



**Queensland University of Technology**  
Brisbane Australia

This is the author's version of a work that was submitted/accepted for publication in the following source:

[Lonne, Bob & Gillespie, Kerri](#)  
(2014)

How do Australian print media representations of child abuse and neglect inform the public and system reform?

*Child Abuse & Neglect*, 38(5), pp. 837-850.

This file was downloaded from: <https://eprints.qut.edu.au/80865/>

**© Copyright 2014 Elsevier**

This is the author's version of a work that was accepted for publication in *Child Abuse & Neglect*. Changes resulting from the publishing process, such as peer review, editing, corrections, structural formatting, and other quality control mechanisms may not be reflected in this document. Changes may have been made to this work since it was submitted for publication. A definitive version was subsequently published in *Child Abuse & Neglect*, [VOL 38, ISSUE 5, (2014)] DOI: 10.1016/j.chiabu.2014.04.021

**Notice:** *Changes introduced as a result of publishing processes such as copy-editing and formatting may not be reflected in this document. For a definitive version of this work, please refer to the published source:*

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2014.04.021>

**Title:** How do Australian print media representations of child abuse and neglect inform the public and system reform?

**Authors:**

Bob Lonne<sup>a</sup>

Kerri Gillespie<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>School of Public Health and Social Work, Queensland University of Technology, Victoria Park Road, Kelvin Grove, Queensland, Australia, 4059

**Corresponding author address:** <sup>a</sup>School of Public Health and Social Work, Queensland University of Technology, Victoria Park Road, Kelvin Grove, Queensland, Australia, 4059

**Key Words:** Child abuse and neglect; print media reporting; system reform; child protection policy

**Acknowledgements**

The authors thank Nicola Lynch, Elizabeth Doneley and Mary Micett who assisted in the data collection of this research as part of the Vacation Research Experience Scholarship Scheme at the Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia.

## **How do Australian print media stories of child abuse and neglect inform the public and system reform?**

### **Introduction**

The print media play a vital role in informing the public about child abuse and neglect, providing information which helps build broad support for laws and system developments that enable the state to intervene into private family lives and ensure that children are protected from maltreatment. Print media coverage usually sets the daily media agenda and is, therefore, important because it influences public understandings of child abuse and neglect, and what people believe should be done about it. Media impact on policy agendas should not be underestimated. In this Directions paper we outline the results of a study of all major Australian newspaper stories covering abuse and neglect matters during an 18-month period in 2008-09. A range of issues are identified concerning how well these inform the public about the nature of the problem, and the current national reform agenda for protective systems that promotes early intervention and prevention.

We highlight important themes in the coverage including general focus upon system failure, an over-emphasis of reported crimes of sexual and physical abuse rather than neglect, a tendency to conflate all maltreatment within stories that are missing important facts, misrepresentations of harm to children within Indigenous communities, and a privileging of some powerful voices while omitting others. Parents and children are typically unheard. We critically analyse the coverage with respect to how it helps and hinders current reforms to build a community-based public health approach rather than punitive forensically-driven statutory interventions.

In particular, we argue that the coverage focuses on individuals rather than the broader structural factors at play, and thereby undermines policy efforts to address issues such as poverty, discrimination and social injustice. Hence, although at one level coverage

supports reform agendas to improve system outcomes, in other ways it misinforms concerning the nature of the problem and its impacts on children and the community, and promoting punitive responses while failing to highlight necessary family support measures. We conclude by asking important questions about how to increase the voice of children and families in media coverage, and to better inform and involve the community in ongoing system reform.

### **Child Abuse and Neglect in Australia**

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) estimated that in 2008 there were 4.1 million (19.3 %) children aged 0-14 years in the country. In comparison to approaches around the globe to address child abuse and neglect, Australia is generally classified as having a *child protection* orientation, with child safety and identification of risk of harm being the main foci of interventions that entail risk-dominated, forensic investigations of notifications (reported allegations) of suspected abuse and neglect.<sup>1</sup> Such approaches sit alongside an increasing child rights emphasis and a policy push for a public health approach, as evidenced by the 2009 decision of the Council of Australian Governments to endorse the *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children*, which articulated a strong early intervention and prevention policy framework with a less investigatory, more supportive approach for families.<sup>2</sup>

A number of broad trends are evident in Australia during the past decade. As shown in Figure 1, there has been a longstanding trend toward rising national incidence of notifications, investigations, and substantiations across Australia. Also, the number of children on orders and in out-of-home care – and the overrepresentation of Indigenous children at all levels – has been on the rise.

<sup>1</sup> LONNE, B., PARTON, N., THOMSON, J., & HARRIES, M. *REFORMING CHILD PROTECTION*. (2009).

<sup>2</sup> COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENTS (COAG). (2009). *PROTECTING CHILDREN IS EVERYONE'S BUSINESS, NATIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR PROTECTING AUSTRALIA'S CHILDREN 2009–2020*.

**Comment**  
footnote re  
somehow o  
a footnote  
HEALTH AN  
WELFARE, S  
AUSTRALIA  
POPULATIO  
AND TORRE  
ABS CAT NO

**PLACE FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE**

These data do not necessarily include criminal offences against children, particularly those occurring outside the family. A recent report on child victims of crime by the Australian Institute of Criminology estimated that only 10% of the substantiated maltreatment resulted in statutory protective action, and “less than 10% of all child protection matters in Australia involve the prosecution of an offender through the criminal justice system” (p. 141).<sup>3</sup>

Figure 2 shows the national aggregated data and depicts respective proportions of the types of substantiated abuse and neglect between 2005-2006 and 2010-2011. Emotional abuse and neglect account for approximately two-thirds of the substantiated harm. The proportion of neglect has been steady; emotional abuse, which often involves exposure to domestic violence, has been falling; and physical and sexual abuse have been mostly stable. While the annual child protection incidence data is reported in print media, we found that it was not given prominence nor any real critical analysis, except when reporting concerned public inquiries into system failures and scandals.

