

IMPROVING THE ODDS

FOR WA'S VULNERABLE CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

April 2019



Commissioner for Children and Young People
Western Australia

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 Western Australia's 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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Partners

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About the Commissioner

The Commissioner for Children and Young People is the independent advocate for all children and young people in WA aged under 18 years.

The role of the Commissioner is described in the *Commissioner for Children and Young People Act 2006*. The Act requires the Commissioner to give priority to, and have special regard for, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, and children and young people who are vulnerable or disadvantaged for any reason.

The Commissioner talks to children and young people and others in the community about what children and young people need to be healthy and reach their potential, and considers research and evidence about children's wellbeing.

From this information the Commissioner works with children and young people, their families and government to improve policies, legislation and services that support children and young people's wellbeing.

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Message from the Commissioner

It is a stark reality that despite the intentions and actions of governments and the community, too many Western Australian children and young people continue to experience significant adversity and disadvantage.

This is particularly the case for some Aboriginal children and young people, who as a group experience significantly poorer health and wellbeing than the general population.

Western Australia has rising numbers of children and young people entering out-of-home care and seven per cent of our children and young people are living in poverty. There are various statistics, including suicide rates, disengagement from school and the number of young people in contact with the youth justice system, that show too many of our young people are continuing to fall through the cracks.

The recent State Coroner's Inquest into the deaths of thirteen children and young persons in the Kimberley Region, Western Australia and the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse both add compelling reasons for a renewed approach to our most vulnerable children and young people.

Vulnerability is complex, there is no quick fix and no short-term response will achieve change on its own.

We also know that without addressing the home, school and wider community environments in which children and young people live, programs and services are unlikely to be effective or sustainable.

My predecessors and I have consulted thousands of children and young people on a range of issues and through this work many have highlighted their own experiences of vulnerability.

The voices of the children and young people gathered by my office show us that there are common underlying factors that contribute to vulnerability. These include poverty, family violence, physical, emotional and sexual abuse, neglect, bullying, disability, discrimination and disadvantage.

Over the last year I have taken what young people have told us about their experiences and used these views to shape discussion on what real change we are achieving.

My Vulnerability Speaker Series brought together government, service providers, practitioners and researchers over the last year to share information and devise improved strategies for the WA community.

What I found encouraging throughout this Series was the strong interest from government and non-government leaders to hearing the views of children and young people and a commitment to working towards reducing vulnerability.

In roundtable discussions, leaders were both open and honest in outlining the challenges their organisations face in best meeting the needs of vulnerable children and there was a general acceptance that we need to improve how we work together.

This report is the culmination of the Vulnerability Speaker Series and it contains five key recommendations to government on a way forward to more sustainably address vulnerability in WA.

My key recommendation in this report is to establish a statewide Child Wellbeing Strategy, with a priority on targeted, early intervention for vulnerable children, young people and their families.

This strategy should set clear outcomes and targets that can be measured to ensure we are making progress.

I have made a further four recommendations for government on strengthening oversight, enabling Aboriginal-led solutions and building community capacity.

I will be monitoring and reporting annually the progress towards reducing the number of WA children and young people experiencing vulnerability.

I urge government and the community to act upon this report and its recommendations – our vulnerable children and young people urgently need an improved approach.



COLIN PETTIT

Commissioner for Children and Young People

“I do think I was vulnerable. And in a certain sense I do think I’m still vulnerable...I was out there by myself and I was naked to the world. I was desperately searching for things to grapple on to and slipping. I just needed someone to scoop me up and be like ‘I’m going this way, down here, this is where you’re supposed to go’.”

Young person

The Commissioner's focus on vulnerability

Since its inception 12 years ago, the Commissioner for Children and Young People's office has advocated for the rights and wellbeing of WA children and young people, with particular priority for Aboriginal children and young people and those who experience disadvantage for any reason.

While many children and young people fare well and live in nurturing households and communities, some children and young people who have participated in the Commissioner's consultations have shared their insights and experiences of issues such as violence, abuse and neglect in the home, challenges with mental health, disability or chronic health issues, disengagement from education, involvement in criminal activity and alcohol and drug use.

The persistent disadvantage and poorer outcomes experienced by vulnerable children and young people in WA prompted the Commissioner to focus on vulnerability by exploring current evidence and bringing government, service providers, practitioners and researchers together to generate ideas and discussion aimed at developing more effective responses.

The Vulnerability Speaker Series involved three public seminars with seven expert guest speakers. Videos and slides from the presentations and other resources relating to the Series are available on the

Commissioner's [website](#). Four executive roundtables were held with guests including government ministers and leaders from the government, not for profit and business sectors.

As part of the Series, a one-day forum was held and attended by 72 Aboriginal leaders in WA to seek the views of Elders and Aboriginal people whose work involves supporting the wellbeing of Aboriginal communities, children and young people. The forum included facilitated discussion on creating Aboriginal-led solutions to address the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children and young people in vulnerability measures. Senior Aboriginal leaders who attended the forum made clear statements on what needs to change to improve outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people.

