

SOUTH AUSTRALIA'S CHILD PROTECTION SERVICES

BRIEFING PAPER

Overview of data trends from the Report on
Government Services (2025)

MARCH 2025



About SACOSS

The South Australian Council of Social Service (SACOSS) is the peak body for non-government health and community services in South Australia, and has a vision of justice, opportunity, and shared wealth for all South Australians.

Our mission is to be a voice that leads and supports our community to take actions that achieve our vision, and to hold to account governments, businesses, and communities for actions that disadvantage South Australians.

SACOSS aims to influence public policy in a way that promotes fair and just access to the goods and services required to live a decent life. We undertake research to help inform community service practice, advocacy, and campaigning. We have more than 75 years' experience of social and economic policy and advocacy work that addresses issues impacting people experiencing poverty and disadvantage.

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the traditional lands of the Kurna people and acknowledge the Kurna people as the custodians of the Adelaide region and the Greater Adelaide Plains. We acknowledge the traditional custodians of lands beyond Adelaide and the Adelaide Plains and pay our respects to Elders past and present. We pay our respects to the cultural authority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, organisations and colleagues and recognise the cultural expertise that they hold.

Contact

For further information regarding this Briefing Paper, please contact:

Ross Womersley, CEO of SACOSS

Ross@sacoss.org.au

47 King William Road Unley, SA, 5061 Australia

Ph (08) 8305 4222

Email: sacoss@sacoss.org.au

Website: www.sacoss.org.au

Title: *Briefing Paper – South Australia's Child Protection Services: Overview of data trends from the Report on Government Services (2025)*

Published by the South Australian Council of Social Service, March 2025. © South Australian Council of Social Service, 2025.

Introduction

There has been considerable attention focused on South Australia's child protection system over the past year, more especially as a result of the Review of the *Children and Young People (Safety) Act 2017* and the proposed Bill.

The high proportional expenditure on care services has long been raised as a concern by many experts and child sector organisations. The persistent insufficient focus and low spending on family support and protective intervention services ultimately results in more young people living in out-of-home-care (OOHC), when they and their families could otherwise have been supported to remain together or work towards reunification.

The evidence is clear that expenditure directed to the tertiary end of child protection and in placing children in OOHC has knock-on effects throughout children's lives and results in increasing pressures on social services. The data we have analysed from this latest *Report on Government Services – Child Protection*¹ accentuates the need for active efforts to be made to focus, wherever possible, on children and their families' best interests and keeping them together.

Summary of key findings

Expenditure on child protection services

- SA spends nearly \$1billion annually on child protection services and expenditure has increased every year since 2019-2020
- Most spending is allocated to out of home care and supported placements (with 60% of spending on residential care services)
- SA spends more per child than every other state (excluding the NT)

Notifications

- Of the nearly 40,000 notifications to DCP in 2023-24, 9% were substantiated
- Half of investigations commenced within 7 days and were completed within 28 days

Children in care

- 12 out of every 1000 SA children were in out of home care in 2023-24
- Half of children in out of home care were in the care of relatives/kinship carers
- The proportion of children in home-based care has continued to decline since 2019
- Children in residential care represent 17.3% of all children in out-of-home care
- More than one in three children had been in care for more than 5 years when they exited
- The longer children are in care, the more placement instability they experience
- In 2023-24, one in 25 children in out of home care experienced sexual, physical, emotional abuse or neglect while in care

Aboriginal children and young people in the care system

- Despite constituting approximately 5.5% of the total child population in SA, Aboriginal children comprised 39% of all children in OOHC in 2023-24
- Only 60% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were being placed according to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle in 2024
- Aboriginal children are disproportionately represented in every component of the care system.

¹ Productivity Commission (2025) Report on Government Services (ROGS) at <https://www.pc.gov.au/ongoing/report-on-government-services/2025/community-services/child-protection>

What does the data tell us?

This Briefing Paper provides an overview of the key Child Protection data sets and trends in the latest Productivity Commission’s Report on Government Services (ROGS) for 2025. We consider how government expenditure on child protection services impacts on the nature and quality of care and support for children and young people and their families.

We appraise South Australia’s child protection system to determine whether the evidence shows it is making active efforts to focus its resources and programs towards early intervention and prevention. We assess the success of the system in supporting and keeping children and young people in their families and communities and out of state care, as well as the nature and quality of care provided to children and young people who have been separated from their families.

Child Protection Expenditure

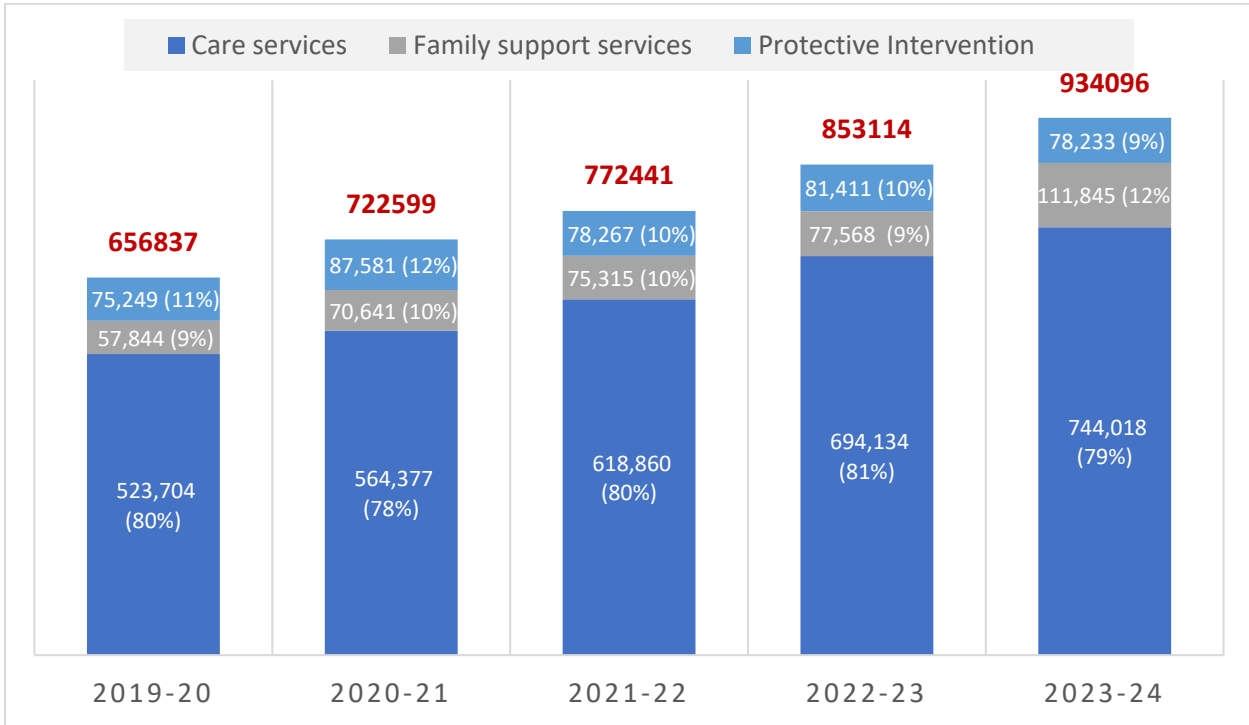
South Australia spends nearly \$1 billion annually on child protection services

In 2023-24 South Australia spent \$934 million on child protection services² (Figure 1).

Spending on child protection services has increased every year since 2019-20

Since 2019-20 real expenditure (i.e. adjusted to 2023-24 prices) has increased by 42% - from \$657 million to \$934 million. In just the last 12 months total recurrent expenditure increased by another \$80 million - an increase of 9.5%.

