

Only the tip of the iceberg is currently getting a response

Far too many at-risk children are hidden below the water line and are not getting the support they need.

The problem

The NSW Department of Family and Community Services directs funding towards the tip of the iceberg when it comes to providing safe, healthy and happy homes for our children.

Just below the surface, there are children who are already experiencing vulnerability – or who could at any moment.

Without a focused effort on prevention, the system is being flooded as the number of kids deemed at risk of significant harm in NSW has skyrocketed 32 per cent over five years¹ to nearly 90,000². The number jumped 10 per cent in the last year alone.

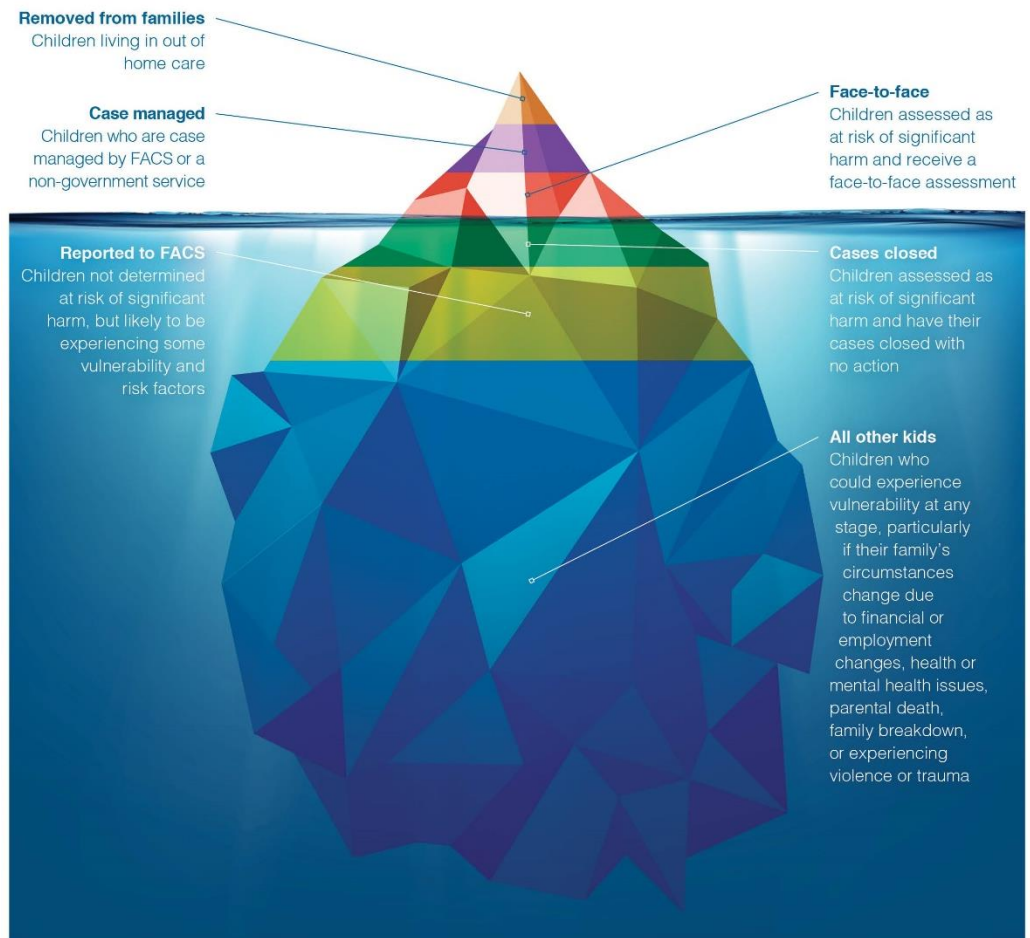
Only 28,000 kids, just 32 per cent, received a face-to-face visit from a FACS caseworker³.

This rings alarm bells as firstly, a large number of kids actually received no help at all.