**PLACE FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE**

**Current policy and practice concerns.** Several relevant events occurred during the data collection period related to print media reporting of child maltreatment. On February 13 2008 the Prime Minister Kevin Rudd gave a national apology to Indigenous Australians for the removal of their children during the *Stolen Generations* from the early 1900s to the 1970s. The Council of Australian Governments announced in early 2009 the adoption of the *National Framework for Protecting Australia’s Children* that heralded a major policy shift away from statutory investigations toward family support and early intervention to prevent entry into the protective systems operated by state and territory governments. The Northern

---

<sup>3</sup> AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF CRIMINOLOGY. *AUSTRALIAN CRIME: FACTS AND FIGURES 2011*, AT 141 (2012).

Territory's Emergency Response, a broad-based and highly contentious national and territory government intervention to protect children continued and was particularly focused on remote Aboriginal communities that were profoundly economically and socially disadvantaged and marginalized.

The Wood inquiry (a special commission into Child Protection Services in New South Wales [NSW]) was initiated and released a report detailing a major program of reform of the statutory child protection system which was accepted by the government of Australia's biggest state. The Mullighan (South Australia) inquiry comprised a Commission of Inquiry into Children in State Care, as well as a report on sexual abuse within Indigenous communities (children on the APY lands) and led directly to significant changes to that state's child protection authority. A number of high profile child deaths from abuse and neglect occurred and five state/territory inquiries into these scandals were held, for example, the deaths in NSW of Ebony, aged 8 years from malnutrition, and the murder trial of the mother of two-year-old Dean Shillingsworth whose body was found in a suitcase floating on a pond. Furthermore, in this period there was ongoing public exposure of historical abuses within institutions, often faith-based, as well as the uncovering of the Austrian Fritzl case which entailed a father holding his daughter in seclusion and sexually abusing her for decades, as well as police busts of several international child pornography rings.

The period examined here entailed tragedies, sensational crimes, system review, policy debate, and reform activity, and the authors were interested in how these sorts of events and processes were being represented to the Australian public and politicians, along with the regular portrayal of day-to-day incidents of maltreatment. We wanted to know how print media stories of child abuse and neglect informed the public and system reform.

**Australian Print Media: How Do They Report on Child Abuse and Neglect and Associated Public and Social Policy Issues?**

Comment

Comment  
events/acti  
little more  
provided.

Comment

Comment  
what to do  
information  
the specific  
needed, bu  
go. Or, may  
should be i  
section. In  
inquiries an  
the context  
events. Dat

Comment

Comment  
important t  
some key d

Australian newspapers play an important informational role and are often the catalyst for coverage by other media regarding events that are deemed to be newsworthy – they usually set the daily media agenda. Although readership has been decreasing, there is diversity among the types of print media, albeit with increasing tabloid-type coverage and fewer broadsheet newspapers. To address the question of how the print media report on child abuse and neglect, we analyzed the stories of the 10 newspapers with the largest readership and that covered six states and the Northern Territory, along with a national paper, *the Australian*. To search for newspaper reports, we used the Australian and New Zealand Reference Centre database within *Factiva*, which contains all print media stories. The key search terms used were child\* (abuse\*, neglect, protection or safety), pedophil\*, paedophil\*, or parent neglect (where \* means ‘and derivatives’), harm and maltreatment.

We examined all stories ( $N = 4,939$ ) that met the key word search criteria, determined whether they contained maltreatment material, eliminated duplications and irrelevant stories, and undertook descriptive content and thematic analyses of the remaining stories. We entered information into an electronic database and used SPSS version 18.0 to analyze it. No university ethics approval was required as data collection involved publicly accessible news reports.

We analyzed 2,710 stories published between January 1, 2008 and June 30, 2009 that met our criteria. Tabloid stories were generally shorter in length (mean range 205-413 words per story) and often left out key facts, possibly because of space limitations. Hence, descriptor information such as age, family size, ethnicity, gender, and even type of abuse were mostly left unspecified. Thus, readers were often left to make inferences based on scant and generalized information. In contrast, broadsheets such as *The Age*, *The Australian*, and *Sydney Morning Herald* (mean range 536-601 words per story) often had lengthy feature

articles that provided detailed and nuanced coverage of issues. A majority (54.7%) of all stories covered local events.

### **Ethnicity**

The ethnicity of the offender or victim was unclear for the majority of stories (83.6%), with those most mentioned being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) descent (15.9%). There was a difference between newspapers on identifying Indigenous ethnicity, with broadsheet newspapers tending to report such information, and tabloid papers tending not to do so. The *Stolen Generation* (i.e., Indigenous children removed from their families by Australian government departments and church missions under acts of their respective parliaments during the 1900s) or the Prime Minister's national apology in 2008 was mentioned in 51 stories (1.9%). The majority of these references ( $n = 34$ , 66.7%) occurred within stories discussing events or issues involving Indigenous people.

