

Policy Position: Poverty and disadvantage and the intersection with child abuse and neglect

Purpose

This policy provides the Benevolent Society's position on the impact of poverty and disadvantage on child abuse and neglect. The Benevolent Society believes that rising poverty in Australia plays a significant role in the increasing numbers of children and young people being removed from their families. State and Federal Governments must address poverty through targeted policy and service interventions to reduce the entrenched disadvantage and hardship found in many families experiencing child neglect and abuse.

Principles

1. All children have the right to grow up in an environment free from neglect and abuse.
2. Children have the right to have a voice in all decisions affecting them.
3. Systems and institutions must address the social determinants, including poverty and social exclusion.
4. Policy, practice and advocacy is outcome focussed, evidence based, measurable and evaluated.
5. Children are best cared for by family and kin where possible and every effort should be made so that children can remain with, and return to, their families.
6. Australian society has a responsibility to value, support and work in partnership with parents, families and communities to care for children.
7. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families have the right to self-determination.
8. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have a right to grow up in culture.
9. Children and families with disabilities have the right to full and effective participation and inclusion in society.
10. Children and families from culturally and linguistically diverse families and refugees have the right to full and effective participation and inclusion in society.

Issue

There can be many factors causing child abuse and neglect. Poverty is only one factor, but perhaps the most pervasive.¹

- There is a strong association between families' socio-economic circumstances and the chances that their children will experience child abuse and neglect. The evidence repeatedly points to this conclusion across developed countries, types of abuse, definitions, measures and research approaches and in different child protection systems.² Both sexual and emotional abuse may be less strongly related to poverty than other forms of child abuse and neglect, with more widely agreed findings that sexual abuse is less closely related to poverty than all other forms of abuse and neglect.³
- Despite this, Australia's child protection systems do not generally respond directly to the role of poverty.
- There is a gradient in the relationship between families' socio-economic circumstances and rates of child abuse and neglect that mirrors the inequalities that appear in health and education – the greater the economic disadvantage, the greater the likelihood and severity of child maltreatment.⁴
- There is also evidence that the resources of the neighbourhood (including the poverty rate, income level, unemployment rate and residential instability) may contribute to the conditions that produce child maltreatment.⁵ When disadvantage becomes entrenched in a locality or neighbourhood, a disabling social environment can develop, leading to generational disadvantage.
- Whilst not all children who are the subject of a notification come from impoverished backgrounds, poverty's effect on families experiencing neglect and abuse can be multifaceted. Poverty generates family stress; parents living in poverty do not have access to the necessary resources and are unable to provide appropriate care for children; and substance abuse, mental health or other issues make parents vulnerable and more likely to be both poor and abusive.⁶

- There is little evidence of spending on interventions that confront the socio-economic difficulties faced by many families where child abuse and neglect is a concern. A decade of so called 'welfare reform' has delivered an often punitive system characterised by income support cuts and tougher sanctions. This has led to increased hardship and inequality, pushed more families into poverty, and made it harder for others to find a pathway out.
- The disadvantaged socio-economic conditions prevalent in many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, such as overcrowding, unemployment and limited access to services are recognised as contributing significantly to the over representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the child protection system.⁷
- There is no reliable measure of the socio-economic circumstances of Australian children and families in contact with the child protection system. The Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development, World Health Organisation and others have called for improved data collection including systematic collection and reporting of data about the economic circumstances of families to provide greater evidence for a policy response to the links between poverty and child maltreatment.⁸

What the Benevolent Society is doing

- The Benevolent Society has a long history of supporting families and communities to care safely for their children and of advocating for policy reform that supports families. We provide services across the continuum from universal early years' programs, community building and parenting programs to prevent children entering the out-of-home care system, and intensive family and other support services to strengthen families' ability to care for their children and assist child and family reunification.
- The Benevolent Society is building a long term national campaign, in alliance with over 20 partner organisations, calling for a nationally coordinated approach to improve the wellbeing and safety of children across Australia.
- The Benevolent Society is a facilitating partner for the Federal Government's Communities for Children in three NSW sites. We develop and implement a whole of community approach to support and strengthen local service networks that contribute to child safety and fund local service providers to deliver early intervention and prevention family support, tailored to the needs of the local community. Services are family focused and child centred, focusing on children 0-12 years and for some services, adolescents up to 18 years of age.
- As Australia's first charity, currently supporting more than 50,000 people each year, the Benevolent Society understands the critical importance of building financial literacy to address entrenched disadvantage. The Benevolent Society has partnered with ANZ on financial inclusion projects since 2004, including MoneyMinded and Saver Plus, and has worked with ANZ to pilot MoneyBusiness and MoneyMinded Online. We deliver training to our own staff and others in community organisations to deliver these programs to assist individuals and families on lower incomes to build assets and improve financial capability.

What needs to be done?

The Benevolent Society supports and will advocate for Governments to:

- Recognise and respond to the link between families' disadvantage and poverty and children's likelihood of being subject to neglect and abuse as a matter of avoidable social inequality.⁹
- Work across jurisdictions and government departments to ensure children and family policy recognises the link and provide an integrated and cohesive response across welfare, employment, and the family service system that prevents children from living in poverty and provides a further protective layer to children's safety and wellbeing.
- Recognise that child wellbeing and safety policies and interventions must operate not only at the individual and family level, but also account for neighbourhood, environment and cultural factors.
- Support further research on the links between poverty and child abuse and neglect in an Australian context including systematic collection and reporting of data about the economic circumstances of families.

