

# Out-of-home care in Australia: A State by State comparison

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*All Australian statutory child welfare agencies collect and report data on children under their supervision, but it is not always clear from this data how many children are actually placed in out-of-home care. This paper reports on a survey of the eight state and territory statutory agencies which focused on comparative placement rates, the usage of the two major types of out-of-home care, and placement patterns for Aboriginal/TSI children. Comparisons are drawn with the USA and a number of European countries.*

Over the past two years, the new welfare division of the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare has begun to collect national statistics on important social welfare issues. The publication of national reporting data on child abuse and neglect (Angus & Wilkinson 1993) reflects the rising profile afforded to the issue in the media, the professional social welfare community, and in the community at large. Recently, concern about child maltreatment has become a national political issue with proposals for uniform national legislation to cover reporting and investigation procedures.

In the under-researched domain of child welfare, any research initiatives into child maltreatment are welcome, but the needs of our most vulnerable children are only partially served by the focus on the detection and investigation of abuse. When child maltreatment is confirmed, State child welfare agencies have a number of options, including legal action and the provision of family support or therapeutic assistance for identified families. But for those children whose safety is most seriously compromised, or whose natural parent/s are unable to provide care, there is little option but to arrange for care in out-of-home settings. In contrast to the recent raft of commissions and inquiries into out-of-home care in some other countries (see, for example, Kahan 1993), there has been little interest in Australia on a national level, the

last national inquiry being held during 1984 (Senate Standing Committee on Social Welfare 1985: vii).

The removal of a child from his/her biological parent/s is a decision which can never be taken lightly. The trauma experienced by both children and parents has been well documented and the impact on the attachment bond between parent and child may be long-lasting (see, for example, Fahlberg 1992; Goldstein, Freud & Solnit 1980). There is also evidence that the population of children cared for out of their homes is at particular risk of maladjustment in adulthood, with research suggesting that such children are over-represented among psychiatric, correctional, and homeless populations (see, for example, Kraus 1981; Mangine et al. 1990; Minty 1987; Taylor 1990; Widom 1989).

Quite apart from the personal and social cost of out-of-home care, there is also a significant fiscal burden for the community. In the United States, it has been estimated that the out-of-home care of minors (for welfare, health or justice-related purposes) costs taxpayers upwards of nine billion dollars each year (Edna McConnell Clark Foundation 1992). In Australia there is currently no reliable national data on the number of children who are cared for out of their homes, so cost estimations have been difficult.

For a number of years now WELSTAT, the Standardisation of Social Welfare Statistics Project, has been publishing national data for Children Under Care and Protection Orders (eg, Standing Committee of Social

Welfare Administrators 1992). This is a valuable resource which includes data on children in out-of-home care, but because the focus is on the **type** of care order which determines the legal status of children involved, it is very difficult to determine the **numbers** of children who are actually being cared for away from their homes. Moreover, legal statutes governing care differ from state to state, as do policies for the provision of family support and out-of-home care. The result is that the data from some states appears to understate the numbers in out-of-home care, while in others they may be overstated (Standing Committee of Social Welfare Administrators 1992:17, compare with data below).

For informed planning and program evaluation, it is important that policy makers and state program administrators know how many children are currently placed in out-of-home care, and how local patterns compare with state and national norms. This is a particular need at the present time as several key states (including NSW and Victoria) are in the process of radically overhauling their approaches to the provision of out-of-home care. In addition, new initiatives such as intensive family preservation programs (see, for example, Bath 1994; Campbell & Tierney 1993) are aimed primarily at preventing the unnecessary placement of children into out-of-home care, but they are usually based on assumptions of numbers and needs, as there is very little hard data to rationally inform decision-makers.

The primary purpose of the current exercise is to determine the numbers

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and placement rates of children being cared for in out-of-home care for reasons related to their welfare. Most such children have been removed from or have otherwise left their natural families (either voluntarily or involuntarily by court order) because of protective concerns, because there are no available competent caregivers, or because of serious parent-child conflict. Also examined are related issues such as placement trends, the types of care being provided, and placement patterns by Aboriginality as it has long been known that this population is significantly over-represented. The study is based on data provided by the relevant statutory agencies in all States and Territories.

