



# Safety of children in care 2020-21

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## Citation

AIHW

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## About

In Australia, state and territory governments provide child protection services to vulnerable children to protect them from abuse in family settings. For some children, this can result in being placed in the care of the state or territory. This report presents 2020-21 data from a new national data collection on the safety and abuse of children in care. This first report will provide baseline data for ongoing monitoring and reporting.

Cat. no: CWS 86

- [Data](#)

### Findings from this report:

- Most children abused in care were aged 10-14 (41%) or 5-9 (27%)
  - 46% of children abused in care were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
  - Physical abuse was the most common type of abuse (32%)
  - 1,442 children were the subject of a substantiation of abuse in care
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## Introduction

In 2019-20, 1 in every 32 Australian children aged 0-17 - or 174,700 children - received child protection services. This may include investigation of alleged abuse, and subsequent placement on a care and protection order or in out-of-home care. These services are provided by state and territory governments to protect children from abuse in family settings.

Some children receiving child protection services may be placed in the care of the state or territory. This occurs when children are unable to safely remain at home because they have been, or are at risk of being, abused or otherwise harmed, or because their parents are unable to provide adequate care or protection. As placement in care requires significant intervention in a child's life, it is used as a last resort.

Sometimes a child who is in care can be the subject of further abuse, for example, by their carer or another person in the household or care facility. Notifications of suspected abuse in care are investigated, and will be substantiated where it was concluded there was reasonable cause to believe that the child had been, was being, or was likely to be, abused, neglected or otherwise harmed. This includes cases of physical abuse, sexual abuse (including sexual exploitation), emotional abuse (including exposure to domestic violence), and neglect (including inadequate supervision and failing to provide appropriate food, clothing, shelter and medical care).

This report presents 2020-21 data from a new national data collection on safety in care. It contains information on substantiations of abuse where the child was living in out-of-home care or other relevant care arrangement, and complements the regular annual national reporting on child protection, for example, *Child protection Australia*.

The scope and source of the safety in care data in this report are different to those in the *Report on Government Services*, so direct comparisons cannot be made between the 2 reports.

This report is primarily a data report. As such, it can at times appear to depersonalise some of the pain and suffering behind the statistics. We would like to acknowledge the serious impact and huge burden that child abuse can have on those affected. It can inflict physical injury, psychological trauma and emotional suffering. These effects can last a lifetime and can affect future generations. It is our endeavour that, by bringing together the available data, we can strengthen the evidence to build a more coherent picture of abuse in care in Australia. This information will help to inform government policies and practice, and also assist in the planning and delivery of prevention and intervention programs.

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## What is abuse in care?

In the context of state and territory child protection systems, abuse in care refers to the abuse of children (including those at risk of abuse) who are in out-of-home care, on third-party parental responsibility orders, or on other orders that transfer full or partial parental responsibility for the child to an authority of the state or territory. It can involve physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse and neglect.

Abuse in care includes instances where the person held responsible is:

- a. the approved carer
- b. another person living in the household or care facility, including other children
- c. an employee of the responsible care service/agency or government department
- d. a person not living in the household, where a person in a) or c) failed to protect the child, or the action or inaction of a person in a) or c) contributed to the abuse.

This report includes data on cases of abuse in care where:

- A substantiation was recorded between 1 July 2020 and 30 June 2021. This may include historical cases where the abuse occurred before 1 July 2020. Historical cases may include children who were in care at the time the abuse occurred, but subsequently exited care before the date of the substantiation (for example, the 2020-21 substantiations data may include children who exited care before 2020-21).
  - The child was aged less than 18 years at the time of the abuse. This may include cases where the child was older at the date of substantiation.
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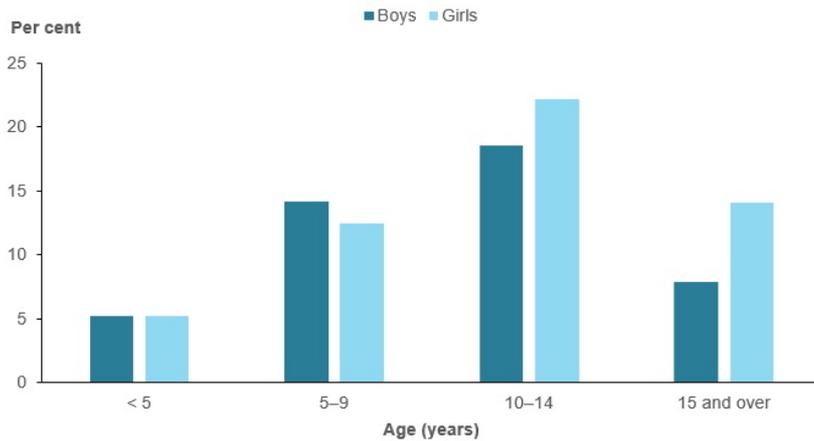
## How many children are abused in care?

