

Evidence based decision making

- 5.1 During the Committee's inquiry, many submitters and witnesses raised with the Committee the need for stronger data and research relating to adoption in Australia, in order to inform the making of best-practice policy and law.
- 5.2 This chapter considers how nationally agreed approaches to data collection and research could improve outcomes for children in out-of-home care and adopted children.

Current approaches to data collection

- 5.3 The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) is a national agency established under the *Australian Institute of Health and Welfare Act 1987* (Cth) to provide 'reliable, regular and relevant information and statistics on Australia's health and welfare'.¹
- 5.4 The AIHW manages Australia's national child protection and adoptions data collections.²
- 5.5 In addition to data collection and analysis, the AIHW also works to improve the quality and consistency of statistical information.³

National child protection data

- 5.6 The AIHW maintains the Child Protection National Minimum Data Set (CP NMDS), which is compiled from individual children's files (unit record data) from states and territories (other than New South Wales,

1 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), *Submission 41*, p. 3.

2 AIHW, *Submission 41*, p. 3.

3 AIHW, *Submission 41*, p. 3.

which provides aggregate data only).⁴ Jurisdictions provide data relating to:

- notifications of child protection matters;
- investigation and substantiation of cases;
- care and protection orders;
- living arrangements (including out-of-home care);
- foster and relative/kinship carers; and
- national standards for out-of-home care.⁵

National adoptions data

- 5.7 The AIHW's Adoptions Australia data collection is an aggregate data collection comprising information on finalised adoptions since 1990-91.⁶
- 5.8 An annual *Adoptions Australia* report has been produced since 1993, and now includes 25 years of trend data, with some caveats for data gaps.⁷
- 5.9 States and territories provide annual data about intercountry, local and known child adoptions to the AIHW for inclusion in the collection.⁸

Opportunities to improve data collection

- 5.10 The Committee was informed that there are concerns about the amount and quality of data collected to support decision making in relation to adoption and out-of-home care.
- 5.11 In its submission, Hope For Our Children noted that:

In 2018 there is still no high-quality surveillance epidemiological data. There is also no auditing of outcomes, no national definitions or reporting data, practically no research to support the effectiveness of support services and no clear, accountable re-notification or re-substantiation statistics.⁹
- 5.12 Victorian Adoption Network for Information and Self Help Inc. (VANISH) submitted that:

4 AIHW, *Submission 41*, pp. 4-5.

5 AIHW, *Submission 41*, p. 4.

6 AIHW, *Submission 41*, p. 5.

7 AIHW, *Submission 41*, p. 5.

8 AIHW, *Submission 41*, p. 5.

9 Hope For Our Children, *Submission 45*, p. 3.

Australian state/territory and national data is scarce, if not non-existent, regarding the characteristics of families that are subject to child protection intervention.¹⁰

- 5.13 The AIHW's submission highlighted that until New South Wales supplies unit record data for the CP NMDS (expected in 2019 after the implementation of new information management systems), the current data is of limited usefulness in analysing national outcomes and pathways through the child protection system.¹¹
- 5.14 The AIHW also advised that, as the adoptions collection is in aggregate data form, it cannot be linked with child protection data. The AIHW suggested that collecting unit-level rather than aggregate data would enable better understanding of the movement of children between the child protection system and adoption.¹²
- 5.15 The Centre for Independent Studies submitted that either the AIHW or the Productivity Commission could be tasked with developing a simpler and more meaningful 'key effectiveness data dashboard' that would provide data reporting on the national framework's 'goals, priorities, and outcomes'.¹³
- 5.16 Barnardos Australia suggested that as part of a national framework for adoption from out-of-home care, the AIHW could provide data on placement stability by state and territory, along with further information on the characteristics of known child adoptions.¹⁴
- 5.17 The Australian Human Rights Commission suggested a number of changes to the national adoption data collection, requesting:
- rates of adoption broken down by adoption type;
 - characteristics of adopted children and adoptive families;
 - success and breakdown rates for adoptions; and
 - an ongoing monitoring and review mechanism to gauge outcomes.¹⁵

