

# Characteristics of parents involved in the Queensland child protection system

*Report 5: Households by level of socio-economic disadvantage of the area they come from*

*2009*

## Introduction

This is the fifth report in a series of six that 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 previous four reports provided:

- Report 1: Demographic profile
- Report 2: Parental risk factors for abuse and neglect
- Report 3: History of contact with the Department
- Report 4: Households with high needs children

This report provides an overview of the household environment and characteristics of parents believed responsible for substantiated harm or risk of harm to their child, with a focus on household differences by level of socio-economic disadvantage.

Using information from the Integrated Client Management System (ICMS) and the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) *Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage* (IRSD), the report is divided into two sections which look at:

- households in the child protection system by level of socio-economic disadvantage of the area they come from
- the characteristics and environment of households in the child protection system by level of socio-economic disadvantage of the area they come from.

The remaining report will focus on:

- 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. This report examines the parent characteristics and environment for 695 of the 847 households, based on the Family Risk Evaluation<sup>1</sup>. Using information from the Integrated Client Management System and Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage, the report examines:

- households in the child protection system by level of socio-economic disadvantage of the area they come from
- the characteristics and environment of households in the child protection system by level of socio-economic disadvantage of the area they come from.

Child Safety Officers assess a range of risk and protective factors to determine whether a child may have been harmed or is at risk of significant harm. Initial decisions to record a notification are supported by a screening tool which focuses on the child's experience of the alleged harm and the consequences of the situation for the child, rather than on any parental behaviour or environmental factors.

For those households who are notified and investigated, the Family Risk Evaluation tool is used to assess the risk of future abuse and neglect to the child. The elements assessed in the Family Risk Evaluation include characteristics of the children living in the household (such as any behavioural problems or disability), parental characteristics (such as domestic violence, mental health issues, and substance abuse), prior contact with the department, as well as housing issues (such as homelessness).

It is important to note that level of socio-economic disadvantage is not a factor in either of these decision tools. That is, the level of disadvantage of the area a household is from is not a factor in determining whether a child has been significantly harmed, or is at risk of significant harm.

<sup>1</sup> The remaining households were not included as, in the majority of cases, the household composition had changed leading up to or during the investigation and assessment.

## Disadvantaged areas

- For the purposes of this report, the ABS IRSD was used to look at the relative level of socio-economic disadvantage of areas across Queensland.
- The index is a general socio-economic index that summarises a wide range of information about the economic and social resources of households within an area.
- A low score indicates relatively greater disadvantage, where a high score indicates a relative lack of disadvantage.

## Key Findings

### Where our families are from

- Substantiated households were over-represented in areas experiencing relatively greater socio-economic disadvantage.
- Of the 695 substantiated households, almost 40 per cent came from relatively more disadvantaged areas in Queensland, characterised by factors such as lower income, lower educational attainment, greater unemployment and more housing stress.
- This was not limited to any one location, with each departmental zone experiencing an over-representation of households from these areas.
- Substantiated households from relatively more disadvantaged areas were significantly over-represented in the Logan and Brisbane West zone (63 per cent compared to 29 per cent for all households with children), the Brisbane North and Sunshine Coast zone (31 per cent compared to 17 per cent for all households with children) and the Brisbane South and Gold Coast zone (14 per cent compared to 5 per cent for all households with children).
- The Child Safety Service Centres with the largest proportions of substantiated households from relatively more disadvantaged areas were: Cape York and Torres Strait, Maryborough, Ipswich North, Bundaberg, Forest Lake, Redcliffe, Toowoomba North, Inala, Gympie and Aitkenvale.

## Characteristics and household environment of substantiated households

### Prevalence of parental risk factors

- Substantiated households from relatively more disadvantaged areas were more likely to have experienced two or more domestic violence incidents within the last year (at 40 per cent) compared to substantiated households from relatively less disadvantaged areas (at 28 per cent).
- Substantiated households from these areas were also more likely to have had a primary parent who was abused as a child (at 30 per cent) compared to substantiated households from other areas (at 21 per cent).

### Child characteristics

- Approximately one in five substantiated households had at least one high needs child, regardless of the level of disadvantage.
- While there is no correlation between relative socio-economic disadvantage and the prevalence of children with high needs, the characteristics with which these children presented differed substantially.
- Substantiated households with high needs children from relatively more disadvantaged areas were more likely to have had at least one child with a significant developmental/physical disability or offending history, while substantiated households with high needs children from relatively less disadvantaged areas were twice as likely to have had one or more children with a mental health or behavioural problem.

