

The prevalence of intergenerational links in child protection and out-of-home care in NSW

This brief presents a summary of findings from an analysis of intergenerational child protection issues using currently available historical data from the NSW Department of Family and Community Services (FACS) client information systems.

Key messages

- Research studies show that while most children who experience child abuse and neglect do not go on to abuse their own children, they may be more likely to have children who experience abuse and neglect than parents who did not experience childhood abuse and neglect.
- This analysis highlights the intergenerational links present in the child protection system in NSW.
- The findings show the intergenerational links are stronger for those children and young people who were in out-of-home care (OOHC) and for Aboriginal children and young people.
- Almost one-third of children and young people involved with the NSW statutory child protection system in 2014–15 had at least one parent who had either been reported or were in OOHC when they were a child. The intergenerational link was strongest for children and young people in OOHC with almost one-half having a parent who had either been reported or were in OOHC when they were a child.
- A similar picture is evident when looking at the group of children and young people who were involved in the NSW child protection system during 1987–88 to 1989–90. Around 16% of children and young people who were reported during this time have a child who has since been reported to FACS or been in OOHC. For those who were in OOHC as children, almost 30% have a child who is known to FACS.
- More work is needed to build an accurate understanding of the extent and causes of intergenerational child abuse and neglect, and to identify groups who may be particularly vulnerable, so that agencies can intervene more effectively and achieve better outcomes for children, young people and families.

Introduction

This brief presents a summary of findings from an analysis of intergenerational child protection issues using currently available historical data from the NSW Department of Family and Community Services (FACS) client information systems.

Intergenerational child protection issues are explored by:

- Looking at children and young people who are currently in the child protection system (i.e. they were reported to FACS at risk of significant harm (ROSH) and/or were in out-of-home care (OOHC) during 2014–15) and determining those whose parents had been the subject of a report and/or in an OOHC placement.
- Looking at former clients of the child protection system (i.e. those who were the subject of a report and/or were in OOHC during the period from 1 July 1987 to 30 June 1990) and determining those whose children had been the subject of a report and/or had an OOHC placement during the period from 1 July 1987 to 30 June 2015.

This analysis presents findings by FACS districts, Aboriginality, age and number of reports.

Background

Intergenerational patterns of child abuse and neglect are complex. Although most children who experience maltreatment do not go on to abuse or neglect their own children, studies have consistently found they are more likely to have children who are abused or neglected than children who were born to parents who had not experienced childhood maltreatment (Berlin, Appleyard & Dodge, 2011; Kwong, Bartholomew, Henderson, & Trinke, 2003; Li, Godinet & Arnsberger, 2010; Pears & Capaldi, 2001; Thompson, 2006).

Many of the factors that help explain the occurrence of intergenerational child abuse and neglect are not unique to families with a parent who has experienced childhood maltreatment, and may in fact be more significant in explaining a child's overall risk than the influence of parental history (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016). There is also evidence that, while children of parents who have experienced childhood maltreatment are at increased risk of abuse or neglect, the perpetrator may not be that parent but another caregiver.

A commonly cited review of the literature concluded that the best estimate of the rate of intergenerational child abuse and neglect is about 30% (Kaufman and Zigler 1987). However, the true extent of links across generations is unclear with different studies reporting rates of intergenerational child abuse and neglect that range from 7% to 70% (Berzenski, Yates & Egeland, 2014).

More work is needed to build an accurate understanding of the extent and causes of intergenerational child maltreatment, and to identify groups who may be particularly vulnerable. This present analysis recognises this context. While it aims to reveal some of the intergenerational child protection links present in the NSW system, further work would be needed to understand the complex factors that explain these patterns.

Method

Available data was used in this analysis and are from the Child Protection and OOHC Annual Statistical Extracts from 1987–88 to 2014–15. These data were extracted from the relevant client information system in use at the time.

Children and parents were linked using ‘relationship’ information extracted from the Key Information Directory System (KiDS). A search of the historical data was undertaken to determine if the parents had ever been reported or had an OOHC placement. These parents were considered to be ‘known to FACS’.

The historical data available for this analysis are from 1987–88 onwards, so it is only possible to identify parents or children reported or in OOHC from 1 July 1987 up until the end of the study at 30 June 2015.

