

Child protection reporting in NSW and Australia – an analysis of comparability issues



Authors

Albert Zhou and Marilyn Chilvers

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Joanna Hopkins and Merran Butler for their helpful comments.

Produced by

Economics, Statistics and Research
Service System Development
NSW Department of Community Services
4-6 Cavill Avenue
Ashfield NSW 2131
Phone (02) 9716 2222

www.community.nsw.gov.au

Introduction

Each year, annual statistics on the operation of child protection in NSW and Australia are published by the NSW Department of Community Services (DoCS), the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) and the Productivity Commission (PC) in four key publications:

- *DoCS Annual Report*
- *DoCS Annual Statistical Report*
- *Child Protection Australia (AIHW)*
- *Report on Government Services (PC)*.

It is of interest to compare child protection data over time and across jurisdictions. However, issues of data comparability such as jurisdictional differences and changes in the data over time can result in inaccurate and potentially misleading conclusions.

The interpretation of trends in these annual statistics can also be a difficult task. Child protection statistics in NSW and Australia are based on administrative data, so only those child abuse and neglect incidents which are reported to the relevant authorities are included. The rise and fall in the number of incidents reported, therefore, cannot be taken as a true measure of change in the level of child abuse, neglect and harm in the community. There are a number of extraneous factors which affect the reporting, recording and presenting of child abuse and neglect. Public awareness and willingness to report, and changes in legislation, practice and/or data collection systems are all examples of extraneous factors which can affect the number of children and young people reported over time within a jurisdiction.

In the case of comparisons across jurisdictions, influential factors include differences in the legislative framework, policies and practices of relevant departments in relation to child protection activities.

There are also significant variations in methods of collecting and reporting data (i.e. different counting rules used) which can make understanding and interpretation difficult,

This paper provides a brief discussion on:

- i) issues brought about by the organisational and legislative changes over the past six years in NSW that affect trends in child protection reporting
- ii) differences in child protection statistics published by DoCS and AIHW/PC
- iii) jurisdictional differences in the child protection data between the States and Territories in Australia.

Impact of organisational and legislative changes on child protection reporting in NSW

In recent years, DoCS and the child welfare system in NSW have undergone significant changes, in terms of legislation, practice and data collection systems. These include the following:

1. Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998

Parts of the *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998* that were proclaimed in December 2000 expanded the number of mandatory reporters to include anyone who works with children and lowered the threshold for reporting to include concern about children and young people who may be at risk of harm or neglect.

2. Centralised intake

The DoCS Helpline commenced operations on 18 December 2000 and provided a single point of contact for people making a report to DoCS. Previously, reports were made and prioritised by each Community Services Centre (CSC).

3. Client Information System changes

Prior to July 2002, the Client Information System (CIS) 4.1 was used by caseworkers to enter information about child protection and out-of-home care.

CIS 4.2 was introduced in July 2002. It included a new 'risk of harm' assessment to support the parts of the Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998 proclaimed on 18 December 2000 and associated practice changes. Assessment/investigation was to be focused on determining the risk of harm to a child or young person rather than just actual harm. As such, new terminologies and classifications were used in the new system and this resulted in substantial differences in the data captured.

The changes as a result of the introduction of CIS 4.2 were also reflected in the data reported to AIHW from 2002/03 onwards. Substantiations now include risk of harm as well as actual harm. Notifications are now based on the legal basis of the report and where further assessment was determined necessary.

The current client information system, called the Key Information Directory System (KiDS), was introduced in October 2003. KiDS introduced a new way of working on child protection cases, allowing information about multiple children (such as siblings) to be held in the one case plan with the potential to record multiple children against initial and secondary assessments. KiDS also provided the ability to indicate that a particular assessment conducted was a result of more than one report, rather than recording an individual assessment for all reports received. Counting rules were developed so that reports and substantiations are counted in a similar way to CIS.

However, the implementation of KiDS meant that caseworkers had to be trained in its use, in new processes that were introduced with the system, and further as the system was enhanced throughout the year. Caseworkers needed time to become comfortable with the new system. A new reporting framework for DoCS information also had to be produced. New processes were developed for data extraction and quality assurance, and new computer programs were written to support these processes and to produce reports from the new client system. Where DoCS had not verified the quality of the data from the new system, the information was not used for reporting. This meant that limited data was published for 2003/04.