### Household types

- Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander substantiated households were two times more likely to come from areas experiencing relatively higher levels of socio-economic disadvantage compared to relatively less disadvantaged areas (at 25 per cent compared to 12 per cent respectively).

## History of contact with the department prior to the current substantiation

- Substantiated households from relatively more disadvantaged areas were more likely to have had previous contact with the Department (71 per cent) compared to households from relatively less disadvantaged areas (63 per cent).
- Irrespective of relative socio-economic disadvantage, approximately two in five households had at least one prior notification that did not lead to ongoing departmental intervention. This cycle of contact with the Department may indicate that households could benefit from enhanced access to support services<sup>2</sup>.

## Key findings

Information about parental characteristics and the household environment 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 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.

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<sup>2</sup> It is important to note the proportion of households with a history of prior contact and that come back to the Department's attention can be affected by circumstances outside the Department's control. This may include, but is not limited to, a change in family circumstances such as illness or a new partner.

In addition to information from the FRE, the report focuses on household differences by level of socio-economic disadvantage, based on the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) *Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage* (IRSD).<sup>3</sup>

The IRSD is derived by the ABS from 2006 Census variables related to disadvantage, such as low income, low educational attainment, unemployment, and dwellings without motor vehicles.<sup>4</sup> Area level disadvantage depends on the socio-economic conditions of a community or neighbourhood as a whole.

The IRSD is ordinal and can be used to rank areas, but cannot be used to measure the size of the difference in socio-economic level between areas. For this report the IRSD was used to group areas into deciles as the basis for analysis, rather than using the individual index scores.

Using these deciles, substantiated households from relatively more disadvantaged areas and relatively less disadvantaged areas were examined. Substantiated households that fell near the mean IRSD score of 1000 (average disadvantaged areas) were excluded from the analysis. The distribution of index scores is shown in Table 1. This indicates that 60 per cent of households with children in the Queensland population fall into the relatively more and relatively less disadvantaged areas.

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<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that information selected to create the IRSD is chosen on the basis of association with relative disadvantage, rather than any assumption of cause and effect. For example, low income is selected because it is associated with relative disadvantage, not because it is either a 'cause' or an 'effect' of disadvantage. Other information is included because of an indirect association; this information acts as a proxy for important information that is not able to be captured using census data.

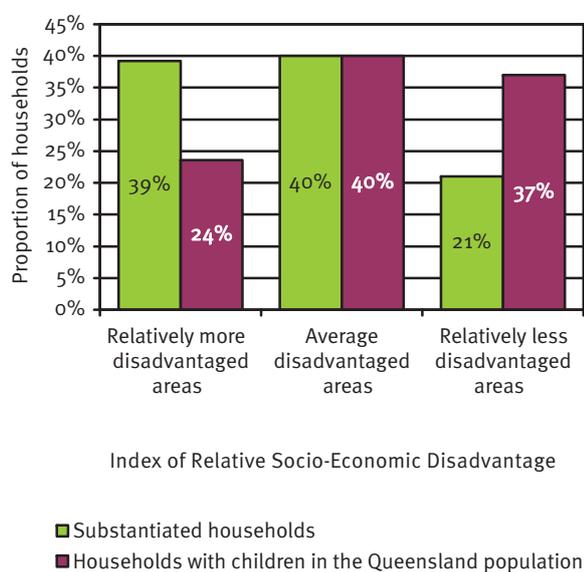
<sup>4</sup> See glossary for further details on the IRSD.

**Table 1: Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage distribution**

Level of socio-economic disadvantage for areas	Index decile	Range of Index scores	Proportion of Queensland households with children	
Relatively more disadvantage	1	479.6 to 962.75	24%	 Excluded from analysis
	2			
	3			
Average disadvantage	4	963.5 to 1036.3	40%	
	5			
	6			
	7			
Relatively less disadvantage	8	1036.7 to 1154.2	36%	
	9			
	10			

## Section 1 – Where our families are from

**Figure 1: Distribution of households by the Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage**



- Households in the Queensland child protection system came from a range of socio-economic environments, with a large proportion (40 per cent) from areas of average disadvantage. This is the same level as all households with children in the Queensland population.
- Substantiated households were over-represented in areas experiencing relatively greater socio-economic disadvantage.
- Almost 40 per cent of substantiated households came from relatively more disadvantaged areas in Queensland, compared to the average of 24 per cent for all households with children in the Queensland population.
- While one in five substantiated households came from relatively less disadvantaged areas (at 21 per cent), they are almost half as likely as all households with children in Queensland to have come from these areas (at 37 per cent).