Figure 1: Real Expenditure Child Protection Services South Australia (\$,000)



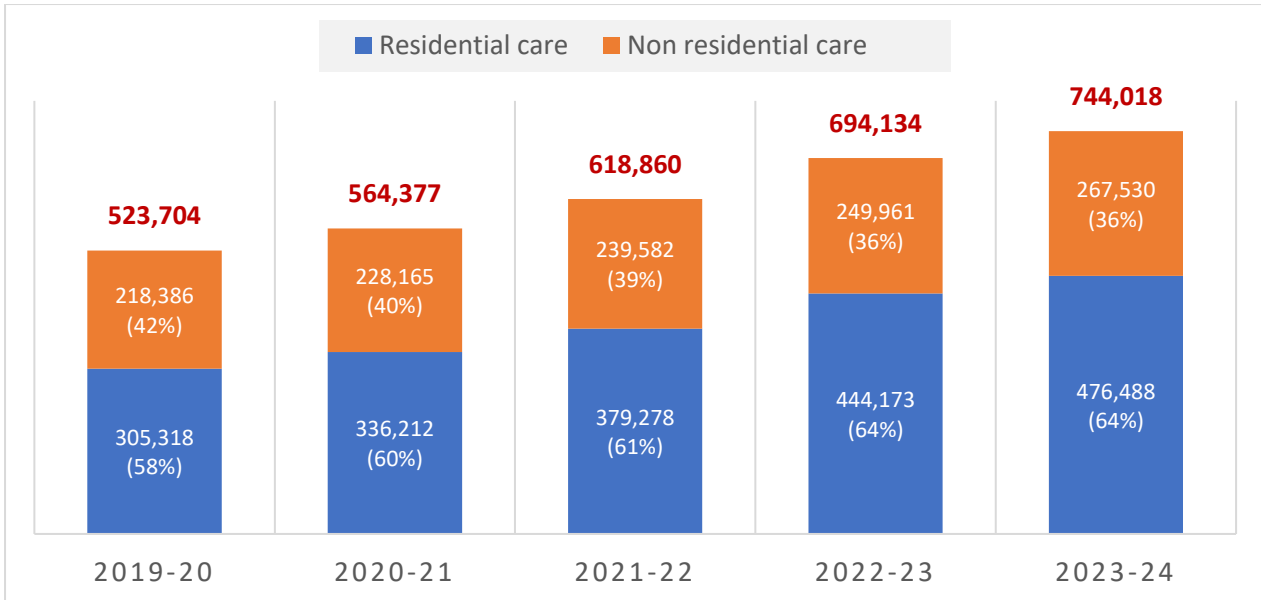
Source: ROGS (2025) Tables 16A.8 and 16A.29

² Child protection services includes family support services (intensive and generic), protective intervention, and care services (out-of-home-care and other supported placements).

Most spending is allocated to out of home care and supported placements

Care Services account for around 80% of recurrent expenditure. Over the past 5 years spending on care services has increased every year - from \$520m in 2019 to \$744m in 2024 (Figure 2). The proportion of the care services budget allocated to residential care has been growing every year since 2019-20 from 58% to 64%, while the proportion of spending on non-residential care has declined from 42% to 36%

Figure 2: Real Expenditure Care Services South Australia (\$,000)



Source: ROGS (2025) Table 16A.37

Spending on family support services has been growing

Compared to spending on care services, spending on family support services has typically accounted for only about 10% of overall child protection expenditure. However, since 2021-22 there has been a substantive increase in spending on family support services from \$75m to \$112m.

In 2023-24 the proportion of total expenditure spent on care services was 79% - a drop of around 2% from the previous year, while family support services accounted for 12% of expenditure - an increase of around 3%, suggesting a possible shift in priorities toward more preventive and early intervention services.

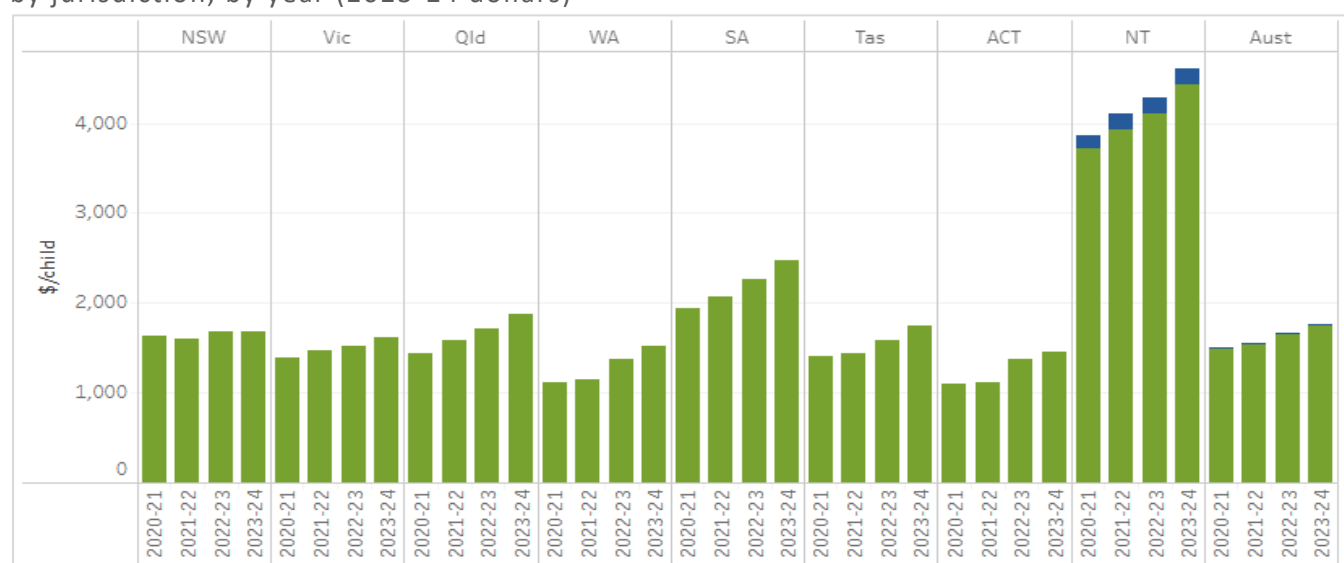
Spending on protective intervention services has been declining over the past five years

However, the proportion of spending on Protective Intervention Services has been declining from 11% of expenditure in 2019-20 to 8.5% in 2023-24. In 2023-24, expenditure (\$78.2 million) was nearly \$2 million below the 5-year average real expenditure for these protective services (\$80.1 million).

