

Submission to the Social Development Committee on the Effectiveness of Programs in Preschools and Schools to Ensure Children and Young People Don't Go Hungry During the Day

May 2025

Submission to the Secretary, Social Development Committee
at sdcc@parliament.sa.gov.au

As the Acting Commissioner for Children and Young People, my mandate under the *Children and Young People (Oversight and Advocacy Bodies) Act 2016* is to advocate for the rights, interests and wellbeing of all children and young people in South Australia.

I welcome the opportunity to comment on the prevalence and effectiveness of programs in preschools and schools to ensure children and young people don't go hungry during the day. Under the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child](#), to which Australia is a signatory, all states must uphold children's rights including:

Article 24: States Parties will recognise the right of the child to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health and will combat malnutrition, including through the provision of adequate nutritious foods

Article 27: States Parties will recognise the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development. States 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.

Article 28: States Parties will recognise the right of the child to education, and with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity, they shall

- make primary education compulsory and available free to all;
- make secondary education available and accessible to every child, and take appropriate measures such as the introduction of free education and offering financial assistance in case of need;
- Take measures to encourage regular attendance at schools and the reduction of drop-out rates.

I draw on the extensive consultations that the inaugural Commissioner, Helen Connolly, has undertaken with children and young people across South Australia over the past four years, and with teachers and other relevant stakeholders.

In this submission, I will address:

- a) What the Commissioner's office has heard about children and young people in South Australia who go to preschool and school without having breakfast and/or bring lunch;
- b) What we know about the academic and social impacts of preschool and school hunger;
- c) What we have heard about the effectiveness of the recently expanded public schools breakfast program in 2023 by the South Australian Government;
- d) Alternative ways to support families to decrease the number of children and young people going to preschool and school hungry; and
- e) The operation of other national and international preschool and school meal programs and their effectiveness.

I recommend that:

- The Eat Well Every Day School Lunch Scheme is expanded, initially to other schools in the northern suburbs and then to other areas of the State.
- I would like to see this model developed into a sustainable and scalable local model of meal production to be available to all schools initially in the northern suburbs, and then in other areas of the State.
- Recognise children and young people's experiences of poverty and the multidimensional impacts of poverty on their human rights and everyday lives.
- Introduce a Child Poverty Act which establishes key child poverty reduction measures, indicators and targets.

I also encourage the Committee to consider the following reports, which summarise engagement with children and young people about the impact of hunger and poverty:

- [Missing Out: Systemic discrimination of children and young people in South Australia](#) (2025)
- [Missing voices: Cost of living pressures as described by primary school children](#) (2023)
- [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).

If you would like to discuss any of the issues raised in this submission, please do not hesitate to contact my office.

Yours sincerely



Mimi Crowe

Acting Commissioner for Children and Young People
Adelaide, South Australia

1. What we know about children and young people in South Australia who go to preschool and school without having breakfast and/or bring lunch and the academic and social impacts of preschool and school hunger

We know that a good education is critical to the future of every young person and is their right under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. We also know that it is hard for children and young people to attend school and fully engage in education if they are hungry.

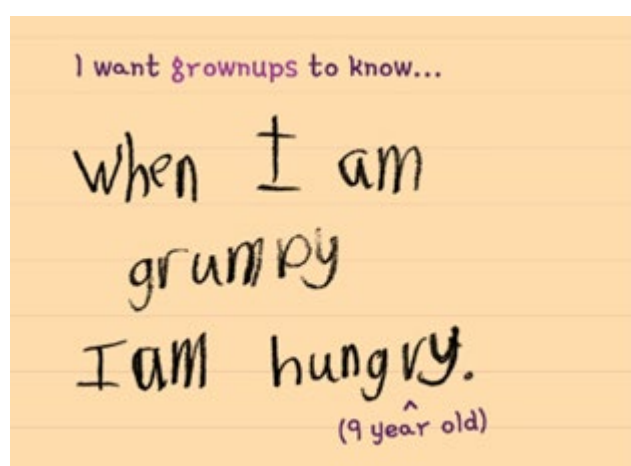
Food insecurity is a chronic issue in South Australia, the causes of which are broad and complex. Nevertheless, poverty is the principal cause.

