



# Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study (POCLS)

## *'At a glance'*

(Updated October 2022)

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*The artist is a young person who grew up in care.*

*"The banner shows many pathways through the care system with a carer or caseworker acting as a guide, ultimately leading to independence for every young person. Whether we live with family or strangers, study, work, or just try our best, the paths we choose and are guided through in our youth are what we use to prepare ourselves for the happiest adulthood we can achieve" Billy Black*



# Acknowledgement

The POCLS acknowledges and honours Aboriginal people as our First Peoples of NSW and is committed to working with DCJ's Transforming Aboriginal Outcomes, and Ngaramanala (Aboriginal Knowledge Program), to ensure that Aboriginal children, families and communities are supported and empowered to improve their life outcomes. The POCLS data asset will be used to improve how services and supports are designed and delivered in partnership with Aboriginal people and communities.

DCJ recognises the importance of Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Indigenous Data Governance of all data related to Aboriginal Australians. The NSW Data Strategy (April 2021) includes the principles of Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Governance and provides provisions in regard to:

- Ensuring that our approach to data projects assesses the privacy, security and ethical impacts across the data lifecycle.
- Ensuring the controls are proportionate to the risks and that we consider community expectations and Indigenous Data Sovereignty.
- Guaranteeing a culture of trust between data providers and recipients, including Aboriginal people, through consistent and safe data sharing practices and effective data governance and stewardship.

A whole of government response to Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Indigenous Data Governance in NSW is being led by the Department of Premier and Cabinet and the Coalition of Aboriginal Peak Organisations. The POCLS will continue to collaborate with Aboriginal Peoples and will apply the policy principles once developed.



# What is the POCLS?

The Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study (POCLS) is the first, large-scale prospective longitudinal study of children and young people in out of home care (OOHC) in Australia.

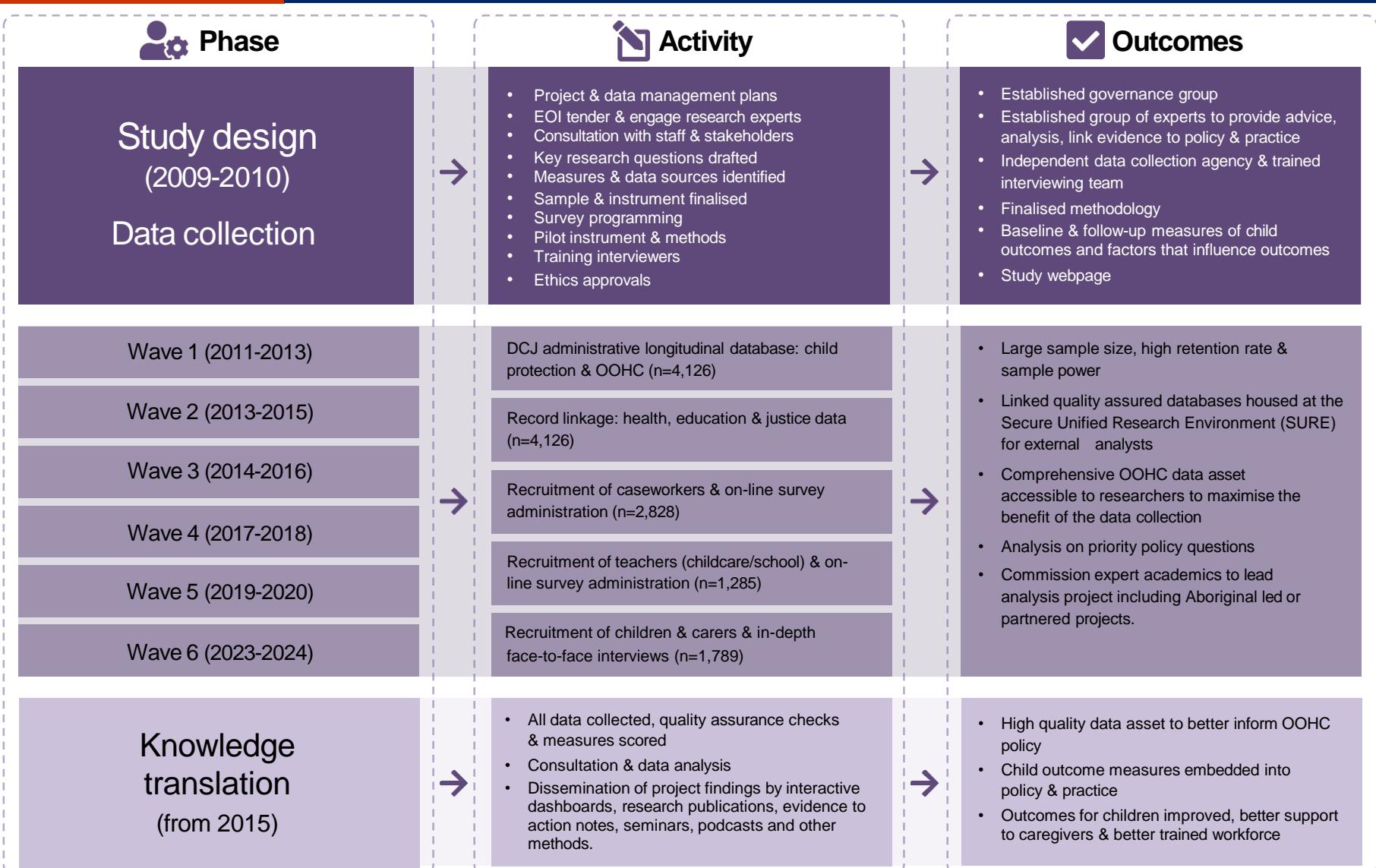
The study data collection commenced in 2011 and tracks the OOHC experiences and permanency outcomes of a population cohort of 4,126 children who entered care for the first time between May 2010 and October 2011 in order to understand factors influencing children's safety, permanency and wellbeing to inform policy, practice and improve the service system.

