

Cultural considerations in out-of-home care

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are vastly over-represented in the out-of-home care population (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2007). Welfare services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families have been shaped by a context of high rates of poverty and extreme social disadvantage in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations that is associated with higher rates of adult imprisonment, criminal history, child maltreatment perpetration, suicide, drug dependence and substance abuse, and poor general medical conditions (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2003; Hogg, 1994; Hunter, 1995; Perkins, Sanson-Fisher, Blunden, & Lunnay, 1994). Social disadvantage among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities has been precipitated by colonisation and past policies of assimilation, particularly those associated with the forcible separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their parents, generally into non-Indigenous care (also known as the Stolen Generations) (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997). This practice of forced removal resulted in the denial of heritage and culture for many individuals and played a major role in the breakdown of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and communities. The loss of parenting skills and knowledge has contributed directly to many of the problems associated with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child welfare, such as higher rates of child maltreatment, over-representation in the out-of-home care population, and problems in finding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander foster carers in accordance with service delivery policy (see below). The past practice of forced removal of Indigenous children has impacted on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities' current perceptions of the government welfare system, including out-of-home care services. The intent of current policies and services in the child welfare sector are to sustain Aboriginal children's family, community and cultural identity while attending to their need for safety.

The Aboriginal child placement principle

The central principle underpinning child welfare placements for Indigenous Australian children and families is the recognition of the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle (Lock, 1997). Adopted in legislation in some form in all states and territories, the placement principle outlines the preferred order of placement for an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child who has been removed from their birth family. The order of preference is that an Indigenous child removed from his/her family be placed with:

1. the child's extended family;
2. the child's Indigenous community;

3. other Indigenous people; and
4. non-Indigenous families.

Other supporting principles adopted in most states and territories include directives to expedite the return of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to their birth families and to facilitate contact between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their birth families and communities. The implementation of the placement principle is also closely linked to the operation of the Aboriginal and Islander Child Care Agencies (AICCAs) (Ah Kee & Tilbury, 1999). A number of states and territories have developed legislation and/or policy for the consultation of Aboriginal and Islander Child Care Agencies in decisions regarding the placement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care.

Aim

In this paper, we aim to:

- summarise what we know from Australian research about cultural considerations for children and young people in care;
- assess the quality of the evidence base; and
- identify future research needs.

For each of the studies identified, a review was conducted describing the study's aim, methodology and key findings, and identifying any particular strengths or limitations that would affect whether the study findings could be generalised to a wider context. In this paper, the findings from this review are summarised to provide an overall picture of the Australian evidence base on the cultural considerations for children and young people in care. For a detailed description of each individual study review see the tables in the Appendix.

What research was reviewed?

Thirteen Australian research studies on cultural considerations for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in care and their carers that were completed between 1994 and 2006, and were publicly available, were reviewed. (For more information on how Australian research was identified, see Bromfield & Osborn, 2007.) The studies examined culturally appropriate practices for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care, or compared Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and non-Indigenous samples on specific factors. (For papers on other topic areas, go to www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/brief/menu.html#research.)

The studies were grouped into four sub-themes:

- measuring the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children;
- outcomes for Indigenous children and young people in care;
- service system responses for Indigenous children and young people; and
- recruiting and supporting Indigenous carers.

Measuring the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in care

Child wellbeing includes dimensions such as social, emotional, educational and behavioural functioning; employment and vocational issues, if applicable; physical health; and cultural awareness and experience. It is not clear whether traditional measures of child wellbeing are appropriate for assessing the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in care.

The studies

Two of the studies identified had findings that contributed to the Australian evidence base on measuring the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in care. They were:

1. McMahon and Reck (2003), "Well-Being for Indigenous Foster Children: Alternative Considerations for Practice Research" (see Appendix, page 8).
2. Yeo (2003), "Bonding and Attachment of Australian Aboriginal Children" (see Appendix, page 13).