This report on the Commissioner's focus on vulnerability draws together the learnings from the expert speaker presentations, Aboriginal forum and executive roundtable discussions. It concludes with the Commissioner's recommendations to build on the current efforts to improve outcomes for vulnerable children and young people in WA. The Commissioner will monitor progress on these recommendations and continue to work with agencies to advance solutions and advocate on behalf of vulnerable children and young people.

WA'S VULNERABLE CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Children with disability are **THREE TIMES** more likely to experience maltreatment than children without disability

1/5

of children are developmentally vulnerable at the start of their first year of full-time school

7%

of children and young people are living in poverty

732

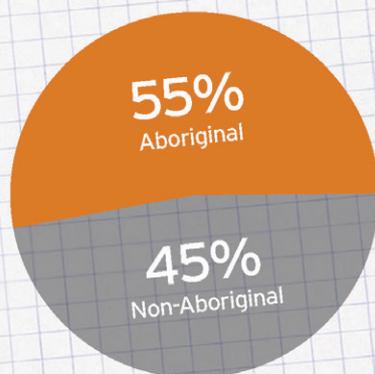
children and young people are under youth justice supervision (community and detention) on an average day



1 IN 5 STUDENTS IS DISENGAGED from school at some level

5,029

children and young people are in out-of-home care



Over 600

young people (15 to 24 years) presented to homelessness agencies in 2015-16



SUICIDE IS THE LEADING CAUSE OF DEATH

for children and young people aged between 13 and 17 years

LGBTI young people are **SIX TIMES** more likely to attempt suicide than their peers of a similar age

Aboriginal children and young people are almost **TEN TIMES** more likely to die by suicide than non-Aboriginal children and young people



Commissioner for Children and Young People
Western Australia

Overview of the research on vulnerability

“...it wasn’t always rainbows and butterflies. My mum and my dad were both drug addicts, my dad was in and out of jail my whole life, there was a lot of domestic violence and mental health issues in the home. So at the age of 14 my Mum took her life and then within that same week my Dad went back to jail so it was me and my brother just living together. He was 16 at the time so we were both going to school and working to try to pay off the mortgage.”

Young person

Risks

No single risk factor on its own causes vulnerability and poorer outcomes for children and young people. Research shows that risks are cumulative and their impact on children and young people vary depending on the child’s age, type of risk and length of exposure.^{1,2}

Children and young people’s probability of experiencing vulnerability is often understood as the interplay between risk factors (circumstances or events that increase the likelihood of poor outcomes) and protective factors (attributes or conditions that moderate risk and promote healthy development and wellbeing). Protective factors include growing up in a loving and safe environment with positive family relationships, living in adequate and stable housing, and having access to quality education and to services that support their healthy development.

Therefore, strategies to address vulnerability must respond to the multiple risks and exposures to harm, as well as build the protective factors that positively influence children and young people’s development and wellbeing.

Drivers

In order to reach their potential, children and young people need to grow up in healthy, safe and nurturing environments, with positive and supportive relationships, and opportunities to learn and participate in their communities. Research indicates the key drivers of children’s development and wellbeing are biology, the expectations others hold and they have of themselves, and the opportunities available to them.³

Biology

Children’s physical, cognitive, social and emotional development is prompted by their biology. While the genes a child inherits from their parents play a significant role, they do not determine the child’s development and future pathways. Children’s experiences in utero and their environments, and experiences and relationships in their early years of life are built into the architecture of the developing brain which influences their physical and mental health, learning capacity and behaviour throughout life.⁴

Expectations

Children's development is prompted by carers' expectations about the capability of their children to undertake tasks, achieve well and assume responsibility. Expectations of children also arise from other members of the child's community such as teachers, peers and extended family. This includes connection to culture and expectations set in a cultural context. When the environments in which children grow up set high expectations of them, they are encouraged and enabled to achieve development milestones. This in turn influences self-expectations and confidence. On the other hand, low expectations of individual children or particular groups of children can constrain their ability to grow, learn and achieve.

Opportunities

The opportunities young children have to engage with responsive caregivers and participate in stimulating activities prompts their socio-emotional and brain development. Opportunities to live in a safe and loving environment and have access to education, health care and employment are also fundamental in shaping the wellbeing of children and young people. Experiences children and young people are exposed to such as sport and recreational activities, meeting new people, and travel to new places are also influential.

