

Report



**MINISTRY OF SOCIAL
DEVELOPMENT**
TE MANATŪ WHAKAHIATO ORA

Date: 22 August 2024 **Security Level:** In Confidence
To: Hon Louise Upston, Minister for Child Poverty Reduction
File Reference: REP/24/8/755

Advice on establishing an indicator of child abuse as a CPRI

Purpose of the report

- 1 This report responds to your request for advice on:
 - 1.1 whether child harm (narrowly scoped) should be a child poverty related indicator (CPRI) or a Strategy indicator only; and
 - 1.2 what the best measure is.

Executive summary

- 2 We've assessed a range of options for a narrowly scoped indicator of child harm and consider that a measure based on the number of children (aged 0-17) with at least one substantiated finding of abuse in the past 12 months (based on Oranga Tamariki administrative data) is most suitable.
- 3 We've also evaluated whether child abuse is better suited as a Strategy indicator only (i.e. for public reporting and monitoring progress) or whether it should also be a CPRI, which creates a further expectation that agencies are accountable for achieving measurable improvements over time. As a CPRI, this indicator:
 - 3.1 would clearly meet the statutory requirements for a CPRI under Section 38(1) of the Child Poverty Reduction Act (2018), including the requirement that it "is, or may be" a cause, consequence, or correlate of child poverty
 - 3.2 is broadly aligned with the overall function you want the CPRIs to serve, which is to drive cross-agency action to address key risk factors in childhood that contribute to long-term socio-economic disadvantage

experienced in adulthood (although, compared to the other CPRI, this alignment is not as strong)

- 3.3 is more technically robust than the currently available alternative measures, but is subject to a number of limitations and risks set out below.
- 4 One risk is that it may be challenging to interpret whether increases or decreases in the indicator are because of changes in the prevalence of child abuse, or because of changes in rates of reporting. We think this can be managed to some extent by providing context in the reporting of the CPRI, including assessing whether any observed changes in the indicator are better explained by other factors.
 - 5 A further concern is that overly-simplistic reporting of child abuse could further stigmatise disadvantaged families and whānau, particularly for some groups (including tamariki Māori and Pacific children) that are over-represented in both child poverty and child protection system statistics. As is the case for all the CPRI, we think this risk could be mitigated by providing appropriate context in our statutory reporting.
 - 6 A bigger concern is that if the intent of introducing a child abuse CPRI is to increase primary prevention activity across the children's system, then this could have unintended consequences. This is because Oranga Tamariki's renewed focus is on ensuring the care and protection system better detects and responds to abuse. This is likely to lead to an *increase* in the indicator over time (which is clearly a good thing). But this will make it hard to isolate the impacts of cross-agency efforts aimed at reducing the indicator through primary prevention. Also, in an effort to drive improvements in this indicator, there's a risk that already marginalised communities and whānau Māori could be unfairly targeted.
 - 7 On balance, we think these system risks, and the fact that child abuse is a comparatively weaker driver of disadvantage at a population level, may outweigh the potential benefits of establishing a child abuse CPRI.

Recommended actions

It is recommended that you:

- 1 **indicate** your preference for officials to include in the draft October Cabinet paper:

Either

- 1.1 a recommendation confirming the establishment of a new child abuse CPRI based on the number of children (aged 0-17) with at least one substantiated finding of abuse (including neglect, emotional harm, physical harm and sexual abuse) in the past 12 months

Agree / Disagree

Or

- 1.2 including the child abuse indicator described above as a Strategy indicator only and not as a CPRI (Child Wellbeing and Poverty Reduction Group recommended).

Agree / Disagree



22/08/2024

Hannah Kerr

Date

Director, Child Wellbeing and Poverty
Reduction Group



Hon Louise Upston

Minister for Child Poverty Reduction



Date

Background

- 8 You've agreed to recommend to Cabinet the establishment of five CPRI: potentially avoidable hospitalisations, children in benefit-dependent families, school attendance, school achievement and housing affordability [REP/24/7/645 refers]. You've also asked officials to advise whether to establish a narrowly scoped indicator of child harm as a CPRI or as a Strategy indicator only.
- 9 You briefly discussed establishing a narrowly scoped child harm CPRI with Ministers attending the 1 August Child and Youth Ministers meeting, including Minister Chhour, Minister Potaka, and Minister Willis. Ministers were supportive in principle, subject to identifying a suitable measure.
- 10 Preventing child harm is one of the Strategy priorities, and you've agreed to the scope of child harm as preventing child abuse and neglect within the context of family [REP/24/7/642 refers]. Whether or not you decide to establish child abuse as a CPRI, an indicator of child abuse and neglect will be a publicly reported Strategy indicator.

