

# Reporting trends and estimate of NSW children and young people “known to DoCS”



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## Introduction

The number of children and young people reported to the NSW Department of Community Services (DoCS) for suspected risk of abuse or neglect has grown in recent years. In 2004/05, DoCS received 216,386 child protection reports concerning 102,349 children and young people. However, it is not clear that there is a strong appreciation in the community, media and oversight agencies of the scale of the issue, as most members of the community, when asked, significantly underestimate the number of reports<sup>1</sup>. Media and oversight agencies regularly draw attention to the fact that children and young people in adverse circumstances or events are 'known to DoCS', implying that it is a relatively small number of children that are reported and then followed up closely.

In this report, we firstly examine the number and rate of reporting for children and young people of each age from 0 to 17 years in 2004/05, identifying new and re-reports. Secondly, the impact of the introduction of the *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998*, proclaimed in December 2000, is examined through a trend analysis of the number of children and young people reported to DoCS over the past 18 years. We then expand the analysis to estimate the proportion of children and young people aged 0-17 years in 2004/05 who have been reported any time in their lives to DoCS, and consider the implications of the changed legislation for this measure.

## Children and young people reported to DoCS in 2004/05

Figure 1 below, and Table A1 in the Appendix, show the number and rate of children and young people, by age, reported to DoCS in 2004/05. Infants aged less than 1 year (including unborns) were the most frequently reported group with 9.6 per cent of the resident population reported, compared with 6.4 per cent for all persons aged 0-17 years. The rate of reporting varies with age, with high rates recorded for pre-school aged children – an average 7.0 per cent for children aged 1-5, down to 6.4 per cent for the 6-11 age group. The lowest reporting rates are recorded for post-15 year-olds.

**Figure 1: Percentage of resident population reported, by age at first report in 2004/05**

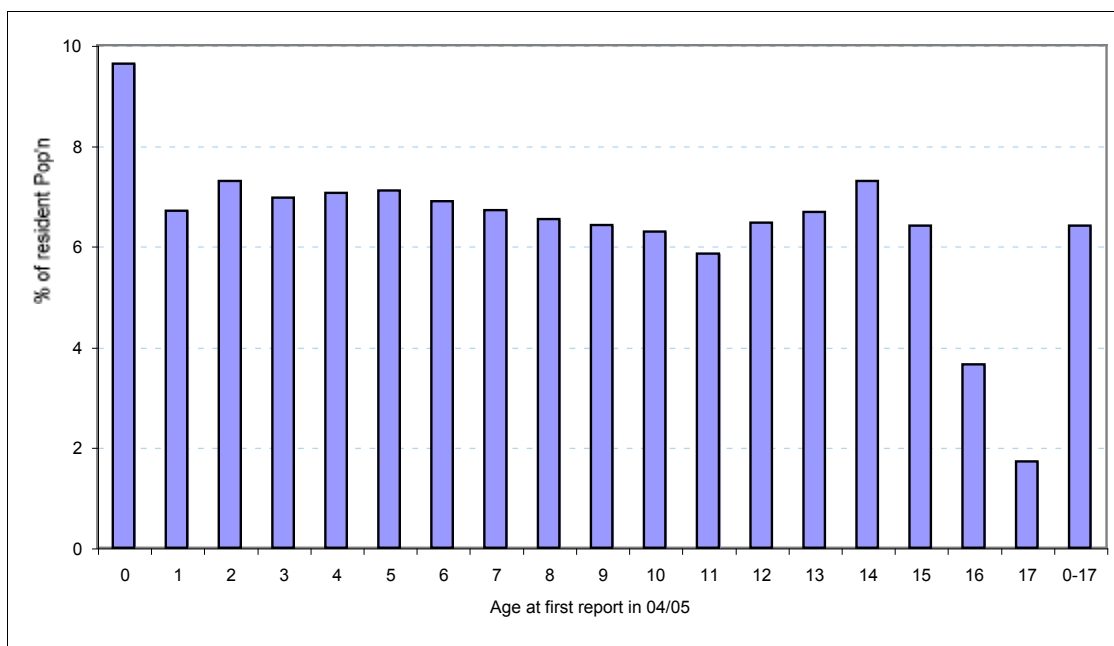


Table A1 also shows that almost half of all children and young people reported in 2004/05 were not previously known to DoCS. Overall, 45.7 per cent (46,815) of all children and young people had no prior child protection reports. This translates to an average 2,000 individual children and young people reported each week in 2004/05, 900 of them 'new' to DoCS.