South Australia spends more per child than every other state (excluding the NT)

In 2023-24, South Australia spent \$2,467 per SA child on child protection services – an increase of \$198 over 2022-23. South Australia’s expenditure is \$704 per child higher than the national average and South Australian expenditure has been growing more steeply than other jurisdictions (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Child protection services expenditure per child in the population aged 0-17 years, by jurisdiction, by year (2023-24 dollars)



Source: ROGS (2025) Table 16A.8

Notifications

Of the nearly 40,000 notifications to DCP in 2023-24, 9% were substantiated

DCP received a total of 39,930 notifications in 2023-24 – an increase of 436 over 2022-23. Around 70% of these were not investigated. Instead they were referred to family services or provided with advice or dealt with by some other means. There were 1,820 more investigations in 2023-24 than in 2022-23, with a 1,949 increase in finalised investigations and a 126 decrease in investigations in progress (at August 31). Of the 11,511 notifications investigated and finalised in 2023-24, 31% (3,521 or 9% of total notifications) were substantiated and 69% (7,990 or 20% of total notifications) were not substantiated.³

Table 1: Child protection notifications, investigations and substantiations

Number (% of total notifications)	2022-23	2023-24
Total notifications ^(a)	39,494	39,930
Not investigated but dealt with by other means	29,076 (74%)	27,692 (69%)
Investigated	10,418 (26%)	12,238 (31%)
Finalised by 31 August	9,562 (24%)	11,511 (29%)
Substantiated	3,123 (8%)	3,521 (9%)
Not substantiated	6,439 (16%)	7,990 (20%)
Investigations in process	720 (2%)	594 (2%)
Investigation closed – no outcome possible ^(b)	136 (>1%)	133 (>1%)

Source: ROGS (2025) Table 16A.5

(a) If a child is the subject of more than one notification, investigation or substantiation, each of these is counted.

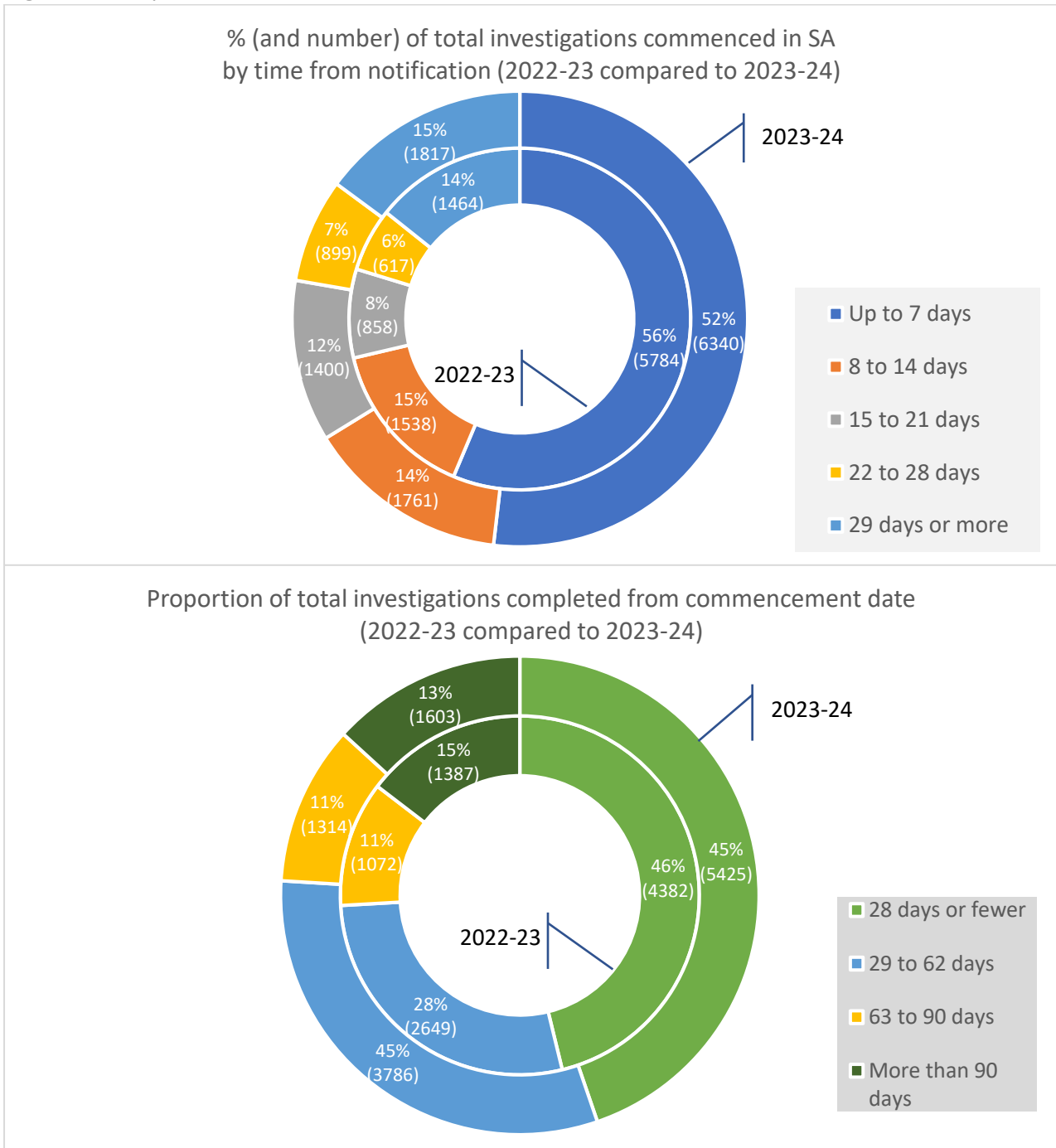
(b) 'Investigation closed – no outcome possible' includes cases where an outcome of 'substantiated' or 'not substantiated' could not be reached, but where the file may be closed for administrative reasons.

³ The ROGS report notes that it is difficult to determine a target substantiation rate. A very low substantiation rate might indicate that investigations are not directed to appropriate cases. A very high substantiation rate might indicate that the criteria for substantiation are unnecessarily bringing 'lower risk' families into the statutory system. Substantiation rates can fluctuate due to policy, funding or practice changes. Mandatory reporting, increased community awareness and willingness to notify suspected instances of child abuse, neglect or harm may also affect the substantiation rate.

Half of investigations commenced within 7 days and were completed within 28

Just over half of all investigations were commenced within 7 days of notification (Figure 4, top panel). In 2023-24, there were 2000 more investigations commenced than in 2022-23 (12,217 vs 10,261), but the proportion of these that commenced within 7 days of notification decreased from 56% in 2022-23 to 52% in 2023-24. Relatedly, the proportion of responses that were commenced between 15 and 21 days increased (from 8% in 2022-23 to 12% in 2023-24). Nearly half of all investigations were completed within 28 days of being commenced. In 2023-24 there were 2500 more investigations commenced and completed than in 2022-23 (12,128 vs 9490) but the proportion completed within different timeframes was largely the same (Figure 4, bottom panel).

