

# MISSING OUT MATTERS: CHILD POVERTY IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA



Commissioner for Children and Young People  
Western Australia

## Recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People

The Commissioner for Children and Young People WA acknowledges the unique contribution of Aboriginal people's culture and heritage to Western Australian society. For the purposes of this report, the term 'Aboriginal' encompasses Western Australia's diverse language groups and also recognises those of Torres Strait Islander descent. The use of the term 'Aboriginal' in this way is not intended to imply equivalence between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, though similarities do exist.

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# UP TO 17%\*

## of Western Australia's 610,000 children and young people are estimated to be living in poverty.

**Measures of poverty are varied and contested, and this is part of the challenge in understanding and addressing the impacts on children and young people.**

Child poverty means the deprivation of material basics, including adequate food, clothing, or safe and secure housing.

There are children and young people experiencing the impacts of poverty across metropolitan, regional and remote areas of Western Australia.

Many children experiencing poverty live in families where parents and caregivers work hard to make sure nobody goes without, but children still absorb feelings of shame, stigma and isolation. Other parents and caregivers are not able to cope with the immense strain of living in poverty, which significantly undermines their capacity to provide a loving and supportive home environment.

These risk factors can alter a child's developmental trajectory.

The international perspectives on child poverty published by the Children's Commissioner for England, Anne Longfield OBE, in her report *Child poverty: the crisis we can't keep ignoring* prompted the WA Commissioner for Children and Young People to seek local voices on this global issue. The Commissioner's office acknowledges the Children's Commissioner for England as the inspiration for this publication.

The contributions published on the following pages universally acknowledge the rights of all children and young people to be healthy, happy and safe, and are intended not only to highlight child poverty as a critical issue, but also offer some solutions to address it.

Each contribution has been provided individually and has not been edited prior to publication. The Commissioner acknowledges the advocacy of all contributors in addressing child poverty in WA. The words on the following pages are their own.

\*Data from Profile of Children and Young People in WA 2021, Commissioner for Children and Young People WA





# FATIMA MERCHANT

WA Youth Awards 2021 Participate Award recipient

In Western Australia, child poverty and mental wellbeing revolve in an insidious cycle where the improvement of mental wellbeing is preceded by the alleviation of poverty and the alleviation of poverty is preceded by the improvement of mental wellbeing. The burden of navigating this cannot be placed on the shoulders of vulnerable children and young people, it is imperative that our government and communities take action.

**"If you are lower on the social ladder, and if you are poorer, then you are more likely to experience poor health."**

In the lives of children and young people, poverty and disadvantage are influential drivers of social exclusion, disengagement and worse mental health outcomes. There are numerous consequences of ongoing and long-term poor mental health including the struggles of managing symptoms such as disruptions to behaviour and the creation of tensions within families.

A key impact of child poverty is a lack of access to services that may assist in navigating challenges and maintaining mental wellbeing, a concern that has been compounded in light of the global COVID-19 pandemic. Irene Verins, Mental Wellbeing Manager at The Victorian Health Promotion Foundation outlines that socioeconomic disadvantage is clearly associated with poorer mental health, detailing that "if you are lower on the social ladder, and if you are poorer, then you are more likely to experience poor health".

**“The likelihood of disengagement from school in the face of poverty is exacerbated by feelings of hesitancy, lower self-esteem and the fear of exclusion from peers based on the manifestations of socioeconomic disadvantage in more subtle ways such as differences in lunches and school uniforms.”**

When child poverty is a consideration, the likelihood of accessing both clinical services such as general practitioners and support organisations such as Beyond Blue and Lifeline decreases notably. Furthermore, for many children and young people a safe, enjoyable and meaningful experience at school is often restricted by child poverty.

Wendy Smith, Head of Policy and Programs at The Smith Family details that “intuitively you think Australia is the land of opportunity and all kids have access to education. But the data shows really clearly that kids growing up in disadvantaged households have much poorer (educational) development at school start than their more advantaged peers.”

Limited access to support services and family circumstances that do not allow for additional learning assistance curtail progression through the education system,

significantly limiting the potential for the development of key competencies such as financial literacy and stable employment into the future. The likelihood of disengagement from school in the face of poverty is exacerbated by feelings of hesitancy, lower self-esteem and the fear of exclusion from peers based on the manifestations of socioeconomic disadvantage in more subtle ways such as differences in lunches and school uniforms.

