



Save the Children

54 reasons

Getting to the root of it: How a child rights approach can end child poverty in Australia

Submission to Senate Community Affairs References
Committee inquiry into the extent and nature of poverty in
Australia

17 February 2023

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians on whose land we live and work, honouring their continued connection to land, sea, skies and water.

We pay respects to Elders and Ancestors of Country and celebrate their role in passing down sacred cultural, spiritual and educational practices.

We also acknowledge the strength and commitment of First Nations practitioners who work alongside children and young people to support and guide leaders of the future.

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Save the Children and 54 reasons – our perspective on poverty in Australia

Save the Children is a leading global non-government organisation focused on children's rights which has been active in Australia for over 100 years.

54 reasons delivers Save the Children's services in Australia, working alongside children, and with their families and communities, in accordance with the 54 articles in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Our perspective on poverty in Australia is grounded in our experience as Australia's leading child rights organisation.

- We work directly with children, their families and communities across Australia to provide services spanning early childhood development, parenting and family support, domestic and family violence, youth justice, school engagement and wellbeing, child rights education, disaster response and recovery, and collective impact and place-based initiatives.
- We advocate for reform to protect, promote and fulfil children's rights in Australia. Our advocacy is strongly informed by our experience in service provision, and based in our experience translating the principles of child rights into practical and impactful policy and system change within Australia.

At all times, our focus is on realising children's rights across Australia, in the context of their families, communities and broader ecologies, including underlying structural and systemic factors such as poverty.

Executive summary

Poverty is the root cause of untold harm to children in Australia, driving huge inequality in children's access to opportunity and outcomes. It is unconscionable that 1 in 6 children in Australia lives in poverty,¹ with children more likely to be in poverty than adults. Child poverty is fundamentally an issue of denial of children's rights.

Child poverty undermines every aspect of children's lives. It has a distinct character that requires a focus on children in their own right, not just incidentally to adults. Poverty deprives children of the material basics, the opportunity to develop and experience positive wellbeing, and the ability to be included and participate in society as an active agent in their own lives. These are fundamental rights.

Children who live in poverty for any period of time are more likely to struggle in school, have poor physical and mental health, and suffer worse outcomes across virtually every domain of development and opportunity. This harm is lifelong.

They are more likely to experience domestic and family violence and be exposed to the harm done by child protection systems' failure to recognise and respond to the structural nature of poverty.

All this is compounded by the ongoing housing crisis in Australia and repeated decisions by government to keep levels of income support below the poverty line.

Children who experience poverty are far more likely to also be poor as adults, as are their own children, entrenching poverty intergenerationally. Ending child poverty is the key to ending poverty. It should be a social and political priority of the highest order.

COVID-19 has made it undeniable that high rates of child poverty are a political choice. Countless children were lifted out of poverty by income support boosts in the first months of the pandemic, only to be plunged back into dire hardship when the Australian Government then reduced the supplement effectively back to its previous level, below the poverty line.

Despite the overwhelming case for addressing it, child poverty has remained widespread in Australia for many years. It is clear that a fundamental shift in mindset and approach is needed, by government and across Australian society, along with an unequivocal commitment by governments to act accordingly.

We must accept – rather than deny – the severity of the problem. We must recognise that poverty is a structural rather than individual problem and requires a structural solution. We must focus on children in their own right rather than assuming that adult-focused approaches will automatically be in children's best interests.

¹ P Davidson, B Bradbury and M Wong, 2022, *Poverty in Australia 2022: A snapshot*, Australian Council of Social Service and UNSW Sydney.

A child rights approach to poverty

A child rights approach is the key to ending child poverty.

Both the principles of a child rights approach, and the science of child development, tell us that a sense of agency, dignity, inclusion and having a voice is crucial for children to develop healthily and thrive. At its heart this is about taking children seriously in their own right.

By focusing attention on the rights that all children should be able to access in order to develop healthily and reach their potential, centring children's development, and supporting children's agency and participation in society, a child rights approach can broaden our frame for understanding child poverty and focus us on what will be effective to address it.

A child rights approach also brings into sharp focus other structural inequities that children experiencing poverty face. The intersection between poverty and children's access to digital technologies and environments will only grow. Climate change is dramatically eroding children's basic right to a healthy environment and the right to an adequate standard of living.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and communities, all this has particular implications, grounded in the intergenerational harm and trauma of colonisation, dispossession and denial of self-determination.

Without a fundamental shift in approach to centre children's rights, these forces will drive still greater inequality and further entrench the harmful effects of poverty. As a society, this is a toll that we cannot afford to pay, economically or morally.

Drawing on our perspective as a service provider that works on a daily basis with children and families experiencing poverty, and as Australia's leading child rights organisation, as well as our knowledge of best practice to respond to child poverty globally, we have developed a set of recommendations for applying a child rights approach to poverty in Australia. These are the priorities for reform.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Save the Children and 54 reasons recommend that the Australian Government:

1. Adopt a child rights approach to understanding and addressing poverty in Australia.
2. Implement institutional reform to put children at the centre of all government decision-making:
 - a. Establish a National Children's Plan to drive a coordinated approach to supporting children's development and promoting their rights;
 - b. Develop a national agenda for children's participation and civic engagement; and
 - c. Ensure that children's wellbeing and child poverty are at the centre of Australia's wellbeing framework and budgeting, including a national definition of poverty and legislated targets to end child poverty.

3. Establish the foundations for all children to access the material basics:
 - a. Raise the rate of income support above the poverty line; and
 - b. Ensure adequate social and affordable housing is available.

This should include specific child-focused elements.

4. Drive fundamental reform to Australia's child wellbeing, safety and protection systems to recognise and address poverty as an underlying cause of harm:
 - a. Make a clear commitment, supported by action, that no child will be removed from their family due to poverty or before demonstrating that all possible measures have been taken to address the underlying cause of poverty; and
 - b. Drive a fundamental shift in focus from late intervention into individual families, to ensuring that the conditions and supports are in place so that all children can live in a safe and supportive family environment where opportunity is not undermined by poverty.

This should be done in collaboration with State and Territory Governments.

5. End the vicious cycle between poverty and domestic and family violence and the resultant harm to children:
 - a. Make a clear commitment, supported by action, that no child will be removed from their protective parent due to domestic and family violence;
 - b. Drive integration between child protection and domestic and family violence responses at the level of policy and practice; and
 - c. Ensure that no parent needs to choose between living in violence or becoming homeless with their child, by addressing the lack of appropriate housing for women and children who experience domestic and family violence.

This should be done in collaboration with State and Territory Governments.

6. Implement child-centred, integrated support for children and families experiencing poverty or at risk of poverty:
 - a. Facilitate services that reach, engage and support families and children to promote healthy child development, effective parenting, parent-child attachment and family functioning, as well as social connection, starting from children's early years;
 - b. Promote social and emotional wellbeing and engagement with education during the school years; and
 - c. Respond therapeutically to the needs of children at risk of youth justice involvement, addressing the underlying factor of poverty.

This should be done in collaboration with State and Territory Governments.

7. Address inequity in children's experiences of their broader environments:
 - a. Ensure that poverty is not a barrier to all children's right to fully participate in the digital environment, including safe and inclusive access to digital and online technologies and resources needed for their learning, development and participation in society;
 - b. Ensure that poverty is not a barrier to all children's right to fully enjoy a healthy environment, including equitable access to support in the face of escalating natural hazards and other impacts of climate change;
 - c. Ensure that social protection payments, including income supports, help shore up community resilience to shocks from the impacts of climate change; and
 - d. Apply a climate and inequality fairness test to new and existing policy, which addresses whether policies are addressing the climate emergency, poverty and inequality together, in line with children's rights standards for current and future generations.
8. Take all possible steps to support the collective right to self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, in communities and nationally, as the best way to address the underlying drivers of poverty and related harms experienced within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities today.

