

CHILD POVERTY

A CALL TO ACTION

July 2020



Commissioner for Children and Young People
Western Australia

Commissioner for Children and Young People WA

The Commissioner is the independent person who works closely with children and young people, their families, community and government to make WA a better place for 0 to 18 year-olds. The Commissioner reports to the WA Parliament.

The Commissioner undertakes projects, research, publishes reports, and hosts events to highlight specific aspects of children and young people's wellbeing. Using research and the other evidence available, the Commissioner seeks to positively influence legislation, policy, services and attitudes.

Recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People

The Commissioner for Children and Young People WA acknowledges the unique culture and heritage of our Aboriginal peoples and the contributions Aboriginal peoples have made and continue to make to Western Australian society. For the purposes of this publication, the term 'Aboriginal' is intended to encompass the diverse cultures and identities of the First Peoples of Western Australia and also recognises those of Torres Strait Islander descent who call Western Australia home.

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Foreword

While most Australian children and young people are faring well, too many continue to experience significant poverty and disadvantage.

While the experiences of Western Australian (WA) children are the focus of this paper, they are reflective of what is a growing national issue.

First-hand accounts from children affected by poverty range from being deprived of the basics, to experiencing homelessness or seeing their families under stress. Some do not have access to nutritious food, adequate clothing, shelter or technology. Others live in chaotic or unsafe homes, where parents are struggling to make ends meet and may be unable to provide nurturing spaces where their children can thrive. For others, poverty means being socially excluded - bullied for looking different, or sidelined when they can't undertake the same activities as their peers.

All of these experiences shape a child's developmental trajectory.

Poverty has a profound impact on the life of a child that can extend well beyond childhood. WA has rising numbers of children entering out-of-home care and the justice system. There are also clear links between child poverty and youth suicide rates, disengagement from school, and longer-term physical and mental health issues, indicating that many children and young people are continuing to fall through the cracks.

As the world continues to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen the devastating impact on vulnerable members of our society. For children experiencing poverty, measures to curb the spread of the virus, such as online learning and mobility restrictions have potentially placed already vulnerable children at greater risk of harm. Unstable living arrangements, family conflict, poor health and job losses only exacerbate these issues further.

There is both a moral and economic imperative to act.

Child poverty is a critical issue and yet there is no agreed national definition of child poverty; nor is it measured on a regular basis by any government department. I, along with my Children's Commissioners and Guardians counterparts in other states, believe we need a national approach to measuring and ultimately reducing childhood poverty.

A key priority of the WA Government is to improve the health and wellbeing of WA's children in the early years. One of the most effective ways to achieve this is to develop a whole-of-government child wellbeing strategy, with clear targets and measures to address socio-economic disadvantage and child poverty.

All children and young people have the right to be healthy, happy, learning and safe. These rights are enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which Australia is a signatory. As a nation, we have also committed to achieving the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, the first of which is ending poverty in all its forms by 2030.

The COVID-19 pandemic presents us with a valuable opportunity to make a difference. As we move into the recovery phase, it is more important than ever to ensure that vulnerable children do not fall further through the cracks.

With strong leadership and a clear plan, effective action can be taken at all levels of government and the community. We must undertake new ways of working, build community capacity, and deliver the solutions required to achieve real change.

Colin Pettit
Commissioner for Children and Young People WA

Approximately 598,000 children and young people,

including 40,000 Aboriginal children and young people, live in Western Australia...

...representing 23% of the state's population.




MORE THAN
2-IN-5

children in single parent families live in poverty.



56% of WA children under 10 presenting to homelessness services are Aboriginal.

In 2016,
1,949 WA CHILDREN aged 0 to 18 years were homeless — more than half were under 11.



WA children and young people aged 0 to 14 years living in remote and very remote areas were **10 times more likely to be homeless** than those in the metropolitan area.



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Almost one-half of all WA children and young people seeking homelessness assistance need help due to

family and domestic violence.



Almost one-third of WA children who live in very disadvantaged communities are developmentally vulnerable when they enter school.



