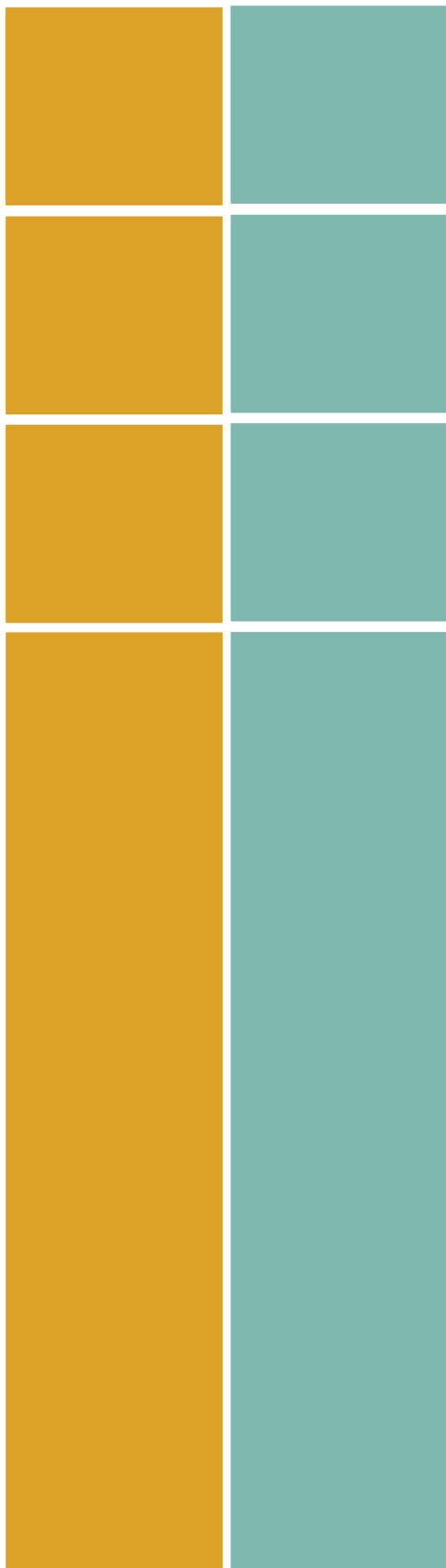


P O L I C Y
M O N O G R A P H



Addressing the Over-
Representation of Aboriginal
and Torres Strait Islander
Children and Families in
Queensland's Child
Protection System

January 2010

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We acknowledge the organisations who have so far added their voice to demand better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children:

Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Human Services Coalition (QATSIHSC) ■ Queensland Council of Social Services (QCOSS) ■ Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Protection Peak Ltd (QATSICPP) ■ PeakCare Queensland ■ CREATE Foundation ■ Uniting Care Centre for Social Justice ■ The Queensland Alliance ■ CentaCare Cairns ■ Save the Children ■ Foster Care Queensland ■ Kummara Association Inc ■ Central Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Care Agency ■ Kahwun Wooga ATSI Corporation for Community Development ■ RAATSICC ■ Kalwun Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Childcare Agency ■ Brisbane Youth Service ■ Brisbane Rape and Incest Survivors Support Centre ■ Community Focus Association Discovery Program ■ Community Care Software ■ Sharon McCallum & Assoc

We also thank the many individual voices who support the Combined Voices campaign.

Thanks finally to Dr Clare Tilbury for assistance with preparation of the monograph.

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Addressing the Over-Representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Families in Queensland's Child Protection System.

January 2010

Published 2010 by:

Combined Voices

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The over-representation of Indigenous children and families has been a long-standing concern in the Australian child welfare system. In Queensland, Indigenous children are three times more likely to be substantiated for harm or risk of harm, and six times more likely to be placed in out-of-home care than other children. Strategies aimed at protecting children have tended to be coercive, rather than voluntary services that effectively engage families and communities. Over time, this situation has worsened. Despite policy rhetoric, in reality strategies to reduce over-representation are clearly inadequate to address the scale and significance of the problem.