In addition, we endorse the submission made to this inquiry by the Poverty and Inequality Partnership,² which is co-led by the Australian Council of Social Service and UNSW Sydney, and of which we are a partner.

The reasons for these recommendations are detailed in the rest of our submission.

² <https://povertyandinequality.acoss.org.au/>.

Part 1 – Child poverty in Australia

While the causes and impacts of child poverty are complex, efforts to understand and address them should be guided by some clear and uncontentious facts.

CHILD POVERTY IN AUSTRALIA IS DOING UNTOLD HARM

Poverty is the root cause of untold harm to children in Australia. In Australia, 1 in 6 children lives in poverty, and children live in poverty at higher rates than adults.³ These are extraordinary facts in a country of our wealth and advantages.

Child poverty has a distinct nature

Children can be said to be living in poverty when they do not have enough to meet their fundamental needs for a standard of living that every child in Australia should expect. This extends well beyond basic material needs such as food and shelter and includes the broader wellbeing, development, participation, connection and inclusion needs that are integral to children's life opportunities and outcomes.

For children in Australia, poverty has three important dimensions:⁴

1. *Material hardship.* When children are unable to access the material basics such as food, shelter, clothing and transport, their most fundamental needs are undermined, including safety, health and even survival. Material deprivation, grounded in income poverty, is a core element of the experience of child poverty.
2. *Denial of opportunity to develop and experience positive wellbeing.* This is about all aspects of development and wellbeing as the foundation for a flourishing life. Healthy development is particularly significant for children, given its importance in its own right across childhood and its enduring effects throughout their lives.
3. *Social exclusion and inability to actively shape their own lives.* For children, this particularly relates to being able to engage with school and form connections with their broader communities. It also includes their ability to acquire the capabilities needed to actively participate in society and exercise agency in relation to decisions affecting them, including into adulthood.

The multidimensional nature of child poverty means that, to understand and address child poverty, it is necessary to understand the inequities associated with it. The harmful impact of poverty arises through the inequality that it creates in people's opportunities and outcomes.

This means it is critical for policy-making to focus on reducing inequality, removing the barriers that society creates for those facing material hardship to access

³³ Davidson, Bradbury and Wong, above n 1.

⁴ For other approaches to understanding child poverty, see, eg, G Redmond, 2008, 'Child poverty and child rights: Edging towards a definition', *Journal of Children and Poverty* 14(1): 63-82; Save the Children Sweden, 2010, *Hands, minds and hearts: An examination of the relationship between child poverty, child rights and inequality*, pp 22-8; S Bessell, A Bexley and C Vuckovic, 2021, *The MOR for Children framework*, Children's Policy Centre, Australian National University.

opportunities and life outcomes, and promoting broader wellbeing and access to rights. This can be contrasted to a narrower focus only on material hardship.⁵

This is most poignant in every sense for children. As outlined above, children have distinct experiences of poverty that are different from those of adults. Addressing child poverty requires a distinct approach that recognises the connection to adult poverty while focusing specifically on children themselves, and the specific causes and character of child poverty.

Moreover, any meaningful attempt to address child poverty must be strongly informed by children's direct perspectives and experiences. In other words, the views of children themselves about their circumstances should be central to identifying and understanding child poverty.⁶

Child poverty undermines every aspect of children's lives

Poverty has an all-encompassing negative effect on children. It undermines every aspect of a child's life and development, including the sense of stability, safety and routine that is vital for children to thrive. Poverty robs children of their childhood.

Research tells us without doubt that children who live in poverty for any period of time are more likely to struggle in school, have poor physical and mental health, and suffer worse outcomes across virtually every domain of development and opportunity.⁷

Poverty creates immense stress of all kinds for families. This lands most acutely on children through the environment in their homes. Domestic and family violence and child protection involvement are sadly far more likely in families experiencing poverty, compounded by a lack of suitable housing options.⁸

Children feel a sense of stigma about the effects of poverty.⁹ This has a wide range of harmful effects. Among other things, it makes it harder for children to stay engaged with school – to learn and fit in – and directly undermines children's mental wellbeing, thus eroding two key protective factors that could otherwise support children against the harmful impacts of poverty.

⁵ There is some Australian evidence that material disadvantage impacts life satisfaction through the conduit of exclusion: G Redmond et al, 2022, 'Who excludes? Young people's experience of social exclusion', *Journal of Social Policy*, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279422000046>.

⁶ See, eg, P Saunders and J Brown, 2019, 'Child poverty, deprivation and well-being: Evidence for Australia', *Child Indicators Research* 13: 1-18.

⁷ See, eg, United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), *General Comment No. 7 (2005): Implementing child rights in early childhood*; S Brinkman et al, 2012, 'Jurisdictional, socioeconomic and gender inequalities in child health and development: Analysis of a national census of 5-year-olds in Australia', *BMJ Open* 2:e001075; US National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019, *A roadmap to reducing child poverty*.

⁸ See Part 4 of this submission.

⁹ S Bessell, 2022, 'Rethinking child poverty', *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* 23(4): 539-61.

Children's perspectives

From children we work with at 54 reasons, we hear words like “embarrassed”, “ashamed”, “isolated”, “alone”, “anxious” and “stressed” when describing their experiences of poverty and its effects, and phrases like “I can’t go to school when I don’t have what I need”.

When children describe their feelings about their own lives in these terms, we must listen and take them seriously. This type of language is a clear indication that they are struggling, with their development at risk. It should be taken as a call to action for all of us to respond.

ENDING CHILD POVERTY MUST BE A PRIORITY OF THE HIGHEST ORDER

Child poverty does extraordinary harm to children. In itself this is ample reason why ending child poverty should be a social and policy priority of the highest order.

Yet, even more than this, ending child poverty is the key to ending all poverty.

Child poverty does lifelong harm, so focusing on child poverty can prevent future harm, including the harmful effects of adult poverty and the intergenerational transmission of poverty. Children who experience poverty are far more likely to also be poor as adults. Their children are in turn more likely to be poor, creating an intergenerational cycle of poverty.¹⁰

Effectively addressing child poverty is a paradigm example of the benefits of early intervention in preventing future harm to individuals and to broader society.

The concrete benefits that ending child poverty would produce are clear, as is the moral obligation requiring us to act.

COVID-19 HIGHLIGHTED THAT HIGH CHILD POVERTY IS A POLITICAL CHOICE

Our experience working directly in communities with high rates of poverty, as well as research done by ourselves and others,¹¹ makes two things clear.

First, the pandemic has driven thousands of families into poverty, and deepened the poverty experienced by many others. The financial pressure that COVID-19 has

¹⁰ E Vera-Toscano and R Wilkins, 2020, *Does poverty in childhood beget poverty in adulthood in Australia?*, Melbourne Institute: Applied Economic & Social Research, University of Melbourne.

¹¹ See, eg, B Phillips, M Gray and N Biddle, 2020, *COVID-19 JobKeeper and JobSeeker impacts on poverty and housing stress*, ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods; B Phillips and V Narayanan, 2021, *Financial stress and social security settings in Australia*, ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods; P Davidson, 2022, *A tale of two pandemics: COVID, inequality and poverty in 2020 and 2021*, ACOSS/UNSW Sydney Poverty and Inequality Partnership, Build Back Fairer Series, Report No 3; Save the Children, 2022, *The true cost of COVID-19: A generation left behind – A recovery plan for Australian children and families*, available at https://www.savethechildren.org.au/getmedia/61a5547c-9eca-42db-992c-f2273fcbef9e/True-Cost-of-COVID-report_Save-the-Children.aspx; S Bessell and C Vuckovic, 2022, ‘How child inclusive were Australia’s responses to COVID-19?’, *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, DOI: 10.1002/ajs4.232; Davidson, Brown and Wong, above n 3.

placed on families is well known, and the flow-through psychological pressures that this has created for family functioning and parent-child relationships are significant.