Less than 3% of the Australian population identify as ATSI;<sup>4</sup> a people who remain the most economically and socially disadvantaged group in the country. According to the AIHW, Indigenous children are far more likely to be the subject of notifications (7 times) and substantiated reports of harm (8 times) than are children of other ethnicities.<sup>5</sup> In their 2009 study of Australian print media reporting of sexual abuse, Alan McKee and Amelia Birnie noted a difference in how Indigenous child abuse was reported. They found that such reporting was more concentrated on “rape and exploitative sexual relationships” (p. 17) and was more likely to discuss a range of issues surrounding the cause of the abuse (e.g., drug and alcohol abuse, unemployment). The current study found a similar trend: stories indicating Indigenous ethnicity mentioned three forms of abuse in over 90% of stories – sexual abuse ( $n = 203$ ), non-specified abuse ( $n = 112$ ), and non-specified neglect ( $n = 83$ ) – and 32

<sup>4</sup> AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF HEALTH AND WELFARE, *AUSTRALIA'S WELFARE*, SERIES NO. 9 (2009) AND AUSTRALIAN BUREAU OF STATISTICS, *POPULATION DISTRIBUTION, ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER AUSTRALIAN*, ABS CAT NO. 4705.0 (2006).

<sup>5</sup> AIHW. *CHILD PROTECTION AUSTRALIA 2011-12, CHILD WELFARE SERIES NO. 55. CAT. NO. CWS 43. (2013).*



mentioned other forms of abuse or neglect. In contrast to what these media reports suggest, the latest national data indicates that neglect (40%) is the largest type of harm substantiated for Indigenous children (compared to 25% for non-Indigenous children). The proportions for other types of harm are all comparatively higher for non-Indigenous children. Sexual abuse, which accounts for 9% of all abuse cases, is lower for Indigenous children than for other ethnic groups.<sup>6</sup>

### **Types of Abuse**

More than half the stories ( $n = 1,384$ , 51.1%) were focused primarily on an issue related to abuse (see Table 1), but a difference between tabloid and broadsheet newspapers was noted. Broadsheet papers were less likely to describe a specific event of abuse or neglect (37.8% vs. 52.7%). When the story referred to a specific event, another unrelated abuse event was often mentioned, for example if a local incident of sexual abuse was being reported a link was often made to the Fritzl case in Austria. The majority of stories that focused on a specific instance of abuse predominantly concerned sexual abuse, and it was unlikely that a case of emotional abuse was reported. These proportions are at considerable variance to the national incidence data outlined in Figure 2 and reflect that the primary source of information was police and court reporting of a criminal offence against a child, but also that journalists and editors deem such events as ‘newsworthy’.

### **PLACE TABLE ONE ABOUT HERE**

A number of stories referred to neglect in addition to, or instead of, abuse (see Table 1). The broadsheet national paper, *The Australian*, consistently identified much more detail about this than other publications. Together, the broadsheets were more likely to mention non-specified abuse and neglect, and less likely to mention physical or emotional abuse.

### **Story Voice**

---

<sup>6</sup> IBID.

These stories rarely gave a voice to the victim ( $n = 162$ , 6%), child protection authorities ( $n = 61$ , 2.3%), or the offender ( $n = 20$  / 0.7%). Instead, they favored the voice of community members who were prone to make claims about interpretations of events and their implications. Often times, these community members were prominent professionals and community opinion leaders ( $n = 819$ , 30.2%, range: 23.7% - 40%) and politicians ( $n = 494$ , 18.2%, range: 13.2% - 27.2%). These findings are similar to those of the previously mentioned study by Alan McKee and Amelia Birnie, which found only one article that included the voice of the perpetrator, and it was an exceptionally short apology. Their report also found the regular exclusion of the voice of the victim and inclusion of the voices of authorities, politicians, and experts.

### Victim Details

Overall, reporting of maltreatment incidents tended to be conflated into generalised stories that lacked important details about the children who were harmed and the event context. Hence, in most instances, without vital information readers were left to infer what exactly had happened apart from an incident of maltreatment, and were therefore likely to be informed by stories that only mentioned broad descriptors, and focused on sexual and physical abuse. The public was being informed by a generalized portrayal of sexual and physical abuse as the primary maltreatment with scant attention to the variations in the events and demographics of those involved. For example, the number of children involved in an incident was generally unreported ( $n = 1,844$ , 68.0%), and *The Daily Telegraph* most commonly discussed this (in 50.2% of stories. Between 62.2% and 78.5% of stories in other newspapers did not report these numbers. Stories that did report victim numbers most commonly reported only one child ( $n = 369$ , 13.6%) or six or more children ( $n = 326$ , 12.0%).

**Comment**  
this section details should help, and if draw comparisons to see if the inaccurate actual numbers do not want aims, I would

**Comment**  
your conce

**Comment**  
sentences. most likely children wa

The child's gender was usually not reported ( $n = 1,986$ , 73.3% for the first child, and similar for each other child). Genders of the children reported were similar for the first or only child mentioned, (12.3-12.5%), however when more than one child was mentioned, they were more commonly male (approximately 2-4% more for each child involved).

A small number of stories ( $n = 185$ , 6.8%) reported the victim's death, and 53 (2.0%) of the stories reported the offender as a child. The victim's family type was rarely reported ( $n = 2621$  / 96.7% did not mention family), but those who were mentioned were predominantly from polygamous or sect environments ( $n = 37$  / 1.4%), in a two parent natural family ( $n = 14$  / 0.5%), in a broken home ( $n = 13$  / 0.5%), or with a step parent ( $n = 13$  / 0.5%).

