

Characteristics of parents involved in the Queensland child protection system

*Report 2: Parental risk factors for
abuse and neglect*

March 2008



Introduction

This is the second report in a series of six that will provide a profile of parents involved in the Queensland child protection system. The aim is to provide an additional evidence base for developing policy and programs across the child protection system, from prevention and early intervention through to permanency planning.

The reports will look at the household environment and the characteristics of parents believed responsible for substantiated harm or risk of harm to their child.

The first report provided a demographic profile. This report provides an overview of the parental risk factors assessed in these households during the investigation and assessment phase.

Using information from the Integrated Client Management System (ICMS), the report looks at:

- the prevalence of parental risk factors within households
- households with multiple risk factors
- risk factors and the harm types substantiated
- risk factors within different household types and young households (at least one parent aged 21 or younger) and Indigenous households (at least one person identifies as an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person)
- risk factors within households with a child assessed as 'substantiated — child in need of protection'.

The remaining four reports will focus on:

- Report 3: Profiles of parents who are resubstantiated for abuse or neglect.
- Report 4: Parental characteristics of children who have high levels of support needs and particular kinds of needs.
- Report 5: Disadvantaged areas and geographic differences in the prevalence of key risk factors.
- Report 6: Final report — summary of key findings from reports 1 to 5 and cross-analysis.

Executive summary

Between April and June 2007, the Department recorded substantiations relating to 847 households where a parent was believed responsible for harm or risk of harm to their child.

The first section of the report examines the parental risk factors for 695 (82 per cent) of these households, based on the Family Risk Evaluation.¹ It provides an overview of the prevalence of parental risk factors in households where the Department has determined one or more children have been harmed or are at risk of harm, but where further intervention by the Department is not necessarily required.

The second section of the report examines the parental risk factors for those households where one or more children are in need of protection (279 of the 695 households). It provides an overview of the parental risk factors present in those households subject to ongoing intervention by the Department.

The Family Risk Evaluation helps to assess the likelihood of future harm occurring within the family by looking at a number of risk factors. The tool includes five risk factors that relate to the characteristics of parents in a household and these have been analysed in the report.

Parental risk factors – Households substantiated

Prevalence of parental risk factors by type

- Nearly one-third (29 per cent) of households substantiated do not have any of the five parental risk factors. The remaining households (71 per cent) have at least one parental risk factor.
- In nearly half of all substantiated households (47 per cent) one or both parents have a drug and/or alcohol problem.
- Over one-third (35 per cent) of households have had two or more incidents of domestic violence within the past year.
- One-quarter (25 per cent) of primary parents were abused or neglected as a child.

¹ The remaining households are not included as in the majority of cases the household has changed.

- Around one-fifth of primary parents have a criminal history (21 per cent) and around the same proportion have a current or previously diagnosed mental illness (19 per cent).

Multiple parental risk factors

- Multiple risk factors (that is, a household with more than one risk factor recorded) exist in nearly half (44 per cent) of all households. Overall:
 - 27 per cent have one parental risk factor
 - 23 per cent have two
 - 22 per cent have three or more.
- Households with multiple risk factors are more than twice as likely to progress to ongoing intervention as households with one risk factor or no risk factors (59 per cent compared to 25 per cent respectively).

Parental risk factors and harm types

- With the exception of domestic violence, parental risk factors are most prevalent in households with a child substantiated for neglect.
- Domestic violence is prevalent in households with substantiated emotional or physical abuse (around 43 per cent).
- Parental risk factors are least common in households with substantiated sexual abuse. Over half of these households do not have any of the five parental risk factors recorded (53 per cent).

Parental risk factors within the different household types

- Parental risk factors are more prevalent in young households (at least one parent aged 21 or younger) and Indigenous households (where at least one person identifies as an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person) with 93 per cent and 86 per cent respectively having at least one of the five risk factors compared to the average of 71 per cent.
- These households represent 10 per cent and 21 per cent respectively of all substantiated households.
- Drug and/or alcohol problems and domestic violence are more prevalent in these households; around two-thirds are affected

by drugs and/or alcohol and around half are affected by domestic violence.

