

AUGUST 2025

Sector insights paper

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Risk and protective factors for child protection involvement following restoration from out-of-home care

CHILD SAFETY

A systematic literature review published in *Child Abuse & Neglect* explored factors related to child protection involvement following reunification from out-of-home care. Forty-two publications were reviewed based on research conducted in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom. No Australian studies on this topic were identified.

Child-level factors

Most child-level factors associated with greater risk of maltreatment substantiations after restoration and/or out-of-home care re-entry related to more complex needs, including:

- Younger age (especially those under 1 year old).
- Intellectual and/or physical disability.
- Mental health difficulties.
- Behavioural issues.

A few studies identified that post-reunification child protection involvement was more likely among girls than boys.

Associations based on race and ethnicity were minimised when accounting for other variables, such as poverty, length of placement and reason for removal.

Family-level factors

Parental substance abuse was the most frequently identified family-level factor for post-reunification child protection involvement.

Many studies also identified poverty as a risk factor, but this risk diminished over time in some instances.

A smaller number of studies identified the following risk factors:

- Limited parenting capacity.
- Single-parent families.
- Families with a large number of children.
- Parental isolation and lack of social support.

A history of neglect was associated with out-of-home care re-entry more often than physical or sexual abuse.

System-level factors

Shorter removal periods were the most frequently identified system-level risk factor for post-reunification child protection involvement.

Kinship care as a final placement was a widely identified protective factor.

A few studies identified placement instability and previous history of child protection involvement as risk factors.

Protective factors largely related to case management factors, including:

- More experienced caseworkers.
- Family visitation after reunification.
- Outlining specific parental conditions prior to reunification.

A few qualitative studies identified a range of risk factors related to case management, including:

- Cultural bias.
- Risk-adverse decision making.
- A lack of focus on key case issues.
- Limited permanence planning.

Conclusion

Out-of-home care impacts children's identity development and daily routines. Family challenges in adjusting to reunification can be exacerbated by the trauma of family separation and disconnection during the removal period, particularly when children have entered a new developmental period. Parental factors associated with out-of-home care re-entry may reflect bias and heightened scrutiny.

Risk factors for child protection re-involvement should be considered for enhanced intervention and support following reunification, rather than used as 'red flags' for high-risk groups. Safe and stable reunification necessitates recognition of, and support to maintain, individual family protective factors.

Restoring children from out-of-home care: insights from an Aboriginal-led community forum

CHILD SAFETY

OVER-REPRESENTATION

A study published in *Child & Family Social Work* described findings from a community forum on pathways to successful restoration from out-of-home care for Aboriginal families in New South Wales. This study identified numerous structural and systematic barriers to restoration from out-of-home care among Aboriginal families and highlights the need for Aboriginal-led, trauma-informed, collaborative and flexible practices.

Key findings

- Participants emphasised that improved family preservation services would reduce removal rates.
- Participants felt restoration should be referred to as 'going home', meaning to return to family, country, culture and community, but not necessarily birth parents.
- Parents are subject to high levels of surveillance and compliance and may struggle to understand legal processes.
- Restoration practices are deficit-based and developed from non-Aboriginal perspectives without genuine family participation or recognition of cultural and personal contexts.
- Historical risk factors underpin judgements that reduce the chances of restoration.

Practices to support restoration

- Recognition of grief and loss associated with child removal.
- Cultural care plans developed and implemented by Aboriginal professionals to ensure family connections are maintained.
- Genuine implementation of all components of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle
- Family finding based on kinship structures and natural connections to promote a sense of belonging.
- Greater collaboration between parents and service providers to ensure appropriate intervention post-reunification.
- Individual workers need to overcome systematic distrust in the system by demonstrating genuine care and support.
- Flexible timeframes accounting for factors beyond family control, such as waitlists and caseworker turnover.

