

# Characteristics of parents involved in the Queensland child protection system

*Report 1: Demographic profile*

*February 2008*



## Introduction

This is the first report in a series of six that will provide a profile of parents involved in the Queensland child protection system. The aim is to provide an additional evidence base for developing policy and programs across the child protection system, from prevention and early intervention through to permanency planning.

The reports will look at the household environment and the characteristics of parents believed responsible for substantiated harm or risk of harm to their child.

This report provides a demographic profile of these households compared to the general Queensland population. Using information from the Integrated Client Management System (ICMS), the report provides an overview of:

- the types of households
- young parents, including teenage parents
- young households (at least one parent aged 21 or younger)
- Indigenous households (at least one person identifies as an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person)
- harm types occurring within the different households
- households with a child assessed as 'substantiated – child in need of protection'.

The remaining five reports will focus on:

- Report 2: Parental risk factors for abuse and neglect — such as substance abuse and domestic violence.
- Report 3: Profiles of parents who are resubstantiated for abuse or neglect.
- Report 4: Parental characteristics of children who have high levels of support needs and particular kinds of needs.
- Report 5: Disadvantaged areas and geographic differences in the prevalence of key risk factors.
- Report 6: Final report — summary of key findings from reports 1 to 5 and cross-analysis.

## Executive summary

Between April and June 2007, the Department recorded substantiations relating to 847 households where a parent was believed responsible. These households included 1,407 parents — 776 mothers and 631 fathers — involved in 1,564 substantiations. The following presents a demographic profile of these parents and households.

### Parent age

- The largest proportion of parents in the child protection system are aged 30–39 years (44 per cent of mothers and 42 per cent of fathers). The median age is 32 years for mothers and 34 years for fathers.
- The median age for these parents at the time of giving birth is slightly younger than that of the general population, by around 5 years on average.
- Just 6 per cent of mothers and 2 per cent of fathers in the system are teenagers. Prior research has shown there is a positive correlation between the teenage pregnancy rate in an area and the rate of notification in an area. Importantly, no evidence has been presented to suggest this is a causal connection. It is likely other factors linked to notifications are prevalent in areas that have high rates of teenagers giving birth.

### Household type

- Half of households include two biological parents, and a further one-quarter are step or blended households.
- Indigenous households (where at least one person identifies as an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person) are significantly over-represented in the child protection system (21 per cent compared to 3 per cent in the Queensland population) and are more likely to be single mother households.
- 10 per cent of households have at least one parent aged 21 years or younger.

## Substantiated types of harm recorded within households

- The types of harm are consistent across most households with emotional harm being the most prevalent, followed by physical harm. One exception is single mother households, where neglect is the most common type of harm.
- Neglect is more common in young households and Indigenous households compared to the average rate for other households.
- 45 per cent of households have multiple types of harm recorded.
- Fathers are more likely than mothers to be the person believed responsible for physical harm, emotional harm and sexual harm. Mothers are more likely to be assessed as responsible for neglect.

## Households with a child assessed as ‘substantiated – child in need of protection’

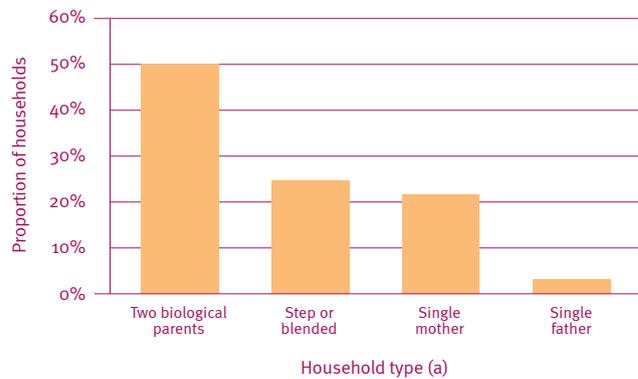
- Young households (55 per cent) and single parent households (50 per cent of single mothers and 44 per cent of single fathers) are more likely to be assessed as having a child in need of protection compared to other household types (39 per cent). That is, there is a higher propensity for children from these households to be assessed as vulnerable and in need of ongoing departmental intervention. These household types comprise 10 per cent and 25 per cent of all households with a substantiation (respectively).<sup>1</sup>
- Households with two biological parents comprise 50 per cent of households with a substantiation, and have the lowest rate of having a child assessed as in need of protection (35 per cent). This may indicate that they are assessed as having less risk factors or more protective factors than other households, which may reduce their need for ongoing intervention.

<sup>1</sup> Note: these categories are not mutually exclusive, as some households can be both a young household and a single parent household, and will therefore be counted in both categories.