- Young households and Indigenous households are more likely to have multiple risk factors (63 per cent and 55 per cent respectively compared to the average of 44 per cent).
- Single mother households are also more likely to have a parental risk factor (78 per cent) compared to the average (71 per cent). They represent 22 per cent of all substantiated households.
- Over half of single mother households have a drug and/or alcohol problem (55 per cent) and one-third have a diagnosed mental health problem (32 per cent). This is higher than the average rate of 47 per cent and 19 per cent respectively for all households.
- Around one-third of Indigenous households and single father households have a criminal history, compared to 21 per cent overall. This is not surprising given that these groups are over-represented in the criminal justice system.

Parental risk factors – Households with a child assessed as ‘substantiated – child in need of protection’

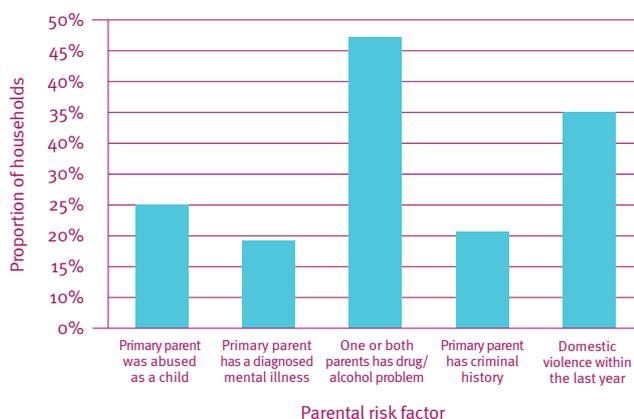
- Parental risk factors are most common in households with a child assessed as in need of protection and requiring ongoing departmental intervention.
- Where a drug and/or alcohol problem was identified as a risk factor, case notes indicate that alcohol is the most likely substance to be abused (51 per cent) followed by marijuana (23 per cent) and heroin (7 per cent). No amphetamine use (including speed, ice and ecstasy) was recorded in case notes for any of these households.
- The general order or pattern of risk factors within households requiring ongoing intervention remains consistent. That is, where parental drug/alcohol abuse is the most prevalent risk factor within households overall, it tends to remain the most prevalent in households where a child is in need of protection, but at a much higher rate.

Key findings

The Family Risk Evaluation (FRE) is completed for a household as part of the investigation and assessment phase. It is an important Structured Decision Making (SDM) tool for assessing the likelihood of future harm occurring within the family. The FRE includes five risk factors that relate to the characteristics of parents in the household.

This report provides an overview of these parental risk factors for 695 (or 82 per cent) of the 847 substantiated households. The remaining 152 households have been excluded mostly because the parents recorded on the FRE are different to the parents who were responsible for the protection of the child at the time of the substantiated abuse or neglect. This can occur when the household membership changes leading up to or during the investigation and assessment.

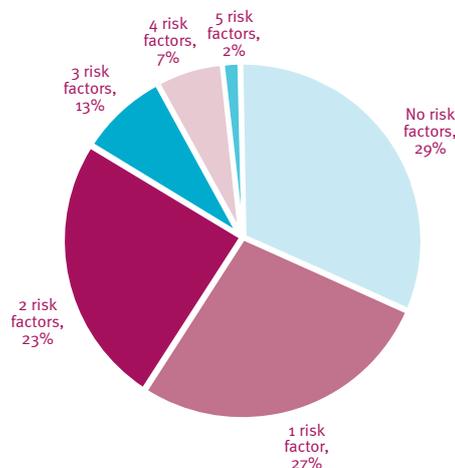
Figure 1: Prevalence of parental risk factors



Source: Department of Child Safety
For full definitions of risk factors see glossary. As multiple risk factors may be present within each household, figures do not add to 100 per cent.

- In nearly half of all substantiated households (47 per cent) one or both parents have a drug and/or alcohol problem.
- Over one-third (35 per cent) of households have had two or more incidents of domestic violence within the past year.
- One-quarter (25 per cent) of primary parents were abused or neglected as a child.
- Around one-fifth of primary parents have a criminal history (21 per cent) and around the same amount have or have had a diagnosed mental health problem (19 per cent).

