is currently called notification.



3.2 Generic reporting format

Generic labels

It became clear in discussions with States and Territories that the current labels used in the AIHW collection contribute to the confusion about comparability. Either States and Territories use the same terms but mean different things or they use different terms but mean the same things – ‘notification’ and ‘investigation’ are cases in point. At times, departmental officers had difficulty in separating the way their department used terminology from the way in which it was used by AIHW or other jurisdictions.

An additional complication is the fact that State and Territory statistics reported in AIHW publications do not necessarily match those reported in departmental annual reports and other similar publications. This is not surprising because the counting rules used locally may be somewhat different from those used nationally; however, because the terminology used is the same, readers expect the data to be the same also.

Part of the solution to these problems would be to introduce an agreed terminology with associated definitions and counting rules which, while relevant and meaningful, are used only for national statistics.

Generic framework

Irrespective of the State or Territory, a referral to a department which ultimately ends up being dealt with as a child abuse or neglect referral passes through a number of similar stages. It is proposed that these stages be used as a framework to facilitate national comparisons.

Three stages have been identified:

- initial contact with department;
- initial examination of contact information; and
- further examination of contact information.

Shorter descriptions for the three stages are proposed, namely Initial Contact, Screening and Investigation. These terms are suggested for use as generic labels within AIHW collections.

Included with the proposal for the new generic terms is the nomination of a new point at which comparison would take place. This point is proposed to be where decisions are made about further departmental action following the screening stage. One of these decisions is to categorise a contact as a child protection matter.

Figure 7 provides an overview of the proposed generic reporting format. Appendix 1 contains a representation of the systems in each State and Territory, separated into stages under the proposed generic labels. Each of the stages is discussed below.

