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| Child protection  |
| Additional service delivery data 2023-24 |
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# Child Protection

Child protection is part of a broader children and families service system that also includes family services, care services, and transition from care services. These services, delivered by the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing and funded community service organisations, support the health, safety, development and wellbeing of Victoria’s most vulnerable children, young people, and families.

Child protection is responsible for receiving, assessing, and investigating reports where children may be at risk of significant harm from abuse or neglect within their family, and for ensuring that appropriate services are provided to protect children from harm.

Child protection practitioners (CPP) undertake assessment, planning, and interventions for children assessed as being at risk of harm in parental care. Child protection practitioners meet with the child, their carers, significant others and professionals in contact with the child to formulate their assessment.

In some cases, children subject to protection orders may be contracted to an agency. Child protection remains responsible for case planning and other statutory functions.

## Case allocation

All children involved with Child protection are actively monitored to ensure the allocation of the most urgent cases where children are at the highest risk.

Table 1: Average ratesof clients awaiting allocation 2023-24, by division and state, per cent 1

Shows the average percentage of clients awaiting allocation each quarter in 2023-24.

| Period | North | South | East | West | State |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| September 2023 | 15.2 | 18.3 | 18.6 | 17.1 | 17.2 |
| December 2023 | 15.0 | 15.9 | 16.9 | 17.1 | 16.2 |
| March 2024 | 16.1 | 16.3 | 14.8 | 15.5 | 15.8 |
| June 2024 | 15.1 | 16.6 | 17.6 | 18.4 | 17.0 |
| 2023-24 2 | 15.4 | 16.8 | 17.0 | 17.0 | 16.6 |

1 Data represents the average rate of clients awaiting allocation per quarter. The count excludes cases in intake phase and cases awaiting allocation for less than four days. Division and State totals include regional services.

2 Daily average over financial year.

## Demand

Reports to child protection can be made about a child’s wellbeing or safety. Reports can also be made about concern for the wellbeing and safety of unborn children.

In 2023-24, there were 139,612 child protection reports received.

The number of reports received in 2023-24 was 8.5 per cent higher than the previous year, while investigations from intake reports increased by 4.4 per cent. Substantiations of abuse following an investigation showed a 0.9 per cent decrease from the previous year. Of the 16,631 substantiated cases, 3,258 (19.6%) involved children who had been part of a previously substantiated case that had been closed in the previous 12 months. The number of reports received on unborn children in 2023-24 (2,230) was 2.5 per cent higher than the number received the previous year (2,175).

Table 2: Child protection demand 3

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Child protection demand (quarterly data) | September 2023 | December 2023 | March 2024 | June 2024 | Total 2023-24 |
| Reports on unborn children | 547 | 569 | 533 | 549 | 2,230 |
| Reports on children | 33,975 | 34,247 | 33,467 | 37,694 | 139,612 |
| Investigations | 9,953 | 10,061 | 9,994 | 11,122 | 41,140 |
| Substantiations | 4,019 | 3,855 | 4,229 | 4,341 | 16,631 |
| Re-substantiations within 12 months | 807 | 765 | 803 | 823 | 3,258 |

3 Quarterly results capture volume over the quarter as at end of quarter. Financial year results capture data entry lag for the first three quarters and may not reflect the sum of the four quarters.

# Care Services

## Placements

When children are unable to live safety at home, the Department of Families Fairness and Housing (the department) makes an application to the Children’s Court for the child to be placed in alternative care arrangements.

For children who cannot safely reside with their parents, kinship care is sought to enable the child to remain with extended family or community networks. If a kinship placement cannot be found, foster carers provide a critical role in providing safe and nurturing home-based care for children and young people.

Residential care is used when placement in home-based care is not possible, or it is in the child’s best interest regarding their individual circumstances.

Permanent care is a legal arrangement in which the child lives permanently with a family approved as suitable to assume parental responsibility to the exclusion of all others. Permanent care provides stability for children who are unable to live safely with their birth parents.