10 Victorian Adoption Network for Information and Self Help (VANISH Inc.), *Submission 56*, p. 19.

11 AIHW, *Submission 41*, p. 10.

12 AIHW, *Submission 41*, p. 10.

13 The Centre for Independent Studies, *Submission 15*, pp. 5-6.

14 Barnardos Australia, *Submission 52*, p. 8.

15 Australian Human Rights Commission, *Submission 103*, p. 25.

Consistency in definitions

- 5.18 The AIHW identified that a key problem with the collection and use of data on children in care and adopted children is inconsistencies in a number of definitions used by the states and territories.¹⁶
- 5.19 New South Wales and Western Australia do not define children on permanent third party care orders (orders granting permanent guardianship and custody that do not change the legal status of the child, and that expire when the child turns 18 or marries)¹⁷ as being in 'out-of-home care'. The AIHW is concerned that this inconsistency impairs comparison of interventions and outcomes.¹⁸
- 5.20 There is also no formal definition of what constitutes a child with 'special needs' as it relates to adoption¹⁹ or out-of-home care.
- 5.21 The Committee was informed that special needs, as related to adoption, has no legal definition in Australia, preventing national reporting on adoption statistics for these children. The AIHW outlines that special needs may comprise:
- mental or physical disabilities;
 - behavioural problems;
 - emotional disorders; and
 - other reasons that increase the difficulty of finding a suitable adoptive family, such as being an older child, or a child from a sibling group requiring placement together.²⁰
- 5.22 The AIHW also reported that many children who have experienced multiple placements might be considered as having 'special needs'.²¹
- 5.23 Moreover, AIHW advised that data is not collected on family reunification as there is no nationally agreed definition.²²
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16 AIHW, *Submission 41*, p. 10.

17 AIHW, 'Adoptions Australia 2016-17', 2017, p. 53, <<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/adoptions/adoptions-australia-2016-17/data>>, viewed 10 July 2018.

18 AIHW, *Submission 41*, p. 10.

19 AIHW, 'Adoptions Australia 2016-17 - Quality Statement', 2017, <<http://meteor.aihw.gov.au/content/index.phtml/itemId/687176>>, viewed 17 September 2018.

20 AIHW, 'Adoptions Australia 2016-17 - Quality Statement', 2017, <<http://meteor.aihw.gov.au/content/index.phtml/itemId/687176>>, viewed 17 September 2018.

21 AIHW, 'Adoptions Australia 2016-17 - Quality Statement', 2017, <<http://meteor.aihw.gov.au/content/index.phtml/itemId/687176>>, viewed 17 September 2018.

22 AIHW, *Submission 41*, p. 10.

5.24 Ms Louise York, Group Head, Community Services Group, AIHW told the Committee that:

In part, a lot of the issues with the data are about the lack of comparability of the legislation, policies and processes in the state[s] and us trying to make sense of that in the data. At the jurisdictional level, investment in more data is probably where it is required.²³

5.25 The AIHW advised that it is working with states and territories to address concerns about data gaps, data quality and inconsistent definitions.²⁴

Family preservation and reunification

5.26 The AIHW advised the Committee that no national data is collected on services to support family preservation (which, if successful, avoids the need for other care arrangements).²⁵

5.27 Submitters were concerned that data on restoration and reunification is not adequately collected or monitored. Hope For Our Children told the Committee that children in out-of-home care who have experienced multiple failed reunification attempts are not currently tracked,²⁶ and Family Inclusion Strategies in the Hunter (FISH) expressed concern about poor data collection of family restoration rates.²⁷

5.28 The Centre for Independent Studies recommended that the national framework include evidence-based data, including:

- repeat notifications of child protection cases;
- rates of family restoration and restoration breakdowns;
- re-entries into care;
- placement moves; and
- length of stay in care.²⁸

5.29 The Benevolent society stated that the AIHW is working to improve reporting by including a 'permanency/reunification' indicator.²⁹

23 Ms Louise York, Group Head, Community Services Group, AIHW, *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 22 May 2018, p. 10.

