

MEDIA RELEASE

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Sustainability of child protection systems questioned: Study shows government spending doubled to \$10b over decade

New research has found government spending on child protection services nearly doubled to more than \$10 billion across a decade, while child protection activity stayed largely the same.

The first of its kind study, undertaken by researchers at Australian Catholic University in collaboration with partner Universities, tracked a full decade of child protection system activity alongside government expenditure. It used publicly reported data from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and the Productivity Commission.

The researchers found that in the decade leading up to 2024, government spending on child protection nearly doubled from \$5.4 billion to \$10.2 billion – an increase of \$1,078 to \$1,765 per child.

Despite the increased spend, there was no change in the number of children subject to safety investigations between 2014 (20.2 per 1,000 children) and 2024 (20.9 per 1,000 children).

Australian Catholic University's Director of the Institute for Child Protection Studies (ICPS) Professor Daryl Higgins said the research highlights the need for a national child abuse prevention strategy.

“We currently have a strategy to prevent child sexual abuse, but the abuse and neglect of children is wide-ranging and complex,” Professor Higgins said.

“We need a cohesive approach across the states and territories to focus funding where it is needed most – prevention.”

In each year of the decade studied more than 50 per cent of children who came into contact with child protection had already been the subject of a safety investigation.

Lead Author Dr Claudia Bull, from the Deakin Lifespan Institute, said this suggests there are persistent unmet needs among children and families.

“A significant proportion of government spending – about 64 per cent – goes towards out-of-home care and other supported placements,” she said.

“This means there's less money for services that support families earlier and prevent children from entering the system in the first place.”

While the national number of investigations was consistent over ten years, there were variations in the data at state level.

Rates in NSW and Tasmania trended down over the study period, while the Northern Territory consistently had the highest rates nationally and South Australia's investigation rate more than doubled.

Emotional abuse is now the most frequently substantiated type of harm, according to the data, climbing from 43 per cent to 57 per cent of substantiated reports over the study period. It has now overtaken physical abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect.

The disconnect between rising expenditure and stable activity raises critical questions about whether increased resources lead to improved outcomes.

“Our study raises questions about system sustainability and efficiency. If we want better outcomes for Australian children, we need to rebalance funding across prevention, early intervention, and system responses to child protection,” Dr Bull said.

ICPS Director Professor Daryl Higgins, who co-authored the new research along with Dr Claudia Bull, of Deakin University, Professor Delyse Hutchinson, of Deakin University, Dr Lakshmi Neelakantan, of The University of Melbourne, Dr Jaimie Northam, of Western Sydney University and Honorary Associate Professor Debbie Scott, of Deakin University, said global evidence shows abuse and neglect of children is preventable.

“Our attitudes towards children must change to value them and prioritise their safety. We have clear evidence that we need to do more to prevent harm and support families who have already come to the attention of a child protection service,” he said.

Read the study [here](#).

ICPS Director Daryl Higgins is available for interview.

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