Although not strictly "research", these two critical analyses of the suitability of current theories of data for Indigenous children have important implications for the measurement of wellbeing.

How reliable is the evidence base regarding measuring the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in care?

Although methodologically sound, Australian researchers to date have only identified the need for culturally specific wellbeing assessments for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in care, rather than directly investigating what such assessments might look like.

What do we know about measuring the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in care?

Yeo (2003) critiqued the applicability of assessments of the bonding and attachment of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to their carers. The author argued that the use of such concepts to assess the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in care are inconsistent with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander values regarding family relationships and childrearing practices (e.g., a child's mother may not necessarily be the child's primary attachment figure). In general, more research of culturally specific wellbeing indicators for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children needs to be conducted.

The use of concepts such as attachment and bonding to assess the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in care are inconsistent with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander values of relatedness and childrearing practices.

A paper by McMahon and Reck (2003) drew attention to the need to develop indicators of wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in care. The authors argued that there is widespread use of indicators that measure a child's administrative status (e.g., reasons for coming into care, time in care, racial and ethnic identity, compliance with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle, continuity of caseworkers and location of placement), but that indicators that reflect a child's wellbeing and how they are functioning are not considered.

The use of administrative indicators to measure case outcomes is widespread. Indicators that reflect a child's wellbeing and how they are functioning are rarely used.

A search of literature carried out by McMahon and Reck (2003) of indicators used to assess children's wellbeing suggested that the main emphasis was on indicators of health, educational progress and social development. The authors argued that these ignored those indicators that prominent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander commentators contend are important to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people when addressing their children's wellbeing. Specifically, wellbeing indicators for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children should include cultural and spiritual dimensions as well as physical, emotional and social status. These should be considered in holistic terms in relation to the wellbeing of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child's community. Furthermore, the authors also noted a view expressed by some Indigenous commentators that a lack of an economic base underlies social disintegration

within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities; as such it is also important to consider housing, employment and other economic indicators of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child's community when assessing their wellbeing. The authors identified the need for further research into the development of general wellbeing indicators for children in foster care. There also needs to be further research to identify wellbeing indicators that address specific Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander concerns for children in care.

Wellbeing indicators for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in care should include cultural and spiritual dimensions as well as physical, emotional and social status.

What future research is needed regarding measuring the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in care?

In the study by McMahon and Reck (2003), the authors highlighted the importance of culturally specific perspectives on child development and desirable parental practices in informing this research. There needs to be research to identify wellbeing indicators that address specific Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander concerns for children in care.

Outcomes for Indigenous children and young people in care

Even though Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are vastly over-represented in the out-of-home care population (AIHW, 2007), only limited research has been conducted on the outcomes for Indigenous children and young people in care. By and large, Indigenous children and young people in the general population perform worse on certain educational, psychological and social measures in comparison to non-Indigenous children and young people and this also appears to be the case for those involved with the foster care system (ABS, 2003).

The studies

Four of the studies identified had findings that contributed to the Australian evidence base on the outcomes for Indigenous children and young people in care. They were:

1. Barber, Delfabbro and Cooper (2000), "Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal Children in Out-of-Home Care" (see Appendix, page 1).
2. Delfabbro, Barber and Cooper (2002), "The Role of Parental Contact in Substitute Care" (see Appendix, page 3).
3. Delfabbro, Barber and Cooper (2003), "Predictors of Short Term Reunification in South Australian Substitute Care" (see Appendix, page 4).
4. Osborn and Delfabbro (2006), *National Comparative Study of Children and Young People With High Support Needs in Australian Out-of-Home Care* (see Appendix, page 10).

How reliable is the evidence base regarding the outcomes for Indigenous children and young people in care?

Overall, the research on the outcomes for Indigenous children and young people in care was very limited. Only one of the four studies specifically examined the outcomes for Indigenous children and young people in care in comparison to non-Indigenous children and young people in care (Barber et al., 2000). The findings on the outcomes for Indigenous children and young people formed part of the total sample, as the authors did not set out to examine differences or similarities in ethnic status. This is a major gap in Australian out-of-home care research, particularly when there is relatively little scope for international research to inform direction in this area due to the unique cultural needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and the over-representation of Indigenous children in out-of-home care.

