



The Brotherhood's Social Barometer: Children's Chances



“Our economic progress has not delivered better outcomes for children and families in Australia, nor has it reduced the disparity across the social divide. The levels of these problems are now so high that services are already stretched in providing for them and all indications are that they are continuing to increase. While expensive ‘band-aids’ seem to be what the community are clamoring for, they will never deliver the long-term effective solutions to these problems, some of which may be becoming entrenched in some groups in our community and crossing generations of families.”

Prof Fiona Stanley

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Introduction

In the midst of plenty, too many Australian children are being brought up in poverty.

This is a scandal that casts serious doubt on our future as a nation of the fair go. It must be addressed now or a new generation will mature without knowing that being Australian means one thing above all else—having an equal chance in life.

There is no doubt that most Australian children are doing well. They are happier and healthier now than ever before. But not all are so fortunate.

Despite all of the advances we have made, the social group into which a child is born is still a major determinant of his or her life chances. These are not just the chance of entering higher education, travelling the world or enjoying the luxuries so many take for granted. Children born into poorer families have a far higher chance of:

- having low birth weight;
- showing poor physical growth;
- receiving poor nutrition;
- not coping in the early years of school and failing in the later years of school;
- developing physical and mental health problems;



- attempting suicide, and engaging in substance abuse, in adolescence.

Not many Australians realise that high numbers of children never go away for holidays, don't have access to a home computer to do their homework, and are even denied small luxuries like going to the movies.

This is not an Australia that most of us want. It is creating the basis for a future two-tiered society. And it is robbing us of skills and talent. Our economy simply can't afford to have around 15 per cent of our future workers not contributing fully to our economy.

Fifteen years of economic growth were meant to produce better.

1

We need a community campaign against child poverty

The Brotherhood of St Laurence believes it's time for an urgent and comprehensive community campaign to prevent the unequal chances of our children today from producing a divided society in the future.

Children must not be forgotten. They're small. They have no political voice. They are easy to ignore. We must speak up for them.

Change is possible. Over the past 40 years we have made considerable progress in lowering childhood vulnerability to physical diseases; now it's time to do the same for social disadvantage.

2

We need national targets for reducing child poverty

In a number of countries, most notably the UK and Canada, governments have adopted explicit goals

for improving opportunities for children and reducing child poverty. As a result, considerable headway has been made.

Progress in Australia has not been so good. The basis for an all-out assault on child poverty exists. For instance, excellent early childhood programs are operating, but they represent only a fraction of the effort needed. The Brotherhood of St Laurence believes we should follow overseas example by setting ourselves targets for improving opportunities for children and reducing child poverty.

3

We need new measurements of child poverty so we can hold governments and ourselves to account if we fail to act

Many individuals and organisations, including Fiona Stanley, Sue Richardson, Margot Prior and The Smith Family, have made great progress in drawing attention to the extent of child poverty. To help set these targets we are developing a new measure of child welfare and opportunity—*The Brotherhood's Social Barometer: Children's Chances*. The Barometer describes the condition of Australian children today in six key dimensions of life. Each dimension reflects basic capabilities and opportunities that every child should enjoy, including good physical and mental health, literacy and numeracy, freedom from violence and abuse, and access to an adequate level of economic resources and shelter.

In recent years discussions about poverty have been bogged down in a narrow and pointless debate about where a single poverty line should be set. Antagonists have fought themselves to a standstill over



Indicators of childhood disadvantage

Physical health	Mental health	Housing	Education and learning	Physical safety	Economic resources
Infant mortality	Mental health	Homelessness	Participation in preschool	Child protection substantiations	Child income poverty
Low birth weight	Youth suicide		Literacy and numeracy	Victims of assault and sexual assault	Jobless households
Chronic diseases			Youth unemployment		Persistence of low resources over time
Child immunisation					

whether poverty is 'absolute', 'relative' or 'anchored', while the general population has looked on increasingly frustrated. Everyone knows, however, that poverty has many facets and many causes. We must stop talking about numbers and dollars and start talking about people. That's what the Barometer of Children's Chances is designed to do.

We want to use the Barometer to build a broad coalition that crosses all parties, all levels of government, all media organisations and all communities to ensure that the special needs of children from low-income households are met.

The Barometer will set a baseline against which future changes in children's situations can be measured. We want people to hold our governments to account if they fail to act.

But we want another response as well. It's true governments have the prime responsibility for implementing new policies and services, but every single one of us must play a part. Instead of sitting back and asking why others haven't acted to create better services, higher performing schools and a safer environment for our own and our neighbours' children, we should all ask 'what can I do and where do I start?' So this Barometer is a prompt to community action to improve the situation of children.

There is only one certainty about child poverty: children are not responsible for their plight. They can't choose the family into which they are born. So there is no such thing as a 'deserving' or an 'undeserving' poor child. There are only lucky and

unlucky children and we must do our best to give all of them a better future.

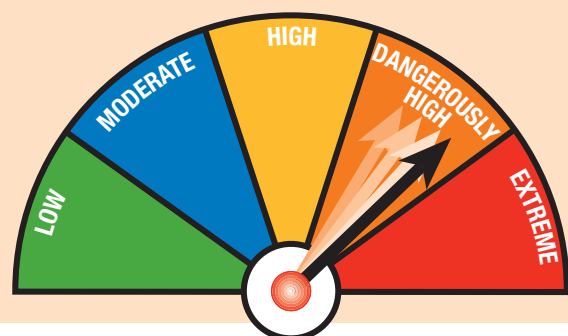
Child poverty imposes enormous immediate and future costs on our nation, and it robs us of talent and skills. But this offers us an opportunity as well, because it means that the best way to create a wealthier society is to reduce child poverty.

