

Infant Removals and Early Parenthood: What the Evidence Shows and What Remains Unresolved

Synthesis for the Turning Point Academic Seminar

This synthesis draws together the current research base on infant removals, early parenthood following out-of-home care, and prenatal child protection involvement. It is intended to support discussion at the Turning Point Academic Seminar and the symposium discussions that follow.

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March 2026

Why this seminar, and why now

The Turning Point Symposium brings together researchers, practitioners, policy leaders, philanthropy and parents with lived experience to examine one of the most consequential questions currently facing child and family systems: how we respond to infants and young parents during pregnancy and the earliest stages of life.

The **Pre-symposium Academic Seminar** has a specific role within that broader conversation. The seminar focuses on clarifying what the current research base shows, where the evidence converges strongly, and where important questions remain unresolved.

Over the past decade, the body of research examining infant child protection involvement, pre-birth reporting and early parenthood following out-of-home care has expanded considerably. Population-level linkage studies, qualitative research with parents, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led scholarship and evaluations of selected programs have together produced a clearer picture of the issue than was available even a few years ago.

At a high level, the literature is strikingly consistent in its diagnosis. Researchers across disciplines describe increasing infant involvement with child protection systems, elevated risk for children of care-experienced parents, and persistent over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander infants in out-of-home care.

Far less clarity exists around which responses reliably alter these trajectories. The research base documents the scale and patterns of the problem in considerable detail, while evidence regarding the comparative effectiveness of interventions and system responses remains much thinner.

This seminar therefore begins from a different starting point. The existence and scale of the issue are well established. The focus now turns to how the field responds to the evidence that already exists.

The following summarises the major areas of convergence in the literature and highlight several tensions that appear repeatedly across research, policy analysis and lived experience accounts. The aim is to provide a shared evidence foundation for the conversations that follow. This synthesis draws on a curated corpus of academic and sector publications assembled for the symposium. The literature was interrogated using structured research tools to identify areas of convergence and unresolved questions

Converging evidence across the research

To support readability, this synthesis does not use in-text citations. A selection of key articles that informed the synthesis is provided at the end of the document for participants who wish to explore the research in greater depth. Please reach out if you would like references for any specific point.

Across the research base several patterns appear consistently

- Infant involvement with child protection systems continues to rise
- Prenatal reporting has become a major pathway into system involvement
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander infants are removed at higher rates
- Intergenerational transmission of child protection involvement is substantial
- Care-experienced young parents face elevated risk and heightened scrutiny

Infant involvement with child protection systems continues to rise

Across the literature, infants now represent the age group with the highest rates of child protection notification, substantiation and entry into out-of-home care. Prenatal notifications affect a measurable proportion of pregnancies and increasingly serve as a pathway into child protection systems

Research following children reported during pregnancy shows high rates of subsequent contact with child protection services in the first years of life. A substantial proportion of these children enter out-of-home care before age two. Removal can occur very early in the child's life, including cases where infants are removed directly from maternity settings. Together these findings describe a system engaging with families at increasingly early stages of pregnancy and infancy.

Prenatal reporting has become a major pathway into child protection systems

Research across jurisdictions shows increasing use of prenatal reporting as an entry point for child protection involvement. Families reported during pregnancy often experience multiple overlapping pressures including family violence, substance use, mental health concerns and prior system contact. Prenatal reporting strongly predicts later involvement with child protection services. A large proportion of children reported before birth experience further contact during infancy, and many enter out-of-home care during the early years of life. These findings highlight pregnancy as a critical point of system engagement with families.

At the same time, the literature raises questions about the quality and effectiveness of responses following prenatal reports. Parents frequently describe confusing processes, limited communication and uncertainty regarding their rights and expectations. These accounts highlight the importance of examining how early system engagement during pregnancy translates into practical support for families.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander infant removals remain a critical concern

The literature consistently identifies the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander infants as one of the most urgent issues within Australian child protection systems. Aboriginal children enter out-of-home care at dramatically higher rates than non-Indigenous children, with infants representing a substantial proportion of these removals.