Second, the boosts to income support during the early stages of the pandemic made a massive difference in lifting families and children out of poverty, and their later withdrawal had the opposite effect, plunging many thousands of children into worsening poverty.

Child poverty rose from 16.3 per cent in 2019 to 19 per cent in the March quarter of 2020, when the pandemic reached Australia. It then fell to 13.7 per cent in the June quarter of 2020, due to the income support boost during that period provided by the Coronavirus Supplement. Overall poverty in Australia followed a similar trajectory.¹²

There is no doubt that as the Australian Government then successively reduced the income support rate effectively back to its starting point, many thousands of children were plunged back into often deepening poverty as the pandemic continued.

The same pattern was apparent in the United States. In 2021, a temporary enhanced child tax credit for low-income families to respond to the impact of COVID-19, provided through monthly payments of \$250 or \$300 per child, reduced child poverty significantly. When it expired at the end of 2021, 3.7 million children immediately fell back into poverty.¹³ Sadly, there can be no doubt that the same has happened here.

The cost of living crisis in Australia is ongoing and deepening along with other impacts of COVID-19. Unchecked, it will deepen the social and economic divide across Australia and further entrench intergenerational disadvantage in postcode and place, and for individual families. Our May 2022 report *The true cost of COVID-19* provides more detail about how the pandemic has affected a generation of children in Australia, drawing on independent research into the direct experiences of children and new analysis of population-wide data.¹⁴

There are two clear lessons to be drawn from COVID-19. First, those already struggling will always be hardest hit. And second, government can make a difference – the level of poverty that persists in Australia today, and is being deepened by the pandemic along with growing inequality, is a political choice.

TO END CHILD POVERTY, A FUNDAMENTAL SHIFT IN MINDSET IS NEEDED

It is plainly unacceptable that such large numbers of children continue to live in poverty in Australia. Given this, it is reasonable to wonder why child poverty remains so persistently high in Australia. While the reasons are complex, at the heart of this failing are a set of widespread and false assumptions that continue to distort the public's thinking and influence government priorities and decision-making. To shift the dial on child poverty, these mindsets must change.

¹² Davidson, Bradbury and Wong, above n 3.

¹³ Z Parolin, S Collyer and M Curran, 2022, *Absence of monthly tax credit leads to 3.7 million more children in poverty in January 2022*, Poverty and Social Policy Brief, Vol 6 No 2, Columbia University Center on Poverty and Social Policy.

¹⁴ Save the Children, above n 11.

First, we need to recognise that poverty – especially child poverty – is a real problem in Australia. As noted above, data shows that is unquestionably true. Yet, in our experience, it is denied by most. There are many reasons for this disconnect, which is so pronounced that one might reasonably suspect it is grounded in a collective sense of shame that we allow such high rates of child poverty to continue despite Australia's overall prosperity and comfort.

Second, we need to recognise that, where child poverty exists in Australia, it is due to systemic and structural forces and that is where the solution resides. In particular, the common assumption that poverty is the fault of the child's parents and they have the power to 'fix' it is simply untrue. Poverty by definition is a result of the operation of structural economic and social forces. Poverty will not be ended by pointing the finger at individual families who are struggling due to structural disadvantage that has been inherited over generations.

Relatedly, we need to confront the toxic and ungrounded assumptions that often attach to the types of households and families with characteristics commonly associated with poverty, including: households with lower parental education or employment; households whose main income is government income support; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families; in many cases, culturally and linguistically diverse families; sole parent households; and households where domestic and family violence is occurring.¹⁵

These damaging assumptions have been reinforced by welfare reform based on fearmongering by governments. Their effects are, in many ways, most pointedly felt by families through the operation of child protection systems, which conflate poverty with child neglect and intervene aggressively to remove children from their families. Children should never be removed from their families due to poverty.

Third, we need to make children the focus of attention in their own right, by governments through policy-making and investment, and by society as a whole. Currently, children are largely invisible in discussions not only of poverty, but broader social and policy goals, or wrongly assumed to have their needs met through measures that are focused on adults. These assumptions are grounded in outmoded and discredited ideas of child development and wellbeing and are fundamentally holding our society back. The costs are borne most directly by children themselves.

It is clear that existing approaches are failing to move the dial on child poverty. The underlying mindsets described above are at the heart of this long-term failure.

In the rest of this submission, we describe how a child rights-based approach can help solve these problems. A child rights approach is what is needed to enable a fundamental shift in mindset and approach. It can guide practical government decision-making at the systemic level.

By adopting a child rights approach, Australia can at last make meaningful progress towards ending child poverty.

¹⁵ See generally P Davidson, B Bradbury and M Wong, 2020, *Poverty in Australia 2020: Part 2, Who is affected?*, ACOSS/UNSW Poverty and Inequality Partnership Report No 4.

Part 2 – Child rights as the key to addressing child poverty

POVERTY IS THE SOURCE OF SIGNIFICANT CHILD RIGHTS VIOLATIONS IN AUSTRALIA

Children’s rights are the things that all children should be entitled to expect so that they can develop healthily and reach their potential. These include the rights to safety, healthy development, education, an adequate standard of living, having a voice in decisions affecting them, and many more.

Children’s rights are enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the most widely ratified of all human rights treaties globally. The CRC establishes an inspiring vision for children, childhood and child development, and global minimum standards for achieving this vision.¹⁶ Australia ratified the CRC in 1990.

For many children in Australia, poverty is an insurmountable barrier to accessing their fundamental rights. Poverty affects every aspect of a child’s life and development. It is the source of vast discrimination and inequality in children’s access to opportunity and life outcomes. All told, poverty is probably the single greatest root cause of breaches of children’s rights in Australia.¹⁷

“Child poverty must be understood as the denial of the range of rights laid out in the CRC [Convention on the Rights of the Child] ... Almost all of the articles in the CRC, either directly or indirectly, address the issue of poverty.”

- Yanghee Lee, then Chairperson of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child

Source: ‘Child rights and child well-being’, Paper delivered at OECD World Forum, Busan, Korea, 2009, available at <https://www.oecd.org/site/progresskorea/44137252.pdf>.

A CHILD RIGHTS APPROACH CAN HELP ADDRESS POVERTY

Poverty is far-reaching, structural and intersectional. Responding to it requires a similarly comprehensive approach, directed at root causes. In turn this requires a genuine paradigm shift in mindset and approach from the long-standing status quo.

A child rights approach is uniquely well placed to provide this necessary shift.

At its core, a child rights approach is about centring children and their development. It involves ensuring children’s best interests are always primary, supporting children’s right to be heard and taken seriously about matters affecting their lives, and taking the steps needed to ensure that these rights can be accessed by all children without

¹⁶ The CRC is contextualised by other key human rights instruments such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

¹⁷ For analysis of key rights of children that are central to child poverty, see Save the Children Sweden, above n 4, pp 33-7.

discrimination of any kind. It provides a comprehensive framework for analysing and doing what is required for all children to flourish and thrive to their fullest potential.

Child rights and children's ecologies

In its focus on children in their own right, and on underlying causes that affect children's outcomes, a child rights approach is directly aligned to the ecological model of child development.

The ecological model recognises that children's development and day-to-day lives are shaped by an ecosystem including: children's immediate family environments; the communities where they live; and the broader social, cultural, economic, governmental, legal and other contexts and forces shaping their lives.¹⁸

An ecological model offers a key insight for addressing poverty: support and responses addressing the impacts of poverty should be child-centred. This means they are integrated and organised around children, to respond to the multiple 'layers' of children's environments that influence their development, each shaped by poverty. It also includes integrating child-centred support around children's families.

Child rights and policy-making

When applied to policy-making and government decision-making, a child rights approach in Australia would reflect six key principles. These are summarised below.

