Table of Contents

"For every talent that poverty has stimulated it has blighted a hundred."

John Gardner

Executive Summary

Uniting*Care* Burnside (Burnside) is an agency of the Uniting Church in Australia and a leading child and family agency in NSW. Our purpose is to provide innovative and quality programs and advocacy to break the cycle of disadvantage that affects children, young people and their families. We provide a range of direct services to vulnerable children, young people and families in Western Sydney, South West Sydney, the Central and mid North Coast and Orana Far West regions of NSW. Burnside conducts a range of services including early intervention programs to strengthen families and prevent abuse and neglect, youth programs to address homelessness and drug and alcohol issues and out-of-home care services including residential and foster care.

Burnside targets its services to the most disadvantaged children, families and communities in NSW. From July 2001 – June 2002 Burnside provided services to 3,747 individuals and families. Of these 71.3% were in receipt of an income support payment, over 30% lived in Department of Housing accommodation and 5% were homeless. Over 17% of all service users were from an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background and 13.4 % from a Culturally and Linguistically Diverse background.

In addition to direct services Burnside conducts a Social Justice and Research Program which initiates practice-based and social research projects as well as policy and education initiatives to bring about positive social change. This combination of direct service with research and evaluation ensures that Burnside's policy work is grounded in research evidence, informed by practical service knowledge and draws from the daily experience of disadvantaged people.

Burnside is convinced that there is enormous variance in the life chances of Australian children. The experience of poverty, especially long-term poverty, creates conditions that make the achievement of life potential and full participation in society very difficult for a substantial number of children. Poverty diminishes essential human dignity, makes children's lives more stressed and troubled than they need be and limits their choices and opportunities. It imposes significant downstream costs not only on children and families themselves but on the whole society. Therefore, there are good reasons to do more to address child poverty in Australia.

Fortunately, there are things that can be done to reduce both the incidence and damaging impacts of poverty. Burnside argues that the Commonwealth Government can, and must, take a lead role in developing and implementing such initiatives.

The extent of poverty for children in Australia

Poverty can be divided into two types: absolute poverty and relative poverty. Absolute poverty refers to living conditions that do not meet a person's basic survival needs for food, clothing, shelter etc. Relative poverty refers to a person's standards and conditions of living falling below what is generally experienced and accepted.

> *"To be relatively poor is ...to be forced to live on the margins of society, to be excluded from the normal spheres of consumption and activity which together define social participation and national identity"* (Peter Saunders, Year Book Australia, 1996, Australian Bureau of Statistics).

Poverty in Australia is more often relative poverty though some indigenous Australians are living in conditions of absolute poverty.

There are different ways to measure the incidence of poverty but most measures involve assessment of individual or household income levels. There is ongoing debate about which measures are most appropriate. Recent estimates of child poverty have ranged from 743,000 (Harding, and Szukalska, 1999) which used a measure of half average family income and 478,711 (Harding, Lloyd and Greenwell, 2000) which used a measure based on half the median family income. <u>Which ever measure is used the numbers of children in Australia living in poverty are substantial.</u>

Some groups are at greater risk of child poverty than others. Indigenous children have significantly higher rates of poverty than the general population. They must receive priority in initiatives to reduce poverty and its impacts. Other children at elevated risk are those living in families where:

- the head of the family is unemployed
- the head of the family is a sole parent
- one or both parents are employed but on low wages.

There is growing evidence that poverty is becoming increasingly concentrated in particular communities. This will require community and regional initiatives to address poverty.

The experience of poverty for children in Australia

Child poverty in Australia has to do with the experience of deprivation, isolation and inequality. This encompasses, but goes beyond, matters of income and material possessions to include issues around choice and sense of belonging. From the perspective of Burnside service users, to live with poverty means:

Inadequate income
Being in poverty means not having enough money to buy the items that most people consider basic to life in this country. It requires a relentless juggling of finances to meet expenses and contributes to a sense of vulnerability to circumstances as there is little or no capacity to meet unexpected bills.

Reduced quality of life
Poverty reduces quality of life by limiting the life-enriching activities and experiences that children have access to, eg outings, holidays, joining clubs etc. Poverty can also increase stress to the point where it undermines family happiness and wellbeing.

Lack of choice and fewer options
To live in poverty is to have fewer options in a whole range of areas including recreation, education, transport, and where you live.

Isolation
Being poor isolates in different ways. It can make it hard to maintain friendships as young people do not have the funds to engage in social activities that cost money. Children can feel different when they don't have the same pocket money, toys or clothes as other children. Those who are poor often have to live in more isolated and less well-serviced communities.

Exposure to risk
Living in poverty increases vulnerability to a range of risks. These include disruptions such as breakdown of an old vehicle and insecure housing to heightened risks of health and mental health problems, child abuse and neglect, harmful drug use and juvenile crime.

The impacts and costs of poverty

Research has identified connections between poverty and a range of adverse outcomes for children and families.

Impacts on cognitive development, learning difficulties and school achievement
Poverty is associated with reduced cognitive development, lower literacy, problems in adjustment and lower school achievement with longer lasting and deeper poverty producing the most negative effects.

Impacts on mental health, behaviour problems and risk of suicide
Children in poverty are at significantly greater risk of developing mental health problems (depressive, anxiety and substance abuse problems) and behavioural problems (conduct disorders, delinquency) than their more advantaged peers. Poverty and associated disadvantage is also a significant risk factor in youth suicide.

Impacts on health status
There is overwhelming evidence that poverty has a strong negative effect on children's health. Children growing up in socio-economically disadvantaged families have higher rates of prematurity and low birth weight, higher rates of accidental and non-accidental injury, lower rates of immunisation and increased incidence of hospitalisation. Some of the differences in health status are related to behavioural risks such as smoking, being overweight and reduced breast-feeding. Other structural factors such as living standards, quality of housing, access to services and presence of social supports are equally significant in their own right as well as influencing behaviour.

Impacts on parenting
Research indicates that poverty and associated social stressors undermines effective parenting. Poverty diminishes parents' ability to nurture their children well. It is related to reduced parental warmth, a decline in appropriate supervision and monitoring of children and an increase in the use of harsh and erratic discipline. In turn these factors undermine healthy child development.

Impacts on child abuse and neglect
There is substantial evidence that children living in poverty are at much greater risk of child abuse and neglect. This is particularly the case for families experiencing significant economic and associated stress who do not have access to the buffering effect provided by strong and available social supports.

Impacts on juvenile crime
While there are multiple paths to juvenile offending, overseas research indicates that factors related to parenting and particularly child abuse and neglect are especially significant. Recent Australian research found that the influence of poverty and other disadvantage contributes to elevated rates of child neglect which was the most significant causal influence on juvenile crime.

These impacts of poverty have enormous costs in human but also in financial terms. More effectively addressing poverty will alleviate human suffering as well as reducing a proportion of the financial burden imposed by poverty (see Table 1 for potential cost savings).

The consequences of poverty have broader social repercussions. Because poverty undermines healthy human development, it erodes the growth of competence and capability across society as a whole. This has major implications for the social and economic growth of the nation. Furthermore, countries with higher rates of inequality between citizens have been shown to have poorer overall health and wellbeing than countries where such differences are less pronounced.

Responding to child poverty in Australia

Poverty imposes a heavy burden on children, families and the whole community. Two types of initiative are needed to effectively address poverty and ameliorate its impacts. Firstly, strategies are required to lessen the incidence of poverty among children and their families. Secondly, initiatives to reduce the impacts of poverty on children and families must be implemented. Both responses must be part of a longer-term and comprehensive plan to tackle child poverty in Australia. This plan should be the product of agreement between the Commonwealth and State governments, non-government organisations and other stakeholders.

1. Broad initiatives to reduce the incidence of poverty

An adequate system of income support

Having inadequate income is a key feature of poverty. The base level of support should be above poverty lines. Burnside is opposed to imposing sanctions on single parents who do not meet requirements associated with income support payments.

Renewed attention to the role of the Commonwealth in training, employment assistance and job creation

Improved education and training programs, especially for long-term unemployed, are crucial if poverty is to be reduced. Attention should also be given to job creation initiatives, especially in the most disadvantaged communities.

Investment in public education

Given that education is a key leverage point to tackle the negative impacts of poverty and that poorer children overwhelmingly attend public schools, a renewed commitment to, and investment in, public education is essential.

2. Specific initiatives to reduce the impacts of poverty

Research reveals that the impact of poverty is mediated by underlying mechanisms. Among these are cognitive development (especially as influenced by the early learning environment), and parental practices (level of nurture, supervision and monitoring, discipline style). Programs that enhance early learning and strengthen effective parenting hold most promise to ameliorate the negative effects of poverty. Consequently, Burnside argues for:

A system of multi-component parenting support and early education programs

Research demonstrates a range of positive outcomes from multi-component programs. These include increased IQ, better school attendance, less disruptive and impulsive behaviour, higher literacy, reduced special education, lower juvenile crime and reduced incidence of abuse and neglect. These outcomes represent enormous benefits in preventing human misery, enhancing child development and lowering subsequent financial costs. Access to programs should commence at birth and be offered universally in the most disadvantaged communities.

Expansion of quality early childhood education and care services

Australia's commitment to early childhood education is minimal when compared to many other OECD nations. Also those children most likely to benefit from services are least likely to access them. Burnside calls for bi-partisan commitment to increasing access of disadvantaged families to quality early education and care services.

Intensive services for families with entrenched and complex problems
Some families will require intensive assistance to address problems that compound the influence of poverty and to prevent the entry of children into out-of-home care. Intensive family support and respite care services must be expanded to address the needs of families struggling with mental illness and substance abuse if cycles of poverty and disadvantage are to be broken.

Table 1

The impacts of poverty	Some potential costs of the impacts of poverty
Impacts on cognitive development, learning difficulties and school achievement	▪ Costs of special and remedial education ▪ Costs for diagnosis and treatment of learning difficulties ▪ Later costs related to school failure, declining retention rates, lower employment prospects, reduced productivity, lower taxation revenue and increased income support payments
Impacts on mental health, behavioural problems and risk of suicide	▪ Costs of provision of specialist teachers to deal with behaviour problems/cost of general school staff dealing with behaviour problems ▪ Expenses related to administration/monitoring/placement of suspended students ▪ Community mental health costs, GP visits and out-patient and in-patient mental health and psychiatric services
Impacts on health status and use of health services	▪ Costs associated with infant health (low birth weight, prematurity, reduced breast-feeding) ▪ Costs related to greater incidence of illness, accidental and non-accidental injury and increased rates of hospitalisation ▪ Later costs related to higher rates of smoking, obesity and substance abuse
Impacts on parenting	▪ Costs specifically associated with developmental delay and broadly (given the critical impact of early nurturing) with the other outcome areas and related costs
Impacts on child abuse and neglect	▪ Costs of statutory child protection services including reports and investigation of children at risk ▪ Police costs in investigating reports of abuse and neglect ▪ Cost of children's court hearings ▪ Expenditure on foster care and residential care
Impacts on juvenile crime	▪ Policing and court costs ▪ Expenditure on juvenile detention facilities / court ordered supervision and non-custodial sentences ▪ Medical costs, compensation and other expenses related to victims of crime ▪ Increased insurance costs

Recommendations

Overall

1. Commonwealth and State government, in consultation with other key stakeholders, should commit themselves to develop, resource and implement a long-term, comprehensive plan to address the problem of child poverty in Australia.
2. Consideration should be given to positioning aspects of a national plan to address child poverty within a broader national early childhood development strategy. There may be benefits in such a strategy by locating initiatives to reduce poverty in an overall strategy of promoting healthy development. This may reduce any stigma attached to anti-poverty initiatives and reduce the likelihood of criticism (and possible resentment) of a discrete anti-poverty strategy as only benefiting a sub-section of the population.
3. Consideration should be given to the instigation of a Children's Futures levy (similar to the Medicare levy) in order to raise funds for the enhancement of all Australian children's developmental opportunities including children living in poverty.
4. A national community education and awareness raising campaign should accompany the above poverty plan. The purpose of the campaign would be to foster public support for the strategy by identifying the costs of poverty and the benefits of preventing/reducing poverty and its impacts. There should be particular emphasis on poverty as a community problem and the wider social and national benefits that will flow from a public commitment to addressing poverty.

Adequate income support

1. The Commonwealth should ensure that adequate levels of income support are available to all children and families. All benefits should have parity with the base aged pension rate.
2. No financial sanctions should be applied to single-parent families as a consequence of failing to meet requirements under Australians Working Together. Such a policy would inevitably adversely impact on already vulnerable dependent children and would therefore be unfair and immoral. Rather, it should be recognised that one of the most important obligations for parents to fulfil is to be actively involved in raising their children and that this is a necessary and valuable contribution to the whole community.