The department contracts a variety of community service organisations to recruit and support volunteer foster carers and operate residential care services. Community service organisations also help to provide permanent care and kinship care support services.

In 2023-24 there were:

* 12,275 children placed in at least one out-of-home care placement during the year (excluding permanent care placements).
* 3,371 admissions to and 3,261 exits from out-of-home care (including permanent care placements)4.
* 9,316 children and young people in out-of-home care (daily average) excluding permanent care.

Table 4a: Daily average children aged 0 to 17 years in care services placements by placement type and quarter 2023-24 (excluding permanent care)

| Quarter | Foster | Kinship | Residential | Total daily average number in care5 |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| September 2023 | 1,416 | 7,294 | 484 | 9,198 |
| December 2023 | 1,401 | 7,406 | 463 | 9,277 |
| March 2024 | 1,381 | 7,409 | 453 | 9,331 |
| June 2024 | 1,346 | 7,455 | 460 | 9,336 |
| Full year average6 | 1,391 | 7,425 | 472 | 9,316 |

4 Children entering and exiting an episode of care – an episode of care may include a break in placement of less than 60 days.

5 The three placement types for each quarter do not sum to the daily average number in care. The discrepancy is due to the inclusion of a small number of placements categorised as “other” which contributes to the overall total.

6 The sum of quarterly averages does not align with the full-year average, primarily due to slight variations in the number of days within each quarter.

Table 4b: Daily average children aged 0 to 17 years in care services on Permanent Care Orders by quarter 2023-24

| Quarter | Permanent care  |
| --- | --- |
| September 2023 | 3,583 |
| December 2023 | 3,599 |
| March 2024 | 3,870 |
| June 2024 | 3,864 |
| Full year average6 | 3,874 |

Note: Quarterly results capture average volume over the quarter as at end of quarter. Full year results capture data entry lag for the first three quarters and may not reflect the average of the four quarters. Improved data processing implemented in January 2024 results in a more accurate count.

Table 5: Children less than 12 years of age in residential care

|  | Percentage |
| --- | --- |
| Percentage of children less than 12 years of age placed in residential care, relative to total children in care, at 30 June 2024 | 0.42%  |

Note: Children aged less than 12 years of age in residential care may be in specialised arrangements to accommodate sibling groups or to care for children with high and complex needs.

## Voluntary Child Care Agreement placements

Voluntary placements may occur with or without the involvement of child protection and may be made with a kinship carer, disability provider or out of home care provider. Voluntary placements are an option where there is no court order requiring the child or young person to live in a placement provided outside of the family home and require the consent of the parent to place a child in an out of home care placement for a period of time due to factors including parental illness, family crisis or for emergency reasons.

Table 6: Voluntary Child Care Agreement placements 2023-24

| Measure | 2023-24 |
| --- | --- |
| Number of new child care agreements entered into in 2023-24 | 285 |
| Number of child care agreements open as at 30 June 24  | 20 |

Note: The data report captures data in relation to voluntary placements by agencies, counting unique placements between the carer and child/young person in the reporting period.

# Incident reporting

Client incident reporting data records when a client experiences harm, or is alleged to have experienced harm, during service delivery. Client incident reporting data includes disclosures of historic abuse. Incidents are recorded, and the client’s immediate and ongoing safety needs are responded to. Incident records are maintained regardless of whether an investigation unsubstantiates the allegation of harm.

The Client Incident Management System (CIMS) safeguards clients by providing timely and effective responses to incidents which harm them during service delivery, which in turn, enables service providers to enhance service delivery by learning from incidents. CIMS policy ensures a consistent and proportionate response to client incidents. CIMS replaced the previous incident reporting system in 2018.

CIMS is part of the department’s corrective safeguarding response, ensuring that service providers and the department take appropriate actions to promote the safety and wellbeing of clients. This includes making a report to Victoria Police when has, or is alleged, to have occurred. Service providers and the department use incident data to inform continuous improvement activities.