## Method

The placements of nearly all children in care for welfare-related reasons are at least partially sponsored by statutory agencies, all of which have data systems to record numbers and to track children in care. The reliability of these computerised systems varies, but they all attempt to keep records of children in the care of both governmental and private agencies.

Quite apart from the quality variations that can be expected with data collected from many different sites using different categories and definitions, there are some weaknesses in the reported data which reflect the complexity of the field. For example, in some States children may be accepted into care by non-government agencies without the direct involvement or knowledge of statutory workers. Although the placements of most such children are subsidised by the State, and occupancy statistics are typically forwarded to the appropriate statutory agency, it is likely that some unrecorded placements do occur. Another problem is that although much of the data is based on actual cases, in some instances they reflect average occupancy levels in particular foster care programs or residential facilities. Given these shortcomings, the computerised records of the statutory agencies remain the most reliable, available means for determining the numbers of children in out-of-home care.

In late 1993, each State and Territory Child Welfare Agency was asked to provide their latest figures for

children in any form of officially sponsored out-of-home care<sup>†</sup>, with breakdowns by gender, type of placement, and whether or not the children could be classified as being from the Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (TSI) communities. Counting rules for the data and other relevant issues were also noted.

The statutory child welfare agencies in the ACT, Victoria and Western Australia provided dedicated statistics for children in out-of-home care. Agencies in all the other States provided data on the status of children under the care or supervision of the agency which included those still living with their natural parents or in independent living arrangements. For example, the 'Placement Type' category from the Client Information System of the NSW Department of Community Services has 23 options, at least five of which cannot be considered out-of-home care. However, in contrast to the Victorian data, statistics from NSW included children under the supervision of the Department who were temporarily living in settings not directly funded by the statutory agency.

The following inclusion/exclusion rules were applied:

- Throughout this article, the most recently available (at time of writing) point-in-time estimates were used. There was no attempt to count the number of children who passed through the care systems of the various Departments in a given time frame.
- Only children aged up to 17 years of age were included.
- Where possible, only children in welfare-oriented out-of-home care settings were included. Children and youth in juvenile justice facilities were included only if they clearly continued under the supervision or

<sup>†</sup> There are a number of terms which have been used to describe this group of child welfare services, including *substitute care*, *alternative care* and *out-of-home care*. Sometimes State agencies have different meanings attached to the terms which relate to policy or funding arrangements. The term *out-of-home care* is used in this paper to describe the care of children away from their natural homes where this care is provided for *welfare-related* reasons. Unless there is a clear, continuing involvement by a statutory agency, this excludes most children in hospitals, correctional facilities and boarding schools, and also some who may be in hostels for physically or intellectually impaired children. This approach is consistent with others adopted elsewhere (eg, Hill et al 1990; Tataru & Pettiford 1985).

care of a child welfare department. Data from the Tasmanian Community Services and Health Department had to be to dis-aggregated as it included children in both juvenile justice and child welfare facilities.

- Children in youth refuges (such as those funded through SAAP, the Supported Accommodation and Assistance Program) were excluded unless the relevant child welfare agencies accepted a continuing supervision responsibility. It was necessary to make this distinction between the child welfare and youth domains as the latter is primarily based on voluntary care arrangements which are usually instigated by the youths themselves. It is recognised that some teenagers who might previously have been (and arguably, should still be) cared for by state child welfare agencies, could be considered to be in care for 'welfare' related reasons when they are in youth refuges.

- The boundaries between out-of-home care and family support are becoming increasingly blurred. For example, there are now numerous temporary or respite care programs which would classify themselves as family support rather than out-of-home care. For the purposes of this exercise, children in temporary or respite care were counted as being in out-of-home care if it was possible to do so. It is recognised that children in some such programs may not be picked up in the official care statistics, particularly as most such programs are operated by non-government agencies.

- Placements with relatives were counted if the State Departments retained official supervision of the case, irrespective of whether or not they provided funds for the placement. It is recognised that there are many informal placements of children with relatives that never come to the attention of statutory child welfare agencies. Under the present counting rules, more children are included than is, for example, the case in the USA, where child welfare agencies often do not fund the placement of children with relatives. Children in unfunded placements are generally not picked up in the official out-of-home care statistics.