The proportion of new (compared to repeat) reports varies by age group. While a high proportion of first-time reports is observed, and expected, in the younger age-groups, there is still a relatively high proportion of new reports among older children. It is likely, however, that over the next 10 years, the recent move to mandatory reporting and centralised intake will continue to increase both the rate of reporting, and the proportion of re-reports in the older age groups.

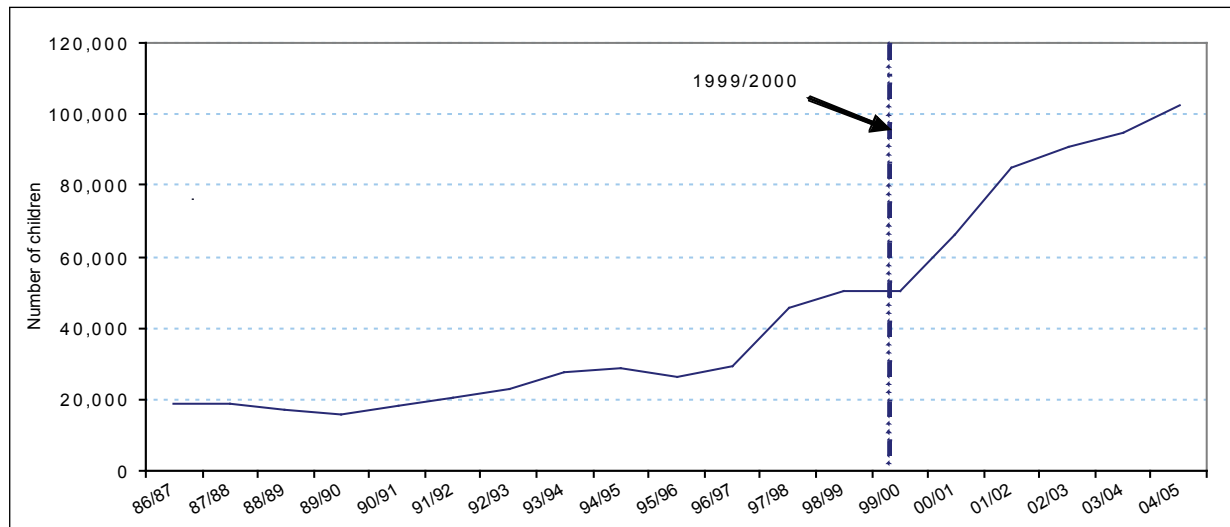
<sup>1</sup> Topline findings: Social Research project (unpublished), NSW Department of Community Services, March 2006.

## The growth in the number of children and young people reported to DoCS

Figure 2 shows that the number of children and young people reported to DoCS each year has increased markedly since 1986/87. The most significant increase occurred after 2000/01, as shown by the dotted line in Figure 2, and has accelerated since then. During the eighteen-year period from 1986/87 to 2004/05, the number of persons reported each year has grown from 18,563 in 1986/87 to 50,295 in 1999/2000 and to 102,349 in 2004/05.

One reason for the significant increase in the number of children reported from 2000/01 is the introduction of the new Act. The expansion of mandatory reporting requirements, both in terms of what was to be reported and who were to be the mandatory reporters, had a major effect on the number of children reported, and on the demand for DoCS services.