The POCLS is the first study to link child protection, health, education and offending administrative data for children in care with first hand accounts from children, caregivers, caseworkers and teachers in order to examine their experiences in OOHC and developmental pathways in the domains of safety, physical health, socio-emotional wellbeing and cognitive/language development.

The POCLS evidence base containing information collected directly from respondents and linked with administrative data will allow policy makers, front-line workers and researchers to see what works for children and young people entering care. They will be able to identify the risk factors that lead to poorer outcomes as well as the protective factors that mitigate these risks and result in improved outcomes.



# POCLS project phases





# POCLS study cohorts

## **Study population cohort**

Entered OOHC on interim orders May 2010-October 2011  
(n=4,126)

## **Final orders cohort**

Children's Court order by April 2013 (n=2,828)

## **Interview cohort**

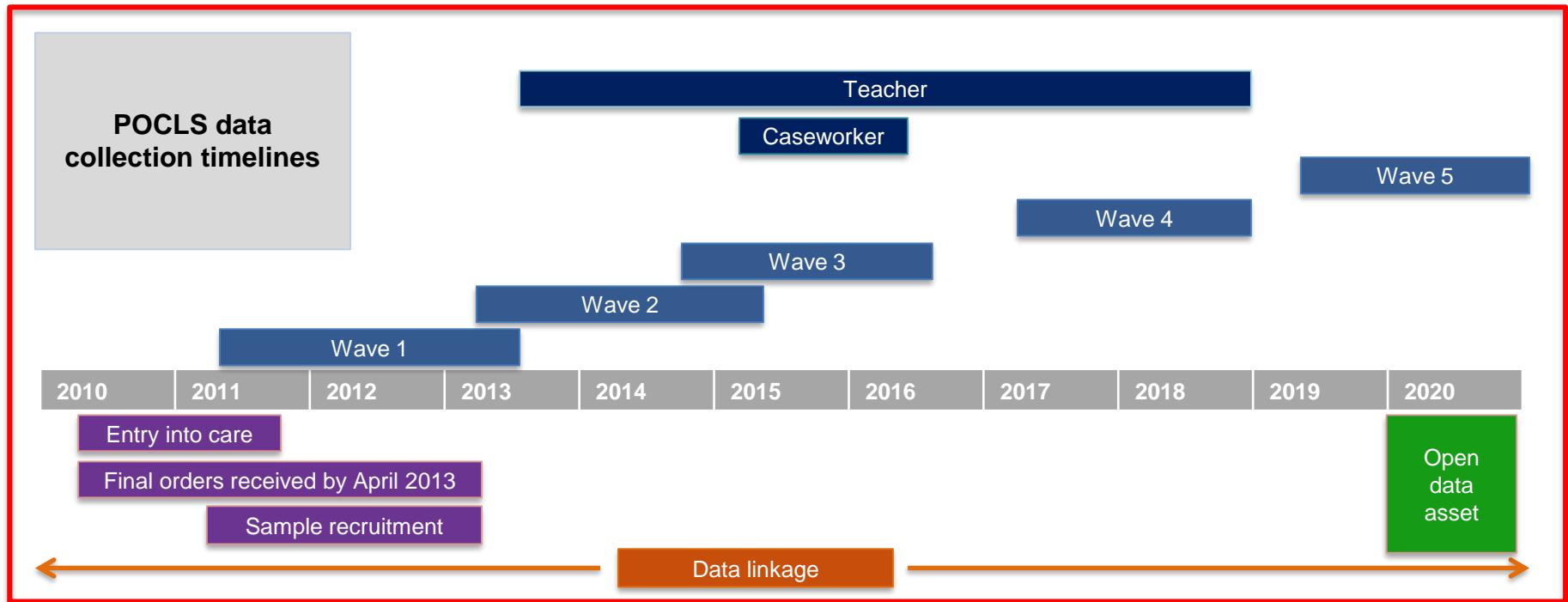
(n=1,789)

Children 0-17 years in long-term  
OOHC or exited to restoration,  
guardianship and adoption. An  
aftercare sub-study will track  
young people over 18 years.



# POCLS timelines

As with all prospective longitudinal studies, the evidence base becomes stronger and more robust as more waves of data are collected from the same cohort of children in the study. To date, 5 waves of data collection have been undertaken at 18-24 month intervals using in-depth face-to-face interviews with the caregivers of around 1,000 children who went on to receive final care and protection orders by April 2013 and agreed to participate in the survey. The POCLS has 10 years of in-depth data on children's OOHC experiences (including exits and re-entries) and developmental outcomes.