The causes of Indigenous over-representation are complex. There are macro-level social factors that increase stresses on parents and the vulnerability of children; and micro-level factors that mean that once in the child welfare system, Indigenous children are less likely to have their needs met and more likely to stay longer in care than other children.

Evidence-based policies and practices to effectively respond to Indigenous over-representation are required. Strategies are required on multiple levels: prevention and early intervention, improved quality of services within the care system. Leadership from government, high-level commitment and resources to reduce racial disparities, and collaboration with Indigenous agencies and communities are all essential.

INTRODUCTION

Racial disproportionality and disparity is a feature of child welfare systems in many countries. Barth and Needell (1997 p. 2) state “the most basic aspect of measuring performance has to do with describing the population” and that “race is perhaps the most powerful background factor in all our child welfare services research.”

Queensland’s current approach to ensuring the safety and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and their families is not working. In fact, the situation is getting worse, with the disparities in outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children and families getting wider each year. At each decision making point in the statutory child protection system, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people are significantly over-represented. In addition, the level of over-representation increases the further children move into the system. Indigenous families are more likely to receive different and more interventionist treatment from the government than non-Indigenous families. Yet, when compared with other children, the gap is widening when it comes to the health, education, safety and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

This paper outlines the international research on racial disproportionality and disparity, and draws out the implications for Australia. It proposes evidence-based strategies for addressing Indigenous over-representation in Queensland.

DIMENSIONS OF THE PROBLEM: OVER-REPRESENTATION AND DISPARITY DATA

While the over-representation of Indigenous children in the Australian child welfare system is well-known, the specific dimensions of the problem merit detailed examination, not least because the situation seems to be getting worse, not better. Understanding the levels of disproportionality at various decision-making points will advance our understanding of the nature of over-representation, the efficacy of current policies and programs, and the most effective points at which to intervene.

There are two accepted ways of measuring the representation of children from different racial or ethnic groups in the child welfare system. The disproportionality metric indicates the extent to which Indigenous representation in the child welfare system is proportionate to their

representation in the population. It is calculated by dividing the percentage of Indigenous children in, for example, substantiations and out-of-home care by the percentage of Indigenous children in the total child population (0-17 years) (Hill 2006). Disproportionality indicates imbalance (Wells et al. 2008). The disparity rate compares Indigenous with non-Indigenous children, and is the ratio between rates for the two groups. It is calculated by dividing the rate per 10,000 of Indigenous children in, for example, substantiations and out-of-home care, by the rate for non-Indigenous children (Hill 2006). While disproportionality has been used more often, researchers are moving to disparity measures to capture the nature of racial differences in child welfare more accurately and appropriately. According to Hill (2006), because disparity rates can show how black and ethnic minority children are treated compared to white children, disparity is a measure of equity. Disparity indicates systematic unequal treatment (Wells et al. 2008). If children with similar needs were treated equitably, regardless of race or ethnicity, then over- or under- representation would be less of an issue.

Table 1 compares Indigenous disparity in Australia as a whole, Queensland and New Zealand in 2006/07. The situation for Indigenous children in Australia is more inequitable than for Maori children in New Zealand, with the disparity rate considerable lower at both substantiation and placement. The disparity rates for Queensland are better than Australia as a whole, but still worse than New Zealand. Indigenous children are three times more likely to be substantiated for harm or risk of harm, and 6.1 times more likely to be placed in out-of-home care than other children.

Table 1: Indigenous disparity: ratio between Indigenous and non-Indigenous rates of substantiated maltreatment and placement in out-of-home care 2006-2007

	Rate per 10,000 substantiations for non-Indigenous children	Rate per 10,000 substantiations for Indigenous children	Disparity rate substantiated cases	Rate per 10,000 in care for non-Indigenous children	Rate per 10,000 in care for Indigenous children	Disparity rate out-of-home care
Australia	58	318	5.4	44	361	8.3
Queensland	69	203	3.0	45	275	6.1
New Zealand	92	251	2.7	35	93	2.7

Source: Tilbury & Thoburn (in press)

Table 2 focuses on the Queensland situation, detailing the disproportionality at key points in the child protection process. The level of disparity *increases* after statutory intervention.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children comprise 6.3% of children aged 0 to 17 years in Queensland. This has increased from 4.3% in 2002. Queensland's Indigenous children are disproportionately represented in the child welfare system as a whole, as well as at various decision points within the system. At each point - notification, substantiation, child protection order and placement - the situation has worsened for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children between 2001-02 and 2006-07.