**Figure 2: Number of children and young people aged 0-17 years reported to DoCS each year, 1986/87 to 2004/05**



## Children and young people in NSW currently “known to DoCS”

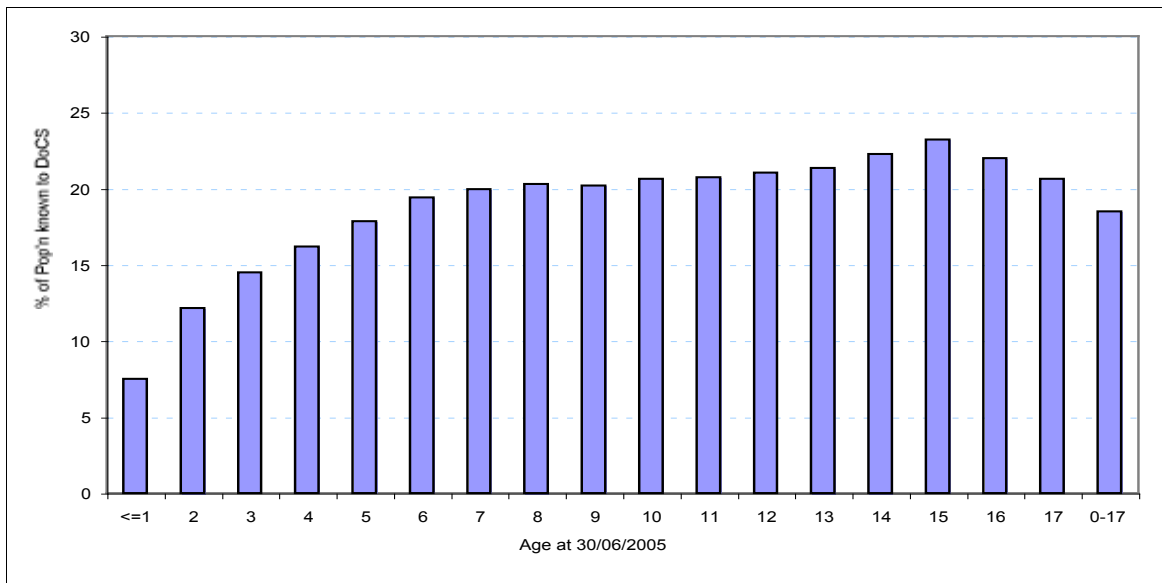
To determine the proportion of children and young people in NSW known to DoCS, we analyse child protection reports over the past 18 years, from 1986/87 to 2004/05. In our analysis, a child who was reported to DoCS at any time from 1 July 1986 to 30 June 2005 is counted as ‘known to DoCS’, and classified according to his or her age at 30 June 2005. A child is only counted once even if he or she was reported on multiple occasions over time.

Figure 3 below, and Table A2 in the Appendix, show that, overall, almost 1 in 5 (18.5%) of all NSW children and young people currently aged 0-17 years were known to DoCS by the end of 2004/05. This amounts to 316,960 children and young people. Approximately half of the children and young people had only been reported once during that time.

Not surprisingly, the proportion of children known to DoCS varies with age. In general, the older a child, the more likely he or she is known to DoCS<sup>2</sup>. Figure 3 shows that at 30 June 2005, only 7.5 per cent of children aged 1 year or under were known to DoCS, compared to 20.7 per cent of young people aged 17 years. For all age groups from 7 years onwards, at least 1 in 5 children and young people in the NSW resident population are known to DoCS. Among all age groups, young people aged 15 years had the highest likelihood of contact with the child protection system (23.2%).

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that the age in Table A2 was calculated using a reference date of 30 June 2005. This is different from Table 1 where age refers to age at the time of first report in 2004/05. Hence, the rates calculated in the two tables will not match. Note also that the figures in this report will not exactly match those published in previous annual reports as data quality issues, such as unknown age, have been dealt with by imputation in developing the source data for the analysis.