# POCLS interviews completed with the child and caregiver



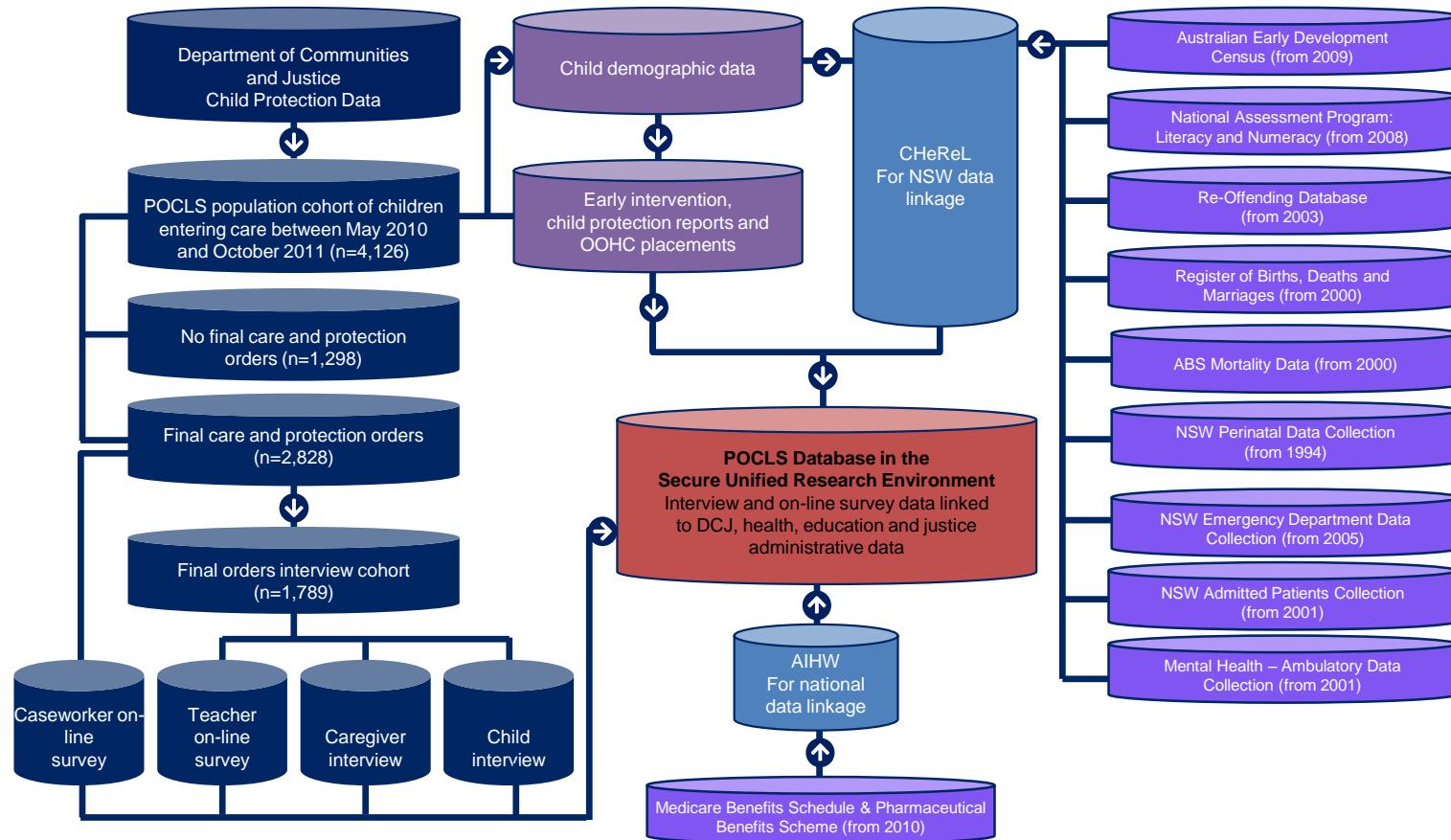
**Number of children who have participated in POCLS child and carer interviews by wave**

Wave 1	1,285
Wave 2	1,200
Wave 3	1,033
Wave 4	961
Wave 5	862
Participated in all waves from Wave 1 to Wave 5	623
Participated in at least one wave from Wave 1 to Wave 5	1,521

Over a third of the children in the interview cohort identify as Aboriginal and we have completed an interview with the child and/or their caregiver: 38.5% at Wave 1, 40.0% at Wave 2, 40.6% at Wave 3, 39.7% at Wave 4 and 40.5% at Wave 5.



# POCLS data asset flowchart





# POCLS data asset

The data asset created by the POCLS is of international and national significance and is likely to have greater explanatory power than other studies because of the large sample size and high retention rate across waves.