Differences between child protection statistics published by DoCS and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and the Productivity Commission

DoCS provide data to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) to include in its publication *Child Protection Australia and the Report on Government Services* compiled by the Productivity Commission (PC). As these publications are national data collections, AIHW sets out definitions, classifications and counting rules for the compilation of the data so it is as comparable as possible across States and Territories.

There are significant differences between the statistics for NSW published by DoCS and by AIHW and the PC. AIHW divides reports into child concern reports and child protection notifications. A child concern report is defined as where there is no indication that the child in question may have been, or is at risk of being, harmed through abuse or neglect. The response is not to investigate, but to assess the concern for the child, the family's circumstances, the need for services, to support the family or to assist them to access services. Child protection notifications are defined as contacts made to an authorised department by persons or other bodies making allegations of child abuse or neglect, child maltreatment or harm to a child.

For AIHW reporting, where there is more than one notification about the same 'event', this is counted as only one notification and a child protection notification only involves one child. In contrast, in DoCS Annual and Statistical Reports, child protection reports are about a child or young person being at risk of harm according to section 23 of the *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998*. That is, current concerns exist about the safety, welfare or wellbeing of the child or young person (C/YP) for any of the following reasons:

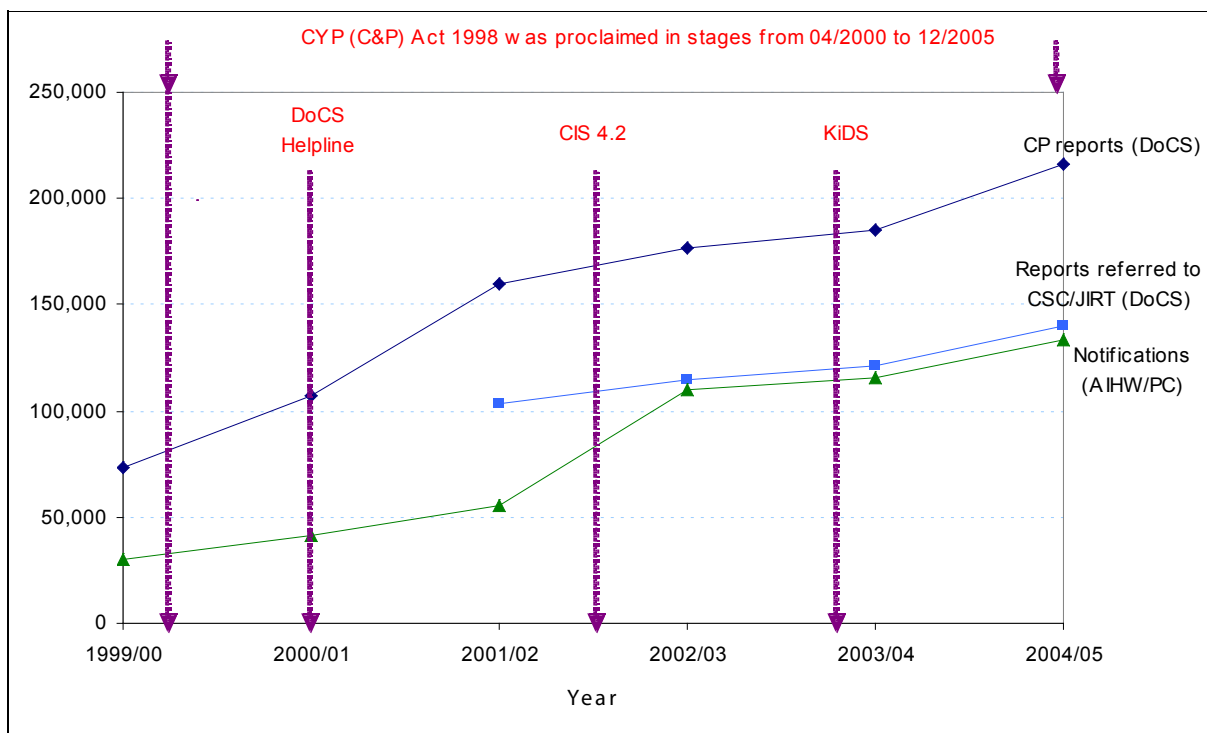
1. the child or young person's basic physical or psychological needs are not being met or are at risk of not being met,
2. the parents or other caregivers have not arranged and are unable or unwilling to arrange for the child or young person to receive necessary medical care,
3. the child or young person has been, or is at risk of being, physically or sexually abused or ill-treated,
4. the child or young person is living in a household where there have been incidents of domestic violence and, as a consequence, the child or young person is at risk of serious physical or psychological harm,
5. a parent or other caregiver has behaved in such a way towards the child or young person that the child or young person has suffered or is at risk of suffering serious psychological harm.

