

# A Longitudinal Study of Children Reported to the Child Protection Department in Western Australia.

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## Abstract

This study of management information provides data on all reports, investigations and findings of maltreatment of children in Western Australia from their birth in 1990 or 1991 until their eighteenth birthday. It provides prevalence rates of children being reported, investigated and found to have been maltreated. A study of more recent cohorts shows trends in recent years. A key finding is that over 13% of all children born in 1990 and 1991 were reported before reaching the age of eighteen although 71% of them were not found to have been maltreated. International data suggests this rate of 1 in 8 children being reported may be equalled or exceeded in countries with an Anglo-American forensic child protection system. There was also a disturbing increase in reports of Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders in recent cohorts with an estimate that almost half of those born in 2004 had been reported before their fifth birthday. These findings add further evidence to the need for social work to address and severely limit investigative approaches. In this way social workers will provide support rather than continuing practices involving high rates of surveillance and a focus on parental blame.

**Keywords** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, Australia, Child Maltreatment, Child Protection, Longitudinal, Prevalence of abuse

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## **Introduction**

This paper provides a study of children born in 1990 and 1991 and reported to the Western Australian (WA) statutory authority at any time before their eighteenth birthday. It provides rates with which this cohort of children was the subject of reports of concerns about the care of children and allegations of maltreatment (henceforth reports), investigations and some information about the forms and nature of maltreatment. As a longitudinal study it identifies the prevalence rate of a child being referred and the extent of individual children's involvement in the child protection system through their lifetime. It also highlights the significance of Aboriginal cultural heritage as a demographic feature of both reporting and substantiation rates in this jurisdiction and looks at more recent trends in reporting rates.

Most child protection statistics are limited to data on reports of suspected maltreatment and substantiations on an annual basis and seldom have data on the type of harm children have suffered other than a categorization of a type of maltreatment. In Western Australia more detailed data has been collected which allows analysis of all child maltreatment and child concern reports in the twenty year period between 1990 and 2009. This paper is one of a series analysing this data and the innovations and changes that have taken place in Western Australian child protection.

## **Background**

In Australia, statutory child protection is the responsibility of the eight state or territory governments each of which have their own relevant legislation. WA is geographically the largest of these with a population of 2.5 million, 3.8 % of which are Indigenous (ABS, 2012). All Australian jurisdictions were heavily influenced by child welfare programmes in the United States that had their origin in the 1970s (Thorpe, 1994). In so doing, they developed legislative frameworks and practices that have been subject to on-going investigation, inquiries and critique since that time (Lonne et al.,2009). The

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history of colonial oppression and more recent forced removal of Aboriginal children which was official government policy until 1969, along with extreme levels of disadvantage provide the backdrop against which the continuing over-representation of children in the child protection and out of home care system are seen with mistrust by Aboriginal people (Ivec, Braithwaite and Harris, 2012). There is growing awareness of these issues and their implications for the welfare of children including Prime Minister Rudd's formal apology for the "Stolen Generations" in 2008. There have been a number of interventions aimed at reducing Aboriginal disadvantage and protecting Aboriginal children (e.g. NSW Department of Family and Community Services, 2012). Whilst there may be some positive outcomes in relation to these interventions, there is also a strong critique emerging suggesting the major outcome has been that of increased policing and surveillance (Ivec, Braithwaite and Harris, 2012; Briskman, 2008)

Concerns about escalating number of reports in WA during the late 1980s led to the first major analyses by Cant and Downie (1994) and Thorpe (1994) contributing to the first of three significant policy changes to child protection in WA between 1990 and 2009. The first, in 1995, aimed at differentiating allegations of child maltreatment from concerns about children and families thus emphasising a family focused rather than forensic response by social workers to the latter. Bromfield and Holzer (2008:65) acknowledge the significance of this now "long-standing emphasis on diverting children and families from the child protection system" to explain "the comparatively lower rate of notifications in WA compared to other jurisdictions" in Australia.

The second change was the Children and Community Services Act 2004 which came into effect in March 2006. Under this Act information which raises concerns about the wellbeing of a child is screened and an investigation may be conducted to ascertain whether a child

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protection investigation or family support assessment is required (AIHW, 2012). The introduction of mandatory reporting for child sexual abuse in January 2009 constituted the third change.

### **Other child protection data**

All states contribute to a national child protection data base that provides “detailed statistical information on state and territory child protection and support services and some of the characteristics of the children receiving these services” (AIHW 2012: 10). Because the national data base aggregates annual data from all jurisdictions in comparison to the WA data base which holds additional longitudinal data, it is not possible to provide direct national comparisons for most of the analyses in this article. However, national statistics for 2010-11 (AIHW, 2012) do show that WA had the lowest rate of reports (15.8 compared to a national rate of 46.2 per thousand children) and substantiations (3.4 versus 6.1). WA also had the lowest rate of substantiations (17.3 versus 34.6) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (henceforth the term Aboriginal will be used) and non-Aboriginal children (1.4 versus 4.5). One explanation for these lower rates is mentioned above.

