



one in
7
seven

**Almost 1 in 7 children
Are living in households below the poverty line**

**But we can act to break the cycle of disadvantage
And ensure these children have the best chance in life.**

About NCOSS

The NSW Council of Social Service (NCOSS) works with and for people experiencing poverty and disadvantage to see positive change in our communities.

When rates of poverty and inequality are low, everyone in NSW benefits. With 80 years of knowledge and experience informing our vision, NCOSS is uniquely placed to bring together civil society to work with government and business to ensure communities in NSW are strong for everyone.

As the peak body for health and community services in NSW we support the sector to deliver innovative services that grow and evolve as needs and circumstances evolve.

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Message from the CEO

October, 2015



Being born into poverty shouldn't determine a child's life chances or educational outcomes. But for the 1 in 7 children living below the poverty line in NSW, we know this is likely to shape their entire life course.

We know that those children and young people who experience poverty and disadvantage are more likely to have health and behavioural problems, experience housing and food insecurity, and not achieve their full potential at school. And we know that this experience will shape their employment prospects, their health outcomes and their sense of wellbeing.

But we also know that here in New South Wales, we can act to break the cycle of disadvantage and ensure that the 1 in 7 children who are experiencing poverty have the best chance in life.

NCOSS, together with our members, is working to ensure that whatever causes a child to experience poverty, it doesn't determine their life chances.

We have spent the last three months talking to our members and other stakeholders about their own experiences and the experiences of the children and families with whom they work. And we've asked them about what makes a difference in the lives of children experiencing poverty.

It's been inspiring to witness the passion and dedication of people across our State who are committed to working towards a better deal for all children. And it's been humbling to witness the resilience and courage of families doing it tough.

Again and again we heard about the critical importance of the early years in building a strong foundation for life and learning. But we also heard about the many children and young people who are falling through the cracks and not getting the support they need.

Our conversations focused on five key areas that affect a child's risk of social exclusion, and what we all can do to reduce that risk. And as a result we've identified five actions the NSW Government could take – this year – to ensure a better future for all children. Each of these actions clearly links to one or more of Premier Baird's priorities identified in his *Making it Happen* plan for NSW.

Working together, we can make a real difference for those 1 in 7 children currently living in poverty. Together, we can shape a future where the life outcomes of children in New South Wales aren't determined by their socio-economic status and the poverty they experience in childhood.

Tracy Howe

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tracy Howe". The signature is stylized with a large, flowing 'T' and 'H'.

CEO

Introduction

In New South Wales, 13.8% of children under the age of 15 are experiencing poverty – a rate higher than any other mainland state. Almost 1 in 7 children are living in households below the poverty line.¹

These statewide statistics mask a situation that is even more troubling in some towns and suburbs in our state. Country towns like Brewarrina (31.8%), Kyogle (28.2%), and Tenterfield (27.9%), and suburbs like Auburn (26.1%) and Canterbury (25.6%)² – among others – have child poverty rates that far exceed the statewide average. And we know that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are overrepresented amongst children experiencing poverty and are particularly disadvantaged across a range of indicators.³

There is no shortage of research and evidence to show the prevalence and consequences of child poverty here in New South Wales. Children and young people who experience poverty and disadvantage are more likely to have health and behavioural problems, experience housing and food insecurity, and not achieve their full potential at school.⁴ These childhood experiences have an impact across the entire life course, shaping their employment prospects, their health outcomes and sense of wellbeing.⁵

There is also no shortage of evidence to point to the many causes of poverty. Unemployment and underemployment, jobs shortages, poor health, disability, dysfunction within a family, as well as the effects of racism and other forms of discrimination, can all contribute⁶.

But whatever causes a child to experience poverty, that child is not responsible.

Whatever causes a child to experience poverty, it shouldn't determine their life chances.

We also know that here in New South Wales, we can act to break the cycle of disadvantage and ensure that the 1 in 7 children who are experiencing poverty have the best chance in life.

Our 1 in 7 Children in Poverty Campaign outlines five key actions the NSW Government could take to make a very real difference to the life chances of children and young people experiencing poverty and disadvantage.

These actions have been informed by extensive conversations with our members and other stakeholders across NSW - specialists in working with children and young people to break the cycle of disadvantage. Before we started these conversations we also gathered some data and spoke with 400 low and middle income families about their experience of the cost of living today. And they have also been shaped by a panel of experts and leaders in social justice.

In the coming months NCOSS, together with our members, will be calling on the NSW Government to bring these actions to life. Working together, we can make a real difference and build a future in which the life outcomes of children in New South Wales aren't determined by their socio-economic status and the poverty they experience in childhood.

¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2011). *Headline Indicators for Children's Health, Development and Wellbeing*. Canberra

² Ibid

³ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2011). *Headline Indicators for Children's Health, Development and Wellbeing*. Canberra

⁴ Considine, G. & Zappala, R. (2002). The influence of social and economic disadvantage in the academic performance of school students in *Australia. Journal of Sociology*, 38(2): 129-148.

⁵ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2011). *Headline Indicators for Children's Health, Development and Wellbeing*. Canberra: AIHW.

⁶ Aboriginal Disability Network (2007). *A report on community consultations with Aboriginal people with disability and their associates throughout NSW, 2004-2005*. Sydney: Aboriginal Disability Network, p. 26-27.

Recommendations Summary

1. HEALTH

Children get the healthiest start in life

Recommendation: Invest an additional \$25 million per year in the state-wide roll-out of a nurse-led home visiting program for vulnerable families during the first two years of a child's life.

Outcome: Children grow up in safe and nurturing home learning environments.

2. EDUCATION

NSW children deserve a better funding early education system

Recommendation: The NSW Government should increase investment in early childhood education and care (ECEC) so that all children experience a quality early education from the age of three. As a first step, the NSW Government should increase funding from \$193 per child to \$600 per child, bringing NSW into line with other States.

Outcome: Children develop to their full potential.

3. SOCIOECONOMIC

Children and young people have healthy food to eat

Recommendation: Invest \$3.2 million in a Healthy Eating: Healthy Living Schools Fund to support schools in specific locations fund programs such as school breakfasts and other healthy food initiatives.

Outcome: Children and young people are healthier and achieve better educational outcomes.

4. CONNECTEDNESS

Children and young people are connected to their families, friends and communities

Recommendation: Invest an additional \$15 million per annum in activities and programs that ensure children and young people are connected to their families and communities.

Outcome: Children and young people are safe, secure and happy.

5. HOUSING

Children and young people have a safe and secure place to call home

Recommendation: Ensure children, young people and their families can access affordable housing, by investing an extra \$711 million to increase social and affordable housing stock in NSW, reduce homelessness and properly maintain existing housing stock.

Outcome: Children and young people live in stable and secure housing.

1. CHILDREN GET THE HEALTHIEST START IN LIFE



Recommendation

Invest an additional \$25 million per year in the state-wide roll-out of a nurse-led home visiting program for vulnerable families during the first two years of a child's life.

What's the issue?

We know that the environment into which a child is born can have huge impact on their health, developmental and social outcomes.⁷

While the first years of a child's life are a time of great joy, for many families – especially those experiencing poverty and disadvantage – it can also be a tough time, and stressful.

But often, those families most in need of support are the least able to access it. They may have had bad experiences with the service system, be ashamed of asking for help, or face logistical barriers to accessing services.⁸

Too many vulnerable families are therefore falling through the gaps in the service system in the first years of their child's life. This is a missed opportunity to identify issues early and prevent potentially serious issues from escalating.

Nurse-led home visiting programs have been shown to have a range of benefits for children and their families. They can lead to better pregnancy outcomes, support mothers to breastfeed for longer and improve women's experience of motherhood. Ultimately, research has shown that nurse home visits can improve a child's health and developmental outcomes and help cultivate a safe and nurturing home environment.^{9,10,11}

Some home visiting programs already operate in NSW; for example the NSW Sustaining Families Program and the Australian Nurse Family Partnership Program. However, these are only available in a small number of locations, and not all vulnerable families can receive support.

Outcome: Children grow up in safe and nurturing home learning environments.

Headline Indicator: A decrease in the proportion of children developmentally vulnerable on two or more domains in the Australian Early Development Census.

Premier's Priorities:

- Protecting our kids
- Reducing Domestic Violence

⁷ Heckman, J (2008) "The case for investing in disadvantaged young children" In Big ideas for children: Investing in our nation's future (pp. 49-58). Washington, DC: First Focus.

⁸ McDonald, M., Moore, T.G. and Goldfeld, S. (2012) "Sustained home visiting for vulnerable families and children: A literature review of effective programs" Prepared for Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth Parkville, Victoria: The Royal Children's Hospital Centre for Community Child Health, Murdoch Childrens Research Institute

⁹ Kemp et al (2011) "Child and family outcomes of a long-term nurse home visitation programme: a randomised controlled trial", Archives of Disease in Childhood, available at <http://adc.bmj.com/content/early/2011/03/23/adc.2010.196279.short>

¹⁰ Early Childhood, MECSH Trial Outcomes. Available at <http://www.earlychildhoodconnect.edu.au/home-visiting-programs/mecsh-public/mecsh-trial-outcomes>

¹¹ Australian Nurse-Family Partnership Program, Evidence of Program Effectiveness. Available at <http://www.anfpp.com.au/proven-results/evidence-of-program-effectiveness>

Action Needed:

Expand existing nurse-led home visiting programs to ensure full coverage across the state, beginning with locations with high concentrations of disadvantage. These programs should:

- Be evidence-based and community driven,
- Build on the success of existing programs, including the Sustaining NSW Families program and the Australian Nurse Family Partnership Program in Aboriginal communities,
- Be tailored to the family's individual needs and circumstances, and be sensitive to their cultural expectations,
- Have multiple entry points in addition to the routine screening of mothers during pregnancy,
- Ensure monitoring and support is provided where domestic and family violence is suspected or disclosed,
- Link the mother to community and specialist services, including psychologists and drug and alcohol workers if required,
- Take a strengths-based approach to skills development.