Training education and job creation

1. The Federal government, within the Australians Working Together initiative, should give greater attention to improved job education and training and employment assistance for the long-term unemployed.
2. The Federal government should continue to address disincentives, including tax disincentives, to greater paid employment for the unemployed and those in casual/part-time employment.
3. Increased tax incentives should be available to business/companies who agree to train and employ long-term unemployed people in the longer term, especially to companies operating in areas of higher unemployment.
4. Federal and State governments should implement strategies to increase employment in the public sector and give particular attention to job creation strategies in regional areas targeted to young people.

Investment in public education

1. The Commonwealth and State Governments should substantially increase funds for public education. This is particularly true of the Commonwealth where the amount of funds expended on public education as a proportion of all funds expended on school education has been declining. There needs to be explicit agreement with the States to direct sufficient funds to the strategies nominated below.

2. There should be increased availability of school-based support teachers to assist with students with learning difficulties and emotional and behavioural problems

3. The numbers of school counsellors available to public schools needs to be increased. For example in NSW the proportion of counsellors to students is around 1:1000. This proportion of counsellors needs to be increased to at least 1:500 with each counsellor being responsible for no more than two schools.

4. There should be consideration of the expansion of alternative schools for those students who have most difficulty in the mainstream system.

5. There should be a review of salaries with a view to attracting people into the teaching profession. Specific incentives should be implemented to attract more experienced teachers to the most disadvantaged communities. These incentives could include extra pay and/or training opportunities.

6. Homework/study centres should be developed in more disadvantaged communities.

7. As recommended by the Vinson Inquiry into Public Education in NSW strategies need to be developed to identify, train and support teachers who possess the qualities to successfully teach Aboriginal students.

Multi-component parenting support and early education programs

1. Burnside calls on the Federal Government, in cooperation with State and Territory governments and in consultation with non-government organisations, to institute a comprehensive system of early parenting support and education programs for children and families exposed to poverty. Such programs should be universally available in the communities that are most disadvantaged and that have higher numbers of young children. Programs need to be adapted to suit Australian communities and should be accompanied by funding for systematic evaluation of interventions. This knowledge should be used to inform future program development.

Quality early childhood education and care services

1. The Federal government in consultation with State and Territory governments should continue its development of a national agenda for early childhood. The agenda should include an integrated policy framework and clear strategies for the provision of early childhood education and care and parenting support. Particular attention needs to be directed to supporting children and parents in indigenous communities.

2. Commonwealth funding for early childhood education and care services should be increased substantially at least to the average (of GDP) expenditure in the OECD.

3. Strategies must be developed to support the provision and expansion of early education and care services by the community sector which is more likely to provide services in more disadvantaged communities and for the youngest children.

4. There should be national guidelines and funding commitments that allow every three- and four-year-old child in Australia to attend a pre-school or long day care centre at no cost, at least one day per week. Children from low-income families should be able to attend two days per week at no charge.

5. Parent education and support services should be co-located, or preferably, integrated with children's services to create multi-component services in disadvantaged communities.

6. Development of services should be accompanied by ongoing research and evaluation of program outcomes.

Intensive services for families with entrenched and complex problems

1. Commonwealth and State governments should establish new Intensive Family Services within Australia over the next two terms of government. Implementation of services should be coordinated with existing State government initiatives. Services should be located in disadvantaged areas with a high incidence of child abuse and neglect and high rate of entry of children and young people into care. Given the extremely high rate of entry into care in Aboriginal families, a significant proportion of services should be directed to indigenous communities. It is important that such services should be co-located or integrated with existing family services. Service implementation should be accompanied by ongoing evaluation of program outcomes.

2. Commonwealth and State governments should develop a network of respite care services for children at risk. A capacity for planned respite should be co-located and incorporated into other family services programs in line with the principle of offering multi-component services. Service implementation should be accompanied by ongoing evaluation of program outcomes.

1.   Uniting*Care* Burnside

Uniting*Care* Burnside (Burnside) is an agency of the Uniting Church in Australia and a leading child and family agency in NSW. Our purpose is to provide innovative and quality programs and advocacy to break the cycle of disadvantage that affects children, young people and their families. We provide a range of direct services to vulnerable children, young people and families in Western Sydney, South West Sydney, the Central and mid North Coast and Orana Far West. These services include: early intervention programs focussing on education and child development; healthy family relationships and parenting support; youth services to address homelessness and drug and alcohol issues; and a range of out-of-home care services including foster and residential care.

In July 2001 - June 2002 Burnside provided services to 3,747 individuals and families. Burnside targets its services to the most disadvantaged children and families in the community using measures which include income, housing status and ethnicity. Of the individuals and families using Burnside services 71.3% were dependent on some form of income support payment. Only 16.5% were receiving a wage. In terms of housing, 31% were in Department of Housing accommodation and 5% were homeless. Regarding ethnicity, over 17% of all service users were of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background and 13.4% were from a non-English speaking background.

Burnside considers that poverty and other forms of disadvantage are powerful influences on how children develop and grow. Disadvantage affects the capacity of families to care for their children. We are committed to working with children, young people and families who are living with disadvantage, and have developed a range of services that provide a full continuum of care and support. The type of services offered depends on the needs and situations of each child and family.

With increasing evidence on the positive effects of early intervention, we have developed several programs to support very vulnerable families before severe problems develop. Most children and families have contact with Burnside in this way. For many other young people and families, crisis has already occurred and they need intensive support to build on their existing strengths and find new ways of living. For a much smaller number of families, breakdown cannot be avoided, so Burnside offers quality out-of-home care services that provide a safe and secure environment where children and young people can flourish. In all our services, we seek to support healthy family relationships, nurture the capacity for positive change and build strong communities.

There is huge variance in the life chances of children in Australia. As a community we tolerate conditions for some of our children that make the achievement of their life potential and full participation in society very difficult. Acknowledging the fact of these inequalities is the first step in changing the situation. The next involves developing and implementing policies that address the impacts and causes of poverty and disadvantage and enhance the social environment of our most vulnerable children.

The focus of this paper is on reducing the incidence and impacts of poverty on children and families in Australia. Poverty is unacceptable for a number of reasons. It is deplorable that some children and families simply do not have the resources to meet basic needs. Living in poverty diminishes the essential human dignity of children and families and makes their lives less happy, less rich and more stressful and troubled than they need be. In the longer term it constrains people's life opportunities and limits their capacity to develop their full abilities. A widening poverty gap also impacts on the nation and the whole social fabric, by eroding social cohesion and reducing our overall national capabilities. There are, therefore, good reasons to do more to address child poverty in this country.

The paper begins with a brief discussion of the extent of child poverty in Australia. It then describes some of the characteristics of poverty as experienced by children, young people and families known to Burnside. The next section identifies some of the costs of poverty for both the children and families concerned and the wider community. These costs affect both the individual and the community. They impose a heavy burden in developmental and social as well as financial terms. The final section calls for a committed response from government as well as other sections of the community to address child poverty. It outlines the sorts of initiatives that are required to reduce both the incidence and impacts of poverty on children and their families in Australia including specific recommendations to that end.

It is important to note that material for this paper is drawn from Burnside's research and policy development work as well as from the direct experience of workers and service users in Burnside programs. This helps ensure that our policy positions are grounded in research evidence, informed by practical service knowledge and given impetus and credibility by the daily experience of disadvantaged people.

2.   The extent of poverty for children in Australia

> *Having opportunities in life is a birthright of all Australian children, but a right which, in the parlance of the day, will only be attained by some 'levelling of the playing field.'*
>
> (Vinson 1999: 45)

In developed nations like Australia we like to believe that all children have the same opportunities to grow well, and to develop and utilise their unique skills and abilities. In contrast to this belief, the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine in America argues that, "young children are the poorest members of society and are more likely to be poor today than they were 25 years ago" (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000, p. 9). A similar situation exists with regard to Australia's children. Many Australian children are subject throughout their lives to various forms of disadvantage that make them vulnerable to social problems, constrain their life choices and limit their potential. Seen in this way an understanding of poverty includes but goes further than an examination of income levels and material living standards. For example Jacque (1997, p. 3) defines child poverty as *"any serious physical, social, material or emotional deprivation experienced by children, which proves detrimental to their well-being and disrupts their social, educational and emotional development."*

It is often argued that there is no consensus on how to measure poverty. There are a variety of measures but no one measure has popular or political endorsement. Just some of the factors over which there is debate include whether poverty should be measured according to absolute or relative terms, and further, according to a mean or median income. Still others argue that it should not be measured against income at all, but rather according to expenditure or consumption. Different measures result in differences in the estimated numbers living in poverty, but at the end of the day, no matter which measure is used, the numbers of children in Australia living in poverty are significant and unacceptably high.

For example, a recent mean-based estimate, based on family income, estimates the number of children in poverty in Australia at 14.9%, which equates to approximately 743,000 children (Harding, Lloyd & Greenwell 2000). A recent median-based estimate, similarly based on family income, puts the figure at 9.6%, equating to 478,711 children (Harding et al 2000). This study has also shown that although the rate of children living in poverty in Australia decreased in the first part of the 1990's, it has been increasing since then. It appears then that even relatively conservative poverty measures reveal very significant numbers of Australian children living in poverty and that this number is increasing.

Children at greater risk of poverty
Research has revealed that children in some family types are more likely to experience poverty. For example Harding & Szukalska (1999), found a greater rate of childhood poverty in families where:
- the head of the family is unemployed (17.9% of children under 15 years of age according to ABS 2002)
- the head of the family is a sole parent (19.6% of children under 15 years of age according to ABS 2002)
- one or both of their parents are employed but on low wages.

Others (eg Harding et al 2000) argue that poverty is more prevalent in families where one or more members are employed in part-time work, where family members are completely relying on Government benefits, or where parents have not attained some level of post-secondary education. Some groups are clearly at greater risk of poverty. For example, poverty is more prevalent amongst people with disabilities and in members of some cultural groups whose communities are less well-established in Australia than others (Brotherhood of St Laurence 2002). In particular, however, it is indigenous children who are the group most at risk of poverty in Australia.

Indigenous Australians have the highest rates of poverty of any group in Australia (McClelland, 2000). Ross and Mikalauskas (1996) concluded from 1991 estimates of indigenous child poverty that, while comprising only 2.7% of all Australian children, indigenous children comprised 7% of all Australian children in poverty. While the main factor contributing to the poverty of indigenous children is unemployment among indigenous parents other factors are also highly significant. For example, sole parenthood seems to have an even stronger correlation with poverty for indigenous families than for non-indigenous families, with sole-parent indigenous families being overwhelmingly in poverty.

McClelland (2000) cites Daly and Smith (1997) who outline some of the key factors confronting indigenous sole-parent families in comparison with their non-indigenous counterparts. Indigenous sole-parent families:
- have larger numbers of children
- are less likely to live in major urban areas
- are more reliant on public housing and more likely to have inadequate housing
- are younger and more likely to be never married, and
- have lower levels of education and employment and lower incomes.

Given the much greater vulnerability and risk of poverty among indigenous children they must be the overwhelming priority for action to reduce the incidence and impacts of poverty in Australia.

Alongside the vulnerability of specific groups there are also concerns about what seems to be an increasing spatial dimension to poverty. That is, poverty is being concentrated in particular communities/suburbs, especially in the rural cities. For example, according to the 'Unequal in Life' survey (Vinson 1999), Waterloo and Redfern (which are well known for their high levels of poverty) are within walking distance of suburbs that are significantly more affluent, such as Moore Park, Newtown and Erskineville. This survey ranked 578 postcode areas in New South Wales by various measures for social disadvantage. The findings indicated that of the 30 communities ranked as being most disadvantaged, all but two were located outside Sydney. Of the remaining 28 communities, five are located within the Newcastle region and the remainder are spread throughout rural New South Wales.

Poverty does exist, to differing degrees, throughout Australia. Its impact is felt on individual families and also increasingly, on entire communities. The impact of poverty for children is related to their higher degree of dependency. That is, children are poor because their families, on whom they are dependent, are poor. Even on a conservative estimate, the number of Australian children living in poverty (around half-a-million) is substantial.

3. The experience of poverty for children in Australia

This section provides insight into the nature of poverty as experienced by children, young people and families. It is clear that the experience of poverty includes, but also goes beyond, matters of income, employment and material possessions. Poverty also has to do with the amount of control people have over their lives and life decisions. Often people living in poverty feel that they have a lack of options and that their lives are largely determined by circumstances beyond their control. Poverty is also associated with isolation, reduced opportunity to participate in social and economic life, and sometimes, a sense of alienation from the wider community and society.

The following section outlines some of the features of poverty as it is experienced by people in Australia. Each characteristic is illustrated by direct quotes. These are extracts of life stories from parents, workers and young people which are taken from three Burnside social research projects: "They… Challenging Australian lifestyle myths" (1998); "Young people's experience of the Youth Allowance system: An exploratory study" (2002); and a submission in relation to award safety net adjustments made by Uniting*Care* NSW/ACT to the Industrial Relations Commission in 2001.

