

# The national out-of-home care data collection

## Where to from here?

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*This paper outlines the parameters of the national out-of-home care data collection managed by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. The paper discusses the need for national data, what is included in the national data collection and the current data collection process. In addition possible developments to the national collection are outlined, in particular the proposal to collect the data electronically in unit record format. The benefits of this would include greater flexibility of the data and the ability to analyse how children move through the child protection and out-of-home care systems.*

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) is responsible for the collection of national child protection data. This comprises three separate data collections: child protection notifications, investigations and substantiations; children on care and protection orders; and children in out-of-home care. The data come from State and Territory community service departments and the AIHW is funded by these departments to collate and publish these data.

The AIHW has been responsible for collecting national data on child abuse and neglect and on children on care and protection orders since 1992. For a number of years prior to this, national data on child abuse and neglect and on children on care and protection orders were collected by WELSTAT (The Standardisation of Social Welfare Statistics Project). The first national data on child abuse and neglect and on children on care and protection orders published by the AIHW were 1990–91 data which were published in 1993. From 1995–96 national data on children in out-of-home care were also collected and published by the AIHW.

### THE NEED FOR NATIONAL DATA

Having a national data collection is important for informing community discussion and decision making. While each State or Territory will have its own emphases and imperatives, there are also areas of common themes or interests that become more apparent in national collections. National data are useful to government agencies and community groups for policy development and planning purposes and are widely used by the research community (SCCSISA, 1999).

In addition, national performance information in the area of child protection and out-of-home care services are reported on annually by the Review of Commonwealth/State Service Provision. The Review reflects the moves within the government sector over the last few decades to measure the effectiveness and efficiency of government services through performance measurement. It was an initiative of the Prime Minister, Premiers and Chief Ministers at the Premiers' Conference in 1993 and now operates under the auspices of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG). The purpose of the Review is to develop and report objective and comparable performance indicators for government funded services in Australia to include in the *Report on Government Services*. The focus of the Report is on key performance

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indicators that provide an overall, system-wide insight into the efficiency and effectiveness of each service area (SCRCSSP, 1996).

## WHAT IS INCLUDED IN THE NATIONAL DATA COLLECTION

For the purposes of the national out-of-home care data collection, 'out-of-home care' is defined as out-of-home overnight care for children and young people aged 0–17 years for which the State makes a financial payment. It includes those in foster care, residential care, relative/kinship care and independent living arrangements.

The national data collection includes a range of descriptive data on children and young people in out-of-home care such as different types of placement, whether on a care and protection order, age, sex, indigenous status and length of time in placement. The latest data are for the 2001-02 financial year and these are published in the AIHW report *Child Protection Australia 2001-02* (AIHW, 2003).

The national out-of-home care data collection also includes data for the following quality and outcome measures that are published each year in the *Report on Government Services*:

- Stability of placement – the number of different placements experienced by those leaving out-of-home care where each new placement lasting more than seven days is counted;
- Placement with extended family – the proportion of children and young people in out-of-home care placed with extended family;
- The proportion of children aged under 12 years in home-based care, that is foster care or relative/kinship care;
- The proportion of Indigenous children in out-of-home care who were placed in accordance with the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle;
- Safety in out-of-home care – the proportion of children in out-of-home care who were subject to a child protection substantiation while in care and the person believed responsible was living in the household.

The *Report on Government Services* also publishes data on three efficiency indicators: cost per child in residential out-of-home care, cost per child in non-residential out-of-home care and total cost of out-of-home care per child (SCRCSSP, 2003).

There are a number of new indicators that have been developed for the report, and data on these will be collected over the next few years. These indicators include safe return home for children who leave out-of-home care and return to their families, and the time taken to achieve a permanent care outcome for children in the system.

## THE CURRENT DATA COLLECTION PROCESS

The data for the national collection come from the administrative databases of the State and Territory community service departments. There are documents for each of the three data collections, referred to as the 'Counting Rules', that contain the specifications for the tables to be provided, along with a list of national definitions for the major data items. States and Territories take the data from their administrative systems and aggregate it into cross tabulations in spreadsheets to provide to the AIHW. Once it has been provided, it is relatively easy to collate into national tables for publication.

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While there are national definitions used to collect the data, the fact that each jurisdiction has its own legislation, policies and practices means that the data provided reflects these differences. There is for instance a different mix of government and non-government provisions across jurisdictions, as well as different types of out-of-home care options available. For example, there are variations in practices in relation to relative/kinship care and the financial support provided to relatives and kin, and these are reflected in the data:

For example in 2001–02 the proportion of children and young people in out-of-home care who were in relative/kinship care ranged from 57% in New South Wales to 13% in South Australia (AIHW, 2003).

## POSSIBLE DEVELOPMENTS TO THE NATIONAL COLLECTION

The AIHW is currently working on redeveloping and improving the national child protection and out-of-home care data collections. One option that is currently being considered by the AIHW and States and Territories is to collect the data in unit record format. Unit record data consists of individual records of electronic data. For each child the data file would contain a set of selected data items

taken from State and Territory administrative systems and this file would be provided to the AIHW for analysis.

In the United States the national adoption and out-of-home care (referred to as foster care in the US) data are collected in unit record format. The Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System includes unit record data from all States in the United States. States are required to submit all their data electronically to the Children's Bureau twice a year. The foster care data file contains 66 elements that provide information on child demographics such as age, sex and ethnicity; as well as information about the number of previous stays in foster care, dates of removal and discharge, and funding sources (NDACAN, 2002). In addition some of the data in the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System is collected in unit record format. This data collection consists of two components – a compilation of key aggregate data from all States, and a compilation of unit record data from those States able to provide electronic data.

The major advantage of the unit record format is that the data are more flexible and cross tabulations of any of the variables on the file can be produced. For example, if the national out-of-home care data were collected in this way, it would be relatively easy to produce tables on children's length of time in care according to their type of placement, age or sex if these variables were already part of the unit record file. Another advantage of having the data in unit record format is that the data could be analysed to show how children move through the child protection and out-of-home care systems, rather than counting children separately up to three times in different data collections as is the case under the current arrangements. This would mean that the data would be more useful in relation to understanding children's experience in the child protection system and in shaping policies to improve outcomes for children.

The ease with which unit record data can be dis-aggregated also means that some of the differences in the child protection systems across jurisdictions could be taken into account when undertaking data analyses and reporting results. For example, when reporting on length of time in out-of-home care, the data could be analysed by the different types of placement so that more similar groups of children were compared.

The AIHW has considerable experience in the management of unit record data collections. These include the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program National Data Collection of homeless people and the Commonwealth/State Disability Agreement Minimum Data Set for people who have received disability support services. The AIHW has also been funded by all States and Territories to develop and test a national minimum data set for juvenile justice that is being collected in unit record format.

At this stage, the collection of the child protection and out-of-home care data in unit record format is just a proposal and there are still a number of issues about this type of collection that need to be resolved, including privacy issues. The proposal will be further examined and developed over the next year.

The AIHW and States and Territories are also considering other enhancements to the national child protection data collection. They include broadening the scope of the data collection to better reflect the range of work that is undertaken in the area of child protection and to improve the comparability of the data. This could include reporting on service responses outside the formal child protection system, such as the provision of family support services. It would recognise the significant shift in child protection policy and practice that locates child protection as part of a broader framework of services that provide for the safety and well being of children. □

## REFERENCES

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