Secondly, the proportion of children at risk is also growing. Of every 1,000 kids, 52 are now deemed at risk of significant harm, a 24 per cent increase over five years^{4,5}.

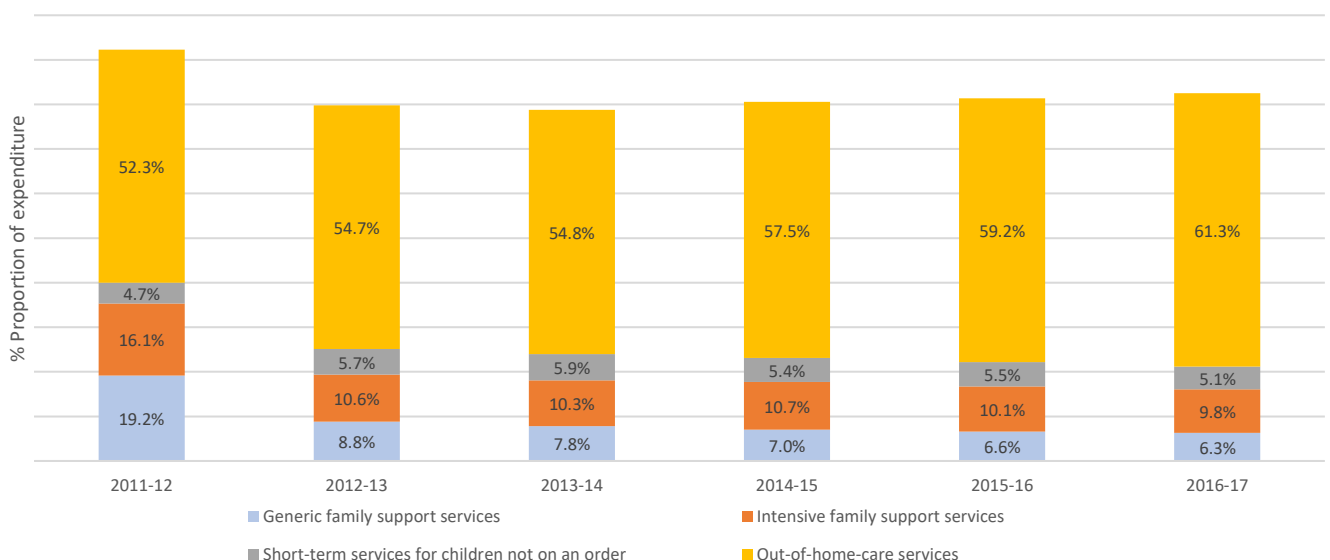
Finally, the costs are also increasing. The costs in 2016/17 were \$1.85 billion, a 24 per cent increase since 2011/12⁶.

All of this is unsurprising, given the lack of resources aimed at preventing vulnerability through targeted earlier intervention (TEI).



The government simply can't afford to continue doing what it is currently doing. Our kids need a significant change to take place.

Productivity Commission Report on Government Services 2019
Activity Group Costs (in 2017/18 dollars) - New South Wales



Spotlight on Northern NSW

As the number of kids at risk grows, it is regional areas which are hit the worst.

There are now nearly 4,800 Northern NSW kids at risk of significant harm, an increase of 22 per cent over five years and eight per cent over the last year alone^{7,8,9}.

There are now 77 kids in every 1,000 at risk of harm, an increase of 16 per cent over five years nearly double than the state average of 52^{10,11}.

Worryingly, only 30 per cent of the kids at risk of harm actually received a face to face response from FACS¹².

In Northern NSW, there are 16 kids in every 1,000 removed from their families and living in Out Of Home Care, 50 per cent above the state average of 11¹³.

Fams is concerned that kids are further disadvantaged by the current services that are available, due to the government's approach to put in place one-size-fits-all, off-the-shelf programs.

Local service providers are stretched, the programs tested in cities don't necessarily suit regional kids' unique needs, and not all programs or support services are even funded in all areas.

If there isn't an appropriate program to refer to, a child's case may just be shut, rather than a response designed for them.

