

# 1 Introduction

This report was produced in response to a recommendation by the National Child Protection and Support Services (NCPASS) Data Group to provide a detailed description of performance indicators in the area of child protection and out-of-home care over a number of years. The report also aims to provide a tool to assist readers in their interpretation of the Australian national performance indicator data presented in the *Report on government services 2006* (SCRGSP 2006).

Some of the discussion of performance indicators from an earlier report, *Guidelines for the interpretation of child protection and out-of-home care performance indicator data* (AIHW 2002), has been incorporated into this report. The *Guidelines* were commissioned by NCPASS and developed through a research project that involved a selective international literature search. This was supplemented by a series of discussion meetings with child protection practitioners, academics and consumer advocates in each state and territory.

This report comes at a time when there is increasing national interest in child protection matters. Child abuse remains a major problem in the Australian community, despite the ongoing efforts of governments to prevent it. Such is the national interest in this area that in 2004, Community and Disability Services Ministers endorsed a new dialogue between the states and territories and the Australian Government to examine a national approach to protecting children. It is hoped that this initiative will establish synergies between the work of NCPASS (particularly on improved standardisation of child protection data) and a proposed work plan for progressing a National Approach for Child Protection. This publication is just one example of the work NCPASS and AIHW are undertaking to enhance the understanding and interpretation of child protection data.

## **Box 1.1: Key terms used in this report**

***Child protection** refers to protecting an individual less than 18 years of age from actions of physical, sexual or emotional abuse or neglect that have resulted in, or are likely to result in, significant harm or injury. The aim of child protection services is to protect children and young people who are at risk of harm or neglect within their families, or whose families do not have the capacity to protect them or care for them.*

***Out-of-home care** refers to the provision of overnight accommodation away from parents or the family home for children and young people aged less than 18 years, where the state or territory makes a financial contribution to the carer. This care may take the form of residential care, foster care, or relative/kinship care, and placements may be either voluntary or legally sanctioned. Children are placed in out-of-home care for reasons of safety or family crisis, including abuse, neglect, parental illness or inability to adequately care for the child.*

*See the Glossary for a list of other terms used in this report.*

## **Performance indicators**

Performance indicators are measures of services and service delivery. In Australia, the current framework of performance indicators for child protection services was developed by the Protection and Support Services Working Group (PSSWG), a working group of the Steering Committee for the *Report on government service provision* (see Chapter 2). The framework is available in the *Report on government services 2006* (SCRGSP 2006).

This report covers information for the years 1999–00 to 2004–05. Some of the data provided to the AIHW by the states and territories are used to measure the eight child protection and out-of-home care performance indicators:

- substantiation rate
- substantiation rate after decision not to substantiate
- resubstantiation rate
- safety in out-of-home care
- stability of placement
- placement with extended family
- children aged under 12 years in home-based care
- placement in accordance with the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle.

These are described in detail in Chapter 3. Each state and territory has its own legislation, policies and practices in relation to child protection. As a result, there are jurisdictional variations in the collection and reporting of performance indicator data. This makes comparisons between the states and territories impracticable, therefore, each state and territory is discussed independently in the report. Finally, changes in policy, legislation and methods of data collection in the child protection area impact on the ability to compare data from any one jurisdiction over time.

## **Indigenous children and the child protection system**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are over-represented in the child protection system compared to non-Indigenous children. This is true for the children who were the subject of a substantiation, children who were on orders and those in out-of-home care. Indigenous children are therefore a major focus for analysis and discussion in this report.

The reasons for the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in child protection substantiations are complex. *Bringing them home*, the report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families (HREOC 1997), examined the effect of child welfare policies on Indigenous people. It noted that some of the underlying causes of the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the child welfare system include:

- the legacy of past policies of the forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families
- inter-generational effects of previous separations from family and culture
- poor socioeconomic status
- cultural differences in child-rearing practices.

While there is only one Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specific indicator – the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle, which measures the number of Indigenous children placed with relatives, kin or Indigenous carers – the majority of the other indicators are disaggregated by Indigenous status. Data for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous children are therefore presented in this report. Where possible, data for the years 1999–00 to 2004–05 are presented throughout the report to illustrate changes over time.

The practices used to identify and record Indigenous status of children in the child protection system vary across the states and territories. Over the past few years, several jurisdictions have introduced measures to improve the identification of Indigenous clients.

In some jurisdictions, however, there is a significant proportion of children whose Indigenous status is unknown and this affects the quality of the data on Indigenous status. Consequently, the data on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children should be interpreted with care.