Newton, B., Gray, P., Cripps, K., Falster, K., Katz, I., Chiswell, K., Wellington, L., Ardler, R., Frith, F., Jones, T., Kent, M. and Tong, N. (2025). Restoring Children From Out-of-Home Care: Insights From an Aboriginal-Led Community Forum. *Child & Family Social Work*, 30, 366-376. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.13174>

Low levels of child protection knowledge identified in a survey of Queensland independent school teachers

CHILD SAFETY

CHILD SAFE ORGANISATIONS

A study published in *Education Sciences* examined child safety legal knowledge among Queensland independent school teachers. The study analysed survey responses from 270 teachers regarding their understandings of duty of care, mandatory reporting, professional conduct and student privacy.

Key findings

A high proportion of Queensland independent school teachers reported incorrect or no understanding of child safety laws, including:

74% misunderstood their duty of care obligations.

69% misunderstood mandatory reporting obligations.

60% misunderstood obligations to report professional misconduct, including colleagues' predatory behaviour.

60% misunderstood student privacy laws.

Common misconceptions

- Many teachers feared legal repercussions or believed they needed proof before reporting child maltreatment.
- Many teachers felt that personally trusting a colleague meant that they did not have to report suspected misconduct or predatory behaviour.
- Many teachers believed they were personally liable for standards of care, rather than the school, or that they did not have to intervene in student fights if it might endanger themselves.

Conclusion

This study identified that many Queensland independent school teachers lack the legal literacy needed to recognise and report abuse, uphold professional conduct, and appropriately respond to safety incidents. Urgent and systematic improvement is needed to ensure the safety of children and young people in schools.

Butlin, M. (2025). Queensland Independent School Teachers' Understanding of Education Law Implications. *Education Sciences*, 15(8), 974. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci15080974>

Child maltreatment in youth-serving organisations: a scoping review

CHILD SAFE ORGANISATIONS

CHILD SAFETY

CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

A scoping review published in *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse* highlighted the fragmented nature of research on child abuse within 'youth serving organisations'. Researchers assessed the current available literature across various sectors, including daycare, youth justice, healthcare, recreation, religion, residential, schools and sports, to find inconsistent definitions and gaps in knowledge.

Definition of 'youth-serving organisations'

Youth-serving organisations (YSOs) were defined in this study as "Organisations to whom parents (or the State) entrust the care of children for an extended periods, with an expectation that the organisation is responsible for ensuring the child's safety."

This definition allows for a clear distinction between establishments that may 'serve' children but do not take a significant 'caretaking' responsibility (such as retail stores, hotels, transport companies etc.), and YSOs which may primarily or exclusively serve children (such as churches or health agencies) which may include specific child-focused caregiving.

The empirical literature on abuse in YSOs was found to be patchy and dispersed, with studies focusing more on certain organisations, sectors, or forms of abuse.

Variations across YSO sectors

The study found that the residential care, youth detention, and sports sectors have considerably more evidence and studies. Residential care and youth detention research were the only sectors found to address abuse perpetrated by other children in YSOs.

Research on abuse in healthcare was found to be the sparsest in respect of coverage, as well as in the scope of the studies for this sector, with very limited findings.

Variations across abuse types

Sexual abuse was covered in literature across all sectors. While the reason for this prevalence is not clear, the study suggests that research in the YSO field should move toward addressing all forms of abuse.

Sector-specific coverage of abuse forms were also identified – such as research on youth-serving religious institutions focused almost entirely on sexual abuse. This was similar in the school, sports, and recreation sectors.

The YSO sectors found to have the most comprehensive coverage of abuse types were the daycare, residential care and youth justice sectors.

Conclusion

These findings highlight the need to provide coordinated and comprehensive research on child maltreatment in YSOs to effectively address these issues. The study found that the existing empirical research is fragmented, using inconsistent definitions and uneven coverage across sectors and different abuse types.