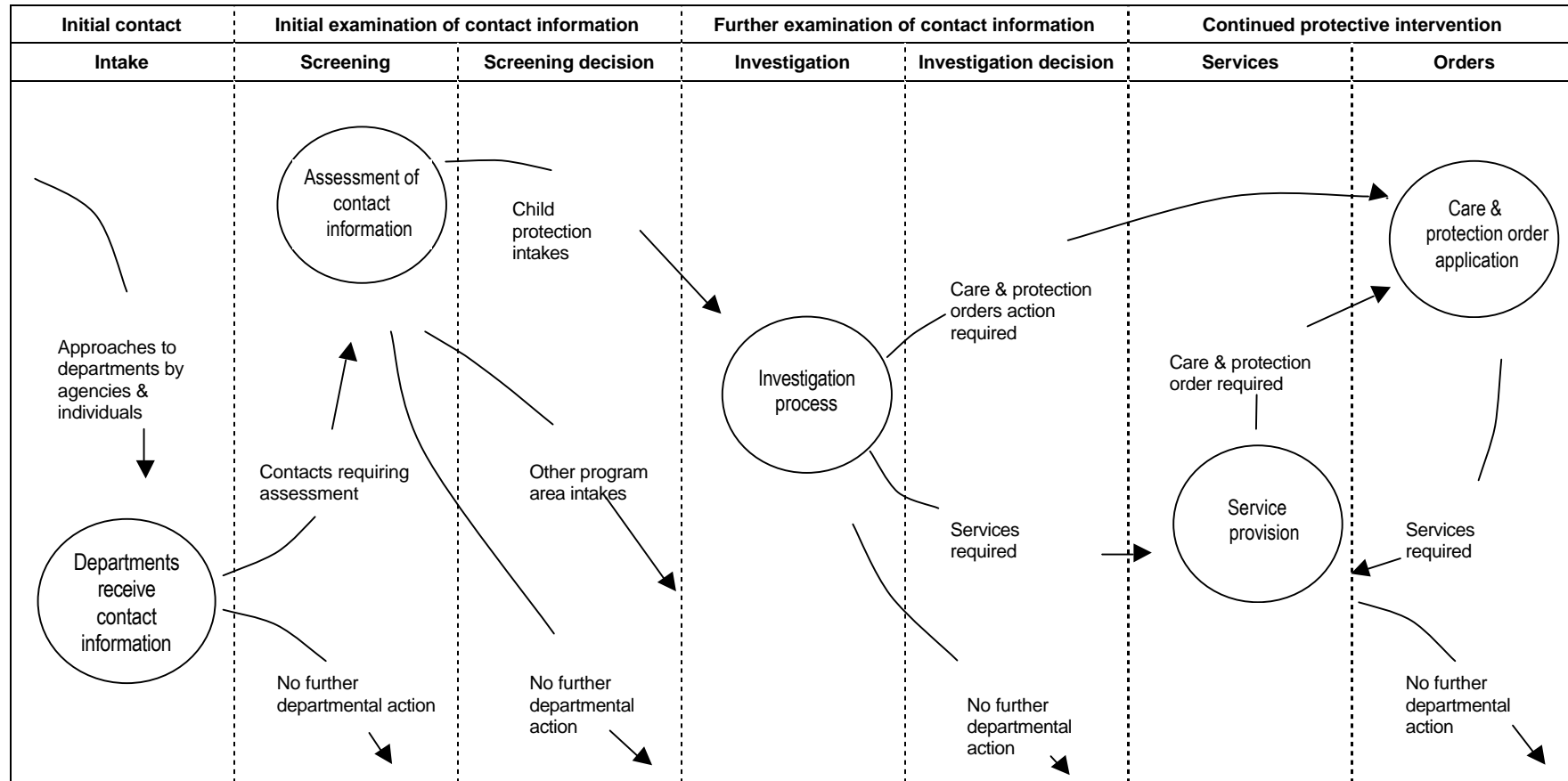


Figure 7: Overview of the proposed generic reporting framework

Initial contact

In nearly all jurisdictions the term 'intake' is used to describe the initial contact that an individual or agency, concerned about a child or requesting a service, has with a department. Where the concept of a 'notification' is caller-determined this initial contact is synonymous with 'notification', that is, the initial contact earns a child protection label and is counted as a 'notification' in AIHW publications (Victoria, South Australia and the Northern Territory). In other jurisdictions 'notification' and 'initial contact' are not synonymous although the actual reasons for contact may be similar to those in Victoria, South Australia and the Northern Territory.

The generic label 'initial contact' is proposed for this stage; however, we do not believe that real comparability in child protection data is possible at 'initial contact' because of differing departmental mandates and functions.

Screening

A second stage has been identified, described here as the 'initial examination of contact information' with a proposed shortened title of 'screening'. Screening leads to an initial decision to screen out some contacts as requiring no further action or to direct them to other (non-child protection) program areas and to screen-in other contacts as potential cases of child abuse and neglect. Only the latter contacts proceed to investigation. All States and Territories screen in this way. Some States and Territories screen before designation of a contact as a 'notification' for AIHW reporting purposes and others after (see Chapter 2).

In reality there may be little or no time lag between initial contact and screening if a referral is clearly a child protection matter. What has become clear, though, is that a point of commonality across States and Territories exists when the decision following the screening stage indicates that the contact requires further action from a child protection perspective. This decision classifies the initial contact as a child protection matter.

It is proposed that all States and Territories adopt the decision following screening as the first point at which they report to AIHW and that it be referred to as 'child protection intake'.

The new count 'child protection intake' would replace the old count of 'notifications'. Victoria, South Australia and the Northern Territory would need to develop new counting rules to reflect this change. Other States will probably be able to use the same counting rules as those used for the old notification counting point but should review their counting rules to make sure. The count 'child protection intake' will be similar to the count 'investigation' but it is unlikely that all 'child protection intakes' will end up being investigated.

Use of the term 'notification' in AIHW reporting should cease. It is used in an inconsistent manner across Australia and its retention may create confusion in some jurisdictions.