- Children in adoptive placements were included if the data suggested that the statutory Department had an on-going interest or case involvement in the arrangement. There are increasing numbers of children (often

TABLE ONE

**Children and youth aged 0-17 years in out-of-home care by State or Territory**

	Number in care <sup>a</sup>	0-17 population <sup>b</sup>	Rate per 1000
ACT	135	81,969	1.6
NSW	4,694 <sup>c</sup>	1,535,102	3.0
NT	123 <sup>d</sup>	54,119	2.3
Qld	2,112 <sup>e</sup>	823,280	2.6
SA	1,195	360,716	3.3
Tas	498	128,997	3.9
Vic	2,504 <sup>c</sup>	1,137,227	2.2
WA	1,012	456,241	2.2
Total	12,273	4,577,651	2.7

**Notes:**

- Figures supplied by: Family Services Branch, ACT Government; NSW Department of Community Services; Northern Territory Department of Health & Community Services; Queensland Department of Family Services and Aboriginal & Islander Affairs; South Australian Department for Family and Community Services; Tasmanian Community and Health Services Department; Victorian Health & Community Services Department; and the Western Australian Department for Community Services. Figures for ACT, NT, Qld, Tas, Vic and WA represent population counts as of June 30, 1993. For NSW, the count is for October 31, 1993 and for SA it is September 1993. Adjustments have been made to the supplied figures in accordance with the counting rules noted in the method section.
- Based on the data table in Australian Bureau of Statistics (1993a, p.37): "Estimated resident population by sex and single year of age, States and Territories, 30 June, 1992 (Preliminary)."
- Victoria is the only statutory department with a database dedicated to accommodation services as distinct from broader child protection and legal status information. However, this database has only five *placement type* options compared, for example, to the much more comprehensive 23 of NSW. The NSW data includes many children under the supervision of the Department who are living in settings that are not normally funded by the child welfare agencies. Included in their total are around 250 children living in detention facilities, refuges, hospitals, supported adoptive placements and other unspecified settings, categories not included in the Victorian data. The comparative NSW placement rate without these placement categories would be somewhat lower.
- Data supplied by the NT does not differentiate between children placed with relatives and those 'placed' with their own parents. As the data from other States suggests that many more children under care orders tend to be placed with relatives rather than natural parents, a conservative 20 of the 28 children in the undifferentiated category were deemed to be in out-of-home care.
- Queensland data does not include children in emergency and temporary care whose placements are usually arranged by Family Data Care Agencies.

older age and/or special needs adoptees) in such arrangements.

• In the majority of cases, the most recent estimates were for children in care as at June 30, 1993. However, for NSW the date is October 31, 1993 and for South Australia it is September 1993. In the interests of standardisation, the most recent, publicly available population estimates from the Australian Bureau of Statistics were used to determine State child and Aboriginal/TSI populations.

## Results

### Numbers in care

Table one contains the most recent estimates of children in out-of-home care by State or Territory, and placement rates per 1,000 children aged 0-17.

This data suggests that there are 12,273 children in out-of-home care placements recorded by statutory child welfare agencies across Australia. This represents a placement

rate of approximately 2.7 per 1,000 children in the population or an incidence of 1 in 373. State placement rates range from a low of 1.6/1,000 in the ACT, to a high of 3.9/1,000 in Tasmania.

Placing this data in the context of temporal trends is problematical, as very little comparable data is available and the time frames differ. Exact comparisons on recent data can only be made for the Northern Territory and Queensland. Northern Territory had a 10% increase in numbers between June 30 1992 and June 30 1993. Queensland also had an increase of 8.8% in the same period. The Western Australian Department noted that, from 1988 to 1993, the number of wards decreased by 38% but the actual number of children in care increased by 30%.

From June 30 1992 to June 30 1993, the Tasmanian Department reports a decrease of 8% in the number of children under guardianship orders, while South Australia reports that the numbers have remained steady. No relevant data is available for Victoria and the ACT, but there are reports of a recent substantial increase in placements in the former after the introduction of mandatory reporting in November 1993 (Were 1994:5). Because of major changes to data collection procedures, no trend analysis is possible for NSW.