Our children and young people cannot and should not be responsible for navigating the destructive cyclical relationship between mental health and poverty. The onus falls upon our government and communities to take action.



# COL BLANCH APM

Deputy Commissioner, Western Australia Police Force

**Child poverty is a critical global issue and can be experienced as a brief episode or for many years and be caused by a range of circumstances. The effects of poverty include unstable housing, food insecurity, family conflict, poor nutrition and health, escalating and unmanageable debt, ongoing hardship and stressful, chaotic living and deprived living circumstances.**

People from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and culturally and linguistically diverse communities often experience poverty at greater rates than the general community, compounding their already deep and persistent disadvantage.

Unfortunately, children living in these circumstances can be exposed to volatile, unpredictable and often violent, highly stressful environments. This exposure can have negative flow-on effects limiting their learning and social, emotional and physical health.

At times, the causes and consequences of poverty result in criminal behaviour. WA Police Force frontline officers can confirm the links between poverty and crime on a daily basis. Many incidents of property or drug crimes, serious assaults, family violence, traffic offences, manslaughter and homicides involve offenders and/or victims from disadvantaged families.

Criminal behaviour can be motivated by attempting to supplement low incomes, or as a result of living with intolerable stress, chaotic environments and poor coping skills.

For Aboriginal people, poverty is closely linked to their involvement with the criminal justice system. Financial penalties or imprisonment creates additional financial hardship, inextricably linking poverty and crime. Therefore, measures which alleviate poverty can reduce the risk of criminal activity and the use of diversionary or alternative sentencing options can reduce the financial burden on people.

Further, addressing the unmet social determinants of crime can significantly reduce involvement in the criminal justice system.

Taking action to reduce child poverty must be a high priority to ensure poverty does not become entrenched for any individual or group of people. It is recommended consideration be given to the following, all of which have an association with crime:

- Targeted support to prevent young people disengaging from school is essential to protect children's futures. Proactive interventions and appropriate environments that suit their learning and cultural needs are required. This approach can significantly reduce their involvement with the justice system.
- Mental health funding and focus, with access to increased, sustainably funded services that are culturally safe and accessible to all who need them, including regional and remote areas of WA using a variety of delivery styles. Increasing appropriate support can have a significant impact on involvement with the justice system.
- Consider pilot sites for justice reintegration, an innovative approach to crime which sees funds diverted from prison buildings into communities needing diversionary options. Identified suburbs/districts with low resources and high prisoner rates are injected with services to address their unmet social needs that are drivers for crime. Justice reintegration has been used successfully in Australia and overseas.
- Particular focus on Aboriginal communities (designed and led by Aboriginal people) to address housing, transport, health and educational needs. With priorities determined by local Aboriginal community leaders,

**"It is vital to address unmet needs to reduce people's vulnerability to the continuing cycle of poverty, unemployment, family stress and crime. Fines and imprisonment create even further hardship for families with children and often lead to worsening, entrenched poverty."**

provide access to training and employment opportunities through lasting partnerships between governments, Aboriginal people and the corporate sector would benefit. These kinds of programs can significantly reduce involvement with the justice system.

- Mentoring of Aboriginal students to promote and support continued education, including scholarships to develop the trained Aboriginal workforce that is going to be increasingly required. Having trained Aboriginal personnel to work with communities can positively influence lives and reduce involvement with the justice system.

It is vital to address unmet needs to reduce people's vulnerability to the continuing cycle of poverty, unemployment, family stress and crime. Fines and imprisonment create even further hardship for families with children and often lead to worsening, entrenched poverty.

While much of these roles don't fall to a single agency, the WA Police Force strongly supports a Child Wellbeing Strategy and working in partnership with other agencies to actively target socio-economic disadvantage and reducing the numbers of children living in poverty.



# PROFESSOR HELEN MILROY

WA 2021 Australian of the Year

There is increasing evidence for the significant negative impact poverty, deprivation and adverse childhood experiences can have on child development and wellbeing. These risk factors often occur together and can lead to a cascade of impacts across development and have a cumulative impact across the lifespan. In addition, there is also increasing evidence regarding the way brain development occurs in early childhood and the ability of the brain to adapt and respond to experience as well as recovery.