The diagrams in Appendix 1 provide clear evidence of potential comparability at the proposed point and will provide a sound foundation on which counting rules for reporting at this point can be developed.

Investigation

The next stage is 'further examination of contact information', assigned a short description of 'investigation'. This stage is referred to in some jurisdictions as 'investigation', in others as 'assessment' and also as 'field action'. The term 'forensic investigation' has also been used. In all jurisdictions it leads to the decision of 'substantiated', 'not substantiated' or to

other outcomes specific to particular jurisdictions. The activities associated with this stage are very similar across departments and it is proposed that the term 'investigation' remain as currently used in AIHW reporting.

All States and Territories appear to make a comparable decision based on the results of the investigation, but this is somewhat deceptive. As outlined in Chapter 2, there is good evidence that, although the same terminology is used, the conditions to which decisions like substantiated or confirmed are applied are not necessarily common across jurisdictions. The issue of what States and Territories actually classify as 'child abuse and neglect' needs much more exploration. Until this occurs there will be limited comparability at this point and hence no new generic label is proposed for investigation decision.

Development and/or refining of counting rules

Prior to the adoption of the proposed generic framework, it will be necessary to identify which existing counting rules remain appropriate, to refine them where necessary and to develop a new counting rule for child protection intakes. NCPASS would be the appropriate group to undertake this task.

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.

3.3 Enhancing the collection

Once the variability associated with the count of 'notification' is removed, States and Territories fall into two bands. Western Australia and Tasmania are in one band and the remaining States and Territories in the other.

The substantially lower rates per 1,000 reported for Western Australia and Tasmania at every stage in the child protection process are the result of these States making the policy decision to separate child protection from family support and to provide services to both types of case. These States are categorising some contacts differently from other jurisdictions. It should not automatically be assumed that these contacts, which are categorised as family support (or other non-child protection equivalent), are less serious child protection cases, although they may be.

However, even within these two bands there are obvious differences between States and Territories in terms of what is being substantiated (see Table 3, Chapter 2).

There are four possibilities for addressing this lack of comparability:

- Option 1 Accept that what is categorised as child protection varies from location to location and do not attempt to compare data from different States and Territories.
 - Option 2 Introduce additional data items and counting rules based on agreed descriptors of substantiated abuse and neglect (i.e. actions responsible and harms/injuries).
 - Option 3 Broaden the collection into a child welfare data collection of which the present child protection collection would be a subset.
 - Option 4 Adopt both options 2 and 3 in an attempt to maximise points of comparison.
- Each of these strategies has advantages and disadvantages.

Option 1

Option 1 is essentially acceptance of the status quo, apart from the new counting point for notifications. It requires no commitment by NCPASS and AIHW to anything other than clear explanatory notes and disclaimers when the data are reported.

Option 2

Properly resourced and implemented, Option 2 would provide useful information about what types of incidents and harms/injuries to children are subsequently being substantiated by departments and allow exploration of differences in response across jurisdictions. It would also allow some assessment of the severity of reported abuse and re-abuse in Australia. Some States and Territories already record this information electronically and presumably most would record it on paper files.

Option 2 is the most practical way that the authors can see for getting to the bottom of the widely different rates of substantiation and abuse types highlighted in Chapter 2. The alternative would be a massive Australia-wide qualitative study. Option 2 would enable ongoing monitoring of harms/injuries in a way that a one-off qualitative study would not. Option 2 is consistent with earlier recommendations to social welfare ministers and administrators (Thorpe 1989). Analysis of this type of data has proved very helpful to policy makers in understanding what is being categorised as child abuse and neglect by a community services department (Cant & Downie 1994) and to tailor intervention accordingly.

The authors do not underestimate the complexity of implementing Option 2 or the commitment that would be required from States and Territories to develop, implement and electronically record new definitions that would more fully (and usefully) explicate the old classifications of physical, sexual and emotional abuse and neglect.

