

Characteristics of parents involved in the Queensland child protection system

*Report 3: History of contact
with the Department*

August 2008



Introduction

This is the third 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 look at the household environment and the characteristics of parents believed responsible for substantiated harm or risk of harm to their child.

The first report provided a demographic profile of parents and the households they formed. The second provided an overview of parental risk factors. This report provides a profile of parents who have a history of contact with the Department. Specifically, the report examines those households that have been involved in ongoing departmental intervention prior to the current substantiation.

Using information from the Integrated Client Management System (ICMS), the report looks at:

- the history of contact with the Department;
- the harm types substantiated;
- the prevalence of parental risk factors within households;
- households with multiple risk factors; and
- household types, young households (at least one parent aged 21 or younger) and Indigenous households (at least one person identifies as an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person).

The remaining three reports will focus on:

- Report 4: Characteristics of parents whose children have high levels of support needs and particular kinds of needs
- Report 5: Parents from 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 for harm or risk of harm to their child.

The first section of the report examines the history of contact these households have had with the Department. This information was obtained for 695 of the 847 households, based on the Family Risk Evaluation.¹

The second section of the report specifically examines the parental risk factors and characteristics of households who have a history of ongoing departmental intervention prior to the current substantiation (181 of the 695 households).

¹ The remaining households are not included as in the majority of cases the household has changed.

History of contact with the Department

Type of contact with the Department prior to the current substantiation

- One-quarter (26 per cent) or 181 of the 695 substantiated households have had a history of ongoing departmental intervention, prior to the current substantiation.
- 42 per cent or 292 of the 695 substantiated households have had at least one prior notification that did not lead to ongoing departmental intervention, prior to the current substantiation.
- For one-third (32 per cent) or 219 households, this is their first notification to the Department.

Harm types of the current substantiation

- Households substantiated for neglect are most likely to have a history of contact with the Department, with 39 per cent previously involved in ongoing intervention.

Households with a history of ongoing departmental intervention

Household types

- Indigenous households and single parent households are overrepresented amongst those with a history of ongoing intervention.
- 40 per cent of the substantiated Indigenous households have a history of ongoing departmental intervention compared to the average of 26 per cent.
- Two biological parent households are less likely to have a history of ongoing intervention.

Prevalence of parental risk factors

- The five parental risk factors are drug and alcohol abuse, two or more incidents of domestic violence within the past year, a primary parent has a current or previously diagnosed mental illness, a primary parent who was abused as a child, and a primary parent who has a criminal history.
- Each of these risk factors are more prevalent in households that have a history of ongoing departmental intervention than other households.
- The most common is current or previous drug/alcohol problems, at two-thirds (65 per cent) of households compared to the average of 47 per cent for all substantiated households.
- Nearly half (43 per cent) of households that have a history of ongoing departmental intervention have experienced two or more incidents of domestic violence within the past year. This is higher than the average of 35 per cent for all substantiated households.
- Households with a history of ongoing intervention are over one and a half times more likely than the average to have a primary parent who was abused or neglected as a child (43 per cent compared to the average of 25 per cent).

Multiple parental risk factors

- Households with a history of ongoing intervention are more likely to have multiple risk factors (66 per cent compared to the average of 44 per cent for all substantiated households).
- They are also more likely to progress to further ongoing intervention (68 per cent compared to the average of 40 per cent) as a result of their current substantiation where a child was assessed as being in need of protection.

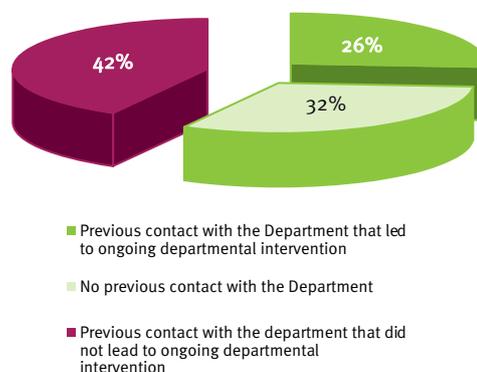
Key findings

Information about parental risk factors, prior notifications, and previous ongoing departmental intervention has been obtained for 695 (or 82 per cent) of the 847 substantiated households, based on the Family Risk Evaluation (FRE). The remaining 152 households have been excluded mostly because the parents recorded on the FRE are different to the parents responsible for the protection of the child at the time of the substantiated abuse or neglect. This can occur when the household membership changes leading up to, or during the investigation and assessment.

The Family Risk Evaluation (FRE) is completed for a household as part of the investigation and assessment phase. It is an important Structured Decision Making (SDM) tool for assessing the likelihood of future harm occurring within the family. The tool contains 23 items about children, parents and the household environment. For the purposes of this report, the five items from the FRE that relate to the characteristics of parents in a household have been selected for analysis along with the history of contact the household has had with the Department. These are:

- two or more incidents of domestic violence within the past year;
- one or both parents have or have had a drug and/or alcohol problem;
- primary parent has a criminal history;
- primary parent has a current or previously diagnosed mental illness;
- primary parent was abused or neglected as a child;
- prior notifications; and
- prior ongoing intervention.

