



Children with special health care needs and involvement with child protection services

What is the study about?

The study **Child protection services for children with special healthcare needs: a population record linkage study** (Hindmarsh et al. 2020) examines the characteristics of contact with child protection services for children in the early childhood years (ages 5-6) with special health care needs (SHCN).

This peer-reviewed study led by the University of New South Wales was completed using data from the New South Wales Child Development Study (NSW-CDS). The NSW-CDS is a longitudinal population study of the mental health and wellbeing of more than 90,000 children born in NSW between 2000 and 2006. It links administrative records from multiple NSW agencies spanning health, education, child protection and criminal justice, with cross-sectional assessments collected in early and middle childhood.

What measures were used by the researchers?

The study analysed data from the 65,349 children with required data from the 2009 Australian Early Development Census (AEDC). Children were categorised as having ‘special needs’ or ‘impairments of concern’ based on school-teacher recordings of the following items of the AEDC:

- *Special needs* - teacher responses to whether the child required “special assistance (with school work) due to chronic medical, physical or intellectually disabling conditions (e.g., autism, cerebral palsy, down syndrome) based on a medical diagnosis or diagnoses”.
- *Impairments of concern* – teacher responses marking any impairments or conditions which they perceive influences the child’s ability to do work in the classroom (e.g., physical disability, vision impairment, hearing impairment, speech impairment, learning disability, emotional problems and behavioural problems).

Children with a child protection contact prior to the age of 6 years were classified into four sub-groups based on their highest levels of child protection contact: non-threshold Risk of Significant Harm (ROSH) reports, unsubstantiated ROSH reports, substantiated ROSH reports, and children placed in out-of-home care (OOHC).

What did the study find?

- Of the 65,349 children included in the study, 2,667 (4.1%) were identified as having special needs and 5,608 (8.6%) as having impairments of concern.
- Children with SHCN (whether designated with special needs or identified as having impairments of concern) were up to two times more likely to be known to child protection services in the early years of childhood, relative to children without SHCN.
- Children in both of the SHCN groups were less likely to be returned to the care of parents compared to children known to child protection services without SHCN. Children with special needs were twice as likely to be placed in OOHC, compared to their peers without SHCN.

- Other factors which also increased the likelihood of child protection contact included: Indigenous status, perinatal and birth risk factors, parental mental illness, socioeconomic factors and parental criminal offending history.



Approximately
30%
of children known to child protection services have SHCN

Compared to children known to child protection services without SHCN, children with SHCN are:



2-3x more likely
to have been the subject of substantiated or non-substantiated ROSH reports



3-6x more likely
to be placed in OOHC

What do these findings mean?

The study highlights that children with special needs are more likely to be in contact with child protection services at a young age. The findings are consistent with previous literature which demonstrates the influence of a range of adversities (i.e., sociodemographic, perinatal and birth, and parental factors) and risk of maltreatment for children with SHCN.

It is important that the present findings are not interpreted to suggest that SHCN is a consequence of early childhood contact with child protection services (or vice versa). The results of this study should be considered by frontline workers and agencies working with children who have SHCN so they are better able to assess risks and vulnerabilities and provide appropriate services and supports. Given the prevalence of children with SHCN among children reported to child protection services (approximately 30 per cent), it is important that workers in child protection are aware and attentive to the needs of children with SHCN. Australian agencies involved with children with SHCN should ensure they receive appropriate care in safe and supportive environments, to achieve positive outcomes. Similarly, children identified with SHCN and their families should be provided with appropriate supports to help prevent them coming into contact with child protection services.

About the NSW Child Development Study

The NSW-CDS is a longitudinal study of the mental health and wellbeing of a cohort of children who started kindergarten in NSW in 2009. It aims to obtain good quality information about the development of these children to map patterns of resilience and vulnerability for later mental health, education, work, and other outcomes. The NSW-CDS will follow these children from birth into early adulthood via successive waves of record linkage. Find out more about the [NSW-CDS](#).

The original research paper is:

Hindmarsh, G, Laurens, KR, Katz, I, Butler, M, Harris, F, Carr, VJ & Green, MJ 2020, 'Child protection services for children with special healthcare needs: a population record linkage study', *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, vol.56, no.2, pp.223-243, DOI [10.1002/ajs4.145](https://doi.org/10.1002/ajs4.145).



Produced by

Research and Knowledge Translation team
Family and Community Services Insights Analysis and Research (FACSIAR)
NSW Department of Communities and Justice
Email: facsiar@dcj.nsw.gov.au