



A newsletter for participants in the Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study (POCLS)

Deputy Secretary Message

I would like to extend my sincere thanks to all the children and caregivers who have been a part of this Study for more than 12 years. Sharing your experiences and giving up your valuable time has provided researchers with a wealth of data to answer very important policy questions in NSW.

As a proud Wiradjuri man from NSW, it is important to me that research projects conducted in Aboriginal communities and with Aboriginal people are ethical, culturally safe and relevant; and the data is used to inform services and support. This will ensure that the Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study (POCLS) benefits all children and families in NSW.

As the Deputy Secretary leading the new Transforming Aboriginal Outcomes Division within the Department of Communities and Justice NSW (DCJ), my work is focused on improving how government works with Aboriginal families and communities. Data from the POCLS will be used to inform 'Closing the Gap' initiatives so the service system can support children and families to reach their fullest potential.

We look forward to your continued support in this important research study and thank you again for your ongoing contribution to building the evidence base of what works for children and families.



Brendan Thomas,
Deputy Secretary,
Transforming Aboriginal
Outcomes, DCJ

What's on in 2023?

The POCLS will be conducting the 6th round of interviews with children and caregivers in 2023. Children who were infants when this Study began will be starting high school. Many children who were older when the Study began are now 18 years or older.

The Study is really looking forward to gathering more information about your experiences to inform decisions and access to timely and appropriate support.

In 2023 we will:

- Invite children and their caregivers to an interview. The questions will mostly be the same as before about your experiences and how you are feeling, where you are living, your family, school, work, friends and support you receive and would like.
- Invite young people who are 18 years and over to take part in an interview so we can understand more about your experiences as a young adult, where you are living, if you are studying or working, about your family and friends and life in general including support needs.
- We will continue to do more analysis so we can learn more about the factors that influence the outcomes for children.
- We will continue to share the new insights with policy makers and practitioners.

How is the Study tracking?



We hope that you continue to be part of the Study in 2023 and we look forward to interviewing you again.

Organisations supporting the Study participants



The CREATE Foundation represents the voices of children and young people with an out-of-home care (OOHC) experience.

Young people can contact the CREATE Foundation on 1800 655 105



My Forever Family's goal is to see that all children in OOHC receive the care they deserve, and all carers receive the support and training they need.

For carer support please contact My Forever Family on 1300 782 975

Gathering the voices of people creates better services

Data collected from interviews and surveys

This important study started in 2010, and so far we've interviewed over 1,500 children and young people, making it one of the biggest studies of its kind in Australia. By participating in research studies like this you are helping us learn more about how to raise happy healthy children and young people and what support they need.

Analysis and reporting by leading researchers

We have commissioned 16 national and international leading researchers to undertake analysis of the de-identified data we have collected from you to inform important policy and practice questions. Together with the Study team we have published, or are soon to publish, 34 publications and 11 Evidence to Action Notes. A Special Issue on the Study's findings will be published in the international journal *Child Abuse and Neglect* in early 2023. All POCLS publications are available on the study webpage www.facs.nsw.gov.au/resources/research/pathways-of-care/pocls-publication. In 2023, we are commissioning new research projects led by Aboriginal researchers.

Evidence to action roundtables

In 2022, we brought together national and international leading researchers who have completed analysis of the POCLS dataset, the POCLS Advisory Group and the Evidence to Action Working Group, to discuss how the new knowledge can inform policy and practice to improve outcomes for children and young people. The five roundtables were on: Child development, wellbeing and children with a disability; Cultural connections and family time; Education and youth justice; Casework and support; and Permanency and wellbeing outcomes.

Research seminars and conferences

We showcase research studies including the POCLS through lunch-time webinars and at conferences in Australia and overseas.

- Information about future and past research seminars hosted by DCJ's Family and Community Services Insights, Analysis and Research (FACSIAR) www.facs.nsw.gov.au/resources/research/research-seminars.
- Subscribe to receive information about future FACSIAR Lunch & Learn webinars www.facs.nsw.gov.au/resources/research/research-seminars/upcoming.