<sup>2</sup> The households defined in this report can include parents who do not live in the household, but who have been included in the investigation and assessment process for the substantiation. In addition, it is not possible to compare the household types to the general population, as it does not take into account the parent/s relationship to other children in the household who were not substantiated.

## Key findings

**Figure 1: Households in the child protection system**

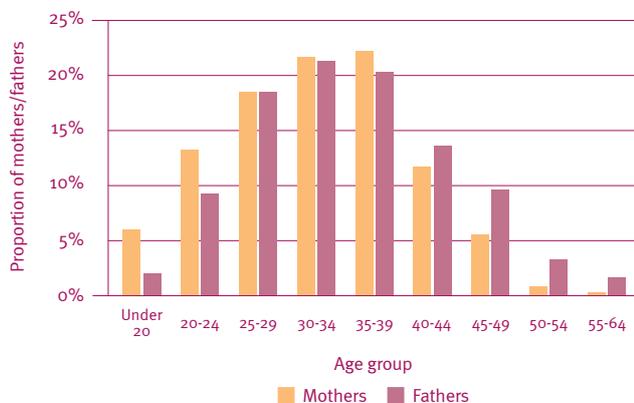


Source: Department of Child Safety

(a) Household types are not comparable to household types reported elsewhere by the Department, or to figures released by any other agency, including the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Population comparisons should not be made with these figures.

- For the purposes of this report, a household includes the substantiated children and the parents that were involved in the investigation of the alleged abuse or neglect, excluding other adults and other children who were not substantiated.
- It is not possible to determine the usual residents of the household from the central information system. This prevents comparison of these household types to the general population.<sup>2</sup>
- The figure shows that, of the 847 households with a substantiation, 426 (or 50 per cent) have two biological parents.
- Step / blended households represent 25 per cent – this includes a biological parent and their partner (step) and households with children from different relationships (blended).
- More than half of the step / blended households (125 or 15 per cent of all households) are a biological mother and her partner.

**Figure 2: Age profile of parents at the time of substantiation**



Source: Department of Child Safety  
Note: Only includes parents whose ages are known

### Parent age at the time of the substantiation

- The largest proportion of parents (44 per cent of mothers and 42 per cent of fathers) in the child protection system are aged 30–39 years.
- The median age of parents is 32 years for mothers and 34 years for fathers. This is reasonably consistent across household types.<sup>3</sup>
- 6 per cent of mothers and 2 per cent of fathers are teenagers.
- 18 per cent of mothers and 28 per cent of fathers are aged 40 years or older.
- Indigenous parents are younger, with a median age of 30 years for mothers and 33 years for fathers. This is in keeping with the younger age structure of the Indigenous population in Queensland.<sup>4</sup>

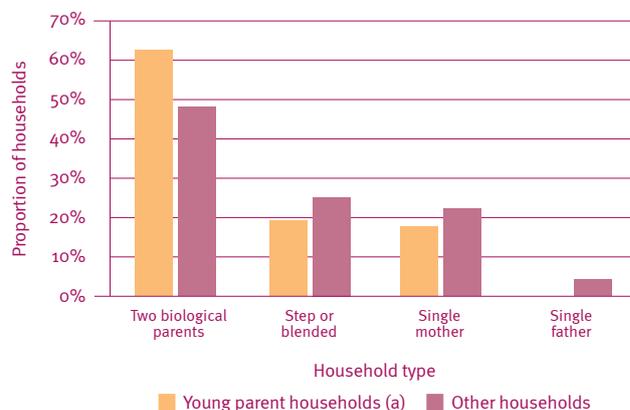
### Parent age at the time of giving birth to their child who was substantiated

- On average, parents in the child protection system were around 5 years younger than the median age for all parents at the time of giving birth.
- For Queensland parents who gave birth in 2006, the median age was 30 years for mothers and 32 years for fathers.

### Teenage parents

- Of the parents in the child protection system, 11 per cent of mothers and 4 per cent of fathers are teenage parents.<sup>5</sup>
- Teenagers do not constitute a large proportion of parents in Queensland (5 per cent of mothers who gave birth in 2006 were teenagers at the time of the birth and 2 per cent of fathers who became parents in 2006 were teenagers at the time of the birth). This indicates teenage parents are over-represented in the child protection system to a certain degree; however they make up a relatively small number of the total parents substantiated.
- Prior research has shown there is a positive correlation between the teenage pregnancy rate in an area and the rate of notification in an area.
- Importantly, no evidence has been presented to suggest this is a causal connection. It is likely other factors linked to notifications are prevalent in areas that have high rates of teenagers giving birth.