## Incident categories

Major Impact (CIMS) incidents are the most serious incidents. Service providers are required to focus on the impact (level of harm) to the client rather than the incident itself, including the extent to which a client has experienced physical, emotional and/or psychological harm and the potential risk of further harm.

## Incident responses

Where there is an allegation, it is met with a strong response that includes medical attention (should this be required); a report to police if it involves an allegation of physical or sexual abuse or a client is potentially victim of a crime; and counselling and support offered to all parties.

Each major impact incident is subject to either an investigation or a review led by the service provider. This requirement provides a better understanding of how and why incidents occur; how they can be prevented; and how the department and service providers can respond to and learn from these incidents.

CIMS incident information for children and young people in out of home care is shared with the Commission for Children and Young people under section 60A of *Commission for Children and Young People Act 2012.*

Table 7: Child Protection and Family Services Major Impact incidents (CIMS) 2023-24

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| CIMS – Major Impact incidents7 | 2023-24 |
| Client death | 17 |
| Abuse  | 1,199 |
| Behaviour | 396 |
| Other incident types | 874 |

7 Major impact incidents data includes both department-funded organisations and department delivered incident data.

### Client death inquiries

All deaths of children in unexpected or unanticipated circumstances, including accident, illness, sudden unexpected death in infancy (SUDI), sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) and suicide, must be reported as major impact incidents. Children who were known to child protection in the 12 months preceding their death are subject to child death inquiries by the Commission for Children and Young People.

The department notified the Commission of 43 deaths in 2023-24 that were in scope of a child death inquiry. Child death inquiries are separately reported.

### Abuse

Abuse incidents include allegations of physical, sexual, emotional/psychological, and financial abuse. Professional judgement is used with respect to the nature of all abuse to determine the appropriate level of categorisation of each incident.

Allegations of abuse are treated seriously. Where clients are victims, they are supported by family support services, child protection, care services, and specialist services, including access to specialist victim support services and medical assistance. The Centre Against Sexual Assault (CASA) is also contacted in cases of alleged sexual abuse unless the client does not want contact with this service. Where a crime may have occurred, Victoria Police are contacted.

### Behaviour

While clients can display a range of dangerous and disruptive behaviours placing both themselves and others at risk, behaviours are generally well managed with a range of services being provided to support clients.

### Other incident types

Other incidents include matters such as absent client, poor quality of care, injury, and self-harm/attempted suicide.

## Care Services client incident investigations

The department requires that the safety and best interests of the child are always paramount, and that children and young people in Care Services reside in safe, stable and high-quality placements.

Under the Client Incident Management System (CIMS), organisations must report and investigate any incident where a child in their care is alleged to have been abused or neglected, and the staff member or carer is identified as the subject of the allegation. All reports are treated seriously, and matters reported to police. The purpose of a CIMS investigation is to determine on the balance of probability whether abuse or neglect has occurred.

Ensuring the safety of children may involve removing the child from placement, the removal of the subject of allegation or, where the subject of allegation does not live in the placement, planning for the child to have no further contact with them.

Table 8: Client incident investigations 2023-24

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | Number |
| Completed CIMS investigations | 993 |
| Completed CIMS investigations with an outcome of abuse substantiated | 503 |

Completed investigations include allegations of abuse or neglect reported to the department.

Multiple clients can be subject to a single CIMS investigation, each with an outcome of "substantiated abuse" or "not substantiated" being reported. CIMS data is not comparable with previously reported Quality of Care data.

# Suitability Panel

The Suitability Panel determines whether a carer who is found to have sexually or physically abused a child in his/her care should be disqualified from being recorded in the register of out-of-home carers. The Suitability Panel may also determine whether a carer who has been disqualified, should have that disqualification removed.

The Suitability Panel conducted sixteen hearings throughout 2023-24. Out of these, four cases are still under review, while allegations of misconduct were confirmed in fourteen cases (including two from the previous financial year), leading to the disqualification of ten carers.

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