Framework for evaluating a child abuse indicator as a CPRI

- 11 To assess the suitability of child abuse as a CPRI we've applied a slightly modified version of the evaluation framework (see Table 1 overleaf) we've used previously, including for the recent statutory review of the CPRI [REP/24/7/682 refers].
- 12 In assessing whether child abuse should be a CPRI or a publicly reported Tier 1 Strategy Indicator only, it is important to consider the intended function. In our discussions with you, you've indicated that establishing a CPRI should drive cross-agency accountability for achieving improvements on the indicator.
- 13 By contrast, the function of Strategy indicators is to monitor progress towards relevant Strategy priorities (e.g. preventing child harm) and the high-level Strategy outcomes. We note that there are two measures of harm against children in the current Strategy reporting:
 - 13.1 Oranga Tamariki Reports of Concern that are referred for further assessment or investigation; and
 - 13.2 the percentage of children and young people who have been physically hurt or seen others being physically hurt in the place they usually live in the past 12 months from the Youth Health and Wellbeing Survey.
This measure is not reported annually and so is not suitable as a CPRI.
- 14 The current Strategy measurement framework also includes measures of serious and non-fatal injuries and child mortality. In line with the simplified

approach to reporting, all of these measures would be replaced with a single child harm Strategy indicator.

Table 1: modified evaluation framework for assessing child abuse as a CPRI

Broad evaluation questions	Specific considerations
Does child abuse align with the agreed function of the CPRIs and meet legislative requirements?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relevance to child poverty – is the indicator (or could it be) a cause, consequence or correlate of child poverty, as required under section 38(1) of the Child Poverty Reduction Act 2018? • Does the indicator align with the proposed function and rationale of the CPRIs – which is to drive cross-agency accountability for addressing the determinants of long-term disadvantage?
Are the measures and data underlying the proposed child abuse indicator high quality?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relevance • Accuracy • Easy to understand • Timeliness • Consistency

Child abuse meets the legislative requirements for being a CPRI and aligns with the agreed function of the indicator set

- 15 We've briefly reviewed some of the international and New Zealand evidence to assess whether child abuse "is, or may be" a cause, consequence or correlate of child poverty (as required under Section 38(1) of the Child Poverty Reduction Act 2018). We also consider the evidence for whether the experience of abuse is a risk factor for long-term disadvantage, in line with the intended rationale of the CPRIs.

A wide range of factors influence the risk of child abuse, including poverty

- 16 An indicator of child abuse clearly meets the minimum legislative criteria for being a CPRI in terms of being a cause, consequence, or correlate of child poverty. In New Zealand, it's well established that rates of child abuse are higher in areas of high deprivation¹. And findings from three, recently conducted systematic reviews of international studies (mostly from the US), show poverty is consistently and strongly associated with child maltreatment². There's also evidence from intervention studies (again mostly

¹ See: [Welfare-and-tax-settings-research-brief.pdf \(orangatamariki.govt.nz\)](https://www.orangatamariki.govt.nz/welfare-and-tax-settings-research-brief.pdf)

² See: Mulder. et al. (2018); Van Ijzendoorn et al. (2019). Piquero, AR. et al. (2021)

in the US) consistently showing a causal relationship between changes in family income and rates of maltreatment³.

- 17 This evidence needs to be understood in context. The research also shows that a complex range of wider risk and protective factors influence rates of child abuse: from the individual circumstances of children and their care-givers; family factors and household stress; neighbourhood and community factors; as well as wider institutional and policy settings, both current and historic. Furthermore, while poverty is an important determinant for the risk of abuse, most children do not experience child abuse (whether they are in poverty or not); and child abuse can, and does, occur across the income distribution.⁴

The experience of child abuse is also a specific risk factor for long-term disadvantage – but the link is less strong than for the other CPRIs

- 18 There is also evidence that child abuse is a specific indicator of risk of a range of adverse outcomes over the long-run, including lower educational attainment, employment rates and earnings⁵.
- 19 However, depending on the measure looked at, it reflects the circumstances of a relatively small group of around 10,000 children per year (~1% of children).
- 20 This means that reducing rates of abuse, while very important in its own right, may have only modest impacts on measured rates of long-term disadvantage at a population level. Compared to the other CPRIs you have agreed, a child abuse indicator would therefore be less strongly aligned with the over-arching purpose of the CPRIs (i.e. to drive cross-agency action to reduce the determinants of long-term disadvantage).