A parent who was born on 1 July 1987 would be aged 28 by the end of the follow-up period. Therefore, to be identified as a parent who was known to FACS, the parent would need to have had a child by the time they were aged 28 years and that child would have needed to have been the subject of a report and/or entered OOHC by 30 June 2015. If a parent was older at 1 July 1987 then they would have had a greater chance of having had a child by 30 June 2015.

Findings

Summary

- Overall, findings from the analysis show the intergenerational links are stronger for those children and young people who were in OOHC and for Aboriginal children and young people. The analysis did not investigate the statistical significance of differences between cohorts and different locations.
- Almost one-third of children and young people involved with the NSW statutory child protection system in 2014–15 had at least one parent who had either been reported or was in OOHC when they were a child.
- The intergenerational link was strongest for children and young people who had been in OOHC during 2014–15 with almost one-half having a parent who had either been reported or was in OOHC when they were a child.
- Aboriginal children and young people were more likely to have an intergenerational link than non-Aboriginal children and young people.
- Around 16% of the children and young people involved with the child protection system between 1 July 1987 and 30 June 1990 have children who were either the subject of a report or were in an OOHC placement.
- Again, the link is stronger for those who were in OOHC as children. Almost 30% of those who were in OOHC at some time from 1987–88 to 1989–90 have a child who is known to FACS compared to around 13% of those who had a report only but were not in OOHC.
- Almost half of the Aboriginal people in the cohort had a child who was known to FACS compared with 15% of non-Aboriginal people in the cohort.

Children and young people involved with the child protection system in 2014-15

In 2014–15, almost 90,000 children and young people were involved with the NSW statutory child protection system, either through a ROSH report, a caseworker assessment, or an OOHC placement.

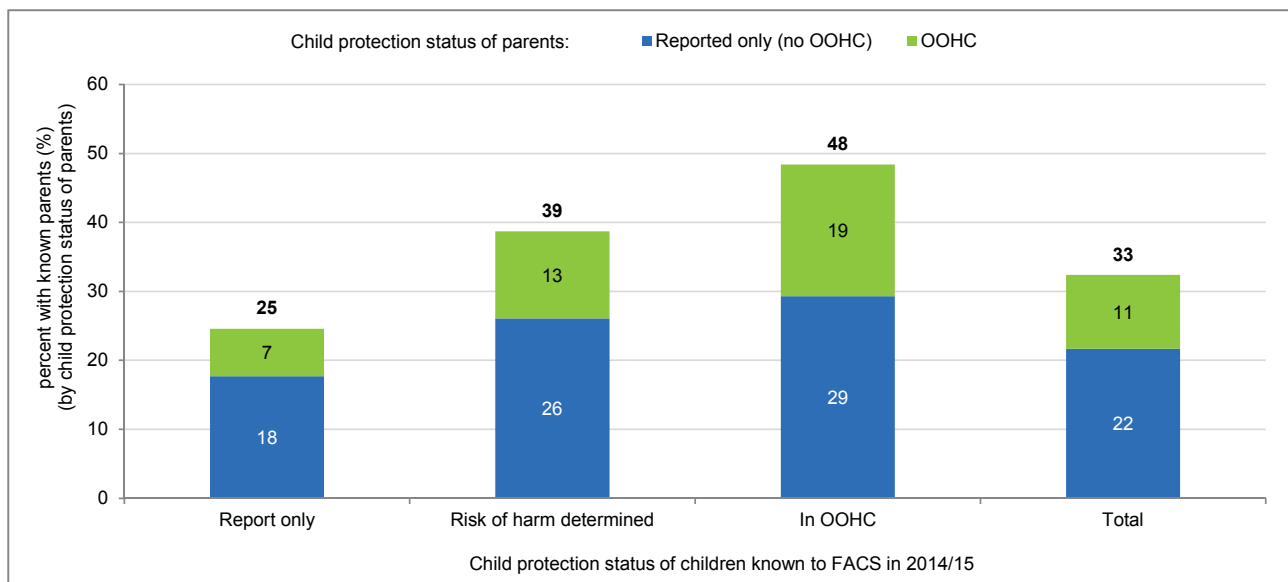
Of these, around one-third had an intergenerational link (Figure 1). That is, 1 in 3 of these children and young people had at least one parent who had either been reported or was in OOHC when they were a child.

For the children and young people in OOHC, the link was stronger. Almost one-half of all children and young people in OOHC during 2014–15 had a parent who was either in OOHC as a child (this is the case for 20% of all children in OOHC in 2014–15) or who was reported as a child (for 30% of all children in OOHC in 2014–15).

