

Submission to the Inquiry into the extent and nature of poverty in Australia

February 2023

Introduction

As South Australia's Commissioner for Children and Young People, my mandate under the *Children and Young People (Oversight and Advocacy Bodies) Act 2016* (SA) is to promote and advocate at a systemic level for the rights, interests and wellbeing of all children and young people in South Australia.

My advocacy is directly informed by my regular conversations with children and young people. When I commenced my role in 2017, I asked thousands of children and young people across South Australia to tell me the 'one thing' they wanted me to do as their Commissioner. Tackling poverty and 'helping poor kids' was a top area of concern, second only to 'listening to kids'.

Children and young people consistently raise the impact of cost-of-living pressures on their own lives, their family lives and the lives of other children they know. They emphasise that the experience of poverty is not just about material possessions or financial stress. They talk about feeling included and having strong relationships, about social, emotional and physical wellbeing, having opportunities to fully participate at school and in the community, and feeling hopeful for the future.

Children and young people firmly believe that poverty is not an inevitability, and they want decision makers to listen and act upon the voices of people with lived experience of poverty, including children and young people, to achieve the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal to 'end poverty in all its forms'.

"In school we talk about homelessness and poor adults, we don't talk about homelessness and poor kids."

– 17 year old, female

"Poverty is not a choice, it is a societal failing."

– 18 year old, female

"We must look to what decisions are being made that perpetuate the poverty trap."

– 17 year old, male

Summary of recommendations

I welcome the Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee Inquiry into the extent and nature of poverty in Australia. A country that prides itself on national values of 'a fair go' must act to ensure that all children not only have access to a home, nutritious food, suitable clothing and shoes, medication and healthcare, but also opportunities to fully participate in their education, to go on school trips, to enjoy family outings, and to regularly participate in sport or other extracurricular activities.

I welcome the Inquiry's broad terms of reference insofar as appropriate solutions to poverty will depend on a clear understanding of the nature and extent of poverty. It is anticipated by this office that this Inquiry will lead to real action that addresses the roots of poverty and breaks intergenerational cycles of disadvantage. To achieve this, it is

important for the Committee to recognise the ways poverty impacts children and young people's lives.

It is imperative that the Committee focuses on what changes are needed to prevent child poverty and to minimise the impacts of poverty on children and young people and their families. This includes changes to policy and legislation, as well as investment in social and community support systems and services, that destigmatise poverty and empower and support families and communities to thrive through access to resources, services and infrastructure.

One in 6 children in Australia are growing up in poverty, and the child poverty rate is consistently higher than the rate for adults.ⁱ In South Australia in 2021, more than half of all children and young people (53.6%) lived in disadvantaged socioeconomic circumstances, compared to 38.9% nationally.ⁱⁱ

While these numbers are concerning, they hide the day-to-day reality of poverty and the pressures facing children and families in school environments, at home and across the community. This submission focuses on the social, relational and material aspects of poverty from the perspective of children and young people.

Addressing the structural factors and systemic failures that create and perpetuate poverty is key to ensuring Australian governments meet their international obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) to promote and protect children's rights.

Specifically, I make the following recommendations:

- 1. Recognise children and young people's experiences of poverty and the multidimensional impacts of poverty on their human rights and everyday lives.**
- 2. Introduce a Child Poverty Act which establishes key child poverty reduction measures, indicators and targets.**
- 3. Invest in multi-sector and non-stigmatising approaches to poverty reduction that support children and families and communities, including those that:**
 - a. Recognise and reduce the true cumulative cost of education.
 - b. Address barriers to children's participation in extracurricular activities.
 - c. Improve access to transport for children, young people and families.
 - d. Address food insecurity through the provision of free meals in schools.
 - e. Expand access to free public wifi and invest in child-, youth- and family-friendly social and physical infrastructure.
 - f. Include children and young people in climate change education and disaster prevention and recovery efforts.
 - g. Improve access to free period products in schools and community centres, youth facilities, libraries, chemists and healthcare settings.
- 4. Ensure that income support payments are increased to above the poverty line and targeted to keep children, young people and families out of poverty.**