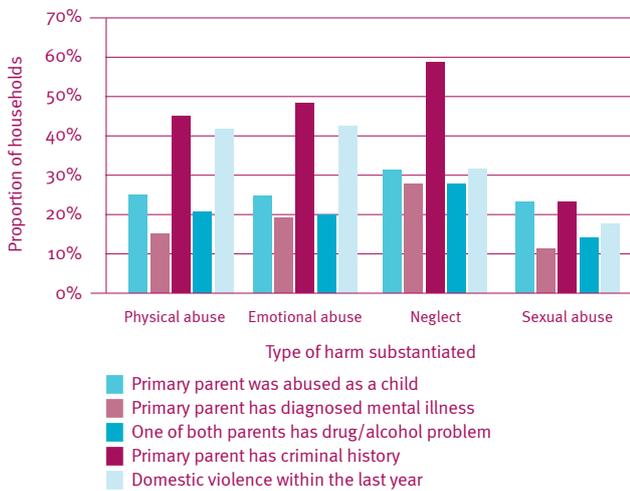
Figure 2: Number of parental risk factors within households



Source: Department of Child Safety
Risk factors included are abuse history, mental health problem, drug or alcohol problem, criminal history and domestic violence. For full definitions of risk factors see glossary. Figures may not add to 100 per cent due to rounding.

- 29 per cent of households do not display any of the five parental risk factors, 27 per cent display one risk factor and 44 per cent of households display multiple parental risk factors.
- Young households (at least one parent aged 21 or younger) and Indigenous households (at least one person identifies as an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person) are more likely to record multiple risk factors (63 per cent and 55 per cent respectively compared to 44 per cent overall). They were also less likely to have no risk factors (7 per cent and 14 per cent compared to 29 per cent).
- Households with multiple risk factors are more than twice as likely to progress to ongoing intervention as households with one risk factor or no risk factors (59 per cent compared to 25 per cent).
- No strong patterns of risk factors co-occurring within households could be identified. Risk factors do occur simultaneously, but are only weakly correlated with each other. The strongest correlations are between drug and/or alcohol problems and criminal history (0.34) and between drug and/or alcohol problems and domestic violence (0.32).

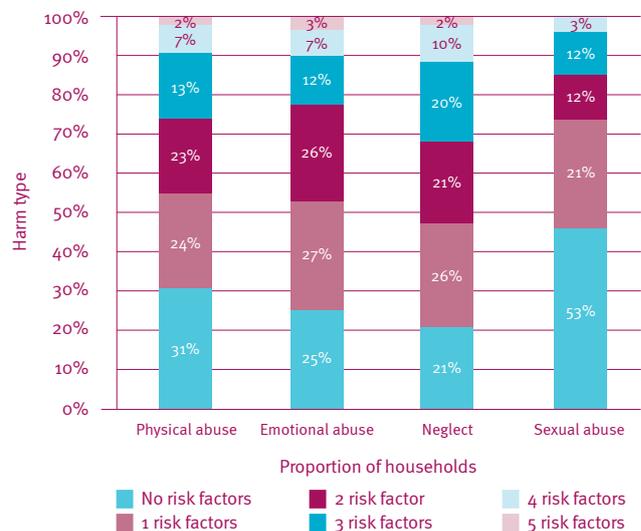
Figure 3: Prevalence of parental risk factors by harm type



Source: Department of Child Safety
For full definitions of risk factors see glossary. As multiple risk factors may be present within each household, figures do not add to 100 per cent.

- All parental risk factors are more prevalent in households substantiated for neglect, with the notable exception of domestic violence, which is more frequent in households substantiated for physical or emotional abuse.
- Households substantiated for physical abuse and emotional abuse have strikingly similar patterns of risk.
- Households substantiated for sexual abuse have the lowest prevalence of all parental risk factors. The most common risk factors in these households are parents who were previously abused as children and parental drug/alcohol abuse, which are each present in less than one-quarter (24 per cent) of households.
- In all households a drug and/or alcohol problem is the most common parental risk factor.

