

# Watchdog slams police over child abuse cases

By [Edward Gay](#)

1:17 PM Tuesday May 18, 2010

A damning report into the police handling of child abuse cases shows at least one district prioritised traffic fines ahead of child abuse investigations.

The Independent Police Complaints Authority (IPCA) said another area appeared to have recorded child abuse files as lost as a "means of reducing overdue file statistics".

The IPCA inquiry followed the discovery last June of a backlog of more than 100 child abuse investigation files in the Wairarapa, where there had been little or no progress by police on the original complaint.

In December, following submissions from the public about delays in other areas, the IPCA widened its inquiry to cover the whole country and today released part one of its findings.

Police Commissioner Howard Broad said the majority of child abuse files were "being dealt with in a proper and timely manner" but he would implement as many of the authority's recommendations as quickly as possible.

[Click here for the IPCA's recommendations](#)

The report shows audits were carried out around the country and some had alarming results.

The Authority found that the Whangarei Child Abuse team had a small number of fully trained staff.

"It was noted that staff were often required to attend to other investigative work that, in some instances, included directions to assist in meeting road policing targets," the IPCA report found.

The report also found that the standard of supervision and record keeping in Northland was "not adequate".

The Gisborne police district was also criticised for filing child abuse complaints under a "generic code" that essentially meant they became lost in the system.

"The total number of files was 1,958 files, of which 37 were child abuse files or part files. There were five files within that group of 37 child abuse files which were of an unsatisfactory standard and required further work," the Authority found.

It went on to say that filing serious crimes under a generic code "represents poor practice and a risk to the organisation".

The Authority also found problems with the way victims were interviewed as some police districts shared the responsibility with Child Youth and Family.

Some areas, including the Eastern District were found by a separate internal police report to be "very poor" in their interviewing technique.

"Police staff working in Child Abuse Teams in Hastings and Napier advised that the quality of some interviews had the potential to impact negatively on the outcome of court proceedings and that Police staff



File photos / NZ HERALD

considered that they had to work to overcome such deficiencies," the Authority found.

The Authority also criticised the Eastern District for filing serious crime files as "lost" when they were not.

"The head of Operation Scope [an internal police audit] confirmed on oath that in the Eastern District child abuse files that were recorded as lost were found in a cabinet.

"It appears the files may have been recorded as lost as a means of reducing overdue file statistics," the Authority said.

An audit of files in Westport also turned up "lost files" after the Detective Constable in charge of the files left the police force in 2008.

"The review found numerous files locked in cupboards in the Detective Constable's office. Two large boxes of files were discovered, which included four historic child abuse files," the Authority said.

It found that since the audit, supervision practices in Westport had changed.

The Authority highlighted the impact of police shortcomings on the victims of child abuse.

"The service offered to children, young persons and their families and caregivers is directly affected by such matters, whether it is a general delay in investigation, a failure to investigate at all, or the failure to comply with mandatory forms such as the 'POL1060' and 'POL1065' forms.

"Such forms ensure that there is a documented record of victim liaison and ensure that victims have been given the opportunity to complete various request forms," the Authority said.

The report concluded: "It is striking that the failures in the investigation of child abuse discussed in earlier chapters were not discovered by any routine audit process, whether at the district or national level."

However, individuals within police had spoken up.

One officer told his superiors that he was carrying 140 files. In an email, sent in 2006 and published in the Authority's findings, he told his superiors what police on the ground were going through.

"My excessive file load has been widely known at a local level for years (literally), but obviously Child Abuse is not an area of importance for the Police, as opposed to other areas, such as Traffic, which is," he wrote.

He went on to say: "Most of my enquiry files have named offenders, some of whom are probably still abusing victims, but I am resigned to the fact that that's just the way it is. To keep my head above water, I remind myself of the old saying 'Just do what you can do, and don't worry about what you can't do'."

At the time, an internal police investigation found that one detective was handling 121 files and notifications with some dating back to 2002.

"It is the author's opinion that 121 active files for any individual investigator is excessive and unmanageable," the internal police report said.

It also found preliminary work had not been done on the files and was no file management system.

But despite the internal report and the wide-spread public interest, some police top brass was in denial.

The Authority cited a media report at the time quoting the local Area Commander as denying that there were 100 active child abuse investigations on the file.

Authority Chair, Justice Lowell Goddard, said the report had found failures but was not representative of all police child abuse investigations.

"But it is important to acknowledge that the failures may occur again unless shortcomings in police practices, policies, and procedures are remedied," said Justice Goddard.

She said the Authority recognised that Police had a number of positive initiatives under way to address

these shortcomings and the Authority had also received evidence of "very sound professional practice".

During the inquiry Justice Goddard also examined on oath serving police officers, and acknowledged their commitment and dedication to the investigation of child abuse throughout the country.

"The Authority has received full and unqualified support from Police staff at all levels of the organisation, and has received all information requested," said Justice Goddard.

She said the second part of the Inquiry would address more specific failures that had occurred.

Police Commissioner Howard Broad said the majority of child abuse files were "being dealt with in a proper and timely manner".

"The safety of a child is paramount in cases of child abuse. What I can say is that in all the 2752 files we looked at, the safety and protection of the child had been attended to and assured," Mr Broad said.

He said the police audit of child abuse files had been thorough and had shown some delays which were unacceptable.

Of the 2752 current and completed files found, 186 were tasked for further examination with 61 files resolved and 125 active investigations still under way.

"I don't want people to think our system is broken when it is not," he said.

He said police deal with up to 6000 cases of child abuse each year.

"I want to acknowledge the substantial commitment of police staff generally and investigators particularly to ensuring the safety of vulnerable members of our communities and to holding offenders to account.

"Our resolution rates for these crimes meet international benchmarks. We are apprehending and prosecuting these perpetrators."

He said he would implement as many of the recommendations as quickly as possible and had appointed a "taskforce" to make this possible.

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