

2. Introduction

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are over-represented in the Australian out-of-home care system. At 30 June 2004, there were 5,059 Indigenous children in out-of-home care compared with 16,736 non-Indigenous children. This means that Indigenous children comprised 23 per cent of the out-of-home care population (AIHW 2005). At 30 June 2001, the estimated Indigenous population of Australia was 2.4 per cent of the total population (Trewin 2001, p. 15). However there are more Indigenous people in younger age groups than in non-Indigenous populations (Trewin 2001). According to the 2001 census, Indigenous children aged 14 years or less comprised 4.5 per cent of the population of Australian children (Pieris-Caldwell 2005). Taking into account the higher proportion of younger people in the Indigenous population relative to non-Indigenous populations, Indigenous children still represent a five-fold over-representation of children in out-of-home care.

The over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care is a reflection of the wider problem of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples having higher levels of economic disadvantage, lower education and employment levels, poorer health outcomes and shorter life expectancies than non-Indigenous Australians. (ABS 2003). There is a complex history between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and governments, which places further strain on the out-of-home care system (Bromfield, Richardson and Higgins 2005).

Richardson et al. (2005) discuss the motivations of Indigenous Australian for providing care. Atkinson and Swain's (1999) discussion about Indigenous Australians' cultural commitment to community also offers some insight into their motivations for providing out-of-home carer. The 1994 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander survey showed that 29.9 per cent of Indigenous Australians aged 15 years and over, engaged in voluntary work compared to 19 per cent of their non-Indigenous counterparts (Altman and Taylor 1996). There is some evidence that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples also have a relatively strong willingness to care for children removed from their parents. Recent data collected by the South Australian Aboriginal Family Support Service showed that in South Australia 1 out of 170 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults became a carer, compared with 1 out of 1470 adults from non-Indigenous communities (South Australian Department of Communities and Families 2004).

In keeping with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural considerations, the last preferred placement option for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children is placement outside of their family with non-Indigenous carers (Lock 1997). Despite the willingness for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to care for children removed from their parents, the over-representation of Indigenous children in out-of-home care has meant there are more Indigenous children in care than there are Indigenous carers. As a consequence, some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are placed in culturally inappropriate placements with non-Indigenous carers (AIHW 2005).

The high rates of caring among Indigenous adults coupled with the over-representation of Indigenous children in care have implications for this research. It suggests that many of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples willing or able to take on the care of children are already doing so and that improving recruitment practices for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers will not address the need for culturally appropriate placements for Indigenous children – that is, there are too many Indigenous children in care for them all to be placed with Indigenous carers.

Although studies have suggested that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are willing to care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children removed from their families, these children are over-represented in out-of-home care. This means many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents are unable to care for their own children (let alone another person's child). Material disadvantage and trauma associated with past welfare practices such as the removal of children from their parents (the “stolen generation”) may lead to an unwillingness to be associated with the formal out-of-home care service system and may also mean Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults are less able to care for children. A tension between a cultural commitment to community and an aversion to formal child welfare among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples appears to be a fundamental issue in enhancing culturally appropriate placements for Indigenous children.

While Indigenous children continue to be over-represented in out-of-home care, maintaining the availability of a viable, appropriate and well-supported cohort of placements for Indigenous children is critical to the wellbeing of Indigenous children in care and the sustainability of the care system. At the same time, strategies to maintain the cultural connection for those Indigenous children placed in non-Indigenous care environments are also required. Such placements are likely to be a feature of the care system in the foreseeable future and the cultural identity of children in such circumstances will need to be appropriately addressed.

As outlined in the companion literature review (Richardson et al. 2005), there has been limited Australian (and in some areas international) research that investigates the recruitment, retention, assessment, training and support of carers and almost no research investigating these issues in relation to Indigenous children. Richardson et al. (2005) showed that in some instances, knowledge drawn from existing studies and evaluations of models of practice with non-Indigenous communities was broadly applicable to Indigenous communities – for example, research highlighting structural problems in the assessment and support of kinship carers. However, some of the research was related to practices that are culturally inappropriate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. For example, the care of children in traditional Indigenous societies is usually shared between several adults, which calls into question the relevance of Anglo-centric theories of parent-child attachment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

The findings of the companion review have shown that a priority area is Australian research that examines the issues associated with the recruitment, retention, assessment, training and support of Indigenous carers and services for Indigenous children in care (Richardson et al. 2005). Specifically, research is needed that:

- identifies culturally appropriate practices;
- evaluates the cultural relevance of current practices;
- investigates structural barriers to culturally appropriate practices; and
- identifies “promising practice” in relation to out-of-home care for young people of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent.

The companion literature review contains a discussion of the lack of placements with Indigenous carers to meet the demand created by the high need for out-of-home care placements for Indigenous children. The recommendations from the literature review were that further research be conducted to examine:

- strategies for reducing the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care; and
- culturally appropriate alternatives to home-based foster and kinship care for Indigenous children unable to live with their parents.

This report describes an extensive research project that includes consultations with:

- current foster and kinship carers (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous);
- Indigenous and non-Indigenous service providers who are currently responsible for, or engaging in the care of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children unable to live with their parents;
- state and territory governments (who are responsible for funding out-of-home care services and/or are the primary out-of-home care service provider in Australia); and
- young people of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent in out-of-home care.

The purpose of this report is to examine models of out-of-home care applied by child protection authorities and non-government organisations in Indigenous communities and with Indigenous children around Australia in order to identify structural and cultural barriers and examples of promising practice. The study will canvass the views and experiences of out-of-home care practitioners and services, carers of Indigenous young people, and Indigenous young people in care. Participants’ views will be collated and themes identified.

It is anticipated that results from this project will contribute to the implementation of the National Plan for Foster Children, Young People and their Carers 2004-2006. One of the key actions outlined in the National Plan concerns sharing information about established, good practice for Indigenous foster care arrangements among government

and non-government agencies and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

In the next section, the methodology is described for the research project investigating the key issues emerging from the literature reviewed in Richardson et al. (2005). Results are described in two sections: perspectives of young people and perspectives of carers, agencies, departments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations. The findings that emerged from the perspectives of carers, agencies, departments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations are separated into the themes “emerging issues” and “promising practices”, are identified for the key areas of recruitment, assessment, training, support, retention and services for children. Finally, overarching themes and issues are described and the differing perspectives of carers and service providers are compared. The report concludes with the presentation of several options for dissemination of the research findings and promising practices.