



ACT Children & Young People Death Review Committee

CHANGING THE NARRATIVE FOR VULNERABLE CHILDREN: STRENGTHENING ACT SYSTEMS

This research brief is a summary of key findings from the ACT Children and Young People Death Review Committee Report *Changing the Narrative for Vulnerable Children: Strengthening ACT Systems*.

The full report is available at: childdeathcommittee.act.gov.au

Key Insights

- Within the ACT, there are approximately 30 deaths each year for children aged 0-17 years. The majority of these are children under the age of one.
- Many factors contribute to the death of a child and the inability to accurately predict child death for many children makes prevention challenging.
- Premature infants or those with low birth weight are particularly vulnerable.
- The majority of children in this review experienced multiple risk factors in their lives prior to their death.
- The three most frequently reported risk factors were poor physical health, problematic parental alcohol, drug and tobacco use and poor parent mental health.
- Domestic and family violence, unstable housing and low income were also factors in the lives of half of the children in this review.

Focus on children 0-3 years

The Committee reviewed 11 children aged 0-3 years who had died in the ACT prior to 2014. All cases were subject to a closed coronial inquiry, with the cause of death for the majority of children determined by the Coroner as unascertained or undetermined.

The Committee considered 16 key risk factors evident in the lives of children prior to their death. Risk factors can be defined as the measurable circumstances, conditions and events that increase the probability that a child will have poor outcomes in the future. Risk factors are often interrelated and intersect at multiple levels. This fact sheet provides a short summary about the risk factors experienced by these children prior to their death.

Contacts

The full report and a fact sheet outlining the practice implications is available from our website. The Committee is keen to receive feedback from interested ACT residents.

Web www.childdeathcommittee.act.gov.au

Email Childdeathcommittee@act.gov.au

General inquires 02 6205 2949

For more information on services to assist families contact OneLink.

Phone 1800 176 468 (free call)

Web www.onelink.org.au

In person Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm at Housing ACT, Corner of Emu Bank & Benjamin Way, Belconnen.

To make a child concern report contact Child and Youth Protection Services.

Phone 1300 556 729

Email childprotection@act.gov.au

CHANGING THE NARRATIVE FOR VULNERABLE CHILDREN: STRENGTHENING ACT SYSTEMS

KEY FINDINGS

Individual risk factors:

- pregnancy and birth factors
- poor child health
- unsafe sleeping environments

Although young children are not responsible for their health or any harm inflicted upon them, certain characteristics may increase their vulnerability, including age, ethnicity and gender. In this review:

- three quarters of children were from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds
- the majority of children were under the age of one year.
- approximately half experienced physical conditions that compromised their health at birth and before their death, including colds, ear infections, breathing difficulties and runny stools.
- three quarters of children had co-slept with parents. Parents who co-slept with their children were found to have a high Body Mass Index and used alcohol and tobacco,

Parental risk factors

- domestic and family violence
- illicit drug and problematic alcohol use
- parental child protection history
- current child protection intervention
- criminal activity
- poor family relationships
- disability
- mental illness
- poor physical health

A key feature of the environments in which children develop is the ability of parents and caregivers to provide protection and support to their children. The co-existence of multiple parental risk factors was evident for more than half of the families in this review.

Children experienced a range of risk factors, irrespective of socio-economic status and service engagement. These risk factors were also evident in the lives of many of the families prior to the birth of child and frequently remained in the lives of subject children in the lead up to their death.

Parental risk factors evident in families included parental drug and alcohol use, mental and physical health concerns, parental history of child protection services and parent relationships with high conflict and/or family and domestic violence present.

Half of the sample had current involvement with child protection services. Half of the sample included parents who were known to corrective services for their involvement with the police and/or juvenile and adult corrective services.

Socio-economic and community risk factors

- economic disadvantage
- inadequate housing
- limited service engagement
- poor social support

Community and socio-economic risk factors included limited social supports, poverty and disadvantage and unstable housing. **Families in this review had lower levels of social support at the time of the child's death.** In two thirds of the cases, families identified feeling socially excluded or isolated.

Stable and secure housing was identified as particularly problematic for families. There were a wide range of situations that increased a child's vulnerability including:

- frequent moves between houses,
- over crowding,
- low and high indoor temperatures (related to poverty),
- squalid conditions such as mould and fleas.