

Recent trends in the out-of-home care of children in Australia

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The recent collection of out-of-home care data by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare has enabled an analysis of placement trends for the three year period 1993-1996. Significant findings include a sharp increase in overall numbers of children placed into care and a continuing decline in the use of residential/group care. The data are considered in the context of longer term placement trends and some implications for service delivery are discussed.

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) has recently collected data on Australian children in out-of-home placement (AIHW 1997). This is the first time in recent years that data specific to this population group has been collected by a national statutory organisation and is the product of standardised counting rules agreed to by the various State and Territory child welfare agencies.

The data allow us to examine some of the recent trends in the provision of out-of-home care. In a 1994 article in *Children Australia* (Bath 1994), I adapted and compiled data from each of the eight State and Territory child welfare agencies which focused on children in care as of June 30, 1993. The counting rules followed by the AIHW are similar to those which I used and allow for a reasonably accurate analysis of placement trends in the three years to June 30, 1996. To set the current data in a longer-term context, some estimates from a 1983 study of out-of-home care provision are also presented.

SCOPE AND COUNTING RULES

The data tables presented here pertain to *numbers in care* in all eight jurisdictions, and breakdowns by *types of care*, and *Aboriginality*. The data focus on children and young people up to the age of 17 years who are in care for *welfare-related* reasons. They may or may not be under a formal care order as there is a great deal of variance in the usage of such orders among the States. As noted in the earlier paper:

unless there is a clear, continuing involvement by a statutory agency, (this approach) excludes most children in hospitals, correctional facilities and boarding schools, and also some who may be in hostels for physically and intellectually impaired children.

(Bath 1994, p. 5)

The data do not include most young people currently accommodated in refuges or facilities funded under the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) as most such placements are of a voluntary nature and do not involve statutory agency involvement. Further details on the counting rules can be obtained from the two focal papers from which these data are derived.

The AIHW data for both Queensland and the Northern Territory are incomplete and are therefore not comparable with those for the other jurisdictions. For the sake of comparability it has been necessary to estimate some numbers from these jurisdictions based on average trends from the other six. Details on these calculations are contained in the notes associated with the various tables.

THE DATA TABLES

Table 1 contains the numbers in care in each State and Territory and the placement rates per 1,000 children, for both 1993 and 1996.

It can be seen that there has been an *increase* in the overall number of children in care of 2,404, or close to

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Table 1 Numbers and placement rates (per 1,000) of children and young people in out-of-home care, 1993-1996

	1993 ^a		1996 ^b	
	#	Rate/1,000	#	Rate/1,000
ACT	135	1.6	181	2.3
NSW	4,694	3.0	5,437	3.5
NT	123	2.3	[171] ^c	[3.1] ^c
QLD	2,112	2.6	[2,725] ^c	[3.1] ^c
SA	1,195	3.3	1,064	3.0
TAS	498	3.9	508	4.0
VIC	2,504	2.2	3,385	3.0
WA	1,012	2.4	1,206	2.6
Total Aust.	12,273	2.7	[14,677]	[3.1]

^a Based on data tabled in Bath (1994), 'Out-of-home care in Australia: a state-by-state comparison', *Children Australia*, 19(4), 4-10.

^b Adapted from data tabled in *Children in out-of-home placement, 1995-96*, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, February 1997 (unpublished).

^c NT and Qld do not collect data on all children in out-of-home care. These are estimates based on the average placement rate for the other six jurisdictions (3.1/1,000).

Table 2 Numbers and percentages of children and young people in residential/group care, 1993-1996

	1993 ^a		1996 ^b		% Change
	#	%	#	%	
ACT	26	19	14	8	-11
NSW	762	16	475	9	-7
NT	11	9	19 ^c	11	+2
QLD	245	12	168 ^c	6	-6
SA	52	4	53	5	+1
TAS	103	21	86	17	-3
VIC	924	37	794	23	-14
WA	293	20	209	17	-3
TOTAL	2,415	20	1,818	12	-5

^a Based on data in Bath (1994), 'Out-of-home care in Australia: a state-by-state comparison', *Children Australia*, 19(4), 4-10.

^b Adapted from data in *Children in out-of-home placement, 1995-96*, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, February 1997 (unpublished).