Child poverty is our poverty, and reducing it is the path to prosperity for all.

The Brotherhood's Social Barometer: Children's Chances

The Barometer of Children's Chances outlined below summarises a number of key measures of children's life opportunities that are being monitored by the Brotherhood of St Laurence.

While Australia is performing better in some areas than in others, the overall outlook for disadvantaged children is bleak. The Brotherhood has therefore set the barometer reading at 'Dangerously High'. Any further deterioration of outcomes and services for disadvantaged children would see it reach the 'Extreme' level.



1. Physical health

Good physical health in childhood is essential for future physical and psychological development. Poor childhood health can have an impact on a person's health right throughout their life. Children from all backgrounds should be able to enjoy good physical health. In Australia this is unfortunately not the case. Research findings show:

- The health outcomes of advantaged and disadvantaged children are radically unequal.
- The proportion of low-birthweight babies is increasing. Children born with a low birth weight do relatively well in advantaged families but those born into disadvantaged families tend to develop more problems.
- Indigenous children are twice as likely as the rest of the population to have a low birth weight or die within their first year.
- Immunisation rates for 6-year-olds are still below target.
- Childhood asthma rates are increasing.
- Other chronic diseases such as obesity, diabetes and cancer in children are becoming more prevalent, and are increasing fastest among children from Indigenous, disadvantaged, rural and immigrant backgrounds.

2. Mental health

The World Health Organisation's constitution explicitly recognises mental health as a central component of overall health. Good psychological health is essential for children to reach their full potential. Children who develop mental health problems face limitations in participating in society, risk social exclusion and are likely to carry these problems on to adulthood. Evidence shows that:

- Over 14 per cent of Australian children aged 4–17 years have some type of mental health problem. The prevalence of mental health problems in children is greater in lower income families.
- Although declining in recent years, suicide rates for young males remain high in Australia. Suicide rates for males aged 15 to 24 have risen fourfold since the 1960s. Children from poor, Indigenous

and rural communities and young people with psychological and substance abuse are more likely to commit suicide.

3. Housing

Having access to adequate housing is an internationally recognised human right and is essential for child-wellbeing and development. The most extreme form of inadequate housing is homelessness, which includes having to rely on temporary accommodation.

- An estimated 9,941 children under the age of 12 were homeless on census night in 2001 in addition to 26,060 homeless children between 12 and 18 years.
- Children make up 46 per cent of all homeless people in Australia.
- Every day an alarming 200 children and their families are turned away from homeless services due to insufficient accommodation.

4. Education

A good education is vital for a child's future success. The early years, when learning abilities are being developed, are particularly crucial to a child's future life chances. Despite this:

- Preschool participation is low in Australia by international standards, especially among disadvantaged groups. Australia is currently ranked 24th out of 30 OECD countries in the proportion of 4-year-olds in preschool programs. Kindergarten participation rates vary substantially between geographical locations.
- Students from poorer communities typically achieve lower results at every level of schooling and are far less likely to go on to tertiary study.
- Up to 10 per cent of children in years 3 and 5 have problems with literacy or numeracy, or both. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds are most likely to suffer.



- Indigenous children are twice as likely to have difficulties as non-Indigenous children.
- Around 16 per cent of young people aged 15–19 years are neither in full-time employment nor in full-time education, leaving them at risk of longer term socio-economic disadvantage. One study found that in Victoria and New South Wales 5 per cent of postcodes accounted for 25 per cent of all early school leavers.
- Indigenous young people are the group most at risk. Although Indigenous school attendance and participation in vocational education has increased since the 1990s, the proportion of Indigenous young people finishing high school or higher studies is still relatively low. Only about 40 per cent of Indigenous secondary students complete year 12 compared with nearly 80 per cent of non-Indigenous young people.

5. Safety

Our children must be protected from physical and mental abuse. Violence, exploitation, abuse and neglect can lead to a shorter life span, poor physical and mental health, educational problems, poor parenting skills later in life and homelessness. In Australia over recent years:

- Child protection substantiations have increased. Whether or not this is due to better reporting, the rise is still a worry.
- Reported instances of assault on children have increased.
- Reported instances of sexual assault on children have also increased.
- Indigenous children are much more likely to be the subject of an abuse or neglect substantiation.
- There is a strong link between poverty and a higher risk of abuse and neglect.

6. Economic resources

The economic resources of a family are important indicators of potential child well-being. Many parents unfortunately lack the resources necessary to give their children the best possible start in life.

- Child poverty rates remain too high in Australia. Nine out of 25 OECD countries have lower child poverty rates than Australia.
- More than 1 in 10 children are living in relative poverty and 1 in 7 is growing up in a household where there is no-one in paid employment.
- No significant dent has been made on child poverty rates in Australia through a sustained period of economic growth.

What we must do

Overall, it is clear that not enough is being done to ensure that disadvantaged children develop and flourish. As a society, we must continue to insist that every child has the chance to reach their full potential. What must we do?

The answer to this question is for each of us to determine. Australia must have a debate about the specific policies to adopt.

The Brotherhood believes we should:

- start measuring outcomes and setting targets for improvement
- create a powerful lobby group for change.

Tackling child poverty is an ongoing focus for the Brotherhood of St Laurence over the coming years and we want to be part of a **community-wide** campaign.

A more comprehensive report on the Social Barometer will be available on the Brotherhood's website: www.bsl.org.au