Urgent action is needed to give FACS and the sector more resources to ensure every child at risk of significant harm is assessed and receives an appropriate, tailored service from a specialist worker.

Every community is different, every circumstance is different, every child is different. Therefore every response must be different.

The solution

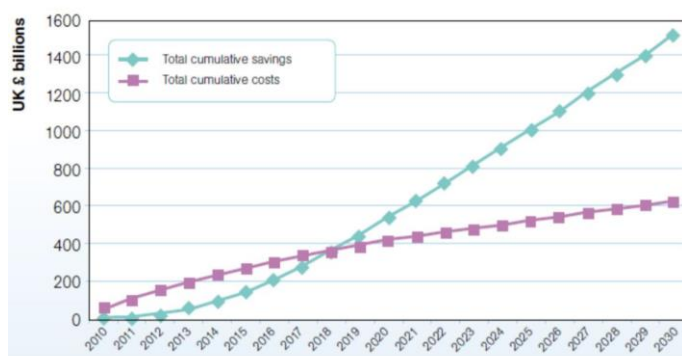
We need to support kids before they end up swimming against the tide.

The evidence is clear, investing early in a child's life has the best – and most cost effective – long-term outcomes.

The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) showed that reducing the number of children experiencing vulnerability, as measured by the Australian Early Development Index, could result in:

- A 7.5 per cent increase in GDP over 60 years¹⁴.
- Positive net returns for FACS in as little as five years¹⁵, with UK estimates showing a \$10 saving over 20 years for each dollar invested in TEI¹⁶.

Combined interventions: costs and estimated savings (£ billions)



Recommendations for next NSW Government

Address the shortfall – First and foremost, every child who is determined at risk of significant harm deserves a face-to-face response and referral to appropriate services. To fund every district in NSW, this is \$184 million for vulnerable families and 25 new specialist workers.

Measure what matters – Create clear, evidence-informed measures that assess the long-term outcome improvements for children.

Collect and analyse the right data – Improve the capture of, and access to, data to ensure that whole-of-sector and whole-of-government planning can occur.

Evidence to evaluate – Introduce an evaluation framework for responses across the entire child safety and wellbeing continuum.

Work together to achieve outcomes – Improve collaboration through transparent and accountable whole-of-government approaches working effectively with service providers and the community.

Invest in our children, fund what works – Amend program and sector funding arrangements, ensuring that long-term, evidence-informed programs in targeted earlier intervention are prioritised.

About Fams

Children are kept safe by quality services which help kids and families when and where they need it. Fams makes this possible by advocating for better public policy, advising how to achieve sustainable outcomes and acting to help vulnerable children, young people, families and communities.

¹ FACS 2017/2018 Caseworker Dashboard Q2

² FACS 2017/2018 Caseworker Dashboard Q2

³ FACS 2017/2018 Caseworker Dashboard Q2

⁴ FACS 2017/2018 Caseworker Dashboard Q2

⁵ FACS 2016/17 Northern NSW District Profile

⁶ Australian Institute of Family Studies (2018), The economic costs of child abuse and neglect.

⁷ FACS Caseworker Dashboard Q2 2017/2018

⁸ FACS District Data and Profiles 2013/14

⁹ FACS Caseworker Dashboard Q2 2016/2017

¹⁰ FACS District Data and Profiles 2013/14

¹¹ FACS Caseworker Dashboard Q2 2017/2018

¹² FACS Caseworker Dashboard Q2 2017/2018

¹³ FACS Caseworker Dashboard Q2 2016/2017

¹⁴ ARACY. (2014). The Nest agenda action: Improving the wellbeing of Australia's children and youth while growing our GDP by over 7 per cent. Canberra: Author.

¹⁵ FAMS. (2018). Investing in children and their families: The right support in the right place at the right time. Sydney: Author.

¹⁶ Aked, J., Steur, N., Lawlor, E. & Spratt, S. (2009). Backing the future: Why investing in children is good for us all. London: New Economics Foundation.