Oranga Tamariki data on substantiated findings of abuse is the most suitable out of the three measures we considered

- 21 We've engaged with relevant agencies about the most suitable measure, while recognising that all available measures are subject to important limitations.
- 22 We developed a long-list of indicators that are currently used for monitoring child harm and abuse, and identified three potentially suitable indicators:

³ See: Bywater & Skinner (2022) [Full-report-relationship-between-poverty-child-abuse-and-neglect.pdf](https://nuffieldfoundation.org/full-report-relationship-between-poverty-child-abuse-and-neglect.pdf) (nuffieldfoundation.org)

⁴ See: [Welfare-and-tax-settings-research-brief.pdf](https://orangatamariki.govt.nz/welfare-and-tax-settings-research-brief.pdf) (orangatamariki.govt.nz)

⁵ See: [Economic Determinants and Consequences of Child Maltreatment | OECD Social, Employment and Migration Working Papers | OECD iLibrary](https://oecd-ilibrary.org/economic-determinants-and-consequences-of-child-maltreatment) (oecd-ilibrary.org)

- the number of children (aged 0-17) with at least one substantiated finding of abuse (including neglect, emotional harm, physical harm and sexual abuse) in the previous 12 months, based on data collected by Oranga Tamariki
 - the number of children (0-17) present (or normally resident) at the location of a reported family harm episode, based on Police data
 - the rate of children hospitalised due to intentional injury (excluding self-harm), based on the Ministry of Health's National Minimum Dataset.
- 23 We then assessed these against the data quality criteria within the CPRI evaluation framework (set out in Table 1) and discounted the second two options because they're not sufficiently accurate for our purposes.
- 24 We don't think the measure based on Police data is suitable because we understand there can be significant variation in Police practice in the way family harm incidents are recorded, and it also includes a wider range of incidents that may not meet the threshold for abuse (e.g. truancy).
- 25 We discounted hospitalisation data because of concerns about the difficulty attributing the cause of injury in the context of a hospital setting. We also note that the total number of child hospitalisations attributed to assault is comparatively small (~30-50 hospitalisations per year) – which reflects that this indicator is focused on the most severe cases of abuse. Despite these limitations, we do think these measures – with suitable caveats – could help provide context as part of Tier 2 reporting to Ministers.
- 26 While Oranga Tamariki data based on substantiated findings of abuse is still subject to important limitations (discussed further below) all agencies agreed that it is likely to be the most robust measure. Importantly, the determination of abuse follows a social work assessment, and therefore has a degree of validity.
- 27 Te Puna Aonui also noted that this measure is currently used as an indicator of child harm in their Te Aorerekura Outcomes and Measurement Framework report.

We assessed a number of concerns with establishing substantiated findings of abuse as a CPRI

- 28 Through discussions with agencies and with Pou Tangata we identified a number of risks, and where possible mitigations, of establishing substantiated findings of abuse as a CPRI.

The measure includes abuse in a range of contexts and is likely to understate the true prevalence

- 29 Oranga Tamariki advise that substantiated findings of abuse data doesn't differentiate family abuse from abuse occurring in other settings (eg whānau and other settings, including non-kin care, Family Homes, and residential care). This is not necessarily a problem in itself – but we do note it means the scope of this indicator extends beyond the focus of the Strategy priority area (i.e. preventing abuse and neglect in the family) you have agreed to [REP/24/7/642 refers].
- 30 The indicator is also likely to understate the true prevalence of abuse (which we cannot know for certain) because it filters out cases where there is less confidence of a statutory finding of abuse or neglect. However, we don't think this is a reason not to establish the indicator as a CPRI.

Reporting bias may make it challenging to accurately interpret changes – but this could be mitigated through our approach to reporting

- 31 It may be challenging to interpret whether increases in substantiated findings of abuse reflect a true increase in the prevalence of abuse or because of changes to reporting practice, operational changes, or external factors⁶. Again, this is mitigated to some extent – but certainly not eliminated – by the fact that this indicator is based on *substantiated* findings of abuse, rather than reports of concern.
- 32 One example of this is that Oranga Tamariki is progressing with changes to their case management system, CYRAS, that could impact the consistency of the data timeseries. This will affect all aspects of recording responses to reports of concern, assessments and outcomes and these changes are planned to come into effect from 2027/28.
- 33 Overall, we think the risks of reporting bias are manageable. As is the case with all of the CPRI, if there is evidence that some external factor, or change in reporting practice, better explains the change in the indicator then this needs to be called out through reporting and taken into account when determining what this means for how agencies should respond.

