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Child abuse reports in NT double after intervention

Damien Murphy

The abuse of Indigenous children in the Northern Territory has soared since the federal government's controversial intervention, raising questions about the value of the multimillion project.

About half of Indigenous children in the NT now come to the attention of the child protection system by the age of 10, the Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory heard on Monday.

Clinical child psychologist and researcher Professor Sven Silburn said in addition to the wider problem, one in four children had a substantiated child protection concerns. "In public health terms you'd consider that to be of epidemic proportions," he said.

"And as a public health concern [given] what we know about the detrimental long-term effects on health, behaviour and learning, we'd see this as a public health if not a humanitarian crisis."

On the eve of Wednesday's 10th anniversary of the federal intervention, royal commissioners were told child protection notifications, substantiations and out-of-home placements had all more than doubled since 2007.

Professor Silburn, of Darwin's Centre for Child Development and Education at the Menzies School of

Health Research, said the child protection service model for responding to child vulnerability in the NT was not sustainable in its present form. "The continuing high rates of neglect and abuse in children's early years have considerable long-term social and economic implications for governments and society," he said.

He said the child protection system's capacity to respond to the

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Professor Sven Silburn

increasing volume of notifications will become unsustainable unless there is a substantial investment in primary prevention and early intervention.

In 2014-15, there were 7365 Indigenous children notified to the child protection system, 1439 with a substantiated concern and 1067 who had an out-of-home care placement.

Professor Silburn said the marked increase since 2007 could reflect increased awareness and changes in reporting after the NT government's *Little Children are Sacred* report, changing legislation

and the introduction of mandatory reporting of family violence. But he said the widening gap between notifications and substantiations could indicate the number of children at risk of harm is increasing and/or that the investigative capacity of the child protection system is being overwhelmed by the increasing volume of notifications.

He said that ideally, longer-term, 10-year strategies should see federal and territory governments services work together to provide a more cohesive, co-ordinated and evidence-informed strategy with substantially greater early investment in children and families.

The royal commission was also told increasing numbers of Indigenous and non-Indigenous children were coming into contact with the protection system, which also contributed to youth crime.

"As in every other jurisdiction in the world there is known to be a strong association between child protection issues and offending, particularly youth offending," Professor Silburn said.

Commissioner Mick Gooda asked one witness why Australian Federal Police were involved in child protection in the NT.

"I'm not sure," said Joy Simpson, manager, investigation and assessment, Territory Families. "Maybe its an overhang from the intervention."