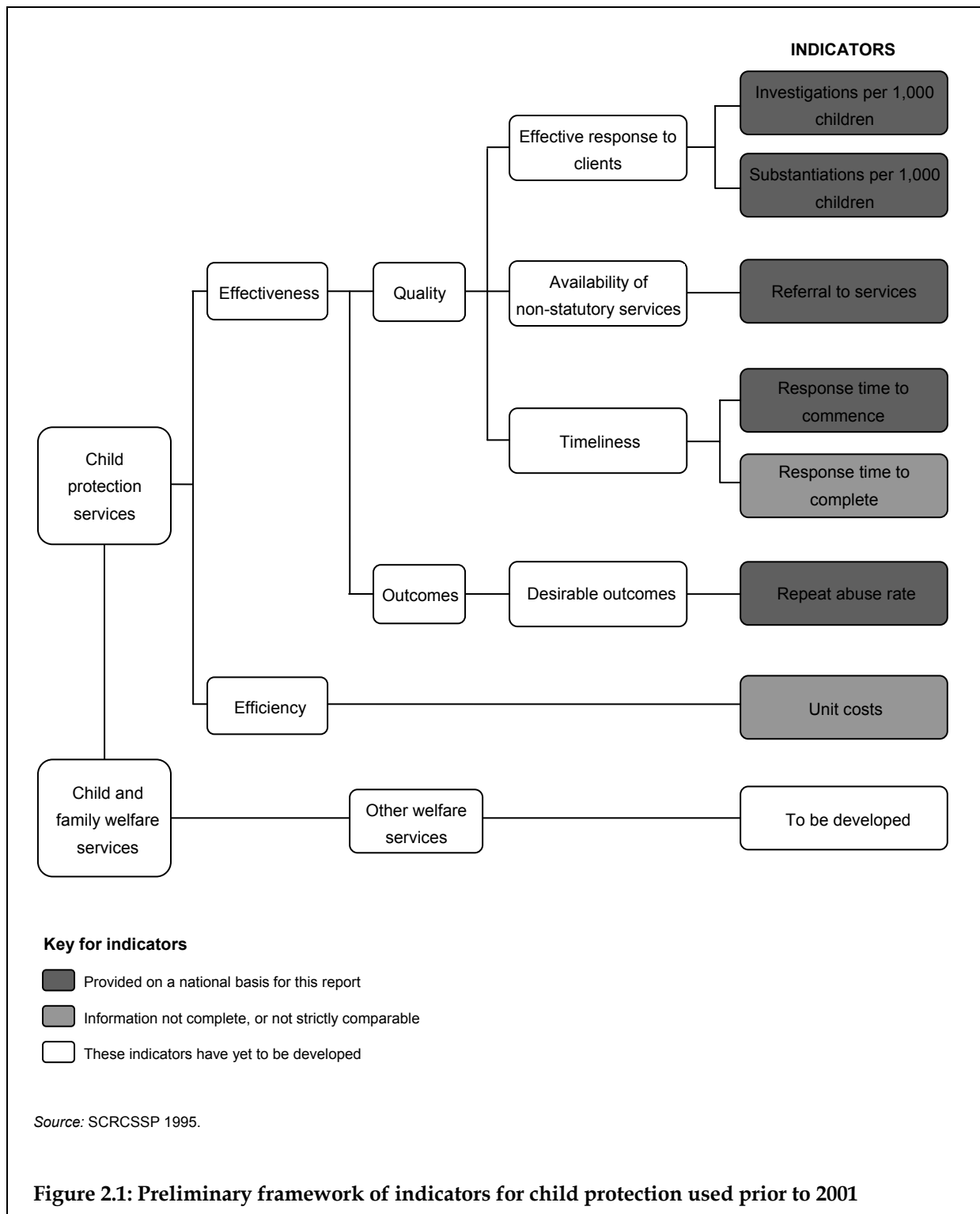
## 2 History of child protection and out-of-home care performance indicators

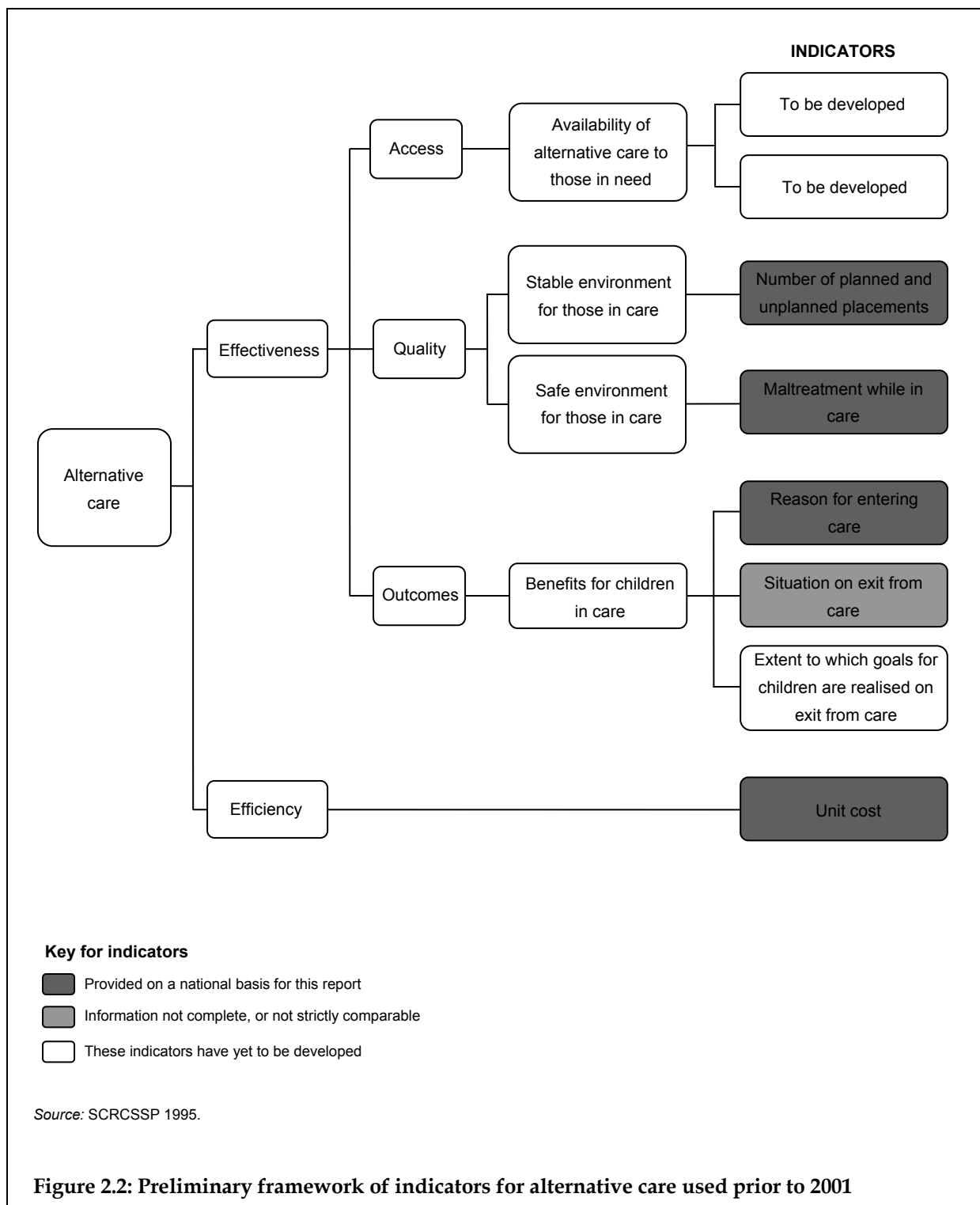
In 1995, Australia began using performance indicators across a broad range of government services to assess service provision, making it one of the first nations to use a performance indicator framework on a national level (AIHW 2002). This chapter provides details about the history of reporting against child protection and out-of-home care performance indicators, including a description of how they evolved over time.