Recommendations

The authors offer several recommendations for sector stakeholders and researchers, including;

- Conduct more general population surveys to measure various forms of abuse across multiple YSO sectors to ascertain the full childhood exposure rates.
- Modify data collection systems for existing child abuse and police data systems, to allow for classification of abuse within YSOs or by YSO personnel.
- Implement targeted YSO surveys of participants or staff in order to capture higher exposure rates for particular variables, and study dynamics.

Areas identified as requiring more research included:

- Comparing all forms of abuse and neglect within different YSO sectors (not only sexual abuse).
- Comparing differences in risk factors and dynamics from one sector to another.
- Clarifying and standardising YSO sector definitions and the overlaps between them.
- Examining the causes of peer victimisation within YSOs.

Queensland Police Service identifies concerns regarding children and young people held in watch houses

YOUTH JUSTICE

A watch house review conducted by the Queensland Police Service (QPS) identified numerous issues regarding the increasing use of watch houses for children and young people.

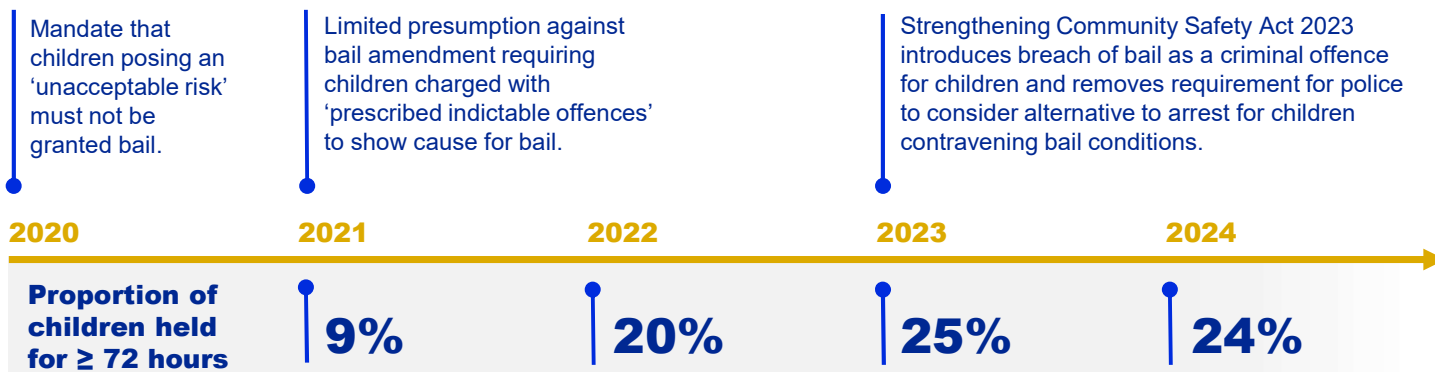
Key findings

- Children held in watch houses are at increased risk of anxiety, distress and self-harm due to the inappropriate physical environment and lack of support.
- Watch house layouts can result in inappropriate exposure of children to adult prisoners in showers or toilets without privacy screens or doors.
- Children may spend additional time in watch houses than is necessary when transport to youth detention cannot be facilitated or a responsible adult cannot be located to release a child to on bail.
- Overcrowding, understaffing, segregation requirements and inclement weather make it difficult to allocate time for children in recreation areas in watch houses that have them.
- Watch houses have no nutritional standards or paediatric healthcare professionals.
- Watch houses do not guarantee children's right to access education as per the Queensland Human Rights Act 2019.

Average stay in hours in watch houses for sentenced or remanded prisoners



Timeline of legislative changes impacting children's bail



Recommendations specific to children

Recommendation 3: Commence a program of watch house remediation works to address safety issues and privacy concerns for women and girls.

Recommendation 9: QPS develop a policy position for Government consideration to set a maximum time prisoners can stay in watch-houses or holding cells, based on the facility type. A 72-hour limit is recommended, aligning with Coronial recommendations and prioritising safety and expedient transfer of women and girls.

Recommendation 23: Develop and implement a watch house intake assessment tool tailored for processing children.