Polygamous/Sect environments were more frequently described as being overseas (97.3% of Sect stories / 11.0% of overseas stories).

Custody issues were mentioned in 35 stories (1.3%, range 0.0% - 3.6%,  $\chi^2(9) = 19.829$ ,  $p = .019$ ). Domestic violence was only reported in a small proportion of stories ( $n = 89$  / 3.3%, range 1.4% - 4.6%), with the broadsheet *Sydney Morning Herald* ( $n = 19$  / 8.5%) publishing this most frequently, and the broadsheet newspapers generally mentioning this more often (4.9% compared to 2.5% of tabloid stories).

### Details of Offender/Event

The victim-offender relationship was not usually reported ( $n = 2248$  / 83.0%), with those reported including family ( $n = 248$  / 9.2%); known to victim or family ( $n = 200$  / 7.3%); and unknown to victim or family ( $n = 14$  / 0.5%). The *Daily Telegraph* was most likely to state the victim-offender relationship ( $n = 173$  / 66.3% unclear) followed by the *Hobart Mercury* ( $n = 118$  / 75.6% unclear), the rest being unclear or unreported between 80.9% and 89.6%. Another Australian study noted a lack of reporting on those abuses perpetrated within the family, consistently over-reporting incidents of abuse committed by strangers (Mendes, 2001).

Comment

Comment  
interpret y

In 10.5% ( $n = 284$ ) of the stories, there was an implication toward the involvement of multiple offenders. There were 284 (10.5%) stories focused primarily on the offender, and 233 (8.6%) focused on the risk posed by the offender. These stories often concerned child pornography crimes ( $n = 294$ , 10.8%), although Internet safety was not a primary subject for many stories ( $n = 47$ , 1.7%). A small number of articles referred to the mental capacity of the offender ( $n = 34$ , 1.3%), the victim ( $n = 26$ , 1.0%), or a family member ( $n = 2$  / 0.1%).

We defined events containing acts of uncommon violence or other seriously anti-social or bizarre behavior toward a child as *horrific*. For example, the Fritzl case entailed seclusion, violence and sexual abuse of a daughter for decades and was deemed to be horrific. These stories typically contained language or information that was clearly 'newsworthy' a subjective and broad term used in media circles to denote stories that will engage the interest of their audiences, often because it entailed aspects of human interest that appeals to reader's emotions or prejudices. There were 232 horrific stories (8.6%), and numbers of these stories differed significantly between newspapers. Two tabloids, *The Daily Telegraph*, and *The Mercury* included more articles that mentioned horrific events (15.3% and 16.0%), whereas the broadsheet *Sydney Morning Herald* had the least (4.0%). Horrific stories were significantly longer ( $M = 463.73$ ,  $SD = 338.48$ ) than those that were not ( $M = 392.51$ ,  $SD = 302.16$ ).

### System Involvement

These stories featured police involvement ( $n = 977$ , 36.1%), with crimes and arrests specified ( $n = 767$ , 28.3%), or references to the legal system (e.g., courts;  $n = 1,054$ , 38.9%) far more often than either child protection authorities ( $n = 350$ , 12.9%) or medical involvement ( $n = 245$ , 9.0%). The pressures typically experienced by child protection staff such as high workloads, time pressures and emotional stress, were only mentioned in 109 stories (4.0%), mostly feature articles.

Comment  
helpful here

Comment

Comment  
definition?  
newsworth

Comment

Comment  
mentioned  
Mercury -  
provided.

Systemic failures or scandals in the protective systems were noted in 7.6% ( $n = 207$ ) of the stories, with broadsheet papers implying failure or scandal within child protection authorities more frequently (range: 0.9-14.3%). The state-based inquiries were reported more often by the local newspapers or *The Australian*. The Mullighan ( $n = 93$ , 3.4%) and Wood ( $n = 55$ , 2.0%) inquiries and the Northern Territory Emergency Response ( $n = 145$ , 5.4%) also appeared with some frequency, which brought the proportion of system failure stories to 18.4% of all stories. Hence, there was a regular theme of system failure, which was reinforced with reporting of institutional abuse of children.

Maltreatment within institutions, often faith-based, was mentioned in 7.5% of stories and involved children's homes ( $n = 104$ , 3.8%), schools ( $n = 76$ , 2.8%), both homes and schools ( $n = 5$ , 0.2%), and also undefined institutions ( $n = 18$ , 0.7%). Very few stories referred to schools as being positive, safe, or preventative environments ( $n = 47$ , 1.7%, range: 1.1% - 3.5%). Two hundred and six (7.6%, range: 3.2% - 13.0%) stories stated or implied that abuse was perpetrated, condoned, or ignored within religious institutions, more so in broadsheets (10.0%) than tabloids (6.3%). Foster care was mentioned in 117 (4.32%) stories, although not often identifying the offender as a caregiver. Only 34 stories (1.3%) referred to childcare in the context of child abuse. There was regular reporting of events of a historical nature ( $n = 268$ , 9.9%), often linking this to the current event that was the focus of the story.