The most compelling evidence, however, tells us that the greatest hope for healthy development as well as recovery from injury comes from supporting prevention, and early intervention, especially in regard to early in age as well as early in distress or illness. This means to get the best outcomes across the lifespan for our population, we must invest in children. It is much harder and far more expensive

**“Every child deserves the opportunity to thrive, and we have the capacity to make this happen.”**

to try and fix problems down the track in adolescence and adulthood, when we know the damage is already accumulating and less likely to be amenable to full recovery.

We also know that building resilience in early childhood, assists in protecting us from the impact of adversity or ill-health later in life.

The science is very clear, early childhood is a time of great potential as well as great vulnerability.

**“Children do not have a choice regarding the circumstances they are born into, nor some of the early life experiences they are exposed to. Often these cycles of poverty, trauma, and disadvantage are generational. Each time we fail to provide the support and opportunities necessary for healthy development in one generation, we are just creating a cumulative impact for the next generation of children to experience.”**

As a society, we have a choice regarding how we invest in our population to achieve the highest standard of health and wellbeing which will give our communities the ability to thrive and our peoples the ability to contribute as citizens.

Children do not have a choice regarding the circumstances they are born into, nor some of the early life experiences they are exposed to. Often these cycles of poverty, trauma, and disadvantage are generational. Each time we fail to provide the support and opportunities necessary for healthy development in one generation, we are just creating a cumulative impact for the next generation of children to experience.

Ensuring the safety and wellbeing of our children is everyone's business and should not be dependent on who they are, where they come from, where they live, nor what we think of their parents.

Australia is a very fortunate country especially in these uncertain times. We have wealth and prosperity in abundance. We have the knowledge and means to ensure our children have the best start in life and greatest capacity to thrive across all areas of development. If we ignore the plight of our children, we put at risk our future.

The evidence is also clear that modest investments in supporting children's health and wellbeing will not only lead to cost savings down the track through reductions in illness, unemployment and other issues but also contribute to even greater prosperity through increased productivity.

Every child deserves the opportunity to thrive, and we have the capacity to make this happen.



# PROFESSOR JONATHAN CARAPETIS AM

Executive Director, Telethon Kids Institute

At the Telethon Kids Institute, our vision is “happy, healthy, kids”, and everything we do is geared to improve the health, development and lives of children and young people. Sadly, we know that for some children poverty will prevent them leading the happy and healthy life they deserve.

**“Economically, the value of investing in early intervention to prevent long term disadvantage is compelling.”**

The importance of reliable data in understanding the extent and impact of child poverty is almost impossible to overstate. The sustained collection of population data, particularly at a national level, helps us identify those children and their families who need our help, but the role data play goes even further. We need to dig deeper than those statistics to ensure we understand the underlying causes of poverty and the complex ways it imposes barriers to optimal child health, development and wellbeing. Strengthening the use of new and more sophisticated population datasets will help us design interventions that are more effective in supporting vulnerable children and families to navigate a path away from poverty and deliver better health and social outcomes across the life course.

Measures such as the Child Poverty Index introduced in New Zealand play a useful role, and should be explored here in Australia, but there are also exciting developments happening



**"Investment, however, must be based on world class research that helps to pinpoint those measures that will be most effective in lifting children out of poverty to improve their lives and reduce the burden on our social services."**

right here in WA. At Telethon Kids we are exploring the use of newly available geospatial datasets to quantify the social determinants of poverty and identify those measures that make a real difference to children's lives. We know that early intervention in the 0-to-5 years is the key.

Economically, the value of investing in early intervention to prevent long term disadvantage is compelling. We know that children who have lived in poverty become adults who are more likely to have long term debilitating health needs and are more likely to intersect with our community services and justice systems.

That investment, however, must be based on world class research that helps to pinpoint those measures that will be most effective in lifting children out of poverty to improve their lives and reduce the burden on our social services. This is where research works best – where it is "useful and used" to drive real change to improve the lives of children and their families.