Figure 1: History of contact with the Department

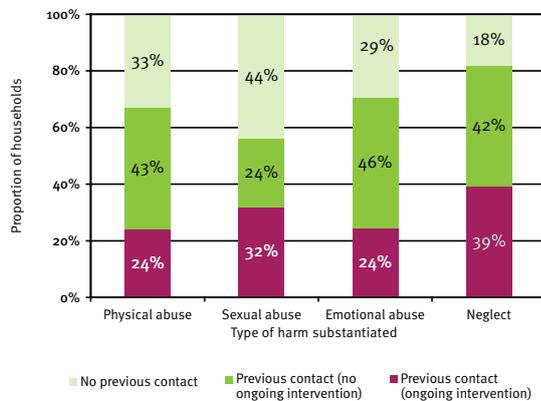


Source: Department of Child Safety

Note: History of contact refers to prior notifications that did not lead to ongoing departmental intervention and prior notifications that did lead to ongoing departmental intervention. For full definitions of contact history with the Department see glossary.

- One-quarter (26 per cent) or 181 of the 695 substantiated households have had a history of ongoing departmental intervention, prior to the current substantiation.
- 42 per cent or 292 of the 695 substantiated households have had at least one prior notification that did not lead to ongoing departmental intervention, prior to the current substantiation.
- For one-third (32 per cent) or 219 households, this is their first notification to the Department.
- It is important to note the proportion of households with a history of prior contact with the Department who come back to the Department's attention can be affected by circumstances outside the Department's control, including a change in family circumstances such as illness, unemployment, or a new partner. A cycle of contact with the Department is also more likely to occur if a family does not have access to the necessary support services it requires.

Figure 2: Harm types



Source: Department of Child Safety

Note: For full definitions of contact history with the Department see glossary.

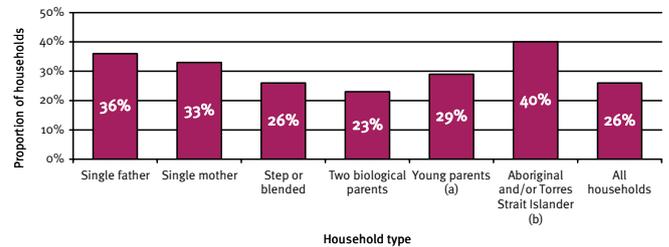
- Households now substantiated for neglect are the most likely to have a history of contact with the Department (81 per cent), with 39 per cent previously involved in ongoing departmental intervention and 42 per cent with a previous notification that did not lead to ongoing intervention.
- The households least likely to have a history of contact with the Department are those now substantiated for sexual abuse (56 per cent) – comprising 32 per cent with a history of ongoing intervention and 24 per cent with a previous notification that did not lead to ongoing intervention. This is, however, based on a relatively small group (5 per cent of all substantiated households).
- For all households, it is important to note that the harm type recorded now is not necessarily the same type of harm as recorded with the previous ongoing intervention. For example, in households substantiated for sexual abuse and which had prior contact with the Department, in 42 per cent of cases this was the first time sexual abuse was recorded.²

² A case study of all households substantiated for sexual abuse and which had a history of contact with the Department was conducted to provide further analysis.

Household types were similar to the Queensland average for all substantiated households with a history of contact with the Department - 75 per cent were two parent households (includes biological and step or blended households) compared to the average of 66 per cent.

For 42 per cent of households, this was the first time sexual abuse was recorded. For the remaining 58 per

Figure 3: Households with a history of ongoing intervention



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 an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person

Note: Individual households may fall into more than one category. For full definitions of contact history with the Department see glossary.

- The households most likely to have a history of ongoing departmental intervention are Indigenous households (at least one person identifies as an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person) and single parent households.
- 40 per cent of Indigenous households have a history of ongoing departmental intervention compared to the average of 26 per cent.
- One-third of single parent households – 36 per cent for single father households and 33 per cent for single mother households – have a history of ongoing intervention.
- Two biological parent households are less likely to have a history of ongoing departmental intervention, at 23 per cent compared to 26 per cent of all substantiated households.

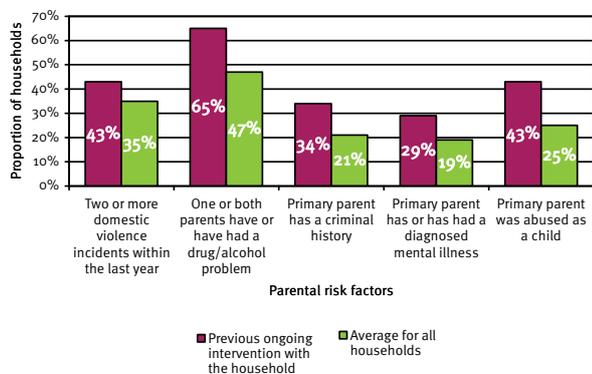
cent, there was a history of prior sexual abuse. Of this group, further examination did not reveal any single reason why these households had a history of incidents of sexual abuse.