Gilbert *et al.*, (2012a) used data on WA in a comparison of six countries. They combined data from the child protection system with a number of other sources to consider variations in trends in physical abuse and neglect in reports and outcomes focussing on children younger than 11. Their conclusion from this rich use of different data sources (principally a combination of health and child protection data) was that:

*“Our results show no clear evidence for an overall decrease in child maltreatment despite decades of policies designed to achieve such reductions.” (Gilbert et al., 2012a: 770)*

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This controversial finding led to letters challenging their findings (Radford et al., 2012; Finkelhor and Jones, 2012) which were then robustly defended (Gilbert et al. 2012b). This issue of whether child protection systems reduce harms to children is significant given the costs of child protection systems and the level of surveillance of family life by these systems.

The Public Health Agency of Canada (2010) carried out large sample studies of the incidence of investigated child maltreatment and neglect. There were 39.16 investigations per thousand children in 2008. Just over 14 per thousand were substantiated and for a further 2.00 per thousand workers felt there was a risk of future maltreatment. Only 1% of investigations involved physical harm requiring treatment and there was a further 2% where treatment was not required. Workers, asked about mental or emotional harm through a series of questions, identified 17% of substantiated investigations (6% of investigations) as showing severe enough emotional harm to require treatment and emotional harm not requiring treatment in a further 12% of substantiated investigations (4% of investigations). Thus at least 87% of investigations were unsubstantiated or workers identified no physical or emotional harm. Analysis focussing on the over-representation of Aboriginal children in Canada (Sinha et al., 2011) found 140.6 investigations per thousand Aboriginal children, 4.2 times the rate of 33.5 for non-Aboriginals. There was a higher proportion of substantiated investigations (58% compared to 47%) in Aboriginal investigations leading to a rate of 49.69 substantiated investigations per thousand Aboriginal children. As in Australia, Aboriginal children in Canada were far more likely to be referred for neglect.

Other studies aiming to identify the causes of over-representation of minorities in child protection suggest it overlaps with issues of social exclusion, poverty as well as the attitudes and beliefs of workers (Drake et al., 2011; Rivaux et al., 2008; Stokes and Schmidt, 2011). There have been specific criticisms of what Higgins (2010:1) referred to as “adversarial risk

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management-driven/forensic systems that do not support families in need” and calls for a new approach based on prevention and diverting all but the highest risk cases (Jordan and Sketchley, 2009; Council of Australian Governments, 2009).

### **Longitudinal cohort studies**

There are few longitudinal cohort studies of child protection systems. Delfabbro et al. (2010) studied 4,410 children born in South Australia during 1991 finding that between 57% and 76% of the 446 Aboriginal children and 22.5% of the whole birth cohort was reported before their 16<sup>th</sup> birthday. This rate of reports on Aboriginal children was increasing and over 50% of those born in 2002 were referred before the age of four. However it should be noted that referral frequently represents concerns about the care of a child but is not synonymous with a finding that maltreatment has taken place as will be shown in this paper.

In Ohio Sabol et al. (2004) used a life table methodology creating a synthetic cohort of children from birth to ten estimating that 11.8% of white children and 33.4% of African American children would have “substantiated or indicated child abuse or neglect reports” (indicated reports have some believable evidence that the report was true). In the UK Sidebotham, Heron and Golding (2002) studied a voluntarily enrolled cohort of 85-90% of children born in 1991-2 in Avon finding 2.0% recorded as statutorily investigated before their 6<sup>th</sup> birthday and 0.8% placed on the child protection register.

### **Method**

This study analyses data from the WA Child Protection Department’s information system covering all reports of child maltreatment and concerns about the wellbeing of children between 1990 and 2009 and the actions taken. The study was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Western Australia.

## **The Sample**

The study focusses on children born between 01/01/1990 and 31/12/1991, a cohort that provides data on all reports commencing before reaching 18. Analyses are also made of cohorts of children born in calendar years 1990 to 2008.

## **Key elements of data collected**

Prior to 1995 all reported concerns about children were investigated. Under the policy from 1995 to 2006 and the legislation thereafter a decision was made by the social worker in conjunction with a senior officer about whether there was an indication that the child has been harmed or is at risk of being harm through maltreatment leading to either an investigation or where there was no indication of harm or risk of harm to an assessment to clarify the nature of the concern and services required. Each investigation concluded whether or not maltreatment was substantiated and this result was recorded along with the worker's view of the nature of maltreatment and the harm that the child had suffered. The definitions of maltreatment used in the agency were:

- Physical maltreatment describes significant physical harm or injury experienced by a child as the result of severe and/or persistent actions or inactions on the part of the child's care giver.
- Emotional maltreatment describes significant impairment of a child's social, emotional, cognitive, intellectual development, and/or disturbance of the child's behaviour, resulting from behaviours such as persistent hostility, rejection or scapegoating.