**Figure 3: Percentage of population known to DoCS by age at 30 June 2005**

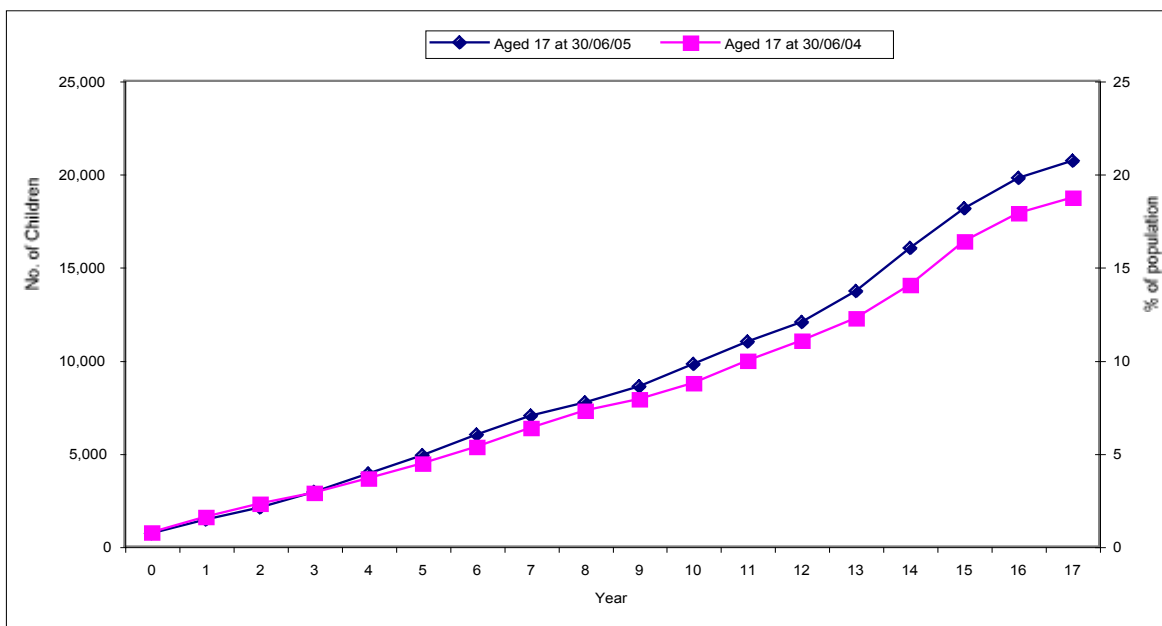


### Children and young people becoming "known to DoCS"

The previous analysis estimated that 18.5 per cent of the current NSW population of children and young people is 'known to DoCS'.<sup>3</sup> The proportion varies across age groups, but for children of school age upwards, the 'known' proportion varies between 20 and 23 per cent. In this section, we examine the pattern of children and young people becoming known to DoCS and the changes in that pattern over time.

Figure 4 shows the cumulative frequency distribution of young people currently aged 17 years who were the subject of child protection reports over time. The cumulative number of children who have ever had a child protection reports is shown on the left vertical axis in the graph, while the corresponding cumulative percentage (of the population) is shown on the right axis. The age in years at which persons were reported for the first time is shown on the horizontal axis. 17-year old cohorts for both June 2004 and 2005 are graphed.

**Figure 4: Cumulative frequency distribution for children aged 17 years at 30 June, 2004 and 2005**



<sup>3</sup> This is only considered an estimate of the true proportion, as a retrospective cohort analysis was not undertaken. The methodology involved analysing administrative data over an 18-year period and matching unique-id system numbers for children over time. In order to account for attrition from the cohort through migration and death, the population estimates were inflated to include all children and young people over time who may have been part of the cohort at any time (an additional 25% of the current population). The mid-point of the rates based on the current and inflated populations is reported as it was necessary to further adjust the reported population to incorporate the conditional probability of child protection reporting after leaving the cohort.

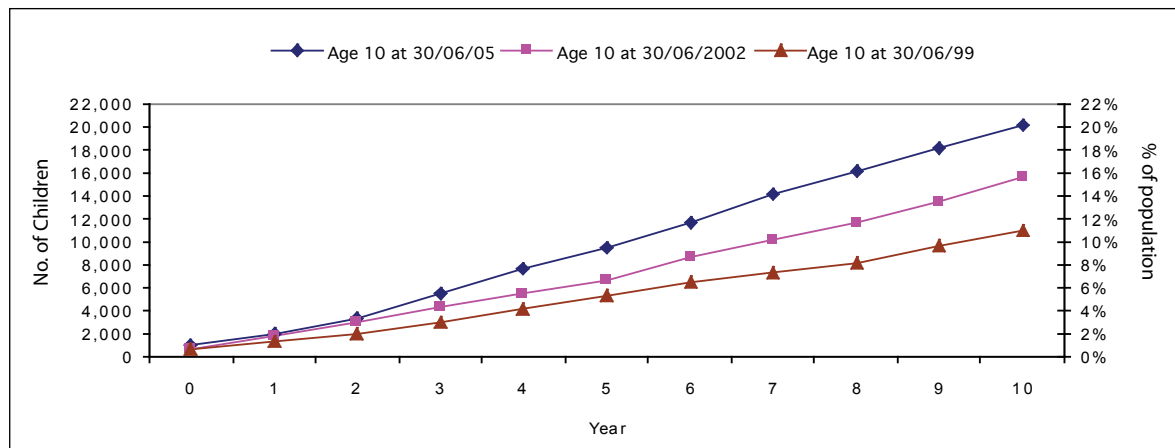
Figure 4 shows that only a small proportion of each cohort was first reported prior to school age, with around 6 per cent of current 17-year olds reported by the time they were 6 years old. This is significantly lower than the current population of 6 year-olds; Table A2 showed that around 20 per cent of these children were already the subject of a report to DoCS at that age. Clearly, with mandatory reporting, young children are much more likely to be the subject of a child protection report than in previous years.