For children and young people with a substantiated ROSH report in 2014–15 (but who had not been in care during this period), almost 40% had an intergenerational child protection link. Around 1 in 8 had a parent who had been in OOHC and a quarter had a parent who had been reported only.

For those children who were reported at ROSH in 2014–15 (and did not have a substantiated report or an OOHC placement during this period), around 1 in 4 had a parent who had either been reported or in OOHC as a child.

Figure 1. Proportion of children and young people involved with the child protection system in 2014–15 by the child protection status of their parents and their child protection status

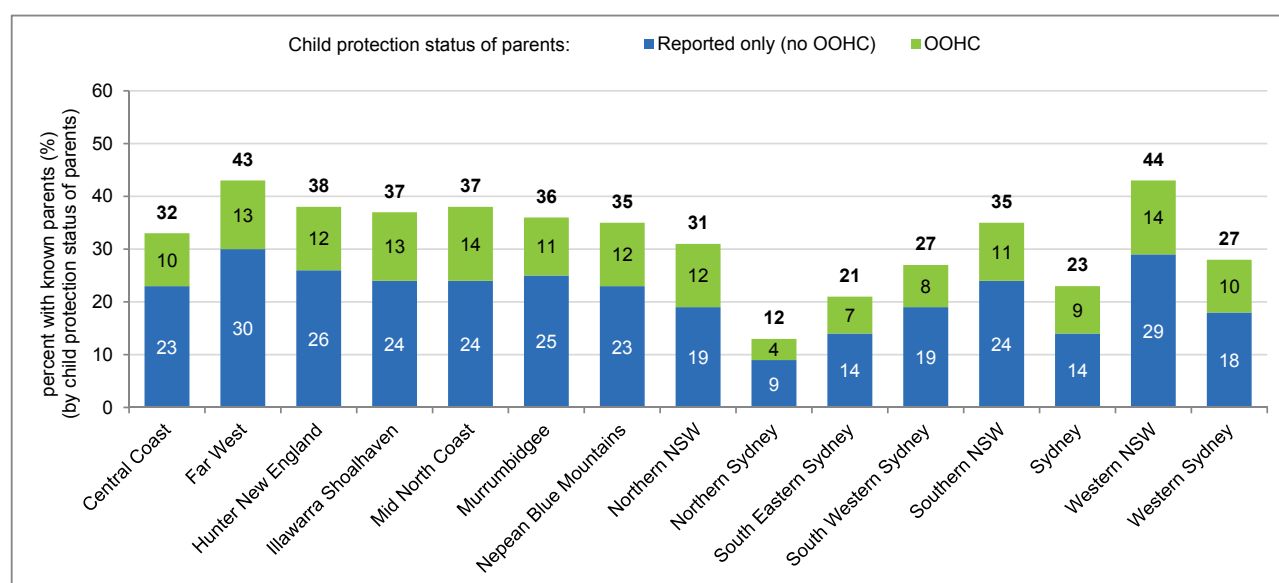


Source: FACS KiDS Data, CIW

Findings by FACS district

Disaggregating by FACS district shows that Western NSW and Far West districts had the highest proportions (both around 43%) of children and young people involved with the child protection system in 2014–15 who had a parent known to FACS as a child (Figure 2). Northern Sydney district had the lowest proportion with 1 in 8 children and young people having had at least one parent who had been reported or was in OOHC when they were a child.

Figure 2. Proportion of children and young people involved with the child protection system in 2014–15 by the child protection status of their parents, by district