Concern has been expressed that this option would narrowly focus the child protection discussion away from contextual issues and onto the harms/injuries and actions associated with a particular incident. The authors accept that this may be a risk, although they see these additional data as supplementing not replacing existing data. Careful development of definitions for harms/injuries and actions responsible should assist in minimising the risk.

Subjectivity in the use of descriptors is also of concern but, as Chapter 2 has shown, this problem is inherent in the collection.

Option 3

Broadening the collection into a child welfare (or children in need) collection would potentially allow some comparison of the number of referrals to departments concerning

children that the different States and Territories are dealing with at initial contact and of how they subsequently stream them. However, while it may increase comparability at initial contact and provide valuable information about the way in which departments are responding to concerns about children, it will not enhance comparability at investigation or substantiation. Substantial work would be required to ensure that broadening the collection in this way did not replace one set of comparability problems with another.

In the case of New South Wales, Tasmania and the Australian Capital Territory, adoption of this strategy might be as simple as the inclusion of what have been called 'child concern reports' or 'consultation'. For Western Australia, including 'child concern reports' would not achieve the desired end; it would be necessary to explore other 'reasons for contact' that involve children to obtain the most appropriate mix for inclusion. Consideration would also need to be given to what additional data would be required from Victoria, Queensland, South Australia and the Northern Territory.

It should be noted that it is intended through this option to more fully report at a national level referrals about children received by the relevant departments. It is not intended to broaden the collection to other departments and instrumentalities. The count would be based on 'initial contact', although detailed counting rules would be necessary.

Option 4

The fourth option, the author's preferred one if there is to be greater understanding of child protection issues Australia-wide based on data, would be to implement both Option 2 and Option 3. Both represent enhancements of the existing data collection and could be implemented without losing any of the data currently collected. Neither option could be implemented without full commitment from States and Territories. Both would require agreement on new definitions and Australia-wide implementation. Most States and Territories would need to make major changes to their information systems, which might prove to be a significant hurdle. On the other hand, neither option requires change to existing legislation, policy or practice and would be relatively impervious to future changes.

Option 4 has the advantage of offering the most comprehensive approach to achieving comparability and would provide the best data for decision-makers. The disadvantage is that it also requires most commitment from States and Territories.

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.

3.4 Other strategies to enhance comparability

While the two major strategies to enhance comparability are (1) the adoption of a generic framework for child protection reporting, and (2) enhancing the existing data collection, use of computer routines (filters) in some areas and consolidating 'at risk' and 'substantiated' reports would also assist.

Use of computer routines (filters)

Computer routines would be used to select or filter existing data to create subsets of data containing information that is more comparable across jurisdictions than the original data. The use of the term 'filter' relates to filtering out certain data values, according to selection or exclusion criteria, resulting in a more reasonable point of comparison across the jurisdictions.

The idea of using filters was discussed in New South Wales with the data analysis team who voiced concern about the value of excluding items that, in the view of certain States, should validly be included. This concern has been echoed by AIHW. The authors make the point, however, that the aim is to achieve greater comparability at certain points in the process and that what is filtered out can still be reported on in different tables within the collection. Indeed, the capacity to apply different filters gives great flexibility to the ways in which the data can be presented.

Use of computer routines (filters) in conjunction with Options 2 and 3 would provide Australia with enormous capacity to explore similarities and differences between the community services departments in terms of the types of concerns about children brought to their attention and their responses to these. Data items that could be used in developing computer routines to filter records are suggested below.

Age

Data categorising the number of notifications by the age of the subject child were requested from all States and Territories but supplied only by some. Without being able to examine across Australia age separation of subject children, it is not clear what impact the imposition of an age filter would have on comparability. However, the filtering out of all notifications (or child protection intakes, in the proposed terminology) for children 17 years and older would immediately make other jurisdictions more comparable to Victoria. An age filter is essential if care and protection order data are to be compared on a like-with-like basis. It is noted that the AIHW currently applies this filter to some tables.

