

RESEARCH BRIEF

# BREAKING THE CYCLE

Supporting Tasmanian parents to  
prevent recurrent child removals

TERESA HINTON



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This report documents the prevalence and experiences of Tasmanian parents who have children recurrently removed by Child Safety Services (CSS) and of the services that support them. Recurrent removal is when removal of a child is followed by a subsequent pregnancy, further court proceedings and another removal at or shortly after birth or during infancy. This tragic cycle can be repeated a number of times with children being 'born into care'.

The research documents the experience of child removal and its consequences for parents and examines the current service network and its capacity to support them. It reviews interventions which are being deployed in other jurisdictions to break this cycle and makes recommendations about how the experiences of Tasmanian parents can be improved.

### The research involved:

- using data from the Child Protection Information Database to estimate the prevalence and characteristics of repeat removal in Tasmania;
- collating the experiences of 15 parents and over 80 service providers;
- mapping current service initiatives in Tasmania to support parents who experience child removal; and
- reviewing research, policy and good practice literature about repeat removal and interventions designed to reduce it.

It's cruel. I just wanted to kill myself after they took my kids. I didn't want to be here anymore. It feels like a part of you has just been ripped out. You just collapse to the ground, it's so cruel. It's like being on a rollercoaster, up and down, up and down, because you don't know what they're going to throw out at you next. I personally think if welfare is going to take your children, you should be put with a worker that you can work with to get your child back, to help you get them back. Their motto is about keeping families together. I don't feel like they are trying to keep my family together. I feel like they are making it that bit harder for me to get her out of welfare.

BIANCA

## What are the facts?

One-fifth (20.5%) of birth mothers who have children removed by Child Safety Services in Tasmania will experience further removals, typically of babies and infants. Since 2000, this involves 331 mothers who have had an additional 572 children removed in recurrent removal episodes. These prevalence rates are comparable to those in other jurisdictions.

Recurrent removal typically involves:

- larger families than among the general population;
- a baby or an infant under 12 months;
- a link between maternal age and recurrence with younger mothers most at risk;
- a higher risk of CSS intervention during a birth mother's own childhood;
- repeat pregnancies which are subject to an Unborn Baby Alert where risks to the unborn child have been identified and consequently potential opportunities for intervention; and
- shorter intervals between removals, which are likely to take place within one year of a previous removal. This reduces opportunities for mothers to make the necessary changes to avoid a further removal.

Overall the data suggests a pattern of increasingly rapid recurrent removal from birth mothers who are commonly young and highly vulnerable. They often have histories in the out-of-home care (OOHC) system, high rates of mental health and substance use issues and experience of family violence, poverty and insecure housing.

They removed my children, my pay got cut off. I couldn't afford the rent and ended up falling very far behind so I had to get out very quickly. It took three months for my payments to be cut off but obviously that landed me with a \$6,000 Centrelink debt. I had to pack up and get out and I didn't have anywhere else to go. I literally lived in my car for a good two to three months and then couched surfed here and there.

MARY

I was 17 when they took Wesley. I was young and I did find it hard to get a grip on it but I managed. Then when it came to Ella they came to do the same again. When I was pregnant with Mia I said I really want to have a chance, I want my children home. They said well do a parenting course, see the psychologist or the counsellor and we'll go from there, keep your visits regular. I was doing all that but they still threw it back in my face and just shut me down. It's like are you setting us up to fail on purpose, that's what it felt like, just to set us up to fail.

EMILY

## Key findings

- **a range of 'collateral consequences' for parents when a child is removed** by Child Safety Services. These include removal processes which are traumatic for both parents and children, an overwhelming grief and loss, reductions in income and threats to housing stability. At the same time parents are required to deal with legal processes, maintain positive access to their children and meet any conditions imposed by Child Safety Services and court orders to address safety concerns. These consequences can exacerbate already existing difficulties, impose system-induced trauma on already vulnerable parents and result in another pregnancy. This has been described as a 'perfect storm'.
- **little support available to parents to assist them in dealing with removal and its consequences.** Although there is a complex network of programs and services working with families across the state, few are targeted to the specific needs of parents after removal and no one has the mandate to actively support them. This means contact with services is sporadic and engagement is problematic as parents try to access services which are often inappropriate to their needs. Parents who embark on another pregnancy, when typically their material and emotional circumstances are deteriorating, face high levels of stress and anxiety about whether their unborn child will be removed. The needs of vulnerable pregnant women and their histories, including those exiting OOHC, become risks to the unborn child rather than eliciting support, and parents describe being neglected by the Child Safety System.

There is a huge service gap once children are removed. There is no support for parents and there is an expectation that the parents will just fix themselves and understand what went wrong and get their children back. That is a huge and unrealistic expectation. They fall through the gaps because there is no support and no one to talk to once your children are removed. Child Safety will only speak to you about access visits and that's about it. There is no one else to ask what do I do now, where do I go? It would be good if at the point of removal the parents were referred to a service that could help them deal with the emotional trauma and start to help them rebuild their lives.

