



'Child protection work is incredibly challenging': Australia's child protection services crisis

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Suzan Delibasic, Isabelle Lane and Killian Plastow

A "crisis" in Australia's child protection services is forcing government agencies to resort to glossy advertising campaigns and mass hiring sprees in a desperate attempt to attract staff to key frontline roles.

An investigation by *The New Daily* has revealed child protective services across the country are battling to attract new talent and combat staff attrition in crucial positions.

From the gruesome discovery of a nine-month-old dead baby on a Gold Coast beach this week to the damning findings of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, there's a glut of evidence suggesting Australia is in the midst of a child abuse and neglect crisis.

Associate professor in criminology at the University of Western Sydney Michael Salter confirmed Australia's child protection system is also facing a crisis as staff at the coalface struggle to cope with demand.

"What we know is child protection work is incredibly challenging work and it has a high rate of burnout and staff turnover because staff find the job so difficult," Dr Salter told *The New Daily*.

"I'm not surprised that we're seeing national advertising to try and fill staff placements because it's a very difficult profession."

Rising rates of child abuse and neglect cases are overwhelming the system, he said.

Last year one out of every 32 children received child protection services, according to an Australian Institute of Health and Welfare report.

Of children receiving child protection services in 2016-17:

- 119,173 were the subject of an investigation looking into allegations of abuse and neglect
- 64,145 were on a care and protection order
- 57,221 were in out-of-home care

Over the five years to 2016-17, the number of official notifications, investigations and substantiations of cases of child neglect and abuse increased dramatically in Australia:

- by 39 per cent for notifications (from 272,980 to 379,459)
- by 45 per cent for investigations (from 122,496 to 177,056)
- by 27 per cent for substantiations (from 53,666 to 67,968)

Government spending on child protection services – including out-of-home care and family support services – rose 8.5 per cent in 2016-17 to \$5.2 billion according to a productivity commission report on government services.

According to Dr Salter, however, more needs to be done to support frontline workers and families before the situation becomes critical.

"We need a much better investment in early intervention and family support so that families aren't at the point of crisis and so we're not intervening after there has been a critical incident," he said.

"For as long as [workers] are feeling helpless or powerless to make a real difference, we're going to continue to see high rates of burnout and turnover.

"The crucial point is that we are waiting too late and there is a lot of nervousness on behalf of governments to put real money into family support and early intervention. And until we do that, then we're going to continue to face a child protection crisis."

Desperate times

Western Australia makes its pitch to would-be child protection workers with a slick, purpose-built recruitment website – parts of which read more like a travel brochure than a job advertisement.

