

Submission to [inquiry into the extent and nature of poverty in Australia](#) to the Senate Community Affairs References Committee

**Submission from:**

[National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect](#)  
(NAPCAN)

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*Note: The intention of this submission is to elevate children as a priority in the Inquiry. We acknowledge and commend the Inquiry's request for submissions based on lived experience and humbly defer to these voices and the organisations that specifically represent them.*

## Overview

Together with the community, the National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (NAPCAN) works to create a child-safe Australia through a range of initiatives including training, education, campaigns, and partnerships.

To treat all of Australia's children fairly, we need to make sure that every child and every family has the support they need to thrive and be healthy.

NAPCAN, acknowledges the impact of poverty on children in the following ways:

- children directly (in the immediate and long term)
- parents and families (and how this impacts their mental, physical and financial health, and capacity to provide the nurturing environments that children need)
- structural systems (including child protection, health, justice, education).

The main aim of this submission is to emphasise the need to include **children and families as a priority area for the Inquiry**. In general terms, this would mean ensuring that the Inquiry recognises:

- voices of children and young people with a lived experience of poverty
- voices of parents and carers with a lived experience of poverty
- impacts of poverty on children including on material basics, on opportunities to participate, and on their relationships
- that alleviating the impacts of poverty on children is about more than lifting families above the poverty line; improving equity will require a cross-sector approach including systems such as education, health, housing, transport, recreation
- that [poverty is a form of toxic stress that can have lasting effects on children's brain development](#) and their opportunities to live full and prosperous lives.

Therefore, poverty has a disproportionate impact on children. It may have been beneficial to have specifically highlighted the impact of poverty on children in the terms of reference for this Inquiry. For example, by adding a phrases as follows:

- “c) the impact of poverty on individuals **of all ages** in relation to: (i) employment outcomes, (ii) housing security, (iii) health outcomes, and (iv) education outcomes; (v) the impacts of poverty amongst different demographics and communities **(particularly on children from pre-birth into adulthood)**”.

Further, in light of preventing child abuse and neglect, it is important for the Inquiry to note that the majority of known environmental risk factors for child maltreatment are linked to financial disadvantage, including:

- socio-economic disadvantage
- parental unemployment
- housing stress
- social isolation
- neighbourhood disadvantage.

Source: [Risk and protective factors for child abuse and neglect](#) (Australian Institute of Family Studies)

**The following notes highlight key points and evidence supporting NAPCAN's request to include a focus on children in the Inquiry.**

### **Note 1: Australia has a strong base of research, policy and advocacy expertise in the area of child poverty**

NAPCAN follows and respects the many experts in the area of child and family poverty and is pleased to know that many of these will have significant input into the Inquiry. In particular, NAPCAN notes the work of:

#### **Professor Sharon Bessell, Crawford School of Public Policy, ANU:**

- [Research based on the lived experiences of children](#), highlights that there are three overarching dimensions of child poverty:
  - Material Deprivation
  - Opportunity Deprivation
  - Relational DeprivationIdeally these three dimensions will be recognised clearly in the Inquiry.
- [We Need to Talk about Poverty](#) showcases the experiences of children and puts forward 5 policy recommendations to end child poverty.
  1. Raise the rate of benefits
  2. Implement child rights impact assessments for all policies
  3. Build child friendly communities
  4. Education equity
  5. Change the narrative
- [Child-Centred Wellbeing](#) is a video about high-level indications that Australia will move towards a wellbeing budget and how we need to end poverty - especially child poverty - in order to build wellbeing for all.

- [Communities matter: Children's views on community in Australia](#), highlights that:
  - Children in disadvantaged areas were more likely to experience negative elements of their community, such as witnessing public drunkenness.
  - Many children did not feel safe in their community, especially those from disadvantaged areas.
  - Being from better-off families protected children from the negative elements of community.
  - Children in more affluent areas were more likely to feel safe, to know their neighbours and to be on friendly terms with adults.
  - Children's views are different. Adult perceptions of a community may not reflect those of the children in a community.

**Anti-Poverty Week campaign**, which has done valuable work in collating poverty research, promoting issues around poverty, and developing cross-sectoral resources, including:

- [Fast Facts - Child and Family Poverty in Australia](#)
- [School teaching resources on Poverty and Inequality in Australia](#)

**Australia's National, State and Territory Children's Commissioners** undertake important research into the needs of Australia's children and work to ensure that the voices of children and young people are elevated. Their work regularly highlights the awareness that children have of poverty and the impact that poverty has on children's lives. For example, in the '[Keeping Kids Safe and Well - Your Voices](#)' [consultation conducted by National Children's Commissioner](#) in 2021, children, young people and families said the top three things that children need to be safe are:

- help with housing
- mental health services
- help with basic needs, like food, clothing, transport, and school supplies.

Children, young people and families also highlighted how important it is for governments and service providers to listen to them when making decisions that affect them.

Internationally NAPCAN follows the work of **Professor Brigid Featherstone, University of Huddersfield, UK** who has done considerable research into the links between poverty and children entering the child protection system. Information of note includes:

- The [Child Welfare Inequalities Project](#)
- [Poverty Proofing the School Day](#)

- NAPCAN webinar [‘Poverty and Keeping Children Safe’](#)

**Note 2: How we talk about poverty is important in gaining policy and community support.**

NAPCAN notes that **framing and language** need to underpin all aspects of poverty policy to best engage all sectors and communities in addressing this challenge.

Relevant existing research includes:

- [Reframing Parenting](#) (Australian research relevant to all conversations about children and parenting, and the challenges of navigating challenges such as financial hardship during the journey of raising children)
- [Core Story of Early Childhood Learning and Development](#) (Australian research relevant to all conversations about impacts on children, including importance of context and fairness)
- [How to Talk About Poverty](#) (created by Anti-Poverty Week based on national and international research on how to frame financial hardship).