Aboriginal-led research situates these patterns within a longer history of state intervention and intergenerational trauma. Scholars highlight the ways in which current policies, service responses and structural conditions contribute to continued family separation. These studies emphasise that culturally grounded, Aboriginal-led approaches provide important pathways for supporting families and strengthening connections between children, family, community and culture.

Intergenerational transmission of child protection involvement is substantial

Longitudinal research provides strong evidence of intergenerational patterns in child protection involvement. Children whose mothers experienced maltreatment or child protection intervention during childhood face sharply elevated risks of further contact with the system. Risk increases further when maternal histories include both substantiated maltreatment and periods spent in out-of-home care.

These patterns rarely reflect a single factor. The literature consistently shows clustering of risk conditions within families reported to child protection services during pregnancy. Intimate partner violence, substance use, mental health challenges and earlier child protection histories often appear together. Studies examining prenatal reporting cohorts demonstrate that many families experience several of these pressures simultaneously.

Care-experienced young parents face elevated risk and heightened scrutiny

A substantial body of research examines young parents who themselves grew up in out-of-home care. Across studies, young women with care experience become parents at higher rates than their peers, with Australian research reporting birth rates between two and four times higher than comparison populations. Their children also face significantly increased odds of removal. Studies comparing groups of mothers show higher rates of child protection intervention for children of care-experienced mothers than for children of mothers with child protection contact alone.

The literature also describes the conditions in which early parenthood occurs for this group. Care-experienced young parents frequently navigate pregnancy and early parenting alongside disrupted family networks, limited transition support, housing instability and social isolation. Several studies highlight surveillance bias, with parents who have prior child protection histories experiencing greater monitoring by services. Parents repeatedly identify trusted relationships, practical assistance and authentic social support as the most valuable forms of support during early parenthood.

Where the evidence remains thin

Limited evidence on intervention effectiveness

The literature provides extensive insight into the drivers of infant child protection involvement. Far less evidence exists regarding which interventions reliably alter trajectories for families during pregnancy and early parenthood.

Several promising approaches appear in the literature, including intensive home visitation programs, strengths-based family conferencing models and Aboriginal-led early support initiatives. Evaluations report improvements in family functioning and parenting confidence in some cases. Comparative evidence across program models remains limited, leaving uncertainty about which responses most effectively prevent infant removals.

Measurement and data limitations

Researchers frequently highlight limitations in the way child protection data is collected and reported. Reporting practices vary across jurisdictions, particularly in relation to prenatal notifications and early child protection involvement. These differences make national comparisons difficult and limit the ability to track trends consistently across Australia.

Measurement challenges also appear in research examining care-experienced young parents. Several studies identify surveillance bias, where parents already known to child protection systems experience greater levels of monitoring than other families. This complicates interpretation of system involvement rates and raises questions about the extent to which observed patterns reflect risk or system scrutiny.

Limited incorporation of parental perspectives

Parents' perspectives remain under-represented in research examining child protection involvement during pregnancy and infancy. Although qualitative work with parents has increased in recent years, several authors note that parental experiences continue to receive limited attention across the evidence base.

Where parents' perspectives are included, studies highlight issues such as unclear processes, limited communication from services and uncertainty regarding rights and expectations during investigations. Expanding participatory and parent-informed research approaches will be important for strengthening the evidence base.

Limited longitudinal evidence

Many studies provide detailed snapshots of child protection involvement during pregnancy and early childhood. Far fewer follow families over longer periods. This limits understanding of how different system responses influence outcomes for children and families over time, including family preservation, reunification and longer-term developmental trajectories.