Table 2: Rates per 1000 for Indigenous and non-Indigenous children at various points in the child welfare process, Queensland, 2001-2002 and 2006-2007

	Indigenous children (per 1000)		Non-Indigenous children (per 1000)	
	2001-02	2006-07	2001-02	2006-07
Children subject to notification	25.9	56.7	20.6	22.5
Child substantiated for abuse or neglect	13.8	19.4	7.5	6.5
Children subject to child protection order	15.1	27.0	3.3	4.7
Children placed in out-of-home care	12.2	27.5	2.9	4.5

Source: Rates calculated data from Report on Government Services 2005 (Table 15A.25); Report on Government Services 2008 (Table 15A.30), Child Protection Australia 2001-02 (Tables 3.10, 4.8 and A1.3), Child Protection Australia 2006-07 (Tables 3.10, 4.8 and A1.3), Child Protection Queensland: 2004 Child Protection System 'Baseline' Performance Report and Child Protection Queensland 2006-07 Performance Report

Indigenous children experience longer stays in out-of-home care, receive less comprehensive services, have irregular contact with family while in out-of-home care, are less likely to be reunified than other children and are less likely to receive voluntary interventions such as Intervention with Parental Agreement. Further, once removed from their families, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are not supported to maintain their connections with family, community and culture.

Adherence to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle has been declining. In 2001/02 (AIHW 2003), 69% of children were placed in accordance with the Child Placement Principle. This declined to 61.2% in 2006/07 (AIHW 2008). By analysing Community Visitor's reports of visits with Indigenous children placed in out-of-home care in April and May 2007, the Child Guardian's report on compliance with the Child Placement Principle (Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian 2009) states that:

- 20% had regular contact with their mother
- 6% had regular contact with their father;
- 6.5% had regular contact with at least one sibling
- 13% had regular contact with extended family.

The report also noted that children and young people would like more family contact.

Disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children is evident in every departmental zone, and tends to be more pronounced in urban areas – see Table 3.

Table 3 Disparity rates, Queensland Dept Child Safety zones, 2005-06

Zone	Disparity at substantiation	Disparity in long term CP orders
Brisbane North and Sunshine Coast	3.3	6.5
Brisbane South and Gold Coast	2.6	6.6
Central Zone	1.7	3.8
Far Northern Zone	1.3	3.9
Ipswich and Western Zone	1.4	3.3
Logan and Brisbane West	2.4	3.3
Northern Zone	2.1	4.5
Queensland	2.3	4.1

In 2005/06 overall, Indigenous children were 2.3 times more likely to be substantiated and 4.1 times more likely to be on a long-term child protection order than other children.

Examining disparity at both substantiation and on orders shows how Indigenous representation can be affected by decisions made after notification. In all zones, the level of over-representation increases significantly between these two decision points. Disparity was greatest in Brisbane North and Brisbane South at both decision points. Disparity at substantiation varied between zones, with a range from 1.3 to 3.3. Disparity at orders ranged from 3.3 to 6.6 between zones.

THE EVIDENCE BASE - WHY OVER-REPRESENTATION EXISTS AND CONTINUES

What explanations are there for this over-representation? Over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the Queensland child protection system is not dissimilar to the situation in other Australian jurisdictions, for Indigenous peoples in Canada, the United States and New Zealand, or for black or other minority groups in countries such as England. A range of macro level factors have been identified as creating and perpetuating over-representation and disproportional representation in child welfare systems across the world.

It is generally agreed that the causes of over-representation are both general, affecting the quality of life of Indigenous peoples on a broad range of indices, and specific to the child welfare system.

System or macro level factors

The social and economic impacts of colonisation - land dispossession, forced removal to prescribed areas, regulation of family life, separation of children from their families, unpaid labour, institutional care and racism - are advanced as the underpinning reason for the over-representation of Indigenous peoples in welfare systems.

