



Commissioner for Children and Young People
Western Australia

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Mrs Robyn Clarke MLA
Chair
Joint Standing Committee on the Commissioner for Children and Young People

Via E-mail: jscccyp@parliament.wa.gov.au

Dear Chair

Submission – addressing food insecurity for children and young people affected by poverty

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Joint Standing Committee's (JSC) inquiry into the most effective way for Western Australia to address food insecurity for children and young people affected by poverty (the Inquiry).

Under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), children and young people have a right to be provided with adequate nutritious foods (Article 24) and to an adequate standard of living that is, where necessary, supported by government-provided material assistance and support to parents and carers (Article 27). Nutrition is particularly noted in Article 27 as essential to an adequate standard of living.

Research has clearly shown that eating a wide variety of nutritious foods is crucial to a child's healthy development and growth.¹ However, not all children and young people in Western Australia have access to a ready supply of healthy food. In 2021 this office conducted the second Speaking Out Survey to collect insights about the health and wellbeing of a representative sample of more than 16,500 Western Australia's children and young people. Eight per cent of children and young people who participated in the survey reported that there was only "sometimes" enough food for them to eat at home, and one per cent said that there was "never" enough food for them at home.² While those percentages may sound small, when applied to Western Australia's total population of young people aged 0-17 years they equate to approximately 55,000 children and young people who are currently experiencing some form of food insecurity.

¹ National Health and Medical Research Council 2013, *Australian Dietary Guidelines: Providing the scientific evidence for healthier Australian diets*, Canberra, National Health and Medical Research Council.

² Commissioner for Children and Young People WA 2021, *Speaking Out Survey 2021. The views of WA children and young people on their wellbeing – a summary report*, Commissioner for Children and Young People WA 2021.

Food insecurity is particularly high amongst low-income families who often experience financial challenges when it comes to buying sufficient quantities of food and appropriately healthy foodstuffs.³ These challenges are often further compounded by other material restrictions experienced by low-income families, such as limited access to transport and the location and availability of affordable housing. These factors can prevent families from travelling to locations where they are able to buy suitably nutritious food, physically constrain the amount of food a family is able to purchase, and in some cases force families to choose between buying sufficient quantities of healthy food and paying for other essential living expenses.

In Australia the primary driver of food insecurity is poverty.⁴ In 2022 up to 17 per cent of Western Australia's children and young people, which equates to almost 105,000 young people aged 0-17 years, are estimated to be living below the poverty line.⁵ While the current measures of child poverty are inconsistent and widely contested, it is broadly accepted that the material circumstances of a child or young person's family is a key aspect of any such measure.

Children and young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds are generally at greater risk of poor health over their lifetime, including higher rates of illness, disability and death.⁶ Young people who experience material deprivation, social exclusion or homelessness are also more likely to have poor mental health, high risk of alcohol and substance misuse, and low education and employment outcomes over the long term.^{7,8} Consistent with national and international child poverty and material deprivation research, data collected through the inaugural Speaking Out Survey showed that Western Australian children who reported experiencing food insecurity were 2.1 times more likely to not like school, 3.1 times more likely to describe their general health as "fair" or "poor", and 4.2 times more likely to rate their life satisfaction as "low."⁹

³ Rosier K (2011), *Communities and Families Clearinghouse Australia Practice Sheet: Food Insecurity in Australia*, Australian Institute of Family Studies.

⁴ Bowden M (2020), *Understanding food insecurity in Australia*, Australian Institute of Family Studies – Child Family Community Australia.

⁵ *Profile of Children and Young People in WA 2022*, Commissioner for Children and Young People WA.

⁶ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) 2018, *Australia's health 2018*, Australia's health series no 16, AUS 221, AIHW.

⁷ Saunders P et al 2018, *Material Deprivation and Social Exclusion Among Young Australians: A child-focused approach (SPRC Report 24/18)*, Social Policy Research Centre, UNSW

⁸ Barnett M 2008, Economic Disadvantage in Complex Family Systems: Expansion of Family Stress Models, *Clinical child and family psychology review*, Vol 11, No 3.

⁹ Commissioner for Children and Young People WA 2019, *Speaking Out Survey 2019*, electronic dataset (unpublished)

Since the creation of this office a number of children and young people have provided the Commissioner with their first-hand accounts of poverty and the impact it has had on them and their families:

"I got cut off Centrelink for eight weeks, and I basically had to steal, I stole the whole time I was pregnant, it was horrible and I, like, I don't have a criminal record like, I'm like generally a good girl but like, I had to do it to survive." (16 year-old)

"A lot of family struggle about rent and food bills. So [kids] try and help their family like stealing...it's not good you know." (16 year-old)

"My family is low on money. And I'm suffering from not eating or sleeping much." (13 year-old)

"Money impacts everything – what we eat, what we wear, where we sleep." (13 year-old)

For many children and young people, their experience of poverty, disadvantage and social exclusion can lead to the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage. Intergenerational disadvantage occurs when the hardship faced by children early in their lives impacts their development and their parents or carers have limited capacity to alleviate this, which further reduces children's hopes and aspirations. This leads to poor outcomes and opportunities later in their life that, in turn, hinder their own capacity as parents to give their children the best start in life.¹⁰ It can therefore be a major challenge for children and young people to move beyond the social and economic circumstances they are born into.¹¹

Addressing childhood poverty is critical to interrupting the cycle of intergenerational disadvantage that almost inevitably leads to food insecurity. While recognising that the Australian Government controls many of the financial mechanisms available to confront the issue of poverty, there are three key policy responses available to the Western Australian Government that will facilitate and support an holistic, cross-government approach to poverty reduction in this State:

Adopt a measure of child poverty that meaningfully captures the experience of poverty as it relates to children and young people.