Clearly, total child protection reports for DoCS are more inclusive and include not only notifications (as defined by the AIHW), but also child concern reports. Requests for general assistance and/or family support services are also included in DoCS counts for child protection reports. Not surprisingly, the number of child protection reports in a reporting period is much greater than the number of notifications.

This difference is illustrated in Figure 1 which shows the numbers of child protection reports, reports referred to CSC or Joint Investigation Response Team (JIRT)¹ for further assessment and notifications from 1999/00 to 2004/05. The first two sets of figures are presented in the DoCS Annual and Statistical Reports whereas the figures for notification appear in the AIHW/PC Reports.

It is noted that after the introduction of CIS 4.2 there was a change to counting of notifications which accounts for the sharp increase in the figures between 2001/02 and 2002/03.

Figure 1: Child protection reports (DoCS), reports referred to CSC/JIRT for further assessment (DoCS) and notifications (AIHW), by year, 1999/00-2004/05



Source: DoCS Annual Reports 1999/00-2004/05 and Child Protection Australia, AIHW 1999/00-2004/05.

Note: DoCS Helpline started in December 2000, and information on the reports referred to CSC/JIRT for further assessment was reported annually from 2001/02.

CIS 4.2 = Client Information System, version 4.2 (introduced by DoCS on 6 July 2002).

KiDS = Key Information and Directory System (introduced by DoCS on 24 October 2003).

Further details are provided in the Appendix in Figure A1, Tables A1 and Table A2. Table A1 presents selected statistics for NSW child protection that appear in the DoCS Annual and Statistical Reports, while Table A2 contains corresponding selected statistics taken from the AIHW/PC Reports during the same reporting periods.

While we acknowledge the difference in the counting protocols between DoCS and the AIHW, it is important to note that the DoCS Annual Report and Annual Statistical Report are the authoritative source of statistics for NSW, as all reports made by the public and mandatory reporters are counted according to NSW legislation.

¹ JIRT investigations involve a coordinated approach from DoCS, NSW Police and NSW Health. Joint investigation occurs where there is the possibility the abuse constitutes a criminal offence. This includes serious and non-accidental injuries, sexual abuse, extreme neglect resulting in physical harm and malnutrition/dehydration from withholding food or fluids.

Comparability of data across jurisdictions

As mentioned previously, the national statistics on child protection, published annually by AIHW/PC, are compiled from data supplied by the States and Territories in aggregated form, based on the counting rules established by the AIHW.

Although the use of counting rules by the AIHW aims to enhance comparability across jurisdictions, this is not fully achieved due to underlying differences between jurisdictions in legislation, policies and practices in relation to child protection. For a review of the differences in legislation and practice across the six states and two territories in Australia, please refer to Bromfield and Higgins (2005). As the AIHW warns, "the data from different jurisdictions are therefore not strictly comparable and should not be used to measure the performance of one jurisdiction relative to another" (Child Protection Australia 2004/05, p.4). Any attempt to make comparisons between States and Territories, without acknowledging this limitation, may lead to inaccurate and misleading results.

Table 1 presents some key statistics and derived rates across jurisdictions from the AIHW/PC reports for 2004/05. Looking across the table, the impression is that NSW had the highest incidence of notifications, investigations and substantiations, implying that the highest level of child abuse, neglect and harm is in NSW.

However, as discussed, there are a range of procedures and factors affecting the figures presented. First, NSW captures a broader range of potential child protection issues than most other states. In contrast, Western Australia only those reports where child maltreatment was indicated were classified as a notification and the majority of these reports were subsequently investigated.

Moreover, the progression from identifying children at risk through to reporting, investigating and substantiating risk and harm is different in each State and Territory. This affects the counts for substantiations between States and Territories.

NSW employs a differential secondary assessment ('investigation') response, whereby an investigation can be undertaken at one of two levels of intensity. More serious cases referred to local CSCs undergo a full secondary assessment (including Stage 1 and Stage 2) resulting in a 'judgement and decision', with the report either 'substantiated' or not. Other cases may only receive a Stage 1 secondary assessment whereby the safety of the child is assured and a service referral provided. However, for Stage 1 assessments, there is no capacity to record a 'judgement and decision' (and hence a substantiation).

