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## Is child safety and wellbeing a national priority in Australia?

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Despite decades of evidence of the failure of our service systems to meet the needs of children and young people, we continue to see governments struggling to build the systems *scaffolding* required to support children and their families with complex needs.

Successive generations of researchers, practitioners and advocates join those who came before them, looking for the 'key' that will unlock the required political commitment and cut through to those who need to be convinced.

Depending on your perspective, you might believe that more academic research is the answer, or hearing directly the voices of children will convince decision makers. Or more data, or economic benefit analyses, or program evaluations. Many would argue that appealing to our human rights obligations, including the right to self-determination, will make a difference.

This is the first of two articles arguing that, unfortunately, 'none of the above' alone will work to shift the dial sufficiently on policy reform for children and young people while we continue to face numerous barriers to evidence-based action that are rarely discussed. These barriers include the absence of core government

mechanisms for accountability. These barriers are the 'elephants in the room' that are blocking our ability to move forward with critical reforms.

It's not that nothing is being done. In fact, one of the barriers is the large number of complex and disparate strategies, plans and frameworks currently found at state, territory and Commonwealth government levels. Too numerous to list here, these plans are usually positioned within a departmental portfolio.

Rarely do these plans acknowledge that the *real-life* needs of children and their families are interdisciplinary and span numerous portfolios. The needs of children often sit awkwardly at the intersection of Commonwealth, state and territory jurisdictions. Policy siloes are designed to meet the administrative requirements of government, not the complex needs of human beings.

The recently launched National Early Years Strategy 2024–2034 (Department of Social Services, 2024) is aiming to create better cross-portfolio collaboration, but unfortunately it is focused only on the Commonwealth government.

Some plans aim to achieve cross-jurisdictional collaboration; for example, the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021–2031 (Department of Social Services, 2021). This

framework is a shared commitment by governments across the federation, but it does not address poverty reduction or facilitate a co-ordinated national approach to child protection system reform, because these are not considered to be 'shared' responsibilities across the federation. Yet no-one is asked to explain how the current differences in child protection laws and policies are in the best interests of Australia's children.

The National Agreement on Closing the Gap (Coalition of Peaks and Australian Governments, 2020) does provide a cross-jurisdictional accountability framework that can support policy for First Nations children and young people. Unfortunately, the 'federation' is still frequently used as an excuse for not taking action on reform for child safety and wellbeing. And it's children who are often victims of federation failure and are falling in the gaps.

## What is the evidence from children?

Children and young people have repeatedly provided their evidence of systems failures through many years of consultations by children's commissioners and advocates across Australia.

In government-funded consultations to inform the first Action Plan for the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children, I heard directly from children and their families about what helps to keep children safe and well (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021).

I heard that, in many areas, services are non-existent, or not accessible, or not fit-for-purpose. For example, children and young people, as well as the adults in their families, are unable to get the help they need for mental health issues, drug and alcohol and gambling addictions, and domestic, family and sexual violence.

Children and their families struggle to get the basics; for example, money for housing, food and public transport.

Children want to go to school but some feel they don't 'belong' there. Many First Nations children said they experience discrimination and don't feel safe at school. For too many children, school is not a welcoming or safe environment and schools are not fit-for-purpose for them.

Children and their families say they want help for different members of the family from the same place, so that they don't need to navigate the complex and fragmented services landscape. Community hubs that integrate services across health and education are highly valued.

Children and their families say they are helped by service providers who understand them, who don't judge or discriminate against them. Service providers who listen to them and whom they can trust.

We know from children and their families that service systems are piecemeal and unco-ordinated, and that those who most need help are unable to get the help they need.

## Barriers

In recent years, we have seen numerous tragedies, often followed by calls for another royal commission or inquiry into child protection or youth justice systems.

One of my first objectives as National Children's Commissioner was to try to understand what can be learnt from previous inquiries. With some *pro bono* help, we were able to create a list of the recommendations from a decade of royal commissions and inquiries.

This project culminated in a report prepared by the Australian Institute of Family Studies that analysed 12 years of inquiries held between 2010 and 2022 (Stevens & Gahan, 2024).

In the 61 reports, there were 3005 recommendations with six core recurring and overlapping issues. The repetition of these evidence-based recommendations demonstrates a chronic lack of accountability for action and a lack of a sense of urgency by governments.

The six key recurring themes were:

- Inadequate cross-system information sharing, collaboration and coordination;
- Limited First Nations partnership and self-determination;
- Limited child protection and youth justice workforce capacity and support;
- Inadequate levels of investment, especially in prevention and early intervention;
- Lack of mechanisms for oversight, monitoring and transparency; and
- Limited opportunities for child voice and participation.

These findings should be a wake-up call that stops us calling for more inquiries. Instead, we need to investigate the barriers to implementing evidence-based recommendations from past inquiries, and to take action to overcome these barriers.

A lack of 'political will' has been raised in numerous expert roundtables and interviews. I have been told directly numerous times, 'There are no votes in children'.

It is also apparent that the accountability mechanisms that we use for other social problems are missing when it comes to children. For example, a key barrier to action is the fact that child safety and wellbeing is not a national priority for the federation.

The Federal Relations Architecture defines the key priorities for National Cabinet (National Cabinet, n.d.). Recently we saw National Cabinet convene a special urgent meeting on women's safety, in addition to the existing shared work on gender-based violence across the federation under National Cabinet's key priority 'Women and Women's Safety'. This is urgent and important work that requires whole-of-federation action.

We have had a Cabinet Minister for Women for decades, and we have an annual Women's Budget Statement that provides transparency and accountability for expenditure on women.

These are excellent initiatives that should be applauded. But we have none of this for children. Based on official documents, 'child safety and wellbeing' is not a priority for National Cabinet.

We need to ask 'why'. If National Cabinet's oversight is required for other priority issues, why not for child safety and wellbeing?

Reform requires the political will to systematically identify and address the barriers that block the implementation of evidence-based actions.

Importantly, we need National Cabinet to urgently make child safety and wellbeing a national priority for the federation. This could be done immediately, and it would pave the way for building

co-ordinated national action and greater accountability for reform.

Together, we need to persevere in tackling the multiple complex barriers until Australia's governments take seriously their shared accountabilities for the wellbeing of Australia's children.

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