Inadequate income

People in poverty have great difficulty in meeting the basic costs of living. Though many Australians might claim that their income is inadequate to pay for all the things they want, people in poverty frequently struggle to pay for the things they need. At times there is simply not enough money to meet the cost of basic items such as food, accommodation, clothing, education, transport, health care and recreation. The lack of income means a relentless juggling of finances in order to meet the most urgent or important bills. Unexpected expenses, caused by ill-health or the breakdown of a car, for example, can cause enormous problems as there are no savings to deal with emergencies. The anxiety arising from constant financial uncertainty affects the parents and can amplify normal family tensions and stresses. Often the treats or little luxuries that provide much needed enjoyment or relief for a family when under pressure are simply not an option for a family living on a low income.

> *Who wants to be poor? The money's a pittance, it really is. Who wants to struggle through their life and not want a secure, good life like everybody else? Who would honestly choose that over having a more regular kind of life?* (Parent, Burnside 1998)
>
> *I'll type up a young person's details on the computer and look at their annual income and it's like $5,000-$7,000 sometimes. I think, my god, I don't survive on that in three months let alone a year!* (Worker, Burnside 2002)
>
> *My mum makes $194 a week and she's got four kids to feed. It's just not enough. She's got enough to put food in the kids but then she's got nothing left and when the electricity bill comes in they have to eat less food…* (Young person, Burnside 2002)

> *If the children need a new pair of shoes, well I just can't say I will buy them this week I have to budget that. Anything they need I just can't say let's have that. Well come on, off we go and we'll go and pick up your new bra or whatever. It has to be done via the budget. We always have to refer back to the budget, we're always juggling it. Like if you have something go wrong with the car and you're looking at $150 for repairs, (we've just been through this) you have to juggle the whole lot to do it... Like we didn't have the money this week to put the new brake pads in. I have taken that money out of the car payment money that is due on the 6th of January and so somewhere I will have to make that up.* (Parent, Living Wage Interviews, 2000)

> *And plus keeping up with the phone bills of these children has been hard plus the extra electricity that they use. I know they think that we are nags but this is one thing that annoys me… The lights on in the day time. Now I get so angry about that because it's a bill we don't need.* (Parent, Living Wage Interviews, 2000)

Reduced quality of life

Involuntary poverty, especially prolonged poverty, erodes the quality of life for both parents and children. This happens in a number of ways. As we have seen above, having a low income means having to struggle to afford even basic items. So a common experience of poorer children is simply missing out - not having the things that other children see as natural and normal. Missing out is not confined to things - poorer children are more likely to miss out on a whole range of experiences- entertainment, participating in clubs or organisation, going on holidays, music and dance classes - that are enjoyable and enriching. Poverty increases the stresses on parents and children, it can exacerbate and fuel family conflicts and undermine family happiness and wellbeing. Also as we shall see poverty can cause children to feel different and thus isolated from other children. In all these ways poverty can diminish families' quality of life.

> *Not having enough money, that's the difficult thing. I know a lot of people think when you're on the pension you've got lots of money, cars and this and that but the people I know don't have cars and they haven't got anything. It's a struggle.* (Parent, Burnside 1998)

> *The kids can eat a lot of food and sometimes we're short of it. Occasionally we have what we call a 'pretend chicken dinner'. We'll have baked potatoes, cauliflower, carrots and gravy but no chicken. Life like this has its bonuses though. Like if we're really poor the night before pay night and we only have bread or something, the food next day tastes really lovely.* (Parent, Burnside 1998)

The sorts of things you're describing - balancing the budget, having some things that aren't options - like going to Wonderland. How does that affect you, does that have any impact on you?

It does in the sense that you can become very stressed. When most of their friends (the children's) come from a one or two child family. And that makes it difficult in that sense because there are times when you're constantly saying, well I'm sorry we can't do that. And the children do handle it very well, they're very good about it, but you as the mother and father often feel this big (holds hand with thumb and forefinger very close together). And I think often for Brett, I see in Brett a deep depression sometimes, because… particularly when he got that new job and he'd gone from $600 gross a week to $ 800 gross a week, you think Wow, at last I can do something good with my family and then everything that we had… we ended up with $11.70 more in our hand, our rent went up $40, we lost our health care card, so really we were worse off. (Parent, Living Wage Interviews, 2000)

My dream is to have two hundred dollars in the bank or even three hundred to fall back on, which I never have. It would be a little safety net for times like when I've had to take one of the kids to hospital. Sometimes you have to wait all night and you've got nothing to eat and you can't get a drink out of the machine or chips or anything. (Parent, Burnside 1998)

Lack of choice and fewer options

Children, families and young people in poverty experience a lack of choice and reduced options. As we have seen being poor means missing out on things and experiences that most families would consider a normal part of life. People living in poverty are constrained in other ways. They must live in areas where housing is more affordable. Unfortunately, areas with cheaper housing frequently have comparatively fewer job opportunities, poorer public transport, and less developed community and health services thus reducing (or increasing the barriers to) some choices. Lower-income communities are also more likely to experience higher rates of crime, more poorly resourced schools and a general sense that the area is 'not as good as others for bringing up children'. Living with a sense of "this is the only choice we have" undermines both individual and community wellbeing.

Much has been made in recent years about the importance of parental choice in education. Poverty makes a mockery of such statements. Enrolment at even the most affordable independent or private school is simply not an option for parents on very low incomes. They must rely on the public education system. Even choice between public schools can be out of the question when transport costs, or lack of transport is taken into account. For these reasons it is crucial that all public schools be supported and resourced to offer quality education (see final section). Because poverty is associated with lower educational attainment it also serves to reduce options later in life that come through higher education and employment opportunities.

It's either miss out on this or miss out on that. It's not do I go to the movies or do I pay my rent. It's do I eat or do I pay my rent. It's choices like that. (Young person, Burnside 2002)

*So no, there is no money to sort of say, let's do this and let's do that. We couldn't just get up and go to a restaurant. No, even an outing. No we've never done that because there's just not the money to get up and say, let's go to a restaurant for dinner tonight. (*Parent, Living Wage Interviews, 2000)

> *Education is important… Sometimes I wish I had finished school so I could've got a high paying job and not be so poor at times. Things could've been different. I still would've had the children but I might have more financial security.* (Parent, Burnside 1998)

Isolation

Another characteristic of poverty is that it contributes to the isolation and exclusion of children and their families. This can happen in a number of ways.

As noted above, low income often limits housing choices to sprawling outlying suburbs where poor public transport makes getting around difficult. Low-income families often have to move <u>away</u> from family and friends to secure cheaper housing thus increasing their sense of isolation and lack of support. Many low-income families rent in the private market where housing tenure is less secure and so are subject to more frequent moves. At the most extreme end, child and family homelessness makes it extremely difficult to maintain any stable connections with people or place. But poverty can be isolating in other ways even when families are able to remain in one locality.

When you are poor you are less able to afford to go out with friends or keep up regular social contacts. Children and young people can feel excluded because they do not have the same pocket money as other friends or the same toys or clothes. They frequently cannot afford to engage in the same sorts of recreational or leisure options, eg sporting clubs, movies, music etc, that their peers are able to. Some young people feel self-conscious about inviting friends over when the housing they live in is very different from the sorts of housing in which their friends live.

A final way in which poverty isolates is through the stigmatised way children and families living in poverty are often perceived. The poor can come under intense (and invasive) media scrutiny often focusing on the most negative aspects of disadvantage. While some media attention can stimulate a more thoughtful and empathetic response to poverty other media seems to adopt a very blaming approach to issues around poverty and those living in poverty.

Integral to citizenship is a sense of belonging. When people are excluded they begin to believe that they do not belong, thus increasing their isolation and sense that they are not part of a group or society. Related to this is a sense that there is a responsibility that comes with belonging, that is, to engage and participate in the systems and processes of the group or society. So, as poverty isolates it robs people of their sense of connection to others and also diminishes their motivation, energy and capacity to contribute to the wider community.

> *We don't go without a lot of things but it can be very tight. I haven't done as good a job at hiding the occasional poverty as my Mum did, no. I do think the children have the impression that they are poor in some ways and I feel dreadful about that. I want them to have everything. I want them to feel secure.*
>
> *Like my daughter, she has friends who come from fairly well off homes and I find that after a while the friendship cools off. The others can do this and do that but she can't and it affects the relationships.* (Parent, Burnside 1998)

How do you feel when you hear people talking negatively, on talk back radio for instance, about people like yourself, people living on welfare?

It makes you feel guilty, it makes you fell really bad. If you hear it long enough it makes you feel maybe it's true. And that makes you feel even worse. (Parent, Burnside 1998)

I think that if I had the opportunity to be working then I wouldn't whinge about people being on welfare because I know you're better off to have a job. But I suppose other people don't look at it that way. It's a bit like them and us: instead of us all being the one people. You feel like a second class citizen, you really do. (Parent, Burnside 1998)

Often homeless young people don't present very well. They're not necessarily clean or washed, their language might not be what other people believe is socially appropriate, so that puts them at a disadvantage. They're often very angry about what's going on in their lives for them at the time, so that creates an image when they walk in the door. (Worker, Burnside 2002)

Exposure to risk

A final feature of poverty is that is associated with exposure to multiple risks. That is, those children and families in poverty, especially for longer periods, are more vulnerable to a whole range of adverse situations and circumstances. These range from the disruption, experience and inconvenience caused by breakdowns in cars or appliances to more far-reaching problems. For example a significant proportion of poorer families are dependent of the private rental market and so are subject to rent increases, short leases and evictions. In terms of employment, those in poverty are much more likely to be unemployed, or to be in more precarious casual or part-time employment. Living in poverty also increases vulnerability to a variety of conditions and behaviours that are harmful to self and/or others. For example it is clear that those living in poverty are at greater risk than the general population of ill health, mental health problems, harmful alcohol and drug use, criminal behaviour, learning and behavioural problems and child abuse and neglect. And children, especially children living in poverty for protracted periods, are the most vulnerable.

You're always hoping that the fridge doesn't break down or hoping that your washing machine doesn't break down because you have no way of buying another one. And you know, it never happens on pay day, always the day before. You're just hoping everything coasts along. (Parent, Burnside, 1998)

Well I just think, medicine, the unexpected illness of the whole family getting sick because with so many people in the house if someone gets the flu, the whole family gets the flu, right. It's that kind of thing. You can have weeks where the whole lot of us are on antibiotics, that's very expensive, you know. That's a hard thing to deal with when that unexpected thing happens. The breaking down of a vehicle, if the car breaks down, that's really hard. The thing is where we are there is not a good bus service so you have to have a car. I mean its not that we've got it as a luxury, the bus only goes to Campbelltown once an hour and it goes nowhere else but Campbelltown. Like you can't get to Minto, there's no buses. (Parent, Living Wage Interviews, 2000)

> *…this young woman I'm thinking of said she only prostitutes herself when she needs to so she has enough money to eat or pay her board in a friend's caravan. But she's still needing to do that because she's been having so much trouble accessing the benefit.* (Worker, Burnside 2002)
>
> *…you're then putting them back into that very, very dangerous way of life and living. Begging for food, or stealing food, or doing whatever they need to do in order to be okay, and those things which in our society should actually be a given right, aren't. The right for food and warmth are no longer a given.* (Worker, Burnside 2002)
>
> *Well how can I look for work if I've got nowhere to live? You want me to go in the same clothes I've been wearing for two weeks. I'm surely going to get the job then! But they can't understand things like that. That to them [Centrelink] is no excuse. What do they want you to do? Jump in the river and have a bath and wash your face and then try to make yourself look presentable to go to a job interview. Any employer is going to look at you and say, I don't think so.* (Young person, Burnside 2002)

We have seen something of how poverty is experienced from the perspective of those living with poverty. Appreciating the reality of lack of income, reduced quality of living, lack of choice, isolation and greater exposure to risk that is a daily feature of poverty should provide some motivation to do something about poverty. The next section takes a different tack, drawing from research knowledge in order to identify the substantial impacts of poverty on children. Taken together these different ways of understanding the impacts of poverty provide compelling reasons to better address the issue of child poverty in Australia.

4.   The impacts and costs of poverty

This section examines some of the impacts of poverty on children and families. Firstly it outlines some of the research evidence for the effect of poverty on a range of child and family outcomes. It then draws from the emerging knowledge concerning the mechanisms that may be particularly important in mediating the impacts of poverty in these outcome areas. Identifying the mechanisms or pathways by which poverty exerts its influence has important implications for policy and programs designed to reduce poverty's adverse effects. The final part of the section examines some of the financial and broader social and economic costs of poverty.

Poverty and negative outcomes for children and families

Numerous studies have identified a connection between poverty and a range of adverse outcomes for children and families. For example Guo and Harris (2000, p. 2) summarising the findings of research in this area have stated that: *"Childhood poverty is correlated with dropping out of school, low academic achievement, teenage pregnancy and childbearing, poor mental and physical health, delinquent behaviour and unemployment in adolescence and early adulthood… The longer children live in poverty, the lower their educational achievement and the worse their social and emotional functioning"* (p. 2).