- Sexual maltreatment occurs when a child has been exposed or subjected to sexual behaviours or acts which are exploitative and/or inappropriate to his or her age or developmental level.
- Neglect is experienced by a child when he or she does not receive adequate food, shelter, medical attention or supervision, to such a severe and/or persistent extent that his or her development is or is likely to be significantly damaged or injury occurs, or is likely to occur. This definition also includes emotional and educational neglect as well as failure to thrive.

### **Cultural Heritage**

Children are recorded as being Aboriginal where the social worker noted that one or both parents identify as Aboriginal. 10.2% of all reports on 14.6% of children had missing values though missing data was less likely on substantiated report (5.1% on 6.4% of children). Two approaches are used to analyse this data. The first creates an *estimated rate* to allocate missing values on the basis of their proportions in the relevant population using the formula:  $\text{No. Aboriginals} + (\text{No. unrecorded} * \text{No. Aboriginal}) / (\text{No. Aboriginal} + \text{No. non Aboriginal})$ . The second calculates the rate if all the unrecorded data is of non-Aboriginal children giving the minimum proportion of Aboriginal children.

The population data on Aboriginal children in WA used to calculate these rates were provided by the Epidemiology and GIS Branch at the Department of Health in WA and the population data for all children are from the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

### **Limitations of the study**

The study is limited to those reported to the statutory authority and subject of official scrutiny (see Bromfield and Higgins, 2004). In the 20 year period of the study there have been

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changes in policy, practice, legislation, and thresholds. Thus, for example, increases or reductions in the rate of findings of maltreatment do not necessarily imply changes in the behaviour of families and may also represent changes in the actions of practitioners and managers.

## **Findings**

This section considers the findings on children born in 1990 and 1991 giving overall figures on reports, investigations and substantiations before focussing on specific issues raised by the data. It then considers changes in the rate of reports and substantiated maltreatment for later birth cohorts of children.

### **Reports, investigations and substantiations**

Diagram 1 shows the routes through the child protection system. There were 13,828 reports, an average of two reports per child (2.06), and more than one in eight children (13.3%) were reported. Table 1 shows that the majority (59.1%) were reported once. A small group of 194 (2.8%) children were reported eight or more times and these children account for 9.2% of all reports.

Over half of all reports were made on children aged under eight (56.5%). Half of the children reported received their first report before their sixth birthday (50.9%) and almost three-quarters before they reached the age of ten (74.5%). Eighty two (1.2%) children had their first report at the age of 17. Differences depending on gender and heritage are discussed in later sections.

*Table 1 Total number of reports on each child (N=6,726) before the age of 18 and whether the child ever had a substantiated episode*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8 or more
Number of children	3978	1221	575	337	182	128	111	194
Proportion of children	59.1%	18.2%	0.85%	0.5%	0.3%	0.2%	0.2%	0.3%
% never substantiated	82.3%	70.8%	57.4%	50.7%	43.4%	25.0%	25.2%	11.9%

Half of all reports were investigated (50.9%), a rate of 84.4 per thousand or almost one in 12 children. Most investigations related to suspected neglect (31.6%), physical maltreatment (32.6%) and sexual maltreatment (28.7%) with suspected emotional abuse accounting for 5.3%.

Only 37.6% of investigations were substantiated. Thus four out of five reports (80.9%) were not substantiated and 71.4% of children reported were never found to have been maltreated. Many children who were the subject of repeated reports never had a substantiated episode of maltreatment (Table 1). This challenges the assumption that children subject to multiple reports are necessarily the subject of maltreatment.

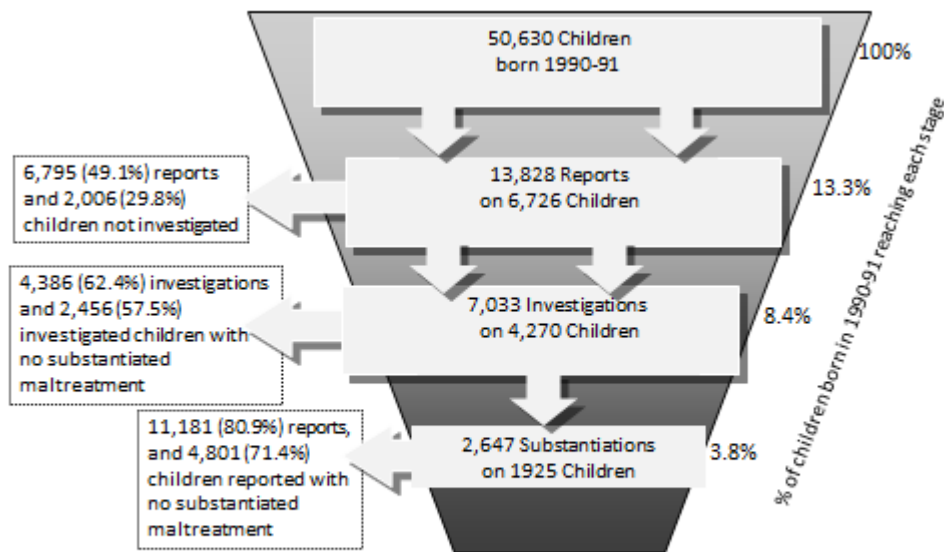


Figure 1 Routes through the Child Protection System of all children born in 1990 and 1991