Perpetrator of maltreatment or abuse

A filter based on the person responsible for abuse may help to overcome differences across jurisdictions, which are the result of extra-familial or peer abuse being included. All States and Territories, apart from South Australia, record information about perpetrators. South Australia will eventually record this detail but was unable to nominate a commencement date.

Caution would be required in pursuing this path as further detailed investigation may exclude it as a viable filter. This comment is made in the light of discussion in Queensland where it was stated that in certain circumstances, where physical or sexual abuse had been perpetrated by an extra-familial person, it could be recorded as neglect perpetrated by the child's parent(s). The rationale for recording the incident in this manner would be that the parent(s) had failed to protect the person from the abuse. Some other jurisdictions alluded to a similar view but nowhere was it stated as clearly as it was in Queensland.

Consolidating at risk with substantiated reports

The number of jurisdictions recording the 'at risk' is reducing. The fact that in some jurisdictions risk is recorded as an outcome of an investigation and in other jurisdictions it is recorded in the detail of what was found during the investigation impacts on comparability.

It may be appropriate to filter out from some counts those cases where the harm/injury descriptor indicates risk of harm only or, as an alternative, to consolidate 'at risk' outcomes with substantiated outcomes. It may also be appropriate to look more closely at 'risk' in its own right.

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.

3.5 Information on services

States and Territories currently report on only three services delivered by community services departments in response to concerns about children:

- child protection investigations
- out-of-home overnight care
- court orders.

Excluding investigation, these services are provided only to a small percentage of children. In addition, the way in which data on out-of-home overnight care and data on care and protection orders are reported makes no linkage back to child protection intakes. All States and Territories provide a range of other intervention services to selected children and families following a child protection investigation; they also provide services to children and families outside a child protection context. None of these services is reported for national statistics.

In terms of the efficiency and effectiveness of child protection (and family support) processes, the provision of services post-investigation (or assessment) in cases of identified need is critical. Thorpe (1989) recommended the use of a 'career path' concept as a means of recording and analysing interventions post-investigation. This proved a useful device for examining child protection interventions (Thorpe 1989) but has not really 'caught on'.

In terms of State and Territory comparability, it would be of considerable interest to understand the extent to which jurisdictions are similar (or different) in their post-investigation (and post-assessment) interventions to support children and families experiencing problems and to prevent incidents of child abuse or neglect.

Recommendation 10

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

3.6 Barriers to comparability

Information systems constraints

Consultations in States and Territories identified that there were limitations in information systems in different jurisdictions that can negatively impact on strategies to achieve comparability. Some issues that surfaced are discussed here.

Data items and data values collected

Important data items such as family structure of subject child, person responsible for abuse, and descriptors of action responsible and resulting harm/injury are not uniformly part of information systems in every State and Territory.

In addition, differences exist from jurisdiction to jurisdiction in the values that are recorded within data items such as actions and resulting harms/injuries. In some jurisdictions, lists of values provided showed a mixture of presenting problems, actions and/or resulting harms/injuries.

True comparability cannot hope to be achieved without uniformity in procedures and the data collected as a result of the procedures and practices. While differences would always exist in legislation, and program management will evolve in the light of trends and findings from child protection research, a greater degree of comparability for data collection systems should be aimed for. This would be achieved through a group like NCPASS embarking on a process to get agreement on a set of core child protection data items for each State and Territory. The values to be recorded within each data item and a uniform understanding of what each of those values represents should also be agreed. Undertaking such a task will not be easy but its successful completion would produce an agreed set of data items and agreed values that could be incorporated in any new information systems developments.

In some States it may be possible, once data items and values are agreed upon, to electronically map existing data to new agreed values. This type of task falls into the most difficult area of information technology systems development in that it requires a strong bridge between the program area experts, data analysis teams and the information technology personnel who would program the mapping process. It is likely that this mapping would also include the use of some or all of the potential filters suggested elsewhere in this chapter.