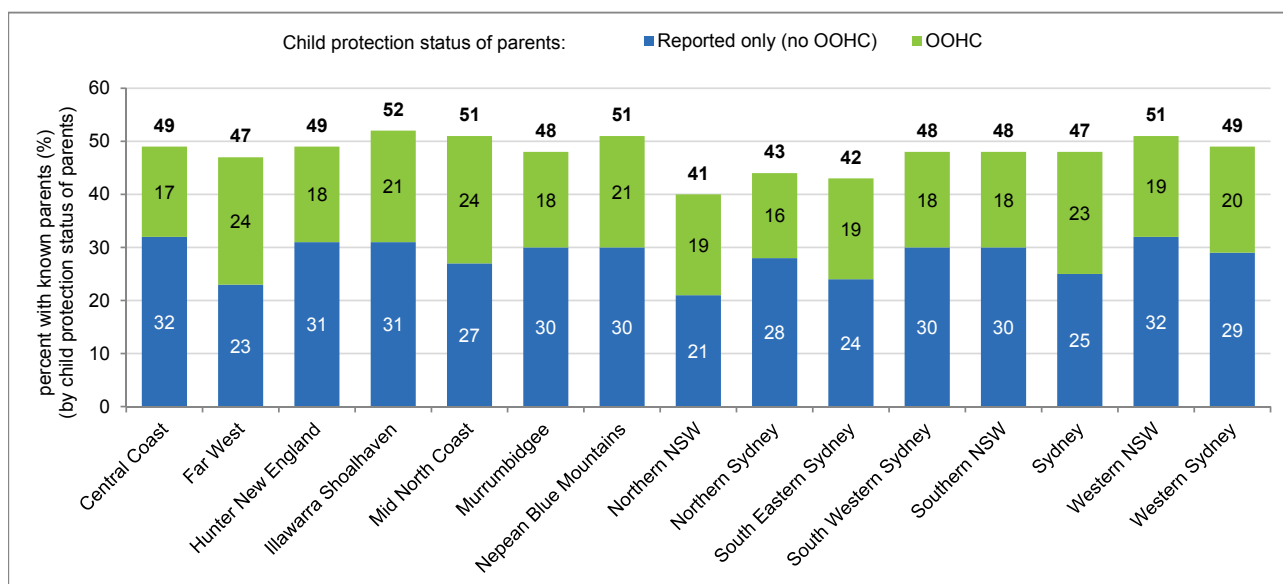


Source: FACS KIDS Data, CIW

The pattern is similar when looking at children and young people who were reported at ROSH in 2014–15 (and did not have a substantiated report or an OOHC placement during this period) and children and young people who had a substantiated ROSH report in 2014–15 (but did not have an OOHC placement during this period).

However, for those children and young people who had been in OOHC in 2014–15, the distribution was much flatter (Figure 3). In most districts around half of the children and young people who were in OOHC in 2014–15 had a parent who was either reported or in OOHC as a child. For Northern NSW, Northern Sydney and South Eastern Sydney the proportion was lower (around 41–43%).

Figure 3. Proportion of children and young people who were in OOHC in 2014–15 by the child protection status of their parents and district



Source: FACS Kids Data, CIW

Aboriginality

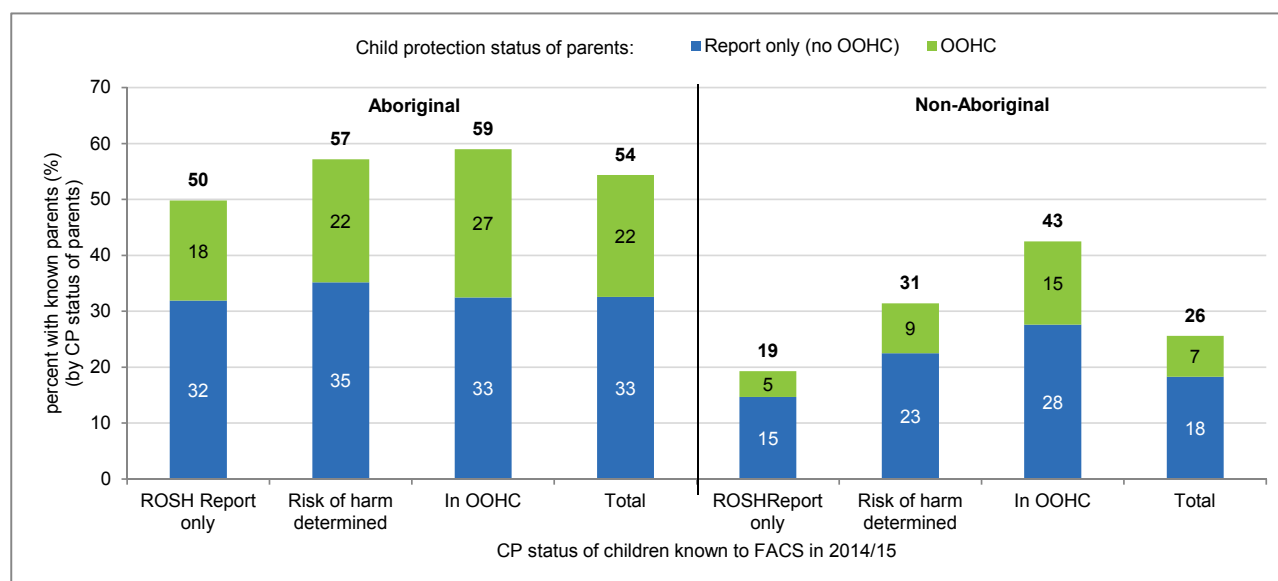
Around 55% of Aboriginal children and young people involved with the child protection system in 2014–15 had an intergenerational link compared with around a quarter of non-Aboriginal children (Figure 4).