The quotes throughout this submission are direct quotes from my workshops, surveys, focus groups and conversations with children and young people about how they experience poverty. I also encourage the Committee to consider my following reports, which summarise this engagement with children and young people:

- [Leave No One Behind: What children and young people have said about living in poverty](#) (2019).
- [2030 SDG Action Plan by South Australian Young People](#) (2020).
- [Menstruation Matters: The impact of menstruation on wellbeing, participation and school attendance](#) (2021).
- [My Digital Life: Understanding the impact of digital poverty on children and young people](#) (2021).
- [Spotlight on the True Cost of Going to School](#) (2021).

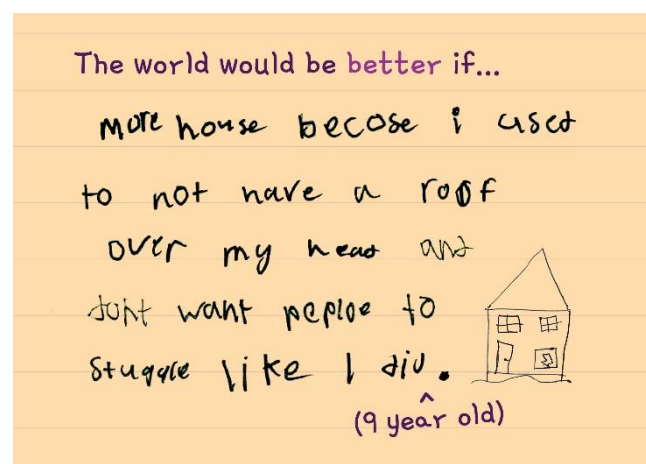
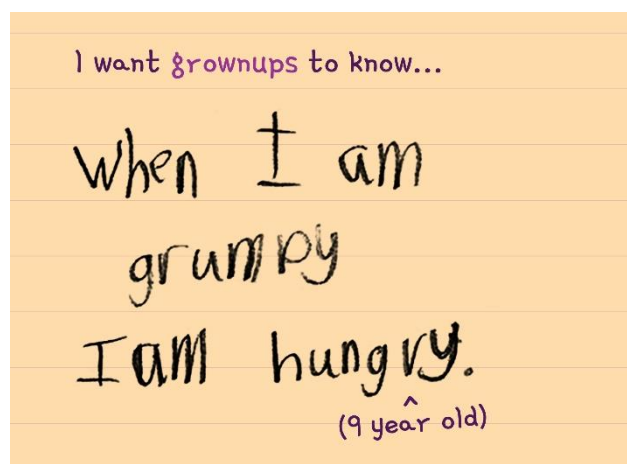
If you would like to discuss anything further, please do not hesitate to contact my office.

Yours sincerely,



Helen Connolly

Commissioner for Children and Young People
Adelaide, South Australia



1. Recognise children and young people's experiences of poverty and the multidimensional impacts of poverty on their human rights and everyday lives.

Children and young people emphasise the impacts of poverty on their relationships and sense of belonging, as well as their opportunities to have fun, be independent and participate in their community. This is consistent with Sharon Bessell's framework that recognises the relational, opportunity and material dimensions of child poverty.ⁱⁱⁱ

"Poverty is often stigmatised in our society so it is imperative that it is humanised to tell stories behind the statistics."

– 15 year old, female

"Living in poverty can make a young person want to give up because they don't think that they belong."

– 14 year old, male

Children and young people describe how the pressures of having 'no food', 'no water' or 'no electricity or gas' can lead to 'less connection with their family', whether due to parents being stressed or needing to work constantly. It also affects friendships, with children being too embarrassed to have friends over due to the state of their home.

Children and young people report that 'being poor at school is experienced as a social issue'. Beyond impacts on learning, poverty also has impacts on how young people see themselves in the present as well as their aspirations for the future. Not having clothes, toys, digital devices or access to the internet or period products, sets them apart from their peers and are significant barriers to their participation at school, in social outings and extracurricular activities.