Child rights principle ¹⁹	Relevance for addressing child poverty
Decisions and actions affecting children should be truly child-centred and in children's best interests	Focus directly on children in their own right – do not assume that focusing on adults will also produce better results for children
Children should be recognised as inherently equally worthy to adults and as agents in their own lives	Take children's lived experiences, perspectives and views seriously in understanding and addressing child poverty
All children should be guaranteed access to the same rights without discrimination on any basis	Act with the goal of ending child poverty and not merely reducing it, and ensure this truly includes all children
Governments should uphold their particular responsibility for ensuring children's rights	Recognise that only governments have the ability to address the complex conditions and causes of poverty
A public health model should guide the promotion of children's wellbeing and safety	Adopt a coordinated approach focused on the underlying causes of poverty,

¹⁸ U Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 'Toward an experimental ecology of human development', *American Psychologist*, 32(7), 513.

¹⁹ Australian Child Rights Taskforce, Save the Children & 54 reasons and UNICEF Australia, 2023, *Blueprint for a National Children's Plan* (forthcoming).

	underpinned by a public health approach to promoting children's outcomes
The right to self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should be fully supported	Fully support self-determination to address underlying causes of poverty and its harms for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

In short, a child rights approach helps us focus on the real causes of poverty, how it affects children, and the solutions to it. It does this by broadening our frame for understanding poverty, maintaining a rigorous focus on how poverty affects children, and providing a nuanced and comprehensive framework for making decisions about how to address child poverty and its effects.

The rest of our submission describes what a child rights approach means for responding to poverty in Australia. Part 3 provides a perspective from service delivery and practice, while Part 4 highlights policy and system reform priorities.

RECOMMENDATION 1

The Australian Government should adopt a child rights approach to understanding and addressing poverty in Australia.

Part 3 – Responding to child poverty: a perspective from service provision

As a national service provider working directly with children and families across Australia, 54 reasons (as part of the Save the Children Australia Group) is deeply committed to addressing the effects of poverty in the communities where we work.

We confront on a daily basis the question of how best to support our clients through the impacts of poverty. Service providers play a critical role in effectively responding to poverty and its effects on families and children on the ground.

In this context, this Part 3 shares insights from our experience as a service provider working directly with children and families. Our focus here is on what it takes for service providers to respond effectively to child poverty. This has implications for broader service systems and governments' role in system design.

CHILD RIGHTS PRACTICE FRAMEWORK

54 reasons' services are grounded in a comprehensive practice framework which guides how we work with children and their families in Australia. At the heart of our services and our practice is a commitment to promoting children's rights in everything we do.

Our practice framework and approach guides how we work with children and their families, to enable children to realise their rights and overcome the many barriers they may face. Recognising that poverty is the underlying source of many violations of children's rights across Australia, our child rights practice approach necessarily includes responding to the effects of poverty.

This practice approach is consistent across all 54 reasons services, which most relevantly include early childhood development, parenting and family support, domestic and family violence, youth justice, and school engagement and wellbeing programs and services. Importantly, it is not restricted to where 54 reasons provides material support and relief from the direct impacts of material hardship and income poverty.

One important aspect of our practice approach is a focus on therapeutic support for the children and families who we work with. This is a practice skill that is grounded in our knowledge of neurobiology, trauma and relational models of therapeutic intervention, applied to work with children, young people and families to reduce the impact of adverse childhood experiences and promote protective childhood experiences.²⁰

Drawing on the science of child development and core capabilities of resilient adults in our therapeutic work, we apply approaches to best support building healthy brains

²⁰ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016, *About the CDC-Kaiser ACE study: Major findings*; C Bethell, J Jones, N Gombojav, J Linkenbach and R Sege, 2019, 'Positive childhood experiences and adult mental and relational health in a statewide sample: Associations across adverse childhood experiences levels', *JAMA Pediatrics*, 2019:e193007

and bodies for children and young people. Drawing on work of the Harvard Center on the Developing Child, this involves implementing evidence-informed practices to:

- support responsive relationships for children and adults;
- strengthen core skills for planning, adapting, and achieving goals; and
- reduce sources of stress in the lives of children and families.

Recognising and responding to the effects of poverty and other sources of stress for children and families is integral to the effective use of these, and other, practice skills embedded across our services. In our experience, a child-centred, evidence-informed and intentional approach of this kind is crucial for service providers to work effectively with children and families experiencing poverty.

CHILD RIGHTS OUTCOMES FRAMEWORK

To ensure that 54 reasons' services are achieving their intended impact for the people who are using them, we are guided by an evidence-informed outcomes framework. This is the basis against which we measure and monitor the impact of the services we provide.

It would be beyond the ability of any one service provider to directly measure the impact of its services in relation to poverty or its direct effects, given the structural nature of poverty. Recognising this, our outcomes framework is instead grounded in a logic of addressing the inequality in access to opportunities, outcomes and rights that too many children experience, which is integrally linked to the effects of poverty, as outlined earlier in this submission.

Further detail about 54 reasons' services and child rights frameworks is available on request and at 54reasons.org.au.

Part 4 – Priorities for addressing child poverty

Poverty is a structural problem, and it ultimately needs to be addressed through policy and system reform. At this level, there are real opportunities to reduce and alleviate child poverty.

To meaningfully address child poverty, we need a paradigm shift in how we value and respond to children at a systemic level. This entails a shift from overlooking children or treating them as passive and vulnerable objects needing protection, to respecting children's rights, agency and dignity, and focusing on them in their own right.

Child poverty is fundamentally an issue of denial of children's rights. Both the science of child development, and the principles of a child rights approach, point strongly to the need for a focus on children in their own right, and not just as adjuncts to adults. These bodies of knowledge also tell us that a sense of agency, dignity, inclusion and having a voice is important for children to develop healthily and thrive. All this is especially important for children experiencing poverty.

INSTITUTIONAL REFORM TO CENTRE CHILDREN AND THEIR RIGHTS

The starting point for addressing child poverty should be broadening our perspective on what works to lift people out of poverty, children in particular. Children and their rights are commonly overlooked in government policy-making, decision-making, investment and other actions. In itself this is a primary reason for the persistence of child poverty in Australia. There are practical steps we can take to reform our systems to put children and their rights at the centre of government decision-making.

Establish the institutions needed to drive a focus on children

To ensure that children are a national policy priority, and that their best interests and wellbeing are central to all decision-making, the Australian Government should:

- establish a National Children's Plan, to provide a comprehensive long-term strategy and framework for supporting children's development, improving children's outcomes, and promoting children's rights;
- commit to child rights impact assessments, so that the impact on children of all legislation and significant policy is subject to rigorous consultation and analysis; and
- establish a Cabinet-level Minister for Children, with the authority and mandate to ensure that children's rights and wellbeing are at the centre of all government decision-making across childhood from birth to age 18.²¹

State and Territory Governments should also commit to equivalent initiatives in their jurisdictions, including working collaboratively to establish and implement the National Children's Plan.

²¹ For more detail about these initiatives, see Australian Child Rights Taskforce, Save the Children & 54 reasons and UNICEF Australia, above n 19.

Incorporate children's experiences and views into all decisions affecting them

Children have a right to be heard and taken seriously about all decisions that affect them.²² This is a fundamental right to be able to shape their own lives and underpins the realisation of all their other rights.

When children's voices are meaningfully heard and considered, the result is better policy-making and more effective implementation. There are also direct benefits for children themselves and their families and communities.

There would be significant benefit in the Australian Government developing a national agenda for the participation and civic engagement of children from their early years to the age of 18, in addition to existing youth engagement initiatives. This should particularly focus on the participation of children experiencing significant barriers to accessing their rights and being heard, including due to poverty.