About 20 per cent of Australian households have experienced severe food insecurity in the last 12 months¹, and we know that this situation is getting worse under the current cost of living crisis.

One in six Australian children lives in poverty², which includes about 75,000 children who are living in the poorest South Australian households. In South Australia more than half of all children and young people (53.6 per cent) live in disadvantaged socioeconomic circumstances, compared to 38.9 per cent nationally³.

Food insecurity impacts children's physical and mental development, as well as their ability to engage positively with school and other activities. Failure to engage in education can have significant negative impacts on the lives of these children now and for many years to come.

According to the Foodbank Hunger Report, 1.2 million children throughout Australia went hungry in 2021⁴. 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.



2. What we have heard about the effectiveness of the recently expanded public schools breakfast program in 2023 by the South Australian Government

All children should have access to at least one nutritious meal per day. Providing food at school is one way that governments can ensure that children and young people have at least one meal a day.

Organisations like Foodbank do a great job to try to meet the immediate needs of hungry students through breakfast clubs and food hubs. However, this is not a long-term or sustainable solution and can mean that kids are reliant on a vegemite sandwich and long-life or frozen food rather than the fresh protein, fruit and vegetables which would help them to thrive.

While I support funding being provided to Foodbank by the South Australian Government to attempt to feed hungry students, a vegemite sandwich for breakfast and nothing more substantial or nutritious throughout the day is not sufficient to fuel students through the day.

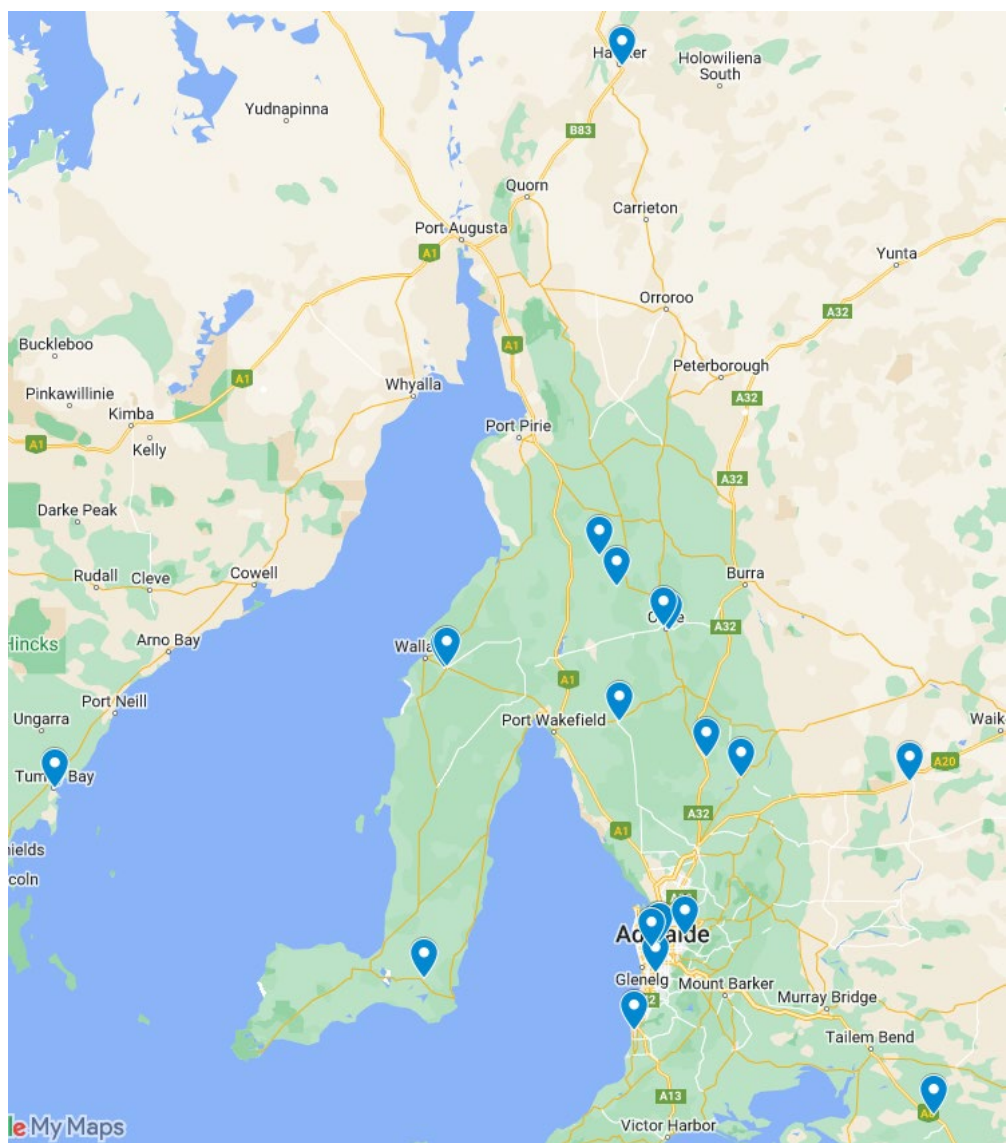
Children and young people understand that they need to eat healthy food each day. They describe having 'healthy food' as just as important as 'having food at all', but the choice to be healthy isn't often available to families experiencing poverty.