**Figure 3: Young households compared to other households in the child protection system**



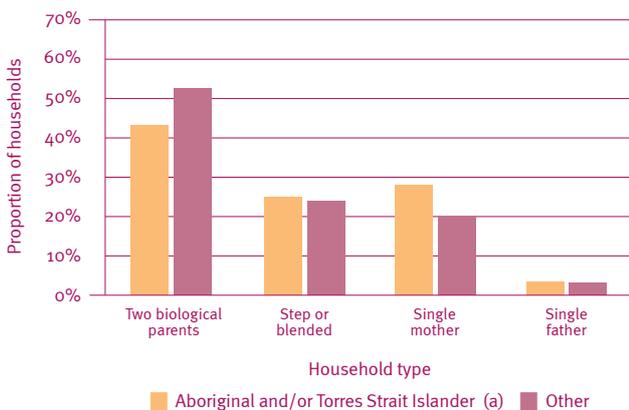
Source: Department of Child Safety  
(a) Household where at least one parent is 21 years or younger are classified as “young parent households”

- Of the 847 households, 88 or 10 per cent are young households (with at least one parent aged 21 or younger at the time of substantiation).

<sup>3</sup> One notable exception was single fathers who had a median age of 42. This was, however, based on a relatively small group (27 households representing 3 per cent of all households).  
<sup>4</sup> The median age of Indigenous mothers was 25 years, compared with the average of 30 years for all women in Queensland who gave birth in 2006.  
<sup>5</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics figures for all births in Queensland present the age of parents who gave birth in 2006 – that is, parent age at the time of their most recent birth. The same approach has been taken to look at teenage parents in the child protection system (at the time of their most recent birth). While the average age of parents does vary slightly from year to year, the variation is slight enough for a comparison of this figure with the Australian Bureau of Statistics figure to be valid.

- Young households are more likely to be formed with two biological parents (63 per cent), compared to 49 per cent for other households in the child protection system.
- There is no data available at this time to compare the proportion of households with a parent aged 21 or younger with that of the Queensland population.

**Figure 4: Indigenous households compared to other households in the child protection system**



Source: Department of Child Safety  
(a) Household where at least one person identifies as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander

## Indigenous parents

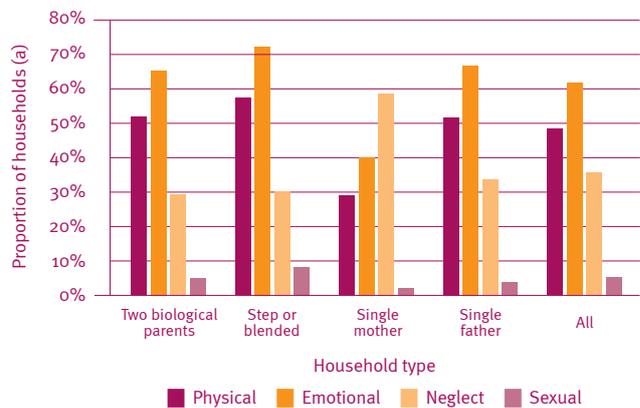
- 15 per cent of mothers and 11 per cent of fathers in the child protection system are Indigenous. This is higher than the level of Indigenous representation in the Queensland adult population, at less than 5 per cent.

## Indigenous households

- 178 households (or 21 per cent of the 847 households) have at least one Indigenous person as a household member.
- Indigenous households are significantly over-represented in the child protection system, accounting for 21 per cent of households compared to 3 per cent in the Queensland population.<sup>6</sup>
- More Indigenous households are single mother households (28 per cent) compared to other households (20 per cent). This may be due to demographic differences in the general population — Indigenous families in

Queensland are more likely to be single parent families (30 per cent compared to 16 per cent for other families).<sup>7</sup>

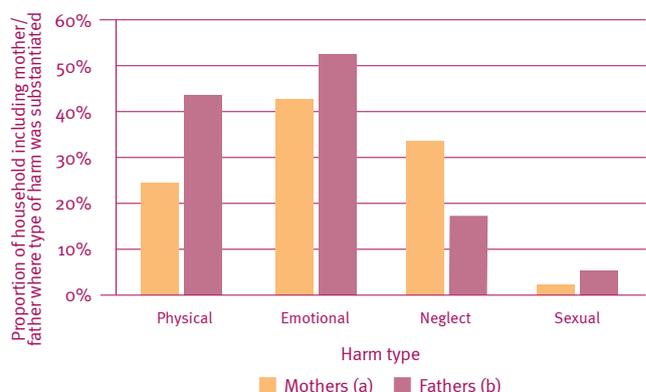
**Figure 5: Harm types recorded within households**



Source: Department of Child Safety  
(a) Household is deemed substantiated where one or more subject children are substantiated.  
Note: As multiple types of harm occur within households, figures do not add to 100 per cent.