### Types of placements

Table two compares the States by type of placement. The two major categories are in-home, foster-type care, and group or residential arrangements. Both of these categories have become increasingly diverse with all States offering a variety of specialised options, but a consistent trend over the past two decades has been the decreasing use of residential care and the increasing use of foster care. Most States have closed or are in the process of closing their larger congregate care facilities. Where residential care is needed, smaller group homes are preferred.

The data reveals that South Australia, which has a relatively high overall placement rate, places the highest proportion of its care population (96%) in foster care settings. In contrast, Victoria places 63% of its care population in foster settings and over one third in residential care.

TABLE TWO

**Types of out-of-home care provided, by State**

	Family Based Care <sup>a</sup>		Group/Residential care <sup>b</sup>		Unclassified care		Total No.
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	
ACT	109	81	26	19			135
NSW	3,811	81	762	16	121	3	4,694
NT	110	89	11	9	2	2	123
QLD	1,849	87	245	12	18	1	2,112
SA	1,143	96	52	4			1,195
TAS	395	79	103	21			498
VIC	1,580	63	924	37			2,504
WA	719	71	293	29			1,012
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>9,716</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>2,416</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>141</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>12,273</b>

**Notes:**

- a) Includes all foster care and any other care arrangement that involves families or individuals as carers.
- b) Includes group homes, institutions, hostels, residential shelters and other settings that provide care for groups of children.

**Aboriginal/TSI children**

State placement patterns pertaining to the care of Aboriginal children are presented in Table three. This data paints a picture of Aboriginal over-representation, and reveals major differences by State.

The Northern Territory has the highest proportion of Aboriginal children in its care population (42.6%), but it also has the highest proportion of Aboriginal children overall. The best comparative statistic is the placement rate for children in the Aboriginal community. Northern Territory has a low rate of 3 per 1,000 (close to the Australian average for all children), while Victoria has very high placement rate of 40/1,000, or 4% of its entire Aboriginal child population. South Australia and NSW also have rates which are well above the national average.

The Australia-wide figures indicate that, although Aboriginal children comprise 2.7% of the overall child population, they make up 20% of the children-in-care population. Two percent of all Aboriginal children are in care.

**Discussion**

The data presented here is a point-in-time count and represents a static, average capacity picture of out-of-home care provision. As such, it covers only one aspect of what is a multi-faceted and dynamic field. However, point-in-time estimates are the most reliable data available and they do allow for intra-national and international comparisons.

**Placement rates**

The data reveals that there are significant differences between the States in their placement rates. It must be acknowledged that the different counting rules and data systems used by the various State agencies may account for some of these differences, but within these limitations every effort was made to standardise the data.

One possible explanation for the differences is that some States have been more effective in implementing preventive programs, such as the provision of family support. However, a number of local contextual issues can also help determine numbers in care. Research has consistently shown that the placement of children is related to socio-economic and demographic factors such as poverty,

TABLE THREE

**Aboriginal/TSI children in care, by State**

	Total children in care	No. of Aboriginal children in care	% of care population who are Aboriginal <sup>a</sup>	% of child population who are Aboriginal	Placement rate per 1000 for Aboriginal children 0-17
ACT	135	12 <sup>b</sup>	8.9	1.0	15
NSW	4,694	829	17.7	2.1	26
NT	123	52	42.3	33.7	3
QLD	2,112	615	29.1	2.0	19
SA	1,195	203	17.0	2.0	28
TAS	498	55	11.0	3.5	13
VIC	2,504	300 <sup>c</sup>	12.0	0.7	40
WA	1,012	353	34.9	4.3	18
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>12,273</b>	<b>2,416</b>	<b>19.7</b>	<b>2.7</b>	<b>20</b>

**Notes:**

- a) Figures for the Aboriginal/TSI child population in each State are taken from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (1993b, 1991 Census of Population and Housing, Aboriginal Community Profile, ABS Cat. No. 2722.0) while those for the total population are from Australian Bureau of Statistics (1993a). The Aboriginal out-of-home care and census figures could well be underestimations because of missing information in both of these counts. For example, no information was available on Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal status for 19.5% of the NSW population of children under care orders.
- b) Estimated from the percentage of children referred to care by the statutory agency.
- c) The Victorian Department estimates that there are approximately 300 Aboriginal children in specialised, Aboriginal-managed out-of-home care programs, with the possibility of 'some others' with other agencies.