The impetus for the development of the performance indicator framework came from the February 1994 meeting of the Council of Australian Governments about the importance of assessing the performance of government services (SCRCSSP 1995). Consequently, the Steering Committee for the Review of Commonwealth/State Service Provision (SCRCSSP) drafted guidelines, and then collaborated with individual working groups to develop the initial performance indicator framework.

The first performance indicator frameworks assessing child welfare services were published in the 1995 *Report on government service provision* (SCRCSSP 1995). There were two frameworks published at this time: one assessed child protection services and the other assessed alternative (out-of-home) care services (Figures 2.1 and 2.2, respectively). These frameworks were developed as a draft proposal of what needed to be collected to adequately assess child welfare services, with the intention that the template would be improved over time (SCRCSSP 1995). The two separate frameworks were used from 1995 to 2000 inclusive (SCRCSSP 1995, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000).

The initial child protection framework contained seven indicators. These were not all comparable across jurisdictions. Although some indicators were shown to be 'provided on a national basis' (Figure 2.1), the SCRCSSP (1995) warned about the problems inherent in cross-jurisdictional comparability due to legislation, policy and practice differences across states and territories. For example, criteria used to calculate substantiation rates differed across states and territories, as did definitions of an investigation. The initial alternative care framework comprised four effectiveness indicators. According to SCRCSSP (1995), three of these indicators were provided on a national basis with the remaining indicator being 'not strictly comparable across jurisdictions'.





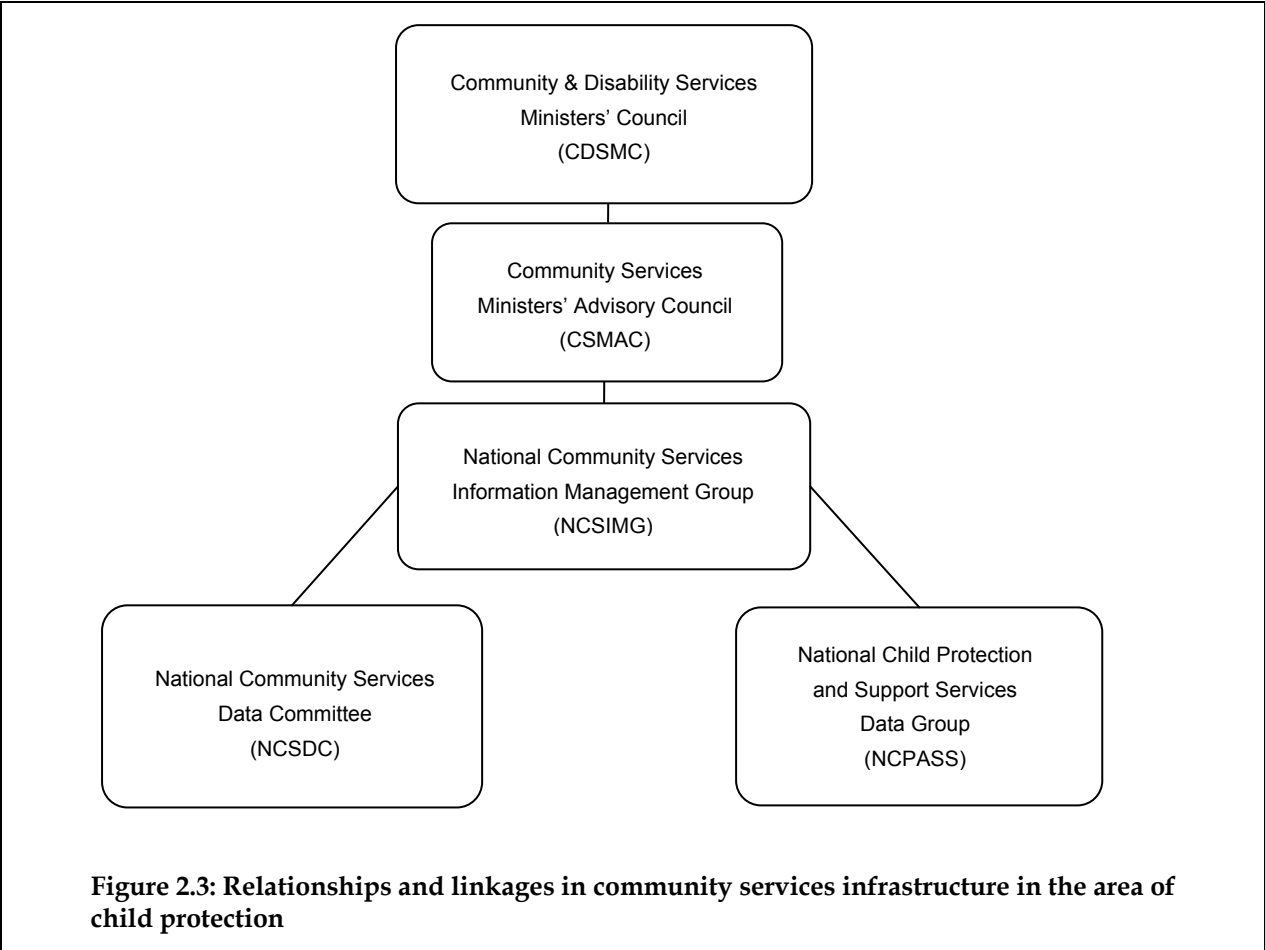
The development of the second set of frameworks in 1997 offered a substantial improvement over the preceding models, reflecting developments in the child welfare arena. These frameworks were used from 1997 to 1999 inclusive (SCRCSSP 1997, 1998, 1999). The model that followed in 2000 offered further improvements to the framework.

Indicator development was aided by a report, *Outcome measurement in child protection*, commissioned by the SCRCSSP (Gain & Young 1998). Among other things, this report

provided recommendations of what indicators should be collected to adequately evaluate child welfare service provision. These recommendations were the impetus for the development of new indicators, and representatives from NCPASS and the AIHW were instrumental in operationalising these indicators (for example, by developing counting rules) to enable them to be accurately assessed on a national level.

At a broader level, it is important to recognise that the development of these indicators was facilitated by gradual improvements to data collection and reporting under the umbrella of the National Community Services Information Agreement. Auspiced by the Community Services Ministers' Advisory Council, the Agreement provides a framework to support the national infrastructure and decision-making processes needed to integrate, plan and coordinate the development of consistent national community services information.