Going to the dentist, doctor or accessing mental health care is virtually inaccessible for children and young people in poverty, 'even when they can be the most needing of that support'. They emphasise the impacts of not having access to sufficient – let alone healthy – food, and not being able to 'take good care of yourself' when you don't have soap or toothpaste or clean clothes.

Young people also describe the impact of 'poverty stigma' when people make assumptions about their family and poverty that make them feel judged, blamed or embarrassed. This extends to how they are treated by their friends' parents, by teachers, coaches and other community members, including health professionals, police or others in the justice system.

"You cannot live poor. You can survive, but that's not living."

– 21 year old, female

"It feels like schools punish you for being poor – having to stay in class during school breaks so you can use the school's technology to get your work done, feels like a punishment rather than a support."

– 15 year old

While low family income is one of the most common denominators of poverty, the factors contributing to low income vary. Inadequate social security payments or low paid

insecure work may be a cause, while other contributing factors include children or family members living with disability or chronic illness, unaffordable housing costs, or being part of a family that has complex needs. Addressing poverty therefore demands multi-sector and community-based solutions (see Recommendation 3) as well as increased income support (see Recommendation 4).

The disproportionate impacts of poverty on the following groups of children and young people require particular attention and action:

- **Children and young people living with disability.**

Where systems fail to support children with disability and their families, this exacerbates poverty and increases the likelihood of crisis situations and a need for more services. The hoops that families must go through to get their child support through the NDIS or state services is also often a hurdle, and many families cannot afford the cost of a formal diagnosis. The NDIS only supports people with disability expenses, rather than day-to-day living costs. For families with children with complex disability needs who are unable to live safely in the family home, parents may be cut off from carer support payments once their child is living outside the family home, despite the reality that their significant caring role continues.^{iv}

- **Young people leaving care.**

As highlighted in my recent submission to the Review of the *Children and Young People (Safety) Act 2017* (SA), action is needed to better support families to prevent children entering care, as well as to extend the support available to young people leaving care.^v Poverty can adversely impact a parent or carer's capacity to care for children, and needs to be addressed alongside other structural factors such as homelessness, social isolation, unemployment or underemployment, disability and mental health problems.

- **Young carers.**

Many children and young people with caring responsibilities live in households that are vulnerable to poverty. They are often juggling school, work and caring for family members who are living with physical disability, chronic illness, mental illness, terminal illness or alcohol dependence. The shortfalls in systemic support for this often-hidden group of children and young people should be addressed to ensure that they are not left in poverty as a result of caring.^{vi}

2. Introduce a Child Poverty Act which establishes key child poverty reduction measures, indicators and targets.

I recommend that serious consideration be given to introducing a Child Poverty Act in Australia, similar to New Zealand's *Child Poverty Reduction Act 2018*. The legislation would establish a shared vision for children and young people's wellbeing, set targets against key income and non-income measures, and focus governments and communities on developing policies and strategies to actively achieve a significant and sustained reduction in child poverty.

The New Zealand Parliament passed its *Child Poverty Reduction Act 2018* (the Act) with the aim to ‘help achieve a significant and sustained reduction in child poverty in New Zealand’.^{vii} The legislation requires the government to set targets for child poverty reduction, and to report annually on measures related to the causes and consequences of child poverty, as well as how each Budget is reducing child poverty.

Since the Act commenced, New Zealand has made significant progress towards child poverty reduction targets, with the latest figures showing rates trending downwards on all nine income and material hardship measures.^{viii}

A range of policies have facilitated progress against legislated poverty reduction targets in New Zealand, including the Ka Ora, Ka Ako Free and Healthy School Lunches Programme, increases to the supply of affordable housing, changes to child support payments, and funding for intensive relationship-based wraparound support for young parents. These policies not only focus on increasing family incomes and reducing housing and other pressures on low-income households, but also supporting the wider wellbeing of children and families.

3. Invest in multi-sector and non-stigmatising approaches to poverty reduction that support children and families and communities.

This subset of recommendations highlights the need to invest in integrated, non-stigmatising and place-based policies to reduce child poverty, mitigate its consequences and support the meaningful participation of children, young people and families in communities.