2. NSW CHILDREN DESERVE A BETTER FUNDED EARLY EDUCATION SYSTEM



Recommendation

The NSW Government should increase investment in early childhood education and care (ECEC) so that all children experience a quality early education from the age of three. As a first step, the NSW Government should increase funding from \$193 per child to \$600 per child, bringing NSW into line with other States.

What's the issue?

We know that high quality early childhood education and care enhances a child's developmental outcomes, and is especially beneficial for vulnerable children.

But while children experiencing poverty and disadvantage are the most likely to benefit from high quality early education, they are the least likely to access it. And Aboriginal children have even less chance of a preschool education, with an attendance rate of only 60%. For many families, cost prevents children attending education in the early years¹², and in NSW we have some of the highest preschool fees in Australia.

Children from low income and at risk families should be able to access free early education services to ensure they do not miss out.

While there is some targeted support for vulnerable children, without a strong universal system many children from disadvantaged backgrounds fall through the cracks. And here in our state, the NSW Government invests less in early

Outcome: Children develop to their full potential.

Headline Indicator: An increase in the proportion of three and four year olds in NSW attending quality preschool programs.

Premier's Priorities:

- Better education results

¹² Brennan, D (2013) *Review of NSW Government Funding for Early Childhood Education*. NSW Government.

childhood education than any other state or territory. This means less access, higher fees, and less opportunity for vulnerable children. In rural and regional areas, the problem is even worse.

And the work to increase the proportion of NSW students in the top two NAPLAN bands needs to start in early childhood.

An overall increase in investment is needed to ensure all children can access high quality early education services, and that NSW ceases to be the worst performing state in terms of investment in early childhood education and care.

The action needed:

The NSW Government should:

- invest an additional \$500 million in early education and care so that preschool is affordable for all families,
- provide free early childhood education to children experiencing poverty and disadvantage,
- work with early childhood educators to promote the benefits of early childhood education to all families in NSW.

3. CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE HEALTHY FOOD TO EAT

Recommendation:

Invest \$3.2 million in a *Healthy Eating: Healthy Living Schools Fund* to support schools in specific locations fund programs such as school breakfasts and other healthy food initiatives.

What's the issue?

For children and young people in families experiencing poverty and disadvantage, a healthy diet is often out of reach. Some children are going to school hungry, others struggle with obesity, and still others experience both. A complete lack of food (such as breakfast), or a poor diet generally can affect daily energy and concentration levels, and longer term health and wellbeing outcomes.



Going hungry is a common experience for children living in poverty. We know that 16% of emergency relief clients report that their children skipped meals, 38% were not eating enough, and 8% experienced severe food insecurity almost every week.¹³ This not only impacts their health, but also their education: Foodbank estimates that the average student loses two hours of learning term per day when they come to school hungry.¹⁴ And research shows that children from low-income households are more likely to be obese.¹⁵

We also know that high school age young people are even less likely to eat breakfast. More than a quarter don't eat breakfast, largely due to poverty, peer and family eating behaviours, bullying, dieting misinformation and body image.

We know that food programs at school improve attendance and behaviour, and therefore educational outcomes.¹⁶ And schools can play a role in ensuring students get the fuel they need to ensure they are strong learners, and learn about healthy eating for life.

The action needed:

Create a *Healthy Eating Healthy Living Fund* to support youth and community services partnering with schools in targeted locations to address identified student needs and:

- Encourage healthy eating and create opportunities to address poor nutrition,
- Involve students in developing and rolling out the programs,
- Draw on strengths within the school and broader community,
- Are tailored to the cultural and linguistic make up of their community,
- Provide opportunities to link students to other services that meet their needs.

Outcome: Children and young people are healthier and achieve better educational outcomes.

Headline Indicator: A reduction in overweight and obesity rates amongst children and young people experiencing poverty and disadvantage

Premier's Priorities:

- Tackling childhood obesity
- Better educational results

¹³ Anglicare (2012) "When There's Not Enough Food To Eat", Sydney

¹⁴ Foodbank (2015) "Hunger in the Classroom", available at <http://www.foodbank.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Foodbank-Hunger-in-the-Classroom-Report-May-2015.pdf>

¹⁵ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2014) "Australia's health 2014" Australia's health series no. 14. Cat. no. AUS 178. Canberra: AIHW

¹⁶ Foodbank (2015) "Hunger in the Classroom", available at <http://www.foodbank.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Foodbank-Hunger-in-the-Classroom-Report-May-2015.pdf>

4. CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE ARE CONNECTED TO THEIR FAMILIES, FRIENDS AND COMMUNITIES



Recommendation

Invest an additional \$15 million per annum in activities and programs that ensure children and young people are connected to their families and communities.