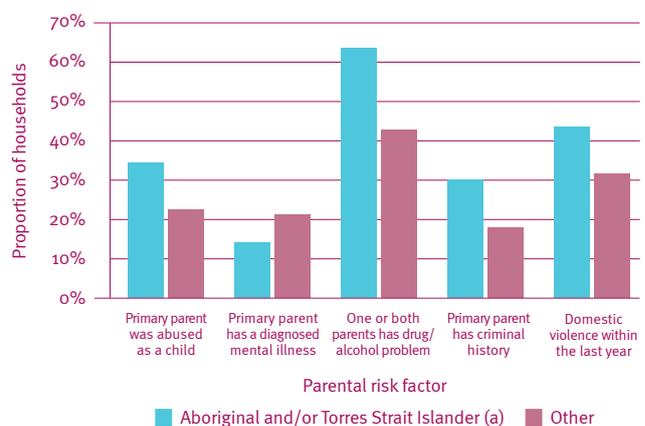
Figure 4: Number of parental risk factors by harm type



Source: Department of Child Safety
Risk factors are abuse history, mental health problem, drug or alcohol problem, criminal history and domestic violence. For full definitions of risk factors see glossary. Figures may not add to 100 per cent due to rounding.

- Households substantiated for neglect are the most likely to display multiple parental risk factors (53 per cent compared to 44 per cent overall) followed by households substantiated for emotional abuse (48 per cent of households display multiple risk factors).
- The majority of households (53 per cent) substantiated for sexual abuse do not display a parental risk factor. 26 per cent of households substantiated for sexual abuse display multiple parental risk factors (compared to 44 per cent overall).

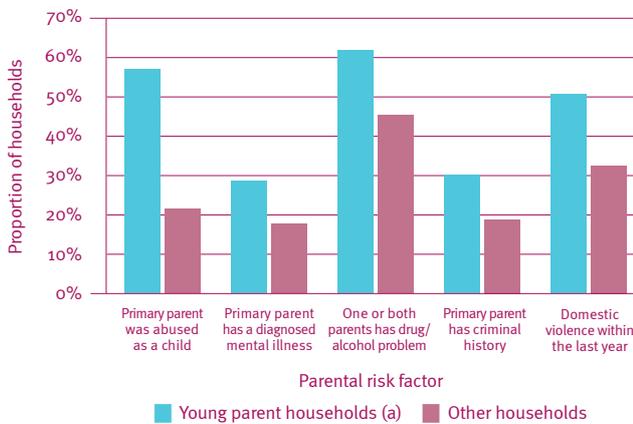
Figure 5: Prevalence of parental risk factors within Indigenous households



Source: Department of Child Safety
(a) Households where at least one person identifies as an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person. For full definitions of risk factors see glossary. As multiple risk factors may be present within each household, figures do not add to 100 per cent.

- 21 per cent of all households are Indigenous households.
- These households are more likely to display parental risk factors, with the exception of diagnosed parental mental illness.
- Indigenous households are one and a half times more likely to have a primary parent with a criminal history, a drug and/or alcohol problem, or a primary parent who was abused as a child.