## Policy and culture

Links to related policy issues appeared in 672 stories (24.8%, range: 15.9% - 39.0% of each newspaper), most often in the broadsheet newspapers. However, only 34 stories (1.3%) mentioned children's rights. Significantly fewer stories in broadsheet papers (32.4%) referred to the law, sentencing, or jail terms than found in tabloids. Sixty-one stories (2.3%, range: 0-8.9%) referred to mandatory reporting. More than half of the stories mentioning

Comment

Comment  
useful to pr  
so a compa  
perceived a

Comment  
what you m  
what exact  
stories in th

Indigenous ethnicities ( $n = 236$ , 54.8%) also related the coverage to policy issues. A total of 307 stories mentioned funding, costs, or compensation (11.3%, range: 3.2% - 18.8%). These stories were slightly more common in broadsheets (13.5%) than tabloids (10.2%). Social or cultural factors associated with maltreatment were identified more in broadsheet than tabloid newspapers ( $n = 313$ , 11.5%, range: 4.4% - 23.0%). Welfare or government assistance was mentioned in 120 stories (4.4%); between 1.1% and 8% of stories from each newspaper mentioned this issue, more so in broadsheets (7.0%) than tabloids (3.1%).

### Discussion

Child abuse and neglect are insidious social problems, which are socially constructed within differing cultures and perspectives of children, childhood, family life, and the state that are, in turn, shaped by diverse societal and political interests. The media are a critical influence upon the ways in which individuals, groups, and communities understand the phenomena of maltreatment, its causes, and what should be done about it. There is little doubt that the media have been instrumental in educating the public worldwide about the pernicious impacts of child abuse and neglect, and garnering broad support to authorize the state to intervene into the private lives of families in order to prevent maltreatment and protect children. It is surprising, therefore, that there has been so little research on the complex relationship between media coverage, public reactions, and the development of policy and intervention systems to reduce its prevalence and incidence.

This Australian study, although not broadly generalizable, nonetheless highlights some key themes to consider in examining the role that the print media plays in shaping social policy and systems for protecting children and supporting families. Some of these themes have been identified elsewhere, for example, the focus on criminal matters, particularly sexual abuse that Hove and colleagues found. Overall, we found that the stories are, generally speaking, succinct descriptions of events and related issues that were shaped to

Comment  
you mean h  
Culture rath

Comment  
information  
involvement

be newsworthy and maintain reader interest. The stories placed a disproportionate emphasis upon sexual and physical abuse in comparison to the reality of much higher incidence of emotional abuse and neglect. Key information such as details of the victim, their family, the offender, and incident details were mostly omitted, leaving readers to use generalized information and inferences to make conclusions about the nature and scope of maltreatment, who is involved, and what should be done to address it. This generalized reporting tends to misinform the public by washing out the variations found in maltreatment and the different approaches needed to address these. Our key themes about the coverage were that stories:

- Exposed and highlighted institutional failures, particularly those entailing scandals by child protection authorities and faith-based organizations;
- Focused on criminal matters (sexual and physical abuse) rather than the national incidence of dominant substantiated harm types (neglect and emotional abuse), thereby distorting the reality of the scope and nature of harm experienced by children, and thereby privileging police and legal system approaches to social control rather than social care responses;
- Provided little opportunity for the voice of those directly involved to be heard, preferring instead to highlight community claims maker's and politician's perspectives;
- Largely ignored the structural and systemic contributing factors to maltreatment and instead focused on the individuals held responsible; and
- Treated Indigenous matters in ways that blamed the people and their communities for the over-representation of child abuse and neglect, and inappropriately emphasised sexual abuse as the main issue.

Comments  
and a logical  
helpful to u  
bullets.

Although there is considerable diversity in how journalistic portrayals are constructed, significant differences are evident between tabloid and broadsheet newspaper stories. Generally speaking, the former provided easily understood newsworthy material with engaging messages about maltreatment, and were more likely to feature stories about a specific event of abuse/ neglect, with a clear focus on criminal and legal matters and horrific events. The latter tended to describe circumstances of non-specific abuse and neglect, often in lengthy feature articles that provided more nuanced, detailed and policy-related information. They also were more likely to include information about broader contributing factors such as domestic violence, social and cultural factors, and welfare assistance. Importantly the broadsheet newspapers highlighted system failures and the ignoring of institutional abuse within faith-based organizations. Both these types of journalism seemed to address different audiences' informational needs about harm to children.

It is easy to look at these themes and journalistic approaches as shortcomings, rather than as reflections of a dominant ideological constructions. But this, in our view, is to underestimate the coverage's positive contributions. For example, tabloid coverage has successfully engaged the emotions of readers and tapped into a widespread moral repugnance toward harming children. Second, it has helped to shift societal attitudes by portraying the frequency of maltreatment, and the seriousness of it, albeit by over-reporting sexual abuse incidence and emphasizing the sensational and horrific incidents. We accept that there are negative aspects too, for example, misinforming the public has resultant impacts on political, policy and program directions as communities are shaped to relieve social angst through punishment of villains through mandatory reporting, heavy sentences and similar approaches. Nonetheless, the coverage has helped to build momentum across the political spectrum for the intervention of the state into private family life and to clarify the boundaries and limits of parental authority over their children. Without the media being onsite, it is unlikely that we

Comment

Comment

Comment  
your conce

Comment  
you are say  
convinced t  
Misinforma  
more so, th  
least, it can  
individuals  
(e.g., calling  
will be a po  
instead of c  
caregiver).



would have had the significant government policy reforms and investments to prevent abuse and support families.