What do we know about the outcomes for Indigenous children and young people in care?

Research from a South Australian longitudinal study (see Delfabbro & Barber, 2004), which aimed to obtain detailed information concerning the placement movements and psychosocial outcomes of children in foster care, included 40 Aboriginal children (17%) in the sample. In the first phase of the three-year longitudinal study (that is, the baseline), there were no differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children in the length of time in care, the extent of parental visiting or the proximity of their placement to birth families (Barber, Delfabbro, & Cooper, 2000). However, Aboriginal children from metropolitan areas and non-Aboriginal children from rural areas had longer histories of alternative care and were most likely to be under a court order at the time of placement. Aboriginal children in metropolitan areas were least likely to be referred into care for reasons of maltreatment and they also had poorer physical health. Analyses at later time points indicated that Aboriginal children were less likely than non-Aboriginal children to have contact with their families, particularly in the first few months after being placed into care (Delfabbro, Barber, & Cooper, 2002), and were also less likely to be reunified with their families (Delfabbro et al., 2003). The study did not examine the relationship between family contact and child psychosocial adjustment, or predictors of family reunification (including family contact specifically for Aboriginal children). This is likely due to the low numbers of Aboriginal children in the sample.

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Osborn and Delfabbro (2006) conducted a national comparative profile study of children and young people with high support needs in out-of-home care from four Australian states. Even though the authors did not specifically investigate the differences or similarities between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children with high support needs in their study, they did find some interesting outcomes. It is important to note that out of the total study sample of 364 children, only 17.9% ($n = 65$) were identified as having an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background. Indigenous children were found to have entered care at a significantly younger age and have spent a significantly longer period of time in care in comparison to the non-Indigenous children. The Indigenous children did not differ from the non-Indigenous children in terms of the number of previous placements or number or duration of reunification attempts. Non-Indigenous children were found to score significantly poorer on the social functioning measure when compared to Indigenous children. The Indigenous children differed significantly from the non-Indigenous sample on a number of social background variables, including parental homelessness, parental imprisonment, parental substance abuse, parental mental health problems, parental homelessness, exposure to domestic violence, and being victims of physical abuse. The Indigenous children were observed to have a significantly higher prevalence of all but two of the social background variables (physical abuse and parental mental health problems). A significantly lower proportion of Indigenous children were found to have depression/anxiety, ADHD and personality disorders/mental illnesses. These findings suggested that the functioning of the Indigenous sample in respect to peer functioning and overall behavioural and emotional functioning was significantly better at the time of review than the non-Indigenous sample.

Indigenous children's peer functioning and overall behavioural and emotional functioning is significantly better than the non-Indigenous sample.

What future research is needed regarding the outcomes for Indigenous children and young people in care?

Future research is desperately needed on outcomes for Indigenous children and young people in care. Research is needed to examine the relationship between characteristics of children, their parents and carers, and placement processes to determine the factors that are associated with successful placements for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. It is important that such research addresses issues that reflect the principles that guide welfare provision to Indigenous children. For instance, there is a need for research that compares child outcomes for those who are placed with kinship and non-related Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers and those who are placed with non-Indigenous carers. Limited research has compared Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and non-Indigenous children in care on their contact with birth families and issues relating to family reunification. It was particularly concerning that, despite principles in legislation and policy in this area and the history of the Stolen Generations, the limited research in this area found that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were less likely than the non-Indigenous children to have contact with their families and to be reunified with their families (Delfabbro et al., 2002, 2003). There was no examination of the type of children who have contact, the relationship between family contact and child psychosocial adjustment, and predictors of family reunification (including family contact) specifically for Aboriginal children. However, it must be noted that this is not unique to Aboriginal children and that the general literature also remains unclear on this area (see Panozzo, Osborn, & Bromfield, 2007).