Children and young people living in disadvantaged communities are

7 times more likely

to be involved in the child protection system and the youth justice system.



RATES OF HOSPITALISATION ARE **75% HIGHER** FOR CHILDREN LIVING WITH SOCIAL DISADVANTAGE.



Children living with social disadvantage have **higher rates of mental disorders.**

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WHO SOMETIMES GO HUNGRY

are 2 times more likely to not like school, 3 times more likely to have poor health and 4 times more likely to have low life satisfaction.



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A focus on child poverty

Defining and measuring

Like many other jurisdictions internationally, there is currently no agreed definition or measure of poverty in Australia.

The most common approach in Australia is to measure poverty using international poverty lines, set at 50 per cent and 60 per cent of median income. People living below these lines are deemed to be living in poverty.¹

While income approaches are useful, poverty is about more than income. Material deprivation, ("missing out on the things that most young people see as essential"²) is also a significant contributor to poor outcomes, particularly for children and young people.³ Many international approaches to defining and measuring child poverty now recognise that disadvantage is multi-faceted⁴ and that a more useful definition should capture the different aspects of poverty and deprivation, such as access to income, material basics, health, education, housing and food.⁵

There are calls for a national definition of poverty to be set⁶, underpinning efforts to set appropriate targets and adequately measure our progress. A national definition should take into account the multi-faceted nature of disadvantage, and child poverty should be defined in a manner consistent with these approaches.

This requires reframing the notion of poverty. While parents ultimately have the task of providing for their children, reducing child poverty is not just an individual responsibility; there is an obligation as a society to address it.⁷ The focus needs to not only be on mitigating the impacts but also addressing its causes.

Drivers

Child poverty can be experienced in many and varied ways, from a brief episode triggered by a particular event, or sustained over a number of years.

Certain family circumstances and inequities in society can increase the likelihood of children experiencing poverty. Low household income is a major component,⁸ but other factors can also contribute. These include but are not limited to:

- parental separation leading to sole parenting
- family and domestic violence
- parental involvement in the prison system
- drug and alcohol misuse
- parents with a mental health issue
- a parent/s with problem gambling and associated debt
- work and income – limited employment opportunities and low pay
- low educational achievement
- housing cost and availability
- cost of living pressures (such as food, transport, essential services and utilities)
- having poor health (including mental health and disability or chronic medical conditions)
- having limited access to services.^{9,10}

Certain groups also experience greater rates of poverty, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and those from culturally and linguistically diverse or migrant communities.¹¹

Impact on child development and wellbeing

There is now a sizeable body of evidence to suggest that poverty is one of the most significant contributors to vulnerability for children.¹²

Child poverty experienced in the first five years is understood to be a particularly strong predictor of poorer outcomes in later life.¹³ Ongoing hardship and material deprivation can expose children to chaotic, high-stress living environments. Research confirms that the experience of child poverty and living with this 'toxic' stress has the ability to impede healthy brain development, disrupting the biological foundations of learning, behaviour and health with lifelong damaging consequences.^{14,15, 16}

Families who experience poverty and other disadvantage, such as food insecurity, poor nutrition, or limited social support are also less likely to have the capacity and resources to provide a safe and enriching home environment for their children to thrive.¹⁷

The experience of child poverty and living in high-stress environments can manifest in socio-emotional difficulties, behavioural problems, lower self-regulation and elevated physiological markers.¹⁸ Without support and intervention, it can also set a trajectory of significant hardship throughout the life-course to such an extent that children who experience poverty are at greater risk of coming into contact with the justice system and entering out-of-home care, becoming disengaged from school or achieving poor outcomes, and experiencing poorer physical and mental health outcomes, including premature death.¹⁹

Aboriginal children and young people continue to be overrepresented in these measures.

WA research has also shown that children in 'working poor'²⁰ families show no improvement in their development from four to eight years, consistently remaining six months behind their developmentally enabled peers.²¹ As an example, low family income status has been identified to co-occur with other risks, such as low parental education levels, which combined act as a barrier to parent-child book-reading; crucial for young children's literacy development and lifelong learning.²²

Children and young people's perspectives

Children's perspectives on poverty highlight the complex and inter-related experiences and causes of child poverty, which is broadly consistent with the literature.