In 2020-21, 1,442 children were the subject of a substantiation of abuse in care.

Among these children:

- 41% were aged 10-14 at the time of substantiation, followed by those aged 5-9 (27%) and 15 and over (22%).
- More were girls (54%) than boys (46%).
- 46% were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

**Figure 1: Children who were the subject of a substantiation of abuse in care, by age and sex, 2020-21**



Source: Supplementary Table 6.

### Type of abuse

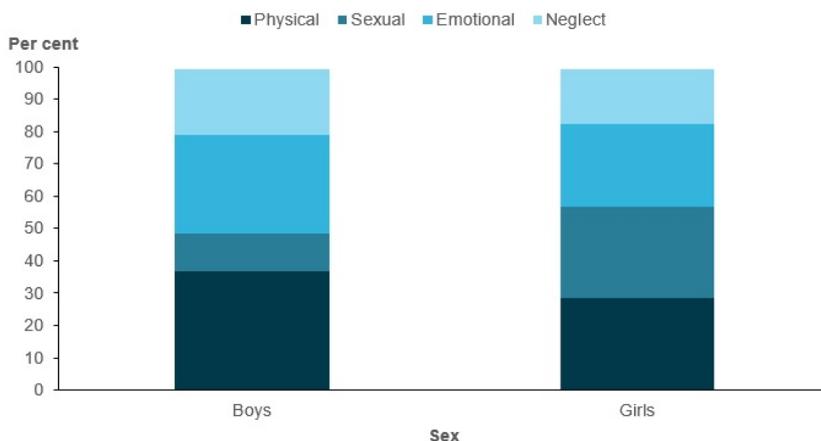
The type of abuse presented here is that considered most likely to place the child at risk or be most severe in the short term - this is known as the 'primary' type of abuse.

In 2020-21, physical abuse was the most common primary type of abuse in care (32%), followed by emotional abuse (28%), sexual abuse (21%), and neglect (19%).

There was some variation based on age, sex and Indigenous status.

Among boys, physical and emotional abuse were most common (37% and 30% of boys, respectively), while physical and sexual abuse were most common for girls (29% and 28% of girls, respectively).

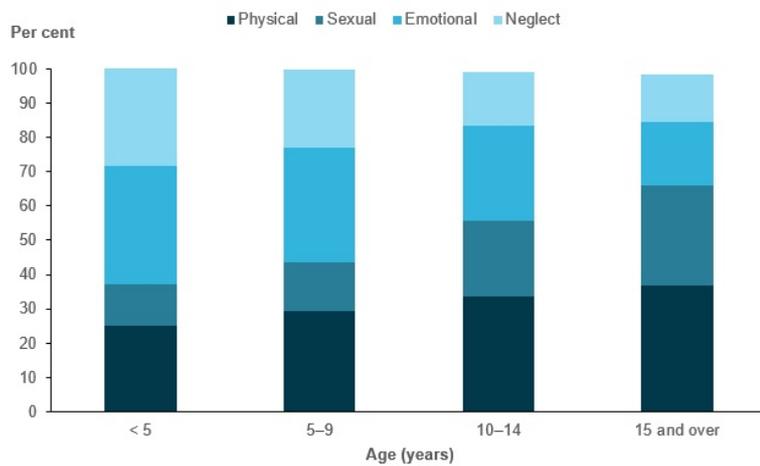
**Figure 2: Children who were the subject of a substantiation of abuse in care, by type of abuse and sex, 2020-21**



Source: Supplementary Table 5.

Among those aged 10-14 and 15 and over at the time of substantiation, physical abuse was most common (34% and 37% of those age groups, respectively), whereas emotional abuse was most common among under 5's and 5-9 year olds (34% and 33%, respectively).

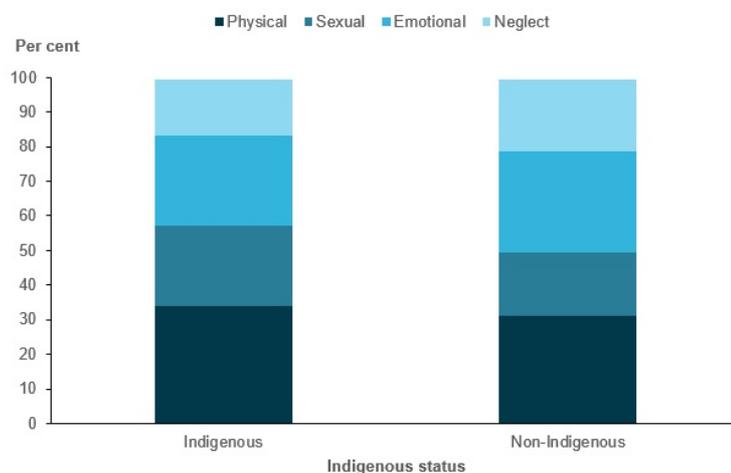
**Figure 3: Children who were the subject of a substantiation of abuse in care, by type of abuse and age, 2020-21**



Source: Supplementary Table 4.