This pattern of earlier involvement with the child protection system is further illustrated in Figures 5 to 7. Figure 5 shows the acceleration in young children becoming known to DoCS by comparing children aged 10 years at June 2005, with those aged 10 years three and six years earlier (June 2002 and June 1999 respectively). More recently, larger numbers and proportions of children are becoming known to DoCS at younger age groups. Figure 5 shows that there were more than 20,000 children aged 10 in the NSW population with a child protection report to DoCS in 2005. In 2002, there were less than 15,000 children of this age known to DoCS and in 1999, there were around 10,000.

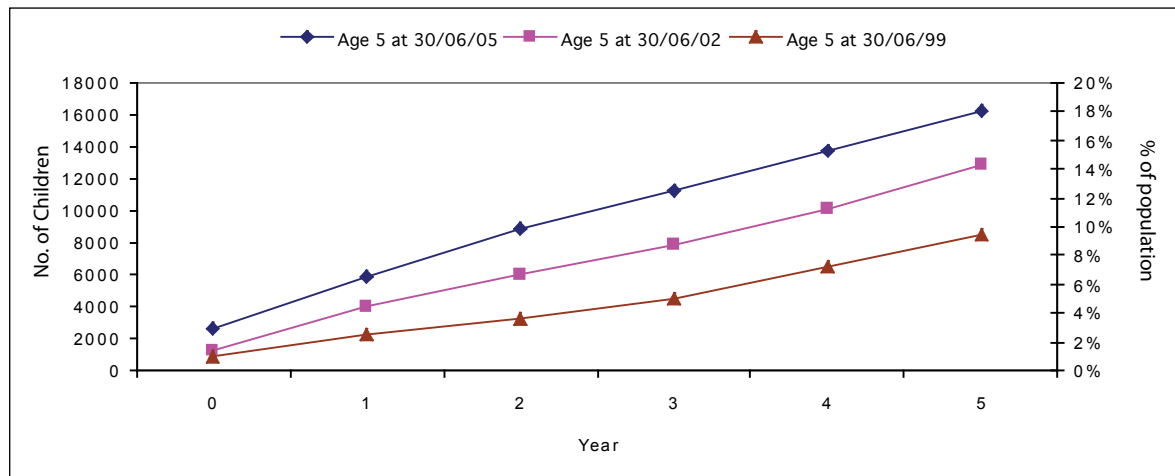
Figures 6 and 7, which repeat the analysis for 5 and 2-year olds, further illustrate the growth in reports in recent years. Figure 6 shows that the number of 5-year olds with a previous child protection report in 2005 is more than double the number of 5-year olds who had been reported to the child protection agency by that age in 1999. Furthermore, for children known to DoCS by age 5 in 2005, almost 3,000 were reported in their first year of life, or while they were unborn. Each year, on average, an additional 2,500 were reported for the first time, resulting in more than 16,000 5-year olds being known to DoCS by June 2005.

Figure 7 shows an even more significant increase for very young children coming into the system. In 2005, there are more than 10,000 children aged 2 years old known to DoCS, compared with around 6,000 in 1999.