Service system responses for Indigenous children and young people

One research area that has gained attention is the area of service system responses for Indigenous children and young people. A relatively high proportion of the studies conducted in this area covered issues related to service system responses, including meeting the specific needs of Indigenous children and young people, training needs of caseworkers who work with this group of children and young people, and issues related to the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle.

The studies

Four of the studies identified had findings that contributed to the Australian evidence base of service system responses to Indigenous children and young people. They were:

1. CREATE Foundation (2005), *Indigenous Children and Young People in Care: Experiences of Care and Connections With Culture* (see Appendix, page 2).
2. New South Wales Community Services Commission (2001), *A Question of Safeguards: Inquiry Into the Care and Circumstances of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Children and Young People in Care* (see Appendix, page 9).
3. Victorian Department of Human Services (1998), *Statewide Review of Out-of-Home Care Services for Aboriginal Children and Young People* (see Appendix, page 11).
4. Western Australian Department for Community Development (2004), *Indigenous Wards in Care Project* (see Appendix, page 12).

How reliable is the evidence base regarding service system responses for Indigenous children and young people?

The four studies conducted on the service system responses varied in research design and quality. Four of the studies were internal reviews or internal case reviews and only one of the studies used a qualitative research interview design (CREATE Foundation, 2005). In particular,

one of the internal case review studies, conducted by the Victorian Department of Human Services (1998), provided primarily administrative data, and no measurement of children's wellbeing was considered. Focus groups were held with Aboriginal carers, but the number of carers attending the groups was not specified, nor was there documentation of the interview questions or schedule. Therefore, the studies are not sufficient to constitute an evidence base in this area.

What do we know about service system responses for Indigenous children and young people?

The Victorian Department of Human Services (1998) conducted an internal review of out-of-home care services for Aboriginal children and young people in Victoria. The review attempted to address the key issue of whether the service system provided for the needs of Aboriginal children and families who were in the system. The primary data for the review were collected during a series of community consultations with six Aboriginal agencies involved in the provision of out-of-home care services to Aboriginal children. Case-related statistical data on Aboriginal children and young people placed by Aboriginal agencies were collected from the six agencies (Aboriginal children in the care of non-Aboriginal families were excluded). The data suggested that placement services for Aboriginal children did not include sufficient care planning, and children and young people were remaining in out-of-home care for inordinate lengths of time, with no clear vision for permanency.

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Consultation with the Aboriginal out-of-home care agencies also suggested that there was insufficient time and resources to provide services. Some agencies also reported that they did not have case management mechanisms or use structured case plans. It was shown that the funding arrangements for Aboriginal agencies providing out-of-care services were inadequate (Victorian Department of Human Services, 1998).

Aboriginal out-of-home care agencies report that there is insufficient time and resources to provide adequate services.

The New South Wales Community Services Commission (2001) carried out case reviews for 15 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in care. A number of issues were considered, including family contact, and educational, health, social and recreational issues. Aspects of case management were also considered, including case planning and review, support for the child or young person and support for the carer. It was observed that, although the majority of the children and young people were benefiting from their care experiences, too often this was related to "good luck" rather than effective casework intervention. Several themes were identified in the context of the care and circumstances of the 15 children and young people:

- There appeared to an "encouraging" degree of compliance with the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle; however there were a number of problems in its application. These included inadequate assessment prior to placement with the extended family; often having to move the child from their locality in order to place them with the extended family; and having limited placement options for children with complex needs.
- For many of the children and young people, contact with their families occurred in an *ad hoc*, unplanned and uncoordinated way, or not at all.
- Strategies to ensure that family identity and relationships were maintained were not identified in case planning.
- None of the 15 children and young people had a case plan that addressed cultural issues or documented strategies to promote cultural identity.

It was concluded that the Aboriginal agencies providing out-of-home care services were hampered by outdated and inadequate policies and practices and a lack of resources. The absence of a policy and practice framework in relation to the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle resulted in problems in its application by Aboriginal agencies (New South Wales Community Services Commission, 2001).