Brief lists of outcomes like the one above can fail to make a real impression on us. What follows seeks to flesh out some of the adverse results of poverty, including some of the potential financial costs, in order to gain a clearer appreciation of the cumulative toll that poverty wreaks on the Australian community. It should be noted that many of the adverse outcomes described are not only harmful in their own right but are also risk factors (predisposing factors) for other negative outcomes. That is, negative outcomes in one area increase the chances of negative outcomes in other areas.

Impacts on cognitive development, learning difficulties and school achievement

Neuropsychologists generally agree that when dealing with young children 'poverty is bad for your brain'.

A range of studies has identified how factors associated with poverty impact on children's development, school performance and employment prospects (McClelland, 2000). A United States study by Chase-Lansdale and Brooks-Gunn (1995) concluded that child poverty was associated with reduced cognitive development, problems in adjustment and lower school achievement as well as contributing to other problems (poor peer relations, depression and delinquency). The Australian Brunswick Family Study (Carmichael and Williams, 1987) found that cognitive functioning at the age of 11 was strongly related to the mother's years in schooling, degree of poverty during the child's first year and current poverty. Furthermore, the longer the child was exposed to poverty the greater the negative impact on their IQ and reading scores. Later work by Brooks-Gunn and Duncan (1997) showed similar findings.

In a review of United States studies based on longitudinal data sets Brooks-Gunn and Duncan found that children living below the poverty line were more likely to experience learning disabilities and developmental delays and to score significantly lower than other children on scores of IQ, verbal ability and school achievement. The effects on IQ were particularly apparent for children exposed to poverty early in life. The duration and intensity of the poverty were also important for many outcomes, with deeper poverty and more time living in poverty being associated with more negative effects (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997).

Australian research is also contributing to our understanding of the impacts of poverty on school outcomes. The Western Australian Child Health Survey (Zubrick et al, 1997) has found strong links between factors such as family income, family stress, parental education and employment and children's academic competence.

Recently, the Brotherhood of St Laurence's 'Life Chances' survey has demonstrated how poverty contributes to lower levels of literacy and numeracy, difficulties in the transition from pre-school to school and lower school achievement (Taylor & MacDonald, 1998). The authors found that poorer families had less access to educational resources such as books and computers, were less likely to read to children and foster an expectation around educational achievement and were subject to higher levels of family conflict and disruption.

In later research as part of the same project Ochiltree (1999, p. 7) argued that for children's education the impact of poverty is greatly affected by parents' education and that literacy 'is often at the heart of their educational difficulties'. Ochiltree (cited in McClelland, 2000) also identifies children's situations that magnify the negative educational impacts of poverty. These include:

- Children whose parents have chronic psychiatric illness or a drug and/or alcohol problem
- Children where English is not spoken at home and where parents have little education themselves and may be illiterate in their native language
- Children living in multi-problem families (violence, drug abuse, mental illness) where parents are overwhelmed and not coping
- Indigenous families and communities where poverty is entrenched and pervasive.

The educational impacts of poverty have long-term implications. Australian research on high-school students demonstrates how family poverty continues to affect school performance and contributes to early school leaving and low retention rates. It is these young people who, on leaving school, are far more likely to be unemployed or in more vulnerable casual or part-time work (McClelland and Macdonald, 1999).

Potential costs: Costs in this area include outlays on special education and remedial education services in pre-schools and schools (diagnostic and treatment) as well as some costs (speech pathology) within the health system. Further down the track there are substantial costs associated with school failure, reduced school retention rates, lower employment, productivity and taxation revenue and increased income support payments and other costs associated with unemployment.

Impacts on mental health, behavioural problems and risk of suicide
Children in poverty are at significantly greater risk of developing mental health and behavioural problems (conduct orders and delinquency, depressive and anxiety disorders, substance abuse etc) than are their more advantaged peers. The West Australian Child Health Survey (Zubrick et al, 1995) found that as parental income fell, the incidence of mental health problems increased. In the study, the proportion of children with mental health problems from families in the upper three quintiles of income averaged 15%. In the lowest two quintiles the rates increased to 19% and 25% respectively. Research in the United States has also found that poorer children have greater behavioural and emotional problems. One study (Duncan et al, 1994) found that children in persistent poverty had more internalising (anxiety, withdrawal, depression) and externalising (aggression, fighting, acting out) than children who had never been poor.

Short-term poverty was also associated with behavioural problems though the effects were not as great. Another study found persistent poverty was associated with greater dependence, anxiety and general unhappiness among four to eight-year-olds, while current poverty was linked to hyperactivity, peer conflict and headstrong behaviour (McLeod & Shanahan, 1993).

The Australian National Mental Health Strategy (Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, 2000) notes the relationship between conduct disorders and adverse perinatal factors such as prematurity and low birth weight, and family factors such as large family size, criminality and substance abuse. The report also notes that the quality of parenting and attachment to children is a major determining influence in conduct disorders. Poverty is a significant influence on many of these factors.

Poverty and associated disadvantage are also indicated as significant factors in youth suicide. Recent research has highlighted the importance of underlying risk factors in the incidence of suicide as well as the immediate personal contexts of those taking their own lives (Kosky and Goldney, 1994). In a New Zealand Study, Beautrais, (1996) suggested that the underlying risk factors could be placed in three related categories. These categories are childhood adversity, social disadvantage and psychiatric morbidity. In the study Beautrais examined the background of young people between the ages of 13 and 24 who had made medically serious suicide attempts. Findings show they were more likely to have no formal educational qualifications, to be unemployed or to have a low income. They were also more likely to come from disadvantaged family backgrounds, with higher rates of parental alcoholism and imprisonment. Hassan (1995) studied suicide rates of people of all ages in Australia. He found that those in occupations with lower wage rates, low job autonomy (but with higher external control), poor training and lower promotional prospects tended to have higher suicide rates. He also found youth suicide to be related to unemployment, greater dependency and poverty. While it needs to be remembered that there are significant other influences on suicide, notably mental health concerns, the significance of poverty including the vulnerability it creates to other problems, should not be discounted.

Potential costs: Some costs here include provision of specialist teachers for behaviour problems within schools, costs associated with monitoring and coordination of suspended students, and expenses due to school vandalism. Other costs include a proportion of visits to GP's (recent research funded by the National Health and Medical Research Council has estimated that 80% of adolescents presenting to a doctor with a physical health problem have an underlying emotional concern (Dunn, 2003)), costs of community mental health services and in-patient and out-patient mental health and psychiatric services.

Impacts on health status and use of health services
There is overwhelming evidence that poverty and other disadvantage has a strong negative effect on people's health and well-being. Disadvantaged groups have the poorest overall health. They make the most use of primary and secondary health services (because they are sicker) but the least use of preventative services (Commonwealth Department of Health Housing and Human Services, 1992).

The poorer health of people with fewer socio-economic resources is apparent on nearly all standardised measures of health. Death rates are highest in the most disadvantaged areas. Those in poverty are more likely to have chronic illness than those on higher incomes. They are more likely to suffer a disability. People from low-income groups are more likely to report recent illness or to describe their health as 'fair' or 'poor', rather than 'good' or 'excellent'.

Evidence shows that children living in socio-economically disadvantaged families also have significantly poorer health and will also grow into adults at greater risk of health problems (Wraith and Murphy, 1998).

Disadvantaged children have:
- higher rates of prematurity and low birth weight
- higher rates of infant mortality
- increased rates of sudden infant death syndrome
- increased rates of accidental and non-accidental injury and death
- lower rates of immunisation
- lower prevalence and duration of breast feeding
- increased rates of developmental delay
- increased rates of hospitalisation.   (Wraith and Murphy, 1998 p131)

Recent findings of the Child Death Review Team in NSW indicate that the death of approximately two-thirds of the young people whose deaths were registered between January 1996 and December 2000 occurred in the context of the young people having endured family dysfunction, mental health problems, severe emotional distress and school-related difficulties (Sankey & Lawrence 2003).

Some of the differences in health status for adults and children are related to behavioural risks more prevalent among low-income groups. These include higher rates of smoking, being overweight, being inactive and lower rates of breast feeding. However, structural factors such as level of income, living standards, education levels and presence of social supports are equally significant in their own right as well as being important influences on behaviour, and must be addressed if health inequalities are to be reduced (Commonwealth Department of Health Housing and Human Services, 1992).

Potential costs: There are obviously enormous costs associated with the higher rates of health problems associated with poverty. These include prematurity and low birth weight, treatment of disease and hospitalisation due to accidental and non-accidental injury. There are also very significant downstream health costs related to higher rates of smoking, obesity and substance abuse.

Impacts on parenting
Australian and International research shows that poverty and associated social stressors undermine parenting in critical ways. In summaries of research Weatherburn and Lind (1997, 2001) found that economic and social stress leads to parents being less nurturing and more rejecting of their children. Chronically stressed parents become more irritable and less likely to give children positive attention. In these circumstances appropriate supervision declines and discipline is more likely to be harsh and erratic. Guo and Harris (2000, p. 2) noted that "economic hardship diminishes parents' ability to interact with their children in ways that are beneficial to their wellbeing." Their overview of research also found that poverty reduced parents' warmth and responsiveness and increased the use of harsh and inconsistent discipline.

The effect of poverty in reducing parental monitoring and positive supervision is especially significant (Sampson and Laub, 1994). Both nurturing and appropriate monitoring are associated with healthy child development and growth of competence, including cognitive development (Amato, 1987). Conversely, coercive and very inconsistent parenting is associated with a range of negative outcomes.

It should be noted that the impact of economic stress on parenting is influenced by other circumstances including the presence of other psycho-social stressors (single parent status, substance abuse, depression etc) and especially the presence of social supports, both practical and emotional (Silburn et al, 1996; Coohey, 1996).

None of the associations identified above should be interpreted as parent blaming. Rather, they underscore the disruptive impacts of poverty and other social stressors on healthy parenting. In other words poverty makes effective parenting even harder than it normally is.

Potential costs: Given the critical impact of early nurturing on later learning, behaviour and health (McCain & Mustard, 1999) the potential costs of ineffective parenting will be most evident in terms of the other impact areas identified. In general terms ineffective parenting will undermine healthy child development and such impairment carries very substantial direct and indirect costs.

Impacts on child abuse and neglect

Although child abuse occurs in all social groups there is substantial evidence that children living in poverty are at much greater risk of abuse and neglect. We have seen above how economic and social stress impacts on parenting. It is not surprising then that economic stress is also positively correlated with rates of abuse and neglect (Rodriguez and Green, 1997; Whipple and Webster-Stratton, 1991). Nor is it surprising to discover that social impoverishment (fewer social supports, smaller social networks) is also correlated with higher rates of abuse and neglect. As Garbarino and Sherman (1980) have noted, it is the unmanageability of stress resulting from the mismatch between the levels of stress and the availability and strength of social support which is the crucial factor in child abuse.

The impacts of poverty on child abuse and neglect are also evident in Australian research. A cross-sectional analysis by Young et al. (1989) indicated a strong relationship between low socio-economic status and elevated levels of child maltreatment. In NSW, Vinson et al. (1989) found rates of physical abuse were two and a half times higher in the bottom 4% of post code areas (identified in terms of socio-economic variables) than in the 6% of post codes immediately above. In an analysis of 334 referrals to the Child Protection Service at the Women's and Children's Hospital, Adelaide, Hood (1998) found that 82% of these referrals came from suburbs in the bottom two of four socio-economic groups.

The research findings above make the connection between poverty and child abuse clear, but they reveal less about how poverty can undermine effective parenting. Poorer parents get less relief from the constancy of child rearing. They are less able to afford baby sitting, quality child care, entertainment, social or sports activities or go on stress-relieving holidays. They tend to experience higher levels of conflict and family disruption. They are more likely to live in substandard and crowded housing where it is difficult to get a break from other family members. Parents in poverty are more likely to experience ill health themselves and for their children to be ill. They are less likely to be well educated and to be comfortable with a range of parenting resources whether in the form of books, videos or courses in community, welfare and health settings. Under these circumstances it is understandable that some parents have a less informed or unrealistic understanding of parenting and children's behaviour. When these obstacles are compounded by significant additional burdens such as substance abuse or mental illness the tasks of parenting can seem insurmountable and family life becomes a landscape of unrelenting trouble.

Potential costs: The financial costs stemming from child abuse and neglect are enormous. Even excluding the flow-on costs in terms of mental health, juvenile crime and other problems the financial expenditure related to abuse and neglect is sizeable. Costs include expenditure on departments having statutory responsibility for child protection and investigation of abuse and neglect. There are also costs for police in investigating allegations, children's court costs and the very significant cost related to provision of out-of-home care. The latter includes the recruiting, monitoring, support and allowances for foster carers and the even higher costs associated with provision of residential care.