Put children's wellbeing and ending child poverty at the centre of policy-making and budgets

The Australian Government's progress towards grounding future budgets in a wellbeing framework is welcome. A well-designed wellbeing framework allows rigorous and transparent analysis of the link between budget expenditure and actual outcomes, across portfolios and expenditure categories, and over time. This enables wellbeing budgeting and analysis to drive progress towards the ultimate objectives of government activity and allows a long-term and intergenerational perspective.²³

A commitment to improving children's wellbeing must be at the centre of any genuine wellbeing framework, as a fundamental societal and governmental purpose. No wellbeing framework could be meaningful without it. Ultimately wellbeing is about quality of life. That is exactly what poverty most directly undermines.

Taken together, this makes it clear that, for Australia's wellbeing framework to have substance and achieve its aims, an explicit focus on child poverty must be at its centre.

Alongside and integrated with the wellbeing framework should be a clear national definition of poverty and specific child poverty reduction targets. These targets should be legislated, and supported with clear accountability and reporting arrangements, including through the annual budget process.

Setting targets would also reflect the global consensus about what is needed to achieve real change. Goal 1 in the UN's Sustainable Development Goals is to 'end poverty in all its forms everywhere', including a national target for each country to halve the number of people (including children) living in poverty 'in all its dimensions according to national definitions' by 2030. New Zealand is an example of a country that has done this, through the Child Poverty Reduction Act 2018, with a wellbeing budgeting approach. Scotland's Child Poverty Act 2017 is another notable example, requiring regular reporting on progress towards ambitious child poverty targets.

²² United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 12.

²³ Save the Children, *2023-24 Budget Submission*, 3 February 2023, available at: <https://www.savethechildren.org.au/our-work/policy-and-publications/government-policy-papers?currentSort=>.

RECOMMENDATION 2

The Australian Government should implement institutional reform to put children at the centre of all government decision-making.

To do this, it should:

- (a) Establish a National Children's Plan to drive a coordinated approach to supporting children's development and promoting their rights;
- (b) Develop a national agenda for children's participation and civic engagement; and
- (c) Ensure that children's wellbeing and child poverty are at the centre of Australia's wellbeing framework and budgeting, including a national definition of poverty and legislated targets to end child poverty.

INCOME SUPPORT AND SOCIAL AND AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Governments have two obvious, big levers to directly address the impact of poverty, both supported by very substantial evidence and analysis:²⁴

- raising the rate of income support above the poverty line; and
- ensuring the availability of adequate social and affordable housing.

These reforms are strongly evidenced and much needed. Children would benefit enormously from both. They would directly support children's access to the material basics, with significant flow-through benefits for children's broader wellbeing.

The benefits for children and the overall impacts of these reforms could be further enhanced through specific child-focused elements. These could include child supplements in income support increases and social housing allocations for children in high risk categories such as those experiencing domestic and family violence.

Child benefits provide a mechanism to better protect and promote the rights of children, ensuring that they benefit from social security.²⁵ Social security contributes to the eradication of poverty, hunger, exclusion, inequality, low level of schooling and health care.²⁶ Social housing helps to ensure that children receive an adequate standard of living for their physical, mental and social development.²⁷

²⁴ See, eg, <https://povertyandinequality.acoss.org.au/>, <https://raisetherate.org.au/> and <https://everybodyshome.com.au/>.

²⁵ United Nations Convention on the Right of the Child, Article 26.

²⁶ Save the Children, *A foundation to end child poverty: How universal child benefits can build a fairer, more inclusive and resilient future*, 2020, available at https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/a_foundation_to_end_child_poverty_full_report_english.pdf/.

²⁷ United Nations Convention on the Right of the Child, Article 27.

RECOMMENDATION 3

The Australian Government should establish the foundations for all children to access the material basics. To do this, it should:

- (a) Raise the rate of income support above the poverty line; and
- (b) Ensure adequate social and affordable housing is available.

This should include specific child-focused elements.

CHILD PROTECTION AND DOMESTIC AND FAMILY VIOLENCE

We cannot talk meaningfully about child poverty in Australia without talking about how child protection and domestic and family violence systems compound the harm that poverty does to children. There is arguably no clearer example of systems' failure to reckon with poverty directly causing significant harm to children.

The failure of governments to prioritise addressing poverty as an underlying cause of harm is all too apparent in how child protection and domestic and family violence systems, in their own right and through their interaction with each other, effectively punish children and protective and non-offending parents for being poor.

Child protection

Poverty drives child protection involvement. A child living in poverty is more likely to come into contact with child protection due to concerns about neglect or abuse.²⁸

These brutal facts illustrate an important truth about how Australia's child protection systems operate. Child protection systems are heavily geared towards late intervention and removing children from their families to avoid harm at the acute stage, rather than addressing root causes or intervening earlier to provide support. They are almost exclusively focused on attributing responsibility to individual parents, rather than on addressing the structural factors that create challenges for families or supporting them to promote their children's wellbeing and development.

The results can be perverse and punitive to parents and children. It is common for parents to be deemed neglectful of their child by child protection systems because they cannot access housing or are spending so much on housing that they cannot pay for food. In other words, because they are poor.

Individual parents struggling with poverty are held responsible for providing a home environment that will allow their child to thrive, rather than governments focusing on changing the structural forces that make this a near impossible task for many parents.

In effect, child protection systems have a propensity to treat poverty and neglect as one and the same. This extends readily to emotional abuse, for similar reasons.

²⁸ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), 2022, *Child protection Australia 2020-21*.

Between them, these two maltreatment types – neglect and emotional abuse – account for the large majority of removals of children from their families.²⁹

When children are removed by child protection systems, this is a sign that the system, and government, has failed. Only in the rarest cases is this truly a matter of avoidable neglect or other types of ‘abuse’ by the parents. The harm done to children by such removals is immeasurable.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, and their families, face the worst effects of this, due to these factors and many others ingrained in child protection systems. Their extraordinary over-representation in out of home care, continuing to today, is a national shame.³⁰

To change this untenable situation, we need a shift to addressing the systemic issues creating poverty (including lack of affordable housing), and supporting families that are under stress to provide for their children’s needs rather than intervening late to remove children deemed at risk. We need to shift from blaming parents for poverty to focusing on poverty itself as the root cause undermining children’s rights and outcomes and on governments’ responsibility to create the conditions enabling families to provide a safe and nourishing environment for their children.

Children’s best interests are best served through primary prevention of harm, very early intervention that is calibrated to the level of support required, promotion of family functioning, and investment in a child-centred and integrated support system for children and families. This system should recognise and respond to poverty at every stage. Policy and system settings should reflect this.

Our July 2021 joint submission with Child Wise on the National Framework for Protecting Australia’s Children provides more detail.³¹

²⁹ AIHW, above n 28.

³⁰ SNAICC – National Voice for Our Children and Family Matters, 2022, *The Family Matters Report 2022*.

³¹ Save the Children and Child Wise, 2021, *Children’s rights, wellbeing and protection: A new paradigm*, Submission to Department of Social Services, available at https://www.savethechildren.org.au/getmedia/4869aa4e-a685-49fd-ab0a-8079bfba16a4/2021-07-30-save-the-children-and-child-wise-submission-successor-plan-to-the-national-framework-for-protecting-australia-s-children_final.aspx.

RECOMMENDATION 4

The Australian Government should drive fundamental reform to Australia's child wellbeing, safety and protection systems to recognise and address poverty as an underlying cause of harm.

To do this, it should:

- (a) Make a clear commitment, supported by action, that no child will be removed from their family due to poverty or before demonstrating that all possible measures have been taken to address the underlying cause of poverty; and
- (b) Drive a fundamental shift in focus from late intervention into individual families, to ensuring that the conditions and supports are in place so that all children can live in a safe and supportive family environment where opportunity is not undermined by poverty.

This should be done in collaboration with State and Territory Governments.