Implementing effective approaches to reducing poverty will address the intersecting structural factors that contribute to and exacerbate poverty for children and families. Such approaches should be holistic and based on an understanding of protective factors already in place across communities, providing for a continuum of services and recognising the role of schools, the community and social service system, as well as the importance of transport and infrastructure.

a. Recognise and reduce the true cumulative cost of education.

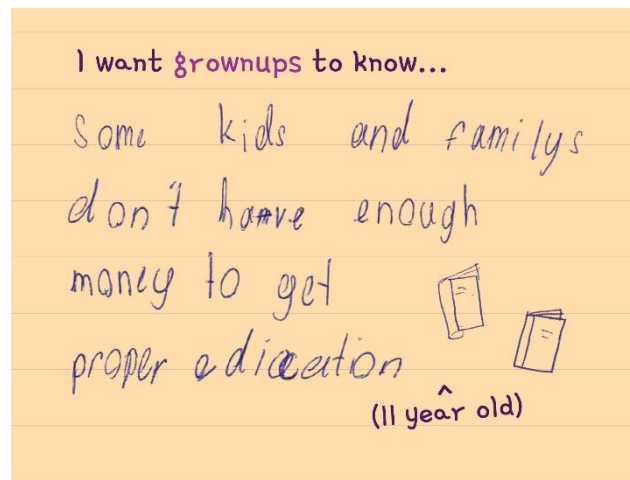
Children and young people have consistently raised with me concerns about what they consider to be the high costs of going to school. This includes the costs of uniforms, digital devices, textbooks, transport, stationery, and other materials, as well as the costs associated with participation in school camps, excursions, sports, and other activities.

While the costs of some events and activities are officially considered ‘optional’ or ‘non-essential’, from the perspective of students and their families, they are all essential as they allow for full and enriching participation in all aspects of school life and ensure no child is seen as the “other” or “different”.

Beyond impacts on learning, poverty has a significant impact on student participation and connection with their school and surrounding community, as well as their friendships and sense of self-worth and belonging. Children and families have also identified financial insecurity as a contributing factor in children’s experiences of school exclusion.

"I would provide parents with money to pay for their house and their children's school fees."
– 11 year old

My 2021 *Spotlight on The True Cost of Going to School* Report emphasises the need for responses at a school and system level that address the financial barriers to public education.^{ix}



b. Address barriers to children's participation in extracurricular activities.

Research shows it is children from low-income families who are likely to benefit the most from extracurricular activities.^x It is therefore recommended that Australian governments commit to improving access to transport (see Recommendation 3c), as well as better targeting, increased value, and overall expansion of the scope of State and Territory government's Voucher Schemes to benefit children and young people from low-income families, and to cover the costs of non-sporting activities.

Regular participation in sport and extracurricular activities is associated with a range of positive health, social and academic outcomes. Yet children from low-income families participate at much lower levels than their more 'well-off' peers. Addressing barriers to children's participation is key to mitigating the consequences of child poverty.

Children and young people describe how living in poverty means their family becomes entirely focused on 'the necessities' of life and that 'fun' or 'additional' activities are 'luxuries' that are generally not available to them. Many children and young people have also raised concerns about the inequity of government assistance that is provided for formal sports, but not for other outdoor pursuits such as Scouts, Guides or creative activities.