Participation and co-design remain underdeveloped

The literature reflects growing emphasis on participation, lived experience and co-design. In practice, most examples remain at the level of consultation, where parents and young people share their experiences but have limited influence on decisions, service design or system responses. Stronger examples exist where people with lived experience contribute to research design or intervention development, though these examples remain uncommon.

Several studies also highlight structural constraints, including fear of child protection involvement and existing power imbalances, which limit how genuine participation is experienced. Taken together, the literature suggests that participation is often positioned alongside the system rather than shaping it. In many cases, what is described as co-design remains closer to consultation.

Points for reflection ahead of the academic seminar

The academic seminar is intended as a working conversation rather than a series of presentations. The aim is to examine where the evidence converges, where it remains uncertain, and what this means for practice, policy and research. Participants may wish to consider several questions as preparation for the discussion:

Across the research base, there is strong evidence regarding the scale and drivers of infant child protection involvement. Which areas of the evidence feel most settled, and which areas continue to generate uncertainty in practice and policy?

The literature highlights prenatal reporting as a significant pathway into child protection systems. What opportunities exist to ensure that system engagement during pregnancy strengthens support for families rather than intensifying surveillance?

Research examining care-experienced young parents consistently identifies the importance of trusted relationships, practical support and social connection. How can systems respond to these needs in ways that strengthen parenting capacity while maintaining child safety?

How are best interest principles currently interpreted in practice when working with young parents and infants, and what would it look like to more fully recognise participatory rights within those processes, particularly in ways that shape decisions and service design?

Across multiple studies, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander scholars and practitioners emphasise the importance of culturally grounded, community-led responses. What lessons from these approaches offer broader insight into how systems can work more effectively with families during pregnancy and early parenthood?

The literature also highlights gaps in the evaluation of interventions and in the consistency of measurement across programs and jurisdictions. What forms of research, evaluation and data collection would most strengthen the evidence base over the coming decade?

Participants who wish to share reflections or raise issues ahead of the seminar are invited to do so via the link below. Responses are anonymous and provide an opportunity to help shape the discussion during the academic day. >insert link and QR code<

Key articles

The following articles represent several of the core contributions within the research base summarised in this synthesis. Participants may wish to review these in advance of the academic seminar.

- Chamberlain, C., Gray, P., Bennet, D., Elliott, A., Jackomos, M., Krakouer, J., et al. (2022). *Supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families to stay together from the start (SAFeST Start): Urgent call to action to address crisis in infant removals*. Australian Journal of Social Issues, 57(2), 252–273.
- Gill, A., & Luu, B. (2025). *A population-based analysis of birth rates and placement patterns among care-experienced young women in New South Wales, Australia*. Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal.
- O'Donnell, M., Lima, F., Maclean, M., Marriott, R., & Taplin, S. (2023). *Infant and pre-birth involvement with child protection across Australia*. Child Maltreatment, 28(4), 608–620.
- Purtell, J., Mendes, P., & Saunders, B. J. (2021). *Where is the village? Care leaver early parenting, social isolation and surveillance bias*. International Journal on Child Maltreatment: Research, Policy and Practice, 4(3), 349–371.
- Purtell, J., & Morris, S. (2025). *Care leavers into parenthood: Support needs and effective practice approaches through transitions from care*. Australian Journal of Social Issues.
- Trew, S., Taplin, S., O'Donnell, M., Marriott, R., & Broadhurst, K. (2022). *Parents' experiences with child protection during pregnancy and post-birth*. Child & Family Social Work, 28(2), 549–562.
- Wise, S., & Corrales, T. (2023). *Discussion of the knowns and unknowns of child protection during pregnancy in Australia*. Australian Social Work, 76(2), 173–185.
- Wise, S., King, J., Sleight, J., Omerogullari, S., Samuels, L., Morris, A., & Skeen, T. (2024). *An Aboriginal-led systemic solution to Aboriginal baby removals in Australia: Development of the Bringing Up Aboriginal Babies at Home program*. Children and Youth Services Review, 161.