

2 Child abuse and neglect

Overview of the information on child abuse and neglect

Defining child abuse and neglect

The protection of children from abuse and neglect is legally the responsibility of the community services department in each State and Territory. Each State and Territory has separate legislation to empower it to undertake its responsibilities in this area (see Appendix 3).

There is, however, no clear definition as to what constitutes child abuse and neglect. The term can mean very different things to different people. Incidents notified as child abuse and neglect are open to interpretation and even professionals can make different judgements about whether or not a child needs protection.

For the purpose of this report, 'child abuse and neglect' can generally be defined as occurring when a child has been, is being, or is likely to be subjected to physical, emotional or sexual actions or inactions which have resulted in, or are likely to result in, significant harm or injury to the child. In the main, it refers to situations where there are protective issues for the child because the person believed to be responsible is a parent, family member or some other person with responsibility for care of the child; or where the person responsible for the care of the child is unable or unwilling to protect the child from abuse or neglect.

Within this general definition, however, there are variations across States and Territories in:

- what is classified as child abuse and neglect;
- the policies and procedures of the community services departments in relation to child abuse and neglect; and
- the terms and definitions used to describe certain procedures and practices.

These variations reflect the fact that each State and Territory has developed its own legislation, policies and practices in relation to child protection and child welfare. Examples of these differences include:

- where some jurisdictions classify any incident of child abuse or neglect as a notification, while other jurisdictions include only notifications of abuse and neglect where there are protective concerns for the child; and
- the use of terms such as 'significant harm' or 'substantial risk' in some States and Territories, while others refer to 'harm' or 'in danger of being harmed'.

These variations should be kept in mind when comparing data between States and Territories. It is also important to be aware of any major changes in policies and practices that occur within a State or Territory over time, since these will be reflected in the data. See 'Policies and practices of the States and Territories' (page 9) for more detail on the current

policies and practices of the different States and Territories in relation to child abuse and neglect and recent changes that have occurred.

Only incidents of abuse and neglect notified to community services departments are included in this national collection. Notifications made to other organisations, such as the police or the non-government welfare agencies, are only included if these notifications were referred to the community services department. It is widely acknowledged that a certain amount of child abuse and neglect is not reported to any agency or department, although the extent of this is unknown.

Police also have some responsibility for child protection in each State and Territory although the extent of their responsibility in each jurisdiction varies. Generally they are involved in all abuse and neglect of a criminal nature, that is, significant sexual or physical abuse, or any abuse which results in the death of a child. In some States or Territories there have been protocols or informal arrangements established whereby the police are involved in joint investigations with the community services department (Broadbent & Bentley 1997, p. 6).

Reporting of child abuse and neglect

Notifications of child abuse and neglect come from a number of different sources, including groups of people who are mandated to report abuse and neglect. Currently, all States and Territories except Western Australia have legislation requiring the compulsory reporting of child abuse and neglect to community services departments. Mandatory reporting was introduced in the Australian Capital Territory on 1 June 1997.

In most States and Territories, only the members of a few designated professions involved with children are mandated to report, although in the Northern Territory anyone who has reason to believe that a child may be abused or neglected must report this to the appropriate authority. While Western Australia does not have mandatory reporting, it does have protocols or guidelines in place which require that certain professions report maltreatment of children.

The types of abuse or neglect which should be reported, and the professions mandated to report, vary across jurisdictions (details regarding the mandatory reporting requirements in each State or Territory are set out in Appendix 4). In addition to requirements under State and Territory legislation, Family Court staff are also required under the *Family Law Act 1975* to report all suspected cases of child abuse.

As well as mandatory reports, there are a range of other sources of notifications of child abuse and neglect. These include the subject of the abuse and neglect, a parent or guardian, other relatives, friends or neighbours.

The processes of notification, investigation and substantiation

Each community services department undertakes certain procedures when notified of an instance of child abuse and neglect. While these procedures vary across jurisdictions, they are broadly described below. It should be noted that family support services may be provided at any point once a notification has been received, or a child may be removed from home at any stage if it is deemed absolutely necessary for his or her protection.

Notification

Notifications of child abuse and neglect consist of contacts made to an authorised department by persons or other bodies making allegations of child abuse or neglect. The data in this report relate to notifications received between 1 July 1996 and 30 June 1997.

Only one child is the subject of any notification. If there is more than one notification about the same event, only one notification is counted. If a child is the subject of more than one notification during the year but these notifications relate to different events, these are counted as separate notifications, except in Victoria. In Victoria, while a case is open, multiple notifications concerning a child are counted as one notification only.

In most jurisdictions, once a notification is received it is assessed to determine whether it requires investigation or should be dealt with by other means (such as referral or the provision of advice), or whether no further protective action is necessary or possible. No further action may be taken because there is insufficient information for the department to take any action, because it is obvious that the allegation is mischievous or malicious, or because it is obvious that the child is not in need of care and protection.

Investigation

An investigation of child abuse or neglect is the process by which the community services department obtains information about a child who is the subject of a notification. Once a notification is received, an initial assessment is made to determine whether the notification warrants investigation. In most States or Territories, these initial assessments do not count as part of the investigation phase. Since notifications about different events for the same child are counted as separate notifications in all States or Territories (except Victoria), each of these has a separate investigation.

In this report, an investigation was categorised as finalised where it was completed and an outcome recorded by the department by 31 August 1997. While the types of outcomes of a finalised investigation vary across jurisdictions, for the purposes of the national data collection they are categorised as 'unsubstantiated', 'child at risk' or 'substantiated'.

A notification is classified as 'unsubstantiated' where it is concluded after investigation that there is no reasonable cause to suspect the child has been, is being, or is likely to be harmed. Around half of all finalised investigations are classified as 'unsubstantiated'.