Figure 4: Response times to notifications, SA 2022-23 and 2023-24



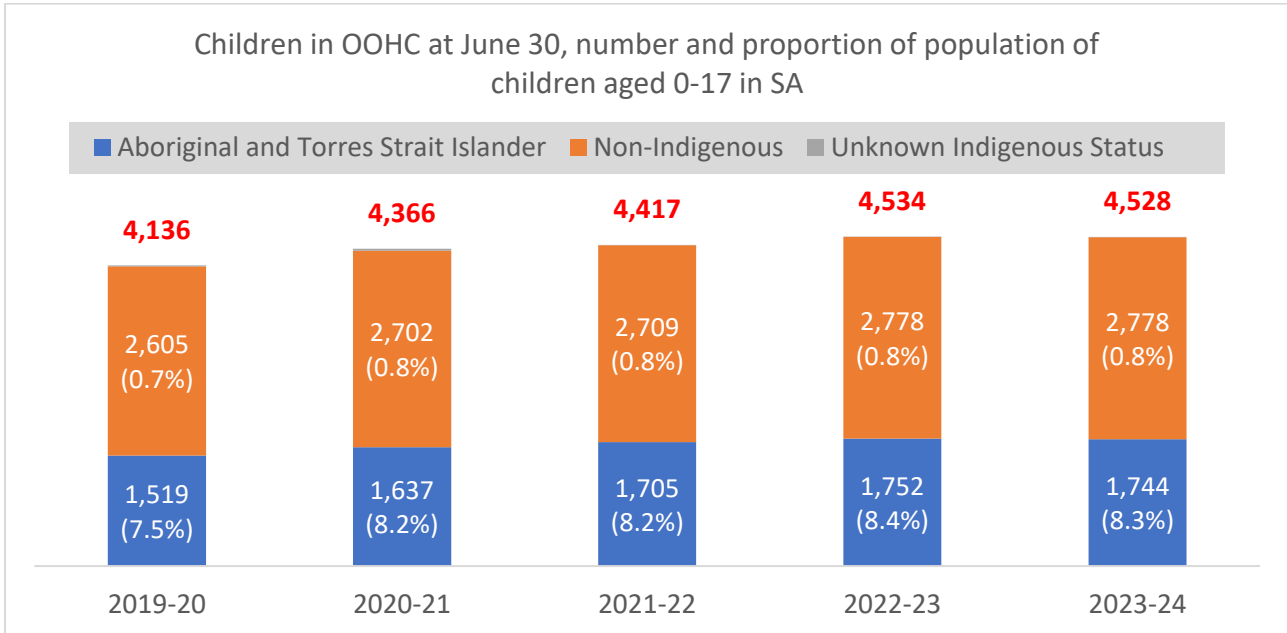
Source: ROGS (2025) Tables 16A.10&12

Children in care

12 out of every 1000 South Australian children were in OOHC in 2024

There were 4,528 children in OOHC in 2023-24 – 1.2% of all children aged 0-17 in South Australia⁴ – and a negligible decrease of six fewer children than in 2022-23 (Figure 5). Despite constituting approximately 5.5% of the total child population in SA, Aboriginal children comprised 39% of all children in OOHC in 2023-24. Aboriginal children were 7 times as likely to be in OOHC as non-Aboriginal children.

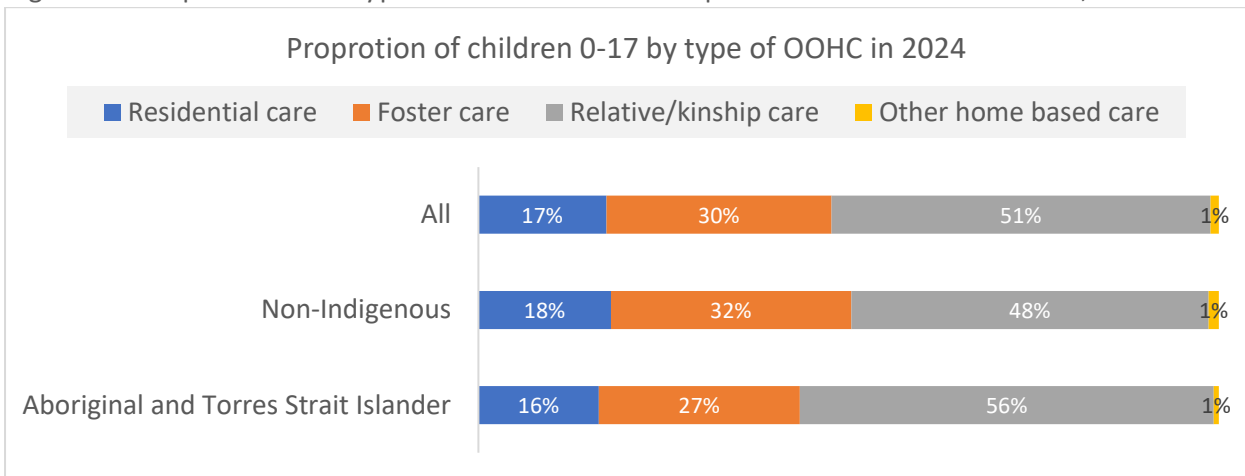
Figure 5: Children in OOHC in South Australia, 2019-2024



Source: ROGS (2025) Table 16A.2

In 2024, half of children in OOHC were in the care of relatives/kinship carers – this is slightly higher for Aboriginal children (56%) than for non-Aboriginal children (48%). Foster care was provided to around one in three children and residential care to around one in six children in OOHC (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Proportion and type of out of home care provided in South Australia, 2024

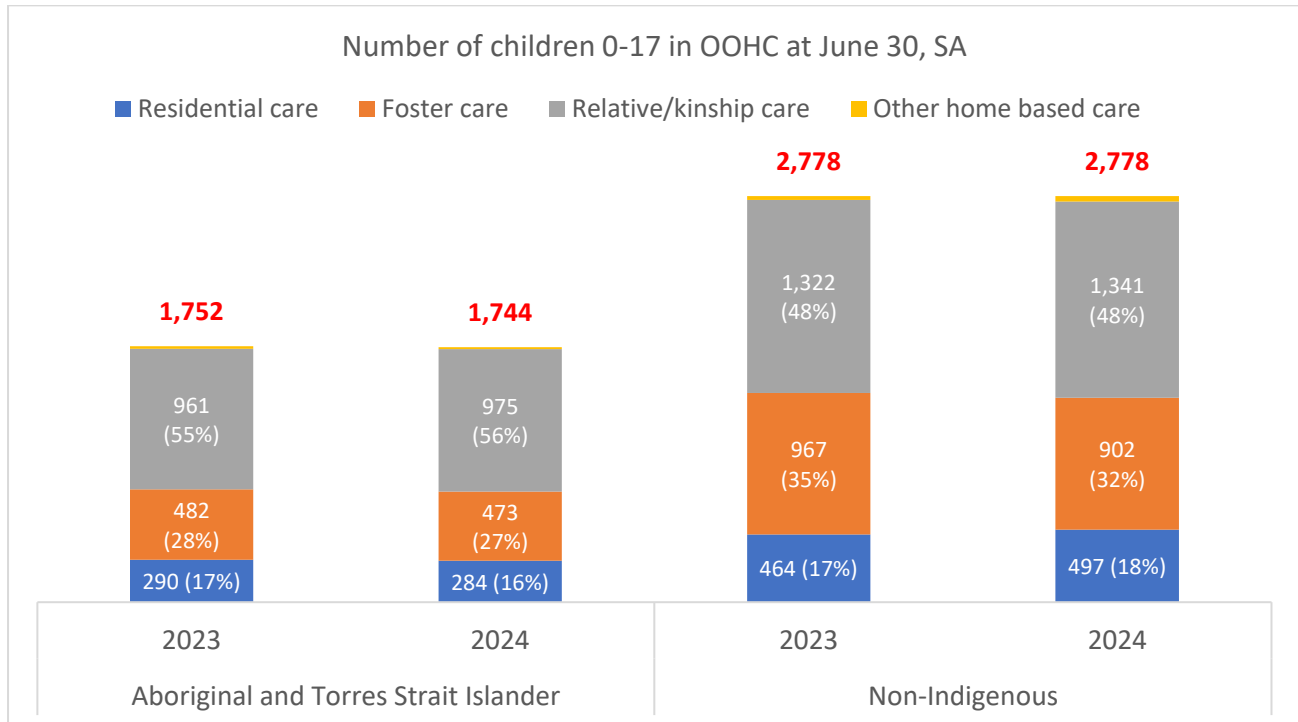


Source: ROGS (2025) Table 16A.21

⁴ There were 378,562 children and young people aged 0-17 years at 31 December 2023 in South Australia: 20,985 (5.5%) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and 357,578 (94.5%) non-Aboriginal children (ROGS (2025) Table 16A.42).

