



Government of South Australia

Office of the Guardian
for Children and Young People

Mr Russell Broadbent MP
Chair,
Select Committee on Intergenerational Welfare Dependence
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17 September 2018

Dear Mr Broadbent

Response to the House of Representatives Select Committee on Intergenerational Welfare Dependence Discussion Paper

I welcome the opportunity to provide comments to the Select Committee on Intergenerational Welfare Dependence. As South Australia's Guardian for Children and Young People, and Training Centre Visitor, I advocate for and promote the rights and best interests of children and young people under the guardianship of the Minister and those in the Adelaide Youth Training Centre.

Appended is a brief note to highlight issues concerning the intergenerational nature of poverty, and its link to child protection. It is essential that measures to address the complex nature of poverty and the operation of the welfare system respond to the needs of the highly vulnerable children and young people who come into contact with the child protection and youth justice systems.

South Australian research is currently being undertaken by the BetterStart Child Health and Development Research Group, and the Australian Centre for Child Protection. Their preliminary findings suggest a strong intergenerational link to child protection involvement. Both research bodies advocate for targeted early interventions in order to break the cycle.

Please let me know if you require any further information about, or wish to discuss, this feedback. Your staff also can contact my Senior Policy Officer, Ms Jessica Flynn for this purpose on

Yours sincerely

**Penny Wright | Guardian and Training Centre Visitor
Office of the Guardian for Children and Young People**

Comments on: the House of Representatives Select Committee on Intergenerational Welfare Dependence

From: Penny Wright, Guardian for Children and Young People and Training Centre Visitor

Introduction

There is a strong relationship between dependence on welfare and poverty, although it is not necessarily a causal connection. Poverty, moreover, is not solely characterised by lack of money. It manifests in various ways and is affected by the degree to which individuals, families and communities can access resources and services through our 'welfare' system.

The South Australian Council of Social Service (SACOSS) states that the level of Newstart is 'completely inadequate to live on'¹ and that other welfare payments are paid at or below the rate of Newstart. It also notes that in South Australia, eight per cent of the population are living in poverty, which includes 22,350 children.²

Whilst poverty itself is not the reason why children become involved in the child protection system it can be a compounding factor. A longitudinal study published in 2016 found that in Australia, factors of disadvantage such as social instability, domestic and family violence, poor parental mental health and substance abuse have a strong association with increased risk of child abuse and neglect.³

By the age of 10, one in every four children in South Australia has been the subject of a child abuse or neglect notification.⁴ This statistic is unacceptable and demonstrates the crisis currently affecting children, families, and the child protection system.

Recommendations

Emerging research demonstrates the interrelationship between the socio-economic circumstances of families and rates of child abuse and neglect across the community. It does not represent a simple divide between families who are affluent and families who experience poverty. These findings mirror evidence about the inequality in child health and education.⁵ A focus on early intervention and prevention for children is required as they may become parents of future generations of children involved in the child protection system.

¹ SACOSS Submission to the Legislative Council of South Australia Select Committee on Poverty in South Australia, p 20. This document can be accessed [here](#).

² SACOSS Submission to the Legislative Council of South Australia Select Committee on Poverty in South Australia, p 6. This document can be accessed [here](#).

³ J.C. Doidge et al 'Risk factors for child maltreatment in an Australian population-based birth cohort' *Child Abuse & Neglect* 64 (2017) p 47.

⁴ The South Australia Early Childhood Data Project, Informing Early Intervention in Child Protection, EIRD Forum 10 April 2018, John Lynch, Rhiannon Pilkington, Alicia Montgomerie. This document can be accessed [here](#).

⁵ Ibid.

The Australian Centre for Child Protection states that resourcing and funding appropriate supports for families at risk of entering the child protection system antenatally and during infancy is crucial for the child's development and wellbeing. Early intervention can reduce disorders that develop during pregnancy and can help break the intergenerational nature of poverty, abuse and neglect. They state that if harm can be prevented early, the cognitive, social, emotional and physical impacts can also be prevented and can have a lasting lifetime effect on families.⁶

Intergenerational welfare dependence and poverty

In the Productivity Commission's report *'Rising inequality? A stocktake of the evidence'*, it was demonstrated that people living in single-parent families, the unemployed, people with a disability, and Aboriginal Australians are at a higher risk of experiencing income poverty, deprivation and social exclusion.⁷ People living in these circumstances face an increased risk of economic disadvantage becoming entrenched, which limits economic opportunities and the ability to develop necessary skills to overcome these factors.⁸ Children in care and/or detention feature heavily in all these demographic groups.