The Commissioner has consulted thousands of children and young people since the office's inception, hearing first-hand accounts from children affected by poverty. These range from a lack of money for basic needs, experiencing homelessness and seeing their family under stress.

These accounts highlight how the experience of poverty commonly manifests for children and impacts on their health, development and wellbeing.

"I got cut off Centrelink for eight weeks, and I basically had to steal, I stole the whole time I was pregnant, it was horrible and I, like, I don't have a criminal record like, I'm like generally a good girl but like, I had to do it to survive." 16 year-old

"Well most of it was having to break the law, stealing food and stuff cos that's the only way I could survive at the time." 18 year-old

"I'm struggling with diet, not enough money, I have \$100 a fortnight, sometimes less, after phone is paid." 15 year-old

"Both my parents work hard because dad says things are not cheap no more. I get scared because dad says it's going to get harder to get a job because nobody wants to give Aboriginals work. He has two jobs and I hardly see him, which makes me sad..." 11 year-old

"A lot of family struggle about rent, food bills. So [kids] try and help their family like stealing... it's not good, you know." 16 year-old

"How the hell are you supposed to get somewhere if you don't have anything or anywhere to go? I feel trapped." 13 year-old

"People don't help them to get their basic needs and wants so they go out and do it themselves. But otherwise, they just be sleeping on the streets, with nothing, only their clothes. That's why they just do crime in general, for survival, or the result of people, you know of racism, or family issues, family problems, you know, relationship problems between friends." 18 year-old

"...even though I was very young, I went through enough misery to last a lifetime. First we didn't have anywhere to live, after when I started school everybody teased me, I didn't have any friends, my accent was different, I was an outsider. I didn't belong." 16 year-old

Children and young people also have a sound understanding of the drivers of poverty and some of the measures that could be taken to address it:

"I think we should help the homeless people like give them homes, money, food, clothes and all this stuff will make the homeless people have a better life." 10 year-old

"...there isn't that many jobs that give out enough money to families and for people to be off the streets and be able to have a good and fun life." 10 year-old

"I would include more opportunities and support for children who want to go to school but can't afford to buy basic school supplies..." 17 year-old

"[We need] more houses for more people because [there's] not enough houses for everyone." 10 year-old

"Supporting families, making sure the families know how to give [young people] the life they deserve." Young person

Commissioner for Children and Young People's Speaking Out Survey 2019

The Speaking Out Survey was developed to address the clear need for stronger data on children and young people's wellbeing in WA that is informed by the views of children and young people themselves.

Their voices are critical in developing a cohesive response across government portfolios and the non-government sector and monitoring their experiences over time.

Almost 5,000 children and young people from across WA took part in the inaugural survey, which is due to be repeated in 2021.

The key findings highlight some important issues. The data showed that one-in-ten students do not always have enough food to eat at home and nearly one-half of female high school students do not always feel safe at home.

Consistent with national and international child poverty and material deprivation research, SOS19 also showed a correlation between poverty and wellbeing indicators, with those students who experienced material deprivation also rating their general health and life satisfaction as lower, as well as being less likely to enjoy school.²³

The results and data from the Speaking Out Survey form a unique and robust information source. This information is readily available and can be used by government and non-government agencies to guide policy development and decision-making, with a particular focus on children's views and experiences.

The COVID-19 pandemic

COVID-19 has caused sudden and unforeseen changes to the lives of children and young people worldwide. For many in WA, this has been their first experience of significant upheaval to everyday routines and being physically isolated from family members, friends and support networks. While only some WA children and young people have been directly impacted by COVID-19 as the result of the illness or death of an important person in their life, almost all will have been impacted by the steps taken to protect our community from the spread of this virus. Although the scale of the COVID-19 pandemic is unprecedented, research shows that epidemics, natural disasters and other traumatic world events have similar impacts on the lives of children and young people.

