

## Foreword

It is my pleasure to present *Snapshot 2009: Children and young people in Queensland*. This is the seventh *Snapshot* report published by the Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian (the Commission).

The Commission is the lead agency responsible for overseeing the rights, interests and wellbeing of children and young people in Queensland, particularly those most vulnerable. We do this in a number of ways. We monitor laws, policies and practices, investigate complaints about services for children, review child deaths, regularly visit children placed in alternative care and administer the blue card system.

The Commission produces a number of publications – including the *Child Guardian Report*, the *Child Deaths Annual Report* and the *Views of Children and Young People* series – that draw on data generated through our systemic monitoring activities and engagement with children and young people in state care. We also undertake an important research function that is designed to support policies and programs for children and young people by providing a solid evidence base for advocacy and decision-making.

*Snapshot* features key findings from the Commission's other publications, together with data drawn from a wide range of external sources, to provide a comprehensive overview of matters relating to children and young people in Queensland. These data are supported by robust trend analyses highlighting the positive changes as well as areas for ongoing improvement.

Some promising trends in this year's *Snapshot* include the continuing declines in self-reported alcohol, tobacco and illicit drug use among young people, declines in neonatal and post-neonatal mortality, and general declines in youth victimisation and in offending behaviours. There are, however, areas of concern, including the significantly poorer outcomes experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people on a range of measures, and the growing numbers of children and young people under 5 about whom child protection concerns are raised and who subsequently are assessed as needing to be placed in alternative care.

As Commissioner, I work across a broad range of policy areas relating to children and young people. This consistently demonstrates to me how seemingly discrete policy areas are inextricably linked and how certain issues pervade so many aspects of children's and young people's lives. For example, early school success may be hindered if a child has an undetected hearing problem resulting from infections during infancy. Or, as is demonstrated by our own *Views* surveys, early disengagement from education may result if a child or young person moves school multiple times – as is often the experience of children and young people requiring alternative care.

I hope that *Snapshot* will not only provide you with the key data and findings that relate directly to your own specific area of interest, but also give you an opportunity to engage with some of the data and trends that may seem peripheral. Not only will this provide valuable context for your work, but I believe it is crucial to developing the shared understandings across sectors that are necessary for effective collaboration.

By working together and listening to the children and young people themselves, I remain confident that we can make Queensland a better place for children and young people.

Elizabeth Fraser

**Commissioner for Children and Young People and Child Guardian**

# Summary

The annual *Snapshot* report presents data from a range of sources to provide a population-level point-in-time portrait of safety and wellbeing of children and young people in Queensland, as well as demonstrating any changes over time through the presentation of trend data.

The strength of the *Snapshot* series is the use of contemporary data from a broad range of sources that build on the statistics reported in previous editions. The specific data presented and discussed in *Snapshot* comprise many widely recognised indicators of children's and young people's safety and wellbeing that are systematically gathered by agencies for a range of administrative and reporting purposes. Where possible, these data are presented as time series, with Queensland and Queensland Indigenous data differentiated from national data for purposes of comparison.

As well, *Snapshot* incorporates new and emerging issues where new information or data collections are available.

By reporting annually, *Snapshot* enables the Commission to monitor key indicators of children and young people's wellbeing. This provides the opportunity to identify improvements as well as areas where more needs to be done.

## The early years

Infant mortality rates have generally decreased over the past 15 years. Deaths from sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) are also generally decreasing, but this remains the leading cause of death of post-neonatal babies. The Indigenous infant mortality rate is decreasing slightly, but remains almost twice the Queensland rate.

Despite recent fluctuations, the proportion of babies born prematurely or of low birthweight is relatively stable. Babies born to Indigenous mothers are at increased risk of being born pre-term or of low birthweight, and both of these factors have been shown to contribute to higher infant mortality rates. Testing of clinical indicators at birth identified a small proportion (2.3%) of babies born in 2007 with difficulties that could lead to developmental or health problems.

Foetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) is difficult to diagnose in babies and children but can lead to significant developmental difficulties affecting growth and brain function. FAS appears to be more prevalent among Indigenous children.

