

# Sharp rise in child protection interventions in Australia

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A report released this year by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare revealed a 25 percent rise over the past five years in the number of child protection interventions—that is, children who were the subject of an official investigation, care and protection order, or out-of-home care.

The statistics in the *Child Protection Australia 2016–17* report point to a deepening social crisis, particularly in working class and rural areas, with the worst impact on indigenous families, who are among the most vulnerable layers of the working class.

A total of 168,352 children, a rate of 30.8 per 1,000 children aged 0–17, received child protection involvement throughout Australia in 2016–2017, with 74 percent of these children being repeat referrals. This included 47,915 children, with a median age of nine, who had been removed from their families and placed in out-of-home care as at June 30, 2017. That was an 18 percent increase over four years.

These figures partially mask the disproportionately high rate of state intervention among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, which was 164.3 per 1,000, seven times higher than non-indigenous children.

Indigenous children were placed in out-of-home care at 10 times the rate for non-Indigenous children. For indigenous children aged 5 to 9, the rate of out-of-home care rose to 12 times their non-indigenous counterparts.

Out-of-home care means children are taken from their birth families and placed in the homes of relative or foster carers, or residential facilities or family group homes run by governments or non-government organisations (NGOs).

Many of the carers in these programs are volunteers, paid only rent and board or out-of-pocket expenses. They are not required to be qualified to deal with these

children’s complex needs, including past trauma.

Teenagers can be placed in “lead tenant households,” where an adult lives and supervises them in rented premises. Alternatively, they may be housed in hotels or motels.

The high proportion of children remaining in out-of-home care for five years or more—41 percent of the total—contributed to the overall increased rate.

About 1 in 20 children in out-of-home care were living in residential care, ostensibly used for children with complex needs. Some were very young—3 percent of those in residential care were aged under five years.

Residential care facilities can be described as mini-institutions where children are denied the consistency of care and opportunity for a loving bond provided by a parent, permanent carer or guardian.

Moreover, in 2017–2018, according to a Productivity Commission report, almost 6 percent of children in out-of-home care across the country were victims of sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse or neglect. That was only among the *reported* cases, so the true level of abuse is likely to be higher.

Bernie Geary, the Children’s Commissioner in the state of Victoria for 10 years, until 2015, provided a damning condemnation of residential homes in that state in a report he released as he left his position. After visiting 21 residential care homes, he reported 189 incidents of the alleged sexual abuse of 166 children. That was 1 in 3 of the 500 children in residential care at the time.

The *Child Protection Australia 2016–17* report did not ask or seek to explain what accounts for the increase in state intervention, which leads, in many cases, to the forced and traumatic removal of children from their families, for years on end.

The Productivity Commission report showed that

police, not doctors, schools or social workers, initiated the greatest number of cases. It also showed that the highest rate of substantiations—notifications found to be true—came from poorer families. This indicates the impact of falling wages, soaring living costs, poverty, unemployment, homelessness and mental health issues, especially on low-income households.

However, another factor has also contributed to the rise in interventions. Governments have slashed budgets and staffing to government-run child welfare departments, and transferred the residential care of children to NGOs and corporate residential care providers, creating a profitable industry. There is now a clear economic incentive to remove children from their families and place them in out-of-home care.

In 2016, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "Four Corners" program revealed aspects of this process. It reported that one company, Premier Youthworks, with a revenue of around \$20 million in 2015, was paid between \$550 and \$1,700 per child per day to house and "care" for approximately 80 children. As a proprietary limited company, it was under no obligation to report its profits.

Nationally, there have been over 40 official inquiries into child protection and care provision over the past two decades. Yet the crisis has only worsened. The brutal conditions exposed in state-run institutions have been replaced with a model where similar conditions exist behind the doors of smaller facilities, run by private providers. A multi-billion-dollar government-funded industry profits from placing children into residential care, with little or no transparency to assess the quality of the services provided.

In 2015, the New South Wales state government commissioned an "Independent Review Of Out Of Home Care," which was not made public until this year. It said the number of children in out-of-home care in that state had doubled between 2006 and 2016, a rate far greater than the population growth of children and young people.

The previously-buried report concluded that the system was "ineffective and unsustainable, not client centred." Expenditure was "crisis driven and not aligned to an evidence base" and "failing to improve long-term outcomes for children and families with complex needs." Almost three quarters of cases of suspected abuse or neglect reported to Family and

Community Services (FACs) were closed without investigation, even where the risk of serious harm was "high" or "extremely high."

The review also reported that the average cost per child of out-of-home care had more than doubled since 2012, when the state government began to shift programs to NGOs. It said 60 percent of children in out-of-home care were placed with NGOs and they were staying there longer because the bulk of funding was paid to NGOs "instead of addressing family needs earlier." Despite this, the state government is seeking to transfer all children's out-of-home care services to the private sector by 2022.

Child protection departments across the country remain understaffed and unable to cope with the number of cases reported to them. Lack of resources has increasingly led to the ditching of any pretence of addressing the underlying family crises that lead to state intervention. Instead, children are simply removed and offloaded to private "care providers."

Ten years ago, the last federal Labor government offered a phony apology to the "Stolen Generations" of indigenous children who were taken from their families, shattering their lives. Today new "Stolen Generations" are being created of both Aboriginal and non-indigenous children.

Governments, state and federal, Labor and Liberal-National alike, are divesting themselves of any responsibility for community and family support. At the same time, vulnerable children have been reduced to an economic commodity, worth thousands of dollars a day to NGOs and business operators.



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