Throughout Australia there is currently substantial data development activity being undertaken in the community services sector. This represents a considerable investment of time and resources by governments and the many agencies involved. For the program area of child protection these agencies include state and territory community services departments, committees such as the National Community Services Information Management Group, the National Community Services Data Committee, NCPASS and the AIHW (Figure 2.3).



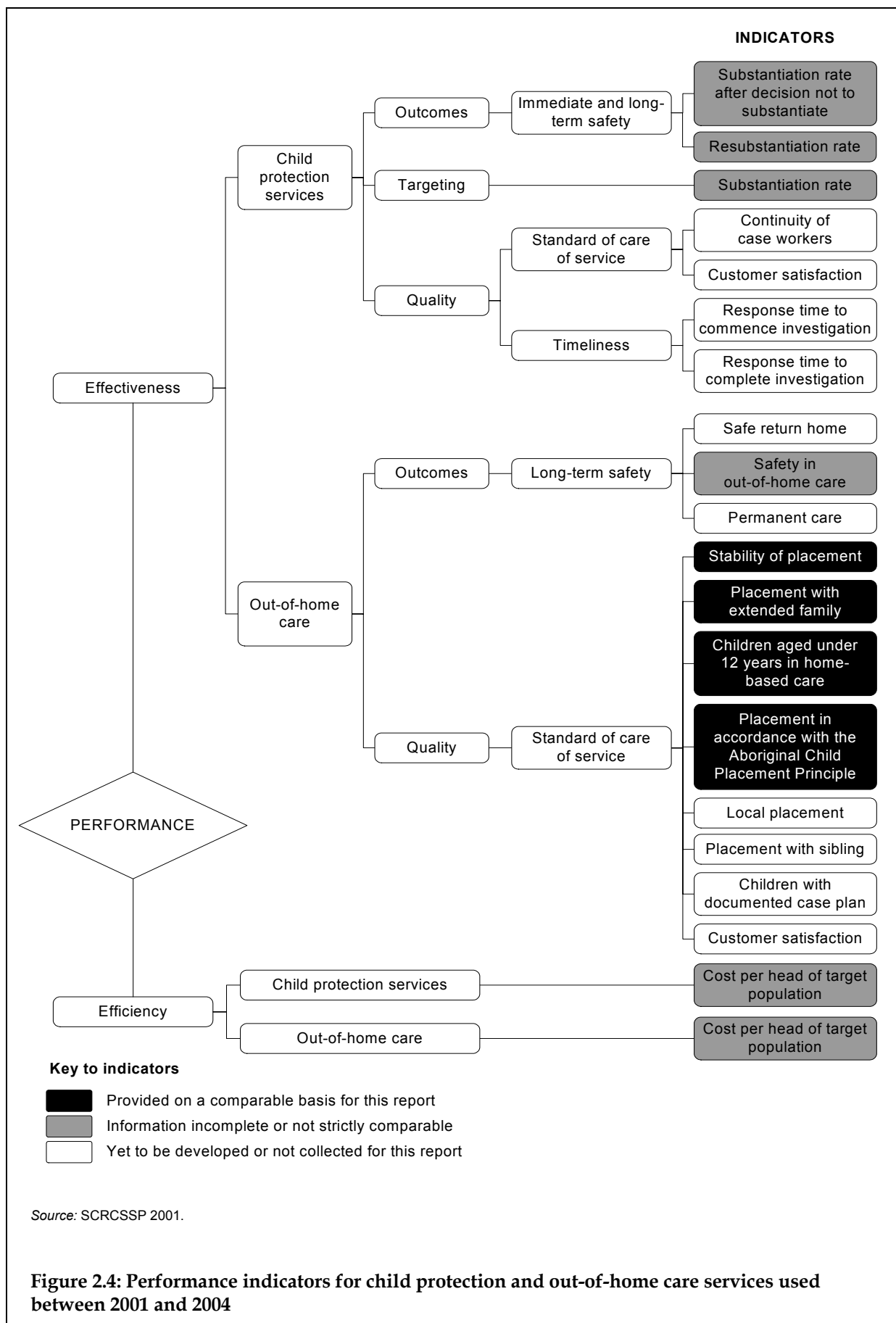
In 2000, two new effectiveness indicators were included – substantiation rate after decision not to substantiate, and continuity of case workers – although only the first was able to be collected immediately. In 2001, improvements were made in the reporting of Indigenous people’s access to services, resubstantiation rate, substantiation rate after decision not to substantiate, and service efficiency (SCRCSSP 2001). Data on placement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children with extended family and children aged under 12 years in home-based care were also reported for the first time.

As previously noted, prior to 2001, two separate frameworks were used to assess child protection and alternative care (SCRCSSP 1995, 1997, 2000). In 2001, a new framework was developed combining the two previously existing frameworks to form a single more streamlined model to assess child welfare (Figure 2.4). The framework was extended to include a variety of new indicators. Although these items were agreed to conceptually, data for many of them were not immediately available (SCRCSSP 2001). In addition, some terminology was revised to maintain consistency with the AIHW national child protection data collection.