Between 2022-23 and 2023-24 there was a slight increase in the number of Aboriginal children in relative/kinship care (14 children more) and a slight decrease in the number in foster care (9 children less) and in residential care (6 children less). By comparison, there was a decrease in the number of non-Aboriginal children in the foster care system (a decrease of 65 children) and an increase in the number of children in residential care (increase of 33) and relative/kinship care (increase of 19) (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Out of home care placement types 2023-24, SA



Source: ROGS (2025) Table 16A.21^a

a. There were also 6 children of unknown Indigenous status in 2024 (2 in residential care and 4 in home-base care) and 4 in 2023 (one in residential care and 3 in home-based care)

Only 60% of Aboriginal children were being placed according to the ATSI CPP

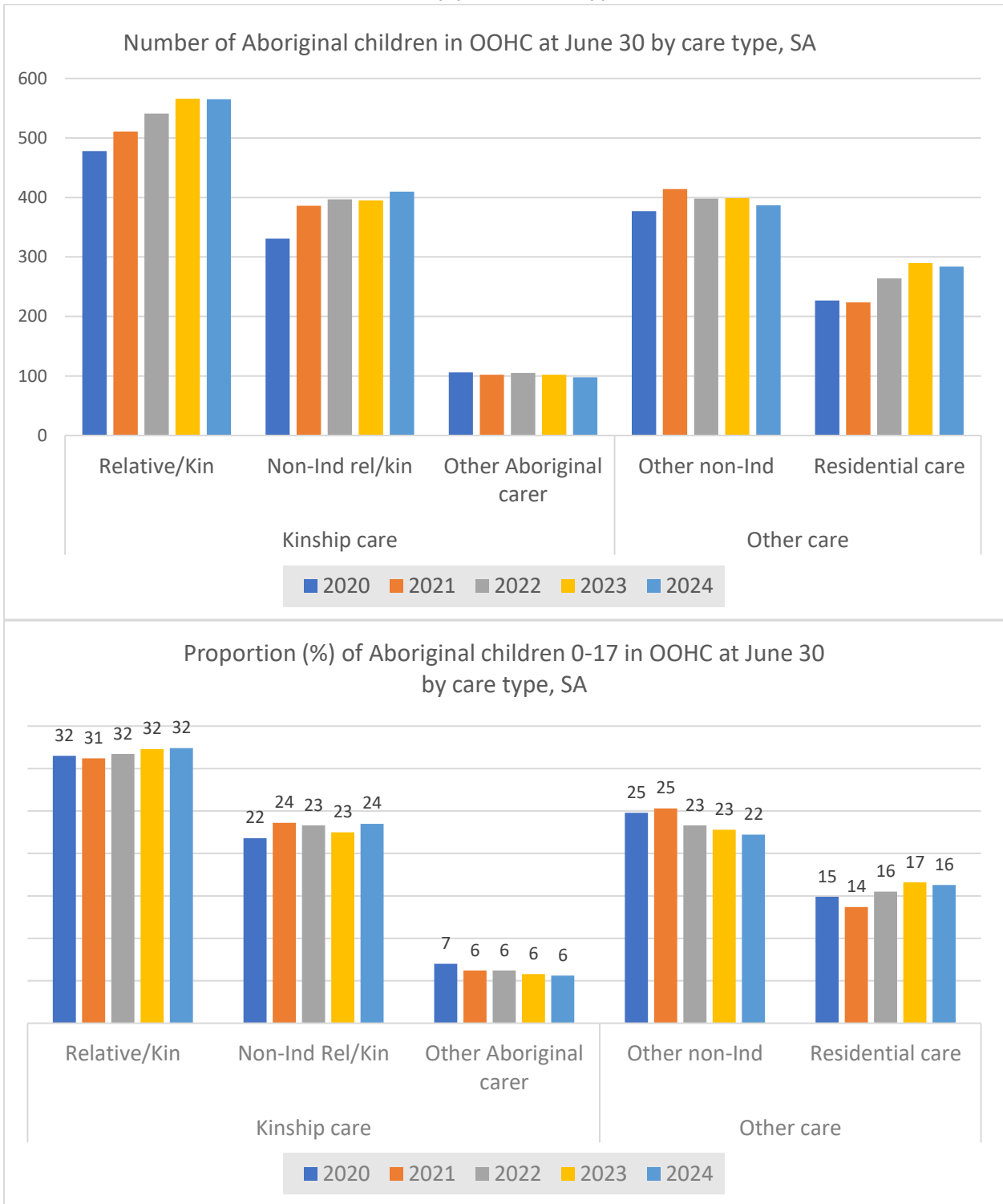
In 2024, approximately 60% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were placed in accordance with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle (ATSI CPP)⁵ but 40% were placed with a non-Aboriginal carer or in residential care (Figure 8). These proportions have not changed significantly in the past 5 years, although there has been a slight decrease in children placed with non-Aboriginal carers and a slight increase in children placed in residential care.

This indicates that a great deal more work needs to be done to properly implement the ATSI CPP. This has been highlighted in the report of the Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People – *Holding on to our future – Final report on the Inquiry into the Application of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle in the removal and placement of Aboriginal children and young people in South Australia*.⁶

⁵ The ATSI CPP is a framework designed to promote policy and practice that will reduce the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the child protection system by making active efforts to, when necessary, place children with Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal relatives or extended family members (kin); with Aboriginal members of the child’s community; or with Aboriginal family-based carers.

⁶ April Lawrie, Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People South Australia (2024). *Holding on to our future*. https://cacyp.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/CACYP-Inquiry_Final-Report_14052024.pdf

Figure 8: Number (top panel) and proportion (bottom panel) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out of home care by placement types 2020-2024, SA



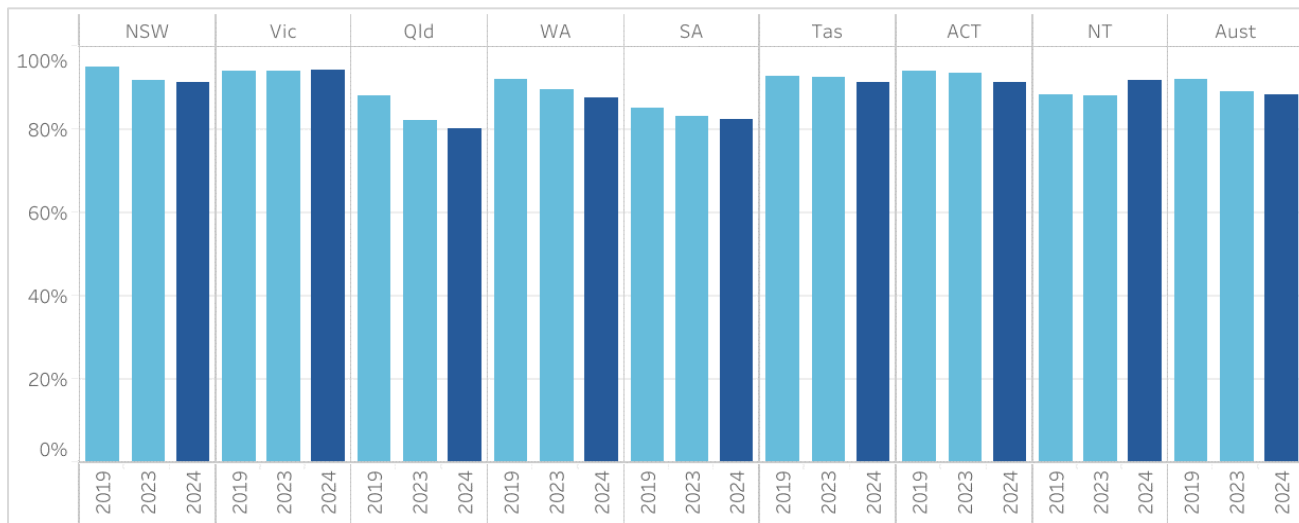
Source: ROGS (2025) Table 16.A.23

Proportion of children in home-based care has continued to decline since 2019

Home-based care is generally considered to be the better option when placing children in out-of-home care, particularly for younger children, as they will generally make better developmental progress in family settings than in residential or institutional care environments.