Finally, the print media portrayals outlined here played pivotal roles in uncovering systemic scandals, bringing those responsible to account, and building a groundswell of public and political support for significant and ongoing system reform in our institutional responses. It seems unlikely that the recent Australian government decision to initiate a Royal Commission into institutional responses to the sexual abuse of children would have occurred by now without the longstanding media focus on their historical failings. These are all profound and necessary contributions. Because of the powerful forces at play, the media are pivotal in exposing those responsible for institutional abuse of children. Suzanne McDevitt provides evidence to indicate that system failures and the related public inquiries are associated with increased reporting to authorities of suspected child abuse and neglect, which can be interpreted as illustrating increased public anxiety, but can also signify strong support for the role of state frontline service responses.

Our study identified few stories where public officials were subjected to language that would besmirch their character or reputation, although we note that the coverage elsewhere may be different. Nevertheless, we accept that fear of this sort of coverage has become part of the dominant discourse within the sector, which often depicts the media as feared, nasty, intrusive, and destructive forces that set out to destroy people's careers, and place them in a "damned if you do, and damned if you don't" position regarding their case decision making.

There are, however, legitimate issues to take up regarding the key themes evident in the coverage. In particular, the emphasis on individualizing portrayals hinders the recognition of the societal and structural factors at play, particularly those related to the two-thirds of substantiated harm that entails emotional abuse and neglect. By emphasizing individual

**Comment**  
policy reform  
been negat  
these polici  
reporting la

**Comment**  
mentioned  
the change  
specifically  
those chang  
connection  
conclusion  
data preser

responsibility, stories help to mask the role played by broader structural factors (e.g., poverty, social injustice, inequity, systemic discrimination and racism).

Moreover, these stories placed undue emphasis upon the utility of social control measures and too little emphasis upon social care responses to help struggling families and vulnerable children. Parenting can be a richly rewarding experience, but immensely challenging, especially because people receive little training and preparation other than their own learned experiences. Most families at one time or another find themselves struggling to cope, even more so if they also experience the pressures stemming from poverty, unemployment, drug and alcohol problems, mental health, disability, health-related issues, or social marginalisation and disadvantage. As Gary Melton posits in an article on the importance of family support, community and neighborhood support are critical to many, if not most, families, particularly in an era of increased alienation.

Yet, the privileging of police, legal, and political voices marginalizes the voices of those affected directly, particularly children, child protection authorities, and health professionals. From one perspective, this practice serves to perpetuate the system's risk-averse and forensic approaches by uncritically promoting punitive, rather than rehabilitative, interventions. Claims makers who use increasingly strident language to argue for ever-tougher measures are often featured, and we must ask ourselves, is it right for the media to so vigorously promote punishment of offenders as the preferred social measure to protect children from harm, particularly when neglect and emotional abuse are so prevalent, yet not well recognized?

The absence of the voices of children and families can contribute to a generalized negative stereotyping of offenders and families that come to the attention of authorities. How, we ask, are the rights of children to be heard being addressed here by the media? Are children not most entitled to have their stories heard and their right to protection directly heard by the

general public and policy makers? How might such coverage be brought about within our current system that uses confidentiality laws to prevent it? How does this exclusion of children's and families' voices negatively impact on institutional openness and transparency, and their capacity to undertake necessary system reforms? What are the impacts of the media ignoring the voices of families and, in particular, parents who need help?

Similarly, the coverage of Indigenous incidents was different to those involving non-Indigenous people. What purposes does the over-reporting of sexual abuse in these communities serve? Why is neglect, and the reasons for it, significantly under-unreported? The current coverage is, arguably, likely to contribute to racial stereotyping and a blaming-the-victim response that lacks both compassion and social justice imperatives for Australia's most disadvantaged and dispossessed group.

The lack of detail provided in most stories leaves the public to form opinions based largely on generalized information. The stories in this study contribute to the public being poorly informed about the roles, programs, services, and approaches of child protection services and, specifically, the types of support and assistance that can be provided to successfully help parents and families and to assist child victims overcome the trauma and impacts of their maltreatment. We found little of this sort of information in the print media stories, and we conclude that the public is likely to be largely uninformed about the need for the altered policy directions contained in the *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children*, particularly early intervention and prevention strategies.

At the very least, people are likely to be confused about how approaches to address sexual and physical abuse need to be differentiated from those that are taken with emotional abuse and neglect. How might the media play a more active role in exposing the range of harm that occurs to children through neglect and emotional abuse, and the sorts of approaches that should be taken to redress this? How might the media be effectively employed to

broaden the community's engagement in the helping process for struggling families rather than the reporting and surveillance role that it is largely restricted to nowadays?