Domestic and family violence

There is a vicious cycle between poverty and domestic and family violence. When families are under financial pressure and stress, violence increases.³² At the same time, domestic and family violence itself is a major cause of poverty – overwhelmingly for women and children.³³

Children are the hidden victims and survivors of domestic and family violence. While their experiences of domestic and family violence are complex and varied, the harm done to them by such violence is clear.³⁴

Yet children are largely invisible in the domestic and family violence system, with little or no attention paid to their experiences in policy, investment and services. Instead, domestic and family violence is seen as a problem between adults. This blind spot is compounded by the inability of the domestic and family violence system to respond adequately to poverty, and especially child poverty. Sadly, children bear the cost of this systemic breakdown.

This commonly comes to a head with mothers experiencing violence in their own home facing an impossible choice: remain in a home where their child's and their own safety is at risk, or leave and in many cases immediately face the prospect of a slide

³² L Schwab-Reese, C Peek-Asa and E Parke, 2016, 'Associations of financial stressors and physical intimate partner violence perpetration', *Injury Epidemiology* 3(6), DOI 10.1186/s40621-016-0069-4; A Morgan and H Boxall, 2022, *Economic insecurity and intimate partner violence in Australia during the COVID-19 pandemic*, Research report, 02/2022, ANROWS.

³³ A Summers, 2022, *The choice: Violence or poverty – Domestic violence and its consequences today*.

³⁴ Save the Children, 2021, *Take them seriously: Children's experiences of domestic and family violence*, Submission to Department of Social Services, available at <https://www.savethechildren.org.au/getmedia/0debf85c-ecc2-4275-8cd0-946fb056f542/national-plan-to-reduce-violence-against-women-and-their-children-publication.pdf.aspx>.

into or deepening of poverty. Research, and our own experience providing domestic and family violence refuges and other services, highlights that when a mother flees domestic and family violence, the risk of poverty for her and her child skyrockets.³⁵

Children are commonly caught between this unconscionable fact and the interaction of housing and child protection systems. Immense and entirely avoidable further harm results to children from the operation of the very systems that should be supporting their safety and wellbeing.

All children should have a safe and stable roof over their heads. Yet when mothers escape violence with their children, it is difficult – if not impossible – to find accommodation. Domestic and family violence is the leading cause of child homelessness.³⁶ This creates extreme stress and hardship in its own right, for children as well as for their protective parent.

At the same time, the threat of intervention by child protection systems is ever present. Child protection systems are wholly inept when it comes to recognising and responding appropriately to domestic and family violence, or to poverty, let alone to the intersection between those two sources of pressure on a victim-survivor parent.³⁷

This often results in the mother – the victim-survivor – facing intrusive intervention by child protection, with the very real prospect of being deemed neglectful or abusive for being unable to provide a safe environment for her child, and having her child removed by child protection, through no fault of her own.

Indeed, it is common for the mother to end up going back to live with the perpetrator, returning to a violent home because at least there she is safe – or safer – from child protection and can at least keep her child with her and do something to protect her child.

This is a horrific outcome, yet all too common.

³⁵ Summers, above n 33.

³⁶ M Campo, 2016, *Children's exposure to domestic and family violence: Key issues and responses*, CFCA Paper No 36 of 2015, Australian Institute of Family Studies.

³⁷ C Humphreys and L Healey, 2017, *PATHways and research in collaborative inter-agency practice: Collaborative work across the child protection and specialist domestic and family violence interface – The PATRICIA Project: Final report*, ANROWS Horizons 03/2017.

Case study: Domestic and family violence, housing and child protection

A mother who leaves her home with her child due to violence typically immediately faces significant financial hardship and the need to find accommodation. In many cases no accommodation can be found.

If she does find accommodation, she is often moved from place to place due to the lack of available or longer-term accommodation – for example, from Brisbane to the Gold Coast and back again. This is extremely disruptive to say the least. For children, whose wellbeing and healthy development so strongly depend on stability and routine, it is extraordinarily stressful.

Where accommodation is available, it is unlikely to be particularly suitable for a child's needs. Any supports available are likely to be adult-focused, and almost certainly do not include any kind of trauma-informed support of the type needed by children who have experienced domestic and family violence.

Each time the mother moves, she needs to find child care. It is challenging to access and pay for child care at the best of times. These challenges are compounded by the need to deal with Centrelink in relation to Child Care Subsidy arrangements and possibly the Family Court, while enrolling school-age children in new schools and paying for uniforms and other costs.

Given these challenges, it is extremely difficult to find and retain a job, increasing the financial pressure. The mother may have no choice other than to place her children in unsafe environments – at home and outside – to find and retain employment, in order to provide for the child and herself.

All this is happening in a state of significant financial and psychological stress, with domestic and family violence and coercive control potentially ongoing.

At the same time, child protection is very likely involved, adding to the mother's distress and fear of the prospect that her child will be removed, and potentially forced to live with the perpetrator using violence.

These circumstances are utterly untenable for any protective parent who becomes trapped within them. Ultimately, the heaviest cost is borne by the child, who is nonetheless largely invisible to services and lost within the system.

Under all of this lies the harm done by the context of poverty.

There are many other examples of the intersection between domestic and family violence and poverty. It is common for the perpetrator to threaten to throw the family into poverty, as a way of controlling the protective parent and preventing her from speaking up about violence. It is also common for perpetrators to evade child support payments and for women as victim-survivors to decide it is not worth pursuing their entitlements, despite the financial hardship caused. In both cases, children are overlooked despite being direct victims – and survivors – of the violence and behaviour of the perpetrator.

The interaction between child protection and domestic and family violence systems is toxic for children and their protective parents, compounded by the lack of appropriate housing.

The way these systems operate is broken. Children pay an enormous price. At the heart of this is poverty, and systems' failure to recognise it shapes families' circumstances and children's wellbeing for the worse. It is urgent and necessary for governments to commit to a fundamental shift, so that addressing poverty and its impacts on children is front and centre across all of these interconnected systems.

Our August 2021 submission on the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children provides more detail.³⁸

RECOMMENDATION 5

The Australian Government should end the vicious cycle between poverty and domestic and family violence and the resultant harm to children.

To do this, it should:

- (a) Make a clear commitment, supported by action, that no child will be removed from their protective parent due to domestic and family violence;
- (b) Drive integration between child protection and domestic and family violence responses at the level of policy and practice; and
- (c) Ensure that no parent needs to choose between living in violence or becoming homeless with their child, by addressing the lack of appropriate housing for women and children who experience domestic and family violence.

This should be done in collaboration with State and Territory Governments.

INTEGRATED SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

As noted earlier, a child rights approach is directly aligned to the science of child development and the ecological model of child development. An important implication is that support for children should be child-centred and integrated around children, their families and the broader communities where their lives are lived.

Effective family support that focuses on children in their own right

Families are the primary environments shaping children's outcomes. Overwhelmingly, families wish to do the right thing for their child. Yet poverty can place exceptional pressure on families' capacity to do this. The stress of poverty deprives families and children of the material basics, as well as parents' capacity and bandwidth to meet their child's emotional, social, cultural and other needs. To effectively address child

³⁸ Save the Children, above n 34.

poverty, it is crucial to identify, reach and engage families who are struggling, so they receive the right support at the right time, with no unnecessary barriers.