The absence of a policy and practice framework in relation to the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle results in problems in its application by Aboriginal agencies.

The Western Australian Department for Community Development (2004) completed an internal case review audit for 50 Indigenous wards in the care of the department. The project focused on reviewing issues pertaining to case practice, particularly practices in the engagement of Indigenous children in care, the inclusion of Indigenous families in decision-making, and consultation with Aboriginal departmental staff. The project aimed to explore the cultural appropriateness of past practices in order to enhance ways of working with Indigenous clients, their families and their communities. Each case was individually reviewed and a comprehensive report prepared. In this process, the review team consulted with departmental caseworkers, including those from the specialist Aboriginal services unit, to gain further understanding of the issues pertaining to Indigenous children and young people in care. It was found that overall there was a sound understanding of the need to include and consult with relevant departmental and non-departmental Aboriginal staff regarding case practice, as well as recognition of the need to integrate culturally appropriate support services into the case plan. Despite this, in some cases minimal attempts were made to include culturally appropriate responses into the family system. This response coincided with minimal involvement of relevant Aboriginal staff. In many cases, minimal attention was given to the development and maintenance of a child's cultural identity. It was noted that there was difficulty in facilitating contact with the child's birth family, often because venues where contact was facilitated were threatening to Aboriginal families.

Recommendations included that serious consideration be given to the creation of a "cultural" plan for Indigenous wards in care to explore ways in which children can remain connected to their families of origin and their culture. Other recommendations included the need to develop cultural awareness training for non-Indigenous carers, the need to explore culturally appropriate venues that allow Aboriginal families to have contact with their children in a comfortable space, and an imperative to consult with Aboriginal staff members in relation to the assessment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people and the statutory response.

Serious consideration needs to be given to the creation of a "cultural" plan for Indigenous wards in care to explore ways in which children can remain connected to their families of origin and their culture.

The Western Australian Department for Community Development commissioned the CREATE Foundation (2005) to undertake a qualitative interview process with a random selection of 13 of the 50 children and young people in care identified in the audit of case files of Indigenous children in the care of the department (described above). Notable recommendations by the CREATE Foundation included the need for the training of caseworkers, carers and residential workers about the value of connecting Indigenous children and young people to their culture. Furthermore, it was highlighted that, where appropriate, Indigenous children and young people should be provided with culturally appropriate counselling to help them deal with the trauma of being separated from their birth parents and families.

Caseworkers, carers and residential workers need training regarding the value of connecting Indigenous children and young people to their culture.

What future research is needed regarding service system responses for Indigenous children and young people?

There is a need for further good quality quantitative and qualitative research into issues regarding service system responses for Indigenous children and young people in all states and territories.

Recruiting and supporting Indigenous carers

A lot of research has focused on strategies to recruit and retain foster carers, but very little research has been done specifically on recruiting and/or retaining Indigenous carers for Indigenous children and young people. Furthermore, little attention has been given to the unique needs of Indigenous carers and the Indigenous children and young people they care for, or the best ways to provide support for this special group of carers.

The studies

Five of the studies identified had findings that contributed to the Australian evidence base on the recruitment and support of Indigenous carers. They were:

1. Higgins, Bromfield and Richardson (2005), *Enhancing Out-of-Home Care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Young People* (see Appendix, page 5).
2. McHugh (2002), *The Costs of Caring: A Study of Appropriate Foster Care Payments for Stable and Adequate Out of Home Care in Australia* (see Appendix, page 6).
3. McHugh, McNab, Smyth, Chalmers, Siminski, & Saunders (2004), *The Availability of Foster Carers* (see Appendix, page 7).
4. New South Wales Community Services Commission (2001), *A Question of Safeguards: Inquiry Into the Care and Circumstances of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Children and Young People in Care* (see Appendix, page 9).
5. Victorian Department of Human Services (1998), *Statewide Review of Out-of-Home Care Services for Aboriginal Children and Young People* (see Appendix, page 11).

