

Child abuse and neglect statistics

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In this resource sheet we present and discuss a snapshot of data describing child protection activity in Australia.

In Australia, state and territory governments have the statutory responsibility for protecting children from child abuse and neglect. Definitions of what constitutes child abuse and neglect vary across the different states and territories. It is therefore difficult to obtain consistent and comparable national statistics. (For more information on this, refer to Resource Sheet No. 12, *Australian Legal Definitions: When is a Child in Need of Protection?*).

Since 1990, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) has compiled annual national figures for child protection activity. The 2009 AIHW statistics can be found at www.aihw.gov.au/publications/index.cfm/title/10687

How many reports are made to child protection services in Australia each year?

The most recent national figures from the AIHW indicate that in Australia, during 2007–08, there were 317,526 reports of suspected child abuse and neglect made to state and territory authorities.

While the number of notifications increased, the increase observed was not as great as that observed between

previous reporting periods. In fact, the increase observed between 2006–07 and 2007–08 is the smallest national increase recorded for total notifications over the past 10 years. Figure 1 illustrates the trends in total notifications recorded across Australia from 1998–99 to 2007–08. Table 1 contains the numbers plotted in Figure 1.

The figures do not necessarily mean that the amount of child abuse and neglect that occurs in the community has increased over this time, but they do show that the reporting of cases to child protection services has increased.

A child may be the subject of more than one notification—in 2007–08, the 317,526 notifications recorded during the financial year concerned 194,937 children. Nationally, notifications were most commonly made by members of the police force, followed by school personnel, and hospital/health centre staff (AIHW, 2009).

How many reports are investigated by child protection services in Australia each year?

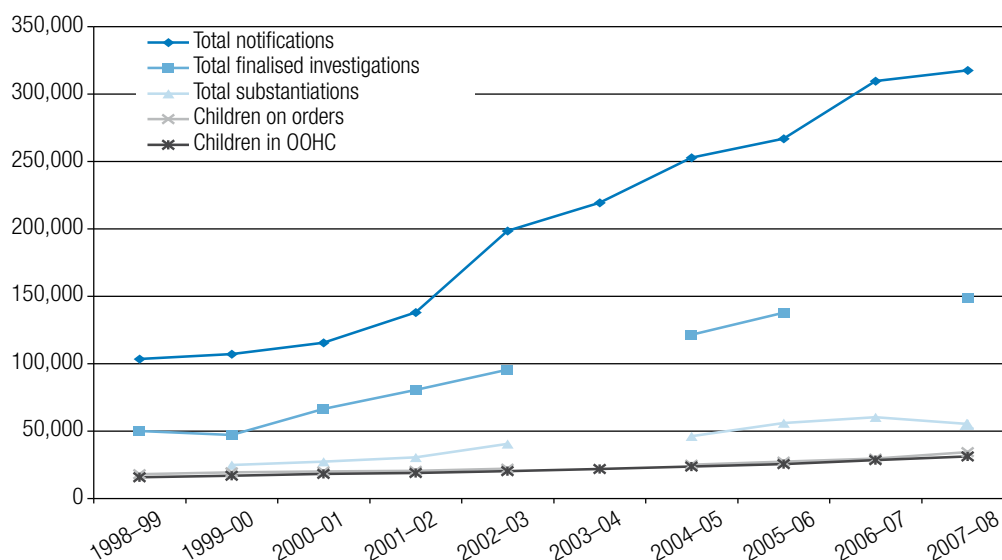
The total number of finalised investigations increased in 2007–08, with 148,824 total finalised investigations recorded across Australia (AIHW, 2009). Due to the implementation of a new information management

Table 1: Total number of notifications, investigations and substantiations across Australia from 1998–99 to 2007–08, and total number of children on orders and in out-of-home care at 30 June 1999 to 2008