At Telethon Kids, we firmly believe that we work better when we work with others. We are keen to work with government and industry in a coordinated way to deliver supported interventions during the early years so that children are ready for school entry and set on a pathway to success. In WA we can proudly point to compulsory pre-primary attendance and strong support for kindergarten and playgroups as key early intervention measures that put children on the right track to better health, educational and social outcomes.

We must put supporting children in poverty at the forefront of our public policy agenda, particularly as we brace ourselves to deal with the long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on household incomes. Telethon Kids is ready and eager to play its part in delivering breakthrough knowledge through independent, world class research, to drive change and improve the lives of our most valuable resource, our children.



# DR CASTA TUNGARAZA

Ambassador for Commissioner for Children and Young People

**My work with new and emerging culturally and linguistically (CaLD) communities in Australia, particularly African communities from refugee backgrounds has given me greater insight into the compounded impact of poverty on children and young people from more vulnerable groups in our society.**

African children and young people experience unique challenges that require appropriate settlement services and strategies aimed at empowerment and integration in order to mitigate child poverty.

When discussing the cause of child poverty with African communities, a common pattern emerges – it starts from experiences of children, young people and/or their families coming from refugee camps, or living in safe third countries on a refugee status before coming to Australia. Moving from their countries of origin and continuous mobility from place to place de-stabilises families and individuals, causes detachment and disrupts social networks.

**“When discussing the cause of child poverty with African communities, a common pattern emerges.”**

Their traumatic experiences and hardships are compounded by growing up in a new environment, often with single parents or siblings taking on the role of parents and at the same time facing all other challenges that ‘refugee’ settlement brings.

Underlying child poverty issues and the negative impacts experienced by children and young people in the African communities

include unemployment, exclusion, discrimination, alienation, mental health issues, marriage breakdown, domestic violence, alcohol abuse, remarriage and changes in family structure, language barriers, homelessness, contact with the justice system, bullying, disrupted family life, 'perceived' loss of parenting powers, level of education and sense of insecurity, just to mention a few.

Strong leadership and will are essential to address these societal and institutionalised causes of poverty, in order to mitigate child poverty in our society.

Settlement strategies should be aimed at removing barriers to successful integration and creating empowerment.

Considering the entrenched nature of the problem, a whole of government poverty reduction strategy needs to be developed and implemented using a human rights approach.

It should be noted that significant differences exist between and within groups, therefore there is no 'one size fits all' approach to solving child poverty in African communities.

However, child poverty is preventable through a human rights-based approach to poverty reduction and a commitment to and respect of the rights of the child. Settlement programs should lead to empowerment and effective integration.

Effective strategies to prevent this problem in our society require decision makers at every level to be mindful of some of the cultural issues and to be aware of the systemic issues that need to be addressed.

In relation to the design and development of effective intervention programs it is suggested that:

- Communities are consulted to ensure that where appropriate, culturally-specific competencies are included in the strategies to ensure sustainability of implementation.
- Those developing programs listen to children and young people themselves, as they are experts of their own experiences and their opinion matters in developing solutions. You cannot solve what you don't know.
- Education and professional development is provided in both African cross-cultural competence and children's rights. This should be an ongoing focus for services dealing with child safety.
- We work with families and extended family networks to achieve holistic poverty prevention programs for individuals and to develop lasting, sustainable solutions.
- We work with elders and parents with the ability to explain African cultural values and practices, to attain a realistic understanding of the cultural aspects of poverty that need to be incorporated into the strategies being developed.

**"Child poverty is preventable through a human rights-based approach to poverty reduction and a commitment to and respect of the rights of the child. Settlement programs should lead to empowerment and effective integration."**



# DAVID CAIN

Western Australian Co-Chair, Anti-Poverty Week 2021

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## **Child and family poverty – Australia's permanent lockdown.**

Much has been said about child and family poverty over many decades. The experience of poverty brings with it the likelihood of poor lifelong outcomes in areas including health, education, and socio-economic mobility.

In many ways, poverty is like living in a permanent lockdown. The ability to do things that are foundational to life are taken away from you; decisions that affect your life are made for you. Poverty erodes our integrity and ambition as a nation.

**"In many ways, poverty is like living in a permanent lockdown."**

Anti-Poverty Week supports the Australian community to have an increased understanding of poverty and to take action collectively to end it. It brings together a diverse network of individuals and organisations who share this common purpose.

