

Ten years of out-of-home care research: Evaluating the Australian evidence-base

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This presentation provides an overview of a report to the Community Services Ministers Advisory Council commissioned by the Australian Government Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs:

Bromfield, L. M., Higgins, D. J., Osborn, A., Panozzo, S., & Richardson, N. (2005). *Out-of-Home Care in Australia: Messages from Research*. Melbourne: National Child Protection Clearinghouse, Australian Institute of Family Studies.

Available at: <http://www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/keyreports.html>



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Context

- λ Systematic review of Australian out-of-home care research
- λ Aim was to identify key messages from research, research gaps and duplication and to identify priorities for future research
- λ Contribute towards the National Plan for Foster Children, Young People and their Carers 2004-2006
- λ Build upon the Cashmore and Ainsworth (2004) Audit of Australian Out-of-Home Care Research



Method

- λ Broader definition of research than Cashmore and Ainsworth
- λ Reviewed completed research in the form of publications, reports, theses, conference papers
- λ Included:
 - υ Research identified by Cashmore and Ainsworth (2004)
 - υ Some of the ‘key reports’ identified by Cashmore and Ainsworth
 - υ Selected conference proceedings to identify ‘new’ research not completed at the time of the audit



Findings

- λ Cashmore and Ainsworth identified 94 Australian research studies
- λ We reviewed 67 publications reporting findings from Australian OOHC (1994-2005)
- λ Of 67 publications reviewed, 29 were empirical, 24 were qualitative, 2 used mixed-method and 12 were policy analyses
- λ At a glance appears roughly even split between qualitative and quantitative
- λ However, 16 quantitative were by Delfabbro and colleagues
- λ 24 qualitative and only 13 quantitative (if exclude Delfabbro and colleagues)



Australian OOHC research was identified in the following areas:

- λ foster families
- λ participation of children and young people in care
- λ cultural considerations
- λ issues relating to reunification
- λ outcomes for children and young people in care
- λ young people leaving care
- λ residential and specialised models of care
- λ kinship care
- λ professional issues
- λ policy in relation to both the service system and service provision



Foster families

- λ 12 publications about foster families in four areas: recruitment; retention, satisfaction and support; and biological children
 - υ There has been little evaluation of the effectiveness of recruitment strategies
 - υ Foster carers are often dissatisfied as they do not feel adequately supported.
 - υ Foster children may have both a positive and a negative impact on carer's biological children
 - υ Evidence about what influences the overall satisfaction and intent of foster parents to continue to foster is lacking.



Participation of children and young people

- λ Six publications on the topic of participation of children and young people included in this report
 - υ Including views of children and young people in care can enhance their self-esteem and benefit them psychologically
 - υ Importance of foster children and young people having a stable, trusting relationship with one person – can be their carer or even their caseworker
 - υ The need for the appointment of an independent representative to improve access to children and young people in care for the purposes of research



Cultural considerations

- λ 11 publications on Indigenous issues. No publications identified for other cultural or linguistically diverse groups
 - υ No Australian research that examined outcomes of Indigenous children in care
 - υ Culturally specific wellbeing indicators for Indigenous children need be developed
 - υ Important that research investigates principles that guide culturally appropriate welfare provision to Indigenous children.
 - υ Very little research has specifically focused on the recruitment, support and retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander foster carers



Issues relating to reunification

- λ 10 publications in four areas: family contact; types of children; engaging biological parents; and sibling placement
 - υ Practitioners may need to be educated about the benefits of family contact and procedures may need to be put in place to assist family contact to occur
 - υ Biological parents appear to be marginalised from case planning and placement decision-making
 - υ Australian research concerning sibling placement is lacking



Outcomes for children in care

- λ 18 publications in five areas: children's wellbeing; placement stability; permanency planning; educational needs and family contact
- λ Largest body of research and most methodologically rigorous studies were in this area
 - υ Majority of foster children fare reasonably well (but more poorly than the general population)
 - υ Many children display improvements in psychosocial functioning over time



Outcomes for children in care

λ Continued ...

