

## **CHILD PROTECTION AND SOCIAL SERVICES SYSTEM**

**Organisation:** Centre for Evidence and Implementation

**Date Received:** 11 December 2020

# The adequacy and effectiveness of current interventions

Submission to the Committee on Children and Young People

NSW Parliamentary inquiry into the child protection and social services system

## About CEI

The Centre for Evidence and Implementation (CEI) is a global, not-for-profit evidence intermediary dedicated to using the best evidence in practice and policy to improve the lives of children, families, and communities facing adversity. Established in Australia in late 2015, CEI is a multi-disciplinary team across four offices in Singapore, Melbourne, Sydney and London. We work with our clients, including policymakers, governments, practitioners, program providers, organization leaders, philanthropists and funders in three key areas of work:

- Understand the evidence base
- Develop methods and processes to put the evidence into practice
- Trial, test and evaluate policies and programs to drive more effective decisions and deliver better outcomes

11 December 2020 //

The Hon. Matthew Mason-Cox MLC  
Committee Chair  
Committee on Children and Young People  
Parliament House  
Macquarie Street Sydney NSW 2000

**Submission to the NSW Parliamentary inquiry into the child protection and social services system**

Dear Mr Mason-Cox

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Committee on Children and Young People. The Centre for Evidence and Implementation (CEI) is delighted to submit this paper to the NSW Parliamentary inquiry into the child protection and social services system.

CEI has a long history of working with the NSW government, generating insights on effective child protection interventions, the implementation and adaptation of effective intervention to fit local contexts, and the difference social policy intervention has made to the lives of vulnerable children and families in contact with the child protection system.

We draw on this experience in the following assessment of the current adequacy and effectiveness of interventions in the child protection and social services system, while identifying opportunities to strengthen the NSW government's response to vulnerable children and young people.

If you have any queries in relation to this submission, please contact Dr Robyn Mildon on

[REDACTED]

Sincerely

[REDACTED]

Dr Robyn Mildon  
Executive Director

## NSW needs an effective and efficient child protection and social services system grounded in evidence and good implementation

The child protection and social services system involve some of society's most vulnerable children and families. Ensuring that state interventions to support them are as effective as possible is essential not only because precious – and increasingly pressured – public resources are at stake, but because these children and families are accessing public services when they are most at risk.

Ill-informed or poorly implemented services can prolong problems or, worse, exacerbate them. Conversely, receiving the right service at the right time can change lives.

Vulnerable children and families deserve to receive services grounded in the highest quality evidence of what we know to be effective. They deserve to be cared for by a NSW child protection and social services system that is built on the foundations of evidence: access to the best-available evidence in child protection, including evidence syntheses and independent evaluations of programs in local contexts, usable guides to the application of evidence in child protection policy, structured support for the implementation of best-available child protection evidence in practice, and continuous evaluation and system improvement processes to effectively embed evidence in child protection policy and sustain initiatives across the system.

Weak evidence foundations increase the risk that service and reform initiatives are retained that do not improve the lives of vulnerable children and families or may even do more harm than good. There are multiple examples of initiatives that have led to poor outcomes for vulnerable populations. These initiatives can fail at the very beginning, when intuition or common-sense takes the place of evidence in initial program design. A famous example of design failure is the Scared Straight program for young people at-risk of entering the justice system,<sup>1</sup> in which a program that “sounded good” was found to cause harm – but only after it had spread to many cities and countries.

But, initiatives can also go wrong at the end, when an evidence-based program designed and shown to work well in another country cannot be implemented effectively in Australia because of system differences or an inability to adapt the approach to fit the local context – such as in our recent study of the implementation of the Multisystemic Therapy – Emerging Adults (MST-EA) program in NSW. This study identified policy dynamics and interactions with the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) as an impediment to roll-out of the initiative across NSW.<sup>2</sup>

Service and system reform failures in child protection are socially and economically costly. Weak evidence means that opportunities to improve services and minimise waste are missed and scarce public resources are squandered to little benefit. Strong evidence foundations can tip the system toward more effective policy decisions and the implementation of interventions with a higher likelihood of success. In the context of COVID-19 and the substantial effects the pandemic has had on state economies, the effective and efficient use of public resources in NSW is more critical than ever.