Despite widespread public health campaigns promoting the health benefits of breastfeeding, only a small proportion of babies are exclusively breastfed for the recommended 6 months.

Children in our community aged under 1 year were at elevated risk of physical harm and neglect in 2007–08, with rates for this age group being approximately three times greater than the rates for any other age group. The number of children under 5 years who are assessed as needing alternative care has increased more than fourfold in the past decade.

There have been widespread reforms to the early childhood education and care sector, both nationally and in

Queensland. New initiatives include universal kindergarten access for all children by 2013, increases to the Child Care Benefit and the introduction of paid parental leave in 2011. A Pre-Prep program is being run in Indigenous communities throughout Queensland to promote children's early development and aid the transition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to Prep and school.

## Family and community

There has been a general trend for mothers to have fewer children, and to have them later in life. However, after a long period of fewer births and low fertility rates, there was a sharp increase in the number of births registered in Queensland in 2007. This is reflected in increased fertility rates for Queensland women, including the teenage fertility rate. The substantial increase in registered births is believed to be associated to some extent with changes to processes of registration as well as an increase in the actual number of births.

Family composition and structure have been changing over time, with more babies born to parents in de facto relationships, and divorce and separation being a common experience within many families. One in five children in Queensland now live in single-parent families.

In 2007, the 0–17 population represented about one-quarter of the total Queensland population. However, because of the ageing population, increased life expectancy and lower fertility rates, by 2056 it is projected that children and young people will make up only about one-fifth of the population.

Although the number of homeless high school students in Queensland appears to be declining, there are still worryingly high numbers of children and young people who are using Supported Accommodation Assistance Program services, either as clients themselves or accompanying their parents.

## Health and safety

There is converging evidence from several recent studies which indicates that approximately one-quarter of children and young people in Queensland (and Australia) are overweight or obese. This is linked to increased time engaged in sedentary activities such as computer games and watching television, in combination with poor dietary choices.

The increasing accessibility of technological devices such as the internet and mobile phones has seen an increase in a new form of bullying – cyber bullying. Cyber bullying is the intimidation, victimisation, harassment or bullying of an individual by means of text messages, emails, social networking sites or online chat rooms.

The reported use of alcohol, tobacco and illicit drugs among young people continues to decline, but about one-quarter of 16–17 year olds drink at levels that put them at risk of short-term harm at least once per month. The National Binge Drinking Strategy, announced in 2008, will seek to reduce the harmful effects of alcohol consumption by all Australians, but with an explicit focus on young people. The preference for alcopops (pre-mixed spirits), particularly by younger females, has led to the Australian Government's attempt to introduce an alcopop tax.

Although there have been continued decreases in the number of child protection notifications and substantiations of harm and neglect, this has not translated to fewer children and young people being placed on protection orders or in alternative care.

Mortality rates for children and young people are generally decreasing, with the exception being rates for 15–17 year olds, which have increased in recent years. On closer investigation, the increases are largely related to increases in transport-related deaths and suicides among males of this age cohort.

## Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population in Queensland continues to be substantially disadvantaged by family and community violence, drug and alcohol abuse, and poverty. These factors have contributed to Indigenous children and young people having poor health, education, safety and social development outcomes. For example:

- Indigenous perinatal and infant mortality rates are almost twice those of the general Queensland population.
- Indigenous babies are more likely to have a low birthweight and to be born prematurely.
- The Indigenous teenage fertility rate is about three times higher than the Queensland average.
- Foetal alcohol syndrome is more prevalent in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children than in their non-Indigenous peers.
- Indigenous children are more likely to be affected by hearing loss and to have poorer oral health than their non-Indigenous peers.

- The suicide rate for Indigenous young people is three to five times higher than the rate for non-Indigenous young people.
- Indigenous children are significantly over-represented in the child protection system, with almost one-third of all children in alternative care and on protective orders being Indigenous.
- A lower percentage of Indigenous children and young people reached the national minimum standards in literacy and numeracy across all age ranges.
- Indigenous students are less likely to finish school or to be eligible for an Overall Position (OP) score.
- Indigenous young people are 25 times more likely to be in youth detention than non-Indigenous young people.