The overall prevalence rate of substantiation for any type of maltreatment was 38.0 per thousand children. Table 2 shows that prevalence rates of substantiated physical maltreatment, sexual maltreatment and neglect were similar; while emotional maltreatment was substantially lower. Differences due to cultural heritage and gender are discussed below.

Table 2: Number of children ever substantiated for each type of maltreatment (N=1925) and prevalence rates per 1000 born 1990-91

	Female		Male		Total	
	Number	Rate/1000	Number	Rate/1000	Number	Rate/1000
Emotional	94	3.8	88	3.4	182	3.6
Neglect	325	13.2	335	12.9	661	13.1
Physical	336	13.7	374	14.4	710	14.0
Sexual	520	21.1	172	6.6	693	13.7
Any type of maltreatment	1090	44.3	833	32.0	1925	38.0

## **Harm and police action**

The level of harm associated with a substantiation of maltreatment varied from one child who died through to over 40% where workers recorded no discernible physical or emotional injury. There were some serious physical injuries including 12 who had a fractured skull and or brain damage, 51 scalds, burns or fractures and 79 with anal or vaginal trauma or disease. In addition there were 66 occasions where a child had impaired development and 61 cases of avoidable illness. Even accounting for multiple substantiations, child protection workers recorded that for 38.9% of all children with a substantiated maltreatment they found no identifiable harm.

Police prosecuted 15.0% of cases and for a further 6.6% the outcome of police involvement was unknown. Police were not involved or did not prosecute at least 78.4% of all substantiated cases.

## **On-going involvement with families**

The length of time that the child's case remains open after the investigation gives an indication of whether any work is being carried out with the family by the statutory authority (at the very least there is no work on a closed case). Table 3 shows that 50.4% of all investigations were closed within four weeks of the investigation being completed. This includes 29.6% of those where maltreatment was substantiated and 62.9% of reports that were investigated but maltreatment was not substantiated. Cases were closed on two-thirds (63.4%) of all investigated reports within 13 weeks of investigation including 42.7% of substantiated cases. By 26 weeks 71.7% of all cases were closed including over half (53.7%) of substantiated cases.

*Table 3: Length of time case remained open following investigation (N=7,033)*

	0 to 3 weeks	4 to 13 weeks	13 to 26 weeks	27 to 52 weeks	Over 52 weeks	All
Not Substantiated	2760 62.9%	569 13.0%	295 6.7%	287 6.5%	475 10.8%	4386
Substantiated	783 29.6%	346 13.1%	291 11.0%	349 13.2%	878 33.2%	2647
All Investigations	3543 50.4%	915 13.0%	586 8.3%	636 9.0%	1353 19.2%	7033

### **Repeated Episodes of Substantiation**

There were 2,647 substantiations on 1,925 children. Just under a quarter (23.6%) of these children had more than one substantiated episode of maltreatment; 8.7% had three or more episodes and eighteen children (0.9%) had five to eight episodes. The pattern of repeated substantiations was almost identical for males and females.

Fifty seven of the re-substantiations were investigations that started alongside or during the previous investigation and mostly represent reports on linked episodes of maltreatment. Discounting these diagram 2 shows that one third of second substantiated episodes took place within a year of the start of the first substantiation and just over a half within two years.

For those re-substantiated, the time between the first substantiation and the start of the last substantiated investigation was under a year for 23.3% and for 39.1% it was under two years.

Almost two-thirds (65.9%) had their final re-substantiation within five years of the first.

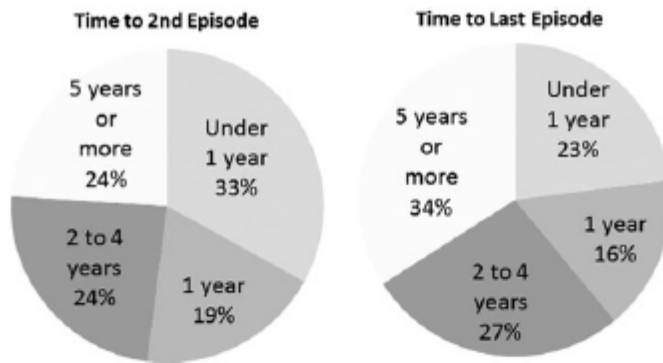


Figure 2 Number of years between 1st and second and 1st and last substantiated episode of Maltreatment