The 'child at risk' category refers to situations where the notification of abuse or neglect is not substantiated, but where there are reasonable grounds for suspecting the possibility of previous or future abuse or neglect and it is considered that continued departmental involvement is warranted. Only four jurisdictions are currently using this category—Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania and the Australian Capital Territory.

Substantiation

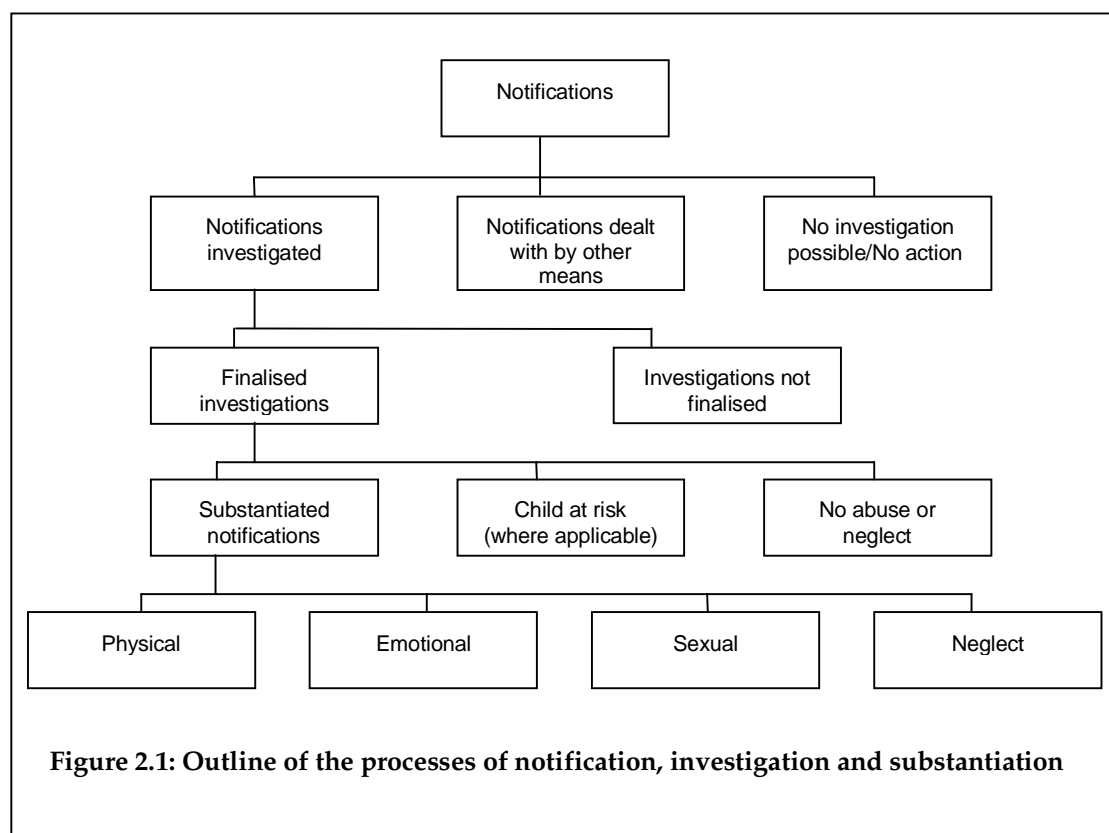
Child abuse or neglect is substantiated on the basis of information gathered during an investigation, including contact with the subject child and family. The matter is considered substantiated if, in the professional opinion of the officers concerned, there is reasonable cause to believe that the child has been, is being or is likely to be abused or neglected. The level of information or evidence required for a substantiation is less than that required for a criminal prosecution.

Substantiated abuse and neglect is broken down into the following four categories:

- physical abuse—any non-accidental physical injury inflicted on the child;

- emotional abuse—any act which results in the child suffering any kind of significant emotional deprivation or trauma;
- sexual abuse—any act which exposes a child to, or involves a child in, sexual process beyond his or her understanding or contrary to accepted community standards; and
- neglect—any serious omissions or commissions which, within the bounds of cultural tradition, constitute a failure to provide conditions that are essential for the healthy physical and emotional development of a child. This includes failure to thrive.

Many children suffer more than one type of abuse and neglect and it is not always clear what type has occurred. As a result, categorisation according to these four types is somewhat subjective (Goddard 1992; Tomison 1995). In this collection, the type of abuse and neglect is recorded as the one most likely to be the most severe in the short-term, or most likely to place a child at risk in the short-term, or the most obvious.



Policies and practices of the States and Territories

Differences in policies and practices

While the processes of notification, investigation and substantiation outlined above occur in all States and Territories, each State and Territory has its own policies and practices in relation to these processes. These differences in policies and practices mean that the child abuse and neglect data from the different jurisdictions can be measuring different types of events.

Some jurisdictions count reports of child concerns as a notification of child abuse and neglect while others exclude reports of child concerns at the point of notification. Victoria

and South Australia have a broader definition of notifications that includes reports of child concerns, for example where there are behavioural problems with the child. The inclusion of child concerns would increase the rate of notifications within a jurisdiction. It also may increase the rate of substantiations by bringing into the system cases that other jurisdictions would exclude.

There are also different criteria used to substantiate a notification in some States and Territories. For example, most States and Territories will only substantiate abuse and neglect if the person believed responsible is within the household or the parents are unwilling or unable to protect the child. New South Wales and South Australia will substantiate abuse and neglect by a stranger. The rate of substantiations in jurisdictions that substantiate abuse and neglect by a stranger is therefore likely to be higher than in those jurisdictions that do not.

There are a number of other differences between States and Territories that impact on the comparability of the data on child abuse and neglect. Work is now being undertaken by the States and Territories, and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, to improve the comparability of the child protection data. The aim of this work is to outline the activities undertaken by the States and Territories in the child protection area, to classify these activities and to develop some new core descriptors of these activities that could apply to all or most States and Territories.