In practice, this involves:

- *Supporting parents and children through integrated services.* Effective support in the face of poverty requires a focus on supporting parents in their role as parents, as well as supporting child development. This includes support to help promote effective parenting, parent-child attachment and family functioning, buffer the effects of poverty on children's development, and acquire and use the skills that can help families break free of poverty.
- *Connecting families to the services they need, and providing free services that are inviting and accessible.* Removing barriers to accessing services and programs in communities is vital. Services should be in community settings, accessible by public transport, co-located with other services wherever possible, and provided in a way that is engaging and non-stigmatising. 'Warm referrals', such as where trusted practitioners take families to other services they need, are essential. Community-based services should be particularly targeted at families who would most benefit from, but are most likely to miss out on, 'universal' services such as high quality early childhood education and care.
- *Enabling families to connect to their communities.* Social connection and broader engagement with communities is a vital source of support and wellbeing for families and children and an important protective factor against the negative impacts of poverty. Unfortunately, poverty itself directly erodes people's ability to experience connection in this way. Support to build and maintain such connection is a direct way to enable families to build resilience.
- *Employing people who belong to the communities where they work.* In many communities, it is hard to get any job and there are hidden barriers to women maintaining a job. For example, many women face cultural expectations to keep their children with them at home, while also needing to work to keep their family above water. When support workers understand and share these pressures, they are far better placed to help families to navigate them.
- *Supporting people to access the income supports and benefits to which they are entitled.* It is common for people to not receive the government benefits for which they qualify, and which the income support system is intended to provide so that children's needs can be met. This is due to lack of information and problems with Centrelink. It is especially common in remote communities and some communities with high populations of people from migrant backgrounds.
- *Ensuring supports are in place for people driven into poverty by domestic and family violence.* Many women and children experience poverty – some, for the first time – due to domestic and family violence. It is critical that supports are in place where they can access them. This can include initiatives like free school supplies so that mothers do not need to bear the costs of changing schools when they escape the home where violence is occurring.

To maintain a child-centred approach, this also involves:

- *Focusing on children in their own right, not just adults or 'families'.* Every professional or practitioner who is working with families should be focusing on children in their own right and providing information and referrals to other services where needed. This might include identifying early signs of children's material and emotional needs not being met and ensuring families can access support locally through warm referrals.
- *Asking children what they want.* Children sometimes say that well-intentioned organisations come in and give them a pack of supplies that contains what adults think they need, but what is actually most important to the child would be something like a teddy bear or a pet that is part of their routine and that their world revolves around.

These considerations are relevant across children's development from birth through the middle years and adolescence, but have special significance in the early years. The early years, including the first 1000 and 2000 days, are of crucial importance to children's long-term development and outcomes. The returns on effective investment in those early years far outstrip those available for later expenditure.³⁹

Importantly, the potential of Australia's early years system to intentionally drive improved equity – including where poverty exists – remains largely unrealised, despite the large investments over recent years in establishing universal access to preschool, with significant numbers of children continuing to reach school developmentally vulnerable.⁴⁰ A specific focus on equity in children's early years, through measures including those listed above, would be a wise investment at this point in Australia's early childhood education and care system reform journey.

Educational engagement and social and emotional wellbeing

Education is a foundational protective factor for children experiencing poverty.

Schools are ideal sites for supporting children, especially when it comes to mental health and wellbeing. They are a natural space to establish connection and belonging for children who may not be able to access these experiences elsewhere, and for early identification and support where children's material and emotional needs are not being met due to their families struggling.

Moreover, education is a source of opportunity. It changes lives, and can be the pathway out of poverty for those who are able to remain engaged with education despite the challenges created by poverty and its associated impacts.

At the same time, poverty is an enormous barrier to engaging with education. That is why it is crucial to invest in measures that support children to engage with education, or to re-engage where disengagement occurs. It is also why focusing on student wellbeing, and programs and initiatives to support social and emotional wellbeing in schools, is essential to addressing the harmful effects of poverty.

³⁹ See, eg, <https://heckmanequation.org/resource/13-roi-toolbox/>; UNCRC, above n 7.

⁴⁰ Commonwealth of Australia, 2022, *Australian Early Development Census National Report 2021*.

Youth justice

Along with child protection and domestic and family violence systems (see above), Australia's youth justice systems are a major driver of inequity and source of children's rights being breached across Australia on a daily basis. This is a systemic failing that has appalling consequences for individuals and society as a whole.

In particular, children who require additional support are commonly met with a punitive, criminalising response through their involvement with youth justice. This makes children more likely to reoffend and engage in escalating serious behaviour, rather than being supported through therapeutic and trauma-responsive interventions to find a more positive path.

As with child protection system involvement, poverty is commonly an underlying factor and youth justice systems are very ill-equipped to recognise and respond to it. This is equally and compoundingly true of other underlying factors such as systemic racism and the ongoing intergenerational trauma of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples arising from their violent colonisation and dispossession and the subsequent history of Australian governments' actions.

The large crossover between children involved with child protection and those involved with youth justice⁴¹ is eloquent testament to the interrelated failings of these systems. There is an urgent need for a fundamental shift to target underlying causes of children's involvement with both systems, while supporting children affected by those underlying causes, rather than perpetuating the cycle of harm through ineffective, punitive responses.

⁴¹ S Baidawi and R Sheehan, 2019, 'Crossover kids': Offending by child protection-involved youth, Trends & issues in crime and criminal justice, No 582, December 2019, Australian Institute of Criminology; AIHW, 2020, *Young people under youth justice supervision and in child protection 2018-19*, Data linkage series no. 26, Cat. no. CSI 28; AIHW, 2022, *Young people under youth justice supervision and their interaction with the child protection system 2020-21*.

RECOMMENDATION 6

The Australian Government should implement child-centred, integrated support for children and families experiencing poverty or at risk of poverty.

To do this, it should:

- (a) Facilitate services that reach, engage and support families and children to promote healthy child development, effective parenting, parent-child attachment and family functioning, as well as social connection, starting from children's early years;
- (b) Promote social and emotional wellbeing and engagement with education during the school years; and
- (c) Respond therapeutically to the needs of children at risk of youth justice involvement, addressing the underlying factor of poverty.

This should be done in collaboration with State and Territory Governments.

INEQUITIES IN ACCESS TO CHILDREN'S BROADER ENVIRONMENTS

The impacts of poverty on children are heavily shaped by the broader environments within which they live. To understand the intersection between poverty, inequality and these broader environments, a child rights approach can bring clarity by highlighting what is required so that children can access their rights in relation to these environments.

Rights in the digital environment

Digital technologies and online environments are constantly evolving and expanding, and becoming increasingly important in children's lives. Indeed, for many children, the distinction between digital and non-digital environments is increasingly porous in terms of how children experience their lives. In this context, it is important to recognise that all children's rights apply everywhere, without exceptions, in all public and private spaces, and including online.⁴²

Poverty has profound effects on children's ability to access their rights in relation to the digital environment. Governments have a responsibility to ensure the continuing growth in the importance of digital technology and environments does not rapidly widen the existing divide between those with safe and reliable digital and online access and those who do not. While digital and online technologies present great opportunity, this opportunity will only be realised at a society-wide level if accompanied by a strong focus on equity. Without this, the result will be a vicious cycle of digital exclusion reinforcing existing disadvantage, and a widening divide between digital 'haves' and 'have-nots'.

⁴² UNCRC, *General comment No. 25 (2021) on children's rights in relation to the digital environment*, 2 March 2021.

Some key dimensions are:

- *Access to education.* Reliable internet access and access to suitable devices are increasingly baseline requirements to access education. This was true even before lockdowns due to COVID-19 accelerated the trend. When children are unable to access these basic requirements, their opportunity to learn and benefit from education may be lost before it even begins.
- *Digital skills.* Digital skills are the foundation of core life competencies, in childhood and adulthood. Children who do not acquire these skills may never recover due to the compounding effects of falling behind early.
- *Connection, participation and inclusion.* Digital environments have the potential to be a rich source of information and broader social connection for children, and a means through which they can participate in their broader communities and have their voices heard, individually and collectively. However, these opportunities are unequally shared.
- *Mental health, wellbeing and safety.* Digital environments can have both positive and negative effects on children's mental health and wellbeing. While they can have many benefits as described above, they also create specific safety and mental wellbeing risks. Without appropriate resources of all kinds to enable them to access digital environments safely and informedly, some children are particularly exposed to these risks.
- *Family access to information and services.* With the internet increasingly the primary source of information for many, including both official and informal sources, as well as the means for delivering critical services for families, it is important that children's parents and caregivers are able to confidently access information and services online.