Approximately 60% of Aboriginal children and young people who were in OOHC during 2014–15 had a parent who was known to the child protection system as a child compared to 43% of non-Aboriginal children and young people who were in OOHC during 2014–15.

Just over 57% of Aboriginal children and young people who were determined to be at actual or risk of harm during 2014–15 (but who did not have an OOHC placement in this period) had a parent who was known to the child protection system as a child compared to 31% for non-Aboriginal children and young people.

Half of the Aboriginal children and young people with a ROSH report only in 2014–15 had a parent who was known to the child protection system as a child – this compares with 19% for non-Aboriginal children.

Figure 4. Proportion of children and young people involved with the child protection system in 2014–15 by their child protection status, Aboriginality and the child protection status of their parents



Source: FACS KIDS Data, CIW

Aboriginality and FACS district

The pattern was similar across most districts with notable differences in Northern Sydney, South Eastern Sydney, Sydney and Western Sydney districts (not shown). In these districts, the proportion of Aboriginal children with an intergenerational link was at least three times that of non-Aboriginal children. For example, in Sydney district around 55% of Aboriginal children who were involved with the child protection system in 2014–15 had a parent who was known to the child protection system when they were a child. This compares to around 16% for non-Aboriginal children.

These same districts, along with South Western Sydney district, had a much greater proportion of Aboriginal children reported at ROSH only in 2014–15 who had a parent who was known to the child protection system as a child compared with non-Aboriginal children reported at ROSH only in 2014–15. For example, in Northern Sydney and Sydney districts the proportion of Aboriginal children reported at ROSH only in 2014–15 with an intergenerational link was around five times that of the non-Aboriginal children reported at ROSH only in 2014–15.

Children and young people involved with the child protection system between 1 July 1987 and 30 June 1990

Over the three year period from 1 July 1987 to 30 June 1990, there were almost 48,000 children and young people who were the subject of at least one concern report to FACS (a report) or were in an OOHC placement at some point during this period.

Of these, around 16% have children who were either the subject of a report or were in an OOHC placement (i.e. were known to FACS) at some point during the follow-up period (i.e. up until 30 June 2015). This means that around 84% of the cohort did not have a child who was known to FACS either because they have not had children or they have had children who have not been reported or entered OOHC.

Again, the link is stronger for those who were in OOHC as children. Almost 30% of those who were in OOHC at some time from 1987–88 to 1989–90 have a child who is known to FACS compared to around 13% of those who had a report only but were not in OOHC. Those who were in OOHC at some time from 1987–88 to 1989–90 were also more likely to have their own children enter OOHC compared to those who were the subject of a report only during 1987–88 to 1989–90.