Recommendation 24: QPS partner with Department of Education to expand delivery of co-designed education services for children in watch houses including via VideoLink.

Recommendation 29: QPS to explore strategies to enhance bail processing to minimise the use of watch houses supported by a risk-based framework and officer training.

Queensland Police Service. (2025). *Queensland Police Service Watch-house Review 2025*. Queensland Government. https://www.police.qld.gov.au/sites/default/files/2025-07/QPS%20Watch-house%20Review%202025_1_0.pdf

Evaluation of a specialised treatment service for youth adjudicated sexual offences in Queensland

YOUTH JUSTICE

CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

A study published in the *Journal of Criminal Justice* investigated the effectiveness of Griffith Youth Forensic Service (GYFS), a specialised treatment program for Queensland young people aged 10–17 convicted of sexual offences. The study used data from the Department of Youth Justice and Victim Support to compare outcomes between 144 offenders who received treatment through GYFS between 1 January 2010 and 30 June 2024 and 303 untreated offenders.

Key findings

Young people referred to GYFS were typically convicted of a serious sexual offence, most commonly rape (46.2%) and indecent treatment of a child (41.2%).

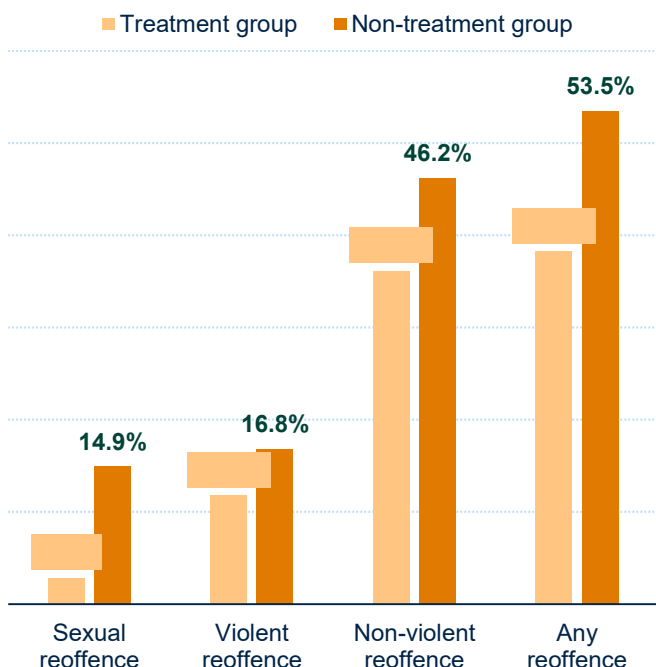
After controlling for differences between the treatment group and non-treatment group, young people who received treatment from GYFS had:

- 78%–90% lower rates of sexual recidivism.
- 34%–44% lower rates of recidivism for all offence types.
- Significantly longer time before committing any new offence (for those who did re-offend).