The Commissioner has heard directly from over 800 children and young people during the pandemic, with some expressing concerns about job losses and the impact this will have on their family's financial situation.

Research²⁴ indicates some vulnerable groups of children and young people have been, and will continue to be, at greater risk as a result of the pandemic. This is particularly the case for children experiencing poverty or living in low income families; where it might not be safe at home, where families have limited access to educational resources and other material basics, or have been impacted by unemployment or job losses. As Australia moves into the response and recovery phase, it is important to ensure the particular supports children and young people require are provided and remain accessible. While the pandemic has had a devastating social and economic impact, it has also brought sharply into focus child poverty and disadvantage, and has created an opportunity to comprehensively address these root causes.²⁵

Strategies to address child poverty

Strategies to address child poverty need to take into account the many important factors that influence a child's wellbeing, such as a loving and supportive family, a safe and secure place to call home, and access to quality healthcare and education. These are all strong preventative factors.

The role of parents and carers cannot be understated, and they must be supported to provide their children with the experiences and environments which nurture the development of high self-esteem, provide positive role models and assist children to cope with adverse life experiences and stress.²⁶

It is the collective responsibility of national, state and local governments and communities to implement the range of measures required to address child poverty, and to foster safe, nurturing environments with the resources, supports and opportunities children need to thrive.

Child Wellbeing Strategy

- At a state level, the way agencies, services and the community engage and build relationships with children, young people and their families should be guided by a whole-of-government child wellbeing strategy.
- The strategy should include a resourced implementation framework with clear outcomes, timelines and agency responsibilities, and be underpinned by a robust process of child impact assessment.
- The strategy should prioritise:
 - investment in targeted, early intervention for children, young people and families who are vulnerable
 - developing models of engagement that identify children and families who experience multiple forms of adversity
 - provision of support that build family and local community capacity to provide a nurturing environment for children.

Child impact assessment

- Policy and strategy development should be underpinned by a process of child impact assessment. This will ensure that potential impacts on children and young people are carefully considered early on in policy development and other processes undertaken by government.
- The Commissioner's Child Impact Assessment Guidelines should be used to assess the impact of any proposed legislation, policy or strategy on the rights, interests and wellbeing of children and young people.

Child Poverty Reduction Bill

- At a national level, there is a need to develop a Child Poverty Reduction Bill. Informed by work undertaken in New Zealand, the aim of a bill in Australia would be to achieve a sustained reduction in child poverty, and improve government accountability and transparency through public reporting against reduction targets.
- Defining, outlining and agreeing on a means of measuring child poverty is critical and should guide the development of the Bill. This measure should incorporate the different aspects of poverty and deprivation, such as access to income, material basics, health, education, housing and food.

Social and economic support for children and their families

- Both national and international evidence shows that effective early intervention and family support, as well as measures to reduce economic disadvantage can significantly reduce the impact of child poverty.²⁷ For WA, this means improving the service system to more effectively respond to the needs of vulnerable children and young people. Access to quality early years education and care, family and parenting support, essential services and community amenities are all critical.
- Adjusting the rate of Newstart Allowance (currently the JobSeeker Payment) will help to reduce income poverty, which in turn can help break the cycle of entrenched disadvantage that many children live with.²⁸ However, while measures to address economic disadvantage are important, they alone are unlikely to achieve a reduction in child poverty.

Infographic references

Approximately 598,000 children and young people, including 40,000 Aboriginal children and young people, live in Western Australia, representing 23 per cent of the state's population.

Commissioner for Children and Young People WA 2020, [Profile of Children and Young People in WA – January 2020](#), Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, Perth

Up to 17% of WA's children and young people are living below the poverty line.

Miranti R et al 2018, [Child Social Exclusion, Poverty And Disadvantage In Australia](#), NATSEM, Institute for Governance and Policy Analysis (IGPA), University of Canberra.

More than 2-in-5 children in single parent families live in poverty.

Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) and University of NSW, *Poverty in Australia 2020: Part 2, Who is Affected?* <http://povertyandinequality.acoss.org.au/poverty/>

In some remote areas of WA more than 60% of children live in poverty.