What Principals say:

In 2023, the Commissioner received a lot of interest from school principals across SA in response to a request for interest in a free school meals program:

- *"I just had a family call me saying they were going to keep their children at home as they had no food. I quickly prepared a sandwich, fruit and treat to have ready for them on arrival. This is a story that happens too often..."*
- *"We currently provide food for our students who need it (those we are aware of, anyway) and it would be great to formalise it in some way."*
- *"We are frequently feeding students from the school budget. We find students are coming with a high carb and refined sugar filled lunch box that cannot sustain them for the day."*
- *"We are experiencing an increase in the number of students requesting lunch, on top of requests for recess. I see enormous benefits, both socially and academically, by the provision of school lunches."*

Map of schools which expressed interested in a free school food trial:



What we have heard from children and young people

Children and young people recognise the importance of nutritious food across different aspects of their lives. They talk about food in the context of their health, their relationships and connection to different cultures, as well as their experiences of poverty.

Children describe food as something that 'gives you energy' and 'keeps you alive', safe and healthy. Many children and young people enjoy not only eating food but also preparing, cooking and sharing food, particularly with their friends and family members. When asked about their favourite things about where they live, many children mention restaurants and fast-food places as important places where they 'hang out' and have 'good food'.

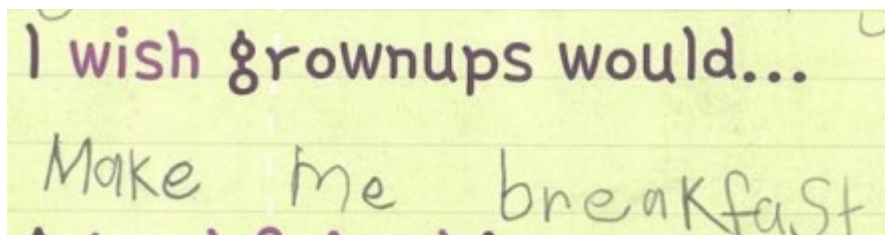
Children are aware of the ways in which poverty, as well as droughts and other natural disasters, impact food supply. They are worried about the cost of food and people who are 'hungry' and do not have enough food at home, and they are aware that cost-of-living pressures can leave many families with no choices when it comes to healthy food options.

They talk about the impacts of 'not having enough food' on their ability to engage and focus at school, as well as on their social life when it is 'embarrassing' to go out and not have enough money to buy food or to have friends over 'when there's no food in the house'.

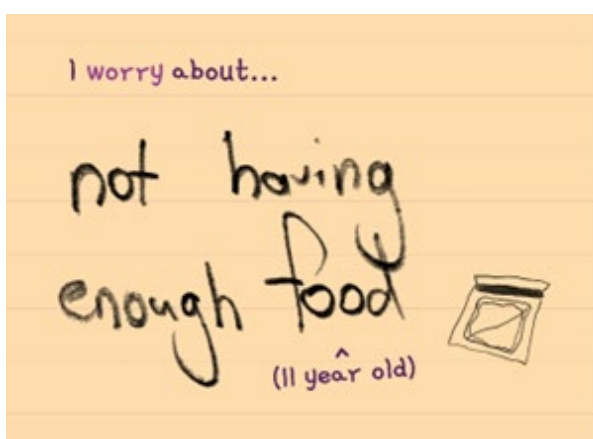
Children want to make sure everyone – no matter who they are or where they live – has consistent and reliable access to food and water, which they recognise as an essential part of a healthy and full life and a basic human right alongside 'having a roof over head'. Children and young people say that a healthy kid eats a variety of foods and 'sometimes treats'.