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.

Inflexibility of the format in which child protection data is currently available

Requests for additional data from States and Territories resulted in most jurisdictions in comments about how difficult it was to extract data from existing information systems and present these data in a flexible manner. In both the Australian Capital Territory and the Northern Territory the request was met with a simple statement that it is not possible to provide ad hoc reports without significant prior notice and scheduling of the work.

The authors see the most likely short-term prospect of enhanced comparability being achieved through the application of filters to existing data. However, for this to be properly investigated, data would need to be available in a variety of flexible formats such as ad hoc reports and data extracts. There currently seems to be limited potential for most jurisdictions to provide this.

3.7 Legislative and policy changes

Given the task of working with data across eight different jurisdictions, changes in legislation and policies from time to time can have enormous impact on the comparability of data collected. Any strategies to enhance comparability of data across jurisdictions would need to be reviewed on a regular basis, either annually or every 2 years, to ensure that the strategies to maintain comparability remain accurate and relevant.

Discussions in New South Wales focussed on new legislation in that State which is proposed to come into operation in the year 2000. In conjunction with the implementation of the new legislation it is proposed that a new information system will also be established, the development of which is just commencing. The new bill in New South Wales to replace the existing *Children (Care and Protection) Act 1987* will result in substantial changes to how care and protection is dealt with in that State. Some elements of the new legislation that arose during discussion were:

- the concept of notification being replaced by 'reports' that can be made by parents or children;
- change of focus to the child being more 'at risk of harm';
- the inclusion in the bill of categories (circumstances) where a 'risk of harm' will exist;
- provision for prenatal reports to be made; and
- expansion of mandated reports.

The impact of this new legislation on the comparability of New South Wales data with data collected in other jurisdictions may be significant. The consequences of other jurisdictions adopting new legislation (or new policies) could have a similar impact.

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.

4 Summary and conclusions

The findings in Chapter 2 confirm that the Australia-wide comparability of both child abuse and neglect and children on care and protection orders data is problematic.

4.1 Comparability of child protection data

Definitional problems with child protection

The authors found that there are major definitional problems with key terms like ‘child protection’, ‘abuse’, ‘notification’ and ‘substantiation’. The AIHW has already quite correctly stated that there is no clear definition of what constitutes child abuse and neglect in Australia. Even when similar Australia-wide definitions exist, as with abuse types, there is strong evidence they are used differently. The different rates per 1,000 for children who are the subject of notifications, investigations and types of substantiations of abuse and neglect presented in Chapter 2 vividly illustrate this.

These definitional differences, rooted as they are in legislative, policy, service and above all philosophical differences, cannot be easily resolved. The development of common definitions will not help unless the definitions reflect shared policy, philosophy and ultimately legislation.

Australia is not alone in facing this problem. The influential *Child Protection: Messages from Research* starts off with, but does not resolve, the problem of definition (Dartington Social Research Unit 1995). It is critical that differences in definition and meaning are not glossed-over in any way and that their impact on the data is clearly identified and understood.

What is child protection?

Deciding what is and is not a child protection matter is fundamental as this determines how departments intervene and therefore in a data context what they record.

In recent years the definition of child abuse has broadened considerably with the growth in professional and public awareness. There has been concern, however, that the 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 them. It has also increased the pressure on community services departments to cope with burgeoning investigatory requirements with limited resources. All this is well documented in the literature (e.g. Parton et al. 1997).

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, which has impacted markedly on the comparability of national child protection data across Australia.

Child concern reports

In an effort to improve comparability, the AIHW has begun to collect data on child concern reports. Currently four jurisdictions provide these 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.

