



UNSW  
SYDNEY

*Building the evidence:  
Restoration from Out-of-Home-Care for  
Aboriginal Children and Families*

*DCJ Lunch & Learn- 29 November 2022*

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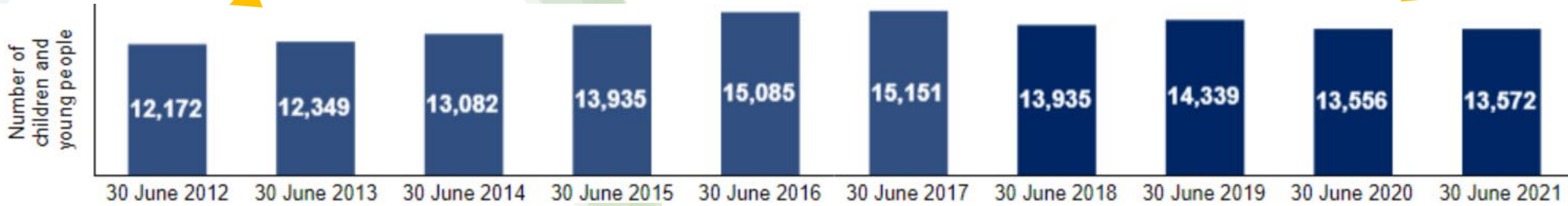
# Overview

- OOHC and restoration statistics in NSW
- Family is Culture findings and recommendations regarding restoration
- Restoration research using the Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study data
- Bring them home, keep them home-update and insights

# Children and young people in statutory OOHC- NSW

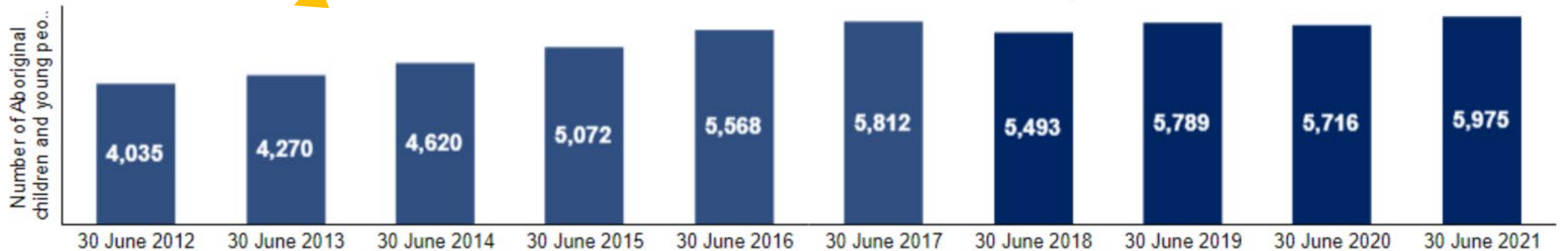
## All children

The number of children in statutory OOHC has increased over the past 9 years (about 12%), but has been relatively stable the last two years.



## Aboriginal children

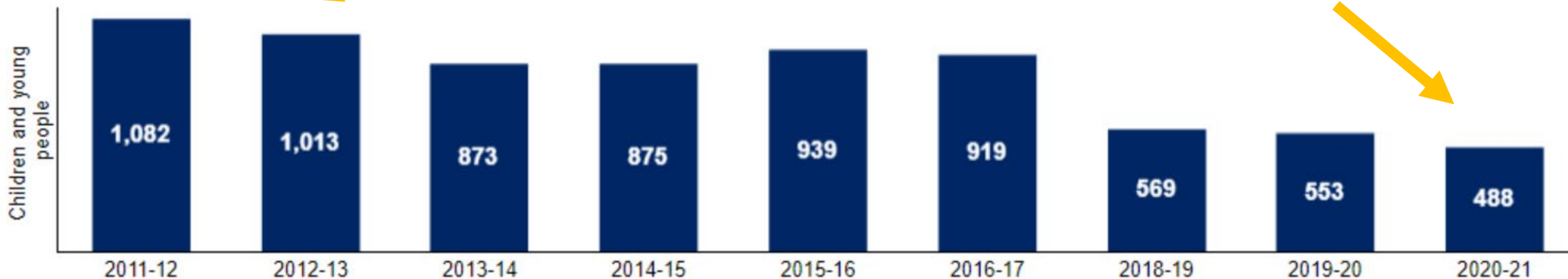
The number of Aboriginal children in statutory OOHC has increased over the last 9 years by 48.1%



