

Executive Summary

The Executive Summary contains a summary of the main points from each Section of the Report in addition to the Conclusions.

A Profile of Foster Carers in NSW

- Census data suggest that in 2001, some 1865 NSW families contained at least one foster child. These data are likely to underestimate the true number of foster carers.
- Most foster carers are aged between 35 and 54 years, this group representing 70 per cent of female carers and 66 per cent of male carers.
- Single parents are more likely to be foster carers than couples. However, due to the higher number of couple families, a majority of foster carer families are couple families.
- A majority (56.3 per cent) of female foster carers were not in the labour force, while almost two-fifths (39.1 per cent) were in paid employment.
- In terms of the DoCS regions in NSW, South West Sydney has the highest rate of families fostering. The highest rates for areas outside of major cities were found for the Hunter, Nepean, Far North Coast and Illawarra.
- A relatively high proportion of foster carer families are Indigenous, though their prevalence varies greatly by DoCS region.
- Families at the extremities (low or high end) of the income distribution were least likely to foster.
- The majority of female foster carers (62 per cent) indicated that they have no post-school qualifications.

Projections of Foster Carers

- Projections of the future number of foster carers in NSW between 2003 and 2013 have been derived by combining the current carer profile with ABS demographic and labour force projections.
- These projections are not predictions and are sensitive to the underlying assumptions used. Future demographic changes may diverge from these assumptions, while many other factors will influence the decision to become a foster carer. Policy has a role to play in influencing these decisions.
- The number of foster carers is projected to increase at a lower rate than growth of the overall population of adult women under all of the scenarios considered. This is mainly because women in the labour force are less likely to be foster carers than other women, while the ABS projects increases in the labour force participation of women in most age groups.
- The projections do not suggest any major changes in the composition of foster carers by age or labour force status. In 2013, as in 2001, about two-thirds of foster carer families will include women aged between 35 and 54.

- Regions with high rates of projected population growth also have the highest rates of projected growth in the number of foster carers.

Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Foster Carers in 2003 –Analysis of Survey Data

- A postal survey of one thousand foster carers in NSW was conducted specifically for this project. It generated 450 responses and produced new statewide information on the demographic characteristics of carers, the factors that attracted them to caring, the training they received and financial and other supports.
- The survey data indicate that the typical NSW foster carer is female; aged 48 years; Australian-born; has completed Year 10 schooling (or equivalent); is not in the labour force; and has been fostering for five years or less.
- These dominant or average patterns conceal the great variety that exists in the overall foster carer profile.
- Almost all foster carers owned or were purchasing their home, and 60 per cent lived in a dwelling with at least four bedrooms.
- More than one-third of primary carers were in paid employment, as were almost three-quarters of secondary carers.¹ Of those who were not in employment, many relied on government pensions or allowances as their principle source of income.
- A majority of primary carers had incomes less than \$400 a week, and many had incomes below \$200 a week. Secondary carers were more likely to have incomes over \$600 a week.
- Eighty-five per cent of carers rated their health as very good or good.
- Most carer had access to a motor vehicle (but around one in ten did not).
- Almost half of all carers had been fostering for five years or less, but over one-quarter had been fostering for 11 years or more.
- The total number of children fostered by carers varied greatly, with around one-fifth fostering one or two children, and a similar number fostering more than twenty children. In total, 439 households were fostering 657 children at the time of the survey.
- Less than one-fifth of carers had fostered a child from a different cultural or ethnic background to their own. Most of those who had fostered Indigenous children were themselves from an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background.

Demand for and Current Availability of Foster Carers

- According to the interviewed stakeholders and workers in focus groups there is an urgent need for carers in all areas of fostering: crisis; respite; short-; medium- and long-term, and culturally specific carers to take children from specific cultural backgrounds.

¹ The primary carer is defined as the carer who carries out most the day-to-day care of foster children. The secondary carer is the partner in carer couples. Most primary carers are female (92 per cent).

