

Child Poverty

Vote [1] No More Poverty

Fact Sheet September

Some facts:

- poverty does exist in Australia today
- it exists at an unacceptably high level
- poverty robs children of opportunities to develop their potential.

Poverty is a structural issue

This means that there are problems with the way our society is organised, so that even those poor who try hardest cannot lift themselves, by themselves, out of poverty. The structural sources underlying child poverty have remained the same in 30 years: a labour market that does not deliver the jobs or the wages to allow parents to raise their children in dignity and an income security system that does not provide an adequate income floor to protect children from the vagaries of the economic cycle.

- We cannot rely on economic growth alone to have a major effect on reducing the rate of child poverty - social investments are crucial.
- A job is no longer a guaranteed escape from poverty for families with children.

Governments can make a difference

To achieve a sustained reduction and virtual end to child poverty, governments need to adopt a comprehensive, multi-pronged social investment strategy which includes:

- Income security to protect families with children regardless of the ups-and-downs in the economy;
- Significant steps to improve the availability of jobs with living wages and decent working conditions;
- A well-designed system of early childhood education and care;
- Affordable housing that meets the needs of families, including the most vulnerable.



UnitingCare NSW.ACT Child Poverty

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UnitingCare Burnside

In Australia today poverty is a harsh reality. Most experts agree that around 15% of Australian children – that's 750,000 children – live in poverty.

As well – the proportion of children living in poverty is increasing. Figures rose from 14.3% in 1990 to 14.9% in 2000.

Such levels of poverty are not inevitable.

In the United Nations 2004 Human Development Index for OECD countries (the 'developed' nations), Australia had the second highest percentage of people living below the income poverty line.

Poverty not only involves having a low income, but also having no or limited access to essential services such as education, health and welfare.

This is of real concern to the Uniting Church. In its 2004 pre-election resource, No security without justice, the UCA National Assembly states :

All Australians are entitled to a decent life, secure from the fear of poverty. This includes access to appropriate food, clothing, housing, health care, meaningful work, quality education and the opportunity to participate in society. It also includes opportunities for rest and recreation. All people should have the chance to share justly in the abundant

UnitingCare Burnside, the NSW Synod agency for child and family services, is committed to raising public awareness about the extent of child poverty in Australia, and to campaigning to make a difference. Burnside know what poverty means for children, young people and families, because it works with these people every day.

One young person involved with a Burnside program described what it's like:

"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..."

Missing out on access to quality education is a significant aspect of poverty. A parent told Burnside, *"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."*

Poverty robs children of opportunities to develop their potential....

- Children living in poverty can suffer poor health
- Poverty makes it harder for children to learn
- Children living in poverty can suffer poor mental health or behavioural problems
- Children living in poverty are at a higher risk of suffering abuse or neglect
- Child poverty leads to social exclusion

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The economic conditions contributing to child poverty in Australia are not unique to this country. Many industrialised European countries have been experiencing unemployment, wage inequalities and low wages. Yet countries with strong social security systems have been able to protect children and families from the impact of labour market inequalities.

Vote [1] No More Poverty is a joint campaign of the Uniting, Anglican and Catholic Churches and their social services agencies to raise awareness among community members and our political leaders about the growing rate of poverty, particularly in the lead up to the Federal election.

The **Vote [1] No More Poverty** campaign is asking all those in its networks to help to make politicians and political candidates aware of this issue. In the lead up to the next election the campaign is asking people to take the time to write to or call politicians and political candidates and ask: "Do you care about poverty in Australia and what will you do to address it?"

Suggestions for Action

- Get together with others in your congregation and local community who are concerned about this issue and organise a public forum to 'meet the candidates' and hear their answers to these and other questions.
- Write your own letters to local candidates seeking their response to questions on these issues.
Ask them: What steps will your party take to reverse the current level of child poverty in Australia?
- Also ask: 'Will your party commit to a national strategy to address poverty, in the interests of the 750,000 Australian children living in poverty?'

The National Council of Churches in Australia, of which the Uniting Church is a member, has suggested these questions for candidates and parties in the lead up to the next federal election:

- How will your party's policies improve the situation for those whose lives are less rich and more trouble than they need to be?
 - How will your party's policies enhance people's opportunities to participate as fully as they wish in society or improve their life chances?
 - How will your party's policies help transform struggling communities? Or place more pressure on them?
- How will you and your party work to build a less divided Australia?

cont

Poverty affects parenting too, making effective parenting even more difficult than it normally is:

- Poor parents get less relief from the constancy of child rearing
- Are less able to afford baby-sitting or quality child care
- Tend to experience higher levels of family conflict and disruption
- Are more likely to live in sub-standard housing
- Are less likely to be well-educated

The groups of children most affected by poverty are:

- Aboriginal
- Immigrant groups
- Children with disabilities

The impacts of poverty impose great personal costs on children and families, but also great social and financial cost on the whole Australian community.

In the long term, children living in poverty are at risk of becoming adults living in poverty..... so that a 'cycle of disadvantage' is quickly created.

Public policy can make a difference

The Report of a major Senate Inquiry into 'Poverty and financial hardship' was released in March 2004. It recommended that that a **comprehensive anti-poverty strategy be developed at a national level**, with a commitment to achieve a whole of government approach. This coordinated action would be across policy areas such as employment, health, education, income support, community services, housing and other relevant areas to reduce poverty and poverty of opportunity.

The Report saw that one way to help break the 'cycle of disadvantage' is to provide **quality early childhood education to children living in poverty**. It made several recommendations regarding funding and strategies to achieve better participation in early childhood education. Research shows that programs that combine support, parent education and the modelling of ideas of effective parenting with quality early childhood education, work best. Burnside is committed to advocating for government priority to access to quality child care centres in areas of identified need, and is exploring how access to quality early education can be incorporated in its own work with children and families.

Affordable housing was also noted by the Senate Report as playing an important role in reducing poverty. The Report recommended base funding arrangements for public housing be increased under the Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement, and recommended other measures to develop new public housing stock and improve maintenance of current public housing. It also recommended that the Commonwealth Government develop a national housing strategy in consultation with State Governments, community housing providers, the construction industry and the finance sector.

YOU ARE URGED TO PHOTOCOPY THIS FACT SHEET AND DISTRIBUTE IT WIDELY

Go to the website of the **Vote [1] No More Poverty** campaign:

<http://www.nomorepoverty.org.au>

This website provides a link to information on who is your local candidate/member, and has sample letters you can use. Bumper stickers and T shirts can also be supplied.

Contact the Campaign for information on how to plan a public forum on this issue

[email info@nomorepoverty.org.au](mailto:info@nomorepoverty.org.au)

This sheet updates information available at:

<http://www.burnside.org.au>