How reliable is the evidence base regarding recruiting and supporting Indigenous carers?

Very little research has specifically focused on the recruitment, support and retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander foster carers. Only one Australian study had as its primary aim the identification of issues that specifically impacted on the recruitment, assessment, training, support and retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers (Higgins et al., 2005). The little research that has been conducted has been qualitative. This may reflect the better “fit” between qualitative research methods and culturally appropriate research practices with Indigenous communities. Due to their focus on carers in general, the majority of these studies did not provide conclusions or make recommendations specific to the needs of Indigenous carers. The research in this area is not sufficient to constitute an evidence base on the recruitment and support of Indigenous carers.

What do we know about recruiting and supporting Indigenous carers? Adequately preparing and supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers

Only one Australian study had as its primary aim the identification of issues that specifically impacted on the recruitment, assessment, training, support and retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers (Higgins, Bromfield, & Richardson, 2005, findings discussed below). However, the inadequacy of current systems and procedures for preparing and supporting

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers was noted in several studies. The New South Wales Community Services Commission (2001) enquiry into the care of Aboriginal children in care reported that there was a requirement for a greater focus on the recruitment, training and support of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers and the development and implementation of a policy and practice framework to support the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle. Similarly, the Victorian statewide review of out-of-home care services for Aboriginal children and young people noted that there was limited use of formal recruitment strategies and training of carers (Victorian Department of Human Services, 1998).

The inadequacy of current systems and procedures for preparing and supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers has been noted in several studies.

Recruitment

The study by Higgins et al. (2005) comprised interviews with professional stakeholders ($n = 80$) in every state and territory of Australia, from relevant organisations such as statutory care and protection departments, Indigenous child care agencies, and non-Indigenous out-of-home care agencies. In addition, focus groups were conducted in two states (Western Australia and Queensland) with Indigenous carers, non-Indigenous carers of Indigenous children and young people, and Indigenous children and young people in care. In relation to recruitment, Higgins and colleagues found that there were an insufficient number of Indigenous carers to meet demand. Some groups of children were particularly difficult to recruit carers for (e.g., children with a disability, who had been involved in juvenile justice, who required short-term care, or who had no kin).

There is an insufficient number of Indigenous carers to meet demand.

Material disadvantage and the mismatch between traditional child rearing practices and the out-of-home care system represented barriers to recruitment. The commitment to community among Indigenous people assisted recruitment. Past government policies and practices represented both a barrier and strength for recruiting Indigenous carers (Higgins et al., 2005).

Recruitment of Indigenous carers is both aided and hindered by several culturally specific factors.

Community-based (especially word-of-mouth) strategies were reported by participants as being the most effective ways of recruiting Indigenous carers. Such strategies were also more effective when undertaken by Indigenous people (Higgins et al., 2005). In their study of the availability of foster carers, McHugh and colleagues (2004) reported similar findings in relation to the recruitment of Indigenous carers. According to the workers, word-of-mouth referral from existing carers or through others in the local community was successful in attracting carers. Indigenous stakeholders gave a number of reasons to explain why Indigenous people foster, including contributing to community and reasons associated with the prevention of another Stolen Generation. A limitation of the study was that discussion of the findings in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers tended to focus on the views of Aboriginal workers rather than the views of carers.

Community-based (especially word-of-mouth) strategies are the most effective way of recruiting Indigenous carers, particularly when undertaken by Indigenous people.