# Children and young people restored to parents- NSW

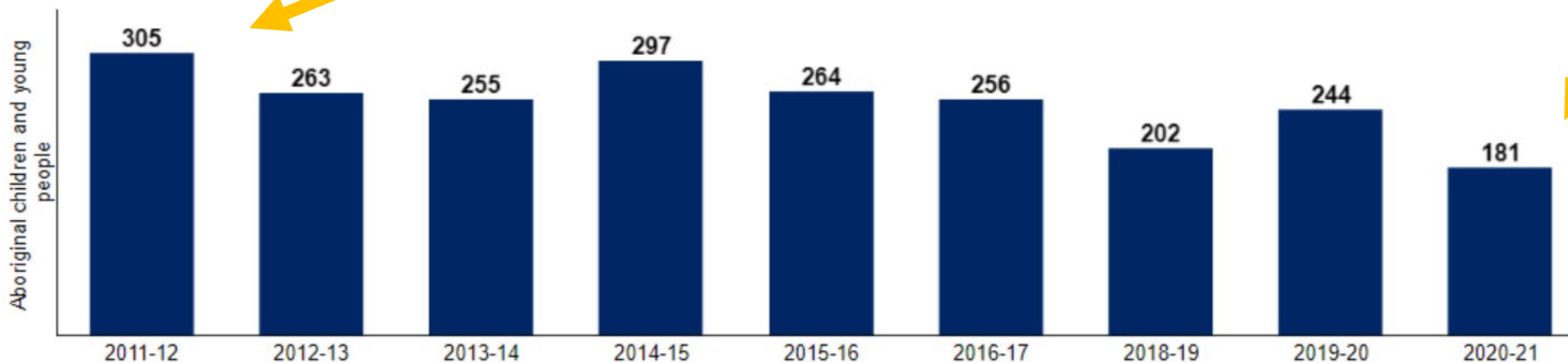
## All children

There has been a downward trend in the number of children and young people who were restored to their parents since 2011-12. Restorations decreased by 54.9% from 2011-12



## Aboriginal children

There has been a downward trend in the number of Aboriginal children restored to their parents since 2011-12. Restoration numbers decreased by 40.7% from 2011-12.