Impacts on juvenile crime

The issue of juvenile crime is one that captures media and public attention but the level of interest is not always matched by the quality of evidence that is used to support the various positions taken. While there are multiple paths to juvenile offending, research suggests that factors related to parenting and particularly child abuse and neglect are especially significant. For example, Leech (1998) argues that child abuse should be seen as having twice the causal weight of other factors. This is significant given that we have already seen the connections between poverty, parenting and abuse and neglect. In cross-sectional studies Widom, (1989) and Maxfield and Widom (1996) found that children with confirmed histories of abuse and neglect were more likely to have been arrested for non-traffic offences than children in a matched control group. Support for the relationship between abuse and juvenile crime has also been obtained from Smith and Thorbury's (1995) study of adolescents' self reports of offending in the years following their abuse or neglect. Summarising research findings Homel concludes that "lower levels of parental support, poor parental supervision and harsh physical punishment and verbal aggression are related to higher levels of official and self reported delinquency" (Homel, 1998, p. 14).

Further compelling evidence for the relationship between disadvantage, child abuse and neglect and juvenile offending has come from Australian research by Weatherburn and Lind (1997). The authors found in their research that postcode areas with higher rates of abuse and neglect also had higher rates of juvenile crime. Child neglect on its own was found to explain 57% of the variation in juvenile participation in crime across postcode areas. Similar patterns were found for abuse. The pattern was also similar in rural areas but slightly weaker.

The authors' analysis showed clearly that "*poverty, single parent families and crowded dwellings affect the level of juvenile participation in crime mainly by increasing the rate of child neglect.*" (Weatherburn and Lind, 1997, p. 7). A path analysis showed that neglect was the most important causal influence on juvenile crime. Extrapolating from their research Weatherburn and Lind calculated that an additional 1,000 neglected children would result in 256 juveniles involved in crime and an additional 466 court appearances. The authors concluded that early intervention programs designed to support effective parenting and reduce child neglect have an important role to play in crime prevention.

Potential costs: Costs associated with the incidence of juvenile offending include policing costs, court costs, expenditure on juvenile detention and non-custodial sentences. Other costs stemming from juvenile offending relate to medical procedures for victims of assault, clean up costs for graffiti and other offences, compensation and other expenditure for victims of crime and increased insurance costs.

The importance of key pathways/underlying mechanisms

The research reviewed above suggests that poverty exacts a heavy toll on children and families. However it does not explain what the pathways or mechanisms are by which poverty exerts its influence. Researchers are now devoting more attention to the key pathways or underlying mechanisms through which poverty produces negative outcomes. This exploration is important to give a fuller picture of how poverty produces its adverse impacts and also to identify the key leverage points to reduce the impacts of poverty. It is at these points that policy and program initiatives can be most fruitfully focussed. Although research in this area is still in its early days, the following gives a brief summary of some of the pathways/underlying mechanisms that research has begun to identify.

In their review of the effects of poverty on children Brooks-Gunn and Duncan identify and review the research for five potential pathways, with most focus on cognitive outcomes. The pathways they examine are health and nutrition; home environment (which includes opportunities for learning, warmth of mother/child interaction and physical condition of the home); parental interactions with children; parental mental health; and neighbourhood conditions. Focussing mostly on cognitive outcomes they conclude there is most evidence for the impact of early health factors (low birth weight, lead levels, etc) and learning experiences in the home with the latter estimated to account for about one-half of poverty's impact on cognitive ability. The authors recommend interventions to work with parents to enhance early learning experiences in the home as one strategy to address impacts of poverty.

The Western Australian Child Health Survey (Zubrick et al, 1997) found strong links between factors such as family income, family stress, parental education and employment and children's academic competence. This comprehensive study sampled 2,732 young people aged 4-16 years from 1,462 households. Analysis revealed that the education history and employment status of caregivers was more significant for academic performance than the structure of the family (one or two parents) or the level of income.

The researchers suggest that the mechanism that links caregiver education and employment to their children's academic capabilities is likely to be related to the skills and knowledge that the caregiver has about caring for and raising children rather than the numbers of caregivers or income level per se (Zubrick et al, 1997, p. 32). The attitudes and values of caregivers, which in part have been formed in their educational and occupational contexts, will influence:

- how caregivers use their time and income
- what proportion of that time and income is directed to educational activities
- the expectations of caregivers and students about education and its value
- family and parental involvement with the school and its community.

These and similar findings led researchers to recommend both programs that support and enhance effective parenting and quality child care as appropriate strategies to reduce the negative educational consequences of poverty (Zubrick et al, 1997).

An earlier report of the West Australian Child Health Survey focussed on health issues including mental health. The study found that children in low-income families had an increased risk of mental health problems (25%) in comparison with children in wealthier households (16%). In exploring further the researchers concluded that household income, in itself, was less important than other factors that affected parents' ability to provide the security and stability that children need.

Regardless of income the family variables they found to have the most influence on child mental health were family type (including single parent/blended families); level of family discord; and parental disciplinary style, with a coercive style most predictive of mental health problems (Silburn et al, 1996).

Work by developmental and early intervention approaches to crime prevention have also suggested some key mechanisms to influence outcomes (National Crime Prevention, 1999). Among these they suggest parental attention and monitoring of children, a sense of control over one's own life (including parenting) and enhanced sense of parental competence as key underlying factors. Consequently, the researchers recommend programs which provide parents with effective management strategies and which alleviate parents' feelings of guilt and helplessness. These strategies can increase parents' sense of control and competence which is associated with better child and family outcomes. Two very different additional pieces of research add support to conclusions of the National Crime Prevention (NCP) team.

A sense of personal control was identified in the benchmark Whitehall studies as a key predictor of general health status and mental health outcomes (Marmot, Shipley and Rose, 1984). Though the context is different it is readily apparent how some of the subsequent effects of poverty, such as low social status, feelings of isolation and persistent economic stress, when combined with the already substantial demands of parenting, can erode any sense of control and personal competence.

Work by Weatherburn and Lind has also highlighted the key role played by reduced parental monitoring of children and the strength of the parent-child bond as a precipitating factor for juvenile crime. In their research they found that features of disadvantage (poverty, single-parent families and crowded dwellings) were the most significant predictors of juvenile crime. However, the mechanism by which these factors increased the rates of juvenile crime was by increasing the rate of child neglect, characterised by reduced parental monitoring and supervision of children and a weakening of the affective bond between parent(s) and child.

Guo and Harris (2000) have summarised a range of research to model the mechanisms through which the effects of poverty disadvantage children, particularly emphasising children's cognitive development. They argue that these mediating factors of poverty, rather than poverty itself, affect child outcomes. Guo and Harris propose five latent factors (cognitive stimulation, parenting style, physical environment, child's ill health at birth and ill health in childhood) that mediate the effects of poverty on children's cognitive development.

From their examination of the literature Guo and Harris offer two main findings:
1. The influence of poverty on children's intellectual development is mediated completely by the intervening mechanisms identified above. Poverty has no direct effect on children's intellectual development. This suggests that focussing on the intervening mechanisms may be an effective alternative to addressing the impact of poverty by additional financial supports.
2. Cognitive stimulation in the home is by far the most important influence mediating the effect of poverty on such development. *"Poverty exerts a large negative effect on cognitive stimulation and cognitive stimulation exerts a large positive effect on intellectual development"* (p15). The second influence of importance is parenting style, and the least important is the home physical environment.

Taken together the above findings suggest that policy and programs designed to reduce the damaging toll exerted by poverty would be well advised to address the key underlying mechanisms which have so far been identified. It seems most promising to focus interventions around: enhancing parenting skills and practices (especially appropriate monitoring and supervision, behaviour management and strengthening the parent child bond); enriching children's learning environments (in the home initially but also beyond the home); and strategies to increase a sense of personal control and agency among disadvantaged parents and children.

Broader social and economic costs of child poverty

The broader social and economic costs of child poverty must be seen against the backdrop of the burgeoning research into early childhood and brain development. We now know that early experience has a profound impact on brain development and subsequent learning, behaviour and health. The net positive impact of early nurturing has been described as the developmental opportunities available to the children in any given society (Keating and Hertzman, 1999). One way to describe the impacts of poverty is that they represent an erosion of children's developmental opportunities. And this erosion has enormous costs.

We have seen in the above analysis some of the costs of failing to address poverty's erosion of children's developmental opportunities. They are evident in terms of reduced cognitive development and school performance, higher rates of abuse and neglect and increased antisocial and criminal behaviour. The social and financial costs of these problems are substantial. However the social benefits and financial savings from interventions to prevent these problems are also substantial.

However there are other costs that are more difficult to quantify but no less important. These, Keating and Hertzmann suggest, are the costs to a society in terms of its future economic growth and the weakening of its social fabric. Let us briefly examine each.

Keating and Hertzman argue that the knowledge economies of the future will require the capacity for creativity and innovation as key ingredients. These are human and intellectual resources. Human development, especially early childhood development, is therefore critical. Failing to provide the necessary supports for human development, especially for early childhood development is likely to incur the costs of lost opportunities for economic growth. Burnside would like to emphasise that providing resources will be most important where children's developmental opportunities are most compromised, ie for children and families in poverty. To maximise our nation's capacity for growth and innovation we need a healthy, competent population across all socio-economic levels.

The second area where the costs of poverty are evident is in the erosion of the social fabric. Keating and Hertzman cite evidence that the steepness of the social gradient has a powerful influence on overall health and wellbeing in a society. That is, societies with greater differences between its poorest and wealthiest citizens will have poorer overall health and wellbeing than societies where the differences are less pronounced. So addressing poverty and reducing the inequalities that exist between people is an important contribution to strengthening the social fabric of the nation. It will help sustain the basis for Australia as a healthy, democratic and civil society.

5.   Responding to child poverty in Australia

This section outlines some of the responses that will be needed to address poverty and its impacts upon children and families in Australia. These responses can be grouped into two areas: initiatives to reduce the incidence of poverty and initiatives to ameliorate the negative impacts of poverty. The first area acknowledges the impact of the structural conditions of society on people's circumstances, including income level, employment environments and education. The Commonwealth will need to establish initiatives in these areas as inequalities here contribute directly to the incidence of poverty. This area is examined only briefly as it has been covered in more detail in a companion discussion paper as part of the Uniting*Care* Australia submission to this Inquiry.

The second area examines the sort of programs and services that can successfully mitigate the damaging aspects of poverty and improve the outcomes of children and families exposed to poverty. It focuses on early education and parenting support programs for at-risk groups, expanding access of disadvantaged families to quality children's services and development of family support and intensive family support services for families with older children.

In practice the above distinction between initiatives to lessen the incidence of poverty and initiatives to reduce the impacts of poverty is not hard and fast. Initiatives to reduce the incidence of poverty also ameliorate its impact, and initiatives to ameliorate the impact of poverty also reduce its incidence, for participants themselves, and by breaking the cycle of disadvantage for subsequent generations of children.

The first initiative required is development of a long-term and comprehensive plan to address the issue of poverty in Australia. This plan should be the product of agreement between Commonwealth and State government, non-government organisations and other key stakeholders. The plan will require simultaneous action on a number of fronts which are outlined in the following sections.

Recommendations
1. Commonwealth and State governments in consultation with other key stakeholders should commit themselves to develop, resource and implement a long-term, comprehensive plan to address the problem of child poverty in Australia.
2. Consideration should be given to positioning aspects of a national plan to address child poverty within a broader national early childhood development strategy. There may be benefits in such a strategy by locating initiatives to reduce poverty in an overall strategy of promoting healthy development. This may reduce any stigma attached to anti-poverty initiatives and reduce the likelihood of criticism (and possible resentment) of a discrete anti-poverty strategy as only benefiting a sub-section of the population.
3. Consideration should be given to the instigation of a Children's Futures levy (similar to the Medicare levy) in order to raise funds for the enhancement of all Australian children's developmental opportunities including children living in poverty.
4. A national community education and awareness raising campaign should accompany the above poverty plan. The purpose of the campaign would be to foster public support for the strategy by identifying the costs of poverty and the benefits of preventing/reducing poverty and its impacts. There should be particular emphasis on poverty as a community problem and the wider social and national benefits that will flow from a public commitment to addressing poverty.

Broad initiatives to reduce the incidence of poverty
An adequate system of income support
As we have seen above, having an inadequate income is a key feature of the experience of poverty. Having sufficient income in order to purchase the essentials of nutritious food, adequate clothing, secure and stable housing and sufficient opportunities to participate in social, cultural and other networks is essential for healthy development of children and families. The base level of income support should be above existing poverty lines. It is in the context of adequate income that discussion on possible sanctions against single-parent families failing to meet proposed participation requirements under Australians Working Together is extremely worrying. Burnside is opposed to the imposition of financial sanctions on single parents for two reasons. The first is that single parents already face an onerous task in effectively raising children and that performing this task should be seen by both policy makers and the wider community as the most important and necessary contribution for them to make. Secondly, any financial sanction on the parent falls not just on the parent but inevitably on the children also. Any reduction in payment to the parent will have a flow-on effect to the children and greatly increase the stress to which the family unit is subject. In Burnside's view the imposition of any such penalties is unwarranted and ill advised.