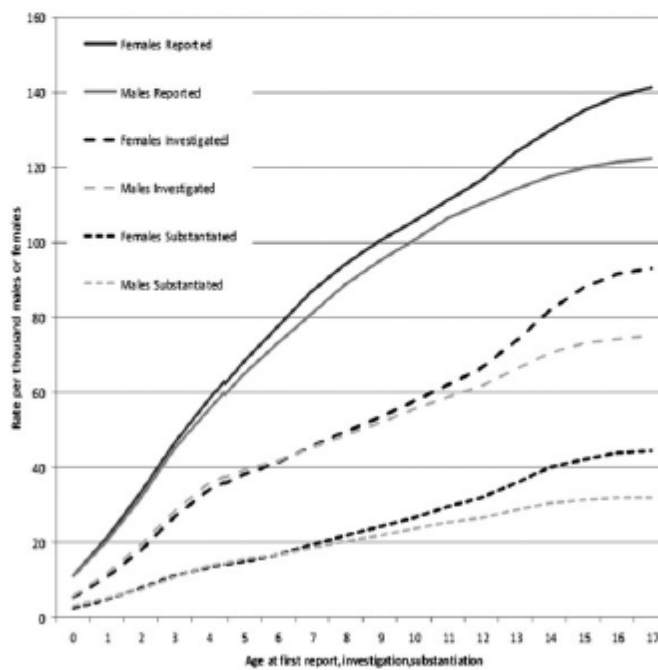


Figure 3 Rate per 1000 of Children Reaching a First Episode of Reports, Investigations and Substantiation by Gender and Age

The proportion of physical maltreatment and neglect substantiations changes little in the repeated substantiations while proportions of emotional maltreatment increase in later episodes and those of sexual maltreatment fall. This suggests that children are less likely to suffer sexual than other types of maltreatment in a second or later episode (a 38% reduction in the odds of sexual abuse in a second or later episode).

## Gender

By the age of 18, a higher rate of females had been subject of reports, investigations and found to have been maltreated than males (see diagram 3). Females had a 15.6% higher rate of reports per thousand (significant at  $p \leq .001$   $\chi^2 = 39.9$   $df = 1$ ); 24% higher rate of investigations (significant at  $p \leq .001$   $\chi^2 = 53.7$   $df = 1$ ); and 38.4% higher rate of substantiated maltreatment (significant at  $p \leq .001$   $\chi^2 = 52.1$   $df = 1$ ). These differences are associated with different types of reported concerns and substantiated maltreatment. Table 2 shows the number and rate of children ever substantiated for each category of abuse. There are no significant differences in rates of physical maltreatment, neglect, or emotional maltreatment but females were subject to 77.6% of all sexual maltreatment, over three times the rate for males ( $p \leq .001$   $\chi^2 = 197.7$   $df = 1$ ), a finding consistent with victimisation studies (e.g. Carmody and Carrington 2000; Cook, David and Grant. 2001). Diagram 4 shows higher numbers of females suffering sexual maltreatment at all ages above two years-old.

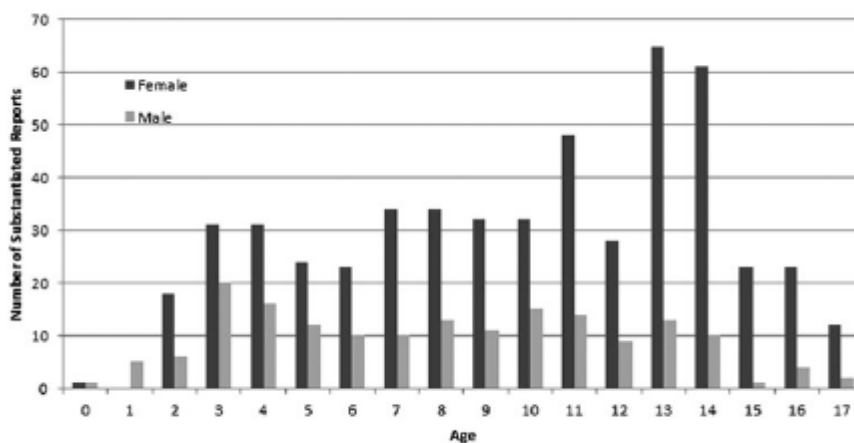


Figure 4 Number of Substantiated Reports of Sexual Maltreatment by Age and Gender

## Aboriginal Children

It has long been realised that Aboriginal children are over-represented in the child protection system and that the problems faced by Aboriginal children are complex (Al-Yaman and



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Higgins, 2012) and include those caused by previous welfare programmes which led to unjustified removal of many children from their communities. In this study 1,324 of the children reported were identified as being Aboriginal, 4,417 as non-Aboriginal and 985 whose ethnicity was unrecorded. Diagram 5 shows the routes through the child protection system and Table 4 shows the estimated and minimum prevalence rates of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children having ever been reported, investigated, substantiated or having a finding of each category of maltreatment. The table shows that at least 35.7% and an estimated 41.8% of Aboriginal children were reported compared to an estimated rate of 11.0% for those who are non-Aboriginal. The estimated risk of an Aboriginal child being referred was thus 3.8 times higher than a non-Aboriginal child. They were also 1.5 times more likely to have repeated reports with 21.6% having four or more reports compared with 14.1% of other Australians.