# Family is Culture Review: Aboriginal child restoration

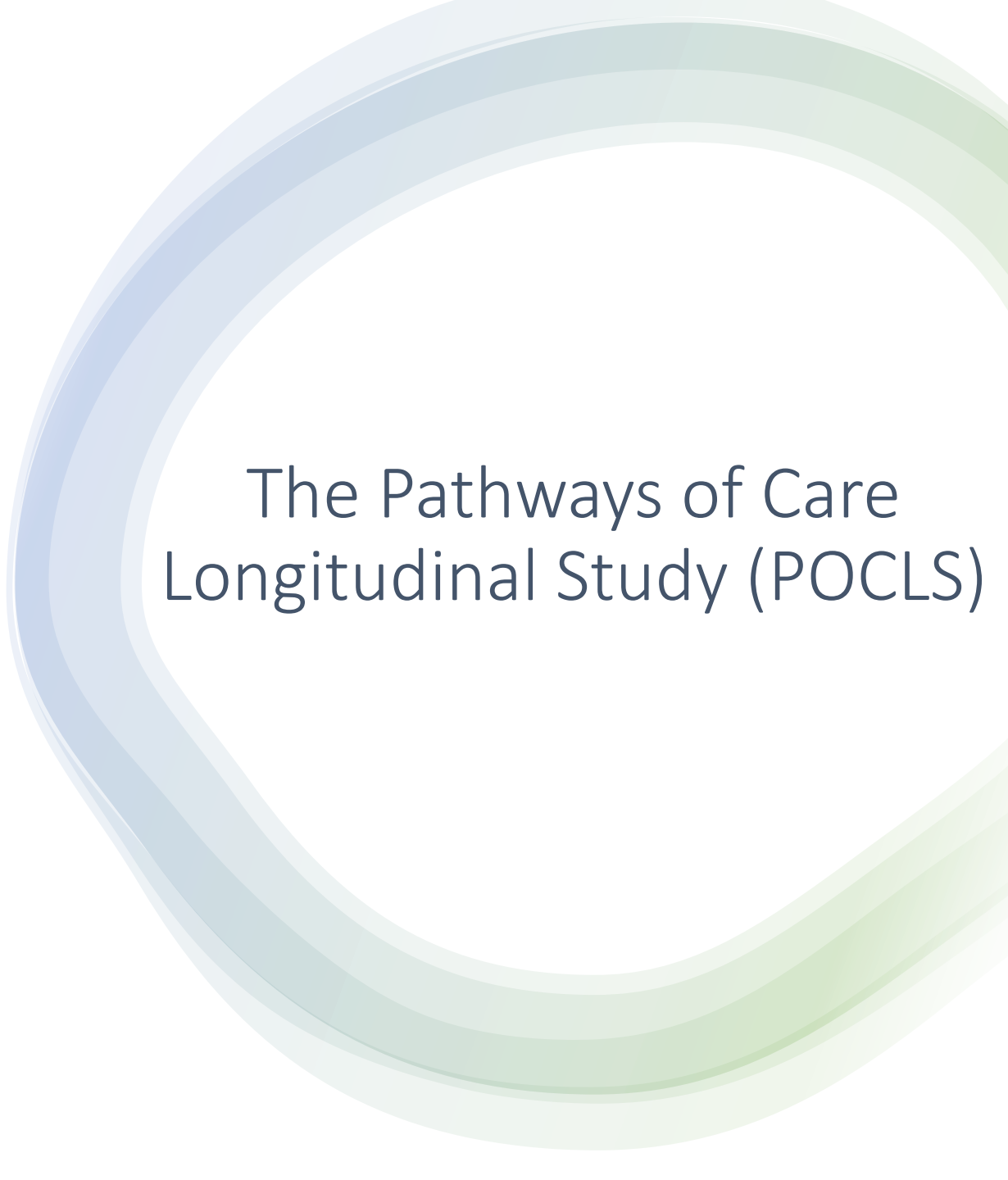
- DCJ Administrative data of 1,318 Aboriginal children taken into care over 2015-2016 found a restoration rate of 17.5% (n=230).
- Restoration was not considered possible in 84.1% of cases. The restoration rate could have been much higher if the possibility of restoration was identified in more cases and appropriate casework was directed towards that goal with more families.
- In 70/200 (35%) cases in the case file reviews, no casework was provided to parents to assist restoration.
- Barriers to restoration: unclear restoration processes, unrealistic restoration goals, a lack of appropriate support services, and potential legal barriers to families achieving restoration.

# Family is Culture recommendations


Family is Culture Review recommendation topic related to restoration	Number of recommendations
Legislation changes	4
Improving access to information for parents	2
DCJ strategy development to support restoration	2
Funding allocation to align with restoration priorities	2
DCJ practice and processes	4
Education on historical trauma and impacts	1
Total	15

## About POCLS

- Follows the child development and life experiences of all children from birth who first entered OOHC over an 18-month period in NSW between May 2010 and October 2011 (n= 4,126).
- A subset of those children and young people who went on to receive final Children's Court care and protection orders by April 2013 (n= 2,828) were eligible to participate in the interview component of the study.
- Of 2,828 children in the 'final orders cohort', 721 (25.5%) were restored to families by 30 June 2016.
- There is an additional 'survey cohort', where children and their carers (including parents if restored) are interviewed at intervals via the POCLS survey. Data up to Wave 5 currently is available.



## The Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study (POCLS)



# Restoration from Out-of-Home Care for Aboriginal children: Evidence from the Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study and experiences of parents and children

## Aims of this study is to investigate

- The rate of restoration for Aboriginal children in POCLS
- The factors that influence restoration for Aboriginal children
- The experiences of parents whose Aboriginal children have been restored
- The experiences of Aboriginal children and young people.



# Research methods: Two streams, quantitative and qualitative using different data sets

## Quantitative sample

- Aboriginal children in NSW on final Children's Court care and protection orders ('final orders cohort') by April 2013 (n= 1,018 or 36% of the 2,828 children).
- DCJ administrative data used to track the trajectory of these children and compare the circumstances of children who have been restored to their parents with those who were not restored.