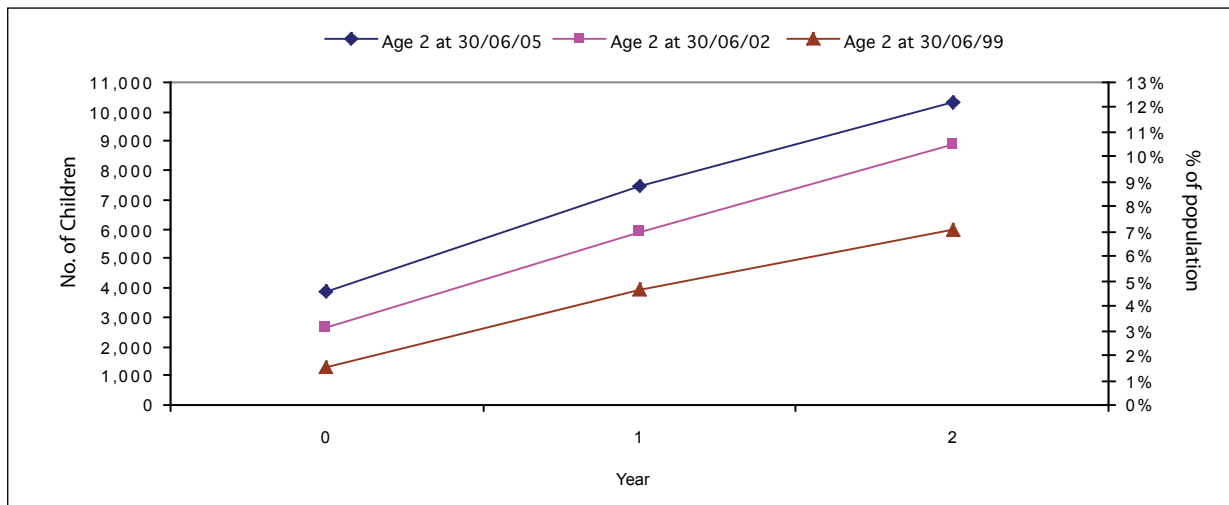
**Figure 5: Cumulative frequency distribution for children aged 10 years at 30 June, 1999, 2002 and 2005**



**Figure 6: Cumulative frequency distribution for children aged 5 years at 30 June, 1999, 2002 and 2005**



**Figure 7: Cumulative frequency distribution for children aged 2 years at 30 June, 1999, 2002 and 2005**



## Discussion and Conclusions

By 30 June 2005, we estimate that around 1 in 5 children and young people aged 0-17 years were 'known to DoCS'. Half of them had only been reported once in their lifetime.

The analysis shows that the likelihood of having ever been reported varied with age, generally increasing until age 15 years, and declining slightly thereafter. It is important to view these estimates in the light of changes to the legislation which had an impact on reporting rates from 2001/02 with the expansion of mandatory reporting requirements. These requirements have significantly increased the rate of reporting across all age groups, and lowered the age at which children first become known to the child protection system.

These findings have several implications for the service sector, particularly for early intervention programs. The early reporting of children who may be at risk of abuse or neglect is critical for the success of such programs which are designed to keep children and families out of the child protection system. The programs identify and build on family strengths that may prevent escalation of problems that gave rise to the initial child protection report.

However, the consistent increase in the proportion of children ever reported to DoCS places a significant strain on the service system. In 2004/05 alone, there was an average of 900 'new' children and young people becoming known to DoCS each week. As the growth continues, both DoCS and the sector will have difficulty meeting the demand for services.

The expansion of mandatory reporting requirements is likely to have significantly reduced the threshold for reporting by mandatory reporters. In light of this, it is important that DoCS has the ability to quickly and effectively identify those cases that need more attention. Tighter initial screening and/or differential response mechanisms may be needed to better target limited resources. This need has been noted publicly by the Auditor-General (in the audit of the DoCS Helpline in 2005) and by the NSW Ombudsman in recent Annual and Child Death Review reports. In response, DoCS is currently reviewing the assessment framework used at initial assessment to screen and prioritise child protection reports according to risk and urgency criteria.