<sup>1</sup> Petrosino A, Turpin-Petrosino C, Hollis-Peel ME, Lavenberg JG. (2013). 'Scared Straight' and other juvenile awareness programs for preventing juvenile delinquency. Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews, 3: CD002796. DOI: [10.1002/14651858.CD002796.pub2](https://doi.org/10.1002/14651858.CD002796.pub2).

<sup>2</sup> Albers B, Shlonsky A. (2020). When policy hits practice – learning from the failed implementation of MST-EA in Australia. Human Service Organizations Management, 44(1); 381-405. DOI: [10.1080/23303131.2020.1779893](https://doi.org/10.1080/23303131.2020.1779893)

The continuous, rigorous and transparent application of evidence to public policy has been the hallmark of NSW's response to COVID-19. Internationally, the importance of rigorous scientific evidence, the synthesis of this evidence, and guidance for policymakers and practitioners based on this evidence has been established as the fundamentals for effective action during the pandemic. This evidence-to-policy-and-practice process has been subject to significant public and professional scrutiny and is now seen as crucial to decision making by governments, service providers and front-line practitioners.

Now is the time to ensure that as robust a process is applied to the child protection and social service system in NSW. This is what vulnerable children and families deserve.

## **The adequacy and effectiveness of current interventions and responses in the NSW child protection and social services system**

### **Child protection policy and responses are stronger when informed by evidence**

We are unable to comment directly on the adequacy and effectiveness of the selected interventions and early intervention pilots commissioned by Their Futures Matter (TFM) because independent evaluations have not yet been released publicly – although we understand this is in the works. Publishing the evaluations of key, high-profile child protection interventions increases transparency and public sector accountability across the system and can build citizen trust in government institutions over time – an important consideration for any government portfolio but especially for one that is as highly emotive and contestable as child protection.

CEI has a long history of working with the NSW government, generating insights on what interventions are effective in improving the wellbeing of young people in out-of-home care, how to implement and adapt evidence-based child protection programs so they fit the local context, and whether – in a current project – the Personal Support Program reform has made a difference to the lives of vulnerable children and families in contact with the child protection system. We draw on this experience for the following assessment of the adequacy and effectiveness of interventions while identifying opportunities to strengthen the NSW's government's response through the effective and efficient use of evidence in child protection policy.

### **Access to relevant and reliable best-available evidence in child protection**

COVID-19 has made lasting changes to the rapid synthesis of best-available evidence for policymaking. We have seen systematic reviews of 'what works' in the prevention of virus transmission, with all the bells and whistles of scientific peer review and critique, completed within a period of weeks or months rather than years. The Cochrane Collaboration – the preeminent global institution for the quality synthesis of evidence for health policy and practice (The Campbell Collaboration is the sister organisation for social services) – even rushed the development of rapid review guidelines to encourage researchers to produce robust evidence quickly to inform public health policy.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Garritty C, Gartlehner G, Kamel C, King VJ, Nussbaumer-Streit B, Stevens A, Hamel C, Affengruber L. (2020). Cochrane Rapid Reviews. Interim Guidance from the Cochrane Rapid Reviews Methods Group. March 2020

These changes are to be welcomed because they have decreased the gap between the best research evidence available and responsive, actionable, evidence-informed policy. We have all seen the impact these evidence-informed responses, implemented by responsible government, have had on people's lives.

There is no reason why this urgent approach to evidence synthesis and actionable policy should not, and could not, be applied to improving the NSW child protection and social services system, and outcomes for vulnerable children and families, right now.

Evidence clearinghouses, including 'menus' of programs and 'what works' centres, have changed the game for evidence-hungry policymakers by translating and synthesising research about interventions, previously hidden behind paywalls, and making it publicly accessible. They typically report data on the consistency and quality of findings about the effectiveness of a particular intervention, sometimes including data on populations covered and cost-benefit or value for money. Interventions are assigned an evidence rating category if they meet a particular threshold related to study design (e.g. evidence-based or research-based or between one to five stars) and this serves as a quick guide to intervention quality.