Figure 6: Prevalence of parental risk factors within young households

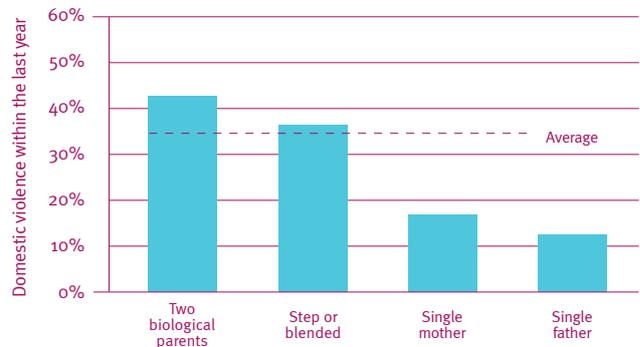
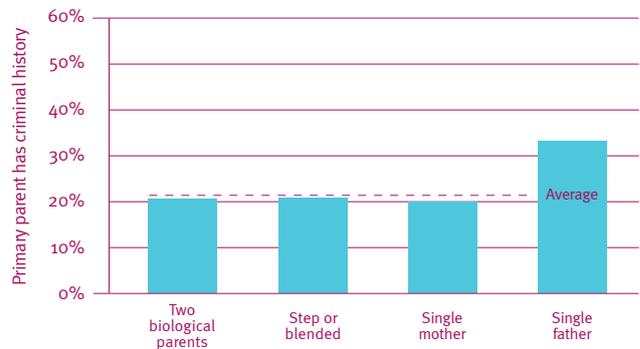
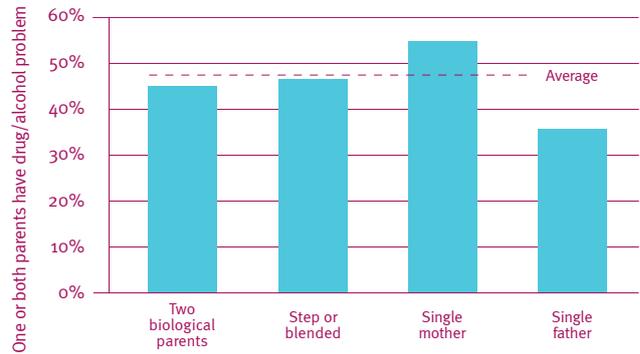
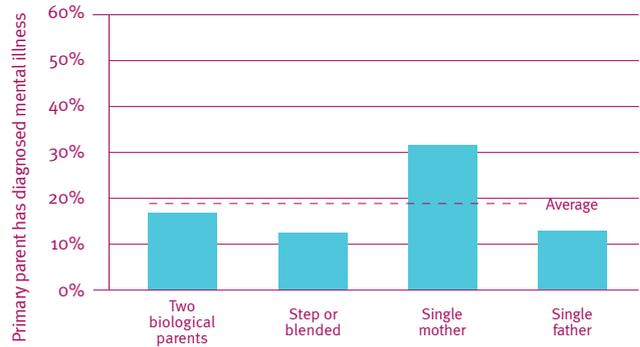
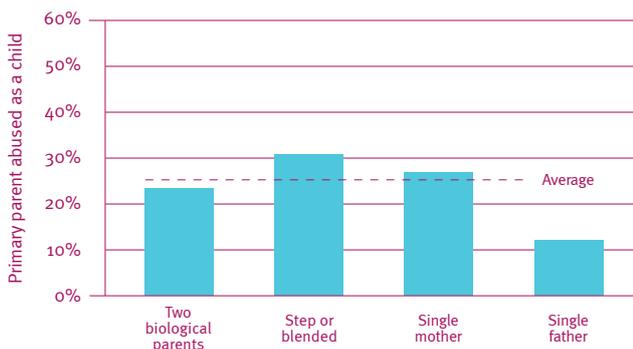


Source: Department of Child Safety

(a) Households where at least one parent is 21 years or younger are classified as "young parent households". For full definitions of risk factors see glossary. As multiple risk factors may be present within each household, figures do not add to 100 per cent.

- Young households, which make up 10 per cent of substantiated households, have a greater prevalence of all the parental risk factors compared to other substantiated households.
- Drug and/or alcohol problems, parental abuse as a child and domestic violence all affect the majority of young households (62 per cent, 58 per cent and 51 per cent respectively).