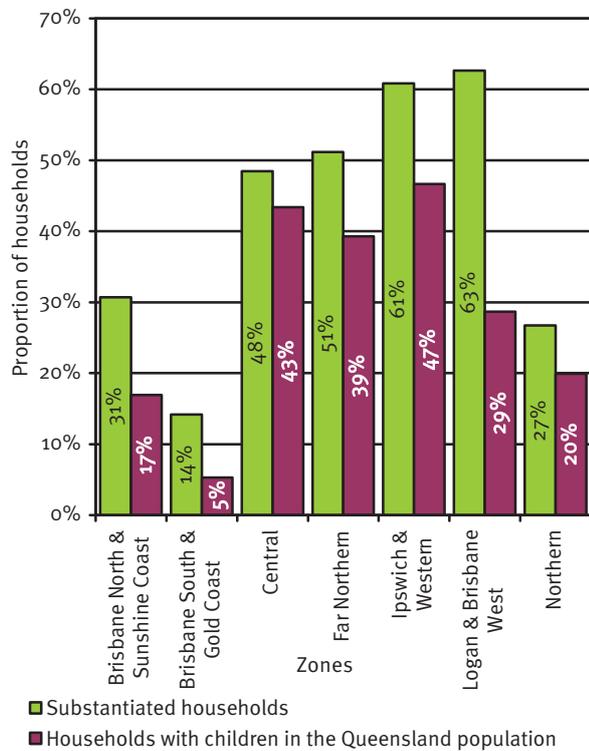
Source: Department of Communities

Note:

Figures may not add to 100 per cent due to rounding.

- A low score on this index indicates a high proportion of relatively disadvantaged people in an area. It cannot be concluded that an area with a very high score has a large proportion of relatively advantaged ('well off') people, as there are no variables in the index to indicate this. It can only be concluded that such an area has a relatively low incidence of disadvantage.
- Unknown households were excluded from the analysis.

**Figure 2: Distribution of households experiencing relatively higher levels of socio-economic disadvantage (a), by Zone**



Source: Department of Communities

Note:

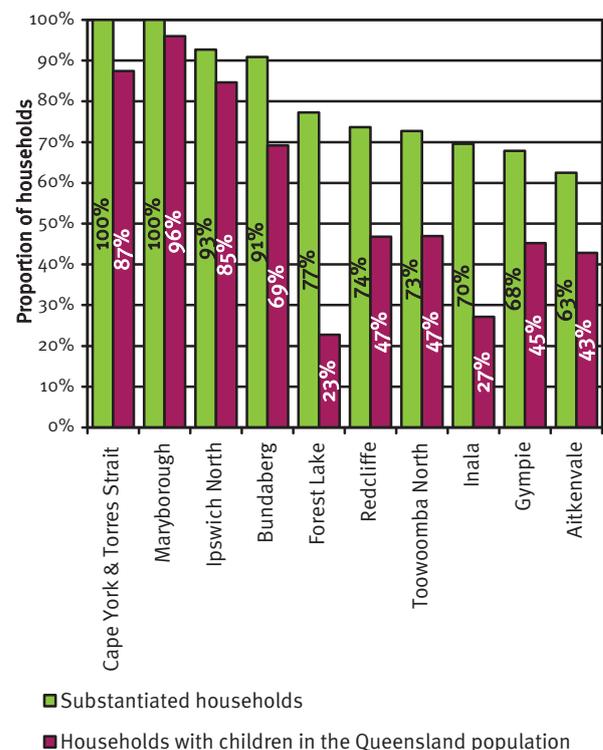
(a) Includes households in the bottom 3 deciles with an IRSD score of 479.6- 962.75.

(b) Unknown households were excluded from the analysis.

- When compared with the distribution of all Queensland households with children experiencing relatively higher levels of disadvantage, substantiated households were over-represented across each of the zones.
- This was not limited to any one location, with each departmental zone experiencing an over-representation of households from these areas.

- For example, 17 per cent of all households with children in the Brisbane North and Sunshine Coast zone live in localities within that zone that are relatively more disadvantaged according to the ABS IRSD. By comparison, 31 per cent of households in the Brisbane North and Sunshine Coast zone that have been subject to a substantiation live in localities within that zone that are relatively more disadvantaged.