There have been mixed results from research efforts to disentangle the effects of race from the influences of poverty and hardship. Some studies examining disproportional representation have found that economic factors (poverty and receipt of welfare payments) are more statistically significant than race in determining child welfare involvement, but the interaction with other factors such as family structure, parental substance abuse and mental ill-health is less clear (Hill 2006; Miller 2008). However it has been pointed out that poverty and associated problems are not race neutral (Needell, Brookhart & Lee 2003). In the case of Indigenous people, disadvantaged living conditions are a consequence of colonisation. That is, the process of colonisation produced alienation, marginalisation, disempowerment, welfare dependency, deprived neighbourhoods and communities, and intergenerational poor parenting, and these conditions adversely impact upon children's well-being (Bamblett & Lewis 2007; Blackstock, Trocme and Bennett 2004; Blackstock & Trocme 2005).

To some extent the debate about causation highlights different perspectives on understanding causation and the extent to which both direct causes (the stated reasons for a child entering the care system, such as parental substance misuse or incarceration) and indirect causes and cumulative effects (the reasons behind high rates of substance abuse and incarceration for Indigenous people) are being investigated. Taking into account only direct or immediate causes misses effects that operate over time, or cumulative disadvantage. For example, there may be discrimination across generations, whereby discrimination against one generation can negatively affect health, work opportunities or wealth accumulation to diminish opportunities in later generations; and it can operate across domains, such as living in a depressed neighbourhood which lessens a person's chance of a job and good healthcare (Panel on Methods for Assessing Discrimination 2004).

Compared to non-Indigenous Australians, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and adults have lower health outcomes, lower level of educational attainment and participation, a higher rate of imprisonment and a higher level of homelessness which reflects generations of disadvantage, or cumulative disadvantage, whereby Indigenous families and communities are more vulnerable to state intervention and child welfare policies that rely more on child removal than family support (Roberts 2002). Clearly, disadvantage needs to be addressed through culturally appropriate supports, practical assistance and therapeutic services so that children are less likely to be at risk of harm.

It follows that reports to authorities about at-risk Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and substantiation rates could be higher than for non-Indigenous children. In turn, the rates of entry to the family support and child protection systems are affected. Placement away from family due to related issues in the child's family and community could also be attributed to disadvantage. A lack of available and/or culturally competent formal supports could also impact on Indigenous childrens' contact with the child protection system.

Micro level factors

Higher rates of Indigenous children in contact with the child welfare system have also been attributed to a range of micro factors. These include bias and inconsistencies in decisions made by the reporter (for example, police, nurses or teachers) and those assessing reports about children at risk of harm (Lemon et al 2005). Differences in child-rearing such as more laissez-faire supervision or the involvement of the extended family may be viewed as deficits (Earle & Cross 2001). Institutional racism or system biases such as a lack of cross-cultural competence, culturally inappropriate or inaccessible service delivery; Indigenous families being less likely to have legal representation or advocacy in decisions on removal and placement; and discriminatory practices of child welfare workers (Hines, Lemon, Wyatt & Merdinger 2004) also impact on the rates of Indigenous children at different decision making points.

The stressful and sometimes chaotic nature of child welfare agency practice is another factor identified as contributing to over-representation of Indigenous children (Lemon et al 2005). To avoid the situation worsening, strong, consistent and committed leadership is needed to lead a culturally competent workforce.

It has also been asserted that for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, decisions about 'the best interests of the child' in placement or reunification have

minimised the importance of the child's cultural identity to their well-being (Bamblett & Lewis 2007), which has an impact on rates of placement and length of time in care.

In terms of exiting care, it has been argued that the lower levels of support provided to often more stable placements with kinship carers means that Indigenous children have lower reunification rates (Hill 2006; see Wulczyn 2003 in relation to African American children).

In summary, whatever the exact combination of factors causing and perpetuating the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in the Queensland child protection system, there is a clear case for responding to both macro and micro level factors. Clearly, as it is for all children, the objective should be for Indigenous children to only enter the child protection system if they need to. The system and related support and therapeutic services should be accessible and equitable, and last only as long as needed.