TABLE FOUR

**Placement rates & types of care in selected European countries,  
USA & Australia**

Country	Number of children placed	Placement rate per 1,000	% in family foster care	% in group/residential care
Belgium <sup>a</sup>	11,142	5.1	31	69
Denmark	9,213	10.5	61	39
France	126,900	9.6	52	48
Germany	97,860	9.4	42	58
Greece	16,954	5.8	4	96
Ireland	2,714	2.2	73	27
Italy	38,890	2.7	27	73
Luxembourg	762	8.7	33	67
Netherlands	19,000	5.0	53	47
Portugal	12,010	4.6	-	-
Spain	22,676	2.4	14	86
U.K.	69,000	5.3	58	42
Total: Selected European countries	427,121	5.8	43	57
United States	500,000	7.7	-	-
Australia	12,273	2.7	79	20

**Notes:**

a) European data adapted from Knorth (1994) and Hellinckx & Colton (1993)

substance abuse, unemployment, and single-parent or minority status (see, for example, Besharov 1988, 1989; Billingsley & Giovannoni 1972; McGowan 1983; Pelton 1989). Where such risk factors are concentrated, placement rates are likely to be high, but such explanations do not readily account for the high rates in South Australia and Tasmania.

Low placement rates may also represent under- rather than over-servicing. There has been, for example, a marked decline over the past few years in the number of children under the care of the Victorian Health and Community Services Department. At the same time, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of homeless children and youth. The current Victorian Director has himself made a connection, noting that 'there are fewer kids in welfare facilities than hitherto, and

more on the streets' (Patterson 1992 :25). This phenomenon is not, of course, limited to Victoria, nor is it necessarily the fault of the statutory agencies. Changes in legislation, most notably the abolishment of status offences in most Australian jurisdictions, have restricted intervention options for police and statutory agencies and have increased the choices for youth.

How do Australian placement rates compare internationally? Again, there are major differences in counting rules and in the quality of the data collected, but some rough comparisons are possible. In the United States, it has been estimated that, in 1990, there were approximately 500,000 children in out-of-home care (Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families, 1990). At the time of the 1990 census, there were 65,145,000

children under the age of 18, which yields a placement rate of 7.7/1,000 (an incidence of 1 in 130), almost three times our own. Even more concerning is a rapid increase in the numbers coming into care. Hill et al. (1990) estimated that the 1985 US national placement rate was around 4.5/1,000, but the Standing Committee has estimated that, by 1995, there will be 750,000 children in care - a rate of over 11/1,000 or more than one percent of the total child population. The Californian placement rate has already reached this level (Barth et al 1992).

The European data in Table four is summarised from research reported by Knorth (1994) and Hellinckx and Colton (1993). This data is based on a similar in-care population to that described in the present study, but it is likely that there is some variation in counting rules and data reliability. With these cautions in mind, it appears that the Australian rate may be well below the European average, possibly ranking with the lowest placing countries. Some European countries have higher rates of placement than the United States.

**Types of care**

As with placement rates, differences in the types of placements provided are difficult to interpret. On the one hand, most would accept the basic principle of normalisation, ie, that children are better off being cared for in normalised, home-like environments. But on the other hand, there is some scepticism over the motives for the whole-hearted embrace of home-based care. Foster care is much cheaper than most forms of residential care, and it is sometimes suggested that the keen interest of statutory agencies in closing residential establishments is driven more by fiscal than theoretical concerns (see, for example, Kahan 1993; Mowbray 1992). In the absence of compelling outcome data, the relative merits of the various forms of care remain open to conjecture. Nevertheless, the thirty-six percentage point difference between South Australia and Victoria suggests quite different policy commitments.

Although there are questions about the direct comparability of the data, the published figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) *Children in care Australia* survey in 1983/84 (ABS 1985), do provide a yardstick against which to assess trends in this area. This survey

determined that there were almost 17,000 children in both major forms of out-of-home care (suggesting that there has been a decline in the overall number of children in care) with 58% in foster care settings (against 79% in this study) and 42% in residential or group care (against 20% in this study). Clearly, there has been a quite dramatic shift away from the use of residential or group care towards foster-type approaches. From Table four, it can be seen that a higher percentage of the Australian out-of-home care population is in foster care than is the case in any listed European country.