	Total notifications	Total finalised investigations	Total substantiations	Children on orders	Children in OOH
1998–99	103,302	50,009	(a)	17,881	15,674
1999–00	107,134	47,007	24,732	19,262	16,923
2000–01	115,471	66,265	27,367	19,917	18,241
2001–02	137,938	80,371	30,473	20,557	18,880
2002–03	198,355	95,382	40,416	22,130	20,297
2003–04	219,384	(b)	(b)	(b)	21,795
2004–05	252,831	121,292	46,154	25,065	23,695
2005–06	266,745	137,829	55,921	27,188	25,454
2006–07	309,448	(c)	60,230	29,641	28,379
2007–08	317,526	148,824	55,120	34,279	31,166

Source: AIHW (2009)

Notes: (a) The Northern Territory could not provide substantiation data in 1998–99. (b) Due to the implementation of a new information management system, New South Wales could not provide data for investigations, substantiations or children on orders in 2003–04. (c) Due to the implementation of a new information management system, Queensland was unable to provide investigation data in 2006–07.



Source: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2009)

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Table 2: Number of substantiations, states and territories, 1999–2000 to 2007–08

Year	NSW ^(a)	Vic	Qld	WA	SA	Tas ^(b)	ACT	NT	Total
1998–99	7,540	7,251	6,373	1,215	2,114	128	442	n.a.	n.a.
1999–00	6,477	7,359	6,919	1,169	2,085	97	233	393	24,732
2000–01	7,501	7,608	8,395	1,191	1,998	103	222	349	27,367
2001–02	8,606	7,687	10,036	1,187	2,230	158	220	349	30,473
2002–03	16,765	7,287	12,203	888 ^(c)	2,423	213	310	327	40,416
2003–04	n.a.	7,412	17,473	968	2,490	427	630 ^(d)	527	n.a.
2004–05	15,493	7,398	17,307	1,104	2,384	782	1,213	473	46,154
2005–06	29,809	7,563	13,184	960	1,855	793 ^(e)	1,277	480	55,921
2006–07	37,094	6,828 ^(f)	10,108 ^{(g)(h)}	1,233	2,242	1,252 ^(e)	852 ⁽ⁱ⁾	621	60,230
2007–08	34,135	6,365	8,028	1,464	2,331	1,214	827	756	55,120

(a) The data for 2002–03 onwards should not be compared with previous years. New South Wales implemented a modification to the data system to support legislation and practice changes during 2002–03 which would make any comparison inaccurate. New South Wales was able to provide limited data for 2003–04 due to the introduction of a new client information system. (b) The increase in substantiations in Tasmania is considered to be in part due to increased application of the Tasmanian Risk Framework as well as greater adherence to the definition of ‘substantiation’ published by the AIHW. (c) The decrease in substantiations in 2002–03 reflects the decrease in notifications in Western Australia. (d) The increase in substantiations in 2003–04 relates to the increase in notifications in the ACT. (e) Data relating to substantiations for Tasmania for 2005–06 and 2006–07 should be interpreted carefully due to the high proportion of investigations in process by 31 August (see Table 2.1). (f) Due to new service and data reporting arrangements, the Victorian child protection data for 2006–07 may not be fully comparable with previous years’ data. (g) 2006–07 data for Queensland was updated in 2008. Data is different to the interim data published in Child Protection Australia 2006–07. (h) 2006–07 substantiation figures for Queensland are affected by a change in recording practice. From March 2007, any new child protection concerns received by the department that relate to an open notification or investigation and assessment are recorded as an additional concern and linked to the open notification/investigation and assessment. Previously, any new child protection concerns received by the department were recorded as an additional notification. If an investigation relating to these notifications was substantiated, each notification was recorded as a separate substantiation. Because new concerns are now recorded as additional concerns and not notifications, only the original notification is counted as a substantiation, where the investigation outcome is substantiated. (i) The decrease in the number of substantiated investigations reflects a requirement of staff to substantiate emotional abuse or neglect only if there was, or is likely to be, significant harm and there was no-one with parental responsibility willing and able to protect the child/young person. Recording an outcome of an appraisal as not substantiated does not exclude ongoing work with the child or young person.