24 AIHW, *Submission 41*, p. 4, 10.

25 AIHW, *Submission 41*, p. 10.

26 Hope For Our Children, *Submission 45*, p. 12.

27 Family Inclusion Strategies in the Hunter (FISH), *Submission 85*, p. [4].

28 The Centre for Independent Studies, *Submission 15*, p. 5.

29 The Benevolent Society, *Submission 86*, p. 14.

Data and research on children in out-of-home care

Permanency planning

- 5.30 Submitters told the Committee that further research needs to be undertaken on foster care, to help assess ways to reduce the numbers of children entering out-of-home care, and to best assist children who require placement into the future.³⁰
- 5.31 The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child has expressed concern over the lack of data recording the decision making process leading to an out-of-home care placement in Australia.³¹ The UN Committee urged Australia to collect information on the reasons children are placed in out-of-home care in order to work towards reducing the numbers of children being placed.³²
- 5.32 Similarly, Dr Nicola Ross and Ms Jessica Cocks agreed that Australia needs further research into child protection processes, given the large numbers of children who are affected by the child welfare system.³³
- 5.33 Hope For Our Children suggested that more needs to be done to determine the level of child welfare concerns along with outcomes of existing policies in order to develop 'evidence-based best practice'.³⁴
- 5.34 The Institute of Open Adoption Studies suggested that:
- ... future research is needed to examine the characteristics and circumstances of children and young people who remain in long-term foster care, or who have benefited from such arrangements to support informed decisions about which permanent placement is most appropriate for a given child.³⁵

Indigenous children in out-of-home care

- 5.35 The Institute of Open Adoption Studies submitted that there is no protocol in place to assess implementation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle.³⁶ While the AIHW reports on the

30 Hope For Our Children, *Submission 45*, p. 3; Institute of Open Adoption Studies, *Submission 76*, p. 17; Australian Human Rights Commission, *Submission 103*, p. 11.

31 Australian Human Rights Commission, *Submission 103*, p. 11.

32 Australian Human Rights Commission, *Submission 103*, p. 11.

33 Ms Nicola Ross, private capacity, *Committee Hansard*, 11 September 2018, p. 5; Ms Jessica Cocks, President, Family Inclusion Strategies in the Hunter (FISH), *Committee Hansard*, 11 September 2018, p. 5.

34 Hope For Our Children, *Submission 45*, p. 3.

35 Institute of Open Adoption Studies, *Submission 76*, p. 17.

36 Institute of Open Adoption Studies, *Submission 76*, p. 24.

percentage of Indigenous children placed with kin or other Indigenous caregivers (including Indigenous residential care), there is no measure to determine adherence to processes for achieving 'familial and cultural connections'.³⁷

- 5.36 The Department of Social Services told the Committee that it is working in conjunction with the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) to develop a tool to help ensure consistent application of the Principle.³⁸
- 5.37 The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child recommended that data collection include data on Indigenous children in foster care, and that the information should be used to develop culturally sensitive policy.³⁹

Children with disabilities

- 5.38 The AIHW reports that data on the disability status of children in out-of-home care are not uniformly captured by states and territories. A preliminary analysis of disability status is available for 2016-17, based on data available for six jurisdictions. However, differences may exist in how disability is defined and how information is captured.⁴⁰
- 5.39 The New South Wales Government advised that capture of data around children with disabilities is poor, but that recent changes to information technology systems should improve data collection in the future.⁴¹
- 5.40 The AIHW also submitted that there are no national data on the disability status of adopted children. Data collection in the states and territories is not routinely or consistently collected and therefore is not required for national reporting on adoption.⁴²
- 5.41 The AIHW is working with jurisdictions to improve the availability of data on the disability status of adopted children.⁴³

37 Institute of Open Adoption Studies, *Submission 76*, p. 24.

38 Mrs Cath Halbert, Group Manager, Department of Social Services, *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 21 August 2018, p. 10.

39 Australian Human Rights Commission, *Submission 103*, p. 10.

40 AIHW, 'Child protection Australia 2016-17', 2017, p. 46, <<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/child-protection/child-protection-australia-2016-17/data>> viewed 20 September 2018.

41 Ms Simone Czech, Executive Director, Child and Family, Commissioning, Department of Family and Community Services, NSW, *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 22 June 2018, p. 13.