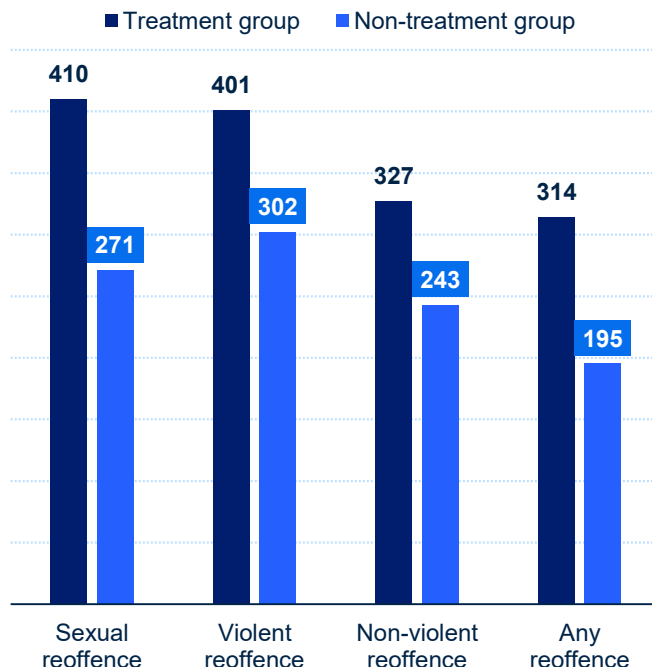
Participant demographics

	Treatment group (n 144)	Non treatment group (n 303)
Mean age at onset (years)	16.05	15.22
Mean number of prior offences	14.35	14.18
Mean prior days of incarceration	61.23	26.74
Mean prior days of supervision order	67.67	68.29
Proportion with prior sexual offence	42.4%	6.3%

Rates of re-offending



Mean number of days before re-offending



Conclusion

This study indicates that GYFS treatment is highly effective at breaking cycles of offending in young people who commit sexual offences. The greatest impact is in preventing future sexual offences. Treating young offenders early reduces the risk that they will become chronic adult offenders. Reducing reoffending prevents victimization and lowers justice system costs, which can divert more resources towards prevention and victim support.

Cale, J., Whitten, T., Perales, F., O'Shannessy, D., & Leclerc, B. (2025). A quasi-experimental evaluation of a specialized treatment service for youth adjudicated for sexual offences in Queensland, Australia. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 99, 102462. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2025.102462>

Productivity Commission Closing the Gap annual data compilation report

OVER-REPRESENTATION

The Productivity Commission has released the 5th Annual Data Compilation Report (ADCR) reporting progress under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. It describes national outcomes towards the 19 targets.

Key findings pertaining to children and young people

- **Target 3:** The proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children enrolled in Year Before Fulltime Schooling (YBFS) early childhood education is 94.2% and the target of 95% is on track to be met by the end of 2025.
- **Target 4:** The proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children assessed as developmentally on track has declined and the target is currently not on track to be met by 2031.
- **Target 5:** The proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people attaining Year 12 or equivalent is increasing, but the target is not on track to be met by 2031.
- **Target 11:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people continue to be over-represented in the criminal justice system, and no progress has been made.
- **Target 12:** The rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care has increased since the baseline and the target is not on track to be met by 2031.
- **Target 13:** There is still no data available to track the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander females and children who have experienced family violence.

Productivity Commission. (2025). *Closing the Gap: annual data compilation report*. Australian Government. <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2025-07/apo-nid331606.pdf>

Maltreatment a stronger determinant of mental health than out-of-home care in an Australian sample

CHILD SAFETY

YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH

A study published in *Child Abuse & Neglect* examined the relationship between out-of-home care and mental health disorders throughout the life course using data from the Australian Maltreatment study. The sample included 395 care-experienced people aged 16–65+ and a comparison group matched on maltreatment variables.

Key findings

There were a few statistically significant differences in maltreatment experiences between the two groups, including:

- Earlier age at onset for physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, and exposure to domestic violence in the care-experienced group.
- The non-care-experienced group reported more types of physical abuse.
- The care-experienced group reported more types of emotional abuse and domestic violence exposure.

After controlling for these differences, there were no statistically significant differences in the odds of any mental disorder examined, including severe alcohol use disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, generalised anxiety and major depression.

Recommendations

This study indicates that out-of-home care alone may not be sufficient to mitigate the risk of mental health issues associated with child maltreatment. Specialised mental health interventions are needed for children and young people in out-of-home care, as well as early intervention mental health services for those with substantiated maltreatment.

Harris, L. G., Higgins, D. J., Willis, M.L., Lawrence, D., Mathews, B., Malacova, E., Erskine, H., Meinck, F., Haslam, D.M. (2025). Determining the effect of out-of-home care on mental health disorders: A propensity score-matched study of child maltreatment intensity, *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 167107571. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2025.107571>