Aboriginal children are 5.3 times more likely to have had at least one investigated report with 28.9% of investigated compared to 6.9% of other Australians. There is little difference in the proportion of reports on Aboriginal children that were investigated (53.2%) to that for other Australian children (52.0%). However, 46.7% of investigations into Aboriginal children were substantiated compared to 35.7% for other Australian children. This and the higher rate of children investigated lead to 15.4% of Aboriginal children having had a substantiated report compared to 2.9% of others (a 5.3 times higher rate). Aboriginal children are more than nine times more likely to have had neglect substantiated than others.

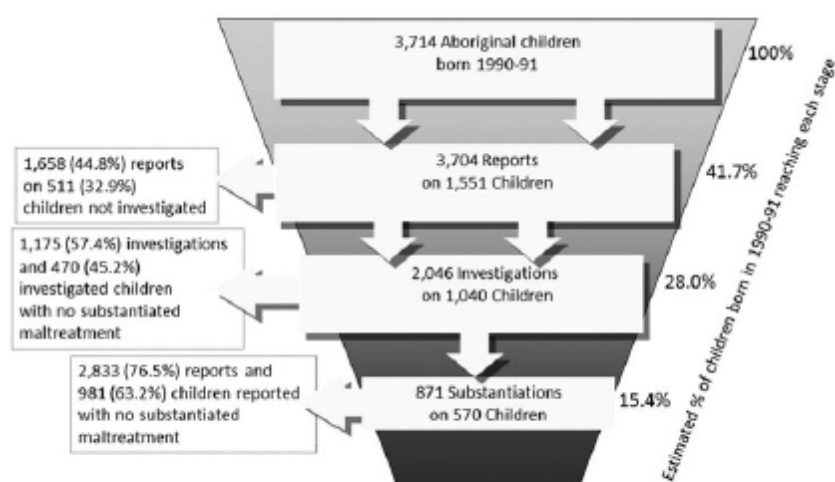


Figure 5 Routes through the Child Protection System for Aboriginal Children. Numbers given are estimates, see section on methods for details

Table 4: Estimated Numbers and Rates of Aboriginal and Other Australian Individuals ever reported, investigated or substantiated and prevalence rates of substantiated maltreatment.

Individuals	Other Australian	Aboriginal	Relative Risk
Reported	5175	1551	
Rate/1000	110.3	417.6	3.8
Range*	94.1 – 115.1	356.5 – 621.7	
Investigated	3230	1040	
Rate/1000	68.8	280.0	4.1
Range*	61.5 – 71.2	250.1 – 372.9	
Substantiated	1355	570	
Rate/1000	28.9	153.5	5.3
Range*	27.0 – 29.6	143.8 – 176.9	
Emotional	133	49	
Rate/1000	2.8	13.2	4.7
Range*	2.7 – 2.9	12.4 – 15.1	
Neglect	377	284	
Rate/1000	8.0	76.5	9.5
Range*	7.9 – 8.1	75.1 – 78.4	
Physical	508	202	
Rate/1000	10.8	54.4	5.0
Range*	10.2 – 11.1	51.4 – 62.2	
Sexual	530	163	
Rate/1000	11.3	43.9	3.9
Range*	10.2 – 11.6	39.8 – 57.4	

\*This shows the range from minimum rate /1000 children (where all missing data for cultural heritage is allocated to the other category) to the maximum (where all missing data for cultural heritage is allocated to this category).

### **Changes in rates of notification and substantiation over time**

Diagram 6 shows the rate of children per thousand born in each year from 1990 to 2008 who had been reported before reaching their 1<sup>st</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> birthday. It shows fairly constant proportions of children having been reported before their 5<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> birthdays over the period since 1990. The proportion of children under one referred has almost trebled rising from 1.0% of children born in 1990 to 2.8% of children born in 2008 with sharp increases from 1990 to 1993 and 2003 to 2007.

The estimated rate of Aboriginal children reported rose speedily for all age groups (Diagram 7) in contrast to that on non-Aboriginals (Diagram 8). Almost half of those born in 1999 were reported before they were 10 years old. The proportion of children referred before their 5<sup>th</sup> birthday more than doubled from 19.7% of those born in 1990 to 40.4% in 2004. These rates approach or exceed that achieved by the age of 18 for children born in 1990-91. Finally the rate of reports of Aboriginal children before their first birthday rose from 5.4% of those born in 1990 to 13.1% of those born in 2004 and further to 28.4% of those born in 2008, a more than five-fold increase since 1990. The increase since 2004 is accompanied by increases in other age groups. For example, an estimated 37.7% of children born in 2007 were already referred before their 2<sup>nd</sup> birthday – almost attaining the 42% of children born in 1990-91 referred before they were 18.