### **Aboriginal children in care**

The over-representation of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care has been a long-standing concern in Australia (see, for example, Butler 1993; Szwarc 1985:85), and the present data paints a disturbing, but not entirely pessimistic picture. Nearly 2% of all Aboriginal children are in some form of officially sponsored out-of-home care at any given time, and the placement rate for Aboriginal children is over seven times that for all children. In Victoria, an astounding 4% of all Aboriginal children are in care at any one time (an incidence of 1 in 23), whilst in the Northern Territory, the incidence is only 0.3%. In all other states, placement rates for Aboriginal children greatly exceed those for the total population.

More disturbing than the actual incidence rates, are the out-of-home care trends for Aboriginal children. In Szwarc's (1985) survey of children in non-government care, Aboriginal children made up 8.7% of the in-care population (pp. 27-28). The current data for children in both government and non-government care reveal that around 20% of the care population is Aboriginal.

As has been noted elsewhere (Ministerial Review Committee 1992), the reasons for the high level of placement in the Aboriginal community are complex, but high poverty levels in the community are certainly a key factor. With respect to very high placement rates in rural NSW, the Committee noted that:

...until there are wholesale, structural changes to give rural Aboriginal families greater access to resources (including employment, education, etc), it is anticipated that formal care will still be sought. (p.97)

Again, State differences suggest diverging policies and programs governing the provision of care for Aboriginal children. The remarkably low rate in the Northern Territory requires some comment. The NT Department adheres to the clearly articulated 'Aboriginal child placement principle' for dealing with Aboriginal children in crisis, and routinely convenes a family conference to seek a solution within the extended kin group. This family conference is similar to that which originated in New Zealand (Maxwell & Morris 1992). The outcome is that very few rural Aboriginal children ever come into the care of the Department. However, under what is called the 'Preventive Family Care' scheme, financial support is available to support placements arranged by the conferences if it is deemed necessary to ensure the placement's success. The scheme would seem to have great merit; however, for the purposes of the present exercise, it could well be classed as a de-facto relative placement scheme. Were children in such arrangements to be included in the out-of-home care count, the NT placement rate would still be comparatively modest, but somewhat higher than it currently stands.

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The very high placement rates in NSW, SA, and particularly Victoria, must be cause for concern and investigation. In these states, it is unlikely that the plight of the Aboriginal communities is any more severe than is the case in the Northern Territory, and it is possible that placement policies somehow maintain the high rates.

One possible contributing factor is that, in all these states, the relevant statutory agency has devolved some child welfare decision-making responsibility to local Aboriginal community associations. Because of cultural norms, many more Aboriginal

children are living with relatives apart from their biological parents than is the case in the larger community. Any placements made because of cultural rather than welfare reasons would not be considered out-of-home care as defined in this discussion, but it is possible that some are indeed counted and funded as such by statutory agencies. In Victoria, over 10% of the children in some Aboriginal communities are recorded as being in foster care. Without detailed accounting procedures, it is impossible to determine if and to what extent the numbers are being inflated in this manner.

### **Summary and conclusion**

In summary, the States and Territories differ markedly, both with respect to placement rates of children into out-of-home care, and the types of care which are favoured. When compared with placement patterns from other Western countries, Australia has a low overall rate of placement and a high reliance on foster care. In most states, Aboriginal children continue to be placed into care at a disproportionate rate.

In accord with repeated calls over the years (eg. Ministerial Review Committee 1992:15-17; Mowbray 1992; & Senate Standing Committee on Social Welfare 1985:58-59), the present study highlights the need for a more consistent and comprehensive recording system for statistics on the out-of-home care of children. From the data that is readily available, it is not possible to determine national patterns for other important dimensions of care. These include the reasons children are placed into care, how long they stay in care, how many are in temporary, short-term, medium or long-term arrangements, how many return home, and how many are returning to the care system after failed attempts at restoration. Individual state agencies are researching and reporting on some of these issues (see, for example, NSW Department of Community Services 1992) but national initiatives are needed to facilitate the compilation of a reliable and regularly updated data base to inform policy and decision-making. ♦

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