- Support further investigation into strategies to mitigate poverty, social exclusion and inequality as key risk factors in child maltreatment, including the family tax benefit threshold, family support payments and income tests through an integrated approach led by the Department of Social Services which administers individual and family income support.
- Support an increase in the Newstart Allowance to ensure the national safety net does not result in acute deprivation.

Background

- In 2017, the Australian Council for Social Security (ACOSS) revealed poverty is growing in Australia with an estimated 2.9 million people or 13.3% of all people living below the internationally accepted poverty line. It found that 731,300 or 17.4% of all children were living in poverty in Australia.¹⁰
- In 2015/16 the number of Australian children suspected of being harmed or at risk of harm from abuse and/or neglect increased by 11.2% from the previous year. Notifications rose from 320,169 in 2014/15 to 355,925 in 2015/16.¹¹
- The Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs in its 2004 Report on Child Poverty called for Governments to address the issue as a national priority. The Committee called for greater employment and adequate income support, but noted the problem of child poverty is more complex. It recommended a co-ordinated approach to providing services and programs to disadvantaged areas covering intensive services for children and families at risk; the provision of adequate housing; early intervention programs; early childhood programs and improving educational opportunities.¹²
- Studies in the United States of parents of at-risk children whose income was increased found reduced rates of child maltreatment. These four quasi experimental studies suggest that increasing families economic wellbeing and security has a beneficial impact on child maltreatment rates.¹³ The findings support the call for an increase in the Newstart Allowance and other income support benefits in Australia made by ACOSS, the Business Council of Australia and others.
- There is evidence that government policy decisions and targeted interventions can reduce poverty in Australia. In 1987, the Hawke Government reduced child poverty by 30% through a series of income support payments, supplements (including rent assistance) and linking family payments to wage growth to maintain pace with the cost of living and community standards.¹⁴

Consultation

Approval

Related Policies

Key Messages

- It has been comprehensively shown that higher than average rates of child maltreatment and neglect are associated with children, families and communities living in poverty. Australia has the resources to address poverty and eradicate systemic, intergenerational disadvantage.
- In children and family policy, poverty is often re-cast as neglect and used to punish families.
- Governments – across jurisdictions and departments – must work together to arrest the rising rate of child poverty and support to families to care for their children.
- Child protection policy and interventions that focus only on individual behaviour rather than addressing social and economic factors will continue to put children at risk.
- Governments at all levels can prevent children from living in poverty and provide a further protective layer to children's safety and wellbeing by implementing policies that provide adequate income support, family support, access to affordable housing, employment, education and healthcare.
- Child neglect and emotional abuse are the most frequent primary types of maltreatment for all children. High rates of neglect and emotional abuse correlate with children living in poverty.

Endnotes

- ¹ Bywater,P. Bunting,L. Davidson,G. Hanraity, J. Mason,W. McLartan,C. Steils,N. (2016) *The Relationship Between Poverty and Child Abuse and Neglect – An Evidence Review*. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation, London 28
- ² Bywater,P. Bunting,L. Davidson,G. Hanraity, J. Mason,W. McLartan,C. Steils,N. (2016) *The Relationship Between Poverty and Child Abuse and Neglect – An Evidence Review*. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation, London 3
- ³ Bywater,P. Bunting,L. Davidson,G. Hanraity, J. Mason,W. McLartan,C. Steils,N.(2016) *The Relationship Between Poverty and Child Abuse and Neglect – An Evidence Review*. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation, London 26
- ⁴ Bywater,P. Bunting,L. Davidson,G. Hanraity, J. Mason,W. McLartan,C. Steils,N.(2016) *The Relationship Between Poverty and Child Abuse and Neglect – An Evidence Review*. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation, London. 4
- ⁵ Peter Walsh and Marilyn McHugh, *Factors Influencing Outcomes for Children and Young People in Out-of-Home-Care* (2017) xi.
- ⁶ Houshyar,S. (2014) *Poverty, Child Neglect: What We Know and What We Need To Do*. First Focus, Campaign for Children
- ⁷ Australian Institute of Family Studies: CFCA Resource Sheet— August 2017 *Child protection and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children*
- ⁸ Bywater,P. Bunting,L. Davidson,G. Hanraity, J. Mason,W. McLartan,C. Steils,N.(2016) *The Relationship Between Poverty and Child Abuse and Neglect – An Evidence Review*. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation, London.17
- ⁹ Bywater,P. Bunting,L. Davidson,G. Hanraity, J. Mason,W. McLartan,C. Steils,N.(2016) *The Relationship Between Poverty and Child Abuse and Neglect – An Evidence Review*. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation, London.6
- ¹⁰ Australian Council for Social Services: ACOSS Briefing, October 2017.A future for all Children, *Addressing Child poverty in Australia* 1
- ¹¹ Australian Institute of Family Studies: CFCA Resource Sheet— August 2017 *Child protection and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children*
- ¹² Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs, *Completed Inquiries 2002-04 Chapter 11 - Children in poverty*
- ¹³ Bywater,P. Bunting,L. Davidson,G. Hanraity, J. Mason,W. McLartan,C. Steils,N.(2016) *The Relationship Between Poverty and Child Abuse and Neglect – An Evidence Review*. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation, London.
- ¹⁴ Australian Council for Social Services: ACOSS Briefing, October 2017.A future for all Children, *Addressing Child poverty in Australia*. 3