Measuring child poverty is both complex and contested. There is no nationally agreed methodology for measuring child poverty, which can result in starkly different figures for the same reference period. The absence of an accurate and meaningful measure of child poverty in Western Australia hinders efforts to effectively address the predominant cause of food insecurity and other detrimental impacts of child poverty.

¹⁰ Smith Family 2010, *Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage, A submission from The Smith Family to The Australian Government Social Inclusion Board*, Smith Family.

¹¹ Martinez A, Western M, Tomaszewski W, Rampino T 2015, *Should we be more concerned about income inequality in Australia? An empirical investigation of inequality of opportunities*, Life Course Centre Working Paper Series, Institute for Social Science Research, The University of Queensland.

For a number of years this office has advocated for 'child poverty' to be defined and measured in a way that recognises the multidimensional nature of child social exclusion and disadvantage, similar to measures that have been adopted in Canada and New Zealand. Such an approach would more accurately reflect the experience of child poverty by taking into account key aspects of disadvantage and social exclusion such as a child's access to income, material basics, health, education, housing and food.

The adoption of a robust methodology suited to the context in which vulnerable children and young people live will allow the WA Government to accurately identify the incidence of child poverty in this state. This would in turn facilitate the development and implementation of effective policies targeted at the drivers of poverty in WA. Work undertaken by the State Government in this area could lead and form a template for a consistent national measure of child poverty in other jurisdictions.

Develop a State Government Child and Family Wellbeing Strategy

Food insecurity amongst children and young people does not occur in a vacuum. It is symptomatic of a breakdown in support structures designed to safeguard and promote the wellbeing of all children and young people, particularly those who are vulnerable. While there is clear need for immediate responses to food insecurity in the community, addressing this issue in the long term requires a strategy specifically designed to address the wider causes and consequences of child poverty through the lens of child wellbeing.

A key step towards addressing child wellbeing concerns in Western Australia is ensuring that the decisions and actions of government agencies and service providers are guided by a whole-of-government Child and Family Wellbeing Strategy. This strategy should:

- include whole-of-government targets to improve wellbeing outcomes, with the targets being long-term, extending beyond election cycles, and spanning individual agency responsibilities
- be developed through wide consultation
- include a resourced implementation framework that incorporates clear outcomes and timelines
- incorporate monitoring and reporting requirements regarding the progress made towards outcomes
- prioritise and strengthen investment for children, young people and families who are vulnerable.

The development of such a strategy was a key recommendation of the *Improving the Odds for WA's Vulnerable Children and Young People* report tabled in the WA Parliament by my predecessor in May 2019. This was again highlighted in the report *Child Poverty: A Call to Action* released by this office in 2020. The initial recommendation was accepted by the Department of the Premier and Cabinet in August 2019, however it is unclear to me what action has since been taken to progress this recommendation.

Develop and implement Child Impact Assessments

Children and young people, particularly those who are vulnerable or disadvantaged, have different needs, experiences and perspectives to the adults who make decisions that impact their lives. Article 12 of the UNCRC recognises this by conferring a right on all children and young people to express their views in regard to all matters affecting them, and a responsibility on decision makers to give due weight to these views. Government agencies therefore have a responsibility to listen, respond to and collaborate with children and young people in any decision-making process that affects them.

The incorporation of Child Impact Assessments into WA Government decision-making processes would support public sector agencies to identify and fully consider the effects that any proposed laws, strategies, policies and programs are likely to have on the rights, interests and wellbeing of children and young people. In the context of child poverty and food insecurity it would act as a key strategy to mitigate against unintended consequences that would otherwise exacerbate or reinforce the disadvantage faced by this cohort of vulnerable children and young people. More broadly the introduction of Child Impact Assessments would represent an appropriate response by the WA Government to the continued feedback this office receives from children and young people that they want adults to listen to them and work with them to build and improve the services, communities and systems they use on a daily basis.

As with the development of a WA Child and Family Wellbeing Strategy, the *Improving the Odds for WA's Vulnerable Children and Young People* recommended that the WA Government undertake a consultation process to develop and implement a Child Impact Assessment tool, and that all government agencies should be required to use this tool. This recommendation was also highlighted the following year in the *Child Poverty: A Call to Action* report. While the Department of the Premier and Cabinet recognised the criticality of WA Government agencies considering the impact on children and young people of all proposals considered by Cabinet, it did not accept this recommendation. I respectfully disagree with the Department's position in relation to this matter, and strongly encourage that it reconsider the value that Child Impact Assessments can add to decision making processes.

Summary

My office has not undertaken specific research in relation to food programs that operate in early childhood and education settings. However, I personally have seen many such programs in operation and there is no doubt they provide a much needed support for children and young people.

It is always challenging to consider such programs as they potentially enable parents to abrogate responsibility for caring for their children's nutrition needs. However, as we continue to see more children living in poverty, I believe there is an urgent need for Government to identify ways of reducing cost of living pressures to enable parents to provide nutritious food for their families. It is also necessary to identify how we deliver food supports – while school is one option, and emergency relief programs are another, there are often barriers for people in accessing these programs in a way that is respectful and non-judgmental.

Thank you again for the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry. For further information about the matters discussed in this submission, please contact Mr Lynton Bennett, Manager Legislation and Legal, on [REDACTED] or at [REDACTED].

Yours sincerely,



Jacqueline McGowan-Jones
Commissioner

13 JUL 2022