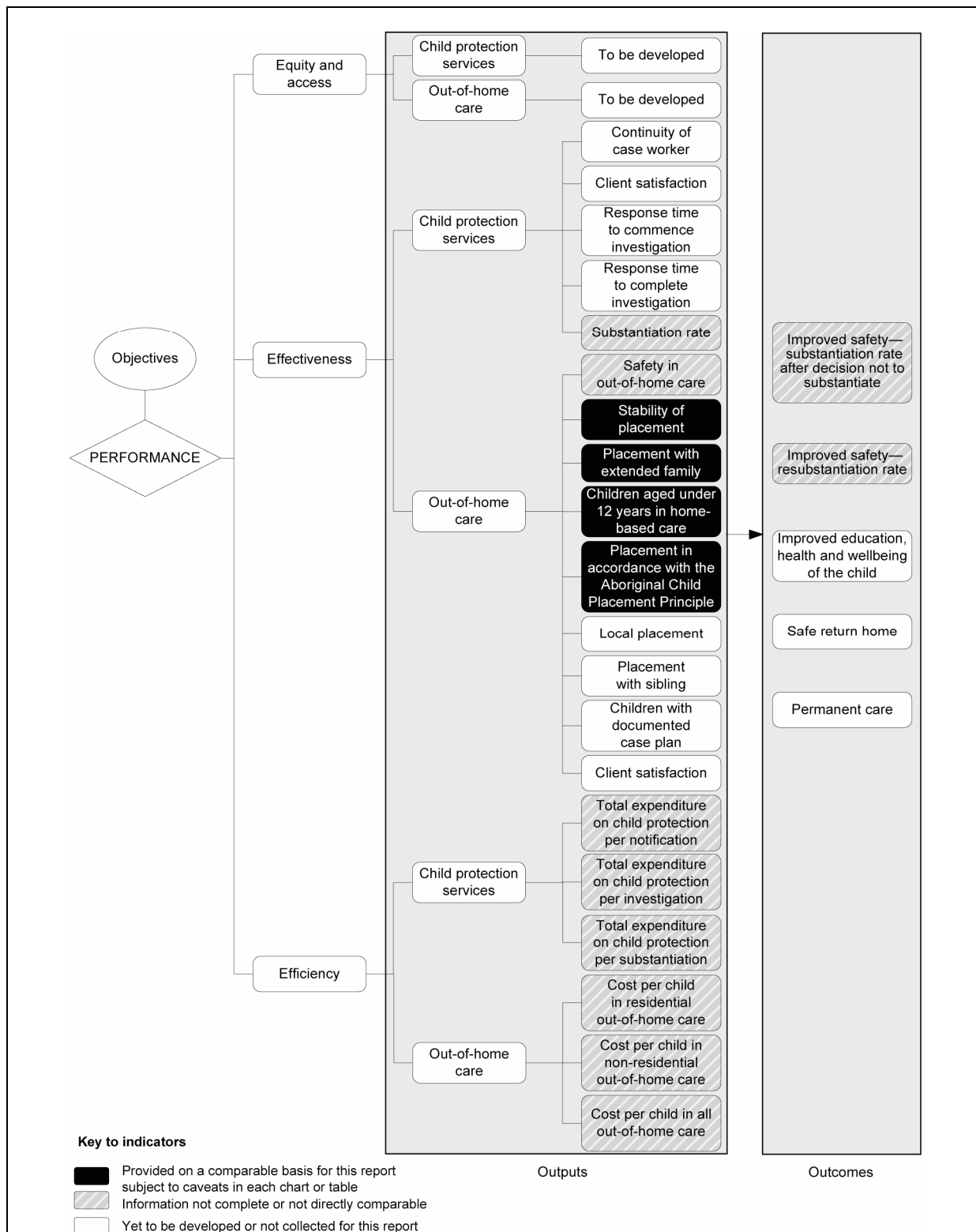
The current Australian performance indicator framework was published in 2004 (SCRGSP 2005). This framework has three major objectives for child protection and out-of-home care: equity and access, effectiveness, and efficiency (Figure 2.5). Equity and access was a new objective in the 2004 framework, but indicators are yet to be developed to assess it. Measures are in place to assess effectiveness and efficiency. Efficiency indicators are calculated by the Secretariat for the Review of Government Service Provision based on financial data supplied by jurisdictions and data received through the AIHW, while the AIHW receives data from all Australian jurisdictions to enable reporting on the effectiveness of child protection and out-of-home care services.

Each addition of a new indicator to the performance indicator framework has improved the assessment of child protection and out-of-home care services within Australian jurisdictions. Throughout, the overall objectives of assessing service provision have remained – to provide information on the equity, effectiveness and efficiency of government services in Australia (SCRGSP 2006). These data can then be used to target improvements to services. Accurate cross-jurisdictional comparison for a number of the individual indicators has remained difficult due to continuing differences in policy and measurement practices. Figure 2.5 shows the comparability of indicators presented in the 2006 Report.





**Figure 2.4: Performance indicators for child protection and out-of-home care services used between 2001 and 2004**



Source: SCRGSP 2006.

**Figure 2.5: Performance indicators for child protection and out-of-home care services from 2004**

# 3 Child protection and out-of-home care performance indicators

The current performance indicator framework has three major objectives for child protection and out-of-home care: equity and access, effectiveness, and efficiency (see Figure 2.5). Equity and access was a new objective in the 2004 framework, and indicators have yet to be developed to adequately assess it. Indicators are in place to assess effectiveness and efficiency. Efficiency indicators are calculated by the Secretariat for the Review of Government Service Provision. The AIHW receives data from all jurisdictions to assess the effectiveness of child protection and out-of-home care services and provide these to the Secretariat for the Review of Government Service Provision. These data also provide the basis for the annual AIHW *Child protection Australia* report (see, for example, AIHW 2006).

This report provides details on the eight effectiveness indicators that are currently measured:

- substantiation rate
- resubstantiation rate
- substantiation rate after decision not to substantiate
- safety in out-of-home care
- stability of placement
- placement with extended family
- children aged under 12 years in home-based care
- placement in accordance with the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle.

For each indicator, this chapter provides a brief description, the importance of the indicator and factors affecting interpretation. While various references are cited in this chapter, much of the information contained within the report was derived from a related report sponsored by the Community Services Ministers' Advisory Council (see AIHW 2002).

## 3.1 Substantiation rate

### Description

The substantiation rate is the proportion of finalised investigations where the notification was made in the same reporting year, resulting in a conclusion that a child has been or is likely to be abused, neglected or otherwise suffer harm. That is, of all incidents of child maltreatment investigated, the proportion for which there was sufficient evidence or cause for concern to establish a corroboration of harm. In some jurisdictions this also includes likely or expected child abuse or neglect (see Bromfield & Higgins 2005 for a review of the differences in legislation and grounds for intervention).

### Importance

The substantiation rate provides a measure of the accuracy with which child protection services are targeting cases for investigation. There are two ramifications for incorrect

targeting of investigations. First, if a report of child abuse is deemed not to provide sufficient concern and an investigation is not conducted, there is the risk that the child will be left in an environment where they are at risk of abuse. Second, when an unsubstantiated investigation is conducted there is a risk that the child and/or family is unduly intruded upon, when in fact there is not sufficient risk of harm to the child. Therefore, careful consideration must be given to the costs and benefits associated with investigating a case of suspected child abuse or neglect.