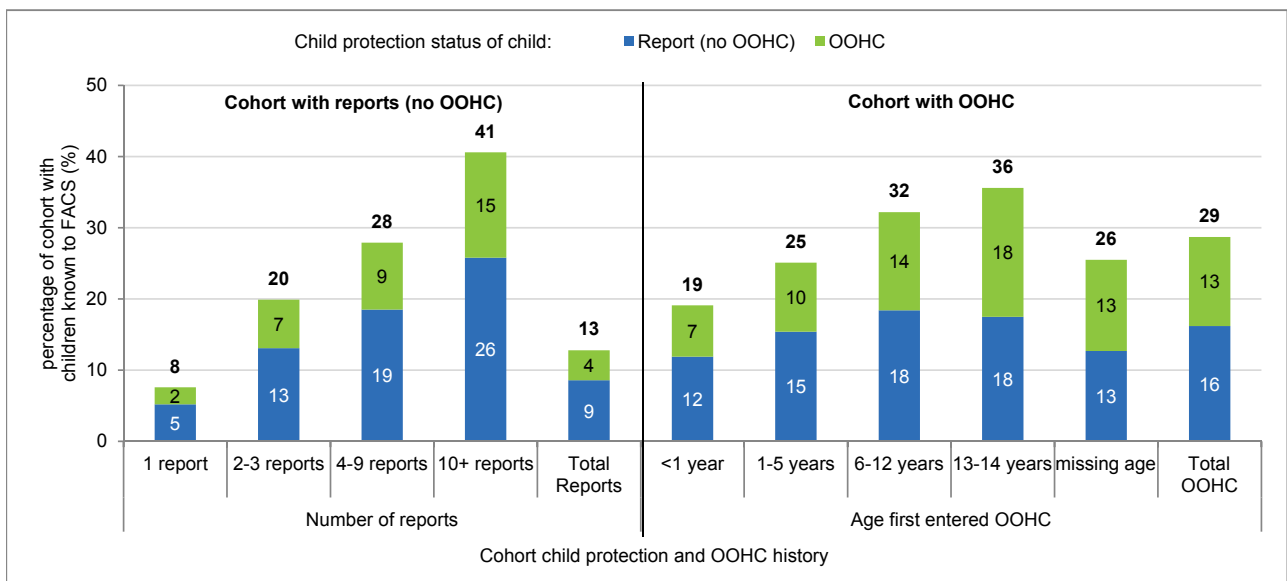
Age and number of reports

The likelihood of having an intergenerational link varied by age at entry to OOHC and the number of reports (Figure 5).

For those in the cohort who entered OOHC when they were aged less than one year old, almost 20% had a child who became known to FACS compared to 36% of the cohort who entered OOHC aged 13 to 14 years.

For people in the cohort who were the subject of a report but who did not enter OOHC, the likelihood of their own children being known to FACS increased with the number of reports they received. Of the people in the cohort who were the subject of one report, 8% had a child who was known to FACS compared to around 40% of those who were the subject of 10 or more.

Figure 5. Proportion of the cohort with children known to FACS by cohort child protection and OOHC history and by the child protection status of their children



Source: FACS KiDS Data, CIW

Aboriginality

Table 1 shows that almost half of the Aboriginal people in the cohort had a child who was known to FACS compared with 15% of non-Aboriginal people in the cohort.

Almost two thirds of Aboriginal people in the cohort who had been in OOHC had a child who was known to FACS and over a third had a child who had been in OOHC. In comparison, a quarter of non-Aboriginal people in the cohort who had been in OOHC had a child who was known to FACS. In fact, Aboriginal people in the cohort who had been reported only were somewhat more likely to have a child known to FACS (29%) than non-Aboriginal people in the cohort who had been in OOHC (25%).

Table 1. Children and young people who were the subject of a report or were in OOHC during 1 July 1987 to 30 June 1990 by their Aboriginality and by the child protection status of their children

Cohort status as at 30 June 2015	Child protection status of the children known to FACS				Total cohort with known children (Reported + OOHC)		Cohort with no known children		Total	
	Reported (no OOHC)		OOHC							
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Aboriginal	432	23.9%	421	23.3%	853	47.3%	952	52.7%	1,805	100.0%
Report (no OOHC)	149	16.9%	106	12.0%	255	28.9%	627	71.1%	882	100.0%
OOHC	283	30.7%	315	34.1%	598	64.8%	325	35.2%	923	100.0%
Non-Aboriginal	4,482	9.7%	2,471	5.4%	6,953	15.1%	39,038	84.9%	45,991	100.0%
Report (no OOHC)	3,027	8.4%	1,452	4.0%	4,479	12.4%	31,739	87.6%	36,218	100.0%
OOHC	1,455	14.9%	1,019	10.4%	2,474	25.3%	7,299	74.7%	9,773	100.0%
Total	4,914	10.3%	2,892	6.1%	7,806	16.3%	39,990	83.7%	47,796	100.0%