Changes to policies and practices in 1996–97

Child protection policy and practice is constantly evolving. Changes to policies and practices in each of the States and Territories are informed by theoretical debate as well as by economic considerations and efficiency measures. Many of the changes that occur impact on the child protection data. The following is an outline of the major policy changes that occurred during 1996–97. It is important to be aware of these changes when comparing this year's data with data from previous years.

New South Wales

In July 1996, the Department of Community Services introduced new policies that significantly changed the way that notifications and investigations were dealt with. Formerly all notifications were investigated. Notifications are now assessed to determine whether they relate to child abuse and neglect or to some other concern about a child's welfare. Only notifications relating to child abuse and neglect are investigated. Prior to July 1996, substantiation of a notification did not necessarily mean that child abuse and neglect had occurred, but rather that the information about the notification was confirmed. Now a notification will only be substantiated if child abuse and neglect is found.

Western Australia

Western Australia introduced New Directions in Child Protection and Family Support State-wide on 1 May 1996, having piloted the program in five regions of Western Australia in 1995–96. Under New Directions, the decision as to whether the information received constitutes an allegation of maltreatment is made by a senior departmental officer rather than being caller defined, as was largely the case previously. Most importantly for this collection, New Directions now classifies reports made to the department into Child Maltreatment Allegations and Child Concern Reports, with only Child Maltreatment Allegations being counted as notifications of child abuse and neglect.

There has also been a revision of what a substantiation means, refocusing attention back on substantiation of significant harm to the child, rather than the incident or act in isolation. It

is still recognised that harm in some cases may not be identifiable and in these instances confirmation of the act is considered to constitute substantiation. The category of 'child at risk' was removed under *New Directions*.

South Australia

For the 1996–97 counting period, South Australia changed the way it counts notifications, broadening the range of reports to include a new category, 'notifier concerns'. This includes cases where mandated professionals have notified the department about a child, but have not provided enough information on which to base an investigation. For example, a teacher may be concerned about a child with behavioural problems, but this may not necessarily be related to abuse and neglect. Notifier concerns are not investigated. Including 'notifier concerns' will increase the number of notifications in 1996–97, but should not impact on the number of substantiations.

In late April 1997, South Australia introduced a Central Intake System for receiving and classifying all child abuse and neglect reports from across the State. All reports are now channelled through a 24-hour telephone service to a central unit of qualified social workers. Standardised assessment tools are used to assist judgement about appropriate responses to each report made to the central unit.

Tasmania

In 1996–97 Tasmania developed new intake and assessment guidelines. These guidelines are similar to those in *New Directions* in Western Australia and were introduced in July 1997. The focus is now on the level of harm to the child rather than on the actual incident, with emphasis on the provision of family support programs in the south of the State. Training for this new system began in early 1997, and this may have had some impact on the count of notifications. Child and family concern reports are no longer included in the count for notifications, only notifications of alleged maltreatment, all of which are now investigated by the department through intake and assessment workers. The intake and assessment workers are assisted in assessing notifications by regional assessment committees which draw on professionals from the areas of paediatrics, social work, child care, law, child psychology and the police.

Australian Capital Territory

Mandatory reporting of child abuse and neglect was introduced into the Australian Capital Territory in June 1997, while training for the professions mandated to report commenced during 1996–97. As part of the process, mandated reporters are encouraged to consult with the department prior to a decision being made on whether to make the report. From 1 July 1997 child concern reports were formally counted separately from notifications of abuse and neglect, although the 1996–97 data show a drop in notifications, partly due to informal moves to separate child concern reports from notifications of child abuse and neglect.

Provision of support services

In situations where abuse and neglect is substantiated, or where there are concerns about the safety and wellbeing of a child, the community services department attempts to work with families towards positive change through the provision of, or referral to, a range of services. Some of these services are targeted specifically at children or the families of children who have been or are at risk of abuse and neglect. Examples of these services

include intensive family preservation programs, in-home support programs and family group conferences.

Many other services are available to a much broader section of the population and seek to deal with a wide range of issues or problems. Such services include legal aid, mediation, alcohol and drug rehabilitation programs, marriage and domestic violence counselling, financial counselling and parental education (see AIHW 1997, pp. 129–144 for a more detailed description of family support services).

Placement of a child in out of home care is another support service that is provided to families in crisis. Chapter 4 of this report provides information and national data on children placed in out of home care. No national data are available, however, on the number of children or families who access, or are referred to, the other family support services outlined above.

Care and protection orders

In the small minority of cases where the care and protection of children cannot be assured within the family, the department of community services may apply to the Children's Court (or its equivalent) under the relevant Act to seek to place the child on a care and protection order. This gives the community service department some legal responsibility for the child's welfare. Only a small proportion of substantiations result in a child being placed on a care and protection order. Chapter 3 of this publication provides more detailed information and national data on children placed on care and protection orders.

Data and analysis

This section includes the national data on child abuse and neglect for the 1996–97 financial year. Most of the child abuse and neglect tables do not have Australian totals. This is because the data for New South Wales and Queensland are not comparable with data from the other States and Territories.

New South Wales introduced major changes to the child protection and client information systems in 1997 which meant that the community service's department could only provide data for the three-month period 1 April to 30 June 1997. There were also changes in the recording and information systems in Queensland in 1997, so that the Queensland data are for the calendar year, that is 1 January to 31 December 1996, rather than for the financial year. Data for all other jurisdictions cover the full 1996–97 financial year.

The terms, policies and procedures of each State and Territory should be taken into account when interpreting the data on child abuse and neglect.

Notifications, investigations and substantiations

The number of notifications of child abuse and neglect in 1996–97 for each State and Territory is shown in Table 2.1. The number of notifications was higher than in 1995–96 in Victoria, Queensland and South Australia.