Material disadvantage

McHugh (2002), in her study focusing on aspects of the foster care payment system in Australia, investigated the specific needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers. Separate focus groups were held with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers in the capital cities of most states, and a joint focus group of non-Indigenous carers and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers was held in a remote town. McHugh reported that Indigenous carers were more

likely than non-Indigenous carers to live in either public or Aboriginal housing, live with their own extended families and foster sibling groups, and they tended to have more children in their care than non-Indigenous carers. From discussion with Indigenous carers, it was apparent that large and often struggling Indigenous families took on more children, both related and unrelated. Often, placements were informal and usually lacked any legal status; therefore it was difficult for the carers to obtain financial assistance from the state/territory to meet the needs of these children. The lack of material resources among Indigenous carers was more obvious than with non-Indigenous carers in the study. Twenty-two of the 43 Indigenous carers said the payments they received were inadequate to meet the costs of the children in their care. Many carers cited difficulties in finding appropriate housing and accessing health services and transport. Carers from a remote area also noted disadvantage in relation to caring for children with special needs (McHugh et al., 2004). Material disadvantage was also identified by Higgins et al. (2005) as a barrier to recruitment.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples experience disproportionate levels of material disadvantage, which limit their ability to become carers, and place additional financial strain on existing carers.

Assessment

Higgins et al. (2005) found that existing assessment techniques and requirements prevent Indigenous people from becoming carers, as they use an inappropriate communication style, fail to take into account culturally sensitive issues (e.g., being a victim of violence) and high rates of numeracy/literacy problems and criminal records, and include some requirements that are culturally inappropriate.

Assessment techniques and requirements need to be culturally appropriate and take into account culturally sensitive issues.

Training

In relation to training, Higgins and colleagues (2005) reported that when carers are adequately prepared, they feel supported. In particular, carers wanted training about how to work with the department. Non-Indigenous carers of Indigenous children wanted training in Indigenous culture, and Indigenous carers (especially those who were part of the Stolen Generations) may also need cultural training.

When carers are adequately prepared for the role of carer, they feel supported.

McHugh et al. (2004) highlighted that more rigorous and professional approaches being taken in assessing and training all carers could be intimidating to some Indigenous families, who were then reluctant to become involved in fostering. According to an Indigenous agency worker, Indigenous carers often attended ongoing training sessions; however, some carers were not comfortable with accessing mainstream training sessions. Accessing training sessions for all Indigenous carers was difficult (many female carers did not have access to a car, or have the financial capacity to meet childcare costs to attend training).

Some Indigenous carers are not comfortable with accessing mainstream training sessions.

Carer support

In the Victorian statewide review of out-of-home care services for Aboriginal children and young people (Victorian Department of Human Services, 1998), several themes emerged from the community consultations and caregiver focus groups:

- Agencies were not fully informing caregivers regarding the processes and legalities of placements.

- Caregivers voiced concerns about the lack of information on children’s medical and behavioural issues.
- A common issue identified by all carers was the need for more home support, financial advice and respite support.
- Carers believed that they did not need parental skills training; however there were “constant requests” in focus groups for training in managing children and young people with special needs.
- Aboriginal agency staff and carers reported they often found it very difficult to work with government workers, including child protection staff, and other departments. A preference was expressed for the use of Aboriginal community organisations.

McHugh et al. (2004) noted that one of the most important conditions for a successful carer was positive and ongoing support from workers in agencies, associations and from small self-support carer groups. This did not always appear to be possible for Indigenous carers, who were more likely to be geographically remote. Carers stated that the best way to support them was to provide services to meet the needs of the children. In addition, carers talked about the need for adequate and timely financial support, respectful relationships with the department, and practical and emotional support (Higgins et al., 2005).

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Retention

McHugh et al. (2004) found that both the NSW Aboriginal State Secretariat Foster Support Group and the agency representatives noted that ongoing support for carers was crucial in their retention, preventing “burn out” and loss of carers. In comparison, Higgins et al. (2005) stated that participants reported retention was not an issue for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers; that once Indigenous people started caring, few dropped out. However, Indigenous carers (like other carer groups) are an ageing demographic and are having to stop for health reasons. Indigenous carers may also be temporarily unavailable for cultural reasons.

Ongoing support for carers is crucial to prevent “burn out” and loss of carers.