### **Conclusion**

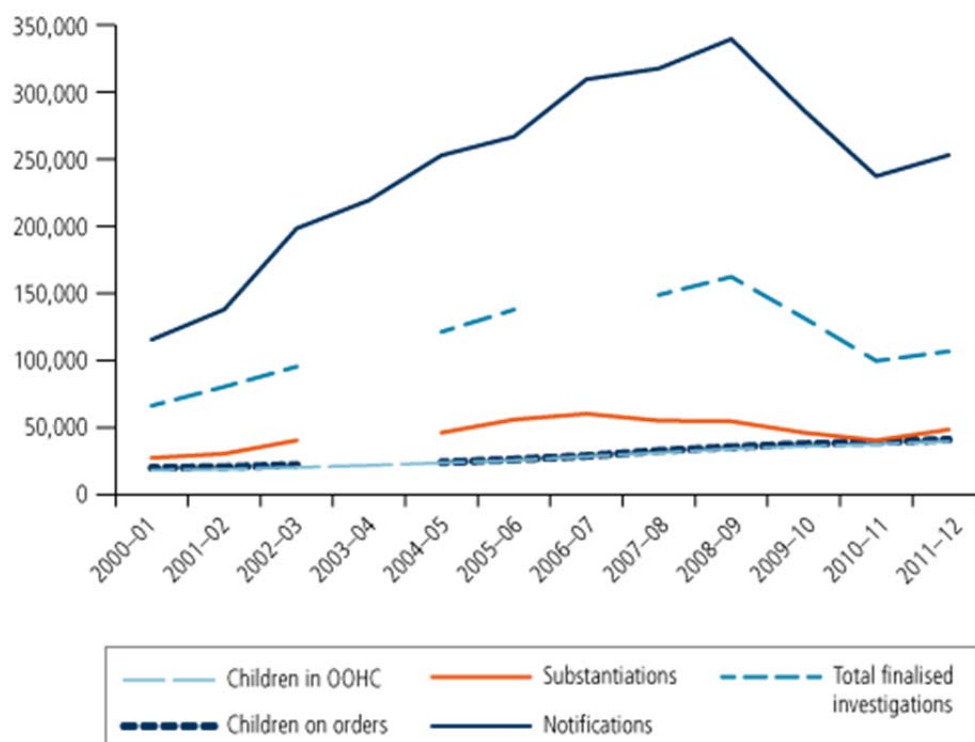
This study highlighted that the Australian print media play a vital role in informing the public about child abuse and neglect but mostly from the standpoint of criminal matters involving sexual and physical abuse rather than emotional abuse and neglect, which have the highest incidence. The public is further misinformed by the scant detail and generalized coverage of maltreatment, and the absence of the voices of families and children as to the real impacts experienced, as well as the attention given to system failures, or rather, the inattention to the many positive stories about successful helping interventions. Overall, the coverage emphasises punitive and legal responses, and the voices of police and claims makers to help the public understand the size, scope and nature of the social problem of children's maltreatment. The distorted coverage of Indigenous peoples is a particular case in point.

Despite this distorted picture, the coverage has had important benefits such as promoting public support for the protection of children from harm and uncovering systemic failures and scandals. The reductionist and individualistic portrayals, however, contribute to masking the part that structural and societal factors play and the need for shaping responses and services to address these systemic influences. Although the public is, overall, better informed and on board with the need for a well-functioning protective system, it is far less so concerning the early intervention and prevention strategies necessary to protect children and support vulnerable families. Further research is needed to critically analyze the complex and multi-faceted relationships between the media and those involved in our political, policy and professional responses to prevent maltreatment and provide beneficial social care to children and families in need.

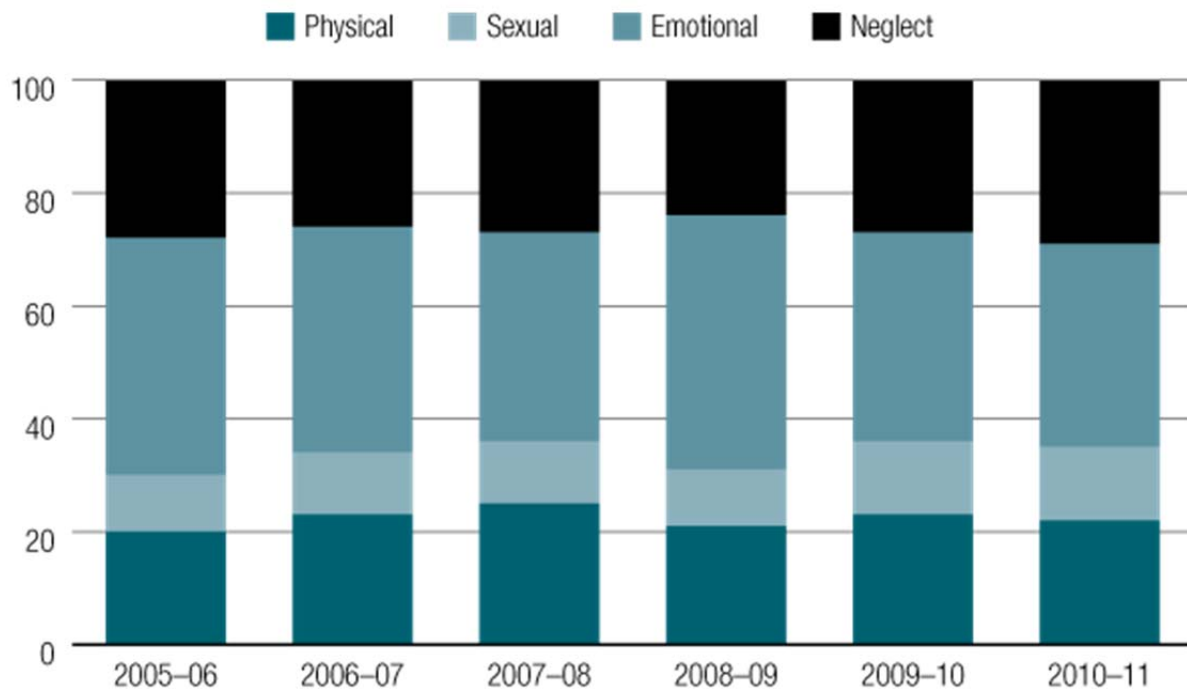


### Suggestions for Further Reading

- Hove, T., Paek, H.J., Isaacson, T., & Cole, R. T. (2013). Newspaper portrayals of child abuse: Frequency of coverage and frames of the issue. *Mass Communication and Society, 16*(1), 89-108.
- McDevitt, S. (1996). The impact of news media on child abuse reporting. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 20*(4), 261-274.
- McKee, A. & Birnie, A. (2008). Differences between journalistic and academic accounts of child sexual abuse in Australia. *Australian Journal of Communication, 35*(3), 93-110.
- Melton, G.B. (2010). Angels watching over us: Child safety and family support in an age of alienation. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 80*(1), 89-95.
- Mendes, P. (2001). Blaming the messenger: The media, social workers and child abuse. *Australian Social Work, 54*(2), 27-36.