There are systemic risks that a greater focus on detecting and responding is likely to increase substantiated abuse numbers

- 34 Oranga Tamariki and some other agencies identified a key risk that establishing child abuse as a CPRI could distort incentives at a system level.

⁶ See: [Analysis-of-the-decrease-in-Reports-of-Concern-Summary-A3.pdf \(orangatamariki.govt.nz\)](#)

For example, Oranga Tamariki's strengthened focus on detecting and responding to harm is, if anything, likely to lead to an increase in reporting as greater activity and awareness shines a light on the issue of abuse. This in itself is a positive thing but it does mean the indicator could give a misleading picture of the success of primary prevention activities undertaken across agencies and te Tiriti partners aimed at strengthening resilience.

There are additional implications for tamariki Māori, including risks of perpetuating systemic disparities and stigma

- 35 It's important to consider the specific implications for tamariki Māori in the context of the Crown's responsibilities under te Tiriti, noting that tamariki Māori are significantly over-represented in the child protection system and poverty statistics owing to historic and ongoing inequities⁷.
- 36 A key concern raised by Pou Tangata and some agencies is that establishing a child abuse CPRI could unintentionally perpetuate disparities by creating systemic incentives that have disproportionate impacts on whānau Māori. This concern is consistent with evidence that because whānau Māori are more likely to be in contact with the system they may be subject to higher levels of surveillance and reporting compared to other ethnic groups⁸.
- 37 Pou Tangata noted that if Ministers wish to establish a child harm CPRI then it would be better to defer this decision subject to doing further work to identify a suitable measure.
- 38 Regardless of whether substantiated abuse is established as a CPRI or a Strategy indicator only, particular care will be needed when reporting on rates for tamariki Māori and other groups over-represented in the system. Reporting needs to clearly emphasise that the great majority of children in these groups do not experience abuse and that any analysis of disparities is ultimately for the purpose of changing policy and practice to prevent child abuse in the first place.

On balance, we think some of the limitations may outweigh the benefits of establishing a child harm CPRI

- 39 There is a general consensus across agencies and Pou Tangata that substantiated findings of abuse is suitable as a Strategy indicator, subject to providing appropriate context through reporting. But there are more mixed views about establishing child abuse as a CPRI: Te Puna Aonui and Police are

⁷ See: [Factors-associated-with-disparities-experienced-by-Maori-children-in-the-Care-and-Protection-System-2023.pdf](https://orangatamariki.govt.nz/factors-associated-with-disparities-experienced-by-Maori-children-in-the-Care-and-Protection-System-2023.pdf) (orangatamariki.govt.nz)

⁸ Vaithianathan et al.(2019)

supportive; Oranga Tamariki, Te Puni Kōkiri, and Pou Tangata are not; and ACC, Ministry of Justice and Ministry of Health did not express a clear preference.

- 40 The Child Wellbeing and Poverty Reduction Group note that some of the perceived risks of establishing a child harm CPRI are overstated. In particular, the concern that establishing a child abuse CPRI risks over-simplifying the connection between poverty and abuse we think can be adequately managed with clear and balanced reporting and an explanation of the purpose of the CPRI.
- 41 We also note one of the potential benefits of establishing child abuse as a CPRI is that it strikes a middle ground between establishing a monitoring indicator (e.g. as the Strategy indicators are) and a target (e.g. as established through the Government targets). Compared to a Strategy indicator, a CPRI creates a stronger expectation that agencies need to take action where appropriate to drive improvement over time, subject to any caveats in the data. But unlike a Government target, it does not set a definitive target “number” to achieve – which seems appropriate given the various data uncertainties.
- 42 However on balance, we think child abuse may be better suited as a Strategy Indicator only, rather than a CPRI because of the system level risks identified by Oranga Tamariki and Pou Tangata and the fact that child abuse is a relatively weak population-level driver of long term disadvantage. Establishing substantiated findings of abuse as a Strategy indicator measure would still ensure there is public visibility of the Government’s priorities but avoids some of the limitations we’ve identified with establishing this measure as a CPRI.

Next steps

- 43 We would welcome the opportunity to discuss the findings of this report at the officials meeting on 26 August.

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