What worries children

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.



- 7 year old girl, Port Augusta



my mum 'cos she has
no money and has to
use dads money to feed us

– 11 year old girl

how my parents will have
enough money to buy things
we need like food.

– 11 year old boy

how much food
is in the fridge
after school

– 11 year old boy

Lunchtime isn't just about food

Current school arrangements not only fail to ensure all children eat, they also miss other aspects of lunchtime that are important to children.

While children describe 'recess', 'lunch' and 'the canteen' as some of the best things about school, their suggestions to make school better often focus on the need for 'more eating time at school', 'more fundraisers', 'more money to get more food', 'more breakfast clubs' and 'free food' at school. They also want to 'make canteen food cheaper', to have teachers 'give fruit to people who don't have any' and to have more opportunities to do 'cooking or baking' as part of the curriculum.

3. Alternative ways to support families to decrease the number of children and young people going to preschool and school hungry

School provided meals are common internationally to ensure that all students get the nutrition they need to learn and have a sociable moment with their peers at the heart of each school day. In addition, these meals support families experiencing food insecurity and help to improve student attendance, academic performance and child nutrition.

Unfortunately, this is not the case in South Australia.

While other countries in the world view children being fed nutritious lunches every day at school as a right not a privilege or an emergency measure, South Australian children are at the mercy of what their parents and schools provide for them, which may be a bag of chips or nothing at all.

The recent introduction of school lunch programs in Tasmania has shown that it is possible to introduce a subsidised hot sit-down lunch as part of the Australian school day, and that this has a positive impact on student engagement with school and education⁵.

Benefits go beyond the provision of meals, with the nutritional support of school lunches children can experience improved concentration, better school attendance, healthy eating habits, life skills and social interaction.

The inaugural Commissioner for Children and Young People, Helen Connolly, has been working with Foodbank, Preventive Health, the Department for the Premier and Cabinet, Flinders University, Schools Plus and Cultivate Bedford to trial a scheme based on the Tasmanian model at a school in the northern suburbs.

I would like to see a similar scheme tested in more SA schools where it is most needed.

Expanding the Tasmanian Scheme to other SA schools

The Tasmanian scheme, which formed the basis for the current trial in the northern suburbs, provides participant schools with the financial and practical support they need to prepare free hot nutritious cooked lunches from locally sourced seasonal food, consistent with Australian Dietary Guidelines.

Providing school lunches has been found to be feasible, valued and seen as an equitable and non-stigmatising opportunity for all children to eat healthy food together. School staff noticed an improvement in behaviour, attendance and engagement by the students involved.

Following the promising results of the Tasmanian trial, the Tasmanian State Government committed to expand the trial to 30 schools over two years. This program is currently underway in a mixture of primary and secondary schools across the State⁶. Some schools have cooking facilities onsite, while for others a local kitchen is used as a hub from which meals are transported to participating schools.

This trial has brought together a range of stakeholders to utilise food gluts collected by Foodbank in order to provide free school meals to all students at a low-SES school using local products where possible.

Under the Tasmanian program, schools set aside 20 minutes for students to eat a sit-down meal each lunchtime.

Under this scheme food is provided to all students: It is important that any approach is generalised as we know that children who receive special treatment for their difficulties can often feel stigmatised. Providing school meals for all where only some people pay is one way to do this, or providing free school meals for all.

Preferred model

The aim of Eat well Every Day School Lunch scheme being trialled in the northern suburbs is to provide a nutritious hot school lunch to every child every day for free.

Guiding principles:

- Equity and universal access – access to school lunch for all;
- Health and wellbeing – healthy, 20 minute sit down meals;
- Enhance the education experience – lunches enhance focus and classroom interaction.

Features of the model

- 20 minute in class dining seated dining experience;
- Free to all schools;
- 5 days a week;
- Nutritious and appealing meals;
- Centrally prepared and distributed to school weekly;
- Heating and assembly on site at school;
- Food waste management on site.