The proportion of children in OOHC who were placed in home-based care in SA dropped slightly from 2024 (82.7%) and the previous year (83.3%). Since 2019, there has been a 2% decrease (from 85.1% in 2019) (Figure 9). This trend is reflected in data from every state and territory except the NT and Victoria where the latter has seen no change since 2019 and has significantly more children (95% in 2024) in a home-based placement than in South Australia.

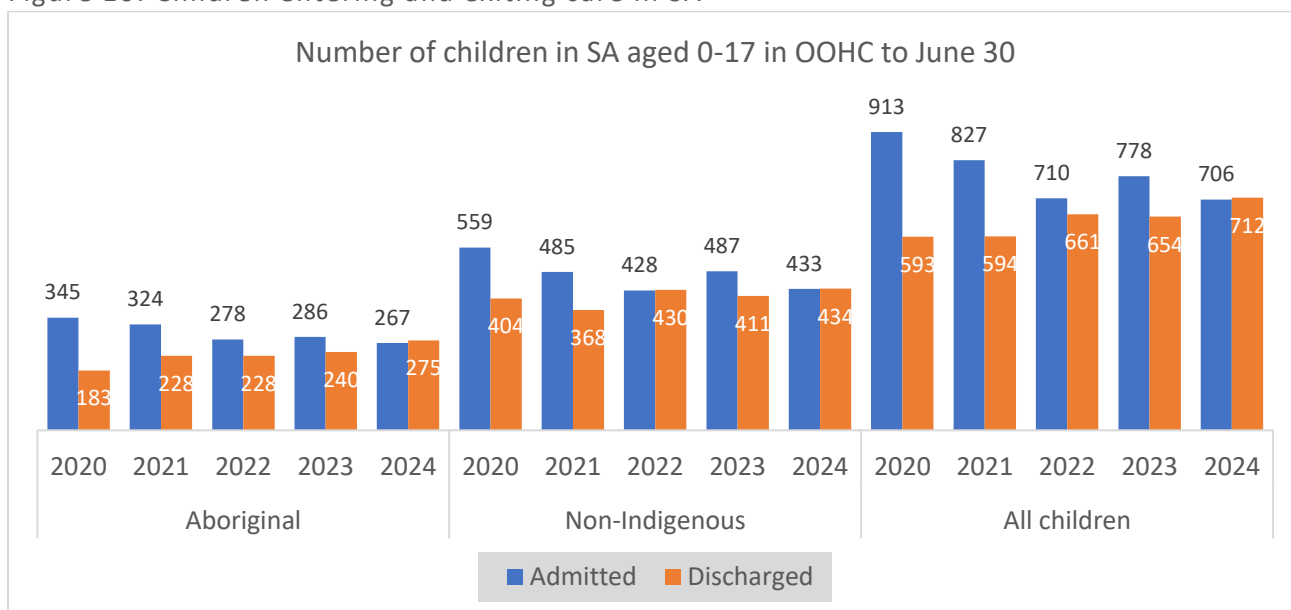
Figure 9: Children in out of home care in a home-based placement at 30 June



Source: ROGS 2025 Table 16A.20

The total number of children in care is a factor of how many children are admitted and discharged in each year. Lower admissions will not lead to an overall decline in children in care if not accompanied by an increase in children being discharged. Between 2019-20 and 2022-23, more children came into care than were discharged. For the first time in five years, in 2023-24 a few more children were discharged from care (712) than came into care (706) (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Children entering and exiting care in SA



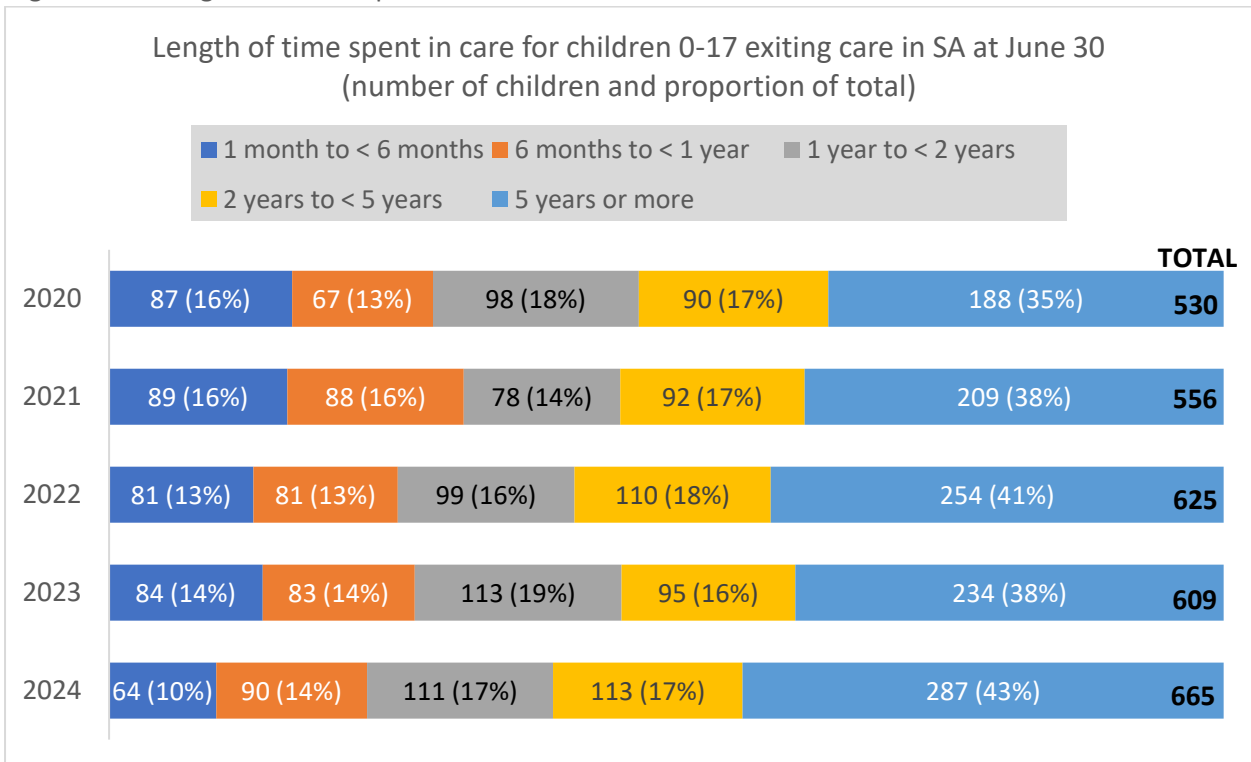
Source: ROGS 2025 Table 16A.4.

More than 1 in 3 children were in care for 5 years or more when they exited

The length of time that children spend in care has significant implications for the possibility of them being reunited with their family and, in the case of residential care placements, increases the potential danger of children being harmed by the institutionalised nature of residential settings. As signalled by the United Nations’ guidance to Australia, if children are placed in care, it should be for the shortest possible time.