Table 2.1: Notifications of child abuse and neglect, by type of action by State and Territory, 1996–97

	NSW ^(a)	Vic	Qld ^(b)	WA	SA	Tas	ACT	NT
Number								
Investigation finalised	4,023	14,006	11,663	1,711	6,986	1,832	944	473
Investigation not finalised	953	410	1,263	222	337	46	55	—
Total investigations	4,976	14,416	12,926	1,933	7,323	1,878	999	473
Dealt with by other means	2,592	17,291	1,547	—	—	485	—	—
No investigation possible/No action	208	—	1,005	166	2,771	—	221	8
Total notifications	7,776	31,707	15,478	2,099	10,094	2,363	1,220	481
Percentage								
Investigation finalised	52	44	75	82	69	78	77	98
Investigation not finalised	12	1	8	11	3	2	5	—
Total investigations	64	45	84	92	73	79	82	98
Dealt with by other means	33	55	10	—	—	21	—	—
No investigation possible/No action	3	—	6	8	27	—	18	2
Total notifications	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

(a) 1996–97 data for New South Wales refer to only three months (from 1 April to 30 June 1997).

(b) Queensland could not provide data for the financial year 1996–97. Data refer to calendar year 1996.

A large majority of these notifications were subject to an investigation. The proportion of notifications that were investigated ranged from 45% in Victoria to 92% in Western Australia and 98% in the Northern Territory.

This large range in the proportion of notifications that were investigated reflects the way that different jurisdictions both define and deal with notifications and investigations. In Victoria the definition of a notification is very wide and there are strict criteria for investigations. Notifications are caller defined and include reports of child concerns, while only face-to-face contact with the child is counted as an investigation. In contrast, in Western Australia notifications are defined by senior staff in the Department of Community Services and reports of child concerns are dealt with separately. A very high proportion of notifications in Western Australia and the Northern Territory were investigated since these jurisdictions have a policy to investigate or assess all notifications.

Outcomes of investigations

While the outcomes of investigations varied across the States and Territories, in all jurisdictions a large proportion of investigations were not substantiated, that is, there was no reasonable cause to believe that the child was being, or was likely to be, abused or neglected. For example, 63% of finalised investigations in South Australia and 55% in New South Wales were not substantiated (Table 2.2).

The proportion of substantiated investigations ranged from 13% in Tasmania to 57% in Western Australia. While a relatively low proportion of investigations was substantiated in Tasmania, a relatively high proportion of investigations (22%) was classified as ‘child at risk’.

Table 2.2: Finalised investigations by type of outcome, 1996–97

	NSW ^(a)	Vic	Qld ^(b)	WA	SA	Tas	ACT	NT
	Number							
Substantiations	1,791	7,034	4,895	982	2,527	244	376	252
Child at risk	—	—	1,470	—	47	398	97	—
Unsubstantiated notifications	2,232	6,972	5,298	729	4,412	1,190	471	221
Total finalised investigations	4,023	14,006	11,663	1,711	6,986	1,832	944	473
	Percentage							
Substantiations	45	50	42	57	36	13	40	53
Child at risk	—	—	13	—	1	22	10	—
Unsubstantiated notifications	55	50	45	43	63	65	50	47
Total finalised investigations	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

(a) 1996–97 data for New South Wales refer to only three months (from 1 April to 30 June 1997).

(b) Queensland could not provide data for the financial year 1996–97. Data refer to calendar year 1996.

Changes over time

The number of notifications of child abuse and neglect has risen considerably over the past decade in most States and Territories. In 1992–93 there were around 73,000 notifications of child abuse and neglect compared with almost 92,000 in 1995–96 (Broadbent & Bentley 1997, pp. 8–9). It is not possible to determine whether this increase is indicative of a rise in the incidence of child abuse and neglect or due to other factors that may impact on the number of notifications.

These include changes in:

- State and Territory legislation, policies and practices; and
- the extent to which abuse and neglect is reported, due to the introduction of mandatory reporting in some jurisdictions or an increased awareness about child abuse and neglect in the community.

The number of substantiations has also increased over the past decade, though more recently the number has remained fairly stable. In 1988–89 there were 18,816 substantiations across Australia with the number of substantiations then increasing each year until 1994–95 to a total of 30,615 substantiations (Table 2.3). Between 1994–95 and 1995–96 the number of substantiations fell slightly, probably due to changes in policies and practices in some jurisdictions. For example, there has been a large decrease in the number of substantiations in Western Australia reflecting policy changes which focus on substantiating significant harm to the child rather than an action and which exclude reports of child concerns from notifications of child abuse and neglect.

While there are no national data for the 1996–97 financial year, in those States where complete data were available for the 1996–97 period, the number of substantiations did not vary significantly from the previous year. There was a slight increase in the number of substantiations in Victoria, Queensland, South Australia and Tasmania; and a slight decrease in the number of substantiations in Western Australia, the Australian Capital Territory and the Northern Territory.

Table 2.3: Substantiations by State and Territory, 1987–88 to 1996–97

Year	NSW	Vic	Qld	WA	SA	Tas	ACT	NT	Total
1987–88	13,498	1,534	2,923	n.a.	1,008	290	275	332	n.a.
1988–89	10,112	2,445	3,377	739	1,326	336	297	184	18,816
1989–90	9,429	2,950	3,721	884	1,165	n.a.	n.a.	184	n.a.
1990–91	11,611	2,427	3,500	1,223	1,162	472	247	226	20,868
1991–92	12,645	2,146	3,027	1,380	1,048	598	295	232	21,371
1992–93	14,290	4,089	2,743	1,519	1,824	416	445	304	25,630
1993–94	15,128	5,253	3,127	1,830	2,077	424	495	377	28,711
1994–95	14,164	7,326	4,000	1,484	2,547	360	376	358	30,615
1995–96	14,063	6,663	4,662	1,095	2,415	235	445	255	29,833
1996–97	1,791 ^(a)	7,034	4,895 ^(b)	982	2,527	244	376	252	n.a. ^(c)

(a) 1996–97 data for New South Wales refer to only three months (from 1 April to 30 June 1997).

