

Summary

Child protection systems are multidimensional, complex, continually adapting entities that seek to prevent and respond to protection-related risks. Systems for child protection in Australia today are facing significant challenges. This has created the imperative to go beyond incremental adjustments and aim for transformational change. This paper outlines the latest iteration of changes within Australian child protection systems. It draws on a survey completed by child protection departments across Australia on change and reform planned or underway since July 2010. Change is documented and compared in terms of child protection system principles, goals and components. Considerable changes to systems for protecting children are planned or underway right across Australia. These are being designed and implemented mainly in response to shortcomings identified in independent reviews. They aim to reduce the number of children involved in statutory child protection and out-of-home care (OOHC) and achieve greater permanence and improved outcomes for children who enter OOHC. Addressing the over-representation of Aboriginal children and families in all areas of the statutory child protection system, particularly the high number of Aboriginal children entering OOHC, is an area of particular focus for reform.

KEY MESSAGES

- Systems for child protection in Australia today are facing significant challenges including insufficient capacity to meet the quantity and complexity of cases into statutory child protection and out-of-home care (OOHC), failure to improve outcomes for children in OOHC and the over-representation of Aboriginal children in statutory child protection and OOHC.
- There has been a remarkable degree of reform and change in child protection systems across Australia in recent times.
- While strategies have been adopted in response to specific concerns and the unique context of service delivery in each jurisdiction, there are many parallels between jurisdictions.
- Several jurisdictions are establishing new approaches to build a more robust and coordinated community service system, reconfiguring their OOHC and leaving care systems and investing in Aboriginal service organisations, Aboriginal service practices and Aboriginal workforce capacity.
- To see real and lasting change, the principle of collective responsibility for protecting children must extend to system stewardship. When diverse stakeholders learn and solve problems collaboratively they can foster more effective actions and better outcomes for children and families than they could otherwise accomplish.

Background

Australian state and territory child protection systems are facing significant challenges including:

- insufficient capacity to meet the quantity and complexity of cases into statutory child protection and out-of-home care (OOHC);
- practice concerns in statutory child protection;
- presentation of families with more chronic and complex risks and needs requiring a response that crosses the boundaries of government agencies that isn't always available;
- the intergenerational cycle of abuse and neglect;
- failure to improve outcomes for children in OOHC;
- unstable OOHC placements, poor outcomes for care leavers; and
- over-representation of Aboriginal children in statutory child protection and OOHC (see reports of public inquiries and reviews referenced in Appendix A and Katz, Cortis, Shlonsky, & Mildon, 2016).

This has created an imperative to go beyond incremental adjustments and aim for transformational change. There is no single optimal system to protect children from abuse and neglect (Katz, 2015) and as Munro stated, there “was no golden age” of child protection (2010, p. 9). Each country must work within its own particular cultural, community, resource and societal context to tackle the task of protecting children. However, jurisdictions can learn from each other and, in particular, from other sectors who take a similar approach to building child protection systems (Connolly, 2014).

The aim of this paper is to chart the changes in Australia in recent years, so jurisdictions can learn from reform happening elsewhere. The paper includes some broad observations on how our systems are evolving and how they can be steered towards their objectives for children and families in the future.