### **Factors affecting interpretation**

A high level of substantiation can be viewed in several ways. It may be seen as positive because it shows that child protection services are correctly targeting investigations to protect children from harm. However, a high substantiation rate may also reflect a tendency for only higher risk cases to be investigated. Alternatively, a high substantiation rate may also indicate that the threshold for 'at risk' is simply too low and the slightest indication of harm results in a substantiation of abuse. The investigation of some cases which do not result in substantiation may help to discount problematic interpretations in this area.

A very low substantiation rate may indicate that services made a large number of incorrect decisions to conduct investigations. As a result, children and families were unjustifiably intruded upon and the limited resources available were wasted. This type of incorrect decision making has been shown to have detrimental long-term consequences for the child and their family (Osborne 2003).

When considering child protection data it should be remembered that there are a number of children who are abused for whom notifications and therefore subsequent investigations are never made. This seems likely in light of Australian research showing one-third of health, welfare and education professionals failed to report a suspected case of child abuse within a 6-month period (Goddard et al. 2002).

There are significant variations across jurisdictions in methods of collecting and reporting substantiation data, making it difficult to compare these data across states and territories. Some jurisdictions measure and focus on potential harm to children in addition to actual harm (for example, New South Wales, Tasmania, Queensland), whereas others only report and focus on cases of actual harm to a child (for example, South Australia). Taking these differences between jurisdictions into consideration suggests substantiation data should not be compared across Australian states and territories.

A common query regarding the substantiation rate is about the denominator that should be used to calculate it. The AIHW calculates the substantiation rate in its *Child protection Australia* reports (see, for example, AIHW 2006) using the total number of finalised investigations as the denominator, rather than the total number of notifications. This method is also used in the *Report on government services*. This is because notifications are defined differently across the jurisdictions. In Tasmania, for example, all child protection reports are recorded as notifications, and may therefore include broader issues that do not require a child protection response. In contrast, in Western Australia each report is assessed at intake, and only those reports where maltreatment is indicated are classified as a notification (Bromfield & Higgins 2005; AIHW 2006). Given the variation across the jurisdictions, the number of notifications can not be accurately used to reflect the performance of the child protection system, either within a jurisdiction or across jurisdictions. Because more information about a child's situation has been obtained at investigation, and cases that do not require a child protection response have been screened out, the total number of investigations is a more reliable denominator than notifications.

## 3.2 Resubstantiation rate

### Description

The resubstantiation rate measures the effectiveness of child protection authorities in keeping a child who is known to be at risk safe from harm in the short and long term. To evaluate this indicator, the AIHW reports data on the proportion of children who were the subject of a substantiation in a given year, who were also the subject of a further substantiation (that is, resubstantiation) within a 3-month or a 12-month period and where the investigation was finalised before the end of the reporting year.

### Importance

This indicator is considered extremely important in child protection research. If a child protection service has established that a child has been, or is at risk of being harmed, it is expected that necessary actions are taken to ensure that the child is not subjected to further harm or neglect. There is considerable international agreement that the resubstantiation rate is a key indicator, and that reducing the rate of re-occurring child abuse and neglect of children who come into contact with child protection services should be a major aim for the field (DePanfilis & Zuravin 1999; UK DOH 2004; US DHHS 2000).

### Factors affecting interpretation

If a resubstantiation of abuse occurs it may be argued that services are not adequately protecting children from harm. Some have argued that jurisdictions are failing to prevent repeated instances of child abuse (Colman & Colman 2002). However, this may not necessarily be the case. It can not be expected that resubstantiation rates could ever be zero.

Various factors affect the likelihood of report and subsequent substantiation. Rates of reporting differ depending on the type of abuse investigated – an abusive incident is more likely to be reported than a stable pattern of neglect (AIHW 2002). First, when there has already been one substantiation, and then a second notification is made, the probability of this being substantiated is greater than for instances where there is no prior child protection history.

Second, this indicator highlights the dilemma of child protection workers who must weigh up the safety and best interests of the child with the right of the child to be cared for by their family (AIHW 2002). In some cases, a decision to meet the protective needs of a child who has been harmed by providing in-home family support services carries a risk of re-abuse. However, if a child is placed on an order immediately following the initial substantiation and has only limited supervised contact with their family, the chance of subsequent abuse by their immediate family would be negligible. On the other hand, by placing children in out-of-home care, statutory protective action can sometimes hinder children's abilities to form life-long emotional attachments with their original family. Assessment of the risks and benefits of maintaining family integrity is central to adequate child protection practice, and the unique circumstances of both the child and their family need to be taken into account.

Finally, it may be that it was safe to have the child remain in the family home at the time of assessment, but because of changes in family dynamics outside of the child protection service's control some time later (for example, illness, job loss, pregnancy), the child was subsequently in danger of being re-abused or neglected. It is also possible that the source of the harm might be different in the subsequent notification, for example, if the first

notification related to neglect inside the family home and the subsequent notification was about sexual abuse by a family member outside the family home. Additionally, families who are involved with the department may come to feel comfortable with the workers, and once this happens, they may then reveal more issues which are then substantiated.

How substantiation is conceptualised may also impact on resubstantiation rates. Definitions and data collection methods for resubstantiation vary across jurisdictions, and as such cross-jurisdictional comparability is not valid. For example, Victoria does not record resubstantiations while a case is open, meaning that their resubstantiation rates are generally lower than other jurisdictions (particularly at the 3-month period).

The 3-month assessment of resubstantiation would be expected to be lower than the 12-month assessment for a number of reasons. First, children who are subject to a resubstantiation within 3 months are included in both the 3-month and 12-month data. Second, because child protection services tend to engage in intensive scrutiny and support of the family initially following a substantiation of abuse, re-abuse is less likely to occur in this period. Resubstantiation within 12 months would therefore be expected to be proportionately greater than resubstantiation within 3 months because there is more time for family circumstances beyond the control of child protection services to change. In addition, resubstantiation rates are affected by the time it takes to complete an investigation. Some investigations can take more than a year to resolve, in which case a subsequent notification would not be possible inside 3 or 12 months in states where a notification can not be made while a case is still open.

The rule for counting this indicator changed as of 2003–04, making comparisons with previous years inappropriate. Under the revised counting rules, a resubstantiation was not counted for a child unless the notification for that substantiation was received after the first investigation had been finalised.