How your experiences are being used to improve services



Dr Miriam Mclean,
Australian Centre for Child Protection, University of South Australia

Children's education

We were excited to use the POCLS dataset to examine positive reading outcomes for children who have been in care. This Study is important as it combines administrative data – such as how many placements a child has had and their NAPLAN reading scores, with survey data about how things are going, and what supports and services are being accessed. This information can be used to answer a lot of research questions about what makes a difference for children in care. Our study showed that in Year 3, 46% of the children who had been in care scored in the upper 3 bands in NAPLAN reading tests, which was lower than in the whole NSW population of Year 3 students (74%). Children with better social and emotional wellbeing as well as cognitive ability scores were more likely to have higher reading scores. Over time, around 1 in 13 of the children who experienced care maintained above average reading achievement from Year 3 to Year 9. However, most children in the cohort had reading scores that fell a little further behind each year, regardless of whether their Year 3 reading scores were high, average or low.

Children who have been in care often need additional support to achieve well in school, even if they are doing well early on. Some carers need more support too, in implementing OOHC education plans to enable them to best help the children in their care to thrive at school.

Our study found that higher levels of reading achievement in children was associated with a range of factors: average or above cognitive ability, low externalising behaviour, highly-educated carers, and non-Aboriginal students. We have been able to share our findings with policy makers, child protection workers, education staff, and families, and hope that this research will help more children and young people who have been in care have every opportunity to achieve in school and beyond.



Associate Professor Melissa O'Donnell,
Australian Centre for Child Protection, University of South Australia

Health and wellbeing of infants

Our research focused on investigating infant (under 1 year of age) involvement with child protection given that they have the highest rate of admission into OOHC. The POCLS was the only study we are aware of that had comprehensive data on infants admitted into care, assessed them on a routine basis to investigate their health and wellbeing outcomes and determined the service provision they received. We were therefore able to investigate the prevalence of developmental vulnerability for children who entered OOHC as infants, and whether they received services.

Our study revealed a high proportion of children who entered care as infants were identified as vulnerable through both health indicators (36%) and standardised assessments (70%). The analysis found that children who entered care as infants predominantly remained in the care system and had a high level of vulnerability. A large group had positive physical and cognitive development with service provision increasing over time, however early service provision is required. Another group of infants were identified who had early social-emotional concerns, and this group displayed worsening social-emotional wellbeing. Our findings point to the importance of developmental assessment of infants in care and the identification of developmental vulnerability and delays.



Associate Professor Rebecca Mitchell,
Australian Institute of Health Innovation, Macquarie University

Supporting carers

Carers of children in OOHC have a challenging role that extends beyond the usual demands and responsibilities of parenting. We examined information from 1,143 carers who were caring for 1,359 children in OOHC using the POCLS carer and caseworker surveys and DCJ administrative data. We studied the impact of child, carer, and placement characteristics on carers' psychological wellbeing and caregiving.

We found that carers who were in paid employment and were looking after multiple children had a higher likelihood of concern for their wellbeing and caregiving. Carers with older children experienced more placement challenges than younger children. We also found that kinship carers who had experienced 2 or more stressful life events or who had a non-government organisation case manager had a higher likelihood of concern for wellbeing and caregiving. The kinship carers with experiences of stressful life events were often less able to cope with caregiving demands. This points to the need to consider short-term respite for carers to deal with life events.

We also identified that some carers need additional support at critical times, such as when a child in their care starts school. Our study also emphasised the importance of social networks and support on contributing to carer wellbeing.

How the Study has informed policy and practice

OOHC policy and practice have new evidence from the POCLS research publications which has informed a range of their work. The Study has been used for staff training, practice initiatives, consultations, and to inform positions that Department staff may form on certain issues. Here are just a few examples of how the Study has informed policy and practice to improve children's experiences and outcomes.

Restoration to family

A new **restoration policy** mandate will be published by DCJ in December this year. The policy responds to feedback from the POCLS research, as well as a range of issues staff, families and other research have raised as important to restoration. Some of the information in the new policy includes:

- unambiguous advice that restoration is the first priority for children coming into care
- clearer guidance about working with Aboriginal children and families, including mandating the use of **Aboriginal family-led decision making**
- being clear with families about what needs to change and mandating their involvement in helping decide what changes are needed to help keep their child safe at home
- using the evidence-based Structured Decision Making Restoration Assessment Tool to help guide restoration decisions
- the importance of family time (contact) and using family time to support relationship-building and skill development.



Serious Case Reviews

Serious Case Reviews regularly use data from the Study to support internal reviews and where relevant casework specialists bring new evidence into Group supervision to help practitioners place their reflections within the context of the current evidence base.