However, in South Australia over the past five years more than one in 3 children exiting care have been there for 5 years or more and this figure has been trending upwards so that in 2023-24 more than 2 in every 5 children exiting care had been there for 5 years or more (up from an average of 38% to 43%). Conversely, the trend has also seen fewer children exiting care after the shortest possible time (up to 6 months), dropping from 16% in 2019-20 to 10% in 2023-24 (Figure 11).

Figure 11: Length of time spent in care



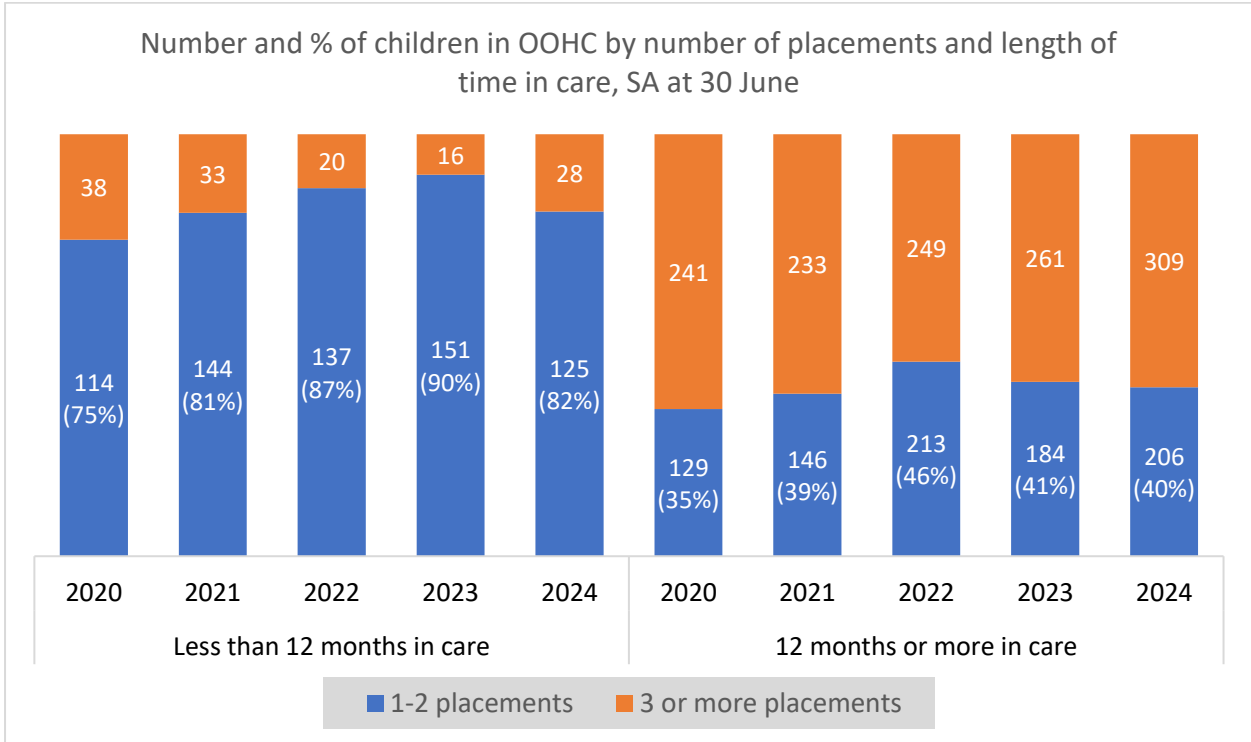
Source: ROGS (2025) Table 16A.19

The longer children are in care the more placement instability they experience

Children in care for less than 12 months typically experienced only 1-2 placements. In 2023-24, 125 of the 152 (82%) children in care for less than 12 months had 1-2 placements and 100 of them experienced only one placement. However, in the past 5 years, for children in care for more than 12 months only 40% experienced just 1-2 placements and the majority experience 3 or more placements, with this amounting to 337 children in 2023-24 (Figure 12). In 2023-24, 123 children experienced 4-5 placements, 94 experienced 6 to 10 placements and 54 children experienced 11 or more placements (Figure 13). This level of placement instability and disruption to the lives of children is not in their best interests and exposes them to increased trauma and harm.

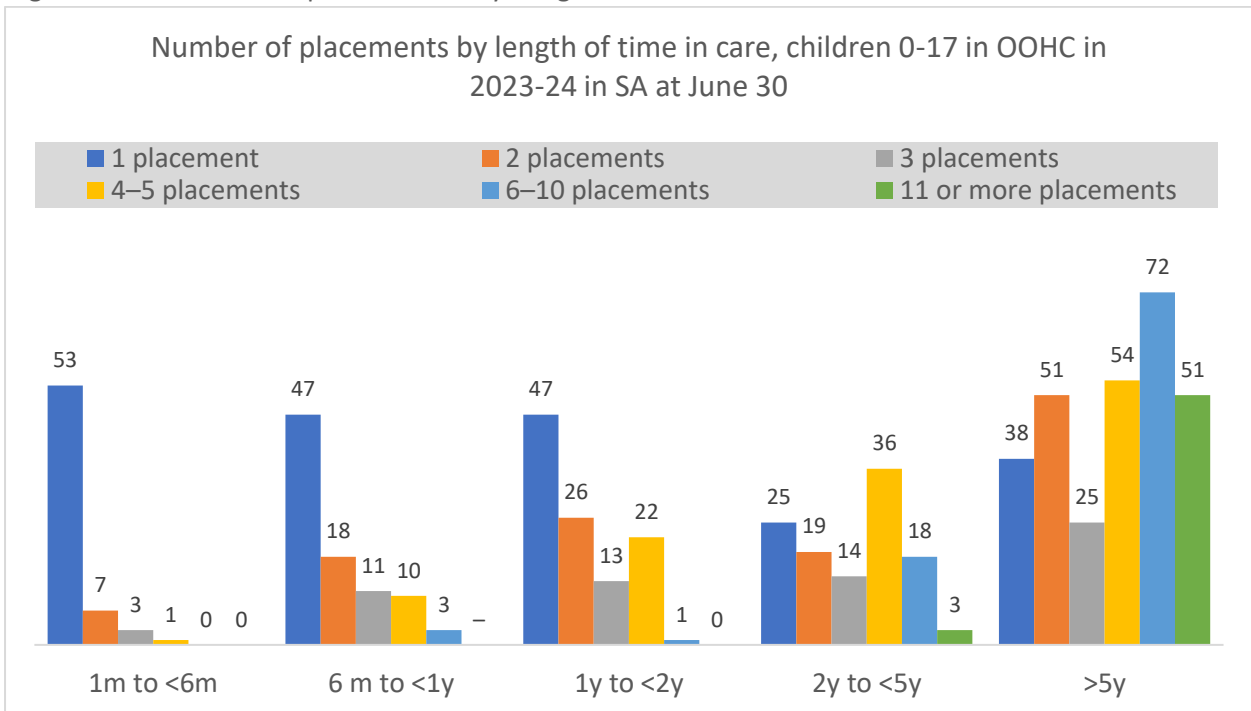
However, nearly all children who exited care over the past 3 years secured a permanent arrangement and did not return to care within 12 months: 94% in 2020-21 and 96% in 2021-22 and 2022-23 (ROGS Table 16.A 41).

Figure 12: Number of placements by length of time in care



Source: ROGS (2025) Table 16A.16

Figure 13: Number of placements by length of time in care for SA children in 2023-24



Source: ROGS (2025) Table 16A.16

One in 25 children in OOHC experienced sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse, or neglect while in care in 2023-24

In South Australia in 2023-24, 4.2% of children in care were the subject of a substantiation of sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse or neglect while they were living in out-of-home care. While this is an

increase from 3.1% in 2022-23, the figures are not directly comparable as outcomes for care concerns changed in the 2023-24 financial year in response to Inquiry recommendations (Table 2).