The BetterStart Child Health and Development Research Group illustrates that disadvantage described above becomes intergenerational as women experiencing social and health disadvantage can give birth to an infant experiencing health disadvantage. This can lead to developmental disadvantage, leading to learning disadvantage. Learning disadvantage often then leads to labour market and income disadvantage.⁹ Twice the rate of developmental vulnerability is reported at the age of five for children who have child protection notifications made about them, compared to children with no child protection notifications.¹⁰ This demonstrates the ease of which disadvantage and the potential for welfare dependence can become entrenched, and highlights that a multigenerational public health and education approach is needed to break the cycle of poverty and child protection involvement.

Poverty and other factors relating to child protection are complex and often circular. For example, poverty can increase the risk of experiencing poor mental health, and poor mental health increases the risk of experiencing poverty. Parental substance use and poverty are more likely to increase contact with child protection, compared to someone in a position of affluence.¹¹

⁶ South Australian Early Intervention Research Directorate (EIRD) Case File Review Research Policy Brief #1, *'Identifying early intervention and prevention pathways for child protection concerns raised in pregnancy: Preliminary Findings from Child Protection Departmental Case File Reviews'*, p 3.

⁷ Productivity Commission 2018, *Rising inequality? A stocktake of the evidence*, Commission Research Paper, Canberra, p 5.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ The South Australia Early Childhood Data Project, John Lynch Professor of Epidemiology and Public Health, University of Adelaide This document can be accessed [here](#).

¹⁰ In reference to Australian Early Development Census Data. The South Australia Early Childhood Data Project, Informing Early Intervention in Child Protection, EIRD Forum 10 April 2018, John Lynch, Rhiannon Pilkington, Alicia Montgomerie. This document can be accessed [here](#).

¹¹ Paul Baywaters et al, *'The relationship between poverty, child abuse and neglect: an evidence review'* Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2016, p 4.

Children experiencing poverty and involvement in the child protection system are more likely to be exposed to risk factors for criminal behaviours.¹² Repeated child abuse reports have been linked to adult outcomes of perpetrating child abuse and neglect, and mental health service use. Among girls, trauma, family conflict, and mental health concerns are linked to juvenile or adult arrests, whilst for boys, community and peer-related circumstances are more important.¹³ In South Australia in 2017-18, almost one quarter of children and young people admitted to the Adelaide Youth Training Centre were also under the guardianship of the Minister at the time of their admission, and more have a history of such involvement. Research demonstrates that children and young people who are brought into contact with the youth justice system are more likely to be involved in the adult system, which perpetuates the cycle of welfare dependence, poverty, and child abuse and neglect.¹⁴

South Australian Context – Intergenerational links to child protection involvement

Preliminary findings from the Australian Centre for Child Protection have identified characteristics of families that have a high rate of repeat involvement in the child protection system. This research does not explicitly link these characteristics with factors of disadvantage but aims to understand what and whom notifiers are worried about. Eight years of data was analysed, and a typology of families that can benefit from early intervention and prevention was developed.

Parental risk factors for families repeatedly involved in child protection demonstrated high levels of family violence, use of alcohol or other drugs, mental health concerns and criminal behaviour.¹⁵ Outcomes of child trauma or factors conveying vulnerability for children were also apparent.¹⁶ These typologies are consistent with the factors of disadvantage mentioned above.

The SA Child Death and Serious Injury Review Committee's (CDSIRC) findings support international research which demonstrates the strong relationship between child death and social disadvantage. CDSIRC has recorded a broad pattern of increasing deaths with increasing levels of disadvantage. The impact of disadvantage is evident in the high number of deaths in children under one year of age, at the higher levels of the SEIFA index.¹⁷ Of the deaths of children whose parent(s) had a history of guardianship, the complexity of the lives of these young parents was identified as a major challenge for practitioners, service providers and carers working with them. The supports needed by these young people were often not provided while they were under guardianship.¹⁸

Intergenerational welfare dependence and poverty are not sufficient factors in the occurrence of child abuse or neglect. Children in families who are affluent may experience child abuse or neglect, and

¹² Bright and Jonson-Reid, 'Multiple Service System Involvement and Later Offending Behavior: Implications for Prevention and Early Intervention' American Journal of Public Health, 2005 105(7) p 1358.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Commentary on Rule 8 of the Beijing Rules states that 'Criminological research into labelling processes has provided evidence of the detrimental effects (of different kinds) resulting from the permanent identification of young persons as "delinquent" or "criminal".'

¹⁵ EIRD: Findings of the first two Case File Reviews, EIRD Forum, 10 April 2018, Professor Fiona Arney. This document can be accessed [here](#).

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ See the CDSIRC Annual Report 2016-17 p 7 for more information. This document can be accessed [here](#).

¹⁸ Ibid.

children in families living in poverty may not experience child abuse and neglect.¹⁹ Often the link drawn between poverty and child protection is either because of the direct effects of material hardship, or an indirect effect through parental stress and neighbourhood conditions.²⁰

¹⁹ Paul Baywaters et al, 'The relationship between poverty, child abuse and neglect: an evidence review' Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2016, p 4.

²⁰ Ibid.