

The mental health and wellbeing of children and young people

Policy brief, May 2012

Children and young people in care

The Commissioner for Children and Young Western Australia (WA) undertook an Inquiry into the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people (the Inquiry) after hearing consistently from communities across the State about concerns for the mental health of children and young people, from infants to young adults.

The *Report of the Inquiry into the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in Western Australia* was tabled in Parliament in May 2011.

This policy brief focuses on children and young people in care, also known as out-of-home care, which refers to children and young people less than 18 years of age who are unable to live with their families, often due to abuse or neglect. It involves the placement of a child with alternate caregivers on a short or long-term basis.

Research conducted in NSW found that more than 50 per cent of children in care had clinically significant mental health problems.¹

What do children and young people say?

Young people in care consulted for the Inquiry placed great importance on the need for accessible, responsive, consistent services; being involved in planning their health services; and raising awareness of children and young people in care about their mental health and where they can go for help.

"There needs to be more information available. I wouldn't know where to go if I thought I was becoming mentally ill." boy 15, in care²

A stable living environment was also seen as important by children and young people in care for the prevention of mental health problems.³

What were the Inquiry findings?

Key findings relating to children and young people in care include:

- Children and young people in care are a high-risk group for the development of complex mental health problems (including attachment, anxiety, conduct, and attention disorders, as well as social problems and depression) due to the lack of development of a secure attachment with a primary care giver in infancy, and the impact of abuse and neglect on the development of the brain and nervous system responses to stress.⁴
- As at February 2010, 45 per cent of children and young people in care were Aboriginal.⁵
- Access to mental health services for children and young people in care is not adequate.⁶
- Inter-agency collaboration and coordination is required to improve the mental health of children and young people in care.⁷



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- Early intervention to address and prevent the further development of mental health problems is crucial and needs to commence when children and young people enter care.⁸
- Children and young people in care, and in transition from care, require multi-modal mental health assessments and timely access to multi-disciplinary teams.⁹
- External monitoring is required of the health component¹⁰ of a child and young people's annual care plan to ensure mental health problems are identified and responded to.¹¹

Key recommendations of the Inquiry relevant to children and young people in care are:

Recommendation 3: A new collaborative service to address the needs of children and young people who have complex needs be established as a demonstration project. The development of this service should consider the models of Wraparound Milwaukee and the People with Exceptionally Complex Needs¹²

Recommendation 9: A strategic and comprehensive plan for the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people across Western Australia be developed by the Mental Health Commission. This plan provide for the implementation and funding of promotion, prevention, early intervention and treatment services and programs.¹³

Recommendation 17: As part of the strategic and comprehensive plan for the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people across Western Australia, the Mental Health Commission identify the unique and specific requirements for:

- Aboriginal children and young people; and
- children and young people who are vulnerable or disadvantaged for any reason.¹⁴

Recommendation 21: The Rapid Response framework identify and respond to the mental health requirements of individual children and young people in care and that this be monitored on a regular basis by the Department for Child Protection.¹⁵

What is being done?

A number of developments relevant to the mental health of children and young people in care have occurred since the Inquiry:

- The Mental Health Commission has developed a 10 year strategic policy, Mental Health 2020: Making it personal and everybody's business¹⁶ and the associated Action Plan 2011-2012. This plan identifies the mental health and wellbeing needs of infants, children and youth as requiring specific attention.¹⁷
- The Mental Health Commission has funded the Department of Health to develop a multidisciplinary brief intervention service for young people 16 to 24 years of age. Planning for this service is underway.¹⁸
- The Mental Health Commission has also commenced planning for a comprehensive youth mental health service for the 16 to 24 year age group.¹⁹
- A service to address the needs of children and young people who have complex needs, that will include those in care, is being developed by the Mental Health Commission, the Department for Child Protection and the Department of Corrective Services.



- The interagency implementation plan for Rapid Response, endorsed by Cabinet in late 2011, included the requirement for a child or young person in care to have priority access to State mental health services over other children or young people with the same assessed level of need.²⁰
- The Department for Child Protection's Secure Care Centre for young people in care commenced operation in May 2011.²¹

What more needs to be done?