Physical and emotional abuse were the most common types of abuse among both Indigenous children (34% and 26%, respectively) and non-Indigenous children (31% and 29%). Sexual abuse was more common among Indigenous children (23%) than non-Indigenous children (18%).

**Figure 4: Children who were the subject of a substantiation of abuse in care, by type of abuse and Indigenous status, 2020-21**



Source: Supplementary Table 3.

### Rate of abuse among all children in care

Currently, it is not possible to estimate the rate of abuse among all children in care because:

- Data are based on the date of substantiation (not date of abuse) so may include historical cases of children who were in care at the time the abuse occurred, but subsequently exited care before the date of the substantiation. This may mean it is not possible to identify a directly comparable numerator and denominator for use in rate calculations. It may only be feasible to identify a 'best estimate' of all children in the in-care population to use as a denominator.
- Abuse in care substantiations data include children in out-of-home care, and children on selected types of court orders who may be in other (non-out-of-home care) living arrangements. Currently, there are no readily available data on this population. Data are readily available for the out-of-home care population; however, this is a narrower scope than the abuse in care substantiations data (so any comparisons may overestimate the rate of abuse in care).

The following information provides some context for the key findings of this report, but should not be used to make direct comparisons:

- There were 1,442 children who were the subject of a substantiation in 2020-21 for abuse that occurred in care.
- 56,456 children were in out-of-home care at some time during 2019-20 (representing 1.0% of all children aged 0-17). This represents a narrower scope than the abuse in care substantiations data in this report, so any comparisons may overestimate the rate of abuse in care. Data for 2020-21 were not available at the time of writing.

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## Improving national data on safety in care

This report presents data from a new national data collection on safety in care - a new file of data items included in the Child Protection National Minimum Data Set. The departments responsible for child protection in each state and territory supply data to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) for analysis and national reporting.

This new collection was established in response to 3 recommendations from the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (Box 1). Although the Royal Commission had a specific focus on sexual abuse, the national data collection also includes physical abuse, emotional abuse and neglect. Work will continue to enhance and expand the collection and reporting of these data.

To provide a more complete understanding of the complexities of abuse in care, future national reporting may include:

- information about children who were the subject of multiple substantiations and/or had multiple types of abuse in care.
- a 'best estimate' of the rate of abuse among all children in care.
- expanded data to progress the Royal Commission recommendations (for example, additional child demographics, further information on when and where the abuse occurred and who perpetrated the abuse, along with data on sexual exploitation).

### Box 1: Relevant recommendations from the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse

#### Recommendation 12.1

The Australian Government and state and territory governments should develop nationally agreed key terms and definitions in relation to child sexual abuse for the purpose of data collection and reporting by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) and the Productivity Commission.

#### Recommendation 12.2

The Australian Government and state and territory governments should prioritise enhancements to the Child Protection National Minimum Data Set to include:

- data identifying children with disability, children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children
- the number of children who were the subject of a substantiated report of sexual abuse while in out-of-home care
- the demographics of those children
- the type of out-of-home care placement in which the abuse occurred
- information about when the abuse occurred
- information about who perpetrated the abuse, including their age and their relationship to the victim, if known.

#### Recommendation 12.15

Child protection departments in all states and territories should adopt a nationally consistent definition for child sexual exploitation to enable the collection and reporting of data on sexual exploitation of children in out-of-home care as a form of child sexual abuse.

A number of other Royal Commission recommendations proposed changes to various aspects of the out-of-home care system to better protect vulnerable children from sexual abuse while in care. The efforts of the Australian, state and territory governments to implement the Royal Commission recommendations are described in [annual progress reports](#).

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## Help and support

### Child protection

If you believe a child is in immediate danger or in a life-threatening situation, call 000.

For non-emergency situations that still require a timely response, contact your local police station or call 131 444.

If you wish to [report a child protection matter](#), directly contact the agency responsible for child protection in your state or territory.

You can report child online sexual exploitation via the 'Report Abuse' button on the [Australian Centre To Counter Child Exploitation](#) (ACCCE) or [ThinkUKnow](#) websites.

### Counselling and support services

[Kids Helpline](#) | 24/7 counselling for 5-25 year olds | 1800 55 1800

[Lifeline](#) | 24/7 crisis support and suicide prevention | 13 11 14

[1800RESPECT](#) | 24/7 support for sexual assault or domestic/family violence | 1800 737 732

[MensLine Australia](#) | 24/7 counselling for men | 1300 78 99 78

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## Glossary

**approved carer:** An approved carer is anyone authorised under a relevant state or territory legislation, including third-party parental orders, to have full or partial parental responsibility and/or care responsibility for a child or young person. For children or young people placed in out-of-home care this includes carers:

- who have undergone the relevant screening/selection and approval process, and
- who have received authorisation from the relevant department or agency to enable a child or young person to be placed in their care, including carers who have received provisional authorisation, and
- for whom reimbursement is available from a government authority or non-government organisation for expenses incurred in caring for the child or young person who is part of an ongoing review process.