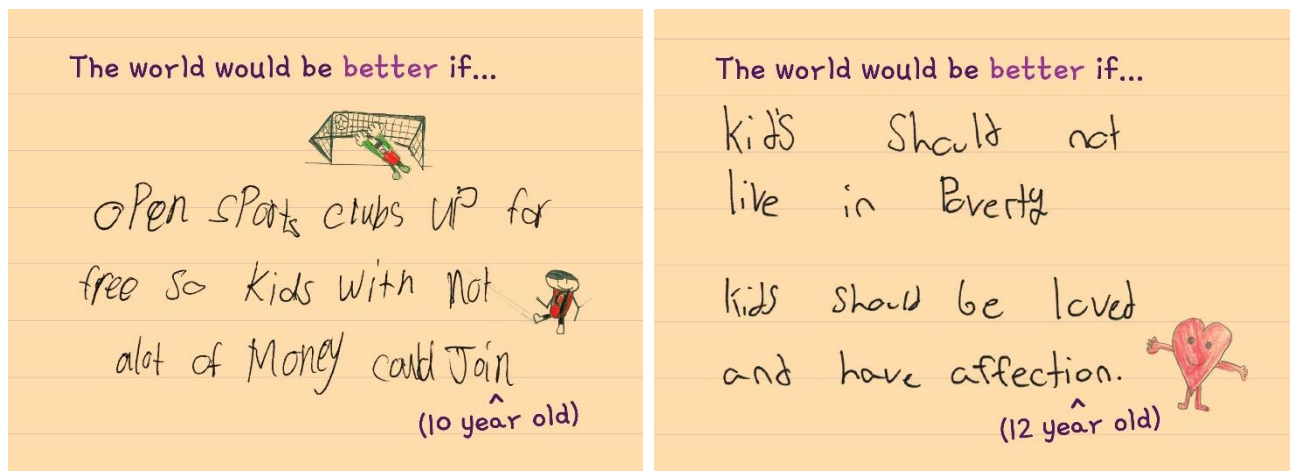
Costs of participation include membership and registration fees, the cost of uniforms, shoes and 'essential' equipment, as well as an expectation that families will contribute to fundraising activities. A lack of reliable and affordable transport options is also a barrier to participation.

"Not having enough money can prevent you from participating in the things you want to do outside of school."

– 15 year old

"Extend the sports vouchers for primary school students to all school students. There are many sports that I really enjoyed and would've stuck with but couldn't because the classes were too expensive."

– 16 year old



c. Improve access to transport for children, young people and families.

It is recommended that governments improve access to transport for children, young people and families, including through the provision of:

- free public transport to and from school and community activities for children and young people from low-income families.
- programs that provide mentoring and financial support for young people to attain their learner's permit and full drivers' license, with a particular focus on support for young people in regional areas.

The availability and affordability of transport underpins children and young peoples' capacity to engage with school, employment, sport, hobbies, interests, and other social and recreational activities. When transport is lacking, unreliable, unsafe, or unaffordable, it has a disproportionate impact on the quality of children and young people's lives, including their ability to maintain employment or friendships.

"You can't get a job outside of the [Adelaide] Hills unless you have your license (better public transport please)."

– 17 year old

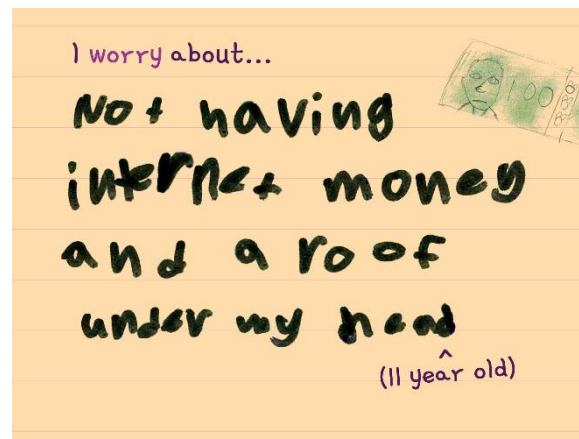
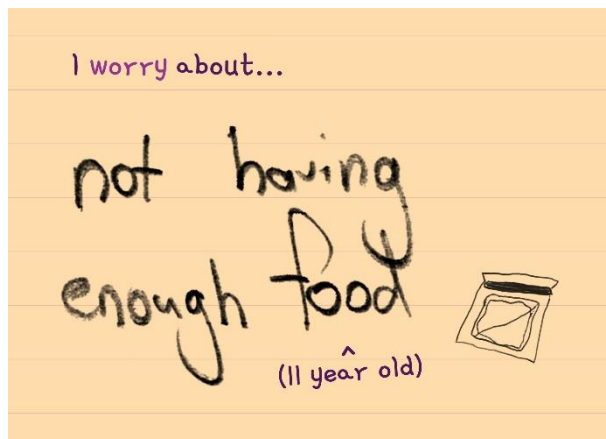
d. Address food insecurity through the provision of free meals in schools.