OOHC Assessment Model

The **Assessment Practice team** used the findings from the POCLS to inform the design of the new OOHC assessment model. The most pertinent findings from the POCLS relate to the:

- consideration of culture for children in care
- factors that impact on placement stability.

Culture has been considered and applied to guide the development of the new Safety-In-Care assessment tool, including definitions and guidance around culture as a strength, source of identity and protection for children in care, and disconnection from culture as a source of harm. Placement stability has focused on factors that are likely to increase the risk of placement move – and the support provided to carers to support children and young people they are caring for.

Learning Initiatives

Practice Learning has directly used the Study findings in its range of learning initiatives, including the Caseworker Development Program, Practice Leadership Program and Change Together. As one example, new staff in Caseworker Development Program learn about the links between carer support and outcomes for children in OOHC, with POCLS research centred in this learning. The unit is also working with Strategy, Policy and Commissioning to include Study findings in updated and new practice notes and policy mandates.

Evidence to Action Notes

Evidence to Action Notes are produced as a resource for policy makers and practitioners and include key findings from POCLS reports as well as recommendations for policy and practice change.

- Note 1 – Birth family contact for children and young people in OOHC
- Note 2 – The early learning and childcare experiences of children in OOHC
- Note 3 – The importance of casework when establishing and supporting OOHC placements
- Note 4 – Carer parenting practices and children's relationships with their carers
- Note 5 – Educational outcomes: children and young people in OOHC
- Note 6 – Aboriginal cultural and family connections: children and young people in OOHC
- Note 7 – Placement stability: children and young people in OOHC
- Note 8 – Developmental outcomes – children and young people who have experienced OOHC
- Note 9 – Developmental outcomes – Aboriginal children and young people who have experienced OOHC
- Note 10 – How to build positive relationships and foster family time for children in OOHC
- Note 11 – Communication between OOHC caseworkers, children, young people and carers

Available on the Study Webpage

www.facs.nsw.gov.au/resources/research/pathways-of-care/pocls-publication/evidence-to-action-notes



Meet our POCLS Study Working Group



Judith Cashmore AO is a Professor of Socio-legal Research and Policy and Professorial Fellow in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, at the University of Sydney.



Daniel McAullay is an Associate Professor at Edith Cowan University and Director, Aboriginal Research and Director of the Centre for Improving Health Services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Families.



Amy Conley Wright is a Professor of Social Work and Policy Studies at the University of Sydney and Director of the Research Centre for Children.



Melissa O'Donnell is an Associate Professor and Deputy Director of the Australian Centre for Child Protection at the University of South Australia.



Andy Cubie is a Director at I-view, the specialist data collection division of the research company Ipsos, specialising in the design and management of social surveys.



Michael Tarren-Sweeney is a Professor and clinical child psychologist, epidemiologist, child developmental theorist at the University of Canterbury, New Zealand.



Melissa Green is a Professor at the University of NSW and is the lead scientific investigator of the NSW Child Development Study, a longitudinal investigation of over 90,000 children.



Michelle Townsend is a Senior Research Fellow in the School of Psychology at the University of Wollongong.



Ilan Katz is a Professor in the Social Policy Research Centre at the University of New South Wales. He directed the centre from 2005-2011.



Fred Wulczyn is a Senior Research Fellow at the University of Chicago and the Director of the Center for State Child Welfare Data.



Alan Taylor is an Honorary Senior Lecturer in the School of Psychological Sciences, Macquarie University.



Merran Butler is the Study's Chief Investigator and Director Statistical Analysis, Data Governance and Research at DCJ's Family and Community Services Insights, Analysis and Research (FACSIAR).

Ethics approvals for the Study

- University of NSW (HC210985)
- Aboriginal Health & Medical Research Council of NSW (766/10)
- NSW Population and Health Services Research Ethics Committee (HREC/14/CIPHS/74 Cancer Institute NSW: 2014/12/570)
- Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (EO2019-1-406).

We'd like to invite you to an interview again

We hope that you continue to be part of the Study and we look forward to interviewing you again in 2023.

Please let us know your new contact details by calling:

- Researchers at DCJ on **1800 997 960**
- I-view who conduct the interviews on **1800 105 088**
- or email **Pathways@facs.nsw.gov.au**

For a reminder on why we do this study, watch our video:

www.facs.nsw.gov.au/resources/research/pathways-of-care/videos

For more information visit our webpage:

www.facs.nsw.gov.au/resources/research/pathways-of-care