The event has taken place every year since 2002 in the week of the United Nations Day for the Eradication of Poverty on 17 October. Thousands of Australians from across many communities, urban and rural, take action to raise awareness of poverty, or reduce it.

Poverty exists. Poverty hurts us all. We can all do something about it. Ours is a message of hope, not despair.

Poverty is not inevitable. There are many policy and program ideas that can reduce the impacts of poverty on people, communities and the nation. The outcomes achieved in 2020 by increasing income support in response to COVID-19 was a great example of this.

This measure enabled many thousands of families and children to participate more fully in society, lifting them out of the cycle of poverty, providing better access to healthcare needs and improving employability.

Poverty can be solved if we as a society choose to reduce it. A permanent increase to income support is critical to achieving this goal. Anti-Poverty Week supports the Raise the Rate for Good campaign and calls on the Federal Government to take this measure immediately.

Most Australians still believe that Australia is a great place to live. However, there is noticeably less support for the belief that “In Australia, if you work hard you can be successful, no matter what circumstances you were born into” than there was two years ago (down from 69% in 2019 to 57% in 2021). This is a significant change in the way people see the fairness of our society and the systems within it.

Many Western Australians work hard, but feel themselves tethered to the foot of the economic ladder.

The second critical change that must occur is a significant increase to social housing to meet the basic needs of children and families. The need for a national plan to increase the availability of social housing is made all the more important as a result of the structural and economic affects of COVID on rental availability and housing prices. The West Australian government’s much welcomed announcement in September 2021 to increase investment in social housing by a further \$875m is a significant and material development.

**“Poverty is not inevitable. There are many policy and program ideas that can reduce the impacts of poverty on people, communities and the nation. The outcomes achieved in 2020 by increasing income support in response to COVID-19 was a great example of this.”**

The interconnections of poverty and family and domestic violence on women, children and housing are complex. In 2017 the Australian Council of Trade Unions released figures which showed that leaving a violent relationship cost an average \$18,000 and took 141 hours of planning.

Anti-Poverty Week supports the Everybody’s Home campaign which outlines five areas to build a fairer housing system.

The Commissioner’s calls for national legislation to reduce child poverty would be a major reform to improve the wellbeing of vulnerable children. Equally is the proposal to develop a Child Wellbeing Strategy to articulate a statewide approach to the priorities, procurement and policies required to lift all children in our state out of poverty.

Poverty exists. Poverty hurts us all. We can all do something about it.



# PROFESSOR DONNA CROSS

Program Head, Development and Education, Telethon Kids Institute

**Despite overall national economic prosperity, a substantial number of Australians are being ‘left behind’, with children from single parent households at most risk of experiencing persistent disadvantage.<sup>1-3</sup>**

Financial hardship experienced by many families due to COVID-19 restrictions and related job losses may deepen the disadvantage. The accompanying possible deficiency of relationships and experiences entwined within economic hardship shapes health and development in early childhood<sup>4,5</sup> by time pressures limiting parents’ ability to provide consistent and responsive care, and a stimulating learning environment for their child.<sup>11</sup>

Children experiencing poverty understand the associated hardships and are aware of how insufficient income limits opportunities, time, and relationships; with “job precarity and housing insecurity impacting on parents, and on child-parent relationships”.<sup>6</sup>

Such relationship deficiencies inhibit crucial “serve and return” activities essential to healthy child development.<sup>7,8</sup>

Lifetime experience of poverty can also form a cycle within families, impacting on parents’ ability to protect against risks, leaving children with limited resources needed for optimal development. The experience of poverty in the first five years of life predicts poorer future life outcomes with the ‘toxic stress’ of poverty impairing the developing child’s higher order functions of the brain – skills likened to an ‘air traffic control system’ for the brain.<sup>9</sup> Growing up in poverty can also lead to the overactivation of the body’s stress response system<sup>7,10</sup> impacting children’s ongoing ability to respond to adversity. Stereotypes and stigma attached to disadvantage also influence children’s engagement in school and activities. Therefore, the experience of poverty not only undermines a child’s health, it also presents a range of risks to development, and educational success,

