

ANTI-POVERTY WEEK SYMPOSIUM 17 OCT 2022
LET'S WORK TOGETHER TO HALVE CHILD POVERTY BY 2030
Government House, Western Australia

TALK: POVERTY ABORIGINAL CHILD

SPEAKER: GLENDA KICKETT

Kaya, Hello: I would like to thank Kworbodok Yok, Djookan Robyn Collard for your wonderful Welcome to Country, and I too would like to acknowledge our Whadjuk Noongar people, whose land we are meeting on, and to honour my Great Grandmothers, whose karla mia, campfires are Kaarta Koombah/Djinny Bo/Kaal Dookininy – Kings Park, and Galup/Karlup – Place of Fire, Monger's Lake, and is our connection to boodjar, country.

When we talk about poverty for Aboriginal children, it is within the context of a number of social indicators, across domains of health, housing and homelessness, income, employment, law and justice, all of which are relative to issues of equity and access, of which various forms of racism and discrimination are apparent. These social and economic issues are underlying indicators of trauma, which is inter-generational, multi-generational, and trans-generational, and are the lived experiences of our people from colonisation and settler societies, that have significantly impacted our cultural and social systems, and our way of life.

The concept of poverty did not exist in our societies and for our families prior to settlement, because we cared for each other within our family groups, and lived off our environments as set out through our cultural and social systems, obligations and protocols. Poverty is a white western concept used to describe our societies, way of life and families, and the interconnected social and economic systems which is seen as our lot in life given that progressive government policies and practices defined and categorised us, and have controlled our daily lives and created a cycle of dependency on 'welfare' transmitted from one generation to another, of which the entrenched disadvantage of our people and communities is embedded within our families and communities.

Christine Choo in her report, Aboriginal Child Poverty (1990), outlined that the social indicators as mentioned above are, for Aboriginal families 'material poverty' and is secondary to that of 'non-material poverty', which are the loss of children through removal, the loss of identity, loss of spiritual and cultural heritage, the loss of contact with the land, and the loss of dignity and self-respect through oppression.

She considers that material poverty and income poverty, and non-income poverty such as housing and health, and Aboriginal people's experience of material poverty, lack of food, water and shelter, and relative poverty, lack of decent standards of material living conditions. These indicators – material and non-material, absolute and relative – indicate that Aboriginal people are by far the most disadvantage group in Australia. How can this be? Given Australia is a first world nation, but Aboriginal people face third world living standards, poor health and educational outcomes, and low employment, and low life expectancy, and are classified as fourth nations peoples within a Nation State.

Maggie Brady states that the core aspect of poverty and health as social determinants is Aboriginality itself, and it is within this context that poverty for Aboriginal people and communities is complex and multi-faceted and is across a number of domains as they intersect and compound each other. Aboriginal people and communities experience absolute poverty as 'severe deprivation of basic human needs, including food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, health, shelter, education, and access to information.

Certainly, these indicators of poverty impact on the ability of parents, grandparents, and extended family to provide appropriate care for their children, grandchildren and great grandchildren, because when you live below the defined poverty line, what becomes a priority, and your reality - paying your rent or feeding your family when your welfare payment may not cover both; or children are sent to school without breakfast, or lunch because their parents have had to pay for electricity of gas so they can have a warm shower to go to school. And because of cultural obligations, the house maybe overcrowded, and there is no money to buy food and to have three meals a day. My experiences of poverty led me to being placed into out of home care away from my family and culture, then working in education visiting Aboriginal families and hearing their stories of poverty, and to why I became a Social Worker, and working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in care, and who would hoard food because they had this ingrained sense of not knowing where they next meal would come from.

Poverty is applied as an indicator for child neglect which is one of the main reasons for why Aboriginal children come to the attention of Child Protection and are then more often to be removed from their families, cultures, and communities, and placed into out of home care away from culture and country, and their family and community. What is seen is a poor standard of living, and other issues associated with care and safety, as well as health and education which are reasons for apprehension. The Family Matters 2021 report highlights the impact of poverty, homelessness, intergenerational trauma and social exclusion on families, and inadequate responses required, and that economic disadvantage is a significant driver of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's overrepresentation in child protection systems.

The Family Matters 2021 report, also state that Western Australia has the highest representation of Aboriginal children and young people in OOHC nationally; the lowest proportion of expenditure on family support and intensive family support (5.8%); comparatively low Aboriginal pre-school attendance for 600 hours (80% of non-Indigenous rate); third highest use of permanent care orders (long-term TPPRO) for Aboriginal children (10.4 per 1,000), and with 18 Aboriginal children in care for every one non-Indigenous child, and with Aboriginal children comprising 56% of all children in care at 30 June 2020 (up from 55% in 2019).

This is alarming, and advocacy for the needs and rights for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children is minimal, in Western Australia, we do not have a peak body to provide advocacy, oversight and accountability for systems that impact our children and families, and we do not have a dedicated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children's Commissioner to pursue better services and outcomes for our children with legislative powers and oversight, and these are two areas leaders in our community continue to discuss and advocate for with government.

The Close the Gap 2021 Campaign Report outlined that there is need for holistic social and emotional wellbeing services in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and for reform through strengths-based community-led action which can be achieved when there is matching political will and investment; and to empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders and work force to provide the solutions for health and wellbeing, early intervention, and prevention services.

Dr Pat Dudgeon, a Bardi woman and Indigenous Psychologist, state that within the context of Indigenous social and emotional well-being is a collective cultural understandings and knowledge systems vital to our well-being and cultural survival. It is holistic and encompasses mental and physical health, cultural and spiritual health of which land is central to our well-being. Social, Emotional Well-Being is a positive state of mental health associated with a strong and sustaining cultural identity, community and family life that provides a source of strength against adversity, poverty, neglect and other challenges of life.

SNAICC and NATSILS, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Rights Report Card, state that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have a right to equal access to services and there needs to be urgent steps taken to address these barriers in regard to health, housing, education, mental health and disability. The Noongar Family Safety Wellbeing Council from our Roundtable report state 'we agree that Aboriginal children need to grow up safe, connected to family, community, and culture and that Aboriginal peoples' rights to autonomy and self-determination should be supported through respectful engagement and shared decision making.

Significantly, the Uluru Statement from the Heart states: Proportionally, we are the most incarcerated people on the planet. We are not innately criminal people. Our children are alienated from their families at unprecedented rates. This cannot be because we have not love for them. And our youth languish in detention in obscene numbers. They should be our hope for the future...These dimensions of our crisis tell plainly the structural nature of our problem. This is the torment of our powerlessness.

As a nation, our children are our future, but we still have a long way to go to ensure the rights and best interest of our Aboriginal and Torres Strait children, which is the responsibility of all of us. I do feel hopeful for the future with a number of local child and family service initiatives taking place across the sector, in collaboration with government which are being led by Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations in communities in regard to early intervention such as the piloting of the Aboriginal Family Led Decision Making to give voice to our families in the decisions which impact their children, and for family contact and reunification to be a reality.

Palyku woman, Dr Helen Milroy, state Our...“Children are a gift, born from country into family, ancestry and culture as enduring as the universe. Connected for eternity through love, life and spirit”.

Thank you for listening to me as we continue to talk about our children, Boorda – I will see you later.