Miranti R et al 2018, [Child Social Exclusion, Poverty And Disadvantage In Australia](#), NATSEM, Institute for Governance and Policy Analysis (IGPA), University of Canberra.

56% of WA children under 10 presenting to homelessness services are Aboriginal.

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), [Specialist Homelessness Services Collection data cubes 2011–18](#), SHSC Demographics data cube

In 2016, 1,949 WA children aged 0 to 11 years were homeless – more than half were under 11.

Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2011 and 2016, [Census of Population and Housing: Estimating homelessness](#), Table 4.6 Homeless Operational Groups and Other Marginal Housing, WA – Sex by age of person – 2016

WA children and young people aged 0 to 14 years living in remote and very remote areas were 10 times more likely to be homeless than those in the metropolitan area.

Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2011 and 2016, [Census of Population and Housing: Estimating homelessness](#), Table 4.6 Homeless Operational Groups and Other Marginal Housing, WA – Sex by age of person – 2016

Almost one-half of all WA children and young people seeking homelessness assistance need help due to family and domestic violence.

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), [Specialist Homelessness Services Collection data cubes 2011–18](#), SHSC Demographics data cube

Almost one-third of WA children who live in very disadvantaged communities are developmentally vulnerable when they enter school.

31.7 per cent of children who live in communities classified in the lowest Socio-economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) category (Quintile 1) are considered developmentally vulnerable when they enter school. Source: Custom report from WA Department of Education [unpublished]

Children and young people living in disadvantaged communities are 7 times more likely to be involved in the child protection system and the youth justice system.

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), *Child Protection Australia 2017-18*, p. 29; AIHW, *Youth Justice in Australia 2018-19*, Table s2

Rates of hospitalisation are 75% higher for children living with social disadvantage.

Rate of potentially preventable hospitalisations is 75.0 per cent higher for children who live in areas with the highest risk of child social exclusion than among the 20.0 per cent who lived in areas with the lowest risk. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) 2014, [Child social exclusion and health outcomes: a study of small areas across Australia](#), Bulletin no. 121, Cat No AUS 180, AIHW.

Children living with social disadvantage have higher rates of mental disorders.

Children in low-income families, with parents and carers with lower levels of education and with higher levels of unemployment have higher rates of mental disorders. Lawrence D et al 2015, [The Mental Health of Children and Adolescents: Report on the second Australian child and adolescent survey of mental health and wellbeing](#), Department of Health, Australian Government, p. 26.

Children and young people who sometimes go hungry are 2 times more likely to not like school, 3 times more likely to have poor health and 4 times more likely to have low life satisfaction.

Commissioner for Children and Young People Speaking Out Survey 2019 (SOS19) data tables [unpublished]

References

¹ ACOSS and UNSW, Research and Insights into Poverty and Inequality in Australia [website], retrieved May 2020 at <http://povertyandinequality.acoss.org.au/poverty/#poverty-definition>

² Saunders, P., Bedford, M., Brown, J., Naidoo, Y., Adamson, E. 2018, *Material deprivation and social exclusion among young Australians – a child focussed approach*, Sydney: Social Policy Research Centre, UNSW Sydney, p. 127.

³ Expert Advisory Group on Solutions to Child Poverty 2012, *Solutions to Child Poverty in New Zealand: Evidence for Action*, Children's Commissioner. New Zealand.

⁴ Saunders, P., Bedford, M., Brown, J., Naidoo, Y., Adamson, E. 2018, *Material deprivation and social exclusion among young Australians – a child focussed approach (Snapshot)*. Sydney: Social Policy Research Centre, UNSW Sydney.

