

## 12 Conclusion and future directions

The data presented in this report make up an important but incomplete snapshot of how well children and young people in Queensland are faring. As new and better data are obtained from external agencies/sources or generated through the Commission's Child Guardian function and research activity, the subject matter of the snapshot may change and there may be a clearer focus and more detail. There are nonetheless some very important observations that can be made about this year's snapshot.

### Children and young people in Queensland

Longer term increases in the number of substantiated cases of child abuse and neglect are clearly areas of concern. However, care needs to be exercised in interpreting trends, particularly in interpreting administrative data, as changes may reflect other factors such as improvements in practices and processes.

In most areas of health and wellbeing, the data show that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in Queensland are worse off than other children and young people. This can be seen through:

- higher mortality rates
- higher teenage fertility rates
- greater likelihood of living in single-parent families
- greater likelihood of being born with a low birthweight
- higher rates of substantiated child abuse and neglect
- fewer children achieving national benchmarks in numeracy and literacy
- lower rates of retention to Year 12, and
- higher rates of youth detention.

Children and young people in the child protection system are also shown to be vulnerable. Victims of child abuse and neglect often experience serious long-term effects on their physical and emotional wellbeing, impacting on many aspects of life. This can include their ability to form healthy relationships and to achieve in education and in the workplace. For example, children in the care of the state are much less likely to achieve national literacy and numeracy benchmarks, compared with the general school population.

The Commission's recent survey of children and young people in out-of-home care found that, although many do not think their views are taken seriously, the majority are happy in their care situation, feel safe and well treated, and believe that their situation has improved over the last year.

These findings are consistent with other data sources as outlined in the 2005 and 2006 Child Guardian reports.

Child protection issues of particular concern in Queensland include:

- children who have substantiated harm or risk of harm and who are the subject of a re-substantiation
- children in care who experience unsuccessful reunifications with their family
- children in care who have many placements or who have been in care for long periods without permanency planning, and
- children in care with substantiated harm, where the person responsible was a member of the carer household.

### Prevention and early intervention

The development of a whole-of-government prevention and early intervention strategy has been a long-term commitment by the Queensland Government, particularly since the Crime and Misconduct Commission's (CMC) recommendations in 2004 to reform the child safety system. Of particular significance was the CMC's view that prevention should be recognised as a continuum from primary to tertiary levels, rather than as mutually exclusive activities. This emphasises the need for a whole-of-government approach to the delivery of prevention services before a child comes to the attention of the Department of Child Safety.

The *Queensland Early Years Strategy* is being developed in recognition of the need for prevention and early intervention during the early years of a child's life (antenatal to 8 years of age). This strategy aims to build on existing child and family support services and enhance their delivery of coordinated and integrated services. Components of the strategy include:

- the *Best Start – Supporting Families in the Early Years* initiative represents the foundation to a comprehensive Early Years Strategy and will be used to support families with young children through community, child health and parenting support programs
- the *Referral for Active Intervention (RAI)* initiative provides funding for intensive support services with a specific focus on families with young children (0–8 years) who have had involvement in the statutory child protection system
- four *Early Years Centres* will provide a range of support, education, health and welfare services, with the possibility of targeted or intensive services to be delivered to families if required
- the *Early Intervention and Parenting Support* initiative, which provides free parenting programs such as the Triple P Positive Parenting Program in urban, rural and remote communities
- the *Early Intervention for Safe and Healthy Families* initiative integrates nurse home visiting and domestic violence programs, to provide early intervention during the first year of a newborn's life, for families with the key risk factors, and
- the *Expanded Child Health Centre* initiative, which provides for an enhanced range of health services for infants, children and their families.

## Developments to improve child safety

The *Queensland Child Protection Strategy* is designed to support, inform and guide Queensland Government agencies and the non-government sector on their roles and responsibilities in providing support to vulnerable children and young people and their families.

The government has also put in place a whole-of-government model of child protection. This model involves all government agencies identified as having a key role in the promotion of child safety. It is designed to provide a continuum of care, from the prevention and early intervention strategies offered by the Department of Communities to the child protection intervention and support offered through the Department of Child Safety.

Some changes include:

- the adoption of an evidence-based structured decision-making process by the Department of Child Safety to assess risk and enhance consistency and outcomes for children
- individual education support plans for children and young people in care – analyses of literacy and numeracy test results for children in care are

published and will be used to monitor progress on a regular basis

- health assessment plans for children and young people in care
- therapeutic services for children in care with mental health and behavioural problems
- a national register of offenders who have committed sexual or other serious offences against children – people on this register are required to provide personal information to the police to reduce the likelihood of their re-offending and to aid the investigation and prosecution of any future offences (information required includes their current address, details of children living in the same household, employment, club affiliations, and interstate and international travel)
- a Child Abduction Alert system implemented across Queensland, which aims to ensure the safe recovery of abducted children through urgent public broadcasts of information about the missing child
- an integrated police response to domestic violence and child protection, to ensure that children who are identified as living with a perpetrator or victim of domestic violence are assessed to determine their risk of harm
- information resources aimed at educating children on internet safety
- an integrated client management system to centralise data management on children in the child protection system.

The Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian has functions that monitor services provided to children in the child protection system and that target prevention and early intervention strategies for vulnerable children and young people. These include:

- a Community Visitor Program which ensures that all children in alternative care (including foster care) are visited on a regular basis, so that the reasonableness of their service provision can be monitored and issues addressed if necessary
- an independent Child Death Case Review Committee to review the Department of Child Safety's internal and external reviews of child deaths where those children have been known to the department
- a Child Death Register maintained by the Commission for research and reporting on all child deaths in Queensland, and
- a requirement for regulated businesses and employers to implement a risk management strategy for children's safety and wellbeing – free training is available from the Commission to help organisations and businesses to clarify the purpose of a child protection risk management strategy and explain what it means in practice.

The Commission through its annual Child Guardian report will continue to monitor and report on outcomes for children and young people in the child protection system.

## Developments to improve Indigenous health and wellbeing

*Partnerships Queensland* is an integrated policy framework that unites existing Queensland Government Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policies. Cross-agency Response Plans have been developed to cover seven priority action areas:

- healthy outcomes for babies 0–12 months
- optimal development in early childhood, 13 months to 6 years
- successful childhood, 7–14 years
- transition to adulthood, 15–24 years
- healthy, prosperous and safe adulthood, 25 years and older
- economic security and employment participation, and
- cultural strength.

Monitoring trends in key indicators of Indigenous health and wellbeing is the first step in the process of developing targeted programs and interventions to address any disadvantage. Working towards this is the Department of Communities' *Partnerships Queensland: Baseline Report 2006* with information on the health and wellbeing of Queensland's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The *Partnerships Queensland* initiative aims to address alcohol abuse and related violence in Indigenous communities, which contribute to the over-representation of Indigenous children and young people in the child protection system. The initial focus on alcohol supply restrictions has now been complemented by the Alcohol and other Substances Demand Reduction Program. Demand reduction will offer alternatives to drug and alcohol use for young people and families, including sports, recreation, arts, cultural and entertainment programs. In addition, the program aims to improve alcohol and drug service delivery through partnerships and workforce development.

Queensland Health and SIDS and KIDS are undertaking a joint project to develop health promotional resources for use in Indigenous communities, with the aim of the resources being to raise awareness of the risk and protective factors for SIDS.

## Other developments

Legislation introduced in July 2006 protects child workers and volunteers, as a result of the Commission's *Review of Child Labour* – including broad safeguards for children in paid and unpaid work, a general minimum working age, and “light work” provisions to limit children's hours of work during school terms.