Notes

1. Data may include unborn children

2. Data is not reported for Tasmania for unborn children since the Children, Young Persons and Their Families Act 1997 does not currently enable Tasmania to accept reports on unborn children. It is anticipated that such reports will be able to be accepted from July 2009 following an amendment to the current act.

Source: AIHW, 2009, p. 25; AIHW, 2001, p. 15

system, Queensland was not able to provide data on the number of finalised investigations in 2006–07, thus a national total could not be calculated for the 2006–07 financial year. However, the 2007–08 figure is an increase of 8% on the number of finalised investigations recorded in 2005–06 (137,829), and a 198% increase on the number of finalised investigations recorded in 1998–99 (50,009) (see Figure 1).

How many confirmed cases of abuse and neglect are there in Australia each year?

The pattern for total substantiations in 2007–08 differed from the pattern observed for notifications and investigations. The total number of substantiations (of notifications received in 2007–08) across Australia was 55,120. This is an 8% decrease on the number of substantiations recorded in the previous financial year (60,230). The 55,120 notifications recorded during the financial year concerned 32,098 children.

The decrease in the total number of substantiations recorded in Australia was the first decrease recorded for total substantiations over the past 10 years. As can be seen from Figure 1, overall, the number of total substantiations increased between 1999–00 and 2007–08 (by approximately 123%). The decrease in substantiations was also not present in all jurisdictions—Western Australia, South Australia and the Northern Territory all recorded increases in total substantiations recorded for 2007–08 (see Table 2). As the AIHW (2009) observed, further years’ data are necessary to determine whether the decrease in 2007–08 will be a continuing pattern.

What are the most common types of child maltreatment?

Substantiations are categorised into one of four maltreatment types: physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse and neglect. Table 3 shows the breakdown of substantiations for the four different types of maltreatment in Australian states and territories. In New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, South Australia and the Australian Capital Territory emotional abuse

was the most commonly substantiated maltreatment type. In Western Australia, Tasmania and the Northern Territory neglect was the most commonly substantiated maltreatment type, however emotional abuse was the second most common type of maltreatment substantiated.

The maltreatment types most commonly substantiated across Australia were emotional abuse and child neglect (see Figure 2). Emotionally abusive behaviours include verbally abusing, terrorising, scape goating, isolating, rejecting, and ignoring. Children who witness domestic violence are also typically categorised as having experienced emotional abuse. The high proportion of substantiations of emotional abuse is a relatively new phenomenon (AIHW, 2009). The inclusion of children who have witnessed domestic violence is likely to be one of the key reasons for the high rates of substantiated emotional abuse (Holzer & Bromfield, 2008).

Neglect refers to the failure (usually by the parent) to provide for a child’s basic needs, including failure to provide adequate food, shelter, clothing, supervision, hygiene or medical attention. The high rates of neglect are consistent with the disadvantaged socio-economic conditions prevalent in many families referred to child protection services (Becket, 2003).

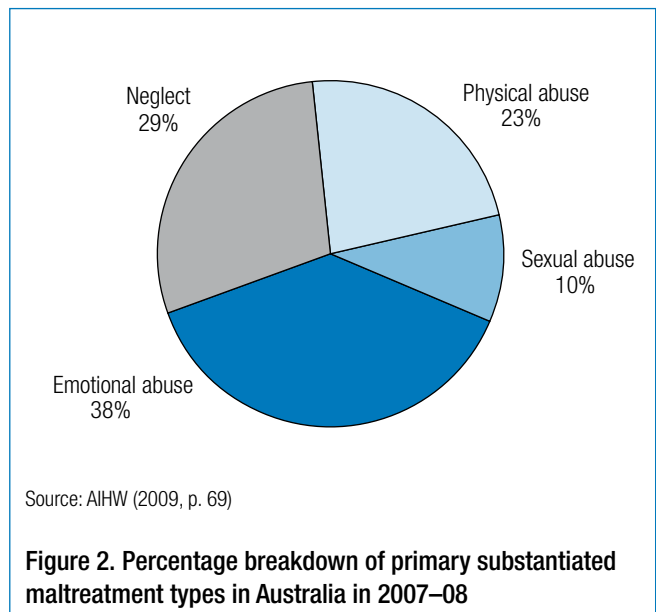


Table 3. Primary substantiated maltreatment types in Australian states and territories in 2007–08