## APPENDIX

Table A1: Children/young people reported to DoCS by age at first report, 2004/05

Age at first report 2004/05	New report in 2004/05		Re-report in 2004/05		Total reports in 2004/05		% of resident population reported
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	
Under-1	7,078	85.1	1,237	14.9	8,315	100	9.6
1	3,258	58.1	2,349	41.9	5,607	100	6.7
2	3,025	50.3	2,990	49.7	6,015	100	7.3
3	2,805	46.6	3,209	53.4	6,014	100	7.0
4	2,698	43.9	3,451	56.1	6,149	100	7.1
5	2,633	42.6	3,552	57.4	6,185	100	7.1
<i>1-5 Subtotal</i>	<i>14,419</i>	<i>48.1</i>	<i>15,551</i>	<i>51.9</i>	<i>29,970</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>7.0</i>
6	2,405	40.3	3,557	59.7	5,962	100	6.9
7	2,312	38.9	3,628	61.1	5,940	100	6.7
8	2,260	38.8	3,567	61.2	5,827	100	6.5
9	2,184	37.6	3,631	62.4	5,815	100	6.4
10	2,147	37.7	3,555	62.3	5,702	100	6.3
11	2,010	37.7	3,327	62.3	5,337	100	5.9
<i>6-11 Subtotal</i>	<i>13,318</i>	<i>38.5</i>	<i>21,265</i>	<i>61.5</i>	<i>34,583</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>6.4</i>
12	2,303	38.7	3,653	61.3	5,956	100	6.5
13	2,517	40.7	3,674	59.3	6,191	100	6.7
14	2,779	41.5	3,922	58.5	6,701	100	7.3
<i>12-14 Subtotal</i>	<i>7,599</i>	<i>40.3</i>	<i>11,249</i>	<i>59.7</i>	<i>18,848</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>6.8</i>
15	2,432	41.9	3,375	58.1	5,807	100	6.4
16	1,332	40.7	1,942	59.3	3,274	100	3.7
17	637	41.0	915	59.0	1,552	100	1.7
<i>15-17 Subtotal</i>	<i>4,401</i>	<i>41.4</i>	<i>6,232</i>	<i>58.6</i>	<i>10,633</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>3.9</i>
<b>Total</b>	<b>46,815</b>	<b>45.7</b>	<b>55,534</b>	<b>54.3</b>	<b>102,349</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>6.4</b>

**Notes:**

- 1) Missing information about age has been adjusted based on the known proportion of each age category.
- 2) NSW population figures are from ABS Estimated Resident Population by Age, Cat No. 3201.0, June 2004.



**Table A2: Children/young people who have been reported to DoCS by age at 30/06/2005, 1986/87-2004/05**

Age at 30 June 2005	Reported only once		Reported more than once		Children ever reported total		% of population known to DoCS
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	
1 & under	6,600	51.1	6,304	48.9	12,904	100	7.5
2	5,045	48.5	5,355	51.5	10,400	100	12.2
3	6,177	47.3	6,882	52.7	13,059	100	14.5
4	7,104	47.9	7,717	52.1	14,821	100	16.2
5	7,973	48.4	8,501	51.6	16,474	100	17.9
<i>1-5 Subtotal</i>	<i>32,899</i>	<i>48.6</i>	<i>34,759</i>	<i>51.4</i>	<i>67,658</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>13.5</i>
6	8,646	48.3	9,253	51.7	17,899	100	19.4
7	9,182	48.4	9,795	51.6	18,977	100	20.0
8	9,506	48.7	10,029	51.3	19,535	100	20.3
9	9,859	49.7	9,984	50.3	19,843	100	20.2
10	10,012	49.0	10,409	51.0	20,421	100	20.7
11	10,428	50.4	10,248	49.6	20,676	100	20.8
<i>6-11 Subtotal</i>	<i>57,633</i>	<i>49.1</i>	<i>59,718</i>	<i>50.9</i>	<i>117,351</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>20.3</i>
12	10,769	50.7	10,477	49.3	21,246	100	21.1
13	10,999	50.5	10,783	49.5	21,782	100	21.4
14	11,456	50.7	11,143	49.3	22,599	100	22.3
<i>12-14 Subtotal</i>	<i>33,224</i>	<i>50.6</i>	<i>32,403</i>	<i>49.4</i>	<i>65,627</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>21.6</i>
15	12,012	51.4	11,347	48.6	23,359	100	23.2
16	11,407	51.8	10,625	48.2	22,032	100	22.0
17	11,062	52.8	9,871	47.2	20,933	100	20.7
<i>15-17 Subtotal</i>	<i>34,481</i>	<i>52.0</i>	<i>31,843</i>	<i>48.0</i>	<i>66,324</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>22.0</i>
<b>Total</b>	<b>158,237</b>	<b>49.9</b>	<b>158,723</b>	<b>50.1</b>	<b>316,960</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>18.5</b>

**Notes:**

- 1) Missing information about age has been adjusted based on the known proportion of each age group.
- 2) NSW population figures are from ABS Estimated Resident Population by Age, Cat No. 3201.0, June 2004.