

# Review shows child protection services need further work

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Credit: University of Otago

One of the first academic and independent reviews of the Government's direction on child protection services has raised fundamental concerns that the study author, Otago University's Dr Emily Keddell, says need addressing.

The aims of the reforms need to be broadened from the "economically oriented" to the "socially oriented" and to a more holistic goal of [child](#) and family wellbeing, her commentary, on the Government's Child Youth and Family Review, commissioned by AUT's Policy Observatory, recommends.

Dr Keddell, a senior social work lecturer at Otago, focuses specifically in the report on recent and proposed further Government changes aimed at preventing child abuse and neglect.

Examining the Vulnerable Child Reforms of 2011-2014, and more recently, the creation of the new Ministry for Vulnerable Children Oranga Tamariki, she finds that while some of the reforms are still in the design phase, "hints" provided so far indicate the Government may not be on the right track.

"There are multiple points of tension between the details of the proposed reforms, the nature of the problem and child protection systems design," she says.

Dr Keddell writes that causes of abuse have been "individualistically" framed, downplaying key evidence about the relationship between child abuse and the broader social and economic context.

"Child abuse and neglect has a range of well-established relationships with social inequalities, poverty and community factors not addressed in the policy proposals," Dr Keddell writes.

She also questions whether the Government's faith in market mechanisms to deliver required prevention services through third party contractors (reducing the role of the state) is overstated.

"Market drivers of supply, demand and profit are unlikely to be responsive to the range and complexity of human problems encountered.....it also leaves key responsibilities of the state up to third party contractors to deliver."

Dr Keddell adds that the new "social investment approach" – to reduce re-notifications of child abuse, future welfare payments and criminal justice liability - could create "perverse incentives" for not-for-profit organisations involved in child abuse prevention. This could lead to children not being notified to Oranga Tamariki for suspected abuse or neglect if a reduction in notifications is linked to a non-Government

organisation's contract.

"In the [child protection](#) context, a market approach to service provision could have the same result: providers might target only those most amenable to cost-effective improvements, whereas those deemed the most high and low-risk miss out.

"Market mechanisms might not, therefore, have the desired impact. Families who find themselves without service provision may proceed rapidly to child removal, reducing opportunities for support and change."

The aims of this approach need to be broadened from the "economically oriented" to the "socially oriented" and the more holistic aim of child and family wellbeing.

Plans for a central 'point of accountability' to locate high risk individuals could create a "lengthy centralised assessment process" that creates barriers to service access. If probabilistic risks alone are used at this point to determine service access, this could exclude some needy people while including those who don't need a service, exacerbated by the potential for limited resourcing. Pathways to services should be easy and non-stigmatising.

Centralising data relies on widespread sharing and linking of personal information that could also lead to [service](#) disengagement by families or individuals. Information sharing is often justified by child deaths, but:

"Preventing child deaths by this method is not borne out by the large numbers of people who will be affected, in relation to the tiny percentage of serious harm cases."

She adds that when all of these "tensions" combine with a stronger imperative in the CYF Review to remove children earlier and place them

in permanent care arrangements, there could be a "child rescue" approach that could lead to children being removed unnecessarily.

This approach would "overstate the benefits of foster care despite mixed evidence about its outcomes." This also downplays the harm caused by child removal itself, and diminishes the importance of family, whanau, iwi and community relationships.

Dr Keddell's report says: "...nowhere is the reality of parenting within resource-poor contexts taken into account, nor the damage of removal to children acknowledged. Foster care, while at times necessary, is not a panacea."

As Maori are over-represented in child-welfare systems-contact, "all of these points will have disproportionate effects on whanau and hapu Māori.

She recommends that the Government takes a more holistic view of prevention, such as addressing the known causes of child [abuse](#) and neglect across the whole social spectrum.

"This report argues for shifting the emphasis away from treating problem individuals or families, and narrow focus on the prevention of [child abuse](#), to the provision of a broad policy landscape that promotes wellbeing."

Provided by University of Otago

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