That said, while evidence clearinghouses have been invaluable tools in the policymaking kit they do have limitations, and like evidence syntheses and reviews they are in need of a shake-up in approach to make them more responsive to policymakers' needs.

Currently, many clearinghouses do not pay enough attention to the generalisability of an intervention or the ability of an intervention to achieve the same effect for vulnerable children and families in different contexts with different populations. They may provide links to training or technical assistance but rarely include critical, real-world implementation insights – such as how easy the program is to implement. These insights can inform a government's decision to invest in a program. Clearinghouses may also risk being too static, failing to keep pace with program adaptations and new evidence and policy changes.

Some organisations and policymakers, here and internationally, have responded to these limitations with innovations in delivery, and CEI has been a partner on many of these initiatives. For example, our team has been working for a number of years with the Victorian Department of Education and Training on the development, and annual updating, of a menu of evidence-informed programs for kindergartens. The menu involves several innovations that make it responsive to policy and the early education sector. For example, the menu – like other clearinghouses – ranks programs based on the quality of evidence and study design (i.e. using an evidence hierarchy where systematic reviews and randomised controlled trials top the scale). Understanding that policymakers often need to take action in the absence of strong evidence, the menu also includes categories for programs that are logically and theoretically consistent and may have emerging evidence. Organisations are able to submit programs for independent review and inclusion on the menu, meaning that early education agencies can receive government endorsement for 'home-grown' interventions, if they meet the standards required.

In NSW, CEI is providing technical support to the Department of Communities and Justice to build an evidence portal for the early intervention sector. This web-based portal, to be accessed by policymakers and program managers, will not only include information about the effectiveness of different programs (including implementation considerations), but the core components of effective programs – giving providers the choice to buy a program in full or instead implement components of programs that are common across interventions.

These ‘common elements’, including the implementation support required, are discussed further in the next section.

Independent, transparent and responsive evidence clearinghouses that place interventions within the Australian and NSW child protection policy context, are ideal policy tools because they put the decision about intervention selection in policymakers’ hands and can guard against influence from vested interests who have a product or solution to sell. In the context of a NSW wide evidence-informed policy system, they can support investment decisions and reduce waste by directing funds toward ‘right-fit’ programs and those that may require further development and evaluation.

### **Implementation of a continuum of evidence-informed interventions and responses**

Their Futures Matter brought a shift in NSW child protection and social services policy toward a greater focus on evidence in reform. This was most clearly seen in the procurement of licensed evidence-based programs (EBP) to prevent child maltreatment, such as Multisystemic Therapy – Child Abuse and Neglect (MST-CAN) and Functional Family Therapy – Child Welfare (FFT-CW). Evidence-based programs are attractive to policymakers because they represent ‘best bets’, or tangible products that can be delivered – at least in the context in which they were developed – with known infrastructure, outcomes and costs.

Many EBPs have been developed and tested outside of Australia in systems where standard care and business as usual services may be limited or of poor quality. This can mean EBPs, even when they have demonstrated positive results in the countries in which they were developed, can struggle to demonstrate the same uplift in outcomes when transported to a country like Australia, which has existing high levels of business-as-usual care. EBP licensing issues, many of which stem from well-intentioned efforts to ensure consistency and quality in delivery, can mean that the kind of adaptive implementation needed to improve the fit between an EBP and the local service context and population, including vulnerable First Nations children and families, is troublesome. This may result in some of the barriers we documented in the implementation of EBPs in family services in Victoria.<sup>4</sup>

When implemented well, EBPs meet the needs of some very vulnerable children and families. Yet they are unable to meet the needs of most vulnerable children and families in contact with the child protection and social service system because EBP coverage is limited. NSW needs more than a series of single interventions to tackle the complex health and social needs of vulnerable children and families. A more system-orientated approach is needed that is as complex as the needs with which vulnerable children and families present. This means a continuum of intervention approaches that can be flexibly applied by skilled child prevention practitioners according to need.

Almost all children and families in the child protection system get a form of ‘case management’ even when they also receive other interventions and EBPs. We currently know very little about the quality and effectiveness of case management despite the best efforts of service providers. NSW needs an approach that ensures there is a high-quality standard in child protection practice to meet the needs of vulnerable children and families across the service continuum.