Figure 7: Prevalence of parental risk factors by household type

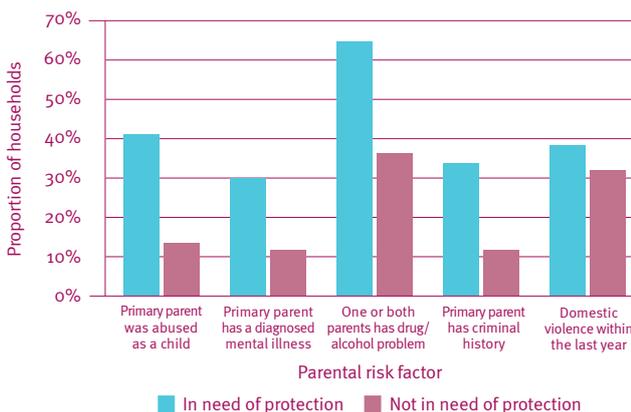


Source: Department of Child Safety

Lines represent the prevalence of risk factors within households overall. For full definitions of risk factors see glossary. As multiple risk factors may be present within each household, figures do not add to 100 per cent.

- Single mother households, which make up 22 per cent of substantiated households, are most likely to suffer mental health problems (32 per cent compared to 19 per cent of primary parents overall).
- Single mother households are also more likely to have drug and/or alcohol problems (55 per cent of households compared to 47 per cent overall).
- The primary parent in a step or blended household is more likely to have been abused as a child compared to parents in other households (30 per cent compared to 25 per cent for all households).
- Single fathers are more likely to have a criminal history than other primary parents, who are predominantly female. This is unsurprising given that males are heavily over-represented in the criminal justice system compared to females.
- Recent incidents of domestic violence are most common in two parent households. Given that domestic violence is usually characterised by conflict between adults living together, it was expected that households with more than one adult would have the highest rates of domestic violence.

Figure 8: Prevalence of parental risk factors within households where a child is assessed as in need of protection



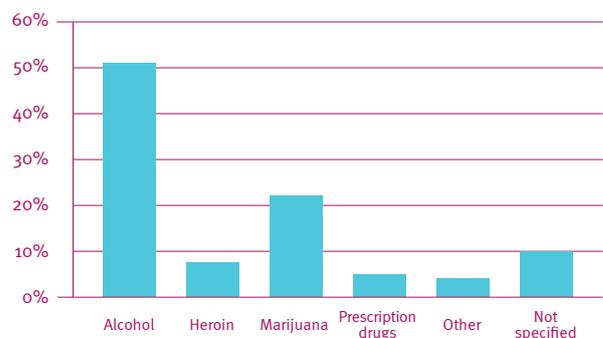
Source: Department of Child Safety
Full full definitions of risk factors see glossary. As multiple risk factors may be present within each household, figures do not add to 100 per cent.

- The risk factors on the Family Risk Evaluation are used to help determine if ongoing intervention is required. As such, households with more risk factors are more likely to have a child assessed as in need of protection.

Figure 8 shows the prevalence of these risk factors in the 40 per cent of households (279 households) that require ongoing intervention compared to households that do not.

- While households with a child in need of protection are more likely to be affected by parental risk factors, it is important to recognise that 60 per cent of the households that do not require ongoing intervention also display risk factors and as such could benefit from support services.

Figure 9: Use of substances within households where a child is assessed as in need of protection and parental drug/alcohol abuse is recorded



Source: Department of Child Safety
Figures are based on Parental Strengths and Needs Assessments (PSNAs) completed at the start of ongoing intervention where the parents on the PSNA correspond to the parents of children assessed as in need of protection. Data relates to 120 households where a parent is identified as having a drug/alcohol problem on the PSNA and as such, these figures should be treated as indicative only.

- Figure 9 looks at Parental Strengths and Needs Assessments (PSNAs) completed at the start of ongoing intervention. Data relate to 120 households where a parent is identified as having a drug and/or alcohol problem by the PSNA. These figures should be treated as indicative only.
- By far the most common substance misused is alcohol, which is misused by just over half (51 per cent) of households where a drug/alcohol problem is identified. The next most common substance is marijuana (identified in 23 per cent of households).
- Amphetamine use (including ice, speed and ecstasy) was not identified in the households.
- It is possible that actual rates of substance misuse amongst parents is higher than reported as some parents may successfully conceal drug or alcohol problems from departmental staff.