The provision of free school meals in Australia should be seriously considered as a mechanism to address food insecurity as a symptom of poverty. Free school lunches have been a feature of school life for many years in countries as diverse as Sweden, the UK and India, where governments provide funding for this purpose. Free school meal programs have been trialled in parts of Australia and New Zealand and have been shown to result in marked improvements in student attendance and behaviour.^{xi}

According to the Foodbank Hunger Report, 1.2 million children throughout Australia went hungry in 2021.^{xii} Almost half of the parents (45%) deemed to be severely food insecure reported that their child went for an entire day without eating at least once a week.

Children and young people describe having ‘healthy food’ as just as important as ‘having food at all’, but that the choice to be healthy isn’t often available to families experiencing poverty. Children talk about the associated stress on their family, as well as the impact of not having enough food on their ability to concentrate and participate at school.

An evaluation of the Ka Ora, Ka Ako program providing free school meals in New Zealand, for example, has shown significant positive impacts on wellbeing and food security.^{xiii} The program supplies healthy school lunches on a universal basis to all students in schools facing the greatest socio-economic barriers, with the option to opt out and bring a packed lunch if they wish to. The universality of the scheme minimises any stigma associated with food insecurity and poverty.



e. Expand access to free public Wi-Fi and invest in child-, youth- and family-friendly social and physical infrastructure.

Developing sustainable, comprehensive and targeted digital inclusion policies should be a key part of addressing poverty in Australia. Such policies should bring together all levels of government, communities and people with experience of digital poverty and seek to:

- Expand free, high quality public Wi-Fi services to include all public buildings, public transport, and community infrastructure such as libraries and school grounds.

- Ensure all students have a laptop and data pack, regardless of family income, circumstance or geography; and
- Recognise that children's rights exist equally online as they do offline and create opportunities for learning, participation, creativity and digital citizenship.

Limited or no digital access currently presents a significant barrier to education, work, safety, and citizenship. My 2021 *My Digital Life* report considers the everyday experiences of issues related to digital poverty from a child rights perspective and makes recommendations that seek to build digitally inclusive schools and communities.^{xiv}

"No internet at home so can't do homework."

- 15 year old

"[The worst thing about being a kid is...] lack of internet and not being able to fix it"

- 8 year old

Greater investment in child-, youth- and family-friendly infrastructure more generally is another key mechanism for poverty reduction.^{xv} This includes increasing access to quality preschool education and care services; reducing barriers to community use of school facilities; ensuring dedicated infrastructure that supports young people's development and career aspirations; and ensuring access to community-based mental health supports.

"[We want] a place for groups of kids to hang out without access to money."

- 15 year old

f. Include children and young people in climate change education and disaster prevention and recovery efforts.

It is recommended that Australian governments commit to:

- Supporting child-focused approaches to emergency management and disaster mitigation, reduction and responses.
- Comprehensive climate change education and including young people in climate-related decision making to address children and young people's climate anxiety and feelings of despair and hopelessness about the future.^{xvi}

Children and young people are regularly exposed to the reality of climate change, either through their lived experience or through various media and digital channels. Many children are living in communities directly affected by bushfires, drought, flood, heatwaves and other extreme weather events. The increasing frequency of extreme weather events, in addition to the high and rising costs of fuel, food and the rental crisis, have exacerbated issues for families 'doing it tough'.

Children and young people recognise that climate change heightens social and economic inequalities and disproportionately impacts those who have the least resources to respond and cope, including people living in poverty and in regional and remote communities. As

highlighted in the Australian Council of Social Services 2022-23 Budget Priorities Statement emphasises that, without fast and inclusive climate action and policies to build climate-resilient communities, ‘it is likely we will entrench and drive greater poverty and inequality in Australia’.^{xvii}

g. Improve access to free period products in schools and community centres, youth facilities, libraries, chemists and healthcare settings.