42 AIHW, *Supplementary Submission 41.1*, Answer to Question on Notice, p. 1.

43 AIHW, *Supplementary Submission 41.1*, Answer to Question on Notice, p. 1.

Outcomes for children in out-of-home care

- 5.42 The Committee heard that there is no national approach to research on outcomes for Australian children in out-of-home care including placement types such as kinship care, guardianship and other permanency orders. The Institute of Open Adoption Studies was concerned that there is an overreliance on international literature, which is based on different legislation and welfare systems.⁴⁴
- 5.43 Similarly, the AIHW highlighted a lack of available data on outcomes for children in out-of-home care, or after an out-of-home care placement. The AIHW suggested that long term indicators for outcomes might include:
- educational attainment;
 - employment status;
 - receipt of income support;
 - involvement with the youth justice system;
 - use of health and welfare services;
 - rate of homelessness;
 - rate of drug and alcohol abuse;
 - instances of mental illness; and
 - suicide rates.⁴⁵
- 5.44 The AIHW, the Department of Social Services and states and territories are collaborating to develop a framework for reporting and evaluation of permanency outcomes.⁴⁶

Research about adoption

Barriers to adoption

- 5.45 The *Barriers to Adoption in Australia* study undertaken by Adopt Change Limited (Adopt Change) in 2017 surveyed adoptive and prospective adoptive parents' experiences of the adoption process.⁴⁷
- 5.46 The study's key finding stated that 'though research on open adoption is growing, there remain significant gaps in the evidence base'.⁴⁸

44 Institute of Open Adoption Studies, *Supplementary Submission 76.1*, Answer to Question on Notice, p. 7.

45 AIHW, *Submission 41*, pp. 10-11.

46 AIHW, *Submission 41*, p. 10.

47 Adopt Change Limited, *Submission 77*, p. 8.

- 5.47 The study found that further research on barriers to adoption (discussed above in Chapter 4) is required, and that the views of prospective adoptive parents were underrepresented in research studies on adoption.⁴⁹
- 5.48 Adopt Change also noted that the *Barriers to Adoption in Australia* study was told that there is a lack of awareness among prospective adoptive parents about access to post-adoption support.⁵⁰
- 5.49 In its report *Post-adoption support for adoptive families in Australia: Is it time for the 'Triple-A' approach?*, Adopt Change noted that there is a lack of data to establish changing or current demand for post-adoption support. The report advised that the AIHW and the Australian Bureau of Statistics do not provide quantitative insights on post-adoption support.⁵¹

Open adoption

- 5.50 The Committee was advised that while there is 'solid emerging research that open adoption is more beneficial for children than long-term foster care', the benefits to children of open adoption require further research.⁵²
- 5.51 As noted in Chapter 3, several submitters expressed concern that there has been limited research into open adoption outcomes. For example:
- The Institute of Open Adoption Studies recommended a longitudinal study.⁵³
 - Ms Simone Czech of the New South Wales Department of Family and Community Services told the Committee that the Department is interested in further research into outcomes for children who experience open adoption.⁵⁴

48 Adopt Change, *Exhibit 20: 'Barriers to Adoption in Australia'*, September 2017, p. 2, <https://engonetac.blob.core.windows.net/assets/uploads/files/Barriers_research_2017_v2.pdf>, viewed 17 September 2018.

49 Adopt Change, *Exhibit 20: 'Barriers to Adoption in Australia'*, September 2017, p. 6, <https://engonetac.blob.core.windows.net/assets/uploads/files/Barriers_research_2017_v2.pdf>, viewed 17 September 2018.

50 Adopt Change, *Exhibit 20: 'Barriers to Adoption in Australia'*, September 2017, p. 34, <https://engonetac.blob.core.windows.net/assets/uploads/files/Barriers_research_2017_v2.pdf>, viewed 17 September 2018.

51 Adopt Change, 'Post-adoption support for adoptive families in Australia: Is it time for the 'Triple-A' approach?' p. 3, <<https://engonetac.blob.core.windows.net/assets/uploads/files/Adopt%20Change%20Post%20Adoptive%20Research%202016%20-%202017052017.pdf>>, viewed 21 September 2018.

52 EY (Ernst & Young), *Submission 51*, p. 1.

53 Institute of Open Adoption Studies, *Supplementary Submission 76.1*, Answer to Question on Notice, p. 6.

54 Ms Simone Czech, Executive Director, Child and Family, Commissioning, Department of Family and Community Services, NSW, *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 22 June 2018, p. 3, 8.