Table 1: Prevalence of risk factors within households for all households compared to those where a child is assessed as in need of protection

| Household type | Primary parent was abused as a child | | Primary parent has diagnosed mental illness | | One or both parents has drug/alcohol problem | | Primary parent has criminal history | | Domestic violence within the last year | |
|--|--------------------------------------|------------|---|------------|--|------------|-------------------------------------|------------|--|------------|
| | All | CINOP | All | CINOP | All | CINOP | All | CINOP | All | CINOP |
| Two biological parents | 23% | 41% | 17% | 27% | 45% | 70% | 20% | 38% | 42% | 52% |
| Step or blended | 30% | 50% | 13% | 26% | 47% | 60% | 20% | 30% | 38% | 40% |
| Single mother | 27% | 36% | 32% | 40% | 55% | 60% | 20% | 30% | 17% | 16% |
| Single father | 12% | 30% | 12% | 30% | 36% | 50% | 32% | 40% | 12% | 30% |
| Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (a) | 34% | 49% | 14% | 21% | 64% | 82% | 30% | 45% | 45% | 58% |
| Young parent (b) | 58% | 61% | 29% | 30% | 62% | 75% | 30% | 41% | 51% | 48% |
| All | 25% | 41% | 19% | 30% | 47% | 65% | 21% | 34% | 35% | 39% |

Source: Department of Child Safety

(a) Households where at least one person identifies as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.

(b) Households where at least one parent is 21 years or younger are classified as "young parent households".

As multiple risk factors may be present in each household and household categories are not mutually exclusive, figures do not add to 100 per cent. For full definitions of risk factors see glossary.

- Table 1 compares the prevalence of each risk factor for all substantiated households to those households with a child assessed as substantiated – child in need of protection (CINOP).
- Risk factors are more prevalent in households where a child is assessed as in need of protection across almost every household type and risk factor.
- The relative patterns within households remain consistent. That is, where parental drug/alcohol abuse is the most prevalent risk factor within households, it tends to remain the most prevalent in households where a child is in need of protection but at a much higher rate.

Figure 10: Number of parental risk factors within households where a child is assessed as in need of protection by harm type



Source: Department of Child Safety

Risk factors are abuse history, mental health problem, drug or alcohol problem, criminal history and domestic violence. For full definitions of risk factors see glossary. Figures may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

- Almost two-thirds (65 per cent) of households with a child in need of protection have multiple risk factors. 13 per cent display none.
- The co-occurrence of risk factors is reasonably consistent across harm types with the notable exception of sexual abuse.
- The prevalence of risk factors for households substantiated for sexual abuse and in need of ongoing intervention was considerably different to other households requiring ongoing intervention. Over one-third (37 per cent) display no parental risk factors (compared to 13 per cent overall) and less than half (47 per cent) display multiple risk factors (compared to 65 per cent overall).

Glossary

Parental risk factors at investigation (from Family Risk Evaluation)

Abuse history: Where the primary parent was abused or neglected as a child. Evidence of abuse includes credible statements by the primary parent or others. Information relating to the primary parent may also be obtained from departmental records or from interstate/overseas child protection systems.

Mental health problem: Where the primary parent has or had a mental health problem. This item only includes diagnosed mental health disorders (as per the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual) or instances where the primary parent has been repeatedly referred for psychological/mental health assessments or recommended for treatment or hospitalisation by a psychiatrist or mental health authority. It specifically excludes drug and alcohol related conditions.

Drug and/or alcohol problem: Where one or more parents have or had a drug and/or alcohol problem. This item only includes instances where the drug and/or alcohol problem interferes with the parent/s or family's functioning such as where family or marital relationships are disrupted, employment is affected or the parent has engaged in criminal activity or been arrested for driving under the influence in the last two years.

Criminal history: The primary parent has a criminal history as an adult or a juvenile. The primary parent has been charged with, or convicted for, offences prior to notification. This includes driving under the influence, but excludes all other traffic offences and non-criminal arrests (such as local law violations and arrests not leading to charges).

Domestic violence: Two or more instances of domestic violence in the household in the past year. This item includes all physical assaults and periods of intimidation, threats or harassment between parents or between one parent and another adult in the home.

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