**Figure 3: Child Safety Service Centres with the highest proportions of substantiated households from relatively more disadvantaged areas (a) compared to all households with children in the Queensland population**



Source: Department of Communities

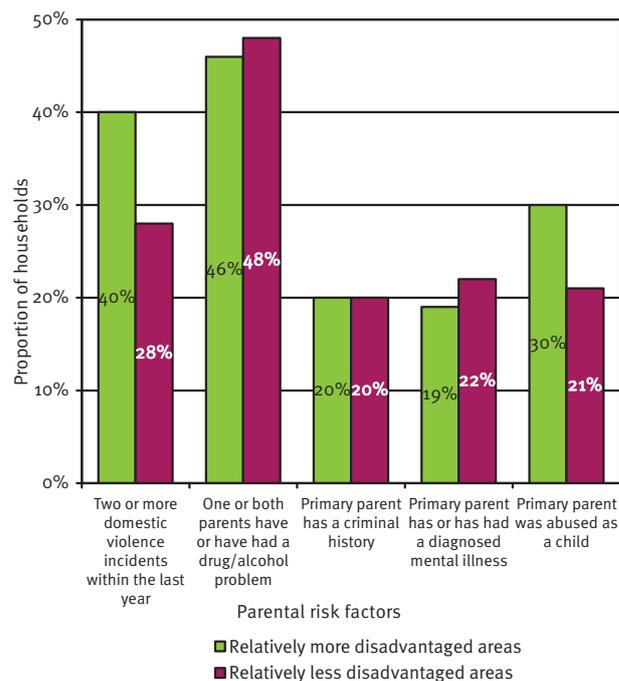
Note: Excludes Child Safety Service Centres with counts of less than 10 households. Unknown households were excluded from the analysis.

(a) Includes households in the bottom 3 deciles with an IRSD score of 479.6-962.75.

- The Child Safety Service Centres with the largest proportions of substantiated households from relatively more disadvantaged areas were: Cape York and Torres Strait, Maryborough, Ipswich North, Bundaberg, Forest Lake, Redcliffe, Toowoomba North, Inala, Gympie and Aitkenvale.
- When compared with the distribution of all Queensland households experiencing relatively higher levels of disadvantage, substantiated households were over-represented across each of these service centres.
- For example, 23 per cent of all households with children live in localities within Forest Lake that are relatively more disadvantaged according to the ABS IRSD. By comparison, 77 per cent of households in Forest Lake that have been subject to a substantiation live in localities within the area that are relatively more disadvantaged.

## Section 2 – Characteristics and environment of substantiated households

**Figure 4: Substantiated households by parental risk factors and level of relative socio-economic disadvantage**



Source: Department of Communities

As multiple risk factors may be present within each household, figures do not add to 100%.

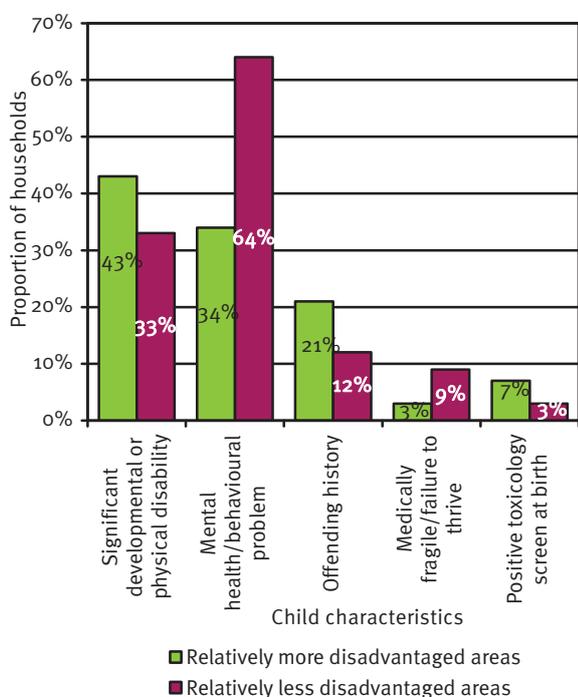
For full definitions of risk factors see glossary.

- Substantiated households from relatively more disadvantaged areas displayed more parental risk factors from the Family Risk Evaluation (75 per cent) compared to substantiated households from relatively less disadvantaged areas (66 per cent).
- A drug/alcohol problem was the most prominent parental risk factor and was prevalent at approximately the same rate irrespective of relative socio-economic disadvantage.
- Substantiated households from relatively more disadvantaged areas were more likely to have experienced two or more domestic violence incidents within the last year (40 per cent) or have a primary parent who was

abused as a child (30 per cent) compared to substantiated households from relatively less disadvantaged areas (28 per cent and 21 per cent respectively).

