

# Characteristics of parents involved in the Queensland child protection system

*Report 6: Summary of Key Findings*

*2009*

## Introduction

This is the final report in the 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.

Through the previous five reports, a wealth of information has been gathered about households where a parent was believed responsible for substantiated harm or risk of harm to their child, recorded between April and June 2007. This includes their demographic profile, parental risk factors for child abuse and neglect, history of contact with the department, prevalence of children with high needs and level of socio-economic disadvantage.

This report provides an overview of the key findings from the previous five reports.

## Executive Summary

A range of parent and family risk factors for child abuse and neglect have been identified in Australian and international research, however there has been very little research into the Queensland child protection system.

To build a picture of the families the department works with, a series of five reports have been produced profiling the family environment of households involved in the Queensland child protection system, where a substantiation was recorded between April and June 2007. This final report draws together the key findings from the previous five reports.

One of the major issues facing these households was the existence of multiple and complex risk factors, such as:

- parents with a drug and/or alcohol problem
- parents' intergenerational experience of abuse or neglect
- parents with a criminal history
- parental mental illness
- domestic violence
- previous involvement with child protection services
- children with health, disability or behavioural problems.

Households in the Queensland child protection system came from a range of socio-economic environments, however were over-represented in areas experiencing relatively greater levels of socio-economic disadvantage.

Challenges for the department included the over-representation of Indigenous households in the child protection system, and the higher-than-average incidence of various risk factors experienced by Indigenous households and single parent households.

## Key findings from Reports 1-5

### Report 1 – Demographic Profile

Report 1 provides a demographic profile of 847 households where a substantiation was recorded between April and June 2007, compared to the general Queensland population.

#### Parent Age

- The largest proportion of parents in the child protection system were aged 30–39 years (44 per cent of mothers and 42 per cent of fathers) with the median age of parents in the system being 32 years for mothers and 34 years for fathers.
- The median age for these parents at the time of giving birth was slightly younger than that of the general population, by around five years on average.
- Just 6 per cent of mothers and 2 per cent of fathers in the system were teenagers at the time of the substantiation.

#### Household type

- Half of households included two biological parents, and a further quarter comprised step or blended households.
- Indigenous households were significantly over-represented in the child protection system with 21 per cent compared to 3 per cent in the Queensland population.
- Indigenous households were also more likely to be single mother households.
- There was a higher propensity for children from young households or single parent households to be assessed as vulnerable and in need of ongoing departmental intervention.

#### Substantiated harm types recorded within households

- The pattern of harm types was consistent across most types of households with emotional harm being the most prevalent, followed by physical harm. One exception was single mother households, where neglect was the most common harm type.
- Neglect was also relatively more common in young households and Indigenous households compared to the average rate of other household types.
- Fathers were more likely than mothers to be the person believed responsible for physical harm, emotional harm and sexual harm, while mothers were more likely to be assessed as responsible for neglect.

### Report 2 – Parental risk factors for abuse and neglect

Report 2 looks at the household environment and characteristics of parents believed responsible for substantiated harm or risk of harm to their child.

Parental risk factors were analysed for 695 of the 847 households substantiated between April and June 2007.<sup>1</sup>

#### Risk Factors

- Five parental risk factors commonly associated with child abuse and neglect were frequently present in households in the child protection system and 71 per cent of households had at least one risk factor in the April-June 2007 period. These risk factors were:
  - *drug/alcohol problem*: In nearly half of all substantiated households (47 per cent) one or both parents had a current or previous drug and/or alcohol problem.
  - *domestic violence*: Over one-third of substantiated households (35 per cent) had two or more incidents of domestic violence within the past year.

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

- *intergenerational abuse*: One-quarter of primary parents (25 per cent) were abused or neglected as a child.
- *criminal history*: Around one-fifth of primary parents (21 per cent) had a criminal history.
- *mental illness*: Around one-fifth of primary parents (19 per cent) had a current or previously diagnosed mental illness.

### Prevalence

- Nearly half (44 per cent) of substantiated households had more than one risk factor. These households were more than twice as likely to progress to ongoing intervention compared to households with one or no risk factors (59 per cent compared to 25 per cent).
- Parental risk factors were more prevalent in Indigenous households and young households (at least one parent under 21 years) with the vast majority in both cases having at least one of the five risk factors (86 per cent and 93 per cent respectively). These households were also most likely to have multiple risk factors (over 55 per cent and 63 per cent respectively).
- With the exception of domestic violence, parental risk factors were most prevalent in households with a child substantiated for neglect and those households substantiated for neglect were the most likely to have multiple risk factors.
- Domestic violence was most prevalent in households with substantiated emotional or physical abuse (around 43 per cent).
- Parental risk factors were least common in households with substantiated sexual abuse. Over half of these households did not have any of the five parental risk factors recorded (53 per cent)
- Drug and/or alcohol problems and domestic violence were more prevalent in Indigenous and young households; around two-thirds were affected by drugs and/or alcohol and around half were affected by domestic violence.

## Report 3 – History of Contact with Child Safety Services

Report 3 looks at the profile of parents who have a history of contact with the department. This information was obtained for 695 of the 847 households substantiated between April and June 2007.<sup>2</sup>

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

- One-quarter (26 per cent) of substantiated households had a history of ongoing departmental intervention prior to the current substantiation.
- 42 per cent of substantiated households had at least one prior notification that did not lead to ongoing departmental intervention, prior to the current substantiation.
- For one-third of the households it was their first notification to the department.