Right to a healthy environment and the impacts of climate change

Children's right to a healthy environment encompasses the right to a safe, clean and sustainable environment, including appropriate measures in response to their unique vulnerability to environmental harm.⁴³ This right continues to be brought into stark relief by the climate crisis and governments' inadequate responses to it. Poverty unquestionably increases children's vulnerability to the impacts of climate change.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has specifically criticised the Australian Government for refusing to acknowledge that its obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child extend to protecting children from climate change. The Committee has also emphasised, in comments directed at the Australian Government, that 'the effects of climate change have an undeniable impact on children's rights, for example the rights to life, survival and development, non-discrimination, health and an adequate standard of living'.⁴⁴

⁴³ Human Rights Council, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the issue of human rights obligations relating to the enjoyment of a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment*, United Nations, 24 January 2018.

⁴⁴ UNCRC, *Concluding observations on the combined fifth and sixth periodic reports of Australia*, 1 November 2019, [40].

Climate change is increasing the frequency and severity of disasters globally, and Australia is on the front line. This is clear from the sequence of major disasters that have struck in recent years, including severe drought, the 'Black Summer' bushfires of 2019-20, and the major floods across NSW (2020), Northern Rivers NSW and south east Queensland (2022), northern Victoria and southern NSW (2022), South Australia (2022-23) and the Kimberley region in Western Australia (2023).

Children and families experiencing poverty, or pushed into poverty by such disasters, are not well-equipped to recover or restore resilience after these shocks. The impacts can be long-lasting, with the harmful effects of poverty compounding the other damage done by disasters to children's wellbeing, education, health and safety.

Climate change is also driving increased difficulties in children accessing the material basics.⁴⁵ There is an important intersection with the continuing housing crisis in Australia, with social and affordable housing availability vastly below what is needed.

This has a particular dimension in remote, primarily Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, where low quality housing that is ill-suited to extreme weather conditions is the norm, and commonly co-occurs with energy instability and food insecurity. The result is that children are denied the basics, including a secure roof over their heads, harming their health, wellbeing and development. In these communities, the inadequacies of remote community housing⁴⁶ are magnified by widespread and often severe and entrenched poverty. Together, these in turn drive harmful intervention by child protection and youth justice systems as well as increased rates of domestic and family violence and over-policing.⁴⁷

More generally, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are particularly exposed to the impacts of climate change. This includes coastal communities where there are risks of sea-level rises, storm surges and salt water intrusion. In those communities, and others impacted by climate change, this can cause – among other things – a loss of cultural connection to traditional lands. This is an immeasurable loss in its own right which also impacts on access to intergenerational justice. The obligations that the Australian Government has to adopt timely adaptation measures to protect traditional ways of life were recent highlighted in the 'Torres Strait 8' case,⁴⁸ but to date there has been little sign of serious focus on this issue. In that case,

⁴⁵ For further global research on the interconnection between poverty and climate change, see Save the Children, 2022, *Generation Hope: 2.4 billion reasons to end the global climate and inequality crisis*, available at <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/Generation-Hope-Report-GLOBAL-online-version-25-10-22.pdf>; Save the Children, 2021, *Born into the climate crisis: Why we must act now to secure children's rights*, available at <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/born-into-the-climate-crisis.pdf>.

⁴⁶ See, eg, T Lea et al, 2021, *Sustainable Indigenous housing in regional and remote Australia*, AHURI, Final Report No 368; S Quilty, N F Jupurrurla, R S Bailie and R L Gruen, 2022, 'Climate, housing, energy and Indigenous health: a call to action', *Medical Journal of Australia* 217(1): 9-12.

⁴⁷ See earlier in this submission.

⁴⁸ United Nations Human Rights Committee, *Views adopted by the Committee under article 5(4) of the Optional Protocol, concerning communication No. 3624/2019*, CCPR/C/135/D/3624/2019, 22 September 2022.

the Australian Government has been ordered to make full reparations for individuals who have had their rights violated, including children.

RECOMMENDATION 7

The Australian Government should address inequity in children's experiences of their broader environments. To do this, it should:

- (a) Ensure that poverty is not a barrier to all children's right to fully participate in the digital environment, including safe and inclusive access to digital and online technologies and resources needed for their learning, development and participation in society;
- (b) Ensure that poverty is not a barrier to all children's right to fully enjoy a healthy environment, including equitable access to support in the face of escalating natural hazards and other impacts of climate change;
- (c) Ensure that social protection payments, including income supports, help shore up community resilience to shocks from the impacts of climate change; and
- (d) Apply a climate and inequality fairness test to new and existing policy, which addresses whether policies are addressing the climate emergency, poverty and inequality together, in line with children's rights standards for current and future generations.

ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER SELF-DETERMINATION

Child poverty in Australia today has multiple deep, historical causes. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, experiences of poverty today are inseparable from the continuing effect of historical and present-day colonisation, dispossession, violence and systemic racism.

Racial discrimination is alive and well, both overtly and through the operation of deficit-based models and discourses relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and to poverty, including child poverty. These deficit-based approaches perpetuate the status quo by systemically disempowering families and communities from making meaningful decisions or shaping their own lives.

Case study: Income poverty in remote communities

In many remote communities it is very difficult to get a job. Most people rely on inadequate income support payments.

With meat, fruit and vegetables very expensive, it is common for people to go out on Country with their children because life is easier – and more affordable – there, for example being able to provide for themselves by fishing.

This has unquestionable benefits for children in remaining connected to culture, but it also results in children missing out on school and health services.

The important point is that the decision to go on Country is not an exercise of meaningful choice, but a forced decision that reflects the intersection of poverty and lack of self-determination, resulting in missed opportunities for children.

A self-determined approach at this level would enable people to make choices, in a context where they would be able to secure their children's best interests in light of all relevant considerations.

Genuine self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is the pathway to addressing these underlying drivers of poverty and the harm that it causes. This has relevance at a community level and a national level. In each case, it is fundamentally about enabling people to shape their own lives, which is a basic right, fundamental to human dignity and development, and ultimately leads to better outcomes. Children have the right to a specific voice, in the context of this collective right, recognising their particular interest and stake in its outcomes.

Our June 2022 submission on the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in Australia provides more detail.⁴⁹

RECOMMENDATION 8

Take all possible steps to support the collective right to self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, in communities and nationally, as the best way to address the underlying drivers of poverty and related harms experienced within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities today.

⁴⁹ Save the Children, 2022, *Application of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) in Australia*, Submission to Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee, available at [https://www.savethechildren.org.au/getmedia/8a789277-4829-4cd9-a4aa-72631aca6b92/2022-06-01-save-the-children-submission-application-of-the-un-declaration-on-the-rights-of-indigenous-peoples-in-australia-\(1\).pdf.aspx](https://www.savethechildren.org.au/getmedia/8a789277-4829-4cd9-a4aa-72631aca6b92/2022-06-01-save-the-children-submission-application-of-the-un-declaration-on-the-rights-of-indigenous-peoples-in-australia-(1).pdf.aspx).

Part 5 – Conclusion

While the challenges posed by poverty in Australia – especially child poverty – are enormous, the opportunities for meaningful change are clear.

A child rights approach provides the principled basis for a true paradigm shift, at the level of service delivery and practice and through policy and system change, which can guide government action that will make a real difference.

By focusing direct on children and their rights and development, and broadening the frame through which we think about poverty and about ‘children’s issues’, it is possible to end child poverty. Enormous benefits would flow from this, for individuals and society. The moral obligation facing us to act is immense.

In this submission, we have outlined the priorities for change. We urge the Australian Government to act.