- The prevalence of substantiated households with a primary parent who has a criminal history or diagnosed mental illness is similar across all broad levels of socio-economic status.

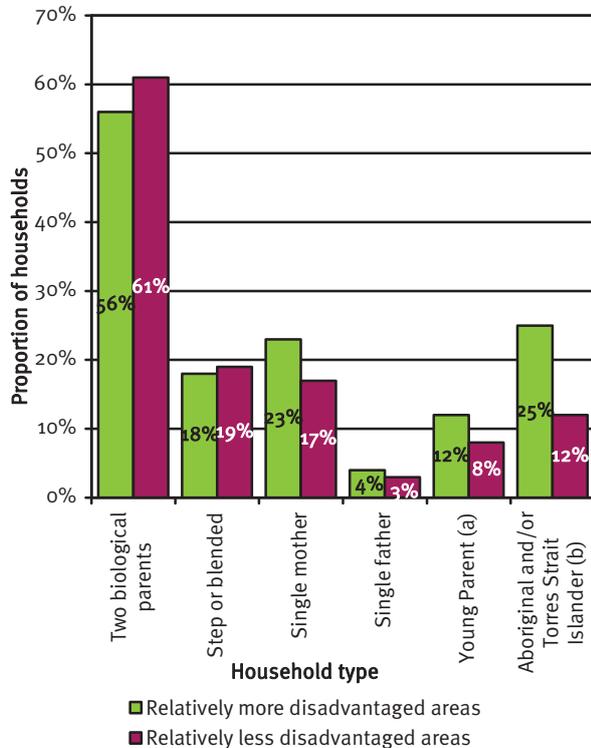
**Figure 5: Substantiated households by child characteristics and level of relative socio-economic disadvantage**



Source: Department of Communities  
 As multiple child characteristics may be present within each household, figures do not add to 100%.  
 For full definitions of child characteristics see glossary.

- The characteristics of children in substantiated households apply to any child in the household. This means one or more children may display one or more characteristics. This may also mean that of the child characteristics recorded, not all necessarily relate to the substantiated child, but may refer to another child in the household, for instance a sibling.
- Approximately one in five substantiated households had at least one high needs child, regardless of the level of socio-economic disadvantage.
- However, while there was no correlation between relative socio-economic disadvantage and the prevalence of children with high needs, the characteristics with which these children presented differed substantially.
- Substantiated households with high needs children from relatively more disadvantaged areas were more likely to have had at least one child with a significant developmental or physical disability, compared to substantiated households from relatively less disadvantaged areas with high needs children (43 per cent compared to 33 per cent respectively).
- 21 per cent of substantiated households with high needs children from relatively more disadvantaged areas had at least one or more children with an offending history, which was almost two times higher than substantiated households with high needs children from relatively less disadvantaged areas (at 12 per cent).
- Substantiated households with high needs children from relatively less disadvantaged areas were twice as likely to have had one or more children with a mental health or behavioural problem, compared to substantiated households from relatively more disadvantaged areas (64 per cent compared to 34 per cent respectively).

**Figure 6: Substantiated households by household type and level of relative socio-economic disadvantage**



Source: Department of Communities

(a) Households where at least one parent is 21 years or younger at the time of the substantiation.

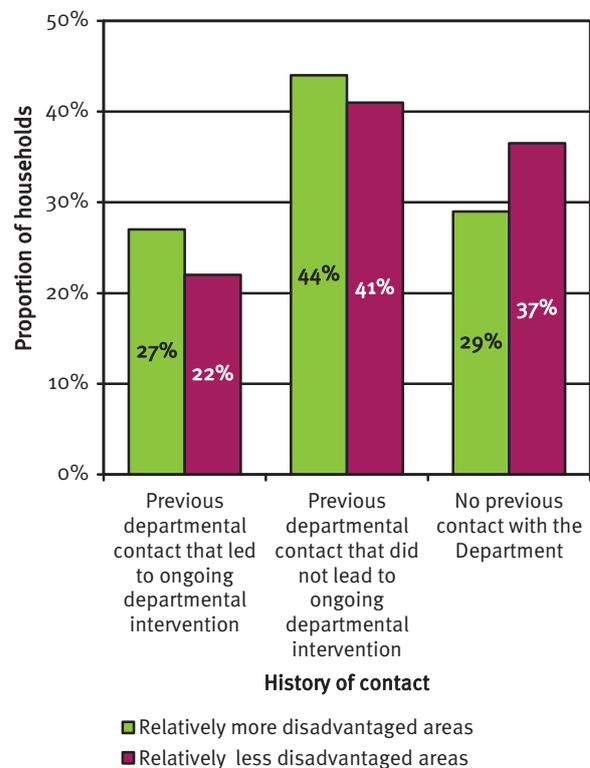
(b) Households where at least one person identifies as an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person.