In 2004/05, only 30% of NSW 'investigations' were Stage 2 assessments. Of these, 88% were substantiated, giving a much higher proportion for substantiation than elsewhere if only Stage 2 assessments are considered. There is no comparable outcome for a Stage 1 assessment, therefore none of the 70% of investigations that were finalised at Stage 1 could be counted as 'substantiated'. This gives rise to a low percentage of substantiations when both types of investigation are added together. In fact, the rates of substantiations per 1,000 children and young people were similar in NSW and Victoria (6.1 and 6.4 respectively) and higher in Queensland (14.1).

Table 1: Selected child protection statistics in AIHW/PC Reports, by State and Territory, 2004/05

	NSW	Vic	Qld	WA	SA	Tas	ACT	NT
Notifications	133,636	37,523	40,829	3,206	17,473	10,788	7,275	2,101
C/YP in notifications	78,136	28,534	29,633	2,958	11,522	5,802	3,555	1,790
Investigations	58,572	11,888	35,361	3,162	6,279	1,833	3,017	1,180
Substantiations	15,493	7,398	17,307	1,104	2,384	782	1,213	473
C/YP in substantiations	9,237	7,015	12,985	1,045	1,809	637	865	453
Rates per 1,000 children aged 0-16 years in notifications	51.6	26.0	32.2	6.5	35.0	52.8	49.3	31.2
Rates per 1,000 children aged 0-16 years in substantiations	6.1	6.4	14.1	2.3	5.5	5.8	12.0	7.9
Investigations : notifications	1:23	1:3.2	1:1.2	1:1.0	1:2.8	1:5.9	1:2.4	1:1.8
Substantiations : investigations	1:3.8	1:1.6	1:2.0	1:2.9	1:2.6	1:2.3	1:2.5	1:2.5
Substantiations : notifications	1:8.6	1:5.1	1:2.4	1:2.9	1:7.3	1:13.8	1:6.0	1:4.4

Source: *Child Protection Australia*, AIHW 2004/05.

Due to the substantial differences between jurisdictions, comparisons involved substantiation data should not be made across the States and Territories (AIHW 2006).

Conclusion

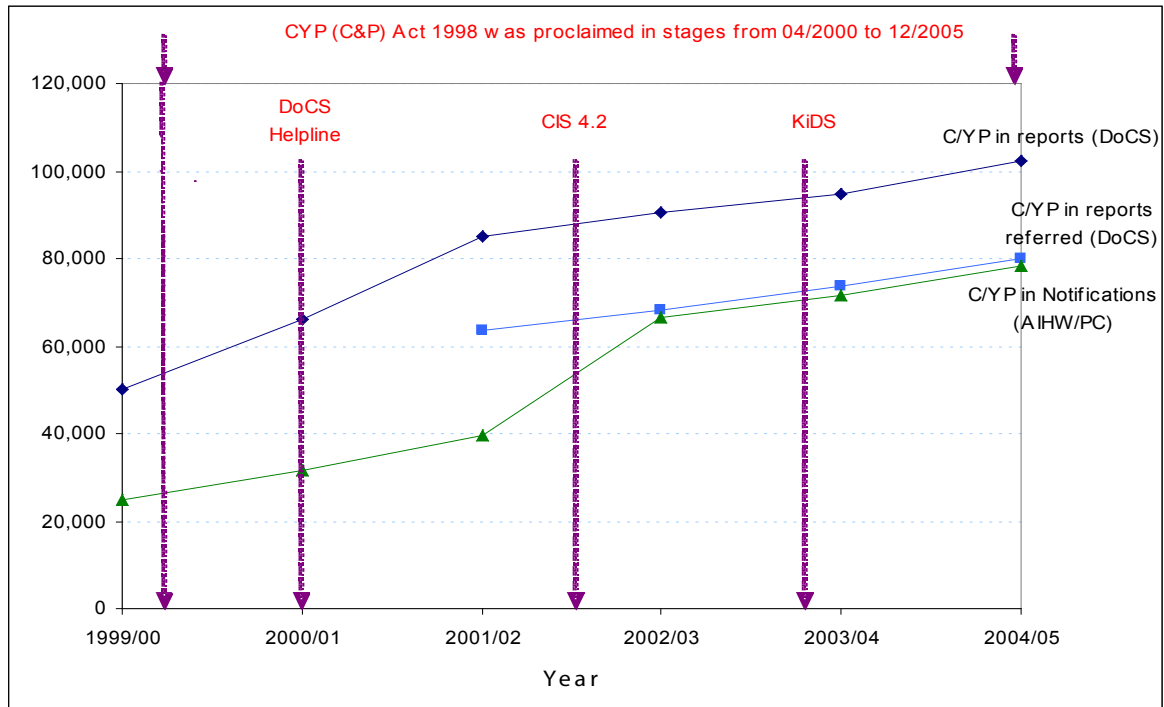
This paper highlights the importance of being aware of extraneous factors which can affect the reporting, recording and presentation of child protection issues. These influences need to be acknowledged and considered whenever comparisons of child protection statistics are being made.