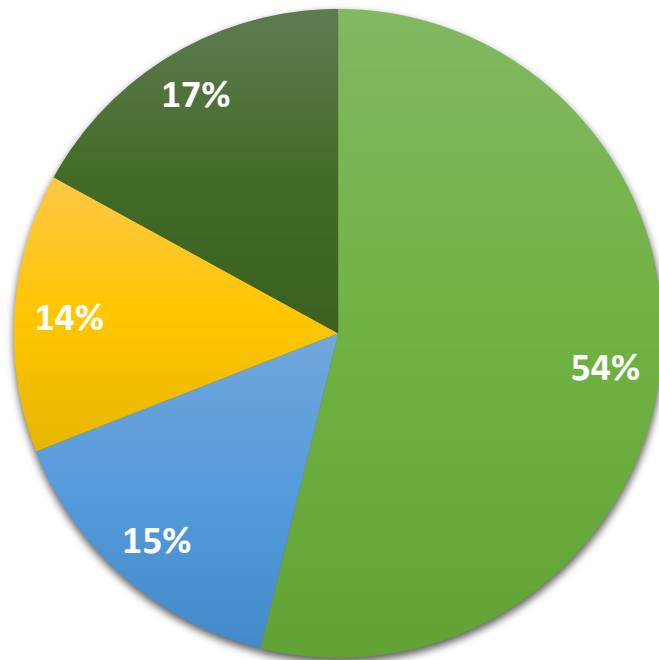
## Qualitative sample

- Participants in the POCLS 'survey cohort' (n= 586 Aboriginal children).
- We explored interview data from
  - Aboriginal children, and their caseworkers.
  - 29 parents whose Aboriginal children had been restored, who participated in at least one interview for the POCLS survey. Mothers of 32 children, and fathers of 7 children completed interviews about 39 children, respectively.

# Findings- quantitative

- The rate of restoration for Aboriginal children in the POCLS final orders cohort is 15.2%, or 155 children of the 1018 that were removed.
- The average time in care for children who had been restored was nearly 2.5 years.

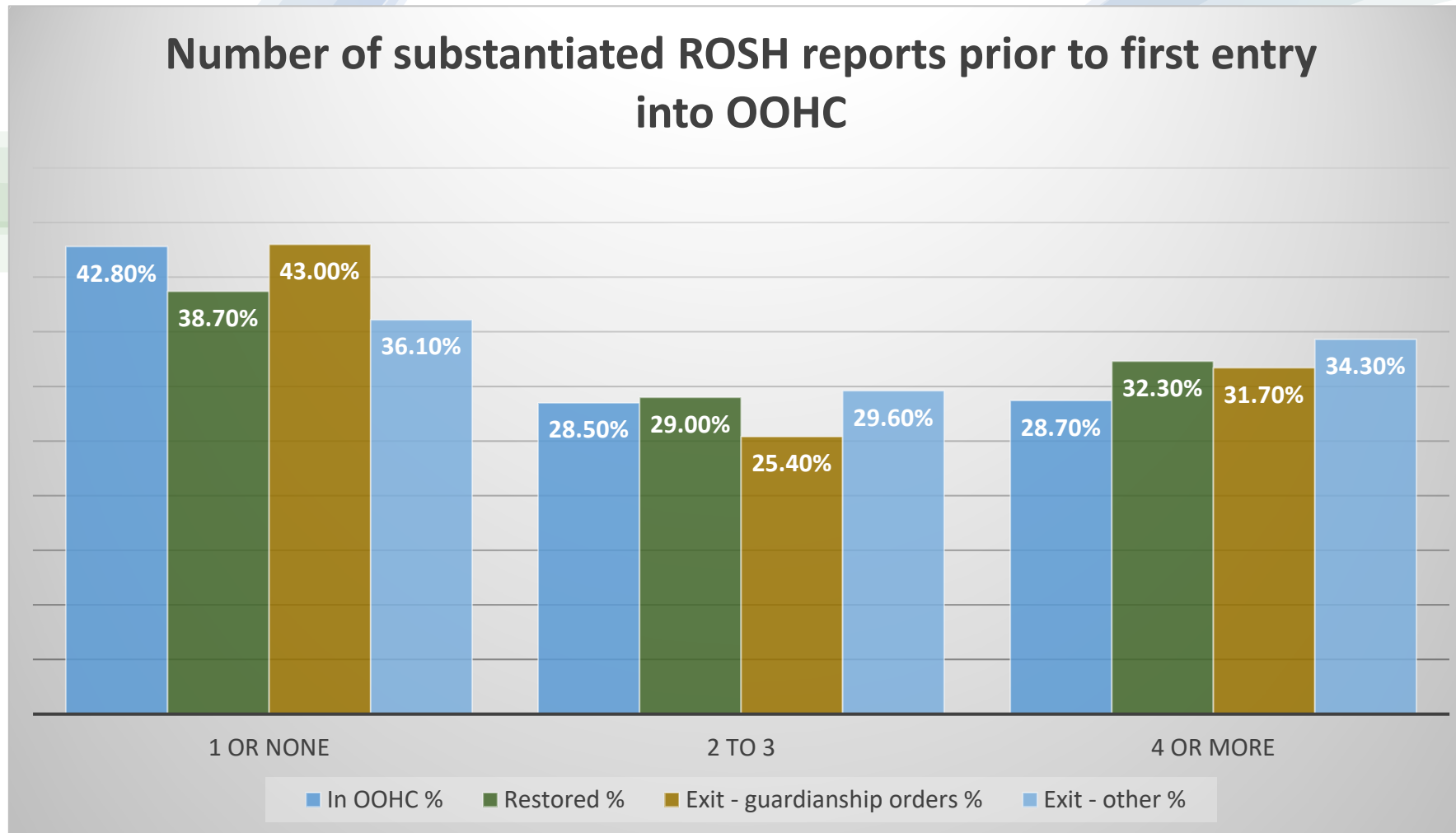
*OOHC status for Aboriginal children at Wave 4*