### Households with a history of ongoing departmental intervention

- Households substantiated for neglect were most likely to have a history of contact with the department, with 39 per cent previously involved in ongoing 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 were 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 was, however, based on a relatively small group (5 per cent of all substantiated households).
- Indigenous households and single parent households (36 per cent of single fathers and 33 per cent of single mothers) were over-represented amongst those with a history of ongoing intervention. 40 per cent of substantiated Indigenous households had a history of ongoing departmental intervention compared to the average of 26 per cent.

<sup>2</sup> The remaining households are not included as, in the majority of cases, the household has changed leading up to or during the investigation and assessment.

## Prevalence of risk factors

- Each of the five parental risk factors were more prevalent in households with a history of ongoing departmental intervention than other households where 88 per cent of households with an ongoing departmental intervention displayed at least one of the risk factors.
- The most common risk factor in households with a history of contact with the department was current or previous drug/alcohol problems, at two-thirds (65 per cent) compared to the average of 47 per cent for all substantiated households.
- Households with a history of ongoing intervention were over one and a half times more likely than the average to have had a primary parent abused or neglected as a child (43 per cent compared to the average of 25 per cent).
- Households with a history of ongoing intervention were more likely to have had multiple risk factors (66 per cent compared to the average of 44 per cent for all substantiated households).
- They were also more likely to progress to further ongoing intervention (substantiated – child in need of protection) as a result of their current substantiation (68 per cent compared to the average of 39 per cent).

Note: the proportion of households with a history of 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, 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.

## Report 4 – Households with high needs children

Report 4 provides an overview of the child characteristics assessed in substantiated households during the investigation and assessment phase. This information was obtained for 695 of the 847 households substantiated between April and June 2007. For the purposes of this report, where households had one or more children presenting with significant developmental or physical disability, medically fragile/failure to thrive, positive toxicology screen at birth, offending history, and/or mental health or behavioural problems, they were referred to as a household with 'high needs children'.

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.

### Child characteristics

- Of the total 695 substantiated households, one in five substantiated households had at least one high needs child (21 per cent or 145 households).
- Of these 145 households, half had one or more children with a significant developmental or physical disability.
- 48 per cent of households with high needs children had one or more children with a diagnosed mental health disorder or behavioural problem such as Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).
- One in six substantiated households with high needs children had one or more children with an offending history (at 17 per cent).

### Prevalence of parental risk factors

- Substantiated households with high needs children displayed slightly fewer parental risk factors (65 per cent compared to 71 per cent for all substantiated households).
- While a drug/alcohol problem was still the most prominent parental risk factor, it was less prevalent in households with high needs children compared to the average (34 per cent compared to 47 per cent for all substantiated households).
- Households with high needs children were more likely to have a primary parent who had a current or previous diagnosed mental illness (24 per cent compared to the average of 19 per cent for all substantiated households).

### Household types

- Single parent households were more likely to have high needs children – an average of 31 per cent compared to 21 per cent for all substantiated households.

### Harm types of the current substantiation

- Neglect was more prevalent in households with high needs children (50 per cent) compared to the average of 38 per cent for all substantiated households.
- Emotional harm was the most common harm type recorded, but at a level slightly less than the average for all substantiated households (55 per cent compared to 59 per cent of all substantiated households).

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

- Households with high needs children were more likely to have had previous contact with the department leading to ongoing departmental intervention - 31 per cent compared to 26 per cent for all substantiated households.

## Report 5 – Households by level of socio-economic disadvantage of the area they are from

Report 5 uses the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) *Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage* (IRSD) to focus on:

- 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.

This information was obtained for 695 of the 847 households substantiated between April and June 2007.<sup>3</sup> It was important to note that level of socio-economic disadvantage was not a factor in the Structured Decision Making tools that assist Child Safety Officers in their decision to record a notification or substantiation.

### Where our families are from

- Substantiated households were over-represented in areas experiencing relatively greater socio-economic disadvantage. Of the 695 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.

---

<sup>3</sup> The remaining households are not included as, in the majority of cases, the household has changed leading up to or during the investigation and assessment.

- Substantiated households from relatively more disadvantaged areas were 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).

### **Child characteristics**

- The characteristics of children in substantiated households applied to any child in the household. This meant one or more children may have displayed one or more characteristics. This may also have meant that of the child characteristics recorded, not all necessarily related to the substantiated child, but may have referred 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 disadvantage.
- 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/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 twice as 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).
- 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 (23 per cent and 12 per cent compared to 17 per cent and 8 per cent respectively).

### **Prevalence of parental risk factors**

- Substantiated households from relatively more disadvantaged areas displayed more parental risk factors compared to substantiated households from relatively less disadvantaged areas (75 per cent compared to 66 per cent).
- In particular, 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 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).

### **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.

## 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 (parent):** 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 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:** The index is produced by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 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.

**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 (child):** 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 DSM – 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 (parent):** 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 DSM – 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 (child):** 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 – child in need of protection and substantiated – child not in need of protection.

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



**Queensland**  
Government