- υ It is only a subpopulation of young people that experience ongoing and severe placement instability and deteriorations in functioning
- υ Adolescents with mental health problems are the least likely to achieve placement stability or display improved psychological adjustment in care
- υ Foster care appears to be unsuitable for a small subpopulation of young people in care and therefore there is an urgent need for a wider range of placement options for this subpopulation



Young people leaving care

λ Five publications relating to young people leaving care

- υ There is a relatively small body of research regarding young people leaving care
- υ Young people leaving care are at great risk of experiencing negative life outcomes
- υ There is a need for minimum leaving care standards
- υ Legislative changes in relation to care leavers need to be evaluated in each state and territory



Residential and specialised models of care

- λ Zero studies on residential models of care. Four publications on specialised models of care
 - υ Need research to identify advantages and disadvantages of alternatives to foster care (residential care, group care, treatment foster care, specialised models of care)
 - υ Internationally, residential care is now considered a viable option for children and young people who are unable to achieve stability in traditional forms of family-based foster care
 - υ Limited number of placement options for children and young people with challenging emotional and behavioural difficulties



Kinship care

- λ Two Australian research publications on kinship care were included in this report
 - υ Kinship care is the fastest growing form of out-of-home care and kinship care placements require the same levels of monitoring and support as non-relative foster care placements
 - υ Need for Australian research evaluating outcomes of children in kinship care relative to other types of care



Professional issues

- λ Two publications on professional issues
 - υ There is limited research identified in the area of professionals involved in out-of-home care
 - υ Further research is required into the role of teachers, medical doctors and other professionals involved in out-of-home care



Policy: service system

- λ Eight publications in four areas: carer payments; safety of children in care; SA Funder-Purchaser-Provider model; and social work practice standards
- λ Discrete policies - not a 'body' of evidence
 - υ Lack of uniformity regarding development and application of carer payment policies
 - υ The cost of caring for children in OOHC is greater than the cost of caring for "normal children"
 - υ Practice environments need to be adequately structured to enable compliance with legislative frameworks



Policy: service system

λ Continued ...

- υ Changes to the structure and funding arrangements fail to address underlying problems of foster care recruitment and retention
- υ Residential care placements may need to be re-funded to address the shortage of foster care placements.
- υ There is a need for further research that investigates the policy context shaping the out-of-home care service system.



Policy: service provision

- λ Seven publications in four areas: kinship care; standardised assessments of child wellbeing; young people leaving care; and permanency planning. Again, discrete policy areas
 - υ There is a need for further research that systematically compares and evaluates existing policy frameworks guiding out-of-home care service provision
 - υ There is a need for practice guidelines to be developed in the areas of: kinship placements, child wellbeing assessment, transition to independent living and permanency planning



Implications - dissemination

- λ There were several examples of Australian research that investigated out-of-home care issues and that were identified as having been completed, but for which it was not possible to obtain a copy of the study findings
- λ This highlights a key problem in the foundation of research dissemination – accessibility
- λ Given limited research dollar, important that research that is conducted is accessible to others



Implications - policy and practice

- λ Policy and practice environment that is inclusive and takes a holistic approach to the child, and the child's biological and foster family
- λ Developmentally-appropriate care during childhood, adolescence and during the transition into adulthood
- λ Given problems associated with recruitment and retention, need to examine whether or not the present model of foster care is necessarily the only option – or whether more creative solutions can be identified that will attract carers to be involved in out-of-home care
- λ Where procedural frameworks were absent, there was little consistency in the level and type of services received



Implications - research design

- λ Research in this area very difficult
- λ However, children in OOHC among most vulnerable
- λ Must strive for quality research
 - υ Over-reliance on qualitative research designs
 - υ Research was largely ‘good’ (method adequately described, approp. sample size, design suited to question)
 - υ Several examples of research excellence
 - υ Approx 15% mod-poor
- λ In addition, there is a need for
 - υ Multi-site or cross-jurisdictional studies
 - υ Longitudinal research
 - υ Evaluation and practice models



Implications - research gaps

- λ No area identified in which there was no Australian research at all
- λ Many areas, some of which represented significant policy or practice issues for which there were only one or two research publications identified
- λ Overall shortage of research in each area, such that it is not possible to claim an adequate evidence-base for sound policy and practice decisions
- λ Further quality research is required in all areas



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Implications - research priorities

λ Several key priority areas

- υ research that assists with prevention of children entering the out-of-home care system
- υ applicability of the existing services – and research findings – to culturally and linguistically diverse groups
- υ rigorous evaluation of the efficacy of alternative models to foster care: kinship and residential.
- υ systematic evaluation of child wellbeing as a critical outcome needs to be included in out-of-home care research



Methodological issues

- λ Methodological issues to consider when commissioning, funding and conducting research:
 - υ realistic timelines for research projects;
 - υ appropriate choice of research design to answer the research question posed
 - υ adequate description of methodology;
 - υ the need for representative sample sizes;
 - υ appropriate comparison groups; and
 - υ the inclusion of dissemination strategies in funding models or research proposals.



Methodological issues

- λ Methodological problems to avoid when commissioning, funding and conducting research:
 - υ avoid over-ambitious research questions (can lead to superficial coverage of issues); and
 - υ avoid assuming causal relationships between variables without longitudinal data to show the direction and nature of this relationship.



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