	NSW	Vic	Qld	WA	SA	Tas	ACT	NT	Australia
Emotional abuse	13,106	2,814	2,955	304	1,106	429	382	214	21,310
Neglect	10,429	634	2,286	621	881	491	314	260	15,916
Physical abuse	6,725	2,507	2,182	280	249	212	86	162	12,403
Sexual abuse	3,875	410	605	259	95	82	45	120	5,491
Total	34,135	6,365	8,028	1,464	2,331	1,214	827	756	55,120

Source: AIHW (2009, p. 69)

What do the AIHW statistics tell us about the characteristics of children who are the subject of reports?

In all jurisdictions, girls were much more likely than boys to be the subject of a substantiation of *sexual* abuse. In Victoria, Western Australia, South Australia and the Northern Territory, three times as many girls were subject to a substantiation of sexual abuse than boys.

The rates of substantiated abuse or neglect decreased as age increased. Children aged 0–4 years old were the most likely to be the subject of a substantiated report of abuse or neglect, while children aged 15–16 years were the least likely.

Nationally, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were more likely to be the subject of substantiated reports than were other children. Across Australia, Indigenous children were more than 6 times as likely as other children to be the subject of a substantiation.

According to the AIHW, how many children are removed and live in out-of-home care?

Some children who are found to have suffered abuse and neglect are removed from their homes by child protection authorities and placed in out-of-home care. Nationally, the number of children in out-of-home care has risen each year from 1998 to 2008. There were 31,166 children in out-of-home care on 30 June 2008. Almost one-third (31%) of children in out-of-home care were aged 10–14 years. A further 30% were aged 5–9 years, 25% were aged less than 5 years and 14% were aged 15–17 years.

Most children who were removed from their homes were placed in home-based care (94%). Home-based care is where placement is in the home of a carer. There are three categories of home-based care:

- *foster care*—where care is provided in the private home of a substitute family that receives payment that is intended to cover the child's living expenses;
- *relative/kinship care*—where the caregiver is a family member or a person with a pre-existing relationship with the child; and
- *other home-based care*—care in private homes that does not fit into the above categories.

Of those children in home-based care, 48% were in foster care, 45% were in relative/kinship care, and 1% were in some other type of home-based care.

A small proportion of children (5%) removed from their homes were placed in residential care where staff were paid to care for them. Children in residential care were

considerably older than children in home-based care, with 43% aged between 10–14 years and a further 42% aged between 15–17 years.

At 30 June 2008, there were 9,074 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care. The national rate of Indigenous children in out-of-home care was almost 9 times the rate for other children.

According to the AIHW statistics, who makes reports to child protection authorities?

Anyone who suspects that a child is being abused and/or neglected or is at risk of being abused and/or neglected may make a report to child protection authorities.

Each state has its own legislation stipulating those people who are mandated by law to report suspected cases of child abuse or neglect. The requirements vary between each state. Mandatory reporting requirements are outlined in Resource Sheet No. 3, *Mandatory Reporting of Child Abuse*.

The most recent AIHW statistics show that notifications most commonly came from police, hospitals and health centres, and school personnel.

Do child protection statistics tell us how many children are abused or neglected in Australia?

Child protection statistics tells us how many children come into contact with child protection services. It is the only data routinely collected in Australia that gives an idea of the number of children experiencing child abuse and neglect. However there are several problems (see box inset for a discussion) with these data that result in some children who:

- have been abused or neglected not being included in child protection statistics; and
- have not been abused or neglect being included in child protection statistics.