It is critical for all levels of governments to work with schools and community centres to :

- Promote the uptake of access to free period products in schools and community centres, youth facilities, libraries, and chemists across the state.
- Raise awareness of menstrual health and develop a suite of best practice resources that recognise the barriers menstruation creates to students’ school attendance.
- Ensure sports clubs are ‘period friendly’ through improving bathroom access and provision of bins for best practice disposal of period products at all sporting grounds and club houses.

During my conversations with children and young people about poverty, those who menstruate raised concerns about ‘period poverty’ or an inability to afford period products. A significant number of young people reported missing school because they can’t afford or access period products. My 2021 *Menstruation Matters* report documents what thousands of South Australian children and young people said about the impact of menstruation on their education, wellbeing and participation.^{xviii}

“Whether or not you’ll be able to support themselves when their period comes around.”

– 16 year old, female

“For a lot of people in poverty, menstrual products are inaccessible.”

– 16 year old, female

In addition to difficulties accessing products, young people explain other barriers to managing their period confidently and comfortably at school, sports clubs and in the community, including strict rules or policies dictating bathroom access; inadequate toilet and bin facilities; and stigma or negative attitudes from adults, teachers or peers.

4. Ensure that income support payments are increased to above the poverty line and targeted to keep children, young people and families out of poverty.

Increasing income support payments to above the poverty line and increasing Commonwealth Rent Assistance payments to better reflect the reality of renting are critical actions that will help alleviate the harmful impacts of poverty on children and young people. Consideration should be given to how payments can be targeted to keep children, young people and families out of poverty, and to recognise the additional costs of single parenthood.

Children and young people with lived experience of poverty highlight the serious inadequacy of income support payments and the need for real increases to ensure payments are above the poverty line, particularly for students and single parents.

“One thing I would like to change is the centre link money so my mum can be able to take better health care for me.”

– 17 year old, male

“Prices of housing, education etc. continue to increase. Government funding is not sufficient enough to support individuals living in poverty.”

– 15 year old

The significant positive impact of the Coronavirus Supplement on the lives of Australians on the lowest incomes has been highlighted in other submissions to this Committee. While the child poverty rate rose from 16.2% in the September quarter of 2019 to 19% in the March quarter of 2020, it then fell to 13.7% – a two-decade low – in June 2020 due to boosted income support payments (the Coronavirus Supplement).^{xix}

For many families, the boosted payments meant they were no longer forced to choose between buying food or medication, and they could pay their rent and provide their children with the ‘essentials’ that were previously not affordable.

However, in the absence of an allowance for children, the Supplement had the greatest impact on those without children, both couples and single people. As ACOSS has shown, the payments would have more effectively reduced poverty if they were ‘better tailored to the needs of different-sized families’ and ‘more generous for sole-parent families’.^{xx}

Older young people have raised concerns about the inaccessibility and inadequacy of Youth Allowance payments. With the age of independence at 22, many young people between 18 and 21 who are not supported by their parents must navigate the difficult process of proving their independence.^{xxi} This leaves many young people without sufficient support and can be particularly dangerous for young people living in unsafe home environments.

“Centrelink assessment based on young person’s circumstances rather than parent’s income so people in abusive homes who need money don’t fall through the cracks.”

– 16 year old, male

“The cost of living is too high even with social supports”

– 14 year old, female

Even where young people can access Youth Allowance, it is lower than other income support payments, and often wholly insufficient to cover basic living expenses. According to Anglicare’s 2022 Rental Affordability snapshot, there was only one rental listing (0%) across the whole country that was affordable to a young person on Youth Allowance looking for a share house.^{xxii}

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- ^{ix} <https://www.ccyp.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Spotlight-on-the-True-Cost-of-Going-to-School.pdf>.
- ^x Alexander O'Donnell, 2021, 'The kids who'd get the most out of extracurricular activities are missing out', The Conversation. Available at <https://theconversation.com/the-kids-whod-get-the-most-out-of-extracurricular-activities-are-missing-out-heres-how-to-improve-access-169447>.
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