What's the issue?

All children and young people – regardless of where they live or who they are – should feel safe and

connected to their communities. Yet many report feeling isolated and unable to access the recreational activities that are critical for their development and sense of belonging.

How children and young people spend their time has a major impact on their development and socialisation. Participation in programs like PCYC and other youth activities can foster healthy behaviours, including reducing aggression and alcohol and drug use. By supporting communities and families, we can also prevent harm, and intervene early to give children and young people the support they need.

Current investment is not meeting the needs of children and young people and coverage across the state is patchy. And many children and young people are falling through the cracks and not getting the help they need before a crisis.

FACS is currently reviewing programs via its Targeted Earlier Intervention Reform process. While we know that these programs make a difference, there is no new or increased funding proposed as part of this process. In fact, funding for prevention and early intervention¹⁷ has eroded. As a result, many issues are not being identified early.

The under-resourcing of programs focussed on families and communities is increasing pressure on more intensive and costly interventions and undermining the child protection system.

The action needed:

We need to focus more of our effort and resources on prevention, so we can avoid crises. The NSW Government should, over the next four years, increase investment in programs for children, young people, families and communities by \$15 million per annum, in order to:

- Provide children and young people with activities in their communities that they choose, and services that they need, taking into account access issues such as transport,
- Support Aboriginal community controlled organisations to meet the needs of Aboriginal children and young people in their own communities,
- Ensure funding for services matches the needs and aspirations of communities, and fills regional and service system gaps,
- Prevent crises occurring and reduce the number of children and young people in out-of-home care.

¹⁷ Early intervention in this context means interventions that occurs early in the life cycle of an issue, and encompasses support for families before they are deemed at Risk Of Significant Harm.

5. CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE A SAFE, SECURE PLACE TO CALL HOME



Recommendation:

Ensure children, young people and their families can access affordable housing, by investing an extra \$711 million to increase social and affordable housing stock in NSW, reduce homelessness and properly maintain existing housing stock.

What's the issue?

Children and young people need stable and secure homes in order to thrive. But housing is unaffordable for families in many places in NSW.

More than half of low to middle income families are experiencing housing stress, and this is a major driver of child poverty here in NSW. Families are living in properties that urgently need maintenance, and thousands of people experience homelessness every night.

Young people are among the most likely to experience homelessness: up to 43% of Australia's homeless population is under 25, and 20% are aged between 15 and 24¹⁸.

Homelessness greatly affects health and education outcomes, with children and young people who experience homelessness more likely than others to find themselves homeless as adults.¹⁹

Housing is not an isolated problem: Insecure and unstable housing can lead to frequent moves, making it harder for children and young people to stay engaged in education and access the services they need.

And we know that homelessness and a lack of affordable housing makes the rest of the service system unworkable.

The action needed:

NCOSS applauds the NSW Government's decision to partner with NCOSS and Infrastructure Partnerships Australia in the creation of the Social and Affordable Housing Fund, as a critical kick start to the investment that is needed to make housing affordable for NSW families. But there are other smart policy and budget choices we can make to ensure children, families and young people experiencing poverty can access secure affordable housing that meets their needs, including:

- Continue delivery of the \$1 billion Social and Affordable Housing Fund.
- Work with service providers, business and the community to find new and innovative ways to fund and deliver new social and affordable housing stock, beyond the Fund.
- Invest \$317 million to address the maintenance backlog in the public housing system.

Outcome: Children and young people live in stable and secure housing.

Headline Indicator: An increase in the proportion of young people who have successfully transitioned from specialist homelessness services to long-term accommodation.

Premier's Priorities:

- Building Infrastructure
- Reducing Domestic Violence
- Reducing Youth Homelessness
- Faster Building Approvals

¹⁸ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2013), Specialist Homelessness Services 2012-2013. Cat no. HOU 27. Canberra.

¹⁹ Flatau et al (2013) Lifetime and intergenerational experiences of homelessness in Australia

- Invest an additional \$5.2 million per annum in tenancy advice and assistance to ensure families and young people in the private rental market can sustain their tenancies
- Support young people experiencing homelessness by committing long-term funding for the full six-year homelessness service reform period, guaranteeing at least \$389 million in funding beyond the four-year forward estimates.
- Increase housing supply, particularly at the affordable end of the market.
- Implement *Inclusionary Zoning* to ensure that developers and builders set aside a share of affordable housing in any new construction project