- Respite has been shown in a number of research studies to be a major factor in retaining carers and preventing placement breakdown. It is suggested that arrangements for respite care should be included in every child's case plan.
- The introduction of early intervention programs for families and the setting up of specialist early intervention teams was perceived as likely to exacerbate the increasing need for carers to provide respite for vulnerable families.
- Finding carers for adolescents is becoming increasingly difficult throughout NSW. Paradoxically, it is also the group where matching the young person with a carer with the capacity to meet their needs becomes more critical.
- In relation to the need for ethno-specific carers, it is perceived that some ethnic communities are too small to provide carers and in some cultures there is no concept of fostering.
- For the Indigenous stakeholders, the areas of highest demand is for carers for children with high or special needs, carers for sibling groups and temporary care services. It is a matter of concern that the placement of Indigenous children with non-Indigenous carers is due to a lack of Indigenous carers.
- According to information provided by a Muslim worker in DoCS the recent introduction of the Muslim Foster Carers Project has meant that there is currently no particular area of demand for Muslim carers in the Sydney metropolitan area.

Recruitment, Retention and Motivation of Foster Carers

- Recruitment strategies are necessary to attract new carers to fostering because of declining carer numbers. In most States there is little available information on current numbers of carers entering or leaving fostering or understanding why they discontinue fostering.
- Most carers in this study always planned to foster. Overall media advertising or promotional material (60 per cent) is the most influential recruiting method, followed by recruitment by another carer (30 per cent).
- General recruiting strategies such as profiling carers in local TV, radio and print media and recruiting at community events (e.g. Foster Carers week) are utilised in the three areas studied in this project.
- Some specific recruitment strategies targeting particular community and ethnic groups have been implemented only in the metropolitan area in this study. In the far north coast area the Foster Care Association and the local DoCS office are involved in a 'partnership' to recruit, assess and train new carers.
- Stakeholders, workers and carers all strongly support the notion that one of the 'best' recruiting strategies is the use of current and experienced carers to recruit by 'word of mouth'.
- Suggested ways to improve recruitment include: targeting professional groups who could care more effectively for children with difficult or challenging behaviours, that DoCS work more closely with other agencies and community groups; and the provision of greater levels of support to existing carers to encourage 'word of mouth' recruitment.

- Most carers' motivations to continue fostering are child-focused. They include the achievement of positive outcomes for children or an awareness that children need families.
- According to carers, they cease to foster mainly due to carer burn out, lack of support, effects of fostering on carer families and children being too difficult to care for. In addition, changes in personal circumstances (e.g. poor health, old age, a new baby or changing work commitments) are also seen as important reasons to cease fostering.
- Most carers and stakeholders agree that providing better support for carers would ensure that more are retained in the system.
- The ageing of the carer population is perceived as a major problem as many of the current older more experienced carers are leaving fostering. (See Section 7.10 and Section 11).

Carer Training

- As noted earlier, children currently coming into care are presenting with more challenging behaviours and hence are more difficult to care for. As a consequence, both initial and ongoing training for carers is becoming a more critical element in the services carers provide than it may have been in the past.
- In the assessment and training of carers many providers of out-of-home care services in NSW are using the packages *Step by Step* (carer assessment) and *Shared Stories Shared Lives* (carer training).
- *Step by Step* has been used across the sector in carer assessment. However implementation of it as the uniform assessment tool is still incomplete.
- *Shared Stories Shared Lives* has been widely used as the main carer training material for several years.
- Stakeholders and worker focus groups agreed that it is important that assessment and training of carers be conducted jointly by recruitment/training officers and experienced carers. This ensures a rigorous assessment of prospective carers and reduces the likelihood of carers leaving during training or shortly afterwards.
- A Koori package put together by Koori workers in the Department, in addition to *Step by Step* and *Shared Stories Shared Lives*, are seen as appropriate tools for use with Indigenous carers.
- *Shared Stories Shared Lives* is used with Muslim carers. The package has been translated into Arabic and Turkish and some parts have been made more culturally appropriate for Muslim carers.
- Two-thirds of carers surveyed reported their initial training as 'good'; 20 per cent found it 'reasonable' and only three per cent found it poor. Around 20 per cent of current carers surveyed had apparently not received any initial training.
- Almost all carers who had completed in-service or ongoing training did so in 2000 or later.
- Over half of all respondents either have not or do not seek to undertake any ongoing training.