To improve the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in care, the following is required:

- The development of a strategic and comprehensive mental health plan for all children and young people in WA that includes the unique and specific mental health requirements of children and young people in care.
- Strengthened inter-agency management to ensure optimal services for children and young people in care who have mental health problems.
- Continued implementation of the Cabinet-approved Rapid Response plan to ensure priority for mental health services is provided to children and young people in care.
- Mental health screening, assessments and associated planning for all children and young people in care to be comprehensively documented in their care plan on entering care, and reviewed annually. The WA Ombudsman's 2011 report *Planning for children in care* found that, of the children's files investigated, a mental health screen had only been completed for a minority (15 per cent) of children in care; and emotional, mental health, or behavioural concerns were only documented in a minority (34 per cent) of children's files.²²
- Regular external monitoring of each child's annual care plan to ensure mental health screening, assessment and planning is undertaken.
- A comprehensive mental assessment by a child and adolescent psychiatrist for young people on admission to the Department for Child Protection's Secure Care Centre, with on-going management by a multi-disciplinary team including a child and adolescent psychiatrist.

Other relevant information

Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia

- *Report of the Inquiry into the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in Western Australia* is available at www.ccyp.wa.gov.au
- *Speaking out about mental health: The views of Western Australian children and young people* is available at www.ccyp.wa.gov.au

Department for Child Protection, Western Australia

- Information on health care planning for children and young people in care is available at www.dcp.wa.gov.au



Mental Health Commission, Western Australia

- Mental Health 2020: Making it personal and everybody's business and the Action Plan 2011-2012 is available at www.mentalhealth.wa.gov.au

Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists

- *The mental health needs of children in out-of-home care: A report from the expert working committee of the Faculty of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* is available at www.ranzcp.org
- *The mental health care needs of children in out-of-home care, position statement 59* is available at www.ranzcp.org

The Ombudsman Western Australia

- *Planning for children in care: An Ombudsman's own motion investigation into the administration of the care planning provision of the Children and Community Services Act 2004* is available at www.ombudsman.wa.gov.au/

¹ NSW Department of Community Services 2007, *Mental health of Children in Out-of-Home Care in NSW, Australia*, New South Wales Government, p.1

² Commissioner for Children and Young People WA 2011, *Report of the Inquiry into the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in Western Australia*, Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, p. 85

³ Ibid, p83

⁴ Ibid, pp 83-84 & 103-104

⁵ Ibid, p.83

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid, p.85

⁸ Ibid, p.84

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ The Department for Child Protection care plan template has eight dimensions of wellbeing, all of which are required to be completed: safety, care arrangements, health, education, social and family relationships, recreation and leisure, emotional and behavioural development, and identity and culture

¹¹ Commissioner for Children and Young People WA 2011, *Report of the Inquiry into the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in Western Australia*, Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, p.83-84

¹² Ibid, p.56

¹³ Ibid, p.63

¹⁴ Ibid, p.72

¹⁵ Ibid, p.85

¹⁶ Mental Health Commission WA 2011, *Mental Health 2020, Making it personal and everybody's business*, Government of Western Australia

¹⁷ Mental Health Commission WA 2012, *Mental Health 2020, Making it personal and everybody's business, Action Plan 2011-2012* [website], viewed 23 February 2012, Government of Western Australia,

http://www.mentalhealth.wa.gov.au/Libraries/pdf_docs/MHC_action_plan_Web_2.sflb.ashx, p.16

¹⁸ Ibid, p.18

¹⁹ Ibid, p.18

²⁰ Information provided to the Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, [letter], 21 December 2011, Department for Child Protection

²¹ *Children and Community Services Act 2004*, Section 88 (C) 2

²² Ombudsman Western Australia 2011, *Planning for children in care: An Ombudsman's own motion investigation into the administration of the care planning provision of the Children and Community Services Act 2004*, Ombudsman Western Australia, p.52