(b) Queensland could not provide data for the financial year 1996–97. Data refer to calendar year 1996.

(c) A total cannot be calculated for 1996–97 due to differences in time frames for data provided by the States.

Substantiations and type of abuse and neglect

Substantiations are classified according to the type of abuse and neglect that has occurred. As noted previously it is not always clear what type of abuse and neglect has occurred and the classification of types of abuse and neglect will vary according to the policies and practices of the different jurisdictions. Table 2.4 shows the classification of substantiations by the type of abuse and neglect in each State and Territory.

Table 2.4: Substantiations of child abuse and neglect by type of abuse and neglect, by State and Territory, 1996–97

Type of abuse or neglect substantiated	NSW ^(a)	Vic	Qld ^(b)	WA	SA	Tas	ACT	NT
Number								
Physical	708	1,859	1,672	424	822	92	131	143
Emotional	164	2,824	962	46	529	17	59	16
Sexual	552	534	319	310	509	63	19	34
Neglect	367	1,817	1,942	202	667	72	167	59
Total substantiations	1,791	7,034	4,895	982	2,527	244	376	252
Percentage								
Physical	40	26	34	43	33	38	35	57
Emotional	9	40	20	5	21	7	16	6
Sexual	31	8	7	32	20	26	5	13
Neglect	20	26	40	21	26	30	44	23
Total substantiations	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

(a) 1996–97 data for New South Wales refer to only three months (from 1 April to 30 June 1997).

(b) Queensland could not provide data for the financial year 1996–97. Data refer to calendar year 1996.

In most States and Territories the most common type of abuse and neglect was physical abuse followed by neglect. Sexual abuse was the least common type of abuse and neglect in Victoria, Queensland and the Australian Capital Territory. A relatively high proportion of substantiations was classified as sexual abuse and a low proportion was classified as neglect

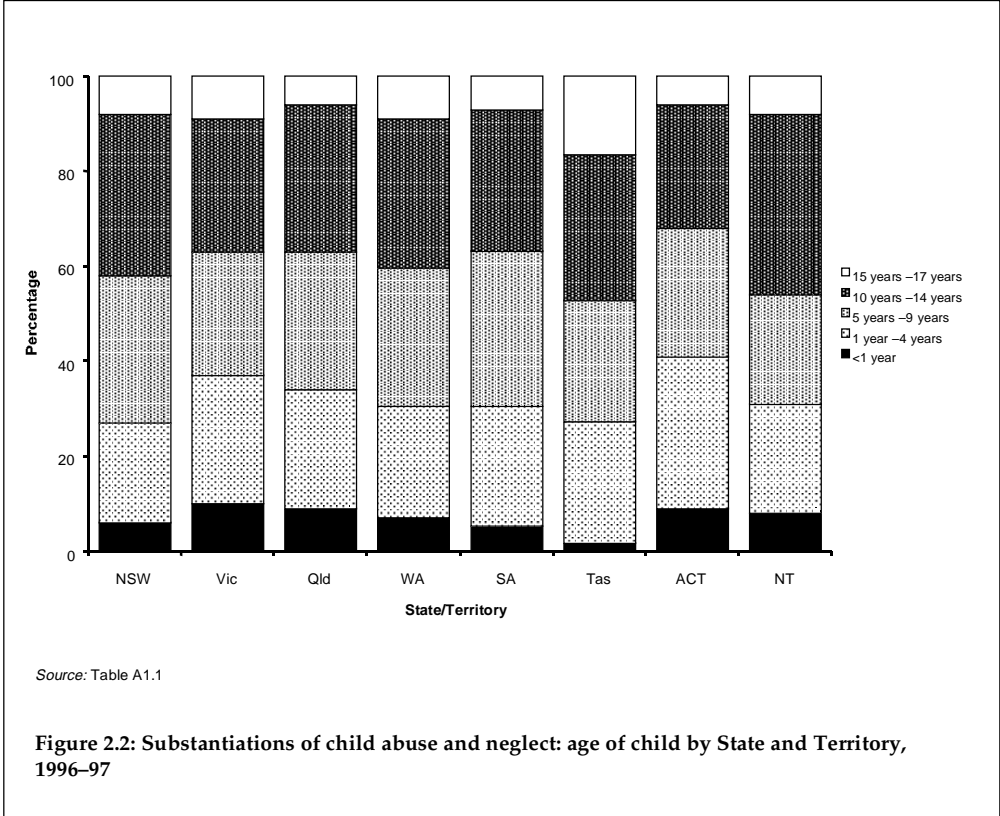
in New South Wales and Western Australia. This reflects the focus in these two States on identifying significant harm done to the child and excluding child concern reports from notifications.

Substantiations by sex and age of the child

There were more females than males involved in substantiations of child abuse and neglect in all States and Territories except Queensland and the Australian Capital Territory (Table A1.1).

In relation to age, in most jurisdictions children aged 10–14 years were the most likely to be the subject of a substantiation, followed by children aged 5–9 years (Table A1.1). The number of substantiations involving children aged under 1 year was also relatively high.

There were different distributions by age for male and female children who were the subject of a substantiation. For example, there were significantly more males than females aged under 1 year, but more females than males aged 15–17 years, who were the subject of a substantiation (Table A1.1). (For more detailed tables on substantiations by single year of age by State and Territory see Tables A1.2–A1.9).



Number of children

The number of notifications and substantiations is greater than the number of children who were the subject of a notification or a substantiation. This is because some children are the subject of more than one notification or substantiation of abuse and neglect in any one year. For example, in 1996–97 in Victoria there were 24,497 children who were the subject of a notification compared with 31,707 notifications and in Queensland there were 11,908

children who were the subject of a notification compared with 15,478 notifications (Table 2.5). In relation to substantiations in 1996–97, there were 2,126 children in South Australia who were the subject of a substantiation compared with 2,527 substantiations (Table 2.5).