^c NT and Qld do not collect data on all children in out-of-home care. These estimates are based on the average placement rate from the other six jurisdictions (3.1/1,000), and assume all under reported placements are in foster/community care.

20% in the three years. Three jurisdictions (the ACT, NSW and Victoria) had moderate increases in their placement rates.

Table 2 contains the numbers and percentages of children and young people in *residential/group care settings*¹, for the period 1993-1996. The estimates for Queensland and the Northern Territory assume that any variation between supplied numbers and the projections for these jurisdictions is likely to be in the foster care count. This is because there are fewer residential/group care settings, they are more expensive than the foster care alternatives, and they are usually fully funded by the State. It is therefore assumed that the data collected by statutory funding bodies on this form of care are more accurate than those pertaining to foster care.

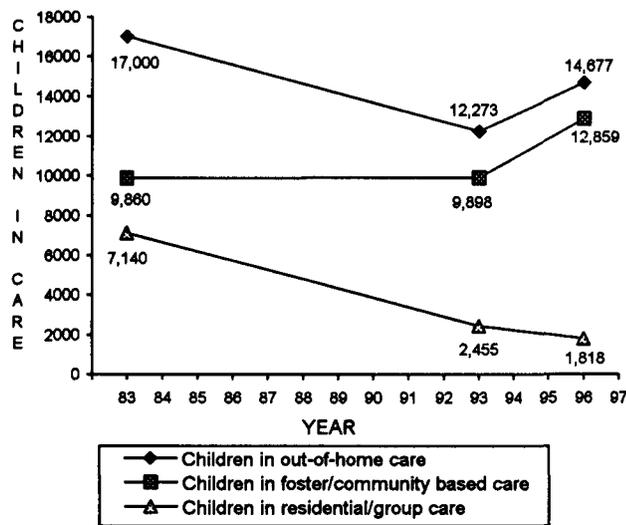
A very consistent trend is evident in these data. In the three year period there has been a continuing decline in residential/group care provision. This decline is most evident in the ACT, NSW, Queensland and Victoria. In South Australia and Queensland there are remarkably small percentages of young people in this form of service provision.

Data from 1983 help to place recent trends in a longer term context. An Australian Bureau of Statistics study (ABS 1985) estimated that there were approximately 17,000 children in out-of-home care. Of these, 7,140 or 42% were in some form of residential or group care.

In summary, the ten year period from 1983 to 1993 saw a *decrease* of around 28% in the overall number of children in care. Numbers in foster care remained essentially *unchanged* while there was a significant *decrease* of 65% in the use of residential/group care.

As noted, there has been an *increase* of close to 20% in overall numbers in care over the past three years. In the same period foster care numbers have *increased* by 30% while residential/group care numbers have *decreased* by 26%. In the thirteen year period 1983-

Figure 1 Trends in out-of-home care service provision, 1983-1996



- 1983 data adapted from *Children in care, Australia*, Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS 1985)
- Figures for 1993 supplied by state child welfare agencies, tabled in H. Bath (1994), 'Out of home care in Australia: a state by state comparison', *Children Australia*, 19(4), 4-10.
- 1996 data adapted from *Children in out-of-home placement, 1995-96*, Australian Institute of Health & Welfare, February 1997 (unpublished). NT and Qld do not collect data on all children in out-of-home care so overall numbers are determined from projections for these states based on the average placement rate for the other six jurisdictions (3.1/1000).

Table 3 Aboriginal/TSI children in out-of-home care, 1993-1996, showing numbers, percentages of the in-care population and placement rates

	Number of Aboriginal/TSI children in out-of-home care		% of the in-care population which is Aboriginal/TSI		Placement rates per 1,000 Aboriginal/TSI children up to 17	
	1993 ^a	1996 ^b	1993 ^a	1996 ^b	1993 ^a	1996 ^b
ACT	12	25	8.9	14	15	27.3
NSW	829	1,233	17.7	23	26	33.2
NT ^c	52	91	33.7	53	3	4.3
QLD ^c	615	654	29.1	24	19	17.3
SA	203	162	17.0	15	28	16.2
TAS	55	44	11.0	9	13	9.1
VIC	300	318	12.0	9	40	35.7
WA	353	379	34.9	31	18	16.2
TOTAL	2,419	2,906	19.7	19.8	20	20

^a Based on data tabled in Bath (1994), 'Out-of-home care in Australia: A state-by-state comparison', *Children Australia*, 19(4), 4-10.