The common risk factors and issues identified within these households were:

- sexual abuse perpetrated by the child’s sibling;
- a parent with a criminal history related to sex with a minor; and
- a parent previously substantiated for the sexual abuse of a child maintaining contact with that child.

Findings should be interpreted with caution due to the small number of households substantiated for sexual abuse in this study.

Figure 4: Prevalence of parental risk factors

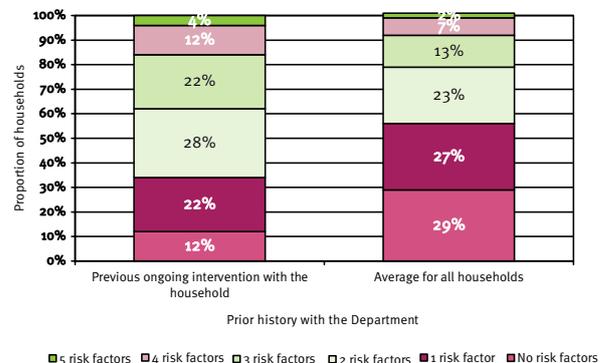


Source: Department of Child Safety

Note: As multiple risk factors may be present within each household, figures do not add to 100%. For full definitions of risk factors and contact history with the Department see glossary.

- Each of the five parental risk factors are more prevalent in households that have a history of ongoing departmental intervention than other households.
- Households that have a previous history of ongoing departmental intervention are more likely to have a primary parent who was abused as a child. At nearly half (43 per cent), this occurs at a rate one and a half times higher than the average for all substantiated households (25 per cent).
- For two-thirds of households, one or both parents have or have had a drug/alcohol problem (65 per cent), compared to the average of 47 per cent.
- 43 per cent of households have experienced two or more incidents of domestic violence in the past year. This is higher than the average of 35 per cent.

Figure 5: Number of parental risk factors



Source: Department of Child Safety

Note: For full definitions of contact history with the Department see glossary.

- The vast majority of households with a history of ongoing departmental intervention (88 per cent) display at least one of the five parental risk factors.
- Two-thirds (66 per cent) have multiple risk factors compared to the average of 44 per cent for all substantiated households.
- Households with a history of ongoing intervention are also more likely to progress to further ongoing departmental intervention, with 68 per cent now having a child assessed as ‘substantiated – child in need of protection’. The average is 39 per cent.
- This highlights the complexity of issues affecting these households and their potential need for a broad range of support services.

Glossary

Substantiation: An investigation and assessment will have a substantiated outcome when it is assessed that harm has been experienced by the child and/or there are identifiable risk factors that a child may be harmed in the future. Harm to a child or young person can be caused by physical, psychological or emotional abuse or neglect, or sexual abuse or exploitation.

History of contact with the Department (from Family Risk Evaluation)

Previous contact – ongoing intervention: Where the Department has provided ongoing intervention to the household prior to the current substantiation.

Previous contact – no ongoing intervention: Where the Department has recorded a notification relating to any adult member of the household prior to the current substantiation, and the household has not been involved in ongoing intervention.

No previous contact: Where the Department has not recorded a notification or provided ongoing intervention to the household prior to the current substantiation.

Parental risk factors at investigation (from Family Risk Evaluation)

Abuse history: Where the primary parent has a history of being abused or neglected as a child. Evidence of abuse includes credible statements by the primary parent or others. Information relating to the primary parent may also be obtained from departmental records, or from interstate/overseas child protection systems.

Mental health problem: Where the primary parent has or has had a mental health problem during the last 12 months and/or at any other time prior. This item only includes diagnosed mental health disorders (as per the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual), or instances where the primary parent has been repeatedly referred for psychological/mental health assessments, or recommended for treatment or hospitalisation by a psychiatrist or mental health authority. It specifically excludes drug and/or alcohol related conditions.

Drug and/or alcohol problem: Where one or more parents have or have had a drug and/or alcohol problem during the last 12 months and/or at any other time prior. This item only includes instances where the drug and/or alcohol abuse interferes with the parents' or family's functioning such as where family or marital relationships are disrupted, employment is affected or the parent has engaged in criminal activity or been arrested for driving under the influence in the last two years.

Criminal history: The primary parent has a criminal history as an adult or a juvenile. The primary parent has been charged with, or convicted of offences prior to the notification. This includes driving under the influence, but excludes all other traffic offences and non-criminal arrests (such as local law violations and arrests not leading to charges).

Domestic violence: Two or more instances of domestic violence in the household in the past year. This item includes all physical assaults, periods of intimidation, threats or harassment between parents, or between one parent and another adult in the home.

For further information about the Family Risk Evaluation please see the Department of Child Safety Practice Manual website <http://www.childsafety.qld.gov.au/practice-manual>



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