Child protection statistics are the best available indicator of the extent of the problem of child abuse and neglect in Australia, but they do not tell us how many children in the community have been abused or neglected.

References

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2009). *Child protection Australia 2007–08*. Canberra: Author. Retrieved 19 February 2009, from <http://www.aihw.gov.au/publications/index.cfm/title/10687>

The limitations of child protection statistics as an indicator for child maltreatment incidence

Traditionally, child protection data have been perceived as a conservative estimate of the occurrence of child maltreatment (Bromfield & Higgins, 2004). Child abuse and neglect often goes undetected due to the private nature of the crime, the difficulties children experience in making disclosures and being believed, and lack of evidence to substantiate the crime (Irenyi, 2007). Child protection data only includes those cases of abuse and neglect that were detected and reported and is therefore likely to be an underestimation of the number of children abused or neglected.

In addition to the under-reporting of abuse and neglect, system issues may also contribute to the underestimation of the number who are abused or neglected. Child protection data exclude cases where the abuse or neglect was not perpetrated by the parent and the parent is protecting the child (e.g., child sexually abused by a non-family member who lives in the community) (Bromfield & Higgins, 2004). These cases are generally considered to be a police not a child protection matter.

Child protection data also include some children who were not abused or neglected:

- reports to child protection include cases in which children need care and protection, but the children have not been abused or neglected (e.g., parent hospitalised and there is no one to care for the child) (Bromfield & Higgins, 2004); and
- child protection data include cases in which the state became involved to protect children who were at risk of being abused or neglected,

but had not yet experienced any maltreatment (e.g., mother's new partner is a known child sex offender) (Bromfield & Higgins, 2004).

The total number of notifications and substantiations reported by child protection services in any given year will also include some children who are reported to child protection services more than once in a twelve month period. Each new notification or substantiation does not necessarily represent a different child (AIHW, 2009).

Finally, it is worth noting that child protection data reflects only those families reported to child protection services. Economically disadvantaged families are more likely to come in contact with, and therefore under the scrutiny of, public authorities. This means that it is more likely that abuse and neglect will be identified in economically disadvantaged families if it is present (Beckett, 2003).

Other countries such as Canada, the US and the UK have undertaken national prevalence or incidence studies to enable more accurate estimates of how much abuse and neglect occurs in the community. "Prevalence" refers to the total number of children who have experienced abuse or neglect at some point in their childhood. "Incidence" refers to the total number of children who experienced abuse or neglect during a specified time period. Such information is usually collected via a large survey of the population.

Beckett, C. (2003). *Child protection: An introduction*. London: SAGE Publications.

Bromfield, L. M., & Higgins, D. J. (2004). The limitations of using statutory child protection data for research into child maltreatment. *Australian Social Work*, 57(1), 19–30.

Holzer, P. J., & Bromfield, L. M. (2008). *NCPASS comparability of child protection data: Project report*. Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies. Retrieved 22 January 2009, from: <http://www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/reports/ncpass/ncpass.pdf>

Irenyi, M. (2007). *Responding to children and young people's disclosures of abuse* (NCPC Practice Brief 2). Retrieved 19 February 2009, from <http://www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/brief/pb2/pb2.html>

Additional online readings and research available from the Clearinghouse web site

Child Protection Statistics from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

Higgins, D. J., Bromfield, L. M., & Richardson, N. (2007, August). *Mandatory reporting of child abuse* (Resource Sheet No. 3). Melbourne: National Child Protection Clearinghouse. Retrieved 19 February 2009, from <http://www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/sheets/rs3/rs3.html>

Holzer, P. J., & Bromfield, L. M. (2007, September). *Australian legal definitions: When is a child in need of protection?* (Resource Sheet No. 12). Melbourne: National Child Protection Clearinghouse. Retrieved 19 February 2009, from <http://www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/sheets/rs12/rs12.html>