Recommendations
1. The Commonwealth should ensure that adequate levels of income support are available to all children and families. All benefits should have parity with the base aged pension rate.
2. No financial sanctions should be applied to single-parent families as a consequence of failing to meet requirements under Australians Working Together. Such a policy would inevitably have adverse impacts on already vulnerable dependent children, and therefore should not be implemented. Rather it should be recognised that one of the most important obligations for parents to fulfil is to be actively involved in raising their children and that this is a necessary and valuable contribution to the whole community.

Renewed attention to the role of the Commonwealth in training, employment assistance and job creation
It is clear that unemployment is a key factor in the incidence of poverty among children and families in Australia. Families where no-one is employed are much more likely to be living in poverty than other families. Harding and Szukalska (1999) estimated that, after housing costs were taken into account, 53% of children living in families with no parent in paid work were in poverty. This figure compared with 18% of children living in poverty where there was one parental earner and 12% where there were two parental earners. It should also be noted that youth unemployment remains stubbornly high.

Two features of the persistence of high unemployment are apparent. Firstly, those with lower educational levels and fewer skills are at much greater risk of unemployment. This is true of both adults and youth and is related to long-term structural changes in the job market, including the impacts of technology, removal of tariff barriers and deregulation of markets leading to a general reduction in jobs for less skilled workers. Even more emphatically, less skilled entry level jobs for young people seem to have all but dried up. Secondly, a strong polarisation of job opportunities is apparent over the last twenty years. Gregory, (1999) examined the employment situation of families with dependent children between 1979 and 1998. He found that the bulk of new jobs for families with dependent children went to families where there was already an employed adult. He noted a growing divide between work-poor and work-rich families with growth in numbers of families where two parents worked and a growth in the number of families where no parent worked. He also noted a geographic polarisation with jobless families increasingly being concentrated in particular areas (generally those with cheaper housing).

In the light of the above realities it is important for the Commonwealth to devote attention to improved education and training programs and additional assistance for the most disadvantaged job seekers. In addition the Commonwealth could re-establish a significant role in the creation of work opportunities. This can be achieved through a combination of direct government initiatives and also through development of incentives for business to employ more people. Particular emphasis needs to be placed on job creation for the long-term unemployed. In particular, given the concentration of unemployment in specific communities, strategies that support education, training and work opportunities need to be developed in these communities as a priority.

Recommendations
1. The Federal government, within the Australians Working Together initiative, should give greater attention to improved job education, training and employment assistance for the long-term unemployed.
2. The Federal government should continue to address disincentives, including tax disincentives, to greater paid employment for the unemployed and those in casual/part-time employment.
3. Increased tax incentives should be available to business/companies who agree to train and employ long-term unemployed people in the longer term, especially to companies operating in areas of higher unemployment.
4. Federal and State governments should implement strategies to increase employment in the public sector and give particular attention to job creation strategies in regional areas targeted to young people.

Investment in public education
A strong public education system is essential for the long-term development of the nation and as a means to combat poverty. We have seen in a previous section that cognitive development and the provision of effective learning environments is a key underlying mechanism in mitigating the impacts of poverty and achieving better outcomes for children and families. Furthermore it is the right of every child to receive an education regardless of their family's circumstances.

In Australia we are fortunate that governments have had a longstanding commitment to education. The Carrick report (1989) states that it is universally recognised that education is a responsibility of governments, that it is part of government's commitment to the common good and the nation's interests. The report accepted as a founding principle that the State has a duty to set basic standards and conditions to ensure the provision and delivery of education for all children. The *National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century* which was endorsed by State, Territory and Commonwealth Ministers in 1999 expresses a similar position:

Governments set the public policies that foster the pursuit of excellence, enable a diverse range of educational choices and aspirations, safeguard the entitlement of all young people to high quality schooling, promote the economic use of public resources, and uphold the contribution of schooling to a socially cohesive and culturally rich society.

However despite the commitments described above, there are worrying signs that Australia's commitment to providing public education of the highest quality may be diminishing. These signs include: the increasing support at a Commonwealth level for private education; the associated emphasis on choice as being the key factor in determining what sort of education a child receives; and the overall declining investment in education in this country.

The increasing movement of Commonwealth resources from public to private education

The increasing enrolments in private school, though presented as an outcome primarily of parental choice and concern for quality, have been actively supported and pursued as evident in a range of administrative and funding decisions. The lobby group Priority Public cite figures that indicate that over the three decades since the 1970's there has been a shift of 10% of the total school population from public to private schools (2001). This has been accompanied however, by a shift of 20% of the total spending on schools. This trend is said to be set to continue with the current Federal Government planning to increase funding for private schools from $2 billion (1996) to $3.7 billion in 2004. The planned increases for public education funding are much smaller, going from $1.4 billion in 1996 to $1.9 billion in 2004. The Vinson Inquiry Into Public Education in NSW (2002) quoted figures from the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training that confirm the shifts in funding priorities. In 1995/96 Commonwealth expenditure on schools as a proportion of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was 0.65%, public school receiving 0.27% and private schools 0.38%. By 2000/01 the total funding reached 0.75% of GDP but with public school expenditure declining to 0.26% and private school funding increasing to 0.48%. Although the States are primarily responsible for funding public education the trends in Commonwealth funding are creating pressures on the public system.

The above trends are having consequences for the type of education available for the majority of NSW students. From the experience of the families using Burnside's services there has been a decline in the base level of resources available to state schools that has a direct impact on the quality of education students receive. There also appears to be an increasing inequality in the provision of education in the NSW. This is evident not only in the resource gap between public and many private schools; it is also evident between schools within the public sector. Many private schools benefit from both government subsidies and substantial parental fees. Such schools enjoy a quality of education and school amenities and resources undreamt of by the majority of students. Other independent schools and public schools situated in more affluent areas can combine government funding with substantial resources from parents, whether through fees, voluntary contributions and/or fund raising.

These schools also are well placed to create a positive educational environment for their students. It is public schools located in the lower socio-economic areas, which are in the weakest position. They are almost completely reliant on public funding, there being much less scope to draw on parental resources whether monetary or social. Such schools have fewer material resources and, as recent newspaper stories attest, experience shortages of basic materials. Schools in very disadvantaged communities cannot offer the same conditions and environment as other schools. Consequently they are less able to attract the most able and experienced teachers. Given the links between socio-economic disadvantage and the incidence of learning and behavioural difficulties, schools in poorer communities will tend to have higher numbers of students with these problems. More affluent and able students will be able to access positions in selective and independent schools. This also has the effect of taking some of the most able and motivated parents away from the non-selective public schools. One result of these factors operating together is that the capacity for public schools in vulnerable communities to create an enriching and stimulating educational environment for all students is diminished. In short, the NSW community is witnessing a move more towards a tiered educational system. In this system some students (often those who are already advantaged in other ways) enjoy an excellent school and learning environment while those at the bottom end are more likely to have a less enriching education at comparatively poorly resourced public schools.

The championing of choice as the key determining factor of children's education

Changes, especially at a Commonwealth level, to funding of education have also been accompanied by rhetoric of parental choice. Within this framework an emphasis on competition and funding private schools with public money is presented as supporting the right of parents to choose their children's education. Some parents may choose the public system, but other parents have a right to choose other sorts of schools and are prepared to make 'sacrifices' to do so. Within this rhetoric private education is portrayed as an option available to everyone - it is simply a matter of choice. While it may be true that some parents are able to adjust spending priorities in order to send their children to a private school this is only a possibility for families with a reasonable proportion of discretionary income. However for many families no such choice exists. Families on very low incomes, especially families who largely depend on government benefits to get by, spend the vast majority of income on the essentials of life - food and housing. Most families with whom Burnside has contact, for example, have very little discretionary income, certainly not enough to afford the fees at the least expensive independent school. Such families are already likely to be subject to other forms of disadvantage. These families need a strong and well-resourced public education system if their children are not to fall further behind their more advantaged peers. (Note: this last point applies at a population level, rather than at the level of the individual, there will always be individual exceptions). The rhetoric of choice discounts the reality of inequality and disadvantage and therefore contributes to the failure to address its impacts on children's education and learning.

Australia's declining investment in education when compared with other nations belonging the Organisation for Economic Corporation and Development (OECD)

Australia's total spending on education over the last ten years has declined in comparison with OECD averages. At the start of the 1990's Australia spent more than the OECD average on all forms of education. By 1998 Australia was spending 5.56% of GDP on all forms of education, significantly below the OECD average of 5.76% of GDP. When public expenditure on education is considered we fare even less well. Australia spends 4.34% of GDP in public investment in education, a figure that is well below the OECD average of 5% and which ranks Australia 22nd out of 29 OECD nations (Considine et al, 2001).

Collectively these trends raise concerns about the level of investment in and commitment to public education. Evidence for the importance of education, and its relationship with financial aspects of the society, is noted in a recent report produced for the Business Council of Australia (2003, p. 3):

> *Education and training are key drivers of economic growth, a higher standard of living and a socially cohesive community… Effective education and training contributes to improvements in outcomes for the disadvantaged, helps address equity issues, supports greater efficiency and productivity in the workplace, builds social capital and creates direct social and economic benefits.*

In addition to the above concerns it is clear that the school retention rate in Australia is declining (OECD, 2001). The proportion of Australian students reaching Year 12 peaked at 77.1% in the early 1990's but has been going down since then. In 1998 the figure was 71.6%. This is worrying given the higher rates of unemployment associated with early school leaving.

Decisions about public education have a critical impact on those students whose families are subject to poverty as overwhelmingly, poor students attend public schools. A well-resourced public education system is essential if the impacts of poverty on these students are to be reduced and the gap between them and their more advantaged peers narrowed. Particular efforts should be made to support public schools in the most disadvantaged communities.

Recommendations

1. Commonwealth and State Governments should substantially increase funds for public education. This is particularly true of the Commonwealth where the amount of funds expended on public education as a proportion of all funds expended on school education has been declining. There needs to be explicit agreement with the States to direct sufficient funds to the strategies nominated below.
2. There should be increased availability of school-based support teachers to assist with students with learning difficulties and emotional and behavioural problems.
3. The numbers of school counsellors available to public schools needs to be increased. For example in NSW the proportion of counsellors to students is around 1:1000. This proportion of counsellors needs to be increased to at least 1:500 with each counsellor being responsible for no more than two schools.
4. There should be consideration of the expansion of alternative schools for those students who have most difficulty in the mainstream system.
5. There should be a review of salaries with a view to attracting people into the teaching profession. Specific incentives should be implemented to attract more experienced teachers to the most disadvantaged communities. These incentives could include extra pay and/or training opportunities.
6. Homework/study centres should be developed in more disadvantaged communities.
7. As recommended by the Vinson Inquiry into Public Education in NSW strategies need to be developed to identify, train and support teachers who possess the qualities to successfully teach Aboriginal students.

Specific initiatives to reduce the impacts of poverty

Alongside the broader structural initiatives to reduce the incidence of poverty other initiatives are required. As we have seen in previous sections poverty exacts a heavy toll on children and families. Programs are needed that are able to ameliorate the impacts of poverty in a number of areas and support and strengthen healthy family relating. Consistent with the research on important underlying mechanisms, Burnside argues that programs which address those mechanisms will be most effective. Consequently Burnside supports the provision of programs that seek to enhance the cognitive development of children (especially early learning environment); strengthen effective parenting; and support a growing sense of personal control (self-agency) as a key means to reduce the damaging impacts of poverty.

Burnside considers that, as part of an effective continuum of care, three types of service initiative are particularly needed for children living in poverty. These include:

- Development of a system of multi-component early parenting support and education programs for families at risk
- Quality children's services (long-day care and pre-school) must be made more accessible to disadvantaged families
- Expansion of intensive family services for families with more entrenched and complex problems.

The following section outlines the evidence for the effectiveness of each program type and then makes recommendations for development/expansion of such programs in Australia. The evidence for program effectiveness is drawn from a number of reviews of intervention studies of early parenting support and early childhood education and care programs (NCP, 1999; Powell, 1996; Barnett, 1995, Boocock, 1995; Bowes, 2000, Prilleltensky et al, 2001).

Multi-component parenting support and early education programs

Burnside argues for the development of a well-resourced system of early parenting support and education programs for at-risk families. Such a system does not currently exist in Australia. Such programs should be early in two senses (NCP, 1999). They aim to address problems and stresses before they fully develop (they have a preventative focus) and they focus on the early stages of children's lives, from birth (even prior to birth) thorough to commencement of school.