The child welfare system cannot rely upon poverty and racism being eliminated as the means to reduce racial disparity amongst those needing to come into care. Policy needs to take account of these social circumstances, so that the child welfare system ameliorates rather than exacerbates disparities (Needell et al. 2003). Clearly child welfare administrators cannot control all aspects of racial inequalities, but they can design services appropriate to the needs of the diverse populations served and control inappropriate disparities within the more coercive parts of the child welfare system. If the assumption is that racial disproportionality and disparity is a consequence of broader inequalities, for which the child welfare system is not responsible, then:

... From this point of view, the child welfare system is simply playing the best hand it can for its clients, given a deck that is stacked against certain clients before they even come in contact with the system ... does the extent to which some racial or ethnic groups in our society suffer disproportionately from family breakdown and poverty really justify the fact that they are thereby more likely to have their children taken away from them? Do child welfare researchers, policymakers, and practitioners believe that it is ethically acceptable to be involved in "improving" the efficacy of a system that takes these children without simultaneously being involved in remedying the problems that bring the children to the system? (Courtney, Barth, Duerr Berrick, Brooks, Needell, & Park 1996, p. 135)

EVIDENCE BASED STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS OVER-REPRESENTATION

Clearly government action is required to remedy this situation. It is not the fact of government intervention that is problematic, but the nature of the intervention. The standard government strategies to develop more effective and culturally sensitive responses to improve the welfare of Indigenous children in Australia, in the main, have not achieved desired outcomes.

A review of strategies to address racial disproportionality in the USA found that states had most success when they made a strong commitment to racial equity, undertook ongoing monitoring of racial differences in quality and outcome, developed agency collaborations, improved and expanded service provision, and worked in partnership with communities (Casey-CSSP Alliance for Racial Equity 2006). Strategies must aim to reduce the number of children entering the formal child protection system; improve the quality of care for children in the system; and aim to increase the number of exits from the system through effective work on family reunification.

Entry factors

Reduce entry to the child protection system through accessible and culturally appropriate prevention and early intervention responses for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

Research has established the link between high levels of socio-economic disadvantage and related problems, and the over-representation of minority racial groups in the child welfare system (Trocme et al. 2004). These systemic conditions need to be dealt with, as well as parental factors, if child abuse and neglect are to be reduced. It is important to develop strategies that go further than improving the quality of services provided after referral, and to also tackle public policy responses that privilege child removal over family preservation (Hill 2006). It is not acceptable that at any given time, about 3 per cent of Australian Indigenous children are in out-of-home care. If the same placement rates were occurring across the whole population it is unlikely this situation would be accepted by government and the community – alternatives to removal and placement would be found.

Instead of relying on removing children from their families, the focus should be shifted to improving family functioning and relationships. Children and young people should only enter

the child protection system if it is needed and should only be placed in out-of-home care if they need to be cared for away from their parents. Macro level factors impacting on housing, drug and alcohol abuse, family violence, health and mental health issues that affect the capacity of parents to adequately care for their children must be identified and comprehensively addressed before children come to the attention of authorities or certainly in the early stages to mitigate more intrusive interventions.

Prevention and early intervention initiatives must respond to the type of harm Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are more likely to be substantiated for. Systemic conditions relating to socio-economic disadvantage need to be dealt with, as well as parental factors, if child abuse and neglect are to be reduced.

Alternatives that would impact on the number and rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children entering or further entering the child protection system include:

- non-stigmatising, preventative family support programs
- family preservation programs
- intensive supports to parents and extended families to address underlying issues
- more voluntary and non-stigmatising family support and kinship placement
- community development initiatives to improve living conditions at the 'place' level
- collaboration with housing, health, child care and income support system
- working in partnership with communities to encourage families to be more actively involved in planning and delivering services.

This commitment to prevention and early intervention will require significant investment to ensure the required spread, equity and adequacy of responses where they are needed across Queensland. Quite simply, there are not enough preventative services available and without sustained commitment and high level leadership to building up a system that responds to housing, drug and alcohol, family violence, health and mental health issues, Indigenous children will continue to come in contact with and enter the system at a higher rate than non-Indigenous children.