■ Still in OOHC ■ Restored to parent ■ Exit to guardianship ■ Exit other reason

Once on final orders, restoring Aboriginal children to their parents is highly unlikely

# Findings- quantitative



An average of 40% of Aboriginal children entering OOHC (in final orders cohort) regardless of their care outcome, were the subject of just one, or no, substantiated ROSH reports

# Findings- parents' voices

## When their children were removed...

*I was not able to attend court as I had three children at home with no babysitter. At the time I did not realise the situation was that serious. I felt if it had been better verbalised to me and suggested that I needed legal representation the outcome may have been quite different (parent).*

# Findings- parents' voices

## When their children were removed...

*They were very sneaky how they did it. We were at the DOCS office, and they took me into a separate room and told me they were taking the children. The caseworker just threw the paperwork in front of me and just said they were taking them. I could hear my children distressed in the other room and I wasn't allowed to see them. I was so distressed (parent).*

\*\*\*\*

*They should not have had two policeman walk into the labour ward at the hospital and remove my child while I wasn't even in the room...they were sneaky about it and lied to me. I was taken to a room half-way down the hall and I couldn't even walk properly, I had just had an emergency caesarean. I went into a function type room in the hospital, they sat me down and they took a long time to tell me that they had actually taken my child (parent).*

# Findings- caseworkers' voices

## Restoration barriers...

*Restoration is being spoken about but casework intervention towards this process has been minimal due to staff levels and staff unavailability (caseworker).*

\*\*\*\*\*

(Caseworker worked hard to engage the family for a year, and then the case was transferred to a new caseworker who) *'...failed to follow through and explore restoration'* (caseworker).

# Findings- caseworkers' voices

## Placement impact on restoration...

*'...moved child from their country, without any significant discussion with CS [Community Services] and parents, the child has significant contact (monthly) with parents and is 5 hours away...'*

*and, 'kin assessments have been identified every case plan and nil work has been completed', because 'staff have not been supported to do the assessment' (caseworker).*

\*\*\*\*\*

*'bullied by paternal family and carer prior to contact occurring', and 'has only attended half of the planned contacts' (caseworker).*

# Findings- children's voices

## Wanting their parents...

*Help the child stay connected to the birth parents. Let them contact their birth parents when they want to (child).*

\*\*\*\*\*

*Give the parents another chance with the child. Have overnight stays and more visits (child).*

\*\*\*\*\*

*Support, like help them through their tough times. Maybe remind them who their birth parents are and help them keep in contact with their birth family (child).*