- The multiple reasons for not attending ongoing training include: the training offered is not relevant; the timing or location of the training is not appropriate; there is a lack of respite or child care; and transport difficulties are a barrier.
- The most common form of ongoing training undertaken by carers is focused on 'challenging behaviour'.
- An overwhelming majority of carers say that ongoing training assists them in their role as foster carers.
- A general trend noticeable amongst longer term carers is that they see their current fostering role as 'professional' and that they are less likely to see their role as either 'semi-professional' or 'voluntary'.

Support for Carers

- Stakeholders perceived the support for carers as being crucial for placement stability and retention of carers in the system.
- The support that carers want from caseworkers is casework itself. They want caseworkers to work with carers and to build up ongoing relationships with children to bring about the best outcomes.
- A lack of regular casework and regular caseworker visits to carers was found to be strongly associated with placement breakdown.
- High caseworker turnover and inexperienced caseworkers are seen as detrimental to the development of worker/child and carer/worker relationships.
- The majority of carers had a caseworker for the children in their care, and less than a fifth did not. Over one half of the carers had regular contact with a caseworker while two-thirds rated their relationship with their caseworker as good.
- Over half of the carers regarded the overall level of support they receive from their caseworker as good. However, over a fifth described it as poor. Carers' assessment of their relationship with the Department was similar, with half describing it as good and a fifth describing it as poor.
- Support groups for all carers including Indigenous and Muslim was seen as useful.
- The provision of a mentor or buddy for new carers was an option suggested by both stakeholders and workers in focus groups.
- Stakeholders agreed that unless there are changes in the attitudes of caseworkers and local office managers, especially in relation to information sharing and working as partners with carers, it will be difficult for fostering to survive as a viable option.
- Equal numbers of carers thought the level of Care Allowance was 'about right' or 'on the low side' while eight per cent thought the Care Allowance was generous.

- Approximately half the carers surveyed had experienced financial difficulties while caring. In the majority of cases, this was due to delayed payments of the Care Allowance.²
- Concern was expressed by stakeholders that the Care Allowances paid to carers were not being used appropriately to meet the needs of the children.

The Fostering Experience

- Two-thirds of carers felt well prepared to foster the children most recently placed with them. When carers were asked what could have prepared them more for caring, the most common response was the provision of more background information about the child.
- Other factors that would help carers prepare for placements include: more advanced notification about the placement; the provision of resources or payment when the child first arrives to allow the carer to buy provisions for the child; more training for dealing with certain types of behaviours; and the availability of a 'buddy' system linking new carers with experienced carers to provide additional support.
- Half of the carers did not feel they had been given adequate information about the last child placed with them, but over half of the carers said that fostering had met their expectations.
- Many carers found the children's behaviours very challenging, others found the removal of the children from their care very difficult.
- Dealing with the child's birth family was often difficult for some carers.
- Seeing positive changes in the children as a consequence of being with the foster family was extremely rewarding for many carers. Seeing the children respond positively to being in a secure, safe home was also a positive for many carers.
- Fostering gave many carers a sense of personal fulfilment. Fostering had many positive benefits for the birth family, including helping birth children share and appreciate what they have.
- For over 300 carers who provided responses to the worst aspects of fostering, the dominant response (mentioned by 53 carers, 15.5 per cent) was a lack of support from the Department. The main difficulties of working with the Department were: unanswered phone calls and queries; not being given honest information about the child; and a lack of respect from Departmental officers.
- The following themes were also noted among the negative aspects of fostering: contact with birth parents (48 carers, 14 per cent); stress and workload (43 carers, 13 per cent); the challenging behaviours of fostered children (41 carers, 12 per cent) and the impact of fostering on carer families (40 carers, 12 per cent).