CEI is at the forefront of one such approach, the international movement in ‘common elements’. This is an approach that uses evidence-informed common elements – practices,

<sup>4</sup> Albers B, Hateley-Browne J, Steele T, Rose V, Shlonsky A, Mildon R. (2020). The early implementation of FFT-CW, MST-Psychiatric, and SafeCare in Australia. *Research on Social Work Practice*, 30(6), DOI.10.1177/1049731520908326



techniques and sets of strategies that commonly occur across EBPs — to engage vulnerable children and families and facilitate behaviour change in ways that are tailored to context and communities' unique needs. They are increasingly being tried and tested in child welfare and other systems around the world as a complement to EBPs. Common elements have the advantage of being low-cost, universal, and compatible with existing service structures. They are user-centred, meaning they can potentially target needs more accurately, and locally owned and readily available, enabling child protection resources to be directed to implementation rather than purchasing programs.

CEI is currently working on a series of common elements trials, with partners in Singapore, the UK and Norway, and in Australia with the Victorian and South Australian governments to implement common elements in child and family services, child protection and specialist family violence settings. We are also supporting the development of systems to monitor and evaluate common elements — a key component of system improvement which has lagged common elements implementation. This will tell us which common elements are most effective in producing change for different cohorts of vulnerable children and families.

When implemented well — using implementation teams, expert coaching and practice adjustments in response to the targeted and continuous monitoring of implementation and client data — common elements can help to build a more integrated service response for vulnerable children and families that have multiple system interactions across a range of services.

### **Effective and efficient use of evaluation and monitoring data**

Good quality impact evaluations — those that answer policy-relevant questions with rigor — can improve the development of critical knowledge, policy, and practice in service systems. Poor quality impact evaluations can generate misleading or wrong findings, leading to poor future decisions. This can mean the difference between NSW wasting resources by continuing to invest in an intervention that is actually of little benefit and rethinking an approach that better meets the needs of vulnerable children and families.

Their Futures Matter's own review of evaluations of child protection interventions (reported in the NSW Auditor General's report) identified only two evaluations from 30 that were of high methodological quality. Poor evaluation quality can stem from a series of problems including: ill-defined research questions; a poorly implemented methodology or one that does not, or cannot, address the evaluation question; 'light-touch' analysis that does not integrate findings across implementation, context and outcomes; and findings and recommendations that do not flow from the method and results.

The opportunity costs of bad evaluation also mean these resources could have been better spent on implementation support to enhance the effectiveness of other interventions or other incentives and initiatives. Evaluation is a precious resource, but it is too often used injudiciously. Impact evaluations are not essential for every policy or program. Small programs that are not high-risk or do not represent significant investment for the NSW government do not need an impact evaluation. Impact evaluations should not be undertaken if they are not feasible, there is insufficient funding to do them well, or if robust program implementation and monitoring data cannot be collected.

The pressure to appear data-driven can push government agencies to collect more data, irrespective of whether they need it or how helpful it is in making decisions. Or they may collect the wrong data, tracking changes over time in an indicator which they cannot realistically influence or in a way that does not enable an assessment of what contribution

the policy made to impact. This is both a waste of effort and resources. Policymakers need access to relevant, reliable and granular data on vulnerable children and families to inform decision-making. Governments need to be able to weigh the full costs of data collection against the benefits.

Even with the impressive strides in data systems made by the NSW government through the TFM Human Services Data Set and ChildStory, we still do not know enough about what vulnerable children and families' functioning and behaviour is when they present to child protection services; the timing, type, intensity and range of services they received; or how their functioning and behaviour has changed when they leave. This data is essential if we are able to understand exactly what it is about the service that is beneficial and why it is beneficial – information that is critical not just to service effectiveness but service efficiency. Service improvement is not just about adding new effective programs, it is also about improving services that are already in place and shelving those that are ineffective.

The challenge for NSW is to build a 'right-fit' evidence system that can demonstrate performance and accountability, report impact in terms of improving the lives of vulnerable children and families, and provide policymakers with timely and actionable data for decision making that guides future investment.



Centre for  
Evidence and  
Implementation