- EY (Ernst & Young) told the Committee that the two main aspects of open adoption requiring research are the sustainability of relationships between adoptees and birth families after an adoption, and the safety and wellbeing of children post adoption.⁵⁵
 - Dr Nicola Ross highlighted a gap in knowledge as to the ease of supporting contact with birth families, to 'reinforce those aspects of the adoption that actually make it open in the first place'.⁵⁶
- 5.52 Barnardos Australia also recommended that a national research project be established to study the attitudes and beliefs of caseworkers that result in decisions either for or against open adoption.⁵⁷

Sibling separation

- 5.53 As part of reporting under a national framework for adoptions from out-of-home care, Barnardos Australia recommended that the AIHW record details of sibling separation.⁵⁸
- 5.54 The Institute of Open Adoption Studies also advised that there is a lack of research into sibling co-placement.⁵⁹

Parental consent

- 5.55 The AIHW *Adoptions Australia 2016-17* report contained data related to parental consent and dispensation of parental consent in relation to local adoptions only (adoptions where the child generally has had no prior contact with the adoptive parents).⁶⁰
- 5.56 Family Inclusion Strategies in the Hunter (FISH) was concerned about the numbers of parental consents dispensed with, and commented that the data is 'opaque', and that 'practice continues to be shrouded in some secrecy'.⁶¹
- 5.57 As noted in Chapter 4, a complication relating to parental consent lies in suggestions that many birth parents will support an adoption, but not

55 Mr Mark Galvin, Partner, EY, *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 21 August 2018, p. 4.

56 Dr Nicola Ross, private capacity, *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 11 September 2018, p. 3.

57 Barnardos Australia, *Submission 52*, p. 9.

58 Barnardos Australia, *Submission 52*, p. 8.

59 The Institute of Open Adoption Studies, *Submission 76*, p. 11.

60 AIHW, 'Adoptions Australia 2016-17', 2017, p. 27, <<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/adoptions/adoptions-australia-2016-17/data>>, viewed 17 September 2018.

61 Family Inclusion Strategies in the Hunter (FISH), *Submission 85*, p. [6, 10].

formally consent, due to concerns over how providing consent will be perceived by the child.⁶²

Potential adopters

- 5.58 National data is not collected on the number of people who have registered to adopt a child.⁶³
- 5.59 The AIHW acknowledges that the availability of information on prospective adoptive parents for local adoptions and carers approved to adopt has not yet been explored.⁶⁴
- 5.60 EY told the Committee that research on the numbers of foster parents currently caring for a child who would consider becoming adoptive parents would be beneficial.⁶⁵

Timeframes

- 5.61 The AIHW submitted that while national data are available on the length of time for intercountry adoptions to be finalised, there are no national data on the timeframes associated with adoptions of children from Australia.⁶⁶
- 5.62 The AIHW *Adoptions Australia 2016-17 Report – Quality Statement* identified that data capture is complex where it relates to timeframes to process adoptions from care, due to uncertainty about the point in the permanency planning process at which an adoption is deemed to have commenced. The availability of data for timeframes to process local adoptions is yet to be considered.⁶⁷

62 Mr Mark Galvin, Partner, EY, *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 21 August 2018, p. 5.

63 Ms Barbara Bennett, Deputy Secretary, Department of Social Services, *Committee Hansard*, 22 May 2018, p. 7.

64 AIHW, 'Adoptions Australia 2016-17 – Quality Statement', 2017, <<http://meteor.aihw.gov.au/content/index.phtml/itemId/687176>>, viewed 17 September 2018.

65 Mr Mark Galvin, Partner, EY, *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 21 August 2018, p. 5.

66 AIHW, *Submission 41*, p. 10.

67 AIHW, 'Adoptions Australia 2016-17 – Quality Statement', 2017, <<http://meteor.aihw.gov.au/content/index.phtml/itemId/687176>>, viewed 17 September 2018.