2 This research was conducted shortly after the introduction of DoCS's new client information system KiDS. Some payment delays may have been due to the transfer of client records to the new system.

- All carers were fearful of allegations of abuse being made against them, but there was a sense that carers would inevitably have to face allegations of abuse.
- The majority of carers would recommend caring to others. However, many emphasised the importance of being honest with potential carers about the realities of fostering.

Conclusions

The study used several sources of information to examine the current and future availability of carers. The sources include ABS data, a survey of carers, focus groups with carers and workers and interviews with stakeholders. In addition research studies both national and international were used to inform the analysis. The provision of out-of-home care (OOHC) is a dynamic phenomenon. It is composed of numerous complex interactions involving a number of parties including the children and their birth families who enter the welfare system; the Departmental workers responsible for the care and protection of children when they are placed in OOHC services; and carer families who provide the volunteer services in caring for children and young people. The complex interactions between all parties are governed by procedures and protocols determined by specific legislation and policy and also involve judicial decisions by the Courts in relation to custody and guardianship of children in OOHC.

A number of issues addressed in the study reflect the multi-faceted nature of fostering and highlight how critical it is that there is an adequate supply of carers, and that all carers receive ongoing training for the apparent increasingly challenging job of fostering. Equally important is the provision of an adequate number of workers to support carers in the system. The OOHC provisions of the new legislation (*NSW Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998*) came into effect in July 2003. These provisions laid the foundations for a number of significant improvements in the care of children including a substantial increase in funding for the OOHC sector and the appointment of additional caseworkers.

A number of major projects and initiatives by DoCS in 2000-2004 give recognition to the fact that the provision of foster care is to be improved in a number of ways. These improvements should provide better support for carers and ensure their retention in the system. The responses from workers, stakeholders and carers to many of the issues presented to them in the study appear supportive of a move to a more professional approach to fostering which involves support and ongoing training for carers and a better working relationship with caseworkers and other departmental staff. As this research study demonstrates from both the ABS data and the carer survey it is women, predominantly mothers in the privacy of their homes, who are the mainstay of the provision of OOHC services. Without their ongoing voluntary commitment to provide these services, fostering would not be a viable proposition.

The projections undertaken for this study do not suggest any major changes in the composition of foster carers either by age or labour force status. In 2013, as in 2003 ABS data indicate that about two-thirds of future foster carer families will include women aged between 35 and 54 (66 per cent in 2003, 64 per cent in 2013). There will be slight increase in older carers (women aged 55+) from 18 per cent to 21 per cent of all carer families. In addition the projections indicate there will be a slight increase in labour force participation rate of carers from 44 per cent to 47 per cent of all carer families.

Changing Characteristics of NSW Carers

There are some indications from a comparison of the survey conducted for this study and an earlier study conducted in 1986 (Gain, Ross and Fogg, 1987) that a number of characteristics in the NSW carer profile has changed in the period 1986 and 2003. Reflecting the rise in single female-headed families in society more generally, single female carer foster families in 2003 represent around one-quarter of all foster families compared to just 14 per cent in 1986.

Whereas in 1986 the carer age profile was women aged 25-49 in the current study 70 per cent of all carers are aged 35-54 years. Female carers in 1986 and 2003 continue to be more likely not to be in paid employment though the rise from 31 per cent in 1986 to 39 per cent currently is not insignificant especially as 36 per cent of the primary carers in paid employment were working full-time in 2003.