Changes in computer systems, the introduction of the Helpline and legislative changes in NSW have all affected the comparability of the statistics over time.

In addition, differences in legislation, practice and use of different counting rules gives rise to the non-comparability of many of the published statistics between the States and Territories. This also means that data published by the AIHW and the PC is different from data published by DoCS as DoCS reports according to NSW legislation.

Appendix

Figure A1: Children and young people in reports (DoCS), children and young people in reports referred to CSC/JIRT for further assessment (DoCS) and children and young people in notifications (AIHW) by year, 1990/00-2004/05



Source: DoCS Annual Reports 1999/00-2004/05 and Child Protection Australia, AIHW 2004/05.

Note: DoCS Helpline started in December 2000, and information on the reports referred to CSC/JIRT for further assessment was reported annually from 2001/02.

CIS 4.2 = Client Information System, version 4.2 (introduced by DoCS on 6 July 2002).

KiDS = Key Information and Directory System (introduced by DoCS on 24 October 2003).

Table A1: Selected statistics for NSW Child Protection in DoCS Annual and Statistical Reports, 1999/00-2004/05

	1999/00	2000/01	2001/02	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05
CP reports	72,986	107,394	159,643	176,271	185,198	216,386
C/YP in reports	50,295	66,111	84,965	90,558	94,552	102,349
Reports referred to CSC/JIRT	n/a	n/a	103,074	115,000	121,368	140,184
C/YP in reports referred	n/a	n/a	63,488	68,329	73,822	80,018
Reports where secondary assessment determined abuse/neglect/actual/risk of harm *	9,045	10,603	12,145	n/a	n/a	16,705
C/YP in reports determined abuse/neglect/actual/risk of harm *	7,707	8,677	9,686	n/a	n/a	8,956
Ratio of C/YP in CP reports to C/YP in reports determined abuse/neglect/actual/risk of harm *	6.5:1	7.6:1	8.8:1	n/a	n/a	11.4:1

* For 1999/00, 2000/01 and 2001/02, secondary assessment determined abuse/neglect not actual/risk of harm.

Source: DoCS Annual Reports 1999/00-2004/05 and DoCS Annual Statistical Report 2004/05.

Table A2: Selected statistics for NSW Child Protection in AIHW/PC Reports, 1999/00-2004/05

	1999/00	2000/01	2001/02	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05
Notifications	30,398	40,937	55,208	109,498	115,541	133,636
C/YP in notifications	24,889	31,471	39,478	66,503	71,445	78,136
Investigations	18,017	25,292	33,618	45,265	n/a	58,572
Substantiations	6,477	7,501	8,606	16,765	n/a	15,493
C/YP in substantiations	5,876	6,621	7,402	11,534	n/a	9,237
Ratio of C/YP in notifications to C/YP in substantiations	4.2:1	4.8:1	5.3:1	5.8:1	n/a	8.5:1

Source: *Child Protection Australia*, AIHW 1999/00-2004/05.

References:

- Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) 1999/00 – 2004/05. *Child Protection Australia*. Canberra: AIHW.
- Bromfield, L. & Higgins, D. (2005). National Comparison of Child Protection Systems. *Child Abuse and Prevention Issues*. No. 22. Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies.
- NSW Department of Community Services (DoCS). *Annual Report*. 1999/00 – 2004/05. Sydney: DoCS.
- NSW Department of Community Services (DoCS). *Annual Statistical Report*. 2004/05. Sydney: DoCS.