Outcomes for adopted children

- 5.63 As discussed above, the Committee heard that there is no national approach in Australia to research the outcomes of children in various placement types, including open adoption.⁶⁸
- 5.64 Jakob's Voice submitted that:
- While short term social and economic indicators might support adoption over out-of-home care, the psychological impact on adoptees is not sufficiently well researched, and the long term social and economic outcomes are unknown.⁶⁹
- 5.65 The AIHW, the Australian Adoptee Rights Action Group and Mr William Hammersley were all concerned that limited data are available on outcomes for adoptees.⁷⁰
- 5.66 The Adoptee Advocacy and Information Service South Australia and The Benevolent Society both suggested that comprehensive national research be undertaken to assess and report on outcomes for adopted children.⁷¹
- 5.67 Some submitters shared specific concerns with the Committee about data and research gaps:
- The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists is concerned that there has not been enough research undertaken in Australia into the mental health of adopted children, and that further research would help direct support to adoptees who may be at risk of mental illness.⁷²
 - Mrs Jo Fraser submitted that the rate of adoption breakdown in Australia is unknown, and expressed concern that follow up for adoptive families ceases twelve months after an adoption is finalised.⁷³ However, the Institute of Open Adoption Studies indicated that there has been some research in this area, which suggested a lower rate of breakdown for adoption compared with other types of placements. More stable placements are reported for children placed at a younger age.⁷⁴

68 Institute of Open Adoption Studies, *Supplementary Submission 76.1*, Answer to Question on Notice, p. 6.

69 Jakob's Voice, *Submission 63*, p. 10.

70 Australian Adoptee Rights Action Group, *Submission 7*, p. 3; Mr William Hammersley, *Submission 34*, p. 1; AIHW, *Submission 41*, pp. 10-11.

71 The Benevolent Society, *Submission 86*, p. 15; Adoptee Advocacy and Information Service South Australia Inc., *Submission 94*, p. 1.

72 The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists, *Submission 37*, p. 2.

73 Mrs Jo Fraser, *Submission 75*, p. 2.

74 The Institute of Open Adoption Studies, *Supplementary Submission 76.1*, Answer to Question on Notice, p. 4.

- 5.68 The *Adoptions Australia 2016-17 Report – Quality Statement* explained that gathering data to assess long term outcomes for adopted children is difficult because after an adoption is finalised, it is difficult to identify an adoptee in administrative data, as they are legally no different from a child living with non-adoptive parents.⁷⁵
- 5.69 Similarly, the Aboriginal Child, Family and Community Care State Secretariat (AbSec) submitted that as adopted children are not considered to be in out-of-home care, approaches to data collection may not provide sufficient accountability and transparency when reporting on the safety, welfare and wellbeing of children placed on adoption orders.⁷⁶

Moving forward – pathways to improved data collection and research

The New South Wales Government approach

- 5.70 The Committee heard that the New South Wales Government has been investing in sector-wide research to inform an evidence-based approach to adoption. This includes the establishment of the Institute of Open Adoption Studies, a number of fora to discuss adoption, and commissioning research.⁷⁷
- 5.71 The New South Wales Department of Family and Community Services has also funded the *Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study* to improve decision-making and the support provided to children and young people who cannot live safely at home. This study:
- is the first large- scale longitudinal study of children in out-of-home care in Australia;
 - links data on child protection, out-of-home care placements, health, education and offending, and matches it to first-hand accounts from children, caregivers, caseworkers and teachers;
 - collects information on safety, permanency and wellbeing, and tracks children’s experiences and outcomes from birth; and

75 AIHW, ‘Adoptions Australia 2016-17 – Quality Statement’, 2017, <<http://meteor.aihw.gov.au/content/index.phtml/itemId/687176>>, viewed 17 September 2018.

76 Aboriginal Child, Family and Community Care State Secretariat (AbSec), *Submission 46*, p. 13.

77 NSW Government, *Submission 22*, pp. 6-7; Ms Simone Czech, Executive Director, Child and Family, Commissioning, Department of Family and Community Services, NSW, *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 22 June 2018, p. 3.