Note: Individual households may fall into more than one category.

- Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander substantiated households were two times more likely to come from areas experiencing relatively higher levels of disadvantage than less disadvantaged areas (at 25 per cent compared to 12 per cent respectively).
- Substantiated households from relatively less disadvantaged areas were slightly more likely to be two biological parent households (at 61 per cent) compared to substantiated households from more disadvantaged areas (at 56 per cent).

- Single mother households and young parent households were slightly more likely to be from relatively more disadvantaged areas compared to substantiated households from less disadvantaged areas (at 23 per cent and 12 per cent compared to 17 per cent and 8 per cent, respectively).

**Figure 7: Substantiated households by history of contact with the Department and level of relative socio-economic disadvantage**



Source: Department of Communities

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

- Substantiated households from relatively more disadvantaged areas were more likely to have had previous contact with the Department (71 per cent) compared to households from less disadvantaged areas (63 per cent).
- Irrespective of relative socio-economic disadvantage, approximately two in five households had at least one prior notification that did not lead to ongoing departmental intervention. This cycle of contact with the Department may indicate that households could benefit from enhanced access to support services<sup>5</sup>.
- 27 per cent of substantiated households from relatively more disadvantaged areas had a history of ongoing departmental intervention, prior to the current substantiation, compared to 22 per cent for substantiated households from less disadvantaged areas.

## Glossary

**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.

**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).

<sup>5</sup> It is important to note the proportion of households with a history of prior contact and that come back to the Department's attention can be affected by circumstances outside the Department's control. This may include, but is not limited to, a change in family circumstances such as illness or a new partner.

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

**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.

**Family Risk Evaluation:** 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.

**Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage (IRSD):** The index is produced by the Australian Bureau of Statistics as a means to summarise the socio-economic conditions of people living in an area. The index provides a general measure of disadvantage using Census variables such as low income, low educational attainment, unemployment, and dwellings without motor vehicles.

**Index rankings:** For the purposes of this report, the area scores of substantiated households were grouped into deciles. The bottom 3 deciles (IRSD score 479.6 to 962.75) were then compared to the top 3 deciles (IRSD score of 1036.75 to 1154.2). Despite the fact that substantiated households that fell in the middle 4 deciles were predominantly excluded from the analysis, 60 per cent of the population fell into either the most or least disadvantaged areas.

**Medically fragile/failure to thrive:** Where the child is medically fragile, has a long-term (six months or more) physical condition requiring medical intervention or diagnosed as failure to thrive.

**Mental health/behavioural problem:** Where the child has mental health or behavioural issues not related to a physical or significant developmental disability (includes ADHD/ADD). This item could be indicated by diagnosed mental health disorders (as per the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual), or other professional diagnosis, the child is receiving mental health treatment, attendance in a special class because of behavioural problems, or the child is currently taking medication to treat a mental health illness.

**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.

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

**Offending history:** Where the child has been subject to statutory youth justice intervention, or where the child has not been subject to youth justice intervention, but is creating stress within the household, examples include: a child who runs away; alcohol or drug misuse; or habitual truancy.

**Positive toxicology screen at birth:** Where the child has a positive toxicology report for alcohol or drugs at birth.

**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.

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

**Significant developmental or physical disability:** Where the child has a significant physical or significant developmental disability. This includes a formal diagnosis of an intellectual disability, a learning disability indicated in school records, or another significant developmental problem (i.e. a limitation in the development of the child when compared to the average range for their peer group, which results in substantial limitation of the child's functioning or intellect).

**Substantiation:** An investigation and assessment will have a substantiated outcome when it is assessed that significant harm has been experienced by the child and/or there are identifiable risk factors that a child may be significantly harmed in the future. Harm to a child or young person can be caused by physical, psychological or emotional abuse, neglect, or sexual abuse or exploitation. There are two types of substantiations – substantiated in need of protection and substantiated not in need of protection.

**Substantiated households:** An investigation and assessment outcome where the household has at least one child who has been substantiated.



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