Although often discussed collectively there is in fact a great variety of early childhood programs which differ according to their goals and delivery strategies (Gomby et al, 1995). However, within this range there are common program elements – these include parent support, parent training, access to resources, child care/pre-school and child skills training. Some programs are centre-based, others emphasise home visits and many involve some combination of the two. Many of the most cited programs originated as small-scale, multi-component, and demonstration projects. Some models have been implemented more broadly, eg the Head Start Program in the United States or the more recent Sure Start initiative in the UK.

While there is a wide variety of programs, a smaller number have been the subject of rigorous evaluation (NCP, 1999). However when results of those programs that have been systematically evaluated are examined, a range of positive outcomes are evident. The majority of these programs were targeted programs, that is, they were directed towards groups who were at greater risk of negative outcomes. All programs were designed to modify or eliminate certain risk factors and/or strengthen protective factors in order to improve the outcomes for the children and families involved.

Evidence

A number of programs produced significant short-term cognitive gains. While these gains tended to fade out over time there were a range of benefits that were sustained longer term. For programs that begin in infancy these include for children: better school attendance; less disruptive and impulsive behaviour; higher literacy and reduced need for special education services. Importantly, given current concerns regarding juvenile offending, those studies that measured outcomes in problem behaviour and juvenile crime showed a positive effect. Overall these studies showed that program participants had a lower incidence of aggressive and antisocial behaviour, were less likely to be rated by teachers as disruptive and impulsive, committed fewer delinquent and criminal acts and were less likely to be arrested for criminal acts than were non-participants in a control/comparison group (NCP 1999; Yoshikawa 1995). A number of programs also showed reduced incidence of child abuse and neglect. Some programs demonstrated significant outcomes for parents with participants reporting more positive and nurturing attitudes to children, greater confidence as parents and adoption of less punitive approaches to discipline. Other programs demonstrated positive health effects and improvements in parents' own education and employment with reduced welfare utilisation.

Programs that focused on the pre-school years have produced similar very positive results. These included for children: sizeable and persistent effects in reading and maths; better social adjustment; reduced grade retention and special education; improved high school graduation; and a reduction in delinquency. Importantly, several programs resulted in parents being more likely to be involved with activities at their child's school. This involvement included taking part in parent-teacher interviews, attending classroom activities and initiating contact with classroom teachers. This is significant, as it is indicative of the parent's increased commitment to and expectation of the child's education. Such expectation and commitment appears to be an important underlying factor associated with school achievement (Zappala and Considine, 2001; Zubrick et al, 1997; NCP, 1999).

Taken together, the above points provide more than sufficient grounds for an increased investment in early parenting support and education services. What is required is an integrated system of services focussed on disadvantaged communities in Australia. The Commonwealth could take a real lead, in cooperation with the States, in establishing and funding such a system. There are many models of effective programs, the majority developed in the United States. While it is true that models need to be adapted to suit the different and diverse situations of Australian communities there is a growing consensus regarding the characteristics of the most effective programs.

Research findings indicate that the most effective programs:

Have multiple components

The most effective services have multiple components directed to well-defined objectives. This is important in order to address specific and multiple risk factors that influence outcomes. Although the emphasis differs from service to service most programs offer some combination of practical and emotional support for parents, parent training, child care, child training and educational support. Home visiting is seen as a key means of delivering many of these elements (NCP, 1999). Several commentators have highlighted the importance of child-initiated learning and play-based problem solving as an important program component (McCain and Mustard, 1999; NCP, 1999; Yoshikawa, 1995).

Combine family-focused and child-focused elements

It is clear that the child-focused programs benefit children more than adults and that the family-focused programs benefit adults more than children (Gomby et al, 1995). Gains in child outcomes are unlikely unless programs have an emphasis on child development input (Powell, 1996: Gomby et al, 1995). Programs that rely on indirect methods (attempting to influence the child through parents) have some of the weakest results. At the same time the child-focussed educational enrichment programs which have produced the most substantial outcomes combine centre-based services for children with significant parent involvement, through home visits, classroom participation or parent groups (NCP, 1999; Yoshikawa, 2000).

Maintain program integrity

As mentioned previously some of the strongest and most stringently evaluated programs have been relatively small-scale model programs. It is reasonable to ask whether such programs achieve similar results when implemented on a larger scale. Barnett (1995) in his review of targeted early education programs found that positive effects reported were somewhat larger in the small-scale demonstration projects compared to the large-scale public programs (such as Head Start). Importantly, Barnett considered this a result of not any deficit in the nature of the large-scale programs themselves, but a lack of sufficient funding of the larger programs which resulted in a lowering of program quality (larger classes, fewer and less qualified staff, poorer supervision) and intensity. Barnett emphasised that the research supported the view that large-scale programs could produce the cognitive and social benefits for disadvantaged children, providing program quality and integrity was maintained.

Start early

There are good reasons for staring early. Family functioning outcomes are better for programs that commence early, even before birth. Starting early also avoids the stigma of joining a program after a problem has developed. Starting early is also important for the more child-focussed programs. Although good educational and other outcomes are achieved with pre-school programs, evidence on brain development suggests that beginning services in infancy is likely to generate even larger effects than waiting till a year or so before school (Barnett, 1995: Yoshikawa, 1995).

Are intensive

While it is not possible to be completely prescriptive about program intensity there are strong indications from research that better outcomes are associated with programs of greater intensity. Intensity here refers to both the extent of the service provided and its duration. Programs which aim for a 'quick fix' are unlikely to be successful. The most effective home visiting programs have a duration of at least two years (NCP, 1999). Parents at higher risk have been shown to benefit more from longer-term intensive visitation (Wolfe et al, 1995). In his survey, Yoshikawa, (1995) found that programs which produced positive outcomes for both parents and children included 25-60 home visits, occurring from weekly to monthly. The most effective early educational programs ranged from half-day to full-day sessions usually four or five days a week. Writing about centre-based child-focussed programs Gomby et al (1995) recommend that in the light of many mothers entering the workforce out of economic necessity or government mandate, full-day, full-year programs should be the norm.

Recommendation

1. Burnside calls on the Federal Government, in cooperation with State and Territory governments and in consultation with non-government organisations to institute a comprehensive system of early parenting support and education programs for children and families exposed to poverty. Such programs should be universally available in communities that are most disadvantaged and which have higher numbers of young children. As many of the most effective program models have originated in other countries, notably the United States, programs need to be adapted to suit Australian communities. Also, there should be provision for well-designed and systematic evaluation of interventions. Subsequent evaluation findings should be used to inform future program development.

Program example: Burnside NEWPIN

The NEWPIN program is based on a well-evaluated UK model of early intervention/family support, and was introduced into Bidwill, a suburb of Western Sydney with a low socio-economic profile, by Burnside in 1998. NEWPIN focuses on families at risk of abuse and neglect of their children, and aims to create structures of reciprocity through which the service users go on to become voluntary co-workers in the program. Key elements of the program include a therapeutic support group for women, an open drop-in program and a parent/child play program facilitated by a trained early childhood worker. During the play program, mothers are coached in play and positive interaction with their children, which is something many of these women did not experience in their own childhoods. Many of the children accessing NEWPIN have significant learning difficulties.

Anecdotal and observational evidence suggests that NEWPIN is having a profound impact. Participants report having a greater sense of control within their family situation and in their lives. Women now talk about enjoying playing with their children rather than interaction with their kids just being a source of stress. This is significant given the research that now points to a sense of control and parenting competence as an important 'underlying factor' in a range of positive health and social outcomes (Zubrick et al 1995; Marmot et al, 1997; NCP, 1999).

There are also other benefits to the program. After discussion with NEWPIN staff a TAFE outreach program was introduced to the centre. Women wanted to develop their own education as well as model educational achievement for their children. Several mothers have now completed these outreach courses and some have gone on to further study. Other participants have become volunteers for other organisations including helping with children's reading at the local school. This is an example of the multiple benefits that can occur as the result of effective early intervention programs.

In 1998 one of the parents associated with Burnside's NEWPIN program in Bidwill presented some of her story at the Standing Committee on Law and Justice inquiry into 'Crime Prevention through Social Support'. She said,

Hi. My name is Cheryl Meredith. Believe me, this is really hard for me to do. I have been a part of NEWPIN since April of this year. Growing up, my father physically, emotionally and verbally abused me. I sought love and comfort early in life and as a result, I was a mother at 16. By 25 I had three children. I had a failed marriage, a broken engagement and was left on my own. I promised I would not do the same things that my father did to me. Unfortunately, it was the only thing I knew and I then became an abuser to my children. I sought help. I went to the doctors, I went to other groups that were shown to me. Unfortunately, they told me, "It is okay, every mother has a bad day. You can fly off the handle". The doctor suggested I go on antidepressants. That is not what I am about.

I have a 16 year old, a 13 year old, a 10 year old and two babies. My family started to break up. I knew I had to do something. I found a counsellor who then put me on to NEWPIN. This is the best step I have ever made. I was no longer told that it is okay to hit my children or put them down. I was offered new ways of doing things. I am now building up the self-esteem of my children by no longer hitting them and putting them down.

My children are now part of the youth group as well, and it is going to take a while but one day they will learn to trust me. I have not hit my children since April and this is a great feeling.

Postscript: Now, five years later, Cheryl has nearly completed a Certificate 3 in Welfare Studies at TAFE. She is still involved with the NEWPIN program as a volunteer "Befriender" helping mothers new to the program settle in to the centre. She also contributes as a part-time employee of NEWPIN in conducting home visits for new program participants. Cheryl regularly acts as an ambassador for NEWPIN by speaking about the program at conferences and seminars.

Program example: The Burnside Family Learning Centre

The Burnside Family Learning Centre was established over ten years ago to counteract educational disadvantage among low-income families in a community in Western Sydney. Children are referred to the Learning Centre by ten local primary schools if they have learning and/or behavioural difficulties and come from a low-income family. The program is based on a family strengths model and a belief that a focus on education can bring about a commitment to positive growth and change. Consequently there is an emphasis on parents and children learning together. Programs include:

- Tutoring for primary- and high-school-aged children with their parents by qualified teachers. Parents are involved in the tutoring and are supported in conducting follow-up work at home
- Family counselling
- Groups for parents, eg. Parenting courses, including child protection, vocational and personal development courses and adult literacy programs. Other agencies such as TAFE are sometimes involved in running these courses. Through these courses many parents move on to further study eg in TAFE
- Self esteem, social skills and peer support training for children at the Centre and in class groups at the referring schools. A holiday recreational program is also offered

- A Parents as Teachers program that focuses on supporting and teaching parents of children 0-5 years to enrich their child's early learning and development. There are two components: regular (weekly – monthly) home visits to provide knowledge about child development in a friendly, accessible way; and a centre-based parent education and a parent/child play program.

The Learning Centre has developed a very effective and positive relationship with the local schools. Feedback from schools and families report high levels of satisfaction with the service. The Centre has also been used as a model family literacy program by the University of Western Sydney.

A recent independent evaluation of the tutoring component of the Ermington program found that parents believed the program had helped them in managing the school relationship and in managing their children's learning and behaviour. Parents felt able to help with children's homework and some parents considered they had progressed in their own learning. Principals valued the program with some emphasising the impact of tutoring but more stressing the value of the program in contributing to behaviour change in both students and parents (Uniting*Care* Burnside, 2002).

Quality early childhood education and care services

As we have stated above one of the key mechanisms that mediates the impact of poverty on children is its effect on the child's early learning environment and cognitive development. If we can support the early learning of children exposed to poverty we will have made a significant contribution to limiting its damaging impacts. One way to enhance disadvantaged children's cognitive development is through the targeted programs described above. Quality long day care and pre-school services are another effective means to this end. They also have the benefit of being non-stigmatised forms of service delivery.

Australia's overall funding of education in the pre-school years has been described as "lamentable" (Considine et al 2001, p 3). In 1998 Australia spent 0.1% of GDP on pre-school education, a figure markedly less than the 1.1% spent in Denmark, 0.7% spent in France and 0.6% in Norway and Sweden. Clearly there is room for a much greater investment in education in the pre-school years.

Another important issue is that of children who would benefit the most from attendance at early education and care services are least likely to access them. Research by Jamrozik and Sweeney (1996) found that the extent of both formal and informal childcare use was positively related to income - the higher the income the greater the use of child care. A study by the Brotherhood of St Laurence (Tasker & Siemon, 1998) found that the affordability of child care had deteriorated between 1992 and 1997 and that Childcare Assistance (fee relief) had not kept pace with fee increases over the same period. In recent years there has been dramatic underspending in the budget for child care subsidies ($150 million less than forecast in 1997/98) suggesting a strong decline in use by low-income families (Siemon and Ford, 1999). The Australian report to the OECD Review of Early Childhood Education and Care (Press and Hayes, 2000) notes a decline in overall attendance and a loss of low-income families at long day care centres between 1995-1999, with affordability being one suggested reason for the trend. While the Federal Government's new Child Care Benefit may reduce costs to some extent, the issue of affordability remains an impediment to greater access to care especially for low-income families (Moyle, 2001).

