



Title: *Child Poverty*
Authors: Don Edgar, David Keane and Peter McDonald
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When Peter McDonald from the Australian Institute of Family Studies and I met in late 1987 to plan a conference on child poverty in Australia, we had two intentions. We wanted to use it as an opportunity to publicise the continuing existence of child poverty, some nine months after the Prime Minister's famous election promise and at a time when the Expenditure Review Committee of Cabinet would be meeting to prepare the 1988/89 budget. We also wanted to pull together a panel of speakers who would review what was known about the extent of child poverty in Australia and its consequences. We believed that child poverty was not simply a consequence of unequal distribution and inadequate income support policies but was also caused by lack of employment opportunity, poor housing and inadequate schooling and was likely to lead to poor educational outcomes, less chance of a job, delinquency and suicide, and in later life, poor housing and ill health. We hoped to bring together Australian researchers on these various aspects of child poverty, to make researchers from various professional fields aware of related work in other fields and to encourage more systematic, well-founded research on child poverty as one way of keeping public attention focused on the problem and ensuring continuing government action to address it.

This book is an outcome of that conference. It provides a comprehensive and up-to-date overview of child poverty and its consequences in Australia. Its chapters review what we know of child poverty and in most cases outline existing policies and summarise their impact. In some cases our knowledge base is far better than others.

Five chapters comprise the heart of the book. In these Joan Vipond shows the central impact that the cost of housing has on creating poverty; Neville Hicks and two of his colleagues note how little Australian work has been done on the interrelation of child poverty and health and indicate overseas research that should be repeated here; Bob Connell and Viv White explore the complexity of the inter-relationship between poverty, inequality and education and conclude with the review of Australia's major anti-poverty education programme, the Disadvantaged Schools Programme; Mike Presdee demonstrates how the celebration

of affluence encourages children from poor families to turn to crime and Bettina Cass provides a thorough overview of the relationship between children's poverty, unemployment and joblessness.

These chapters are surrounded by others of considerable importance. Jenny Trethewey from the Brotherhood of St. Laurence draws three cases from a more extensive study that has just been published and shows just what the experience of poverty is like for children and young people from three Melbourne families; Peter Whiteford and his colleagues from the Social Welfare Research Centre outline the debate about alternative ways of conceptualising and measuring poverty and provide initial data from study of household expenditure patterns that shows the effect of low income on people's ability to participate fully in activities (such as holidays) considered normal by the bulk of the population. Helen Brownlee from the Institute of Family Studies and Anthony King from the National Institute of Economic and Industry Research assess the effect of the government's 1987 Family Package on reducing child poverty, both by providing some families with sufficient income to lift them above the poverty line and by reducing the extent to which others' income are below that line. Some 200,000 children will be lifted, marginally, out of poverty but some 400,000 will remain in poverty. Don Edgar begins the book with an important argument: that while the costs of child poverty are borne immediately by those children and their families, we all end up paying the cost, partly because adults who grew up in poverty will draw more on government services than those who did not but, more importantly, the life of everyone is diminished by permitting the continuing existence of poverty. Don Edgar concludes the book with a review of what we know about the cost to parents of children. The Prime Minister and the Minister for Social Security, Brian Howe, both addressed the conference and the text of their statements are included as forwards to the book.

Three points stand out from a reading of this book.

One is the importance of housing costs in contributing to the poverty of families, the cost of renting, but also the cost of purchasing a house makes many families poor, but these costs are much higher in some parts of Australia than

in others and are thus very hard to address in an equitable and efficient manner by a national government.

A second point, well covered by Bettina Cass, is the close connection between joblessness and poverty. In our society for a child to be dependent on an adult who is without work is almost certainly to mean growing up in poverty. It is in this context that the availability of good quality child care becomes important, a point touched on by Bettina Cass, but arguably the missing chapter from this book and from the conference. But, as Cass and Helen Brownlee and Anthony King's analysis of the Family Package shows, even to have a job is no guarantee that the income it provides will be sufficient to lift a family out of poverty.

A third point, alluded to by some and directly addressed by others, is that poverty is a consequence of the significant inequality in the distribution of income and wealth in this country. As Bob Connell and Viv White point out, it is not the case that only children from poor families get a poor deal from our schools. Rather many more children fail to receive the schooling they need and deserve because of the highly unequal way schooling is organised and school resources provided in Australia. Poverty is the most noticeable consequence of inequality, but must be tackled by policies which address inequality as well as poverty alone. In this context, it should be noted that some of the possible ways of increasing the income of people in poverty would have the effect of reducing the income of those not far above the poverty line, whilst leaving the income and wealth of the top twenty percent of our society untouched.

Most of the chapters of *Child Poverty* report research and will be hard going for those not practiced on the complexities of empirically based policy research. However, the complexities can be mastered with a little effort and a little effort will be well rewarded by this important book. No one working in the fields of community services, health, education, employment or social security can afford not to read it.

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