

The second edition of *The State of Western Australia's Children and Young People* highlights important information to increase our understanding about the wellbeing of children and young people.

The data collected in this report shows that most Western Australian children are healthy and their material and physical needs are well met. Generally, WA compares well against national and international data.

However, this report identifies some areas of wellbeing where Western Australian children and young people are behind national and international trends.

The report also highlights areas where improved data collection systems could be introduced to provide a stronger evidence base for decisions regarding policy development, resource allocation and service delivery.

Of most concern, the report identifies the ongoing and, at times, significant disadvantage which continues to be experienced by many Aboriginal children and young people.

### **Western Australia's children and young people**

In 2013 there were more than 570,000 children and young people under the age of 18 years living in WA. Over the last decade, the number of 0 to 17 year-olds in Western Australia increased by almost 90,000, or 18.5 per cent. The largest increase (28.5%) occurred in the early childhood age group of 0 to eight years.

There were more than 34,000 births registered in Western Australia in 2013, the largest number ever recorded in the State. This is a continuation of the large increase in births in recent years (there was a 43 per cent increase in births between 2002 and 2012).

### **Health and Safety**

**Pregnancy** – The number of Western Australian women who do not smoke during pregnancy continues to increase and is now at 87.9 per cent, one percentage point higher than the Australian average (2011 data). The proportion of women abstaining from alcohol during pregnancy continues to increase in WA and is now at 50.1 per cent (2010 data), slightly higher than the national average of 48.7 per cent.

**Birth** – The incidence of low birth weight has decreased in recent years to 6.0 per cent (2011 data), which is similar to national and OECD country averages. The infant mortality rate is trending downwards and is now at 2.5 per 1,000 live births (2012 data). WA's infant mortality rate is lower than the Australian rate (3.3 in 2012), and this has been the case since 2007.

**Early health** – Immunisation rates for Western Australian children aged 12 to 15 months and 24 to 27 months have remained largely unchanged at close to 90 per cent over the past eight years. There has been a significant increase in the rate of children aged 60 to 63 months who are fully immunised, with the 2013 rate of 89.7 per cent the highest recorded. The 2013 rates of immunisation in WA are lower than the rates for Australia overall, with the difference ranging from 0.6 to 2.1 per cent over the first three immunisation stages.

**Physical activity and body weight** – Less than one-half (48.9%) of five to 15 year-olds in WA met the recommended amount of physical activity in 2012, though there was improvement compared to recent years. Just over three-quarters (77.9%) of Western Australian children and young people aged five to 15 years are not obese or overweight, which is at the lower end of the range observed since 2006 (77.3% to 82.5%).

Mental health – It continues to be of concern that there is no adequate or reliable data which accurately reflects the extent of mental health problems and disorders among Western Australian children and young people. WA hospital data shows a significant increase in the rate for children and young people aged 0 to 17 years who were discharged from a public or private hospital with a mental health diagnosis between 2007 and 2012 (from 784 children and young people in 2007 to 1,302 in 2012). The incidence of hospitalisation from self-harm fluctuated in recent years with a low of 205 hospitalisations in 2008 and a high of 442 in 2012.

Domestic violence, child abuse and neglect – The number of domestic violence incidents attended by police and at which a child or young person was present increased from 16,178 in 2008–9 to 23,832 in 2012–13. In 2011–12, 4.7 Western Australian children per 1,000 population were subject to a substantiated notification of abuse or neglect. This is the highest rate recorded for WA but was significantly lower than the Australia-wide rate (7.4 per 1,000). At 30 June 2012 there were 3,400 children in out-of-home care, a rate of 6.1 per 1,000. This is the highest rate recorded in WA but lower than the national rate of 7.7 per 1,000.

Injuries – The rate of hospitalisation from injury and poisoning increased between 2005 and 2012, with falls the most common injury for children aged less than 13 years, and transport accidents the most common for young people aged 13 to 17 years. The rate of death from injury and poisoning has decreased in recent years. The most common causes of death are transport accidents (41.2% of deaths), followed by intentional self-harm (17.7%).

## Education

Early education – Almost all three to eight year-olds in WA engage in informal learning activities with their parents and more than one-half of three to eight year-olds are being read to or told a story by their parents every day of the week. In addition, more than 98 per cent of four-year olds in WA are enrolled in Kindergarten. Twenty-three per cent of five year-old children in WA were considered developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains in 2012. This is an improvement on the percentage of 24.7 per cent reported in 2009.

Educational attainment – The percentage of Western Australian school students attaining the minimum standard for literacy and numeracy increased for almost all year levels between 2008 and 2013. The number of young people not participating in education, employment or training has decreased from 10.5 per cent in 2008 to 5.8 per cent in 2013.