^b Adapted from data tabled in *Children in out-of-home placement, 1995-96*, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, February 1997 (unpublished).

^c NT and Qld do not collect data on all children in out-of-home care. The 1996 data presented here are estimates based on the average placement rates of the other six jurisdictions (3.1/1,000). Percentages of the in-care population and Aboriginal placement rates for the NT and Qld are derived from the limited data provided to the AIHW. These percentages/rates have then been applied to the new population projections.

1996 numbers in residential/group care have decreased by close to 75%. These trends are presented graphically in Figure 1.

Trends in the out-of-home placement of Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander (TSI) children can be determined from the data presented in Table 3.

There has been some reported increase in the numbers and percentages of Aboriginal/TSI children placed in the ACT and NSW, with decreases reported in SA and Tasmania. However, the overall placement picture for this population group has changed very little in the three year period.

DISCUSSION

With the involvement of the AIHW and the establishment of national counting rules, there is good reason to believe that the data on children in out-of-home care placements are becoming more reliable. However, apart from the estimates that have been necessary for Queensland and the Northern Territory, some variation in the reliability of data collected from multiple sites can be expected. The Australian data for 1983 (ABS 1985) and the international figures have been presented for comparative reasons – these are clearly projections and there would also be some variation in the counting rules which have been used. These data have been used to determine trends, rather than to draw definitive conclusions. The key trends to emerge from these data are the rapidly increasing numbers of children in out-of-home care and the continuing decline in the use of residential/group care options.

After a decade which saw overall numbers in care decrease by about 28%, the last three years have seen a sharp increase. All the increase and more has been taken up with the expanding usage of foster care options. Mothers who are not in the work force have traditionally provided most foster care (see, for example, Smith 1989 cited in Mason 1996) and in the decade from 1983 to 1993 demand for their services remained static. Over the past three years, a period in which the participation rate of women in the work

force is almost 10% greater than was the case in 1983 (see ABS 1996a; 1996b), there has been a sharply increased demand for carers. The recent trend to specialised foster care programs which offer higher remuneration levels than traditional foster care, may therefore be driven as much by economic necessity as theoretical or clinical warrants – a shrinking population of potential carers with an increasing demand for their services.

The data presented here lend some support to anecdotal evidence that there has been a marked increase in the number of children in care with seriously challenging behaviours. Overall there are still fewer children in care than was the case 13 years ago which suggests that child welfare authorities are inclined to seek alternatives to placement where there are lower levels of risk. Moreover, foster care itself is becoming increasingly sophisticated and specialised with most States now offering specialist programs that cater for adolescents and for children with serious behavioural, educational and psychiatric problems. In contrast to previously accepted practice, many emergency or crisis programs are now based around foster care options rather than facilities. It appears that children with particular needs rather than those simply needing care, are making up an increasing proportion of the foster care population.

There are now approximately 75% fewer children in residential/group care than was the case in 1983. Most agencies still providing this form of care report that they are faced with a generally older and increasingly troubled client group than in the past, a trend evident in other developed countries (Bullock, Little & Millham 1993). Media reports on problems related to young people in care and the care system itself, have appeared all around the country, and suggest that the provision of residential/group care presents agencies with particular challenges.

There are now very few children under ten years in residential/group care and most are referred to this rather than other options because of behavioural,

intellectual or psychiatric problems, rather than simply a need for care. Whereas foster care is catering for many children who might previously have been cared for in residential settings, a large proportion of children currently in residential/group care would no doubt have previously been accommodated in secure settings or other specialist justice, welfare or psychiatric institutions.

In Australia we have typically referred to our services as *residential care*, in contrast to the USA where the operative term is *residential treatment*. Most service providers would not want to abandon the focus on care rather than treatment, but clearly, the residential task has moved beyond the simple provision of care to one which requires skilled, purposeful and well resourced interventions if the pressing needs of troubled and troubling clients are to be met.