**“Fully integrated, two-generation programs appear to address the needs of both children and their caregivers and assist adults to build their core capabilities to cope with adversity and manage parenting, providing optimal support for their child’s development.”**

with potential long-term consequences limiting opportunities for full social and economic participation.<sup>11–13</sup>

Intervening in the early years to improve educational outcomes for children is crucial to help break the cycle of disadvantage.<sup>14,15</sup> To develop higher order functions of the brain, children growing up in adversity need responsive and consistent relationships and care, to be challenged and supported in their learning, and to feel a strong sense of belonging and purpose. Support from caregivers can help protect against harmful effects of poverty on brain development in early childhood<sup>16</sup> and having at least one stable and responsive caregiver relationship mitigates poverty effects on child development.<sup>17</sup> A positive and engaging home learning environment impacts on children’s outcomes more than parents’ education or income.

Therefore, fully integrated, two-generation programs appear to address the needs

of both children and their caregivers, and assist adults build their core capabilities to cope with adversity and manage parenting to provide optimal support for their child’s development.<sup>8,18,19</sup> In line with the targets of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, the impacts of poverty can be moderated through social protection measures; with government agencies, the private sector, schools, service providers and community groups invested in creating equitable and sustainable change.<sup>20</sup>

All Australian children deserve the opportunity to reach their potential and have healthy, productive, and fulfilling lives, both now and into the future. We all have a critical moral responsibility to work together, allowing children the opportunity to voice their beliefs and opinions about poverty and how it affects them, to shape future child-centred policies and services designed to address child poverty and protect against its harmful effects throughout the life course.<sup>1, 2, 21</sup>



# ADJUNCT PROFESSOR TONY PIETROPICCOLO AM

Director, Centrecare Inc and Founder, Valuing Children Initiative

**Children are vulnerable. Their vulnerability makes them highly susceptible to the impact of poverty.**

There is significant research evidence showing the negative and often traumatic impact that poverty has on children. Poverty in children, especially very young children, affects their brain development, contributes to lower levels of school readiness and stymies their social and cognitive competencies. It impacts on children's mental health, development of motor skills and sense of security.

The result of experiences largely created by poverty, can have tragic, long-term outcomes for many children who often face an adult life of poor educational achievement, unemployment, homelessness and other personal problems. Entrenched poverty that continues for extended periods creates experiences that become habitual and difficult to escape.

**"Given the negative impact that child poverty has on children, society cannot but take an interest in its resolution."**

The position taken by many Australian decision makers that they will wait for scientific evidence and/or financial justifications before dealing with child poverty denies the moral dimension of the issue. Such a position lacks compassion and a disregard for the human aspect of the problem.

Children living in poverty can rightly expect that those with the ability to help them will do so. They would be justified in believing that they are valued enough to move the hearts and minds of those who have the power and means to effect change. For them to expect urgent action is not unreasonable as every month and year of their poverty results in severe and longstanding consequences.

The ethical dimension associated with child poverty is often overlooked. The major focus is on measuring the financial cost of poverty and undertaking scientific investigation of it.

Such measurement and analysis are important in better understanding the impact and effectiveness of interventions. However, both are of limited value unless founded on an ethical framework that informs the resulting conclusions and actions. There is little value in knowing how poverty affects children and having an accurate actuarial understanding of the problem if this is not accompanied by a moral sensitivity that obliges an active and committed response.

Discussions on child poverty necessarily need to include challenging questions on ethical principles and morality if such discussions are to have a humanitarian dimension. This may avoid limiting child poverty to issues of money and process.

Child poverty is unlikely to be resolved in Australia while it is seen primarily as an economic and political issue devoid of moral considerations. Unless economic factors are encapsulated within moral imperatives, responses to child poverty will lack the passion, commitment and purposeful drive essential to its significant reduction, if not elimination.

The ethical dimension is an essential element of any serious discussion, debate and proposed action on child poverty.

Given the negative impact that child poverty has on children, society cannot but take an interest in its resolution. It could only withdraw from this responsibility if it believed that it was acceptable for children to remain living in poverty and to suffer its inevitable, negative consequences.