The breadth of information in the data asset is extensive and includes:

- Detailed information about the child including their physical health, socio-emotional well-being, cognitive development, how settled they are, temperament, activities and friends, education and work, services and supports, casework , and birth family contact.
- Detailed information about the caregiver including their relationship with the child, parenting style, carer experience and training, informal support network, casework support, satisfaction with being a carer, health/mental health, relationship with partner, finances and housing, and neighbourhood.
- Information from the caseworker about their current involvement, how well they know the child, placement and child needs, child's birth family, birth family contact and case planning.
- Information from the child's teacher (childcare, preschool or school) about the child's socio-emotional wellbeing, school attendance, education plans, progress with schoolwork, extra activities and friends.
- Details of child protection reports and OOHC placements.



# POCLS data asset (cont.)

- Perinatal information about mothers and babies.
- Information about presentations to the emergency departments of public hospitals in NSW.
- Information about all admitted patient services provided by NSW public hospitals.
- Information from the NSW Mental Health Ambulatory Data Collection which is dedicated to the assessment, treatment, rehabilitation or care of non-admitted patients. It may include mental health day programs, psychiatric outpatients and outreach services (e.g. home visits).
- Death and cause of death information.
- Information on subsidised services provided by doctors, specialists, optometrists, etc; and prescription drugs dispensed by approved suppliers (MBS; PBS).
- Information on contact with the juvenile justice system including offending and custodial sentences.
- Indicators of the children's development in their first year of full-time school using the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC).
- Details of educational performance using the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy, (NAPLAN), school suspensions and school attendance.



# Accessing the POCLS data asset

**Aggregated data** is available through:

- Wave Reports
- On-line interactive dashboards
- Statistical and research reports

**Unit record data** is available to approved researchers under strict controls to ensure the information is being used appropriately, and that the research is scientifically sound, feasible and answers important policy questions.

**Technical material** is available to assist in using and understanding the POCLS data. This includes questionnaires, data dictionaries and data use guides as well as papers on statistical power, selection bias and cross-sectional and longitudinal weighting.

For more information about access to the POCLS dataset, please see

[www.facs.nsw.gov.au/resources/research/seminars/chapters/july-2020-dcj-research-strategy-webinar](http://www.facs.nsw.gov.au/resources/research/seminars/chapters/july-2020-dcj-research-strategy-webinar).



# POCLS informing policy and practice

- The study provides unique, high-quality information about the wellbeing trajectories of children in OOHC. The value of this information increases with each subsequent wave. Wave 1 provided a baseline indication of children's socio-emotional wellbeing, cognitive/learning ability, safety and physical health at entry to OOHC. The addition of each wave provides information on children's pathways and the factors impacting on outcomes. The POCLS has collected 10 years of in-depth information on children's experiences and developmental outcomes (Waves 1-5).
- The results from the POCLS will inform changes in policy and practice regarding working with children in OOHC, improve investment decisions and improve the long-term outcomes of children.
- The use of standardised measures in the POCLS enables the comparison of outcomes for children and young people in care with those in the general population. For example, the POCLS uses the Child Behaviour Checklist (CBCL) to measure whether children are in the normal, borderline or clinical range in terms of their socio-emotional development. These results can then be compared to results for the general population.
- Outcomes for children who entered OOHC for the first time and then went on to receive final care and protection orders can also be compared with outcomes for children who did not receive final orders and returned home.



# POCLS informing policy and practice

- POCLS has created a world class longitudinal dataset and evidence base including research and statistical reports, evidence to action notes, journal articles and soon to be released interactive dashboards. In collaboration, FACSIAR analysts and 16 national and international leading academics have published, or are soon to publish, 34 research publications and 11 evidence to action notes. In 2023, a Special Issue on the POCLS will be published in the international journal Child Abuse and Neglect.
- The POCLS insights are disseminated to practitioners, policy makers and educators through conferences and FACSIAR's Lunch and Learn webinar series. This link takes you to information about future and past research seminars conducted by DCJ [www.facs.nsw.gov.au/resources/research/research-seminars](http://www.facs.nsw.gov.au/resources/research/research-seminars)
- To translate the new knowledge and support evidence informed policy development and practice innovation, the POCLS team work with the POCLS governance groups. In 2022, five evidence to action roundtables enabled the lead researchers and members of the POCLS Advisory Group and Evidence to Action Working Group to discuss the key insights emerging from the Study.