**Fig. 1.** Aggregated Australian data on key child protection system statistics (Source AIHW, 2013)



**Fig. 2.** Aggregated Australian data on types of substantiated abuse and neglect 2005-2011 (Source AIC, 2012, p. 155)





**Table 1.**

## Types of abuse reported

	<b>Herald Sun</b> % of paper / % of total	<b>Daily Telegraph</b> % of paper / % of total	<b>Courier Mail</b> % of paper / % of total	<b>Adelaide Advertiser</b> % of paper / % of total	<b>West Australian</b> % of paper / % of total	<b>Hobart Mercury</b> % of paper / % of total	<b>NT News</b> % of paper / % of total	<b>The Age</b> % of paper / % of total	<b>Sydney Morning Herald</b> % of paper / % of total	<b>The Australian</b> % of paper / % of total	<b>N / Total</b>
About specific event of abuse / neglect	98 (44.5%)	159 (60.9%)	196 (53.8%)	210 (57.5%)	65 (32.2%)	94 (60.3%)	117 (54.4%)	62 (31.0%)	85 (38.1%)	203 (40.3%)	1289 (47.6%)
About relevant related issue	121 (55%)	102 (39.1%)	166 (45.6%)	150 (41.1%)	129 (63.9%)	61 (39.1%)	95 (44.2%)	129 (64.5%)	137 (61.4%)	294 (58.3%)	1384 (51.1%)
<i>Abuse/Neglect mentioned</i>											
Abuse	35 (15.9%) / (7.9%)	24 (9.2%) / (5.4%)	63 (17.3%) / (14.2%)	56 (15.3%) / (12.6%)	29 (14.4%) / (6.5%)	31 (19.9%) / (7.0%)	30 (14%) / (6.7%)	47 (23.5%) / (10.6%)	31 (13.9%) / (7.0%)	99 (19.6%) / (22.2%)	445 (16.4%)
Sexual Abuse	90 (40.9%) / (7.7%)	111 (42.5%) / (9.5%)	156 (42.9%) / (13.3%)	176 (48.2%) / (15.0%)	67 (33.2%) / (5.7%)	70 (44.9%) / (6.0%)	104 (48.4%) / (8.9%)	89 (44.5%) / (7.6%)	87 (39%) / (7.4%)	223 (44.2%) / (19.0%)	1173 (43.3%)
Physical Abuse	25 (11.4%) / (9.7%)	30 (11.5%) / (11.6%)	32 (8.8%) / (12.4%)	29 (7.9%) / (11.2%)	29 (14.4%) / (11.2%)	19 (12.2%) / (7.4%)	22 (10.2%) / (8.5%)	16 (8%) / (6.2%)	17 (7.6%) / (6.6%)	39 (7.7%) / (15.1%)	258 (9.5%)
Emotional Abuse	10 (4.5%) / (8.3%)	23 (8.8%) / (19.2%)	15 (4.1%) / (12.5%)	9 (2.5%) / (7.5%)	15 (7.4%) / (12.5%)	10 (6.4%) / (8.3%)	7 (3.3%) / (5.8%)	12 (6%) / (10.0%)	8 (3.6%) / (6.7%)	11 (2.2%) / (9.2%)	120 (4.4%)
Neglect	18 (8.2%) / (5.8%)	26 (10%) / (8.4%)	27 (7.4%) / (8.7%)	52 (14.2%) / (16.7%)	30 (14.9%) / (9.6%)	20 (12.8%) / (6.4%)	4 (1.9%) / (1.3%)	33 (16.5%) / (10.6%)	14 (6.3%) / (4.5%)	87 (17.3%) / (28.0%)	311 (11.5%)
Physical Neglect	7 (3.2%) / (4.4%)	19 (7.3%) / (12.0%)	24 (6.6%) / (15.2%)	8 (2.2%) / (5.1%)	15 (7.4%) / (9.5%)	10 (6.4%) / (6.3%)	16 (7.4%) / (10.1%)	21 (10.5%) / (13.3%)	14 (6.3%) / (8.9%)	24 (4.8%) / (15.2%)	158 (5.8%)
Emotional Neglect	1 (0.5%) / (1.3%)	9 (3.4%) / (11.7%)	14 (3.8%) / (18.2%)	3 (0.8%) / (3.9%)	12 (5.9%) / (15.6%)	7 (4.5%) / (9.1%)	5 (2.3%) / (6.5%)	13 (6.5%) / (16.9%)	5 (2.2%) / (6.5%)	8 (1.6%) / (10.4%)	77 (2.8%)
Supervisory Neglect	6 (2.7%) / (4.2%)	14 (5.4%) / (9.9%)	20 (5.5%) / (14.1%)	6 (1.6%) / (4.2%)	15 (7.4%) / (10.6%)	10 (6.4%) / (7.0%)	19 (8.8%) / (13.4%)	19 (9.5%) / (13.4%)	14 (6.3%) / (9.9%)	19 (3.8%) / (13.4%)	142 (5.2%)