**Note 3: Child poverty and Australia’s national obligations**

As a signatory to the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child \(UNCROC\)](#), the Inquiry needs to recognise the rights of children and young people, in particular relating to Article 27:

1. States Parties recognize the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development.
2. The parent(s) or others responsible for the child have the primary responsibility to secure, within their abilities and financial capacities, the conditions of living necessary for the child's development.
3. States Parties, in accordance with national conditions and within their means, shall take appropriate measures to assist parents and others responsible for the child to implement this right and shall in case of need provide material assistance and support programmes, particularly with regard to nutrition, clothing and housing.
4. States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to secure the recovery of maintenance for the child from the parents or other persons having financial responsibility for the child, both within the State Party and from abroad. In particular, where the person having financial responsibility for the child lives in

a State different from that of the child, States Parties shall promote the accession to international agreements or the conclusion of such agreements, as well as the making of other appropriate arrangements.

The [National Principles for Child Safe Organisations](#) need to guide the work of all organisations involved in delivering services to families experiencing poverty need to adhere to child safe principles that:

1. Child safety and wellbeing is embedded in organisational leadership, governance and culture.
2. Children and young people are informed about their rights, participate in decisions affecting them and are taken seriously.
3. Families and communities are informed and involved in promoting child safety and wellbeing.
4. Equity is upheld and diverse needs respected in policy and practice.
5. People working with children and young people are suitable and supported to reflect child safety and wellbeing values in practice.
6. Processes to respond to complaints and concerns are child focused.
7. Staff and volunteers are equipped with the knowledge, skills and awareness to keep children and young people safe through ongoing education and training.
8. Physical and online environments promote safety and wellbeing while minimising the opportunity for children and young people to be harmed.
9. Implementation of the national child safe principles is regularly reviewed and improved.
10. Policies and procedures document how the organisation is safe for children and young people.

**Note 4: Key risk factors for child poverty need to be considered.**

NAPCAN notes that there are key risk factors for family poverty that need to be considered, particularly domestic and family violence, single-parent families, and intergenerational disadvantage. While these points will no doubt be well represented in the Inquiry by experts in these fields, NAPCAN notes that the [Emerging Minds response to House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs: Inquiry into Homelessness in Australia](#) provides a useful summary:

- “Domestic and Family Violence is the most common factor that contributes to women with children seeking housing services assistance (AIHW 2019a, p.35, Perkins 2018). In 2017-2019, 42% of people assisted by specialist homelessness services had experienced family and domestic violence. The majority (78%)

were female and this has been a 32% increase since 2013-2014, (AIHW 2019 a). A skilled workforce can respond early and appropriately according to the needs of families, parents and children (Kilmer et al, 2012)."

- "Poor housing affordability is a key characteristic of housing stress and contributes to disadvantage and poverty. It is most acute in single-parent families compared to coupled families (Strong Foundations Collaboration, 2019, Wilkins et al, 2019). Behavioural difficulties in younger children (under age 5) are more prominent where there is housing instability. Psychological difficulties are observed from middle childhood (after age 7) where there has been housing instability in the early years."
- "Intergenerational disadvantage that can be transmitted through long-term homelessness impacts on children's health, wellbeing and development (AIHW, 2018a). Therefore, the lack of access to resources that contributes to healthy wellbeing, development and learning is compromised and adults pass on their disadvantage to their children and so on, which has implications on child mental health as well as opportunities throughout the lifespan (AIHW 2018a)."

### **Note 5: The impact of poverty on housing stability is of particular importance for the health and wellbeing of children.**

In terms of material deprivation, it is important to note that housing has particularly strong impacts on child development and future prosperity. The following references outline some of these key impacts:

- NAPCAN blog ['For children, housing is about even more than a home'](#)
- Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) [Australia's Children Report](#):
  - "Homeless children can experience schooling disruptions, food insecurity and an increased risk of being homeless as adolescents and adults (Crawford et al. 2015; Fantuzzo et al. 2012; Flatau et al. 2012)."
  - "Children living in overcrowded housing have an increased risk of emotional and behavioural problems and reduced school performance as overcrowded living arrangements may disrupt their sleep, ability to concentrate, and reduce space for study (Solari et al. 2012)."
  - "Children in families experiencing housing stress (spending more than 30% of their income on housing costs, such as mortgage repayments or rent) are also at risk of adverse health and wellbeing outcomes."
  - "Increased housing stress may compromise parental mental health and reduce the money available to spend on children's food, healthcare and

education (Robinson & Adams 2008; Taylor & Edwards 2012). In contrast, better housing affordability is often associated with better health, academic achievement and school engagement for children (Clair 2018).

- Indirect impacts of housing are outlined in [Housing: an Under-Explored Influence on Children's Well-Being and Becoming](#) - US Research
  - “Housing problems have been found to cause stress and impaired functioning among adults (Sandel and Wright 2006). This may go on to affect children through emotional contagion (Larson and Almeida 1999), where the stress is transferred from parents to children through proximity and shared environment. Negative emotions are thought to transmit more readily between people than positive ones (Larson and Almeida 1999; Larson and Gillman 1999), and there is evidence of parental depression and mental health problems affecting children’s outcomes (Downey and Coyne 1990; Mensah and Kiernan 2010). Similar to theories of emotional contagion, family stress/process models emphasise the impact of (particularly economic) difficulties on family relations and child development, which also supports the hypothesis of an important role for housing on children’s well-being (Kull and Coley 2014).”