In-care factors - quality of the care system

Significantly improve responses for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people who are in the system

Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander children's experience of the child protection system is different, and more intrusive, than for other children. Any bias or inconsistency in decision making must be examined and eliminated. There needs to be ongoing monitoring of racial differences in service quality and outcomes for Indigenous children.

A core component of all work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families is the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle. Although often presented as simply being about with whom a child is placed, the Child Placement Principle is about maintaining family and cultural links. The Child Placement Principle is not just about where and with whom a child is placed. It is also about decision making and including family members and Indigenous community agencies. Planning for maintaining family, community and cultural connections must occur regardless of where and with whom a child is placed.

Taking the time to work with family to identify kin for full-time or shared care, supporting frequent family contact with parents for children placed with kinship carers, and working to reunify children and families, especially children placed with kinship carers, are actions that would ensure Indigenous children maintain their family and community connections while in care and exit the system in a timely manner.

Other strategies to improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's experience of the child protection system include:

- working in partnership with Indigenous child protection agencies and 'recognised entities'
- reviewing Indigenous input to key decisions eg. placement, when completing Structured Decision Making tools, family group conferences and 'One Chance at Childhood'
- closely monitoring service delivery to Indigenous families at the local level (responsibility at a regional level to monitor and report on entry to care, placements with siblings, and decisions about orders and long-term care)
- increase the use of voluntary intervention for Indigenous families
- ensure timely case decision-making to prevent drift in care.

High-level leadership and government commitment to reducing over-representation is required if change is to occur. More trained Indigenous staff are needed to make Indigenous agencies a viable reality, and to enhance the cultural competence of statutory agencies.

However necessary these micro-level strategies are, bolder action is necessary in order to tackle Indigenous disproportionality in child welfare.

Collaboration, community authority and responsibility

Invest in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled child protection services

It is not equitable to provide Indigenous communities with the same level or types of services as others, when their needs are so much greater and the pattern of their involvement with the child welfare system can be markedly different. The question of who is best placed to deliver family support and child protection services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families in Queensland has been subject to a shift in policy and practice whereby mainstream agencies are increasingly approved for funding to provide services to Indigenous families. Across Queensland, only a small number of community controlled agencies are funded to provide these services. So, not only are there too few culturally competent services where Indigenous families need them, there can be a mis-match with the level and type of service needed to meet the different pattern of involvement of Aboriginal children and families with the child welfare system.

Canada has taken a different approach. Provincial governments have taken steps to devolve child welfare powers and functions to Indigenous agencies. While this has mainly occurred for on-reserve children and families, in the province of Manitoba Indigenous child and family agencies have been given authority to provide services province-wide (Hudson & McKenzie 2003).

Better outcomes for Indigenous children and families, and indeed any target group, are best achieved when the target population has a voice in the delivery of services, and when organisations work in partnership with the communities they serve. Incorporating Indigenous values, knowledge and cultural practices when developing service models is also critical (Libesman 2004). The provision of comprehensive and integrated services for Indigenous children and families can be achieved by expanding the functions of Indigenous child protection services to encompass prevention, early intervention for at-risk families, and statutory intervention. Government action is required to enhance the infrastructure and capacity of these agencies.

CONCLUSION

A substantial change in direction is required, but not a return to the paternalism of the past. There needs to be less, not more, coercive government intervention into Indigenous family life. Evidence presented here shows that government has not been effective to date in protecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander children or strengthening family functioning. Alternative policies and programs would focus on children's quality of life and family living conditions, community development, and genuine collaboration with community controlled services and communities. Strategies and progress should be closely monitored at regional level.

In that way, the macro and micro level factors causing and perpetuating the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in the Queensland child protection system will be reduced in equitable, holistic and culturally competent ways. Indigenous children will only enter the child protection system if they need to and contact with the system and related support and therapeutic services will be responsive and meeting each child's individual needs, particularly those relating to culture and family, and last only as long as necessary.

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