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) has launched the *Closing the Gap* approach to reducing the levels of disadvantage as described above among Indigenous Australians through a series of coordinated actions and program implementations at the local, state and national level.

## Children and young people requiring alternative care

Although rates of substantiation of harm and neglect are decreasing in Queensland, the number of children placed in alternative care continues to increase. Children and young people assessed as needing protection and placed in care generally have poorer educational outcomes, as demonstrated by lower proportions meeting national minimum standards or benchmarks in literacy and numeracy testing. Educational underachievement is likely to limit education, training and employment opportunities for young people as they make the transition to adulthood.

The majority of children and young people who participated in the Commission's *Views of Children and Young People in Foster Care, Queensland, 2008* and *Views of Young People in Residential Care, Queensland, 2009* reported being happy in their current placement, and feeling safe and well treated.

The Commission advocates that child protection reforms in Queensland should continue to:

- strengthen targeted and early intervention support for families, children and young people in order to address risk factors and possibly divert children and young people from requiring child protection services
- strengthen education and therapeutic supports for children and young people who need alternative care
- improve placement stability to reduce the negative effects of disruptions in schooling and poor attachments with carers
- consider children's and young people's views during decision-making and facilitate participation that is appropriate to their age and development, and
- strengthen the capacity for systemic monitoring to provide early alerts of system weaknesses.

## Influencing positive change

Consistent with its legislated responsibility to promote and protect the rights, interests and wellbeing of all Queenslanders under the age of 18 years, the Commission has actively informed, contributed to and supported a wide range of government initiatives. The key objective is to improve children's safety, wellbeing, life chances and outcomes through effective prevention and early intervention.

Some important state and national initiatives, which are referred to in detail in the following chapters, are:

- *The National Child Protection Framework*
- *The Road Home: A national response to homelessness*
- *Closing the Gap*
- *The National Indigenous Reform Agenda*
- *The Cape York Welfare Reform Trial*
- *The Family Responsibilities Commission*
- *Pre-Prep for Indigenous Communities*, and
- *The National Early Childhood Education and Care Reform Agenda*.

## The Commission's role

The Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian is active in supporting and strengthening the Queensland Government's whole-of-government model for improved child protection through:

- participation in the interdepartmental Child Safety Directors Network and active engagement in progressing the network's agenda
- implementing the Child Guardian Key Outcome Indicators framework to monitor and report on the effectiveness of the child safety system from the perspective of the children who receive its services
- regularly visiting over 6800 children and young people placed in foster care and other care locations across Queensland through the Community Visitor Program, to monitor their safety and their access to appropriate support

- publication of the Indigenous Child Placement Principle report, an independent audit that monitors the department's compliance with section 83 of the *Child Protection Act 1999*
- chairing the independently appointed, community-represented Child Death Case Review Committee and publishing its annual report, which reviews the adequacy of services provided to children who died and were known to the child safety system in the three years before their death
- maintaining a register of the deaths of all children and young people in Queensland (starting from January 2001), while reviewing the causes and patterns of these deaths
- an audit of young people in alternative care who have self-placed to accommodation arrangements; this audit seeks to improve the outcomes for young people by determining the reasons they have self-placed and identifying themes and trends in service delivery problems for these young people
- administering the blue card system which requires essential and developmentally focused service providers to implement risk-management and screening provisions – for example, in foster care and residential and respite centres
- responding to serious matters where a child or young person was at risk of harm or a victim of a criminal offence, and referring these matters to the relevant agencies for their action
- publishing (on an alternating biennial basis) the results of the *Views* surveys for children and young people placed in foster care, in residential care and in detention centres, and
- progressing the Youth Justice Key Outcome Indicator project, which is developing a method of assessing and reporting on the effectiveness of service delivery in the youth justice system and the outcomes it produces for young people who come into contact with that system.