## Material Wellbeing

Parental income – In WA, the proportion of people in families with dependent children living in a low-income household nearly halved between 2003–04 and 2011–12. The proportion is also lower than the national figures. The proportion of children who are living in homes where a parent is jobless has also decreased, though the proportion of jobless single-parent families with children (37.2%) is far higher than the proportion of jobless couple families (3.1%).

Housing – 6.7 per cent of Western Australian children and young people live in homes that are considered to be overcrowded, which is lower than the national average of 9.5 per cent. It is estimated that in 2011 there were 1,491 children aged 0 to 11 years who were homeless in Western Australia, along with 934 young people aged 12 to 18 years, a total of 2,425 children and young people. This figure is similar to the 2006 estimate of homeless children and young people (2,389).

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## Family and Peer Relationships

The previous edition of this report contained two measures in this domain. Some of the data sources for these measures have changed and the measures were moved to other domains. The lack of measures in this domain does not represent any reduced significance of this aspect of children and young people's wellbeing, but rather reflects the complex nature of these relationships and the difficulty in identifying and collating relevant data.

## Participation

**Sport and cultural activities** – In 2012 63.6 per cent of Western Australian children and young people aged 5 to 14 years participated in at least one organised sport activity, and 74.4 per cent participated in at least one cultural activity. Both of these rates are higher than the national rate and the WA rate recorded previously. However, participation rates do vary. For example, children living with a single-parent who is unemployed and culturally and linguistically diverse children both have lower participation rates.

**Internet** – Almost 90 per cent of children and young people aged 5 to 14 years accessed the Internet in the 12 months to April 2012, and 90 per cent of this group used the Internet for educational purposes. More than one-third of children living in the most disadvantaged communities in WA did not access the Internet.

## Subjective Wellbeing

The most common concerns for children and young people in WA who contacted the Kids Helpline in 2012 were mental health concerns (21.3%) and family relationships (19.4%). Kids Helpline recorded a 25 per cent increase in the number of counselling sessions provided to Western Australian children and young people between 2011 and 2012.

## Behaviours and Risks

**Smoking** – 2011 data shows that 77.4 per cent of Western Australian secondary students aged 12 to 17 years had never smoked, which is similar to the national average. The prevalence of smoking among WA 12 to 17 year-olds has declined strongly since 1996.

**Alcohol consumption** – 2011 data shows that almost one in four Western Australian students aged 12 to 17 years (23.9%) had never tried alcohol compared to one in ten students in 1996 (10.3%). However, for those students who drank in the last week (current drinkers) there has been an increase in drinking at risky levels. Almost half (45.9%) of 16 to 17 year-old current drinkers drank at risky levels. WA's rates of alcohol use among students are slightly higher than the national rates across all measured categories. As with smoking, students in regional WA are more likely to have consumed alcohol across all surveyed categories.

**Births to teenage mothers** – Between 2007 and 2013 there was a decrease in births to Western Australian teenage mothers aged 17 years and younger, from 442 to 294. The decrease was most pronounced for 16 year-olds where the number of births dropped from 135 to 74, a 45.2 per cent change.

**Contact with the justice system** – The rate of 10 to 17 year-olds in detention in 2013 (0.61 per 1,000) is lower than all previous WA rates since 2008 but significantly higher than the national average (0.33 per 1,000). WA's rate of detention for young people has consistently exceeded all other states and territories, with the exception of the Northern Territory. The rate of detention on a community supervision order was lower in 2012 (3.2 per 1,000) than all but one year since 2006 (the 2007 rate was 3.05 per 1,000).

The data on arrests and police bail shows that the number of children and young people arrested was highest in 2009–10, and in subsequent years has decreased considerably. In 2012–13, there were 4,003 arrests, compared to 5,982 in 2009–10. This mirrors an overall downwards trend in offending rates in WA and also an overall decrease in youth offending rates in Australia between 2008–09 and 2012–13. Aboriginal children and young people and males are over-represented.

## Environment

Access to parks and facilities – On average, across all local government areas, 33.6 per cent of children and young people aged five to 14 years lived within 400 metres of a playground. Depending on the local government area, between six and 53 per cent of children and young people aged five to 14 years live within 400 metres walking distance from a park with playground equipment.

Air and drinking water quality – From 2006–07 to 2011–12, all licenced water providers were fully compliant with microbiological and health-related chemical guidelines for licenced water schemes. Around 90 Aboriginal communities are serviced by the Remote Area Essential Services Program. From 2006 to 2012 there were a number of occasions where microbiological guidelines were exceeded in these communities, with remediation taken. Air quality in Perth is generally good, with relatively few days where the national standards are exceeded.