INSERT DIAGRAMS 6, 7 and 8 ABOUT HERE

There is thus an accelerating increase in the rate of Aboriginal children reported while the rate of non-Aboriginals have changed little. Table 5 shows these trends in more detail giving rates and the relative risk of Aboriginals being subject of reports, investigations, substantiation and harm compared to non-Aboriginals. The relative risk of reports etc. was between 9.2 and 12.7 times higher for children under 5 and from 19.7 to 21.8 times higher for

children under one. Most of the large increase in children substantiated before they were one was in those reported by social workers not to be harmed.

This increase in reporting, investigation and substantiation did not appear to lead to more support for children at least in terms of cases being open to workers. In the period from 2004 to 2008 when the biggest increases were seen, the rate per thousand of children under one who had a worker allocated for more than six weeks after the investigation or assessment fell slightly (from 14.7 in 2004 to 14.4 per thousand in 2008). It would appear that even if these increases were due to growing concerns about children, perhaps because of the greater awareness of the harm done by neglect (Dubowitz, 2007), this did not lead to increased on-going support from the statutory authority.

*Table 5: Estimated rate of children per 1000 born in relevant year who were reported, investigated, substantiated or harmed before their first or fifth birthday and relative risk of Aboriginals versus non-Aboriginals in each category*

	<b>Before the child's fifth birthday</b>					
	Non Aboriginal		Aboriginal		Relative Risk	
	1990	2004	1990	2004	1990	2004
Rate reported	45.9	42.7	197.2	404.1	4.3	9.5
Rate investigated	38.8	25.2	174.4	232.2	4.5	9.2
Rate substantiated	12.8	11.5	79.1	132.3	6.2	11.5
Rate harmed	6.9	5.7	45.2	58.3	6.6	10.2
Rate not harmed	5.9	5.8	33.8	73.7	5.7	12.7
	<b>Before the child's first birthday</b>					
	Non Aboriginal		Aboriginal		Relative Risk	
	1990	2008	1990	2008	1990	2008
Rate reported	7.0	14.4	54.0	283.6	7.7	19.7
Rate investigated	6.6	6.9	51.1	136.0	7.7	19.7
Rate substantiated	1.6	3.5	25.7	75.4	16.1	21.5
Rate harmed	1.0	1.1	15.3	24.0	15.3	21.8
Rate not harmed	0.6	2.4	10.4	51.4	17.3	21.4

## Discussion

The paper will now consider three important findings from this study first considering their likely applicability internationally before discussing their implications for social work:

### 1. Very high proportion of all children reported and investigated

More than one in every eight children born in WA in 1990-91 were reported and one in twelve investigated before reaching the age of eighteen. This is despite WA having the lowest annual rate of reports per thousand children in Australia due to its history of diverting children from the child protection system. This high level of monitoring of family life is lower than the 22.5% of all children reported in South Australia (Delfabbro et al., 2010). International comparisons can only be indicative due to varying definitions and lack of longitudinal studies. The WA rates are lower than those in Sabol et al.'s study (2004) in the United States (Diagram 7 allows comparison of a similar cohort of children born in 1999 followed to age 10). The rate of 2.1% statutorily investigated before age six found in Sidebotham and Golding's English study (2001) is lower than the 5.0% in WA. However the English data may have been affected by the voluntary enrolment of parents in the sample. A comparison of annual rates of reports and investigation can indicate whether similar longitudinal rates are likely to be found. The English statistics for 2011-12 showed 10.99 children per thousand were statutorily investigated - this is a strict criteria since many investigations take place without being recorded as section 47 statutory investigations (Thorpe et al., 2012). This is substantially higher than the rate of 8.4 in this data in 2009 indicating that, in recent years, average rates of investigations in England were higher than in WA. Similarly the Canadian study (PHAC, 2010) had higher rates of investigations (39.2) than in WA in the same year (9.1) and New Zealand statistics show higher rates of reports (53.5 -this figure uses notifications requiring further action – versus 18.4). These

international comparisons indicates that similar or higher prevalence rates for reports and investigations of all children may well be found in Australia, Canada, England, New Zealand and the USA. This suggests the need for cohort studies in other jurisdictions.