# POCLS emerging themes

POCLS has found that child development is positively associated with:

- Placement stability, noting caregiver satisfaction in their caring role and feeling supported by caseworkers can prevent placement breakdown
- Relative/kinship care placements, noting there is a 'selection' effect - children placed in relative/kinship care tend to have fewer problems from the outset
- Cultural connections for Aboriginal children through socialising with their birth communities, noting an improvement in cultural identity and cultural activities overtime
- Family time with both or at least one parent, noting children in relative/kinship care are more likely to have contact with family across all waves and that children in all placement types need more frequent or consistent time with their mother and father, and particularly with siblings
- Children being very happy living in their current home, having carers who were emotionally responsive, warm and non-hostile (in terms of parenting style).



# Future investment in the POCLS

- As with all prospective longitudinal studies, the evidence base becomes stronger and more robust as more waves of data are collected from the same cohort of children in the study. More waves of data will allow greater exploration of cause and effect over a child's experience in OOHC and permanency pathways.
- Sub-studies on cohorts of interest, such as young people leaving care, are planned.
- The study design, ongoing review, consultation and subject expert advisors ensure the study continues to maximise rigour and policy relevance.
- The knowledge gained and the value added by continuing the study has enormous potential to inform policy and practice; and understand the long-term trajectories of children and critical intervention points.
- For more information about the POCLS please see the POCLS Technical Report 1: Study objectives and strategic research agenda  
[www.facs.nsw.gov.au/download?file=778733](http://www.facs.nsw.gov.au/download?file=778733)



# POCLS governance framework

The POCLS collaborative governance framework includes experts from DCJ, universities, other government and non-government agencies:

- **Chief Investigator** is responsible for leading the POCLS and ensuring that the overall conduct of the POCLS aligns with the ethics approvals granted.
- **DCJ Executive Board** reviews the POCLS progress and strategic research agenda twice a year.
- **Study Management Group** were responsible for the internal strategic management and coordination of the study during the establishment stage 2008- 2010.
- **Study Working Group** was established in 2011, meets quarterly and is responsible for design, implementation, scientific input and analysis.
- **Study Advisory Group** was established in 2017, meets up to twice a year and is responsible for providing high level advice and direction, identifying key policy and practice questions, review insights and applications to policy and practice.
- **Study Evidence to Action Working Group** was established in 2019 and meets as research reports are finalised to ensure key insights are captured in recommendations to improve policy and practice and provide advice on knowledge translation.
- **Aboriginal Governance Panel** is being established for the POCLS to strengthen the existing governance structures and processes so that Aboriginal community members and stakeholders are better engaged as equal research partners in all aspects of the Study.



# POCLS ethics approval

## **Human Research Ethics Committee**

University of New South Wales HREC (HC 210985).

## **Aboriginal Ethics Committee**

Aboriginal Health & Medical Research Council (AH&MRC) of NSW Ethics Committee (766/10).

## **NSW Population & Health Services Research Ethics Committee**

(HREC/14/CIPHS/74 and Cancer Institute New South Wales 2014/12/570).

## **Australian Institute for Health and Welfare (AIHW) Ethics Committee**

(EO2019-1-406).

## **NSW Department of Education**

State Education Research Applications Process (SERAP) (2012260).

## **NSW Catholic Education Office Sydney and relevant dioceses.**



# Further information

Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study team:

- Phone: 1800 997 960
- Email: [Pathways@facs.nsw.gov.au](mailto:Pathways@facs.nsw.gov.au)

Study information and publication clearinghouse:

- POCLS Webpage:  
[www.facs.nsw.gov.au/resources/research/pathways-of-care](http://www.facs.nsw.gov.au/resources/research/pathways-of-care)