

Police views on child-abuse cases slammed

By [Jared Savage](#)

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A national inquiry into an "unacceptable" backlog of child-abuse cases has uncovered evidence that some police do not believe investigating such crimes is "real policing" and described child-abuse investigators as "poor cousins".

The Independent Police Conduct Authority yesterday released the first part of an investigation which was launched when it emerged that Wairarapa police had let 108 child-abuse files go uninvestigated for up to 11 years, with an average delay of five years. In some cases children had been living with their alleged abusers the whole time.

Justice Lowell Goddard broadened the special inquiry in December to cover all of New Zealand and yesterday said the IPCA had to report on its findings without delay.

While the police had made a number of improvements in investigating child abuse, the IPCA found:

- * The Whangarei Child Abuse Team had a small number of staff that were often required to work on other cases, including to "assist in meeting road policing targets".
- * The Eastern District was criticised for recording serious crime files as "lost" when they were not. The files were later found in a cabinet which the IPCA said may have been a "means of reducing overdue file statistics".
- * An audit of the Westport CIB found "lost files" locked in the cupboards of a detective constable who had since left the police.
- * Police using Excel spreadsheets instead of the national computer system because they lost confidence in it.
- * Evidence of references to child-abuse investigation as not being "real policing" and to child-abuse investigators as "poor cousins".

On this point, the IPCA recommended that only police with "genuine interest and aptitude" be allowed to work on child-abuse files.

One of the most pressing concerns discovered in the inquiry was that the internal police computer, the National Intelligence Application, could not be relied on to provide accurate information.

At the beginning of the inquiry, the IPCA asked for the total number of child-abuse cases held by each district and the status of the file.

The IPCA assumed it would be a "straight forward exercise" but soon discovered it was not and each police district had to carry out extensive physical audits.

In the Bay of Plenty, NIA showed the district had 2450 files of which child-abuse cases totalled 393. A physical audit showed the district in fact held 3088 files, of which 507 were child abuse.

This was because of discrepancies in how police officers entered and updated the data on the computer system.



Justice Goddard said New Zealand had a well-documented "sad history" of child abuse and the failures found by the IPCA could happen again if the shortcomings in police "practices, policies and procedures" were not fixed immediately.

"The commissioner [Howard Broad] has provided a detailed investigation action plan to urgently address matters raised in part one of the authority's investigation. I have confidence in his commitment to addressing these matters," said Justice Goddard.

The second part of the inquiry relates to specific failures in the Wairarapa and elsewhere in New Zealand, although on a lesser scale. Some of the officers involved are facing internal code of conduct proceedings.

Police Minister Judith Collins said the report confirmed there were shortcomings in child-abuse cases in parts of the Wellington District between 1999 and 2006.

While the police had worked hard to improve child-abuse inquiries – which the IPCA indicated it was satisfied with – Ms Collins said she would monitor the new processes.

Mr Broad said that the delays in the Wairarapa were "unacceptable" and Operation Scope examined 2752 files nationwide to ensure cases were being dealt with appropriately.

ONE POLICEWOMAN'S DISGUST OPENED DOOR

WHERE IT BEGAN: In April 2006, Wairarapa Detective Sue Mackle emailed her superiors saying she had an "excessive" load of about 140 files, adding "obviously child abuse is not an area of importance for the police ... most of my enquiry files have named offenders, some of whom are probably still abusing victims".

In response, Detective Sergeant Tusha Penney was asked to review the files in the Masterton office and found Ms Mackle "is effectively the Masterton child-abuse team" with 121 active files, which was "unmanageable".

A request for an investigation was rejected and nothing was done until late 2008 when it was discovered there were 108 open files in the Wairarapa region. Operation Hope was launched, discovering systemic failures which led to the IPCA inquiry in June 2009. This was extended nationwide in December.

ROTORUA: In April 2009, a complaint was made about lack of progress in an inquiry begun in February 2008. The officer involved had moved to another role. A box of 25 files was found. Most had not been entered into NIA and went back as far as 2004.

NORTHLAND: Operation Scope found child-abuse investigation was not properly resourced and information not recorded properly. Staff were often used for other duties, including road policing.

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