- The pattern of harm types is consistent across most households, with emotional harm being most prevalent, followed by physical harm.
- The exception is single mother households, where neglect is the most common harm type (59 per cent), and at a rate much higher than the average for all households (36 per cent).
- 45 per cent of households have multiple harm types recorded.

**Figure 6: Harm types recorded for mothers compared to fathers**

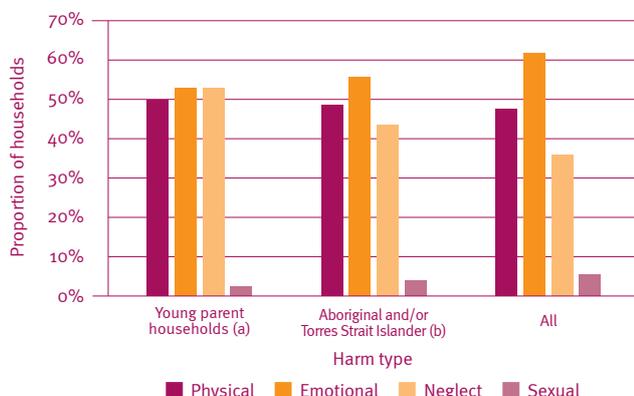


Source: Department of Child Safety  
(a) Figures are expressed as a proportion of households that included a mother  
(b) Figures are expressed as a proportion of households that included a father  
Note: As multiple types of harm occur within households, figures do not add to 100 per cent.

<sup>6</sup> 2001 Census data reported in Department of Local Government, Planning, Sports and Recreation (2006) Queensland's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Population.  
<sup>7</sup> 2001 Census data reported in Department of Local Government, Planning, Sports and Recreation (2006) Queensland's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Population.

- Fathers are more likely than mothers to be the person believed responsible for:
  - physical harm (43 per cent of households with a father compared to 24 per cent of households that include a mother),
  - emotional harm (53 per cent compared to 43 per cent), and
  - sexual harm (5 per cent compared to 1 per cent).
- Mothers are more likely to be assessed as responsible for neglect (34 per cent of mothers compared to 16 per cent of fathers).

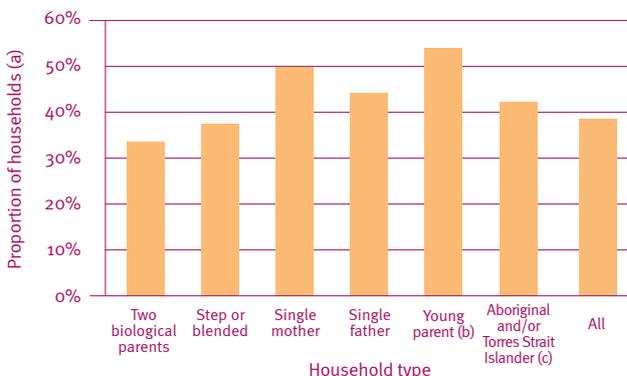
**Figure 7: Harm types recorded within young and Indigenous households**



Source: Department of Child Safety  
 (a) Households where at least one parent is 21 years or younger are classified as “young parent households”  
 (b) Households where at least one person identifies as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander  
 Note: As multiple types of harm occur within households, figures do not add to 100 per cent.

- The pattern of harm types for young households and Indigenous households are similar.
- Neglect is more common in both young households (52 per cent) and Indigenous households (43 per cent), compared to the average of 36 per cent for all households.
- While Indigenous households also tend to be young households, neglect still remains the most common type of harm for these households when this is taken into account.

**Figure 8: Households where a child was assessed as in need of protection**



Source: Department of Child Safety  
 (a) A household is deemed in need of protection where one or more children are assessed as in need of protection  
 (b) Households where at least one parent is 21 years or younger are deemed to be “young parent households”  
 (c) Households where at least one person identifies as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander  
 Note: Individual households may fall into more than one category.

- Of the 847 households with a substantiation recorded, 330 (or 39 per cent) have at least one child assessed as being in need of protection and therefore requiring ongoing departmental intervention.
- Young households (55 per cent) and single parent households (50 per cent of single mothers and 44 per cent of single fathers) are more likely to be assessed as having a child in need of protection, compared to the average of 39 per cent.
- The rate for Indigenous households (42 per cent) is slightly higher than the average.
- The rate is lowest for households with two biological parents (35 per cent), which may indicate they display fewer risk factors or more protective factors than other households, which may reduce their need for ongoing intervention.

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