### **3.3 Substantiation rate after decision not to substantiate**

#### **Description**

This indicator measures the proportion of children who were the subject of an investigation that led to a decision not to substantiate, and who, within 3 or 12 months of that decision, were the subject of another notification that was substantiated. That is, it shows the number of children for whom evidence of actual or potential harm or neglect was believed to be insufficient to warrant substantiation, but for whom a subsequent notification was substantiated and the investigation was finalised by the end of the reporting year.

#### **Importance**

To ensure that children do not remain at risk of harm, child protection services aim to accurately assess reported instances of child maltreatment. It is expected that services will thoroughly investigate reports of maltreatment, accurately ascertain the level of risk and establish the most appropriate protection for that child. This indicator provides a measure of whether important risk factors may have been missed in a prior investigation (AIHW 2002).

## **Factors affecting interpretation**

Subsequent substantiation after a decision not to substantiate does not always indicate a failing of the system. Substantiating harm or risk of harm to a child is not possible if little evidence exists to warrant such a decision. A further notification of harm to a child may provide greater evidence to enable a substantiation to be made. In some cases child and family circumstances may have changed in the intervening period, and factors such as illness or a new partner may be the reason for the subsequent harm or risk. That is, the original decision not to substantiate may have been correct, and changes since that decision resulted in a new notification being made and a subsequently correct substantiation of harm or neglect.

However, it is also possible that the service did not perform an adequate investigation into the claims of child maltreatment. The service may have failed to thoroughly assess significant signs of abuse and neglect, which resulted in an inaccurate decision not to substantiate the claim of child abuse. Similar to the resubstantiation rate, the rule for counting this indicator changed as of 2003–04, making comparisons with previous years inappropriate.

## **3.4 Safety in out-of-home care**

### **Description**

This indicator assesses the proportion of children in out-of-home care (facility or family based), who were the subject of a substantiated harm or neglect notification while in a funded placement. The person responsible may be a carer or another person living in the household (for example, the child of a carer, a relative of the carer, or other children on placement).

### **Importance**

It is expected that when a child is removed from a harmful setting, they will be placed in a setting which is safe from harm. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the child protection service to adequately assess carers initially and on an ongoing basis once the child has been placed in the new family environment. This indicator provides an insight into how effectively the child protection service keeps children safe from further harm.

### **Factors affecting interpretation**

Although this is an extremely important indicator, there are cross-jurisdictional differences with regard to its reporting. Not all jurisdictions collect the indicator as not all jurisdictions will substantiate abuse in care. Abuse in care may be recorded by some jurisdictions in an 'incidence report' or similar, and not be recorded as a notification or substantiation. The outcomes for the child will not differ, only how the matter was recorded in the data system. Other jurisdictions will record all incidences as substantiations, resulting in levels of abuse in care that appear to be higher.

Data for a particular period represent the number of cases which were notified, investigated and substantiated during the financial year. Figures may include reports relating to historical abuse that has only recently been reported and are therefore not necessarily indicative of current levels of abuse in out-of-home care.

## 3.5 Stability of placement

### Description

Stability of placement measures the number of different placements experienced by a child on a care and protection order during a period of continuous out-of-home care. This indicator represents the residential and familial stability a child experienced during their time in care. Data are collected for children who exit care during the reporting period. If a child placed in care exits on two separate occasions during a reporting period, only the placement changes which occurred during the first episode of care are reported.

### Importance

Placement stability is associated with better outcomes for children (AIHW 2002). Research indicates that placement instability (that is, multiple placements) can have negative affects on the child such as poor attachment to primary caregivers, lowered academic performance, and psychopathology such as depression and externalising behaviour disorders (Wulczyn et al. 2003). It is expected that the initial removal from their own family will cause some level of disruption to the child. However, an essential goal of placement is stability for the child and the minimisation of additional disruptions (Wulczyn et al. 2003).

### Factors affecting interpretation

This indicator has changed over recent years. Prior to 2001, data were collected for the actual number of placements. That is, if a child in out-of-home care was placed with another carer and then returned to the original carer, the number of placements recorded would have been three. Since 2001 data have been collected on the number of *different* placements, meaning that the child in the above situation would have only two placements recorded.

As with most performance indicators, there are differences in counting across jurisdictions, deeming state and territory data non-comparable. For example, New South Wales currently reports the number of placement types a child experiences (for example, residential care, foster care) while other jurisdictions report on the number of placements.

There are a number of factors which may impinge on placement stability, including time, age, and child-family compatibility. It is common for the first 6 to 12 months of out-of-home care to involve the greatest number of placements for a child, and for placement stability to increase over time (AIHW 2002; Wulczyn et al. 2003). The first placement of a child is often an emergency placement while additional information on the child's long-term needs is ascertained, and a second more stable, long-term placement is found. Age at the time of entering out-of-home care is positively correlated with number of placements. In a sample of New York foster children, Wulczyn and colleagues (2003) showed that adolescents tend to experience a higher rate of placement change than do younger children. This is possibly due to the greater difficulty they have bonding with new families. Also, because there are a limited number of carers, it may be difficult to place an older child in an appropriate family. Therefore, child-family incompatibility may lead to placement breakdown and the ultimate need to re-place the child. Older children may also elect to exit care themselves and in some cases a move towards independent living may be part of their case plan. For children on orders, a move to independent living would be counted as a change in placement.

Finally, stable care does not necessarily equate to quality care. It may be that a child is placed in only one family during their time in out-of-home care, but that family does not provide



the child with a positive and loving environment. Alternatively, a child may be placed with a number of families who all provide outstanding care for that child.

## **3.6 Placement with extended family**

### **Description**

This indicator measures the proportion of children in out-of-home care who are placed with relatives or kin who receive government financial assistance to care for that child. Separate data are recorded for Indigenous and non-Indigenous children.

### **Importance**

In Australia, the number of children placed with family or kin is increasing (FaCS 2004), and it is believed that this form of placement provides the child with better long-term outcomes due to an increased probability of continuity, familiarity and stability (Patton 2003). Given findings that placement with family members has positive impacts on children in care, the preference is for as many children as possible to be placed with their extended family (Patton 2003).