Table 2.5: Notifications, substantiations and children who were the subject of a notification or substantiation of child abuse or neglect, by State and Territory, 1996–97

	NSW ^(a)	Vic	Qld ^(b)	WA	SA	Tas	ACT	NT
Children subject of a notification	7,120	24,497	11,908	1,923	5,642	1,790	930	458
Total notifications	7,776	31,707	15,478	2,099	10,094	2,363	1,220	481
Children subject of a substantiation	1,669	6,614	3,490	956	2,126	223	315	242
Total substantiations	1,791	7,034	4,895	982	2,527	244	376	252

(a) Data for New South Wales refer to the three-month period from 1 April to 30 June 1997.

(b) Queensland could not provide data for the financial year 1996–97. Data refer to calendar year 1996.

Note: Includes children aged 0–17 years and children of unknown age.

The numbers of children who were the subject of a notification or a substantiation, rather than the number of notifications and substantiations, are used in the following sections on rates of abuse and neglect in the population and among Indigenous children.

Rates of child abuse and neglect in the population

These national data on child abuse and neglect do not include all incidents of abuse and neglect in the population, since they do not include reports made to other agencies and not referred to community service departments, nor unreported incidents. The data also reflect the different policies and practices of the State and Territory community services departments. Rates of children who were the subject of a substantiation of abuse and neglect per head of the population, however, can be used as a very broad indicator of the level of child abuse and neglect in the population.

Rates of children who were the subject of a substantiation vary considerably across States and Territories. Victoria and South Australia had high rates of children for whom abuse and neglect were substantiated. In these two States there were 6.2 children per 1,000 who were the subject of a substantiation (Table 2.6). The rate of children who were the subject of a substantiation was around one-third this level in Western Australia and Tasmania (2.1 and 1.9 respectively).

It is likely that much of the variation in rates between jurisdictions is due to the different policies and practices in each jurisdiction, rather than to differences in the level of child abuse and neglect that has occurred. For example, Victoria and South Australia include child concerns in notifications of child abuse and neglect and this is likely to lead to higher rates of children subject to a substantiation. On the other hand, the low rate of children subject to a substantiation in Western Australia reflects the focus in that State of substantiating significant harm to the child rather than an action, as well as the fact that child concern reports are excluded from notifications.

From these data, however, it is not possible to determine how much of the variation in rates between jurisdictions is due to different policies and practices and how much is due to differences in the underlying levels of abuse and neglect.

Table 2.6: Number and rates of children aged 0–16 years who were the subject of substantiation of child abuse and neglect by Indigenous status, by State and Territory, 1996–97

	NSW ^(a)	Vic	Qld ^(b)	WA	SA	Tas	ACT	NT
Indigenous children								
Number of children	130	365	565	217	239	16	23	128
Rate per 1,000 children	n.a.	38.1	12.6	9.1	25.9	2.4	17.7	6.1
Other children								
Number of children	1,527	6,245	2,922	728	1,861	207	291	112
Rate per 1,000 children	n.a.	5.9	3.7	1.7	5.6	1.8	3.9	3.3
Total children								
Number of children	1,657	6,610	3,487	945	2,100	223	314	240
Rate per 1,000 children	n.a.	6.2	4.2	2.1	6.2	1.9	4.1	4.4

(a) Rates for New South Wales cannot be calculated as the 1996–97 data refer to the three-month period from 1 April to 30 June 1997.
(b) Queensland could not provide data for the financial year 1996–97. Data refer to calendar year 1996.

Notes

- (1) Rates for child abuse and neglect substantiations were calculated for children aged 0–16 years and children of unknown age because of the very small number aged 17 years who were the subject of a substantiation.
- (2) Rates were calculated using the number of children subject to a substantiation in 1996–97, not the total number of substantiations in 1996–97.
- (3) For details on the calculation of rates and the coding of Indigenous status see Appendix 2.

Indigenous children

Number and rates

The number of Indigenous children who were the subject of a substantiation of abuse and neglect in 1996–97 ranged from 565 in Queensland to 16 in Tasmania (Table 2.6). Like the rates for all children, the rates of Indigenous children who were the subject of a substantiation of abuse and neglect vary significantly by State and Territory (Table 2.6). This may, in part, be related to the different practices across jurisdictions used to identify and record the Indigenous status of children (see Appendix 2).