**care and protection order:** A legal order or arrangement that gives child protection departments some responsibility for a child's welfare.

**emotional abuse:** Any act by a person having the care of, power over, or association with a child that results in the child suffering any kind of significant emotional deprivation or trauma. Children affected by exposure to family violence would also be included in this category.

**employee of a responsible care service/agency or government department:** An employee includes any salaried or otherwise remunerated individual, or volunteer who undertakes work, either directly or through a contract arrangement, for a care service/agency or government department responsible for child placements in out-of-home care or under care and protection orders, for casefile management, or for carer approval and review processes. This definition does not include approved carers.

**living in the household:** Persons (other than the approved carers) are deemed to be 'living in the household' if they permanently, usually or occasionally reside (or intended to reside) in the household or care facility. Such persons could include carers' partners, family members (for example, siblings) or children in care in the same placement.

**neglect:** Any serious omission or commission by a person having the care of, power over, or association with a child which, within the bounds of cultural tradition, constitute a failure to provide conditions which are essential for the healthy, physical and emotional development of the child.

**out-of-home care:** Overnight care for children aged less than 18 years who are unable to live with their families due to child safety concerns. This includes placements approved by the government department responsible for child protection for which there is ongoing case management and financial payment (including where a financial payment has been offered but has been declined by the carer). This includes legal (court ordered) and voluntary placements, as well as placements made for the purposes of providing respite for parents and/or carers.

This excludes:

- children on third-party parental responsibility orders
- children on immigration orders
- supported placements for children aged 18 years or older
- pre-adoptive placements and placements for children whose adoptive parents receive ongoing funding due to the support needs of the child
- children who enter and exit a funded out-of-home care placement on the same day
- placements solely funded by disability services, psychiatric services, specialist homelessness services, juvenile justice facilities, or overnight child care services
- children who are self-placed without approval for the placement by the government department.

**person held responsible:** A person held responsible is someone assessed as being responsible for an abusive act (including acts of commission or omission). For instances of abuse of children in care, the person held responsible is someone who is the approved carer, another person living in the household or care facility (including other children), an employee of the responsible care service/agency or government department or a person not living in the household (only where an approved carer or employee of the responsible care service/agency or government department failed to protect the child or their action/inaction contributed to the abuse).

**physical abuse:** Any non-accidental physical act inflicted upon a child by a person having the care of, power over, or association with the child.

**sexual abuse:** Any act by a person having the care of, power over, or association with a child under 18-years of age which exposes the child to, or involves the child in, contact or non-contact sexual activity that is illegal, results in harm, or is likely to result in harm to the child. Non-sexual activities, deliberately undertaken with the aim of befriending and establishing an emotional connection with a child, to lower the child's inhibitions in preparation for sexual activity with the child also constitute a form of child sexual abuse. Child sexual abuse can be perpetrated by an adult, another child or a group.

**substantiation:** Alleged incidents are classified as ‘substantiated’ where there has been found reasonable cause to believe that the child has been, was being, or is likely to be abused or otherwise harmed. Substantiation does not necessarily require sufficient evidence for a successful prosecution and does not imply that treatment or case management was, or is to be, provided. Substantiations may also include cases where there was a ‘failure to protect’ a child by someone with parental authority, or where there was no suitable caregiver, such as children who have been abandoned or whose parents/carers are deceased.

**third-party parental responsibility order:** Legal order transferring all duties, powers, responsibilities and authority to which parents are entitled to by law to a nominated person(s) whom the court considered appropriate. The nominated person may be an individual such as a relative or an officer of the relevant state or territory department.

**type of abuse:** One of the 4 types, or categories, of substantiations: physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect. Each category includes findings of actual harm or significant risk of harm. Where more than one type of abuse has occurred, the substantiation is classified to the type likely to be the most severe in the short term, or to place the child most at risk in the short term, or, if such an assessment is not possible, classified to the most obvious form of abuse. See also **physical abuse**, **sexual abuse**, **emotional abuse**, and **neglect**.

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## Data

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[Data tables: Safety of children in care 2020-21](#)

Data

[Download Data tables: Safety of children in care 2020-21. Format: XLSX 149Kb](#) [XLSX 149Kb](#)

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## Related material

Latest AIHW reports on [child protection](#)

Final report of the [Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse](#)

Australian Government response to the [Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse](#)

### Related topics

- [Adoptions](#)
  - [Children & youth](#)
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