

Urgent reform is needed for child protection workforce, ACU report

Australia's child protection system is in crisis with far too many children taken into care and many not receiving the assistance they need, a new ACU study has found.

The national [study](#), published by ACU's Institute of Child Protection Studies, found the current workforce was ill-equipped and unable to respond to the growing need for child welfare services.

Professor Daryl Higgins, director of the Institute of Child Protection Studies, said the report found the workforce for the preventative and supportive services in the child protection system is poorly defined and resourced.

Many of these workers – teachers, early childhood educators, nurses, and GPs – do not have the qualifications or skills needed to recognise and assess risk of harm and provide needed support.

Most of the funding and resources are aimed towards the more severe end of the child protection systems, yet high levels of staff turnover continue, which negatively affect the quality and consistency of service.

Professor Higgins and the five other leading child protection experts, who co-authored the report, have called for urgent reform to reshape the system.

They say more preventative services are needed to support children to remain safely with their families, rather than the current system geared towards removal.

Research shows Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are more likely to be taken into care. Children from culturally diverse families, and children and parents with disability are also over-represented in the system.

The number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers, diverse workers, and workers with disability does not align with the disproportionate representation of these groups within child protection systems.

Professor Higgins said investment priorities must shift – funding needs to be directed at preventative and supportive services for vulnerable children and their families, rather than at the part of the system that deals with removals.

“We must respond to people's needs early and decrease the pressure on child protection systems,” he said.

The report calls for the preventative child welfare workforce to be better resourced and supported to be able to develop the skills and knowledge necessary to identify and respond to the risk factors.

It also calls for higher education providers and child welfare sectors to work together to plan for the continuing demand and future needs in child welfare services.

Professor Higgins is available for interview.

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Key findings

Trends and needs in the Australian child welfare workforce

	Demand for support in primary, secondary and tertiary child welfare services is high and growing.
	Tertiary level child protection statutory services have seen particularly high growth in the size of workforces.
	Staff in primary prevention services – early childhood education, schools and health – need more support.
	Workforce casualisation has a negative impact on overall workforce development, service quality and consistency.
	Most resources are narrowly focused on statutory agencies within the tertiary tier.
	Many staff are underqualified to recognise and assess the risk of harm of child abuse and neglect.
	Workers do not have opportunities to develop skills to provide consistent high-quality professional support.
	High levels of staff turnover diminish the quality and consistency of prevention and support services.
	Number of graduates of social work and psychology is too low to meet the needs of child welfare sector.
	Indigenous children, children with disability, and children of parents with disability are over-represented.
	Workers who are Indigenous, are from culturally diverse backgrounds, or have disability are in lower skilled jobs.
	Older experienced workers leaving jobs means that the needs of child welfare services are harder to meet.