Table 2: Children (0–17 years) in care who were the subject of a substantiation of sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse or neglect while in care (SA)

	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24
Number of children in at least one out-of-home care or other supported placement during the year	5,335	5,494	5,549
Children in care who were the subject of a substantiation of sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse or neglect	156 (2.9%)	171 (3.1%)	231 (4.2%)

Source: ROGS (2025) Table 16A.14

It is clear that at least some children and young people may not in fact be safer and protected when they are separated from their family and placed in OOHC, something worth considering given that the state has *in loco parentis* responsibility (taking over the role of the parent), and bearing in mind the proportion of expenditure on OOHC and supported placements, the high number of children and young people placed in OOHC, and the focus on safety as the paramount principle in the *Children and Young People (Safety) Act 2017* and the draft *Children and Young People (Safety and Support) Bill 2024*.

Disproportionality and equity

Disproportionality provides an indication of the extent to which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are over-represented in child protection services.⁷ Factors such as inter-generational trauma, forcible removal of children, racism, inequality, and a lack of understanding by departmental staff of cultural differences in child rearing practices and family structures have contributed to the over-representation of Aboriginal children in the child protection system.⁸ ‘Disproportionality’ is an indicator of governments’ objective to provide child protection services in an equitable manner.

The disproportionality ratio⁹ is the ratio of the proportion of children represented in the care system that are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander divided by the proportion of the population of children that are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. A ratio of 1.0 indicates no disproportionality, a ratio above 1 indicates overrepresentation and less than one under-representation. In the following analysis it is assumed that Aboriginal children and young people comprise 5.5% of the population South Australian children under 18 years of age.

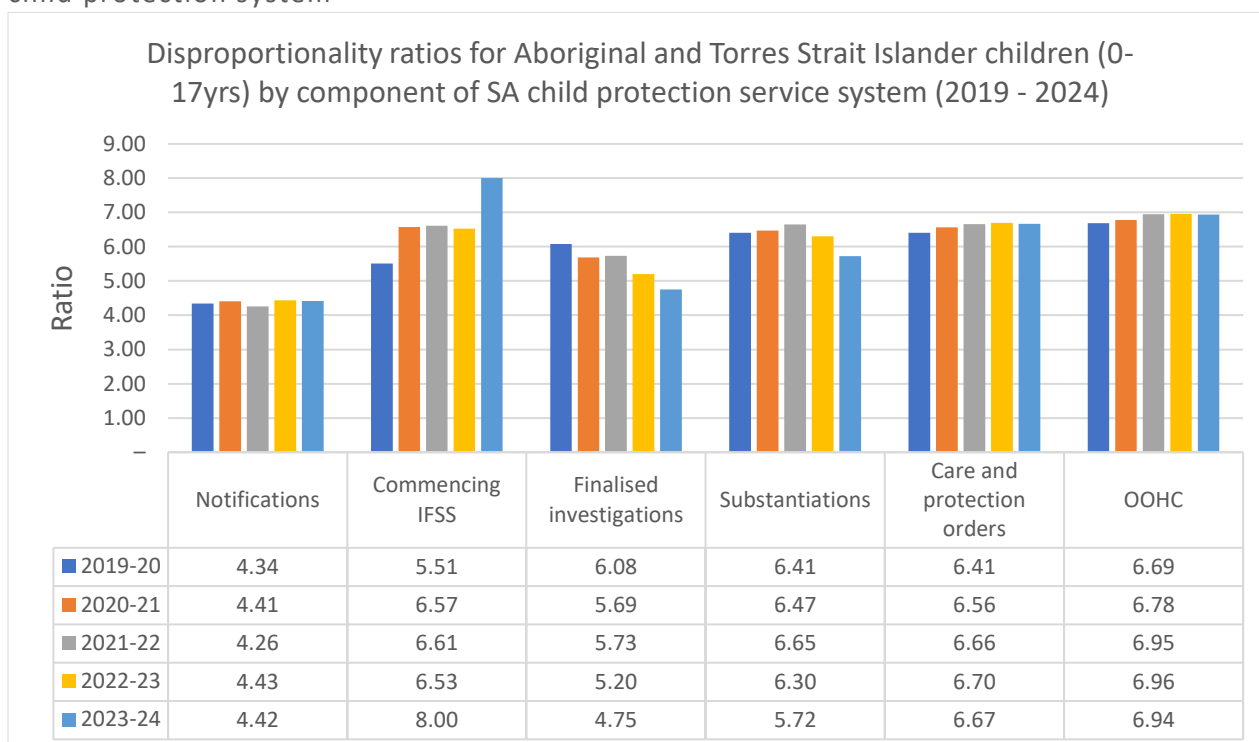
Aboriginal children are disproportionately represented across every component of the child protection service system. In 2023-24 they were four times more likely to have a notification, eight times more likely to have an IFSS commenced, nearly 5 times more likely to have a finalised investigation, nearly 6 times as likely to have a substantiation, and nearly 7 times as likely to have a care and protection order or be placed in out of home care, relative to their proportion of the child and youth population (Figure 14).

⁷ Disproportionality ratios for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are calculated by dividing the proportion of children in the child protection system who are Aboriginal by the proportion of children aged 0–17 years who are Aboriginal. Data for the calculation of disproportionality ratios were sourced from 16A.1, 16A.2, 16A.35 and 16A.42. An example is if 10% of all children in the child protection system are Aboriginal, but only 6% of all children in the target population (0–17 years) are Aboriginal children, the disproportionality ratio is 1.7 (10% divided by 6%). In this example, Aboriginal children are 1.7 times as likely to be represented in the child protection system relative to their representation in the target population.

⁸ SNAICC (2023) National Voice for our Children. Family Matters – Strong communities. Strong culture. Stronger culture <https://www.snaicc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/20240731-Family-Matters-Report-2023.pdf>

⁹ Productivity Commission (2025) Report on Government Services, 16 Child Protection Services – Indicator Results: Disproportionality <https://www.pc.gov.au/ongoing/report-on-government-services/2025/community-services/child-protection>

Figure 14: Disproportionality ratios for Aboriginal children in SA by component of the SA child protection system



Source: ROGS (2025) Table 16A.9

The over-representation of Aboriginal young people across the child protection system is not showing signs of improving. Progress to meet Target 12 under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap – to reduce the rate of over-representation of Aboriginal children in OOHC by 45 per cent by 2031 – is not indicating a positive change. The latest Productivity Commission’s report on Closing the Gap indicates that the rate of Aboriginal children in OOHC is increasing and the target is not on track.¹⁰

Conclusion

The data in this latest ROGS report accentuates the need for active efforts to be made to focus, wherever possible, on children and their families’ best interests and keeping them together. Even with the paramount principle of our current child protection legislation being the safety of children, we see that children are not always safer in care, with 4.2% of children in OOHC being the subject of a substantiation of sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse or neglect this year. The 2025 ROGS child protection data once again highlights that, despite constituting approximately 5.5% of the total child population in SA, Aboriginal children are disproportionately represented and comprised 39% of all children in OOHC. Further work needs to be done to implement the ATSICPP.

The persistent lack of focus and low spending on family support and protective intervention services ultimately results in more young people living in OOHC, when they and their families could otherwise have been supported to remain together or work towards re-unification.

¹⁰ Productivity Commission (2024) Closing the Gap Annual Data Compilation Report at <https://www.pc.gov.au/closing-the-gap-data/annual-data-report>