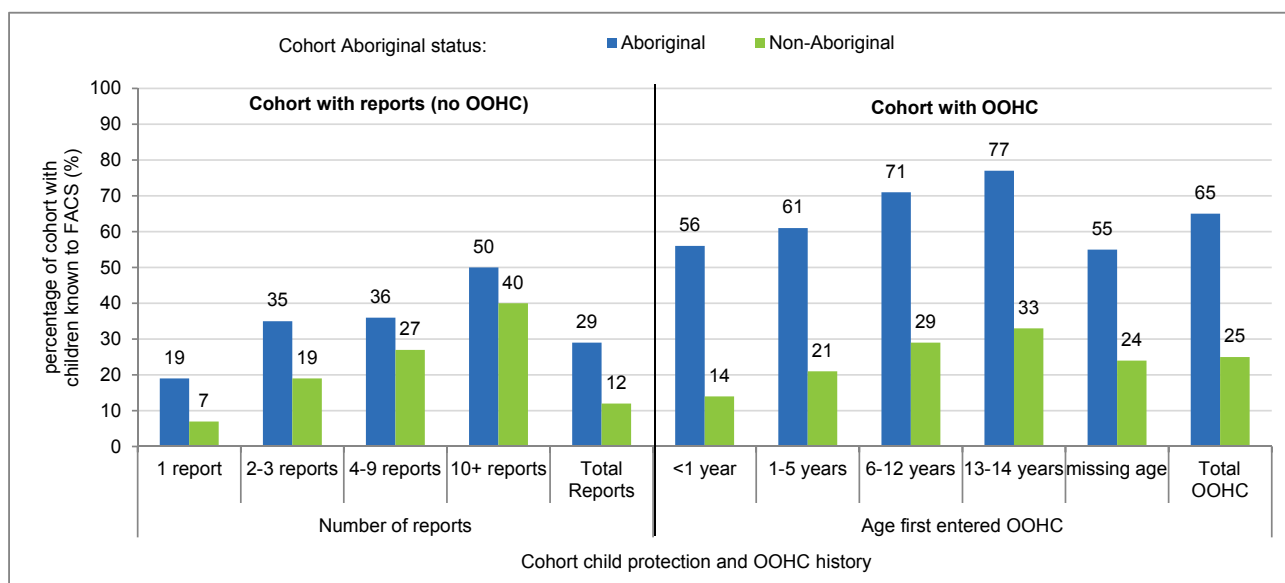
Source: FACS KiDS Data, CIW

Figure 6 shows that both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in the cohort who entered OOHC at a young age were less likely to have their own children known to FACS than those who entered care between 1 and 14 years of age. However, the proportions were considerably higher for Aboriginal people in the cohort compared to non-Aboriginal people in the cohort.

Of the non-Aboriginal people in the cohort that entered OOHC when they were aged less than one year 14% had a child known to FACS. This is less than the lowest proportion of the non-Aboriginal cohort with multiple reports only (i.e. no OOHC) at 19% for 2-3 reports. This is not the case for Aboriginal people in the cohort that entered OOHC when they were aged less than one year with over half (56%) having children known to FACS compared to 50% of Aboriginal people in the cohort with 10 or more reports.

Over three quarters (77%) of Aboriginal people in the cohort who entered OOHC when they were 13-14 years of age have a child who is known to FACS. This compares with a third of the non-Aboriginal people in the cohort.

Figure 6. Proportion of the cohort with children known to FACS by cohort Aboriginality, child protection history and OOHC history



Source: FACS KIDS Data, CIW

Conclusion

This analysis highlights the intergenerational issues present in the child protection system with almost a third of the children and young people involved in the child protection system in 2014–15 having a parent who was reported and/or was in OOHC as a child. The link is stronger for those children and young people who were in OOHC in 2014–15 with almost half of these children and young people having a parent who was either in OOHC as a child or who was reported as a child.

A similar picture is evident when looking at the cohort of children and young people reported or in OOHC during 1987–88 to 1989–90 with around 16% having children who were known to FACS. For those who were in OOHC as children, almost 30% have a child who is known to FACS.

Despite decades of research on intergenerational patterns of maltreatment, it is not yet clear why experiencing maltreatment in childhood is a risk factor for one's own children experiencing abuse or neglect, or what factors make the greatest difference for families. Further analysis is planned to understand how the characteristics and outcomes of those whose children are known to FACS differ from those whose children are not known to FACS. This will require data linkage to look at the health, education, housing, justice and welfare outcomes of the cohort of children and young people reported or in OOHC during 1987–88 to 1989–90.

Further analysis of the intergenerational linkages across multiple FACS services is also planned. Preliminary analysis of the cohort of children and young people who were involved in a ROSH report in 2013–14 shows that around 18% of them were in social housing at some point in the ten year period from 2004–05 to 2013–14.

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