This raises a significant moral question. On what grounds can leaving children in poverty be justified? The mental, physical and emotional needs of children in poverty cannot be consciously and conscientiously ignored. A just society cannot turn away from such a challenge. It needs to meaningfully respond. To do otherwise is to knowingly abandon vulnerable children to endure harm and a lifetime of unfulfilled potential.

**“The result of experiences largely created by poverty, can have tragic, long-term outcomes for many children who often face an adult life of poor educational achievement, unemployment, homelessness and other personal problems.”**



# HON FRED CHANNEY AO

Board member, Polly Farmer Foundation

**Way back in the late 1950s my interest in Aboriginal people was sparked by the glaring injustices I saw when working in rural WA. The poverty of living conditions was obvious and confronting and I quickly realised that was not confined to the country. Through the eyes of a law student it seemed that the legal impediments to equality, the denial of citizenship and segregation of that time were at the heart of the problems faced by Aboriginal Western Australians.**

Since that time the right to vote, to be counted, to have rights to land recognised and racial discrimination outlawed are hard won Aboriginal achievements that have contributed to legal equality but have not achieved social and economic justice for many Aboriginal people. The rates of imprisonment and child removal are brutal reminders of that.

These pressing current issues are issues of poverty and exclusion rather than legal status. If it is true that one in five children in our State arrive at school not school-ready, the statistics around Aboriginal education suggest that percentage may be higher for them.

We know about intergenerational poverty. We know about intergenerational trauma. We know about the relationship between poverty and ill health. We know that these wicked problems, multifactorial problems, are not solved by single programs and require whole of government, whole of community approaches.

Education is one of the key ways of breaking the cycle of poverty. That is why, at Graham Farmer's request, we set up the Graham (Polly) Farmer Foundation. Since 1997 we have tried to respond to Graham's words:

**“We know about intergenerational poverty. We know about intergenerational trauma. We know about the relationship between poverty and ill health. We know that these wicked problems, multifactorial problems, are not solved by single programs and require whole of government, whole of community approaches.”**

*“Education is the key for Aboriginal people to take their rightful place in modern Australian society. Unless we rectify the imbalance in opportunities currently available, young Aboriginal people will continue to be frustrated and unable to develop their talents to make their rightful contribution to the economy and society... and we will all be poorer for that.”*

As we have learned from our programs in State schools, we have added to our secondary programs and moved down to the early years. We will go on developing our approach in partnership with the State education department and our corporate and philanthropic supporters.

We know that our students are 60 per cent more likely to complete school and move into successful post-school pathways including university, direct employment, apprenticeships and traineeships.

Since inception, thousands of at-risk Aboriginal children have completed our programs and gone on to achieve meaningful careers, breaking the cycle of poverty and disadvantage.

Our graduates are represented across a wide range of industries and provide proud, positive role models and mentors for current Polly Farmer Foundation students while becoming future leaders in their communities. But much more needs to be done.

The Foundation has shown that, working collaboratively in partnership with governments and with the support of industry and philanthropics educational programs can significantly increase the educational outcomes, and therefore the future employment, income, health and welfare prospects for Aboriginal Australians. It is one of the tools in breaking the cycle of poverty and disadvantage.



# LOUISE GIOLITTO

Chief Executive Officer, Western Australian Council of Social Service (WACOSS)

**The first few years of life set the foundations for lifelong development – that is why child poverty should matter to us all.**

Lifelong physical, mental and emotional wellbeing is built from positive early development. Growing up in poverty means young children are systemically isolated from critical social and developmental opportunities that have long-term impacts. Child poverty

remains the biggest single factor affecting early childhood development, with evidence poverty in the first five years of life causes lasting harm. Western Australia is one of the wealthiest societies on our planet, and yet child poverty is entrenched here and continues to grow.

State and Federal Government responses to the COVID-19 crisis has shown that it has *always* been possible for our governments to ensure families have sufficient income to meet their basic needs, keep a roof over their head, food on the table and the power connected. We have seen governments can be bold and decisive, investing our resources to tackle the big problems, helping those in crisis and building a better future. Poverty is a political choice.

The pandemic impacted on children and families in WA in unprecedented ways, highlighting the gaps in services and the lack of system-wide coordination and capacity to reach out to all our families when it matters.