# Findings- parents' voices

## Transition to restoration...

*More contact before restoration would of [sic] been better. The children came to the family home for supervised visits and they were not allowed to leave the room we were in. They wanted to go to their bedrooms and outside to see the animals but we all had to stay together (parent).*

## Post restoration support...

*When they came home, I didn't get enough support understanding the child's behaviour, where I could have got help for my child; caseworker was not on my side, I was shuffled around a lot, they didn't care (parent).*

\*\*\*\*\*

*What would have been helpful was a better understanding by DOCS about what was going on. I had no one tell me what my child had been doing or what had gone on with my baby while they were in care. I was given a note by one of the carers which was helpful, but that was pretty much it (parent).*

## *Bring Them Home, Keep Them Home*

Charting the experiences, successful pathways and outcomes of Aboriginal families whose children have been restored from Out-of-Home Care

### **What do we want to learn from the research?**

- For those parents that have had their children restored, what was their experience? What supported them in restoration and what were the challenges?
- What do the institutional barriers look like for families and supporting services when working towards restoration?
- What restoration practices are happening, and what does this look like around the state and in specific communities?
- The size of the problem (how many Aboriginal children are removed and not restored to their parents in NSW?)

*The research is funded for 4 years from Sept 2021 through an Australian Research Council Indigenous Discovery grant*

# Bring Them Home, Keep Them Home

Our approach to conducting the research

## Aboriginal led and controlled

- Aboriginal researchers
- Partners with Aboriginal organisations



South Coast  
Medical Service  
Aboriginal Corporation



## Place based- working alongside Aboriginal communities/organisations

- ACCOs leading the research at the community level
- Supported by NGOs and DCJ
- Community forums
- Interviews with Aboriginal parents, stakeholders and practitioners

## Widest reach possible- Experiences of practitioners and stakeholders across NSW

- Understanding how restoration work looks in different contexts and geographic areas
- Building the evidence of practitioner perspectives of restoration experiences and system engagement across the state
- Practitioner forums- beginning early 2023: *If you would like your services to participate in the practitioner forums, please contact [b.newton@unsw.edu.au](mailto:b.newton@unsw.edu.au)*

## *Bring Them Home, Keep Them Home*

### **Community forum 1- key messages to support practitioners working with Aboriginal families**

- Led by research Aboriginal partner organisations, March 2022
- Attended by more than 50 practitioners and stakeholders in the child and family service sector in the Illawarra Shoalhaven.

### **Challenges in the pathway to restoration for Aboriginal families**

- Decisions concerning Aboriginal families are often made by non-Aboriginal people and without any input from the family or agencies who work with the family
- Parents are expected to understand the workings of the restoration process and legal system, and often are not supported to build this knowledge- services often do not have the internal legal resources or capability to support parents in these processes.
- There is inconsistent knowledge and practice amongst service providers working in DCJ, non-government, and Aboriginal organisations within the sector about restoration approaches and processes

## *Bring Them Home, Keep Them Home*

### Community forum 1- key messages to support practitioners working with Aboriginal families

#### **There needs to be greater alignment between preservation and restoration service models**

- More resources and opportunities should be given to preservation services to conduct restoration work. This will help alleviate capacity issues
- Greater collaboration between the two service types will help improve restoration practice and help address inconsistency in practice
- Greater use of trauma informed practices, and a recognition that lapses in behaviour and judgment are accepted as part of a parent's restoration journey
- Foundational work of family finding and identifying kinship structures must be conducted as early as possible to ensure that a child's connection to family, community and culture is safeguarded post removal
- Restoration timelines and practices, which are often seen as strict and bureaucratic-led would offer greater flexibility under the family-led nature of preservation...

## *Bring Them Home, Keep Them Home*

### **Community forum 1- key messages to support practitioners working with Aboriginal families**

#### **Goals, plans and timeframes for restoration need to be flexible**

- These processes must consider the personal and cultural context of the parents and family
- Parents need time to process the grief, loss and shame associated with having a child removed
- Consideration needs to be given for sector and system barriers beyond parents' control, for example turnover of staff and time it takes to build relationships with new caseworkers or agencies

#### **Restoration outcomes are shaped by relationships and quality of caseworkers**

- Caseworkers need the skills to have difficult conversations with carers to advocate for the needs of the child and birth family
- Positive outcomes are more likely when parents are dealing with a caseworker that is proactive, has relationships with services and genuinely wants to work with the family