- is interested in child developmental indicators including physical health, socio-emotional wellbeing and cognitive/learning ability.⁷⁸

A national longitudinal study for out-of-home care and adoption

- 5.72 The Institute of Open Adoption Studies suggested that a national longitudinal study drawing on administrative data and supplemented with qualitative research, could effectively report on outcomes and experiences of care and adoption for children, families and professionals.⁷⁹
- 5.73 The Institute submitted that targeted longitudinal research would be the 'most effective means of addressing the gaps in knowledge'.⁸⁰
- 5.74 Associate Professor Amy Conley Wright, Director of the Institute, was of the view that it will be 'critical to invest in research that follows children's experiences over time and their long-term outcomes'.⁸¹ Associate Professor Conley Wright suggested that longitudinal data is required to understand the outcomes for children in care and assess support arrangements and policies.⁸²
- 5.75 Similarly, Ms Sue Madden of Anglicare Sydney told the Committee that to inform best practice in adoption, Anglicare recommends that a longitudinal study be undertaken to evaluate long-term outcomes for children adopted from out-of-home care.⁸³
- 5.76 The Institute of Open Adoption Studies recommended a partnership approach, modelled on the Australian Research Council Centres of Excellence, consisting of government agencies, universities, research bodies and industry partners that could collate information in a similar way to the New South Wales longitudinal study.⁸⁴

78 Institute of Open Adoption Studies, *Submission 76*, pp. 8-9; NSW Government, 'Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study', <<https://www.facs.nsw.gov.au/resources/research/pathways-of-care>> viewed 12 October 2018.

79 Institute of Open Adoption Studies, *Supplementary Submission 76.1*, Answer to Question on Notice, p. 3.

80 Institute of Open Adoption Studies, *Supplementary Submission 76.1*, Answer to Question on Notice, p. 6.

81 Associate Professor Amy Conley Wright, Director, Institute of Open Adoption Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Sydney, *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 26 June 2018, p. 9.

82 Associate Professor Amy Conley Wright, Director, Institute of Open Adoption Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Sydney, *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 26 June 2018, p. 9.

83 Anglicare Sydney, *Submission 67*, p. 15; Ms Sue Madden, Manager and Principal Officer, Foster Care and Adoptions, Anglicare Sydney, *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 22 June 2018, p. 25.

84 Institute of Open Adoption Studies, *Supplementary Submission 76.1*, Answer to Question on Notice, p. 6.

Committee comment

- 5.77 The Committee acknowledges the collaborative efforts of the AIHW, Commonwealth, state and territory governments to improve data collection and research on child protection and adoption.
- 5.78 However, the Committee agrees with many submitters that there is further work to be done. In particular, there is a need to improve our understanding of the circumstances and outcomes for children in out-of-home care and children who are adopted, in order to make better permanency decisions and achieve better outcomes.

Addressing gaps in data – improvements in data collection

- 5.79 The Committee is concerned that there are gaps in AIHW's Adoptions Australia data collection. These include: the length of time taken for adoptions to be finalised, data on sibling separations, clarity around consent and dispensation of consent, the number of people wanting to adopt, information on adoption of Indigenous children, information on adoption of children with disabilities and special needs, and long-term outcomes for adopted children.
- 5.80 The Committee is encouraged that work is underway to improve data collection on children with disabilities. However, further work is required to agree a nationally consistent definition of special needs. Identifying special needs will help keep siblings together, give children who have experienced trauma the support that they need and ensure that mental health concerns are identified and addressed.
- 5.81 The Committee is of the view that all jurisdictions need to invest more in data collection and that data should be provided to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare as unit records, rather than aggregate data. This will improve national reporting and comparability between all jurisdictions.
- 5.82 The Committee is concerned that the lack of consistent terminology across the states and territories in legislation, policies and process limits the usefulness of statistics. This is a potential barrier to the development of evidence-based nationally consistent policies to improve outcomes for adopted children and children in out-of-home care across Australia.

Recommendation 7

The Committee recommends that the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare continue to work with relevant Commonwealth, state and territory agencies to improve data collection on adoptions and child protection in Australia, including by:

- collecting unit record data rather than aggregate data;
- agreeing on nationally consistent definitions;
- collecting data on: timeframes for finalising adoptions, sibling separation, parental consent (including dispensation of consent), adoption of Indigenous children, adoption of children with disabilities and special needs, and long-term outcomes for all adoptees; and
- maintaining registers of potential adoptive parents.

Ms Julia Banks MP
Chair

16 October 2018