



Commissioner for Children and Young People
Western Australia

APW22 Symposium

Let's work together to halve child poverty by 2030

Guest presentation

Child poverty in WA

My name is Jacqueline McGowan-Jones and I am the Commissioner for Children and Young People.

The role of Commissioner for Children and Young People is an independent statutory role.

The Commissioner's powers are detailed in the Commissioner for Children and Young People Act, 2006.

There are six key functions I perform in my role as Commissioner:

- **Advocating** for all children and young people;
- **Monitoring** laws, policies and practices that affect the wellbeing of children and young people;
- **Promoting and valuing the voice** of children and young people and the positive contributions they make to our society;
- **Consulting** with children and young people, parents, families and government and non-government organisations;

- **Researching** the latest trends and information that relate to children and young people; and
- **Inquiring** on behalf of children and young people about issues relating to their wellbeing.

Child poverty is a significant and persistent issue that societies globally continue to grapple with. Since the office's inception nearly 15 years ago, we have been building a compelling picture of what child vulnerability looks like, and the commonalities that contribute to poor outcomes for children and young people.

Poverty is one of the most significant markers of vulnerability that shapes a child's developmental trajectory. While there isn't an agreed on definition or measure of poverty in Australia, we are coming to understand that, particularly where children are concerned, an appropriate definition should capture the different aspects of poverty and disadvantage such as access to income, material basics, health, education, housing and food.

Consistent with these approaches, it's estimated that up to 17 per cent of all WA children are living in poverty – that's almost 90,000 children under the age of 14. Many of these children are represented in climbing numbers of children in out-of-home care, in contact with the justice system and disengaged from education and life opportunities.

Others just don't have what they need to flourish and thrive, whether this means not enough food on the table, an inability to purchase adequate school supplies or take part in activities, or not being able to visit a doctor when they need to.

We know that certain groups also experience greater rates of poverty, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and those from culturally and linguistically diverse or migrant communities.

We are now starting to see compelling data from both Speaking Out Surveys, undertaken in 2019 and 2021. These data highlight some of the disparities between groups and draw a link between material deprivation and wellbeing.

The Speaking Out Survey is one of one of the most comprehensive surveys of children and young people's views about their health and wellbeing ever undertaken in Australia.

It's designed to provide robust and representative results of children and young people's views and experiences. In 2021, over 16,500 children and young people in years 4 to 12, from all regions of WA, took part.

This survey provides me with a mechanism to consult with 1000's of children and young people around WA and ensure their views and experiences are heard, understood and respected when decisions that impact them are being made.

2021 survey data reveals that almost one-in-ten students in Year 4 to Year 12 said there was only sometimes or never enough food to eat at home when they were hungry. Of these, Aboriginal students were much more likely to not have enough food at home, with almost one-in-five Aboriginal students across the state sometimes or never having enough food to eat.

Survey data also shows that children and young people who sometimes go hungry are 2 times more likely to not like school, 3 times more likely to have poor health and 4 times more likely to have low life satisfaction.

Having your own laptop or tablet is critical for high school students to be able to do homework and access information and services. However, more than one-in-ten high school students across WA do not have their own laptop, computer or tablet. For Aboriginal students, access is even lower, with around one-quarter of not having these items.

Internet access at home is also considered essential. While almost all children and young people across the state have this, Aboriginal children and young people are less likely to have access than non-Aboriginal children and young people.

We know that this is related in-part to a greater proportion of Aboriginal children and young people living in remote areas where there is less access to the internet, but - Aboriginal students in remote areas were still significantly less likely than non-Aboriginal students in those same areas to have access to the internet.

As we all know, there is a lot more to the child poverty story in this state. Reducing child poverty is about the fundamental right to grow up healthy, happy, learning and safe. All children deserve a chance to thrive, and we have a collective responsibility to ensure this happens.

There is a moral and ethical dimension to this debate that cannot be ignored any longer.

<ENDS>

Measuring child poverty and a wellbeing strategy for WA

Using a rights and wellbeing framework, we need to re-position our understanding of child poverty to more accurately capture the multidimensional aspects of vulnerability and disadvantage.

In Tasmania, the Child and Youth Wellbeing Framework was proposed using strong economic arguments that highlighted the eventual economic benefits of keeping our children healthy, happy, safe and connected, and learning.

I strongly believe that a wellbeing framework will enable us to effectively measure and monitor child poverty and drive the strategies to address and achieve a reduction in it.

CCYP's efforts to address child poverty sit across four areas:

1. Advocating for the development of a Child Poverty Reduction Bill
2. Advocating for measures to reduce family poverty and the impacts of poverty on children

3. Advocating for a comprehensive Child and Family Wellbeing Strategy to be developed and implemented.
4. Advocating strongly for the needs of Aboriginal children and young people, and for other children and young people suffering vulnerability and disadvantage.

The importance of data

A child and family wellbeing strategy should be underpinned by an appropriate child poverty measure.

The measure should reflect the experiences of children experiencing poverty and disadvantage, informed by an economic, wellbeing and rights approach.

My office has also been guided by the work undertaken in NZ in seeking to understand what a child poverty measure could look like here, and how it fits withing a broader wellbeing strategy. New Zealand have had successes in setting and reviewing targets for reducing child poverty using more traditional **primary measures (household income)**, as well as **Child Poverty Related Indicators (CPRIs)**.

Legislated by the *Child Poverty Reduction Act* (NZ) the government is required to report on **primary** poverty measures – income and material hardship, but then also on **poverty-related** indicators, like housing affordability and quality, food insecurity, regular school attendance and hospitalisation rates.

While we would certainly need to adapt New Zealand’s model of measuring child poverty to take account of our very different state / federal context, the approach could be replicated here. We have the datasets – SOS and others, and a wellbeing monitoring framework that could be adapted.

A wellbeing strategy

Similarly to Tasmania, New Zealand’s Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy provides a unifying framework and way of aligning efforts to address child wellbeing from which we can learn.

The economic benefit of this approach cannot be underestimated, and must be balanced with the costs of late intervention.

Clear links between all strategies and policies is required. Independent strategies tackling a single issue rarely have a substantial impact, for example, the Homelessness Strategy has a

very heavy focus on rough sleepers but the fastest growing demographic of people experiencing homelessness is single women aged 50 and over.