### **Factors affecting interpretation**

There appears to be substantial informal use of kinship networks within Australia (AIHW 2002). However, the reported numbers of children in kinship out-of-home care are based on figures derived from government records about formalised care arrangements and arrangements in which there is payment for care. Given that a number of children are living with other family members who do not receive government financial support (AIHW 2003; Patton 2003), the data reported for this indicator underestimate the number of children in kinship care. As with many of the indicators, differences across states and territories make the data difficult to compare. In this case differences exist in terms of the policies used to determine the eligibility of carers to payments. This means that the same carer may receive a payment (and be recorded as an instance of kinship care) in one state, but not eligible for a payment if they resided in a different state (meaning they would not be counted as a kinship placement in this jurisdiction).

Low numbers of children being placed in kinship care arrangements may indicate that child protection services are not successful at placing children with family or kin, or that families simply do not want the added responsibility of rearing another child. This may not be the case, however, for a number of reasons. First, the number of kinship placements reported is substantially lower than the number of children in kinship care due to the number of the informal kinship arrangements being used. Second, there may be a lack of available relatives to place the child with, particularly in highly mobile populations, or when there is a need to place a large sibling group. Third, additional time is required to screen relatives for an individual child or sibling group compared to being able to place a child with a carer who has previously been screened, thus in cases where care is needed urgently kinship care is often unable to be used.

Finally, caution must be taken when interpreting these data across Indigenous and non-Indigenous children. Extended family and kinship networks for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are often conceived more broadly than for other Australian people. For

example, Indigenous communities often perceive community members as well as biological relatives as extended family, whereas non-Indigenous cultures tend to regard only the latter as such (HREOC 1997). Therefore, higher proportions of Indigenous than non-Indigenous children being placed with extended family might reflect different beliefs regarding the constitution of extended family.

## **3.7 Children aged under 12 years in home-based care**

### **Description**

This indicator measures the proportion of children aged less than 12 years in out-of-home funded placements who are placed in family settings, such as foster care and relative or kinship care.

### **Importance**

There is international consensus that family home settings are generally the most appropriate placement option for young children (AIHW 2002). This opinion is most likely due to the fact that family settings tend to be less restrictive and more likely to resemble normal life than residential care facilities. Family settings are also thought to offer greater stability and continuity of relationships than do residential care setting options.

### **Factors affecting interpretation**

Home-based care may not always be the best setting in which to place a child. Residential-based care may be more appropriate for some children, particularly those with severe challenging behaviours or those requiring specialist facilities. Residential care may be the only option when trying to place large sibling groups.

## **3.8 Placement in accordance with the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle**

### **Description**

This indicator assesses the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children placed with Indigenous carers, with non-Indigenous relatives or kin, or with other non-Indigenous carers, by measuring a department's compliance with the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle (ACPP). According to the NSW Law Reform Commission (2004), the ACPP stipulates that (in preferential order) Indigenous children should be placed with:

- the child's extended family
- the child's Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander community
- other Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people living in close proximity.

All jurisdictions have adopted either legislation or policies in line with the ACPP (SCRGSP 2006).

## Importance

Care arrangements that do not take culture into account can disrupt cultural ties and identity for a child, which may result in even further harm and distress to the child (AIHW 2002). In general, placement with familiar people or within a familiar environment strengthens the stability of a placement (Patton 2003). In particular:

Aboriginal people consider that they, as much as any other people, have the right to raise all their children and to retain them in their community. This arises from a recognition of Aboriginal people as a distinct but varied cultural group, with a right to retain their own heritage, customs, languages and institutions. Aboriginal children provide the link between the past and the future for Aboriginal culture (NSW Law Reform Commission 1997:51).

Considering the over-representation of Indigenous children in the child protection system (AIHW 2006), this indicator is particularly important.

## Factors affecting interpretation

The placement in accordance with the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle indicator does not reflect the number of attempts made to place child in accordance with the Principle, or whether it was not possible to place a child in accordance with the Principle despite all possible opportunities being explored.

In their 2005 report, Higgins et al. describe factors that may impact on the ability to place children in accordance with the Principle, in particular, the shortage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers in almost every jurisdiction. This shortage is influenced by the material disadvantage that is experienced in disproportionate numbers by Indigenous people and prohibits many people from becoming carers. The over-representation of Indigenous children in the child protection system means that many Indigenous people who are willing and able to care for children are already doing so. That is, there are too many Indigenous children needing care for the number of available Indigenous carers. Large sibling groups can also be difficult to place within the one family. Furthermore, some Indigenous people are unwilling to be associated with formal care systems due to trauma associated with past practices involving the removal of Aboriginal children from their parents (the 'stolen generation') (Higgins et al. 2005).

In some jurisdictions, Indigenous status is reported by asking the child and the carer if they identify as such. This information is later verified where possible. While placement in a culturally familiar environment is generally the most beneficial for the Indigenous child, sometimes a non-Indigenous placement is required to best meet the needs of an individual child. For example, some Indigenous people living in an urban environment do not identify as Indigenous and do not necessarily want to be placed with Indigenous carers.

This indicator assesses whether an Indigenous child has been placed with relatives or kin and/or Indigenous carer(s). When this type of placement is not possible, the policies or legislation in line with the ACCP in each jurisdiction may include provisions to place children with other carers. For example, in Queensland, legislation states a hierarchy of preferred situations in which a child should be placed, in order to preserve cultural identity and links. This includes where it is not possible to place a child with relatives, kin or Indigenous carers, to preferentially place the child with carers who have demonstrated the ability and willingness to facilitate the child's continued contact with their cultural group. In this situation, the child would be placed with consideration to Queensland's Indigenous Child Placement Principle, but not necessarily with an Indigenous or relative or kin carer.

## 3.9 Summary

This section provided information about each of the eight effectiveness performance indicators for which the AIHW collects and reports data. While each indicator is detailed individually in this report, the interaction between these evaluative measures is also important. That is, a positive outcome for one indicator may be related to a negative outcome for another. For example, a low level of resubstantiation may correspond with a high level of substantiation following a decision not to substantiate. There are a number of factors that affect the measurement and recording of performance indicator data, and these extraneous variables must be taken into account when interpreting performance indicator data. There are also significant variations across jurisdictions in methods of collecting and reporting data, making it difficult to compare performance indicators across the states and territories.