Australia still appears to have a very low placement rate of children into out-of-home care when compared with European countries and the USA. As noted previously (Bath 1994, p. 8), the data presented by Hellinckx and Colton (1993) suggest that our overall placement rate of 3.1/1,000 is still well below the European average. There is no central data clearing house in the USA so the in-care population figures are necessarily projections. Estimates range from 500,000 in care in 1996 (US Department of Health and Human Services 1996, cited in Wilson & Chipungu 1996) up to 840,000 (projection for 1995 by the National Commission on Foster Family Care 1991, cited in Dubowitz 1994, p. 553). Based on population figures published by the US Bureau of the Census (1996, p. 16) these figures translate to a placement rate of between 7.3 and 12.2 per 1,000 children, or two to four times our own.

With respect to the relative usage of the major care options, our increasing use of foster care stands in contrast with any European country for which data is available. The reported average service usage for a select group of European countries in 1993 was foster care 43% and residential/group care 57% – our

percentages were 88% and 12% respectively.

There has been very little change in the overall picture of Aboriginal out-of-home care placements since 1993. This, however, is no warrant for complacency because the placement rate for Aboriginal children remains at 20/1,000 or 6.5 times that for all Australian children (3.1/1,000) and 7.8 times that for non-Aboriginal children (2.6/1,000). A full two per cent of Aboriginal children are in out-of-home care at any given time.

After repeated calls over the years for a standardised, national data collection system (eg, Ministerial Review Committee 1992:5-17; Mowbray 1992; Senate Standing Committee on Social Welfare 1985:58-59), the collection of data by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare is a most welcome development. This paper has concentrated on numbers in care, types of care provision and Aboriginality. The AIHW also collects data on children aged 0-11 years, the legal status of children in care, the numbers of children with at least one placement, the lengths of time in continuous placement to June 30, 1996, and the number of placements experienced by children in care in the two years prior to June 30, 1996.

Gratifying as it is to have access to reasonably accurate national data on children in out-of-home care, there is still room for improvement in both the scope and quality of the data. For example, the data picture would be greatly enhanced by the inclusion of the *ages of children on entry into care*, the *classification of placements in terms of their projected duration* (eg, emergency, temporary, short-term, medium-term or long-term) and the *reasons children are placed into care*. It is also to be hoped that the Queensland and Northern Territory Departments begin to collect and report data on all children in care so that a more accurate national data picture can be obtained. □

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FOOTNOTE

¹ There are some minor differences in the definitions used to define the two major types of care. In Bath (1994, p. 18) these were categorised as **Family-Based Care** ('includes all foster care and any other care arrangement that involves families or individuals as carers') and **Group/Residential Care** ('includes group homes, institutions, hostels, residential shelters and other settings that provide care for groups of children'). The AIHW (1997, p. 2) uses the category **Home Based**, 'where placement is in the home of a carer who is reimbursed for expenses: (i) foster care/community care – general authorised caregiver who is reimbursed by the State/Territory and supported by an approved agency, (ii) relative/kinship care – specific authorised caregiver / "particular person" who is reimbursed by the State/Territory, (iii) other – including private board.' **Facility Based care** is in a 'residential building for the purpose of providing placements and involving paid staff: (i) where staff are rostered (ii) where there is a live-in caregiver (including family group homes (iii) where staff are off-site (lead tenant, supported residence).'

In the present paper I have used the terms **Foster Care** and **Residential/Group Care** as these are the most commonly used terms and the most readily understood.

**BRIEF REPORTS OF ITEMS OF INTEREST
FOR AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL ARE NEEDED NOW**

Lloyd Owen, in addition to being editor of *Children Australia*, has been nominated as a contributing editor for the journal *Community Alternatives: International Journal of Family Care*. The journal is published by Human Service Associates, St Paul, Minnesota USA, but has an extensive international list of editors.

The task involves collecting brief notes of program innovations, research and items of interest in the child, youth and family welfare field. We are seeking to increase the content from Australia, New Zealand and other countries in the Asia-Pacific region. Items should generally be about 500-1500 words.

If you or colleagues have something to contribute, forward, fax or email them without delay to:

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