
REDUCING POVERTY AND IMPROVING CHILD DEVELOPMENT IN WA

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SNAPSHOT

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This is a snapshot of a full report -
Reducing Poverty and Improving Child Development in WA

The full report can be accessed via:
anglicarewa.org.au/childpoverty2021



WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF POVERTY ON CHILD DEVELOPMENT?

All children in WA deserve to have the best start to life. Yet, there are over 94,000 children in WA living in poverty. The rate of child poverty in WA has been steadily rising, with the third highest poverty rate in Australia. The rate of children in WA living in severe poverty,



“THERE ARE OVER 94,000 CHILDREN IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA LIVING IN POVERTY.”

defined as living in a household with income at or below 30% of median income, has risen substantially over the last decade. WA rates poorly against national measurements of severe poverty with 11.4% of children in WA living in severe poverty in 2017/18 compared to the national rate of 6.7%..

Poverty affects children’s development in material ways, for example by limiting access to good, quality food and adequate housing, as well as in non-material ways, by putting parents and caregivers under undue distress. The first is related to the financial resources of the family i.e. their ability to provide goods and services required for healthy child development. The second is related to the detrimental effects of exposure to environmental stressors. For example, parents in economic hardship may experience psychological distress and increased conflict within the home, which can contribute to harsh, inconsistent or detached parenting.

A multi-dimensional approach to conceptualising poverty is required to understand how poverty is experienced in society. A multi-dimensional approach incorporates more than a measurement of material poverty and considers non-material poverty including social isolation, inadequate education, poor health and low self-confidence. These factors are often compounded to shape and deepen children’s experiences of deprivation.

The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) assesses children as they begin their first year of full-time school across five domains: physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills, and communication skills and general knowledge. Children living in disadvantaged areas of WA experience high rates of developmental vulnerability with 1 in 5 children assessed as developmentally vulnerable on two or more of the five domains.

Research from Harvard University’s Center on the Developing Child and other international studies shows us children’s early experiences matter to brain development and lifelong health. Early child development, family and social environments impact on an individual’s mental and physical health, learning and behaviour throughout life.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

While child poverty in WA is extensive, the solutions are straight forward. We’ve seen glimpses of them implemented already, here and elsewhere. However, they require political will and a sustained commitment to prioritise children.

1. Adequate income support for families

The current level of income support is well below the poverty line. Rates of JobSeeker and Parenting Payments were briefly increased in 2020 as an economic response to Covid-19, before being returned below the poverty line. Anglicare WA conducted a survey of parents who received the increased payments.

Parents who received the increases described how the additional income helped them catch up on bills including rent, utilities, paying off fines, and reducing credit card debt.

One parent said, 'For the first time in 6 years, I was not at risk of homelessness, having to go without food or knowing how to pay utilities'. Another said, 'I've been able to sleep better at night and my personal relationships and mental state have improved so much'.

From the parents who shared their stories with Anglicare WA, the Coronavirus Supplement had a deep and meaningful impact on their families' financial health. It also had an impact on parents' social and emotional well-being with some of the persistent stress and anxiety lifted for a short time. There is strong community support for increasing the rate of JobSeeker for parents. 78% support an increase, with 33% suggesting the rate should be slightly higher and 45% supporting a rate that was much higher.

"For the first time in 6 years, I was not at risk of homelessness, having to go without food or knowing how to pay utilities."

Parent, 2020

2. Universal access to high quality play-based Early Childhood Education and Care

The Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector provides a range of services for children based on their age and their education, care and development needs. Australia's out-of-pocket childcare costs are high by international standards and largely borne upfront at the point of service. Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre's Early Learning Disadvantage Index, shows 'children living in the most disadvantaged communities across Australia are far less likely to attend the required 15 hours of preschool and more likely to become developmentally vulnerable in their first five years of life.' Any focus on ECEC must include provisions for high quality, play-based care that supports strong adult-child engagement. Further research is needed in the area of what works, why, and for whom in early childhood education and care.

3. Targeted early intervention supports

Providing adequate income support for families and making childcare more affordable will address the material aspects of poverty. However, relieving parental stress through the provision of quality support in the community has also been shown to have a positive impact on children's development. While not explicitly focused on reducing material poverty, many parenting programs address the stressors parents face when experiencing financial hardship and the impact on families and children's development. Such parenting programs should be available to parents regardless of income or location.

4. Prioritise the rights of children and their development, health and wellbeing

There is a range of other State and Federal Government policies that could be implemented to ensure children's health, wellbeing and development. Such policies include appointing a Minister for Children, developing a Child Wellbeing Strategy, the implementation of Child Impact Assessments, and the introduction of a Child Poverty Reduction Bill. These policies are aimed at prioritising children's needs and ensuring accountability by governments when implementing policies that affect children.

Implementing these policies and programs would lift thousands of children out of poverty in WA and provide the foundations needed for the future health and wellbeing of our state. For the full report, see anglicarewa.org.au/childpoverty2021

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- II. Ibid. Cassells et al (2020) describe severe poverty as children living in households below 30% of median household income.
- III. US National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2019). A Roadmap to Reducing Child Poverty. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. p69-70.
- IV. Centre for Economic Development of Australia (2015) Addressing entrenched disadvantage in Australia. Melbourne: CEDA
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- VII. National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2020). Connecting the Brain to the Rest of the Body: Early Childhood Development and Lifelong Health Are Deeply Intertwined, Working Paper No. 15.
- VIII. Mustard, F. (2007). Early childhood development & poverty. Impact, Summer 2007, p12-14
- IX. Based on a survey conducted by Anglicare WA in June 2020 of 55 parents about the impact the Coronavirus Supplement.
- X. Based on a survey in August 2021 of over 650 people in the Perth Metro area on their views of the rate of JobSeeker.
- XI. Cassells et al 2020, p.20
- XII. See Commissioner for Children and Young People WA (2020) Child Poverty: A Call to Action and Valuing Children Initiative (2021) WA State Election Priorities.