

# Executive Summary

---

The purpose of the audit is to bring together and disseminate information about Australian research projects in the fields of child protection and early intervention to prevent child abuse and neglect. In keeping with the aims of the audit of out-of-home care research (Cashmore and Ainsworth 2004), the specific aims of the current audit were to:

- identify child protection and early intervention research being conducted in Australia in the past decade;
- assess gaps and recognise duplication;
- enable Australian child protection research to be placed within an international context; and
- identify priorities for future research.

The aim of the audit was to identify all research that has been (or is being) conducted in Australia in the past 10 years in the field of child protection and early intervention. This audit was based on the same methodology as the audit of Australian out-of-home care research (Cashmore and Ainsworth 2004). It identifies the research areas that have been covered, and outlines the key messages emerging from this research as well as gaps and directions for future research.

Exclusion criteria were:

- evaluations of generic programs (e.g., family support) or health promotion strategies if the prevention of child abuse & neglect is not specifically targeted;
- non-evaluative program descriptions;
- tertiary/intervention research for adult victims; and
- out-of-home care research (an audit has already been conducted).

The level of response to the audit was lower than anticipated, with library searches identifying a number of publications and theses that would be relevant to the audit, but whose authors did not respond to the current audit. One of the factors that may have contributed to the low response rate for the audit was the perception of what constitutes 'research'. People may not identify their project as 'research', particularly case audits and program evaluations conducted by governments and non-government agencies responsible for service provision. Analysis of the 135 valid responses to the audit showed that all abuse types were covered. A key area of focus was policy analysis. Other priorities were abuse prevention programs for children, identification of risk factors, and attitudes to child abuse and neglect.

The research identified and reviewed in this audit was largely qualitative (that is, interviews, focus groups, etc.). Research objectives tended to be exploratory rather than theoretically based and confirmatory (that is, research was descriptive rather than testing any hypotheses or identifying underlying causal relationships). It appeared, based on the reliance on descriptive statistics, that quantitative research was also primarily non-experimental and tended to rely on categorical<sup>1</sup> rather than continuous data. There was a heavy reliance on existing case records for data.

---

1 *Categorical data* refers to data that is grouped into categories - for example, yes/no answers, gender, income band, or family type. *Continuous data* refer to data measured on a continuum with fixed interval and are able to be subjected to mathematical calculations (that is, addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, etc.) - for example, weight in kilograms, or number of children.

There are numerous types of research designs including case study, retrospective, cross-sectional, experimental, quasi-experimental, non-experimental and longitudinal designs. The study design impacts upon the accuracy of the research findings. Child maltreatment may occur at anytime in a child's development. Similarly, the consequences of maltreatment may manifest at any time throughout the lifespan of child maltreatment survivors. Longitudinal designs are recommended over cross-sectional and retrospective research designs, as they are able to demonstrate causal relationships. In this audit, projects tended to be cross-sectional and retrospective. There were few examples of longitudinal data being collected. The qualitative research generally appeared to use adequate sample size. However, there appeared to be an over-reliance on qualitative research designs in this field. This is problematic, as qualitative research alone does not provide an adequate evidence base that can be generalised. The strength of the research conducted was the breadth and diversity of areas covered.

The detailed project descriptions submitted by the 135 respondents to the audit suggest that Australian researchers investigating child maltreatment and child protection issues have relied heavily on notifications and substantiations of 'maltreatment' recorded by statutory child protection services as their source of data. Consistent with this trend, there was a heavy reliance on case records as a source of data. Research that investigated a single maltreatment sub-type or specific combination of sub-types tended to focus on child sexual abuse and family violence; there was a lack of research investigating issues specifically associated with child physical abuse, psychological maltreatment or neglect. Although there were one or two exceptions, generally there was a lack of research on specific cultural groups or cultural issues, particularly in Indigenous communities (where there were only two specifically targeted projects).

The audit has highlighted the low level of collaboration between institutions, and the overall low level of funding in child protection related research. The level of funding for child protection research projects identified in this audit is very small when compared with the overall cost of statutory service delivery (child protection and out-of-home care), and other child and family welfare services. There was also little focus on researching individuals or families who were in groups that were at a high-risk for abuse and neglect (for example, drug or alcohol dependent parents). This is problematic, given that this is an area where child abuse and neglect prevention efforts are most needed and are likely to have a more significant impact.

We hope that the results of this audit—together with the results of the audit of out-of-home care research by Cashmore and Ainsworth (2004)—will provide a valuable tool for answering questions about the latest research projects and findings being conducted in Australia. The prospect of wider public access to the audit results (in an on-line format of the database) could also be considered as a user-friendly way of encouraging access to the information.