FAMILY SUPPORT WORKER

- **removal and subsequent pregnancy presents key opportunities to intervene and work with parents** to promote insight into safety concerns, improve parenting capacity and circumstances, address underlying problems and break the cycle. Both parents and services want to see intensive case-managed support available during pregnancy and after removal to assist in dealing with the collateral consequences, address safety concerns and provide a firmer base for the parenting of any future children. This support must be trauma-informed, relationship-based and delivered at arms-length from the Child Safety System to promote engagement.
- **the majority of birth families continue to see themselves as parents** post-removal with an important role to play in their children's lives, whether or not reunification is a possibility. Yet maintaining contact can be fraught with difficulty and gradually diminish as long-term orders are applied and children settle into new lives. However, with over 50% of adolescents estimated to either self-place back with their birth families or return to them once they exit out-of-home care at 18 (Kenrick et al. 2006; Salveron et al. 2010), there is a strong case for assisting parents to sustain positive relationships with their children, address the underlying issues which led to removal and improve their future parenting capacity.
- **other jurisdictions are recognising this cohort of parents and developing interventions tailored to their needs** to reduce entry into out-of-home care. Although interventions differ in terms of design, cost and intensity, they share key characteristics. These characteristics are intensive holistic support post-removal, tailored to individual need, and delivered by skilled, well-resourced professionals who can walk alongside parents and refer into specialist services which can appropriately meet their needs.
- **research and policy literature highlights the human and financial costs of successively removing children from their birth parents.** It identifies a policy gap where the focus of Child Safety on the needs of the child obscures and de-prioritises the needs of vulnerable parents. It emphasises a growing concern that there is both a moral and practical imperative to support parents who experience removal to prevent recurrent removal, reduce entry to out-of-home care, sustain the parent/child bond and build a more solid foundation for parenting any future children parents may have.

# Anglicare recommends

## LEGISLATIVE AND POLICY FRAMEWORK

- That the Department of Communities develop a policy framework to clarify where the duty of care for parents lies and how their needs should be met.
- That the Department of Justice and Children and Youth Services review current court processes and access to legal advice and representation for parents involved in the Child Safety System.
- That the Department of Communities ensures that any policy framework proactively assists parents with children in out-of-home care to maintain the parent/child relationship and improve parenting capacity whether or not children are returned.

## ENGAGING AND SUPPORTING PARENTS

- That Children and Youth Services develop a clear framework to respond to and support those in out-of-home care and care leavers through early pregnancy and parenthood.
- That the Department of Communities and the Department of Health ensure that intensive support is available during pregnancy to proactively engage vulnerable women and assist them to prevent removal.
- That the Department of Communities ensure that skilled post-removal support be available to all parents who experience removal of their children.

## ADDRESSING TRAUMA

- That the State Government ensure that trauma-informed practice becomes the norm across sectors working with vulnerable parents who have had their children removed.
- That the Department of Health and the Department of Communities ensure that parents have access to intensive therapeutic support which can address the underlying causes of the challenges parents face in parenting their children.
- That Children and Youth Services ensure full implementation of the Signs of Safety Framework across the Child Safety System.
- That the Department of Communities develop good practice guidelines for the removal of children and specifically for the removal of babies at or shortly after birth.

## MONITORING AND REVIEW

- That the Department of Communities develop the capacity to collect data about the incidence and characteristics of recurrent removal, including trends over time.

## References

Kenrick, J, Lindsey, C, Tollemache, L 2006, *Creating new families: therapeutic approaches to fostering, adoption and kinship care*, Karnac, London.

Salveron, M, Lewig, K, Arney, F 2010, 'Supporting parents whose children are in out-of-home care', in F. Arney & D. Scott (eds), *Working with vulnerable families: A partnership approach*, Cambridge University Press, Port Melbourne, Victoria.

## For more information

The full report, *Breaking the Cycle: Supporting Tasmanian parents to prevent recurrent child removals* by Teresa Hinton, is published by the Social Action and Research Centre at Anglicare Tasmania, September 2018.

It can be downloaded at [www.socialactionresearchcentre.org.au/research-library](http://www.socialactionresearchcentre.org.au/research-library)



### SOCIAL ACTION AND RESEARCH CENTRE (SARC)

SARC contributes to the understanding of poverty and disadvantage in Tasmania by providing credible, independent research, policy development and analysis, and advocacy on key social issues in Tasmania.

You are only just keeping your head above water and they are coming down on you and pushing you under. That's how it goes. They sit on you and you drown. If that history wasn't there they would not have taken my son. It's all because of history. That should not define a person. Is it really that hard to believe that someone can endure what I've endured and still come out the other end? They are not praising me for how well I've done. They are putting me down for my history. You can't possibly be a parent, look at your history.

MARY