## Aboriginal children and young people

The Australian Bureau of Statistics estimates that 36,000 (6.7%) of children and young people in WA are Aboriginal. More than 40 per cent of the total population of Aboriginal people in WA are aged under 18 years. Around 60 per cent of Aboriginal children and young people live outside the Perth metropolitan area compared to 22 per cent of non-Aboriginal children and young people.

While there has been recent improvement in some areas, such as NAPLAN reading results and immunisation rates, Aboriginal children and young people continue to be significantly disadvantaged in several areas of wellbeing.

The following is a description of some key areas of concern. The status of Aboriginal children and young people's wellbeing is outlined in detail in each measure of this report where relevant data was available.

Pregnancy – Aboriginal women are significantly more likely to smoke during pregnancy than non-Aboriginal women (54.9% of Aboriginal women in WA did not smoke during pregnancy, compared to 89.8% of non-Aboriginal women).

Birth – While there has been a slight drop in the proportion of Aboriginal babies who are born at a low birth weight, from 13.7 in 2009 to 13.0 in 2011, Aboriginal babies continue to be more than twice as likely to be of low birth weight compared to all Western Australian babies. The infant mortality rate for Aboriginal babies is two (female babies) to three times (male babies) higher than that of all babies.

Early health – For Aboriginal children, the rate of immunisation at 12 to 15 months is significantly lower than for non-Aboriginal children (81.2% compared to 90.4%). By 24 to 27 months and 60 to 63 months the gap closes, and rates are almost identical. Aboriginal children are more than twice as likely to suffer ear diseases and hearing problems as non-Aboriginal children.

Births to teenage mothers – The teenage fertility rate for Aboriginal women aged 15 to 19 years increased over the last decade. Aboriginal women accounted for about 33 per cent of births in the up to 17 years age group. The median age of Aboriginal women who give birth is 24.7 years, more than five years lower than the median age of all mothers (30.3 years).

Injury – Aboriginal young people are more likely than non-Aboriginal young people to be hospitalised for intentional self-harm. Aboriginal children are more likely to be hospitalised for an injury and are ten times more likely to experience interpersonal violence.

Family and domestic violence, child abuse and neglect – Aboriginal children and young people are significantly overrepresented in family and domestic violence related incidents reported to WA Police (around one-third involve Aboriginal children and young people). Aboriginal children and young people are more likely to be the subject of a substantiated notification of abuse or neglect than non-Aboriginal children. In WA, the rate for Aboriginal children who were the subject of a substantiated notification increased from 20.7 per 1,000 in 2010 to 24.4 per 1,000 in 2012, more than 13 times the rate for non-Aboriginal children. The rate for Aboriginal children in out-of-home care was 51.6 per 1,000 children, more than 15 times the rate for non-Aboriginal children.

Early education – Aboriginal children are significantly more likely to be developmentally vulnerable when entering school – 49 per cent were considered developmentally vulnerable on at least one domain in 2012, though this is an improvement on the 2009 result of 52.3 per cent. In 2013, just over one-third of Aboriginal children were regular attendees at government-run Kindergarten and Pre-Primary, compared with over 70 per cent of non-Aboriginal children.

Educational attainment – Despite some recent improvements in NAPLAN results there remains a considerable gap between the proportion of Aboriginal students achieving the minimum standards compared to that of the overall year group in all tested subject areas. In 2013, 74.6 per cent of Aboriginal students participated in education, employment and/or training in the year they turned 17, compared to over 92.0 per cent of all WA students of the same age.

Housing – The ABS estimates that in WA more than one-quarter of Aboriginal children aged 0 to three years (26.0%) and more than one-third of Aboriginal children aged four to 14 years (34.8%) are living in overcrowded conditions. Aboriginal people are significantly overrepresented in homelessness. In WA in 2011, Aboriginal people represented more than one-third (35.2%) of all people who were homeless.

Youth justice – In 2012, Aboriginal children and young people were 40 times more likely to be in detention than non-Aboriginal children. This means that of the 160 children and young people in custody on an average day in 2012, 113 (or more than two-thirds) were Aboriginal.

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## Conclusion

This report is intended to be a practical document that increases access to data and information concerning the many complex factors impacting on Western Australian children and young people's wellbeing.

It is recommended this report be read with the companion report *Building Blocks: Best practice programs to improve children and young people's wellbeing*.

Further information concerning how Western Australian children and young people are faring is available in the following two comparison tables:

- Appendix 1 – How Western Australia's children and young people compare with other Australian states and territories
- Appendix 2 – How Aboriginal children and young people compare