Recommendations:

- **I recommend that the Eat Well Every Day School Lunch Scheme is expanded, initially to other schools in the northern suburbs and then to other areas of the State.**
- **I would like to see this model developed into a sustainable and scalable local model of meal production to be available to all schools initially in the northern suburbs, and then in other areas of the State.**

4. Addressing poverty more broadly

The wellbeing and educational outcomes of South Australia's most disadvantaged children are severely compromised compared to their more fortunate peers. In order to ensure that all children and young people in SA can engage fully in education and school we must ensure that they are not hungry and actively address disadvantage. We must, therefore, take steps to address the cause of hunger systematically by addressing child poverty in South Australia.

Children and young people have consistently told the Commissioner that they want all children and young people to have equitable access to opportunities, particularly for those who are 'doing it tough'. They are aware that social background is too often a key predictor of educational and future success.

South Australia has the highest rate of poverty of any State in Australia with 22,000 South Australian children living in poverty⁷. In some parts of the State, rates of child poverty are as high as 50 per cent⁸.

Growing up in poverty affects a child's development and can have negative impacts on all areas of their lives: health, education, family relationships, and aspirations. For each stage in a child's development the proportion of disadvantaged children who meet educational milestones are between 10 to 20 per cent lower than for the Australian population as a whole⁹. Those who are off track at one milestone are unlikely to catch up, and the effects persist well beyond school, reflected in higher chances of not finding full-time work, and not being in education and training¹⁰.

"I worry about... homeless children dying because they have no food"
- 9 year old.

Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) data shows that South Australian children living in the most disadvantaged communities are twice as likely to be developmentally vulnerable in one or more domains than those who live in the least disadvantaged communities¹¹.

Young children impacted by poverty can miss out on many things crucial to early development, such as toys, books, and learning opportunities. They also may miss out on other key essentials such as having a secure home and access to food. These have short and long-term impacts on children's lives.

Children and young people talk about the impact 'poverty stress' places on a family, such that everyone in the household feels constantly 'on edge' because of the circumstances they face. During her [Poverty Project](#), Commissioner Connolly heard that the pressure of having 'no food' or 'no electricity or gas' can lead to 'less connection with their family due to parents being stressed (and) having to work constantly.' Some say this can manifest in families 'arguing a lot', or in more serious situations, to becoming an 'abusive family' that eventually results in 'welfare (getting) involved'.

In particular, disadvantaged young people frequently report that they face issues that make them feel as though they do not belong at school. This sense of not belonging impacts their connection with the school and their ability to develop friendships and build

their sense of self-worth. It also increases the likelihood of disengaging completely from school.

They raise financial issues that can sometimes or frequently be the cause of their formal and informal exclusion from school. Every young person who participated in focus group consultations for the [Poverty Project](#) reported difficulties paying for uniforms at some point in their education. Many explained that not wearing the right uniform was a common reason for their exclusion from a particular class or series of classes. Many young people spoke about feeling ‘embarrassed’ and ‘ashamed’ about not having enough money to participate in the full learning experience.

When the cost of various school-based practices and initiatives requires ‘extra money’ it can leave students feeling isolated. We know there is an impact from not being able to afford hygiene products such as deodorant, toothpaste and soap. For young women ‘period poverty’ was a real issue raised in a number of groups which we know can impact their ability to attend or fully engage with their education¹². Often young women who could not access hygiene products will not attend school, work, sporting and recreational or community activities. Some students mentioned the struggle to afford the cost of transport, food and other basic items necessary for school and life, and how this contributed to their exclusion from key opportunities to learn, including missing out on school sporting activities, camps or excursions.

South Australia needs to take action to address child poverty

It is imperative that the State government addresses the structural drivers of disadvantage and poverty as well as better supporting stressed households so that children can thrive. This includes working with the Commonwealth government to increase social security payments; implementing structural changes to address cost of living issues and sticky inflation; increasing minimum wage and subsidising essential costs. It must also include a public health response, underpinned by trauma informed principles, that all agencies working with these families adopt.

Child poverty is a political choice. No single government is responsible for its existence, but every government is responsible for its continuation.

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.

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 as well as increased income support.

The report [Missing Out: Systemic discrimination of children and young people in South Australia](#) (2025) provides further information on this topic.

