



New ANROWS report on links between child protection, domestic and family violence, alcohol and other drug issues and mental health issues

What is the report about?

Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety (ANROWS) has released a new report [Critical interpretive synthesis: Child protection involvement for families with domestic and family violence, alcohol and other drug issues, and mental health issues](#).

The report presents the findings of a critical interpretive synthesis of literature from Australia and overseas, on the intersections of domestic and family violence (DFV), alcohol and other drug issues (AOD) and mental health issues in the context of child protection. It concludes that further evidence is needed about how DFV, AOD and mental health interact with one another; how they operate at micro, meso and macro levels; and how they interact with broader factors to increase the risk of poorer child outcomes. The report was produced by a team of six researchers from the University of Sydney.



The report is the first stage of a project which aims to inform the use of a public health model that can reduce risk and enhance protective factors at individual, family and community levels for children and families with intersecting DFV, AOD and mental health risk factors.

What do we know about the links between child protection, domestic and family violence, alcohol and other drug issues and mental health?

The report finds there is evidence that DFV, AOD and mental health often occur together in reports of child abuse or neglect, and the reporting of DFV, AOD and mental health is often associated with involvement in the child protection system. However, there is insufficient research in the Australian context examining the relationship between these three factors and child protection involvement, and there are limitations in the existing evidence base.

What are the limitations of existing evidence on the prevalence and impacts of these risks and issues in child protection?

The report finds that across the reviewed literature, there is a lack of:

- consistency and specificity in key terminology used
- nuanced understandings of the correlations between risk factors and outcomes
- theory and concepts to understand how DFV, AOD and mental health interact
- consistency in how measurement tools are used across studies

- analysis of how DFV, AOD and mental health interact with broader socio-economic, demographic and contextual factors
- robust empirical research from Australian jurisdictions

What does the report say about the Australian child protection system?

The report suggests that tertiary intervention involving removal of children to out of home care does not address underlying DFV, AOD and mental health issues for individuals, families and communities. These issues are likely to continue (e.g. due to long waiting times for DFV, AOD and mental health services) and may hamper family reunification. The current model of risk assessment is an individualised, deficit-oriented model which risks stigmatising and marginalising families who are, or are at risk of being, in contact with the child protection system.

What can be done to address these challenges?

The report highlights the need for further evidence about how DFV, AOD and mental health interact with one another and with broader factors to increase the risk of poorer child outcomes. It also calls for a shift away from reactive strategies based in tertiary child protection to proactive, primary prevention that aims to reduce risk factors and enhance protective factors. This could be achieved through a public health model that positions DFV, AOD and mental health (alongside other risk and protective factors) at individual, family and community levels, and offers early intervention through a large suite of services cross-cutting child welfare, juvenile justice, mental health and education systems.

What's next?

The report is Stage 1 of the ANROWS-funded project [Analysis of linked longitudinal administrative data on child protection involvement for NSW families with domestic and family violence, alcohol and other drug issues and mental health issues](#). Stage 2 aims to produce population statistics on the links between DFV, AOD, mental health and child protection involvement using the NSW Human Services Dataset.

How was the study carried out?



The research was guided by the question: How and to what extent are the social determinants of statutory child protection involvement, DFV, AOD and mental health reflected in the literature? The researchers developed sub-questions to guide a critical appraisal of the literature, covering the ways risk factors of DFV, AOD and mental health are presented in the literature, other factors considered to co-occur with these risk factors, and the theoretical perspectives used to understand these factors.

The researchers performed a critical interpretive synthesis to assess the evidence base. They used systematic review techniques to search academic research literature in 11 databases, and grey literature in eight databases and the NSW Department of Communities and Justice website. This resulted in 1,370 citations. Duplicates were removed and exclusion criteria applied. The remaining 45 articles report on research from the US (15), Australia (13), UK (9), Canada (5), Japan (1), Germany (1) and New Zealand (1).

The team of six researchers created a data extraction form to record key information. They divided articles between the researchers, and two researchers read, analysed and extracted data independently. All six researchers carried out qualitative thematic analysis of the literature, coded the data then reread the articles to generate categories iteratively. They summarised the data, and identified themes and relationships across the group.



Produced by

Strategy and Evidence
 Family and Community Services Insights Analysis and Research (FACSIAR)
 NSW Department of Communities and Justice
www.dcj.nsw.gov.au
 Email: facsiar@dcj.nsw.gov.au