Evidence

As stated above the lack of access of low-income children to quality care and education is worrying, as it is these children who have most to gain from such services. A review by Boocock (1995) of 15 studies of universally available early childhood programs operating in 13 countries provides valuable data on their contribution to child development and school achievement. Her study particularly focuses on outcomes associated with well-established universal pre-school systems such as those operating in Germany, France and Sweden. Boocock found that early childhood services had positive effects on school readiness, cognitive development and school achievement. The positive effects were most apparent for lower-income children, narrowing, but not closing, the achievement gap that separated them from more advantaged children.

Early childhood education and care programs directed towards disadvantaged children and families have also produced very positive results. In his review Barnett (1995) found large effects on IQ in the early childhood years and sizeable and persistent effects on reading and mathematics, reduced grade retention, reduced need for special education and more positive socialisation. In particular the effects on grade retention and special education were overwhelming.

While, as has been noted, early childhood programs do not completely close the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged children, they can make a significant difference. As Barnett stated in concluding his review …*for many children, pre-school programs can mean the difference between failing and passing, regular or special education, staying out of trouble or becoming involved in crime and delinquency, dropping out or graduating from high school* (Barnett, 1995, p 43).

Quality is an essential characteristic for both long day care and pre-school programs. The most positive outcomes are associated with services that maintain adequate staff/child ratios, have relatively small group sizes and professionally trained staff (Powell, 1996). Other key components of effective pre-school services for disadvantaged families include:
- A focus on cognitive enrichment that incorporates child-initiated learning (especially play-based problem solving) and growth in responsibility
- Family involvement in the program
- Combining parent training programs with child training to support parenting skills and learning in the home environment (NCP, 1999).

Quality pre-school/long day care programs should be further developed and made more accessible and affordable, particularly to low-income families*.* Access to childcare should no longer be based primarily on participation in the workforce. As Harris and Hayes (1999) note, having parent's employment status as the main criteria for access to child care represents a 'defacto disinvestment' in meeting the needs of the most vulnerable families. In particular, the 20-hour cap on child-care fee relief for non-working parents should be removed.

Burnside supports the graded provision of subsidised quality long day care and pre-school services. A start would be to ensure that every three- and four-year-old child in Australia received at least one day per week free care in a quality pre-school or long day care centre. This is already the case in the majority of States and Territories. Children from low-income families should receive two days' free care. This level of universal provision would allow all families with children to have a stake in quality childcare. A range of models of children's services need to be available in isolated regions in recognition of the multiple barriers they face in accessing services.

Long day care and pre-school centres also provide an excellent location for other family-support-type services. As centres are perceived as supportive places and non-stigmatising they provide an ideal setting for other types of parent education, home visiting and child skills training programs. They are also well placed to influence the important transition to the school environment (NCP, 1999).

The Commonwealth is well placed to take the lead in establishing an integrated system of early childhood education and care in Australia. The recent emphasis by both major political parties on the early childhood years is to be strongly commended. What is required is a long-term bi-partisan commitment to this issue. In particular, ways must be found to increase the participation of low-income families and especially indigenous families in quality services.

However it should be noted that although good educational and other outcomes are achieved with pre-school programs, evidence on brain development suggests that beginning services in infancy is likely to generate even larger effects than waiting till a year or so before school (Barnett, 1995: Yoshikawa, 1995). So any development of early childhood programs should be conducted in concert with expansion of the multi-component parent education and support programs described in the previous section.

Recommendations
1. The Federal government in consultation with State and Territory governments should continue its development of a national agenda for early childhood. The agenda should include an integrated policy framework and clear strategies for the provision of early childhood education and care and parenting support. Particular attention needs to be directed to supporting children and parents in indigenous communities.
2. Commonwealth funding for early childhood education and care services should be increased substantially at least to the average (of GDP) expenditure in the OECD.
3. Strategies must be developed to support the provision and expansion of early education and care services by the community sector as it is this sector that is more likely to provide services in more disadvantaged communities and for the youngest children.
4. There should be national guidelines and funding commitments that allow every three- and four-year-old child in Australia to attend a pre-school or long day care centre at no cost at least one day per week. Children from low-income families should be able to attend two days per week at no charge.
5. Parent education and support services should be co-located, or preferably, integrated with children's services to create mutli-component services in disadvantaged communities.
6. Development of services should be accompanied by ongoing research and evaluation of program outcomes.

Intensive services for families with entrenched and complex problems

The service types outlined above will make an important contribution to ameliorating the damaging impacts of poverty and disadvantage. In so doing they will reduce the incidence of the problems associated with poverty. However, there will still be a proportion of families and children who have more complex problems or where compounding issues such as mental illness or substance abuse are present. These families will need more intensive and specialist forms of assistance in order to strengthen family functioning and avoid the necessity of removing children into out-of-home care.

Intensive family services are generally aimed at families where children are at imminent risk of being removed from their families due to child protection concerns. Many programs of this type are based on the United States' Homebuilders model, with staff being available to families on a 24-hour basis, seven days a week over the six-to eight-week intervention. Burnside conducts one such service in NSW. Staff carry small caseloads (two families at a time) and work intensively with families, averaging 8-10 hours' contact each week, although in the initial stages it can be as much as 20 hours per week. Three family caseworkers, a Coordinator and a part-time administration worker service around 36 families each year. However, there are very few services of this type in NSW or Australia as a whole.

While there are some specialist services offering support in the areas of domestic violence, drug and alcohol and mental illness, the growing incidence of families impacted by these problems and the small number of specialist programs available requires urgent attention. Also existing services may not focus on the family context. This issue can be addressed through development of additional specialist services that have an explicit family focus or by building in specialist programs to existing secondary prevention services.

Respite care is an additional service element that can provide important support for families and children at risk. Despite the long recognition of the value of respite care for families of children with a disability, there remains no network of funded respite services directed to families and children vulnerable to abuse and neglect. Yet it is clear that respite provides a critical buffer for families experiencing social and economic stress.

Evidence
<u>Intensive Family Support Services</u>
Overseas research
Many intensive family services are based on the Homebuilders model of family preservation services (although other models also exist). Key characteristics of home-based intensive services are that families receive the service in their own homes, the intervention is short-term (6-12 weeks) and intensive (more than one day of face-to-face contact with a worker and 24-hour-a-day availability for crisis situations). In an evaluation of Homebuilders, (Pecora, Fraser and Haapala, 1991) found significant improvements of rates of out-of-home placement for participant families (44%) in relation to comparison groups (85%).

Summarising the results of controlled studies of intensive family preservation programs, Prilleltensky et al (2001) found that all but one program showed significantly lower rates of out-of-home care placement relative to control or comparison groups. There is also evidence that while not all intensive family services lower the rate of entry to care, they can significantly lessen the duration of placement in care (Yuan et al, 1990).

Other research highlights that the greater the number of hours of intervention and practical supports available the smaller the rates of placement (Dagenais and Bouchard, 1996). However, there is only minimal evidence from controlled studies that programs have other positive outcomes in family, parent or child wellness (Dagenias and Brouchard, 1996). In many instances this may be because such outcomes are not assessed as part of the program.

Local evaluation

In 1995 Burnside's Intensive Family Based Service (IFBS) was evaluated by Macquarie University. The evaluation found that workers considered that the risk to the child had been decreased for 81% of participating families and that for 62% of families improvements in parents' attitudes to children were evident. These findings were supported by family functioning assessments conducted by District Officers (staff of the NSW Department of Community Services whose role is to assess children at risk). Parents themselves were overwhelmingly positive about the service, with 92% saying they would recommend IFBS to other families needing support (Russell & Bowman, 1996). Given the critical nature of ongoing support to maintain positive outcomes for intensive family support services, clients are referred on to other services following intervention, including Burnside's own family centres.

More recently a collaborative research project between the University of NSW and the Spastic Centre of NSW has examined the impact of programs designed to assist families with children with disabilities. The participant families were all under severe stress and were not sure if their family could stay together. Some families had already requested permanent out-of-home care for their child or were considered by the referring agency to be at high risk of having a child placed prematurely in out-of-home care. The research aimed to identify the program elements and treatment strategies that assisted families with a child with a disability stay safely together. Initial findings indicate significant improvement for families in terms of child safety, reductions in stress and strengthening of family coping. These positive results were achieved with a combination of strategies, including strengths-based approaches, and home-based, intensive and both family- and parent-focussed elements. Later analysis is expected to further clarify the program elements and practices most associated with the positive outcomes (Coles & Dunsire, 2002).

Recommendation

1. Commonwealth and State governments should establish new Intensive Family Services within Australia over the next two terms of government. Implementation of services should be coordinated with existing State government initiatives. Services should be located in disadvantaged areas with a high incidence of child abuse and neglect and a high rate of entry of children and young people into care. Given the extremely high rate of entry into care in Aboriginal families a significant proportion of services should be directed to indigenous communities. It is important that such services should be co-located or integrated with existing family services. Service implementation should be accompanied by ongoing evaluation of program outcomes.

Respite care

Respite care has long been an established element of service within the disability sector. Evaluation of respite within disability services highlights its value in reducing parental stress and preventing out of home care placement (Volard et al, 1989; Swarc, 1993). Evaluations also revealed that respite was likely to be used by families experiencing most stress and with fewer support networks (Swarc, 1988).

Evaluations of respite in a child protection context have also revealed positive outcomes. A recent evaluation of the Centacare Taree Aunts and Uncles respite care service found that the number of notifications made to DoCS decreased following the involvement of a respite care service for 27 of the 33 client families (Brennan and Crowe, 2002).

An evaluation of Barnardos (Australia) Temporary Family Care Program (offering both crisis and planned respite care) found that only 5.5% of referrals entered long term out-of-home care arrangements despite being high-risk families referred from State community service departments (Voigt and Tregeagle, 1996). A study of short-term respite in the UK (Aldgate et al, 1996) revealed a range of positive outcomes. Participating parents expressed a sense of being more in control of their lives and having greater self-confidence and higher self-esteem as measured by standard tests. Only two of 60 placements became long-term care arrangements. In a study of the Wisconsin Respite Centre in the United States, Subramanian (1985) found significant reductions in parental stress, anxiety and depression among service participants. While there is a need for more research (Austin, 1997) the combination of practice knowledge and existing evaluative research that points to the value of respite is compelling.

The Commonwealth could play a key role in developing, supporting and co-funding an integrated system of respite services as part of an overall continuum of care. While the provision of many family services is currently largely the preserve of State and Territory governments, the Commonwealth has taken a clear lead in some areas. For example the Commonwealth has developed very substantial and significant respite services in the disabilities sector. In the same way the Commonwealth can offer leadership, set national guidelines and contribute to the funding of respite care services for families without disabilities.

Recommendation
1. Commonwealth and State governments should develop a network of respite care services for children at risk. A capacity for planned respite should be co-located and incorporated into other family services programs in line with the principle of offering multi-component services. Service implementation should be accompanied by ongoing evaluation of program outcomes.

6. Conclusion

This paper takes the position that child poverty remains a critical issue facing the Australian community. There are clear reasons to make the addressing of child poverty a national priority. Firstly, the numbers of children living in poverty in Australia are too high. For anyone to live in poverty is a denial of human rights and an offence against intrinsic human dignity and worth. That so many children, who are especially vulnerable, should be subject to poverty, is a matter of national shame.

Secondly, the costs of allowing children to live in poverty are enormous. These costs are borne not only by the children and families affected but by the whole community. We have seen how poverty is associated with a range of adverse outcomes including poor health, child abuse and neglect, emotional and behavioural difficulties, school failure and juvenile offending. These problems and their consequences not only diminish and constrain people's life opportunities and potential, they also produce huge subsequent financial costs in areas such as health, education, community services and criminal justice. Not only that but prolonged poverty and inequality also work to erode the community fabric and diminish the overall capabilities of the population, both of which make a crucial contribution to the social and economic wellbeing of the nation. Clearly then child poverty is not just a problem for the poor but for all of us.

We have also examined some of the strategies that will be effective in combating poverty. These include systemic-level strategies to address the causes of poverty as well as programmatic interventions designed to reduce the damaging impacts of poverty. There are good reasons to believe that these strategies in combination will be very effective in addressing poverty. What is required is a deliberate, comprehensive and committed plan to apply these strategies in the medium to longer term. Such a commitment will see a move away from seeing child poverty and associated problems primarily as a matter of individual responsibility to a position where we see the problems and their solutions as a matter of shared responsibility between parents, communities, non-government organisations and governments. At the same time however, the Federal government can and must play a key role in driving and resourcing such initiatives, if they are to become a reality. Only then will we see real progress in addressing child poverty and providing a platform for all Australian children to flourish.

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