**"We have seen that governments can be bold and decisive, investing our resources to tackle the big problems, helping those in crisis and building a better future."**



**"State and Federal Government responses to the COVID-19 crisis has shown that it has always been possible for our governments to ensure families have sufficient income to meet their basic needs, keep a roof over their head, food on the table and the power connected."**

Child development experts, children's advocates and services are all in agreement: we need greater investment targeting those children who are developmentally vulnerable and most likely to miss out on existing support. This requires greater coordination between government and child and family services to take a public health approach to prevention and early intervention.

Currently, child and family services are fragmented across health, education and social service sectors, and across a range of federal, state and local programs. We need to recognise where there is expertise and leadership, as well as where there are gaps and overlaps, so we can provide joined-up and effective support to children and families in need. Doing so will help us shift the dial on early intervention, reduce the growing cost of crisis services and close the yawning gap on outcomes for Aboriginal children in WA.

We can learn from the successes of the New Zealand approach to child poverty that shows

that focusing resources on children's wellbeing delivers the best community outcomes, and garners strong public commitment. Western Australia can also become a leader in tackling child poverty, by developing a WA Child and Family Wellbeing Framework that is owned and promoted by the public and community sectors. We should be joining the international movement of Wellbeing Governments (including Canada, Scotland, Finland, Iceland, Wales and NZ, as well as Victoria and the ACT) by moving to a wellbeing budgeting model. WACOSS supports the worldwide *Wellbeing Economy Alliance* and encourages you to get on board at [www.weall.org](http://www.weall.org).

All children, no matter where they live or what their circumstances, have the right to reach their full potential. Investing in our children means backing a brighter future. We need a positive vision for all Western Australian children – one that ensures they have the opportunities and support to grow and to thrive through their early years and beyond.



# COLIN PETTIT

Commissioner for Children and Young People

**How many Western Australian children living in poverty do we think is acceptable? Most of us would answer that the number should be zero.**

The reality is that up to 17 per cent of WA's 610,000 children and young people are living below the poverty line.

Every Western Australian needs to ask, why? Why, despite the actions, funding and good intentions from government and non-government sectors, are our vulnerable children and young people continuing to fall through the cracks?

Eradicating poverty has long challenged societies globally. It is over 30 years since the then-Prime Minister Bob Hawke made his memorable statement that no Australian child would live in poverty by 1990.

As a teacher and principal working across WA, I saw both the day-to-day impacts of child poverty and the longer-term ramifications for a young person's life trajectory.

**"It is over 30 years since the then-Prime Minister Bob Hawke made his memorable statement that no Australian child would live in poverty by 1990."**

In my current role I have regularly heard first-hand accounts from children affected by poverty. These range from a lack of money for basic needs, experiencing homelessness and seeing their family under stress. Poverty impacts on children in various ways every day.

As my term as Commissioner ends, I am saddened that we appear no closer to solving this significant issue.

**“My key recommendation is to establish a statewide Child Wellbeing Strategy that requires government to set meaningful targets and measure and report on how they are improving the wellbeing of children and young people.”**

I have called for a new approach to reducing child poverty.

My key recommendation is to establish a statewide Child Wellbeing Strategy that requires government to set meaningful targets and measure and report on how they are improving the wellbeing of children and young people.

We need to reassess which of the many policies and services we have in place across our state are reaching the children in most need, at the right time and making meaningful changes in their life.

I have no doubt that increasing income support and making housing more affordable for families will go some way to reducing the number of children experiencing poverty. These changes are urgently needed, and I support the national and state-driven campaigns that have long been calling for them.

Nationally, I have advocated for a Child Poverty Reduction Bill, which would hold governments to account and require reporting on levels of child poverty.

Data from WA's Speaking Out Survey has revealed a link between material deprivation and wellbeing – what it means and feels like to miss out.

One-in-10 students reported that there is only ‘sometimes’ enough food for them to eat at home. These students are also two times more likely to not like school, three times more likely to have poor health and four times more likely to have low life satisfaction.

A global pandemic has brought sharply into focus what can be achieved when we prioritise what is fair and just. If we know the factors that lead to vulnerability, we should have the right supports in place to intervene early enough and regularly enough to change the trajectory of vulnerable children's lives.

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