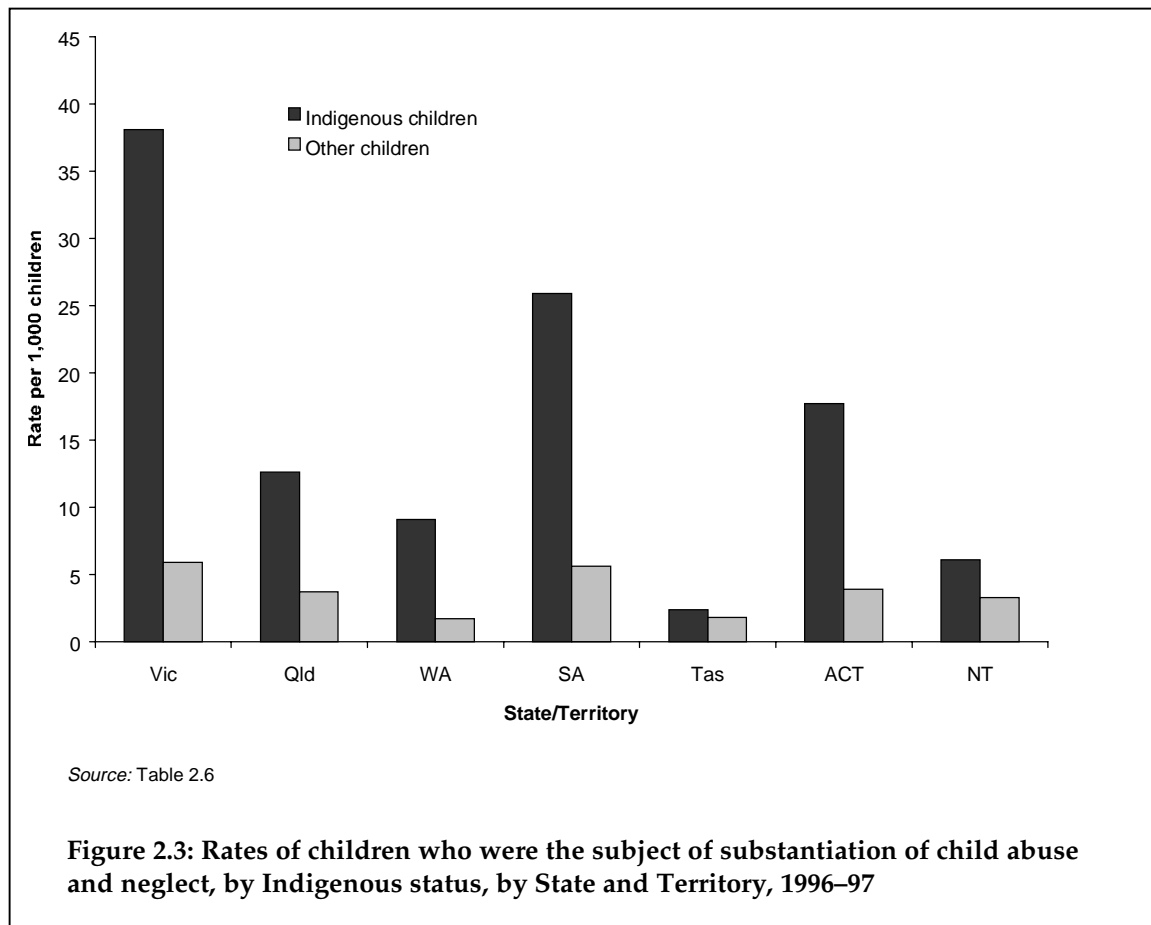
Indigenous children are over-represented in substantiations of abuse and neglect. This is evident in the significantly higher rates of substantiations of abuse and neglect for Indigenous children compared with other children. In Victoria, for example, the rate of substantiated abuse and neglect was 38.1 per 1,000 for Indigenous children compared with 5.9 per 1,000 for other children. The corresponding rates in South Australia were 25.9 for Indigenous children compared with 5.6 for other children.

Not all States, however, had such large differences in the rates of substantiated abuse and neglect for Indigenous children and for other children. In Tasmania, the rates were 2.4 for Indigenous children compared to 1.8 for other children, and in the Northern Territory the rates were 6.1 for Indigenous children compared to 3.3 per 1,000 for other children (Table 2.6).

The reasons for the over-representation of Indigenous children in substantiations of abuse and neglect are complex. Some of the factors that are likely to contribute to this include:

- high rates of poverty and unemployment among Indigenous families;
- the high incidence of single-parent families;
- cultural differences in child-rearing practices;

- the high incidence of alcoholism; and
- lack of access or ability to access appropriate support services.



Types of abuse and neglect

The pattern of abuse and neglect for Indigenous children differed markedly from that of other children. Indigenous children were much more likely to be the subject of a substantiation for neglect and less likely to be the subject of a substantiation for sexual abuse than other children.

For example, in South Australia among children who were the subject of a substantiation, 48% of Indigenous children but only 20% of other children were the subject of a substantiation for neglect. The corresponding percentages in Queensland were 46% for Indigenous children compared with 31% for other children (Table 2.7). In relation to sexual abuse, in South Australia among children who were the subject of a substantiation, 10% of Indigenous children were the subject of substantiated sexual abuse compared with 23% of other children.

Table 2.7: Children who were the subject of a substantiation: type of abuse or neglect, by Indigenous status, by State and Territory, 1996–97

	NSW ^(a)	Vic	Qld ^(b)	WA	SA	Tas	ACT	NT
Type of abuse or neglect	Percentage							
	Indigenous children							
Physical abuse	32	21	36	29	20	56	35	55
Emotional abuse	8	39	12	1	23	—	—	2
Sexual abuse	22	7	6	28	10	6	—	16
Neglect	38	33	46	42	48	38	65	27
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
	Other children							
Physical abuse	41	28	40	47	38	35	38	57
Emotional abuse	9	40	21	6	19	7	17	11
Sexual abuse	33	8	8	33	23	29	5	12
Neglect	18	25	31	13	20	29	39	20
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

(a) Data for New South Wales refer to the three-month period from 1 April to 30 June 1997.

(b) Queensland could not provide data for the financial year 1996–97. Data refer to calendar year 1996.

Note: For details on the coding of Indigenous status see Appendix 2.

Additional data on notifications and substantiations

Source of notifications

Notifications of child abuse and neglect to community service departments come from a range of different sources. Data on the source of notification show that the most common sources of notifications in 1996–97 were parents or guardians, friends or neighbours, school personnel and police (Table A1.11)

The likelihood of a finalised investigation being substantiated varied considerably by the source of notification. A relatively high proportion of notifications from the child who was the subject of abuse and neglect, the police, social workers and school personnel were substantiated (Table 2.8). On the other hand, notifications from anonymous callers, friends and neighbours and other relatives were the least likely to be substantiated.