## 2. Prevalence rates of maltreatment and harm

1,925 children, a rate of 38.0 per thousand, were found at some time to have been maltreated (see Table 2 for types of maltreatment). Thus for 80.9% of reports and 71.4% of children reported no maltreatment was identified. Over 60% of substantiated maltreatment was associated with no identifiable injury, or cuts, bruises and welts and O'Donnell et al. (2010:143) found that in WA between 1990 and 2005, 96% of children reported and 93.6% of those substantiated did not have a maltreatment related hospital admission. Though there are no longitudinal figures for children investigated and found to be harmed and the methods of data collection differ, in Canada, annual figures for 2008 show that the estimated rate of all children physically harmed following substantiated maltreatment (1.17, PHAC 2010) was higher than in the WA data for the same year (1,00 per thousand). Some children had suffered emotionally harm (19.4% of substantiated investigations in WA and, in Canada, 17% severe enough to require treatment).

## 3. Worryingly high and accelerating rates of Aboriginal children involved in child protection

An estimated 41.8% of all Aboriginal children born in 1990 and 1991 were reported; 28.0% investigated; and 15.4% substantiated before reaching the age of 18 (see Table 4). This high rate was rapidly increasing such that for those born in 2004, 40.4% had been reported by the age of 5; 23.2% investigated and 13.2% substantiated. More recent trends show continuing increases with 28.4% of those born in 2008 being reported before their first birthday compared to only 5.4% of those born in 1990. This high rate and growing trend was also found in South Australia (Delfabbro et al. 2010). Comparisons with annual rates of referral of

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Aboriginal and first nation children in Canada (Sinha et al., 2011) and New Zealand (Ministry of Social Development 2012) also suggest that similar high longitudinal rates may be achieved in these countries.

### **Implications for social work**

This research shows the high level of surveillance of children in WA. International comparisons suggest that this is probably the case in other countries. Socioeconomic deprivation is a key factor of involvement in the child protection system as O'Donnell et al. (2010) found in WA. Bromfield *et al.* (2010: 13) conclude that in Australia: "the majority of families involved with child protection services were socially excluded." This means that certainly Aboriginal families, and probably other marginalised groups, will live in communities with very high concentrations (well above the 1 in 8 average) of families who at some point will be subject to surveillance due to reports and investigations. Whilst living with the burden of social exclusion these families will face the increased stress associated with involvement in child protection (Dale, 2004; Davies, 2011; Faller, 1985). Gilbert et al. (2012a) suggest there is little or no evidence of the child protection system reducing the overall levels of physical harm from abuse or neglect of younger children and, for the vast majority suffering from emotional harm, investigative and blaming approaches are unlikely to be a remedy (Wastell and White 2012). The cost of this approach is too high both in the material cost of funding investigations, most of which find nothing and, more importantly, the alienation of and harm to families and communities subjected to high levels of surveillance (Ivec et al. 2012).

This study reveals the extent of surveillance of all socially excluded children and, in Australia, the fast growing proportion of Aboriginals coming under official scrutiny which is maintaining more than one in twenty Aboriginal children in state care (AIHW 2012:28). This

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strengthens the case for a move away from Anglo-American forensic child protection systems (e.g. Hansen and Ainsworth, 2011; Harris 2011, Lonne et al., 2009; Parton, 2012). The forensic approach, with its focus on risk and allocating blame to parents, fails to address the long history of structural inequalities and oppression faced by so many of the families, especially Aboriginals, involved in child protection (Hansen and Ainsworth, 2011). Our concern is that the very understandable horror at the exceptional cases of children being murdered or seriously injured by their parents will continue to drive policy and practice down the forensic track (Hansen and Ainsworth, 2011; MacDonald and MacDonald, 2010). The alternative is not prevention or early intervention which Featherstone, Morris and White (2013) rightly identify as part of the forensic paradigm. Rather it is to genuinely engage with socially excluded communities; stand alongside them in combatting poverty and social exclusion (for example through taking a developmental social work approach; see Midgley & Conley, 2010 or Bilson and Larkins 2013); and work with them to develop appropriate methods of support for children and families. In the small proportion of cases where children are subject to serious harm, there is need for a system of formal investigation of crimes and we support Ivec et al.'s (2012) argument that restorative justice would have more integrity than the adversarial systems currently used in many English speaking countries. It is beyond the scope of this paper to assess the merits of different proposed approaches to social work such as social development (Midgley and Conley, 2010), community development (e.g. Higgins, 2010; Young et al. 2011) and family support through relationship based social work (Featherstone et al., 2013). However, given the long history of oppression of Aboriginal people and the part that social workers have played in this, any credible approach to Australian child protection must be developed in partnership with them.



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## **Conclusion**

This longitudinal study was possible because of the nature and stability of WA's information system. The key findings of high levels of surveillance of all children and very high and growing proportions of Aboriginal children coming under scrutiny combined with much lower levels of findings of maltreatment and significant harm highlight a severe over-reaction in the current system. The paper identifies the likelihood that this occurs in other countries with Anglo-American forensic child protection systems. This level of surveillance creates one more stressor on parents who, in the main, require our help rather than blame.

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