⁵ Canada's Market Basket Measure (which is now Canada's Official Poverty Line); UNSW/Smith Family's Child Deprivation Index. New Zealand recommends that at least five measures are implemented, including a fixed-line measure; a moving-line income measure; a material deprivation measure; a severe poverty measure; and a measure of poverty persistence; see also New Zealand's Child Poverty Monitor, which includes a number of measures in addition to income [website], retrieved May 2020 at <https://www.childpoverty.org.nz/>

⁶ Community Affairs Reference Committee 2020, *Adequacy of Newstart and related payments and alternative mechanisms to determine the level of income support payments in Australia*, Commonwealth of Australia, p. xi. https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Community_Affairs/Newstart_relatedpayments/Report

⁷ Pietropiccolo, T. 2019, *A Childhood without poverty?* Paper presented to the Family and Relationship Services Australia (FRSA) National Conference, Hunter Valley, NSW.

⁸ Davidson, P., Bradbury, B., Hill, T., and Wong, M. 2020, *Poverty in Australia 2020: Part 1, Overview*, Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS), Sydney; Expert Advisory Group on Solutions to Child Poverty 2012, *Solutions to Child Poverty in New Zealand: Evidence for Action*, Children's Commissioner, New Zealand.

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- ⁹ Expert Advisory Group on Solutions to Child Poverty 2012, *Solutions to Child Poverty in New Zealand: Evidence for Action*, Children's Commissioner. New Zealand.
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- ¹² Commissioner for Children and Young People 2019, *Improving the odds for WA's vulnerable children and young people*, Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, Perth
- ¹³ Commissioner for Children and Young People 2018, *"It's like a big circle trap": Discussion paper on children and young people's vulnerability*, Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, Perth
- ¹⁴ Piccolo LR and Noble KG 2019, [How can poverty shape children's brains? Insights from a cognitive neuroscience perspective](#), *Handbook of Infant Mental Health*, Guilford Publications, p. 158.
- ¹⁵ Centre for Community Child Health 2009, [The Impact of Poverty on Early Childhood Development](#), The Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne.
- ¹⁶ Monks, H. 2017, *The impact of poverty on the developing child* [CoLaB evidence report], Telethon Kids Institute, Perth WA; Monks, H. 2018, *Engaging with children's voices on poverty: The value of their lived experience* [CoLaB evidence report], Telethon Kids Institute, Perth WA
- ¹⁷ Commissioner for Children and Young People 2019, *Improving the odds for WA's vulnerable children and young people*, Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, Perth, p.19
- ¹⁸ Barnett M 2008, [Economic Disadvantage in Complex Family Systems: Expansion of Family Stress Models](#), *Clinical child and family psychology review*, Vol 11, No 3.
- ¹⁹ Commissioner for Children and Young People 2019, *Improving the odds for WA's vulnerable children and young people*, Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, Perth, p. 19
- ²⁰ 'Working poor' families are described in the Improving the Odds report (p. 19) as "employed, cash-poor time-poor families who tend to live in disadvantaged areas".
- ²¹ *ibid*
- ²² Commissioner for Children and Young People 2019, *Improving the odds for WA's vulnerable children and young people*, Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, Perth, p.9
- ²³ Findings from the Commissioner for Children and Young People's SOS19 include:
Children who experience food scarcity are:
- 2.1 times more likely to not like school
 - 3.1 times more likely to describe their general health as fair or poor
 - 4.2 times more likely to rate their life satisfaction as low.
- Children who feel they don't have the right kind of clothes to fit in are:
- 1.7 times more likely to not like school
 - 3.0 times more likely to rate their life satisfaction as low.
- ²⁴ Save the Children 2020, *What are we doing about COVID-19?* [website], retrieved June 2020 at <https://www.savethechildren.org.au/our-stories/what-are-we-doing-about-covid-19>; The Smith Family 2020, *Pandemic presents a chance to address the root causes of disadvantage* [website],

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²⁸ Community Affairs Reference Committee 2020, *Adequacy of Newstart and related payments and alternative mechanisms to determine the level of income support payments in Australia*, Commonwealth of Australia, p. xi. https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Community_Affairs/Newstart_relatedpayments/Report; Davidson, P., Bradbury, B., Hill, T., and Wong, M. 2020, *Poverty in Australia 2020: Part 1, Overview*, Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS), Sydney; WACOSS 2019, *Cost of Living 2019*, Western Australian Council of Social Service, Perth, Australia.