What future research is needed regarding recruiting and supporting Indigenous carers?

Research is needed to examine the unique issues that are involved in recruiting, preparing and supporting Indigenous carers and to document the practices and policies that have been designed to address these issues. The study by Higgins et al. (2005) was an exploratory study, and its wide scope, along with the number of sub-groups sampled, means that the findings are not able to be generalised. However, this was the first Australian study examining issues specific to Indigenous carers and, as such, represents an important first step in identifying issues requiring further research. Further research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of strategies to overcome culturally specific barriers to recruitment, assessment, training and support of Indigenous carers.

What do we know from Australian research on the cultural considerations for Indigenous children and young people in care? A summary

Australian research on the cultural considerations for Indigenous children and young people in care comprised 13 studies in four areas: measuring the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander children; outcomes for Indigenous children and young people in care; service system responses for Indigenous children and young people; and recruiting and supporting Indigenous carers.

Overall, the research demonstrated that:

- The use of concepts such as attachment and bonding to assess the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are inconsistent with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander values of relatedness and childrearing practices.
- The use of administrative indicators to measure case outcomes is widespread. Indicators that reflect a child's wellbeing and how they are functioning are rarely used.
- Wellbeing indicators for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children should include cultural and spiritual dimensions as well as physical, emotional and social status.
- Aboriginal children are less likely than non-Aboriginal children to have contact with their families, particularly in the first few months after being placed into care, and are also less likely to be reunified with their families.
- Indigenous children's peer functioning and overall behavioural and emotional functioning is significantly better than the non-Indigenous sample.
- Placement services for Aboriginal children do not include sufficient care planning, and children and young people are remaining in out-of-home care for inordinate lengths of time, with no clear vision for permanency.
- Aboriginal out-of-home care agencies report that there is insufficient time and resources to provide adequate services.
- The absence of a policy and practice framework in relation to the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle results in problems in its application by Aboriginal agencies.
- Serious consideration needs to be given to the creation of a "cultural" plan for Indigenous wards in care to explore ways in which children can remain connected to their families of origin and their culture.
- Caseworkers, carers and residential workers need training regarding the value of connecting Indigenous children and young people to their culture.
- The inadequacy of current systems and procedures for preparing and supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers has been noted in several studies.
- There is an insufficient number of Indigenous carers to meet demand.
- Recruitment of Indigenous carers is both aided and hindered by several culturally specific factors.
- Community-based (especially word-of-mouth) strategies are the most effective way of recruiting Indigenous carers, particularly when undertaken by Indigenous people.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples experience disproportionate levels of material disadvantage, which limit their ability to become carers, and place additional financial strain on existing carers.
- Assessment techniques and requirements need to be culturally appropriate and take into account culturally sensitive issues.
- When carers are adequately prepared for the role of carer, they feel supported.
- Some Indigenous carers are not comfortable with accessing mainstream training sessions.
- Carers talk about the need for adequate and timely financial support, respectful relationships with the department, and practical and emotional support.
- Ongoing support for carers is crucial to prevent "burn out" and loss of carers.

Australian out-of-home care research with findings specific relevance to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is divided into several disparate areas, each of which comprises a small number of studies. Of these studies, very few were conducted specifically to investigate issues in out-of-home care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The evidence that does exist can not be generalised, due to the small samples and potential sampling bias in the quantitative

studies. The qualitative studies were of mixed quality or were exploratory in nature. Overall, there has been very little research in this area, and that which has been conducted can not be generalised. As such, it is not possible to claim an evidence base exists in relation to issues in out-of-home care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Given the significant over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in care in Australia, the lack of quality research in this area represents a major failure in Australian research.

Conclusion

In brief, the limited research in this area demonstrates that it is vitally important that research on outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children addresses issues that reflect the principles that guide welfare provision to Indigenous children. For instance, there is a need for research that compares child outcomes for those who are placed in accordance with the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle (with kinship and non-related Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander placements) and those who are placed with non-Indigenous carers.

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