Notifications are counted at different points in the process

The authors found that jurisdictions varied on the point at which they categorised a contact as a notification for AIHW reporting and that this greatly affected the comparability of data. In some jurisdictions the initial caller-defined categorisation of a contact as a notification was reported to AIHW, while in other jurisdictions a contact was only designated as a notification for AIHW purposes after the department had done some initial screening.

Investigation processes are similar

It was hypothesised that one of the causes of the lack of comparability in child protection data across Australia was differences in what States and Territories viewed as an investigation. However, the authors found that investigation processes were reasonably consistent across jurisdictions. At a minimum all jurisdictions considered that an investigation involved sighting or interviewing the child whenever practicable, identifying harm/injury to the child or risk thereof, determining an outcome and assessing safety needs.

Substantiation and abuse types are used differently

States and Territories define substantiation differently. Some jurisdictions substantiate harm or risk of harm, others an incident and still others a combination of the two. In addition, two jurisdictions are still reporting 'at risk' whereas other jurisdictions do not, although most have the category 'risk of harm' as a value within substantiation.

The definitions of abuse types are fairly similar across Australia but the authors found strong evidence that the way in which they are used varies considerably. In the absence of more detailed information about what is being substantiated, the variation in the rates per 1,000 for types of substantiated abuse and neglect provides the only real insight into the differences in how jurisdictions are categorising different concerns about children. For example, it is a reasonable working hypothesis that the high rate of children who are the subject of substantiated emotional abuse in Victoria may have something to do with the way in which that department is responding to domestic violence when there are children in the family.

4.2 Comparability of care and protection orders data

In the 1997–98 AIHW collection, care and protection orders are grouped into four categories:

- finalised guardianship or finalised custody orders sought through a court;
- finalised supervision or other finalised court orders;
- interim and temporary court orders; and
- administrative and voluntary arrangements with the community services departments.

While this grouping appears reasonable and reflects the options available to the courts in each jurisdiction, the authors found that the counting rules for two of the categories are ambiguous and open to different interpretations. There is clear evidence that States and Territories with similar provisions in their legislation have made opposite decisions in relation to reporting on ‘interim and temporary court orders’ and ‘administrative and voluntary arrangements’.

The authors also found that there was limited comparability when the four categories are aggregated into a single category and States and Territories compared as, for example, in rate per 1,000 by Indigenous status. These sorts of comparisons would be better done on the categories individually.

4.3 Options to improve comparability

The authors have identified several options for improving comparability. The options fall within two areas; the adoption of a generic reporting framework, and the undertaking of enhancements to the collection.

A generic reporting format

Once departments have decided that a contact about a child should be treated as a child protection matter (however defined), there is considerable commonality in the processes used. A simple generic framework for national reporting is therefore feasible. A new counting point called child protection intake is suggested to replace the current notification count.

In summary, the proposed generic reporting format comprises:

Initial contact	not reported (future child welfare reporting)
Screening	not reported
Child protection intake	new counting point for child protection
Investigation	reported for child protection
Investigation decision	reported for child protection
Services	future reporting
Orders	reported as children under orders

The investigation decision could usefully be recorded as both:

- Substantiated, not substantiated, or no investigation possible; and
- Services required (including care and protection applications), or no further departmental action.

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 were proposed in Chapter 3. They provide an ongoing approach to 'unpicking' what jurisdictions are defining as child protection matters. The suggested enhancements include:

1. Enhancing the existing data collection by introducing 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 the collection to 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 records to facilitate exploration of issues of comparability.
4. Including information about supportive and therapeutic services, as well as 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.

The second and fourth strategies would allow Australia-wide comparisons of referrals to community services departments about children and how the referrals are managed by them. The starting point for broadening the collection would be initial contact with the relevant departments about children. The proposal only relates to departments currently contributing to the child protection collection. 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.

Implementing these strategies would present some difficulties. None could be implemented without full commitment from States and Territories as they would require agreement on new definitions and Australia-wide implementation. Most jurisdictions would also need to make major changes to their information systems, which might 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.