Table 2.8: Proportion of finalised investigations that were substantiated, by source of notification, by State and Territory, 1996–97

Source of notification	NSW ^(a)	Vic	Qld ^(b)	WA	SA	Tas	ACT	NT ^(c)
	Percentage ^(d)							
Subject child	68	67	49	74	48	10	63	88
Parent/guardian	45	51	45	60	36	6	47	45
Sibling	—	38	30	67	17	22	—	67
Other relative	36	45	35	53	30	14	33	53
Friend/neighbour	31	47	30	34	19	14	27	31
Medical practitioner	52	55	49	71	35	22	59	27
Other health	50	55	49	78	35	15	61	50
Hospital/health centre	45	45	58	68	39	17	36	73
Social/welfare worker	48	51	57	58	40	20	47	66
School personnel	49	52	51	60	39	34	57	57
Child care personnel	32	33	36	26	31	—	50	—
Police	50	58	56	65	57	40	49	68
Departmental officer	44	57	—	59	50	27	36	—
Non-govt organisation	51	59	70	69	67	22	44	31
Anonymous	21	21	18	14	18	—	19	43
Other	36	21	44	59	31	5	46	33
Total	45	50	42	57	36	13	40	53

(a) Data for New South Wales refer to the three-month period from 1 April to 30 June 1997.

(b) Queensland identifies 'Maltreater' as a separate category if they are also the source of a notification. 'Maltreater' has been included in the 'Other' category. Queensland could not provide data for the financial year 1996–97. Data refer to calendar year 1996.

(c) Where the source of the notification was the 'Maltreater' (five incidences) this is included in the 'Other' category.

(d) Percentages calculated as a percentage of finalised investigations where source of the notification is known.

Family type

Information on the family type of children who were the subject of a substantiation was available from five States and Territories. These States and Territories, however, vary as to when they record the family type in which the child was residing. The Northern Territory and Tasmania record it at the time of abuse. Queensland and the Australian Capital Territory record family type at the time of notification which is not necessarily the family type in which the child was residing at the time that the abuse and neglect occurred.

The data show that a relatively high proportion of substantiations involved children living in two-parent step or blended families and female single-parent families, while a relatively low proportion of substantiations involved children living in two-parent natural families (Table 2.9). Of all substantiations, 40% involved children from female single-parent families, 24% from two-parent families where both parents were the natural or adoptive parents, 25% from two-parent step or blended families and 5% from male single-parent families (Table 2.9). These data compare with the family type of all Australian children where 16% live in female single-parent families, 76% live in two-parent natural families, 6% live in two-parent step or blended families and 2% live in male single-parent families (ABS 1997a).

Table 2.9: Substantiations of child abuse and neglect by type of family in which the child was residing, for selected States and Territories,^(a) 1996–97

Family type	No.	%
Two-parent—natural	1,593	24
Two-parent—step or blended	1,715	25
Single-parent—female	2,732	40
Single-parent—male	360	5
Other relatives/kin	159	2
Foster	20	—
Other	78	1
Not stated	92	1
Total	6,749	100

(a) Data available for Queensland, Western Australia, Tasmania, the Australian Capital Territory and the Northern Territory only.

Note: Queensland data are for the 1996 calendar year.

To put these data into context, the number of substantiations in 1996–97 can be compared with the total number of children in the population by family type (Table A1.13). This shows that while children in two-parent step or blended families and children in sole-parent families accounted for a relatively large proportion of substantiations, the actual number of substantiations is very small when compared to the estimated number of children in these family types.

There are likely to be a number of reasons for the over-representation of sole-parent families in substantiations of child abuse or neglect. These include that single-parent families are more likely to:

- have low incomes and be financially stressed;
- live in poor quality housing; and
- suffer from social isolation.

These are all factors that have been associated with child abuse or neglect. It is also important to note that the parent with whom the child is living is not necessarily the person responsible for the abuse and neglect.

Relationship of person believed responsible

Data on the relationship to the child of the person believed responsible for the substantiated abuse and neglect were available from four jurisdictions. In most jurisdictions abuse and neglect will only be substantiated if the person believed responsible is in the household or the parents are unwilling to protect the child. The person believed to be responsible for substantiations of abuse and neglect will therefore generally be a close relative or other member of the household in which the child lives.

The data show that in the majority of cases, the person believed responsible for the substantiated abuse and neglect is the natural parent. In 71% of substantiations the natural parent was believed to be responsible for the abuse or neglect (Table 2.10). Step-parents and a parent's de facto partner were also believed to be responsible in a relatively high proportion of substantiations. A step-parent was believed to be responsible in 11% of substantiations and a parent's de facto partner in 7% of substantiations.

The relationship of the person believed responsible varied with the different types of substantiated abuse and neglect. For example a natural parent was believed to be responsible in 87% of substantiations for neglect and 76% of substantiations of emotional abuse, but only 24% of substantiations of sexual abuse. Step-parents, other relatives, friends and neighbours and siblings were believed to be responsible for a relatively high proportion of substantiations of sexual abuse.

Table 2.10: Substantiations of child abuse and neglect: relationship to child of person believed responsible, type of abuse and neglect, for selected States and Territories,^(a) 1996–97

Person believed responsible	Physical abuse		Emotional abuse		Sexual abuse		Neglect		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Natural parent	1,588	67	819	76	165	24	2,055	87	4,627	71
Step-parent	351	15	112	10	120	18	116	5	699	11
Parent's de facto	218	9	94	9	43	6	86	4	441	7
Foster parent	46	2	8	1	17	2	5	—	76	1
Guardian	19	1	7	1	5	1	27	1	58	1
Sibling	21	1	8	1	67	10	16	1	112	2
Other relative	71	3	21	2	90	13	40	2	222	3
Friend/neighbour	11	—	3	—	72	11	5	—	91	1
Other	22	1	10	1	62	9	7	—	101	2
Not stated	25	1	1	—	41	6	11	—	78	1
Total	2,372	100	1,083	100	682	100	2,368	100	6,505	100

(a) Data available for Queensland, Western Australia, the Australian Capital Territory and the Northern Territory only.

Note: Queensland could not provide data for the financial year 1996–97. Data refer to calendar year 1996.