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.

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 measures¹³.

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.

I recommend that South Australia:

- **Recognises children and young people's experiences of poverty and the multidimensional impacts of poverty on their human rights and everyday lives.**
- **Introduces a Child Poverty Act which establishes key child poverty reduction measures, indicators and targets.**

4. Recommendations

I recommend that:

- The Eat Well Every Day School Lunch Scheme is expanded, initially to other schools in the northern suburbs and then to other areas of the State.
- I would like to see this model developed into a sustainable and scalable local model of meal production to be available to all schools initially in the northern suburbs, and then in other areas of the State.
- Recognise children and young people's experiences of poverty and the multidimensional impacts of poverty on their human rights and everyday lives.
- Introduce a Child Poverty Act which establishes key child poverty reduction measures, indicators and targets.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Foodbank Hunger Report, 2022 <https://reports.foodbank.org.au/foodbank-hunger-report-2022/>
- ² The Smith Family, Poverty in Australia, <https://www.thesmithfamily.com.au/poverty-in-australia>
- ³ Child Development Council, 2022. How are they faring? South Australia's 2022 Report Card for children and young people. Accessed at <https://childrensa.sa.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/How-are-they-faring-SAs-2022-Report-Card-FINAL-2022-12-21.pdf>.
- ⁴ Foodbank Australia, Foodbank Hunger Report 2021. Available at <https://reports.foodbank.org.au/wp-content/uploads/documents/2021-Foodbank-Hunger-Report-PDF.pdf>.
- ⁵ School Lunch Program, School Food Matters, Evaluation, <https://www.schoolfoodmatters.org.au/school-lunch-program/evaluation/>
- ⁶ School Lunch Program, School Food Matters, Evaluation, , <https://www.schoolfoodmatters.org.au/school-lunch-program/evaluation/>
- ⁷ Submission to the South Australian Legislative Council Select Committee on Poverty, SACOSS, <https://www.sacoss.org.au/antipoverty#:~:text=The%20submission%20sets%20out%20SACOSS,the%20population%20including%2022%2C000%20children>
- ⁸ R Miranti, L Brown, J Li, R Tanton, Y Vidyattama, S Tuli and P Rowe, Child social exclusion, poverty and disadvantage in Australia', NATSEM, Institute for Governance and Policy Analysis (IGPA), University of Canberra, <https://unitingcare.org.au/wpcontent/uploads/2023/02/ChildSocialExclusionPovertyandDisadvantageinAustraliaReport.pdf>, pp 32, 80-83. In South Australia, 17.3% of children aged 0-14 years are living in poverty (the national average is 17.2%). P Davidson, B Bradbury and M Wong, Poverty in Australia 2020: part 2: who is affected?, ACROSS/UNSW Poverty and Inequality Partnership Report No. 4, ACROSS, 2020, https://povertyandinequality.across.org.au/wpcontent/uploads/2020/05/Poverty-in-Australia-2020-Part-2-%E2%80%93-Who-is-affected_Final.pdf
- ⁹ Mitchell Institute, 'Socio-economic disadvantage and educational opportunity persistently linked', Educational opportunity in Australia 2015, fact sheet 1, 2015, <https://www.vu.edu.au/mitchellinstitute/educational-opportunity/socio-economic-disadvantage-educational-opportunity-persistently-linked>
- ¹⁰ Mitchell Institute, 'Socio-economic disadvantage and educational opportunity persistently linked', Educational opportunity in Australia 2015, fact sheet 1, 2015, <https://www.vu.edu.au/mitchellinstitute/educational-opportunity/socio-economic-disadvantage-educational-opportunity-persistently-linked>
- ¹¹ Department for Education, Demographics and key equity groups in South Australia, 2021 AEDC snapshot #2, <https://www.education.sa.gov.au/docs/early-years/aedc/snapshot-2-demographics-and-key-equity-groups-insa.pdf>.
- ¹² Menstruation Matters, 2021, CCYP, <https://www.ccyp.com.au/publications/menstruation-matters-2021/>
- ¹³ Te Kāwanatanga o Aotearoa, New Zealand Government, 2022. Child Poverty Report 2022. Available at <https://budget.govt.nz/budget/2022/wellbeing/child-poverty-report/index.htm>.