Other data suggest that current carers are fostering more children per household than carers were two decades ago. In 1986 almost two-thirds had only one fostered child in their care; in 2003 this had dropped to below a half of all carers (48 per cent). Furthermore, 3.6 per cent of carer households in the 1986 study had four or more children in their care at the time of the study compared with 9.4 per cent of carer households in the current study. As the numbers of fostered children per carer household has increased the proportion of carer families with no other children residing in their home has declined. In 1986, 26 per cent of carer families had no other children residing at home compared to 50 per cent in 2003.

In relation to the children fostered there appear to be fewer older teens (16 to 18 years) in foster families now (less than five per cent) compared to 11 per cent in 1986. In part this could be a reflection of the difficulty OOHC providers experience in attracting carer families for teenagers noted in the report. Of equal concern is the increase in the proportion (33 per cent) of pre-school aged children (0-4 year olds) in OOHC in 2003 compared to 25 per cent in 1986.

The data collected in 1986 and 2003 appear to indicate a number of differences in the length of time children spend in care. Several caveats apply when comparing these two sets of data. Firstly the variation in periods of time with a carer may be due to the 'different' populations of children in care surveyed in 1986 and 2003. In 1986, fostered children surveyed were both related (kin) (14 per cent) and non-related (86 per cent) children of foster carers. No related (kinship) carers were specifically included in the 2003 survey though 10 per cent of carers stated they provided kinship care (see Section 5.9). Numerous studies have documented that children in kinship care are less likely to be reunited with birth families than those with non-related carers. The higher incidence of kinship carers in the 1986 study may have contributed to longer stays in care for some children discussed below.

The data indicate that in 2003 around 31 per cent of children surveyed were in care for one year or less compared to 39 per cent in 1986. The decrease in children in 2003 being in care for a shorter period, i.e. under one year, may in part reflect the increasing difficulty in restoring children to birth families in a short period of time. Issues within the family (e.g. drugs, alcohol, violence or mental health conditions) that today are more likely to led to children being brought into care can prove difficult to resolve.

Other data on longer-term placements are harder to analyse. There appears to have been a decline in longer-term placements over the period. The 1986 study found that 42 per cent of the children had been with a carer for five or more years compared to 25 per cent of the children in the current study. Several factors could contribute to the decline in longer-term placements. The decline in the proportion of children in 2003 remaining with one carer for five or more years may be due to more placement breakdowns with moves to other carers. Legislative changes (*Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998*) emphasise, where it is possible, restoration of fostered children to birth families. As a consequence of the legislation children currently in OOHC are less likely to ‘drift in care’. Restoration at some point in time is therefore more likely than it may have been in the mid-eighties. In addition the suggestion of longer stays for the kinship care children in the earlier study, may have contributed to the higher proportion of children in long-term care in 1986.

Recruiting Carers

Most carers surveyed had always planned to foster. Overall media advertising or promotional material (approximately 60 per cent) was the most influential recruiting method, followed by recruitment by another carer (30 per cent). Most carers’ motivations to continue fostering are child-focused. They include being able to achieve positive outcomes for children or an awareness of children needing families.

It was apparent in the three areas visited by the researchers that DoCS workers do not keep records of the number of potential carer inquiries, or the number of potential carers assessed as not suitable, or those potential carers who withdrew from initial training. Records are also not kept on approved and current carers in any systematic way. For example there is no carer database of when carers commence or leave fostering or the reasons why they cease to foster. No exit interviews are conducted with carers at the time they leave fostering.

Workers in the three focus groups discussed how their local office implemented recruitment strategies and while their approaches provide useful information no general conclusions can be drawn about appropriate recruitment strategies to address the problem of the availability of carers.

The Department’s new Key Information and Directory System (KiDS) (see Section 1.3) and the Carer Development Plan (see Section 8.5) provide the tools for maintaining systematic information on all Departmental carers. In addition to basic demographic data on all carers, information recorded could include all training undertaken, level of training skills, type of children cared for, type of care provided, when fostering ceases and why. The systematic collection of data would allow an audit of carers to be conducted at any point in time by the Department. This could provide extensive details about current carers in the system and to assist with recruiting new carers.

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