Constraints

There are a number of factors that can constrain the development of children and young people and have longer-term impacts on their wellbeing and life outcomes. These include poverty, stress, trauma (from physical, emotional and sexual abuse, neglect, and exposure to family violence) and family dysfunction including environments where alcohol and

drug use, violence, mental health issues, harsh parenting or bullying is present. Social and economic disadvantage can also significantly constrain children's development and wellbeing and may be due to family unemployment, lack of suitable and affordable housing, illness or disability, racism and other forms of discrimination.^{5,6} This can then manifest in social exclusion and inequality, which in turn limits access to high quality child care, health care, schooling and employment opportunities.^{7,8}

Furthermore, families who experience poverty and other disadvantage are less likely to have the capacity and resources to provide a safe and enriching home learning environment for their children.⁹ For example, low family income status, among other factors, has been identified as a barrier to parent-child reading that is crucial for young children's literacy development and lifelong learning.¹⁰

Trajectories

Children and young people who experience significant disadvantage and adversity in their early years can be set on a pathway of cumulative harm. If home, school and community environments do not offer the stability, safety and support these children and young people need to overcome such challenges, they often seek a means of escape that can lead to drug and alcohol use, mental health problems, school exclusion, homelessness and criminal behaviour.¹¹ As they accumulate new traumatic experiences along this trajectory, opportunities diminish, they become further marginalised and their disadvantage deepens.

In the absence of appropriate resources and opportunities at the right time to support vulnerable children and young people, the outcomes of these trajectories can include disengagement from learning, unemployment and mental health issues, as well as more extreme outcomes.

These include sustained homelessness, multiple placements in out-of-home care, repeat involvement with youth justice, suicide or permanent injury following risky behaviour, entrenched vulnerability to abuse and neglect, and early parenthood without adequate parenting capacity or preparedness for adult life.¹²

However, it is the unique and complex mix of biology, expectations, opportunities, and the families and environments children and young people grow up in that shapes their long-term wellbeing and life outcomes. Furthermore, vulnerable children and young people often demonstrate great resilience in the face of adversity and remain active agents in how their life experiences play out. This largely depends on the support and care they receive to persevere in the face of adversity and the opportunities they are given to make meaningful choices about their lives and reach their potential.

Community

Families are one of the most influential factors on the wellbeing of children and young people. Strong family relationships are associated with positive outcomes for children as they tend to provide an environment which fosters the development of high self-esteem, provides positive role models and assists children to cope with adverse life experiences and stress.¹³ Therefore it is essential to build the capacity of parents, caregivers and families so they are supported to provide environments in which their children can be healthy, safe, engaged in learning and have opportunities to thrive.

Features of the support important for families and caregivers include:

- proactive early intervention support
- approaches that break the cycle of family intergenerational involvement with statutory services

- in-reach family support services that are strengths-based and non-judgemental
- tailored, flexible support that meets the needs of each family.

The role of the broader community as well as families in supporting children and young people is also significant. Emerging international research highlights a mismatch of resources to need whereby an estimated one in five (20 per cent) of the most vulnerable children and young people in a community do not receive help from intensive support services.¹⁴

Rather, the majority of children and young people who do receive intensive support services are not those in greatest need.¹⁵ Some children and young people identified as being most vulnerable receive help from society (including family, neighbours, mentors) however, an estimated one in 20 receive no support from services or society.¹⁶ Furthermore, if vulnerability is not identified early enough, there are missed opportunities for prevention or mitigation of risks and service responses may be less effective later.

In addition to targeted services and programs, the broader community, including families, neighbours, school staff and other local community members, also play a significant role in supporting vulnerable children and young people, both to mitigate the need for service intervention early on and later if children and young people fall through gaps in the service system.

Relationships

There is growing recognition of the importance of human connection and relationships for individual and societal wellbeing.^{17,18}

The Commissioner's School and Learning consultation with almost 2,000 WA school students identified quality interpersonal

relationships, with friends, other students, teachers and other school staff, as well as with their families, as the foundation for students' engagement with school and learning.¹⁹ These relationships foster a sense of belonging and of feeling valued, and enable students to develop patterns of persistence and motivation and have access to a support network. This is important in the context of vulnerability as strong engagement with school can provide an important source of early intervention and support for vulnerable children and young people and prevent escalating poor outcomes associated with school disengagement.

The research of Dr Michael Ungar, the Commissioner's 2014 Thinker in Residence, highlighted the crucial role of relationships to mitigate the negative impact of experiences of harm and adversity.²⁰ His research on resilience found children who have a positive, adaptive response in the face of significant adversity had at least one stable, caring and supportive relationship with a parent, caregiver or other adult.²¹ These relationships provide the personalised responsiveness, support and protection that buffer children from developmental disruption due to adversity.

Dr Ungar's research also identified other important factors that support children's positive, adaptive responses when exposed to adversity, which is strongly influenced through the relationships with adults in their lives.

These include having:

- structure and limits and reasonable consequences for their actions
- a powerful identity
- a sense of control over their lives and believing in their own capacity to overcome hardship
- fair and just treatment in their communities
- physical and psychological safety
- a sense of belonging, life purpose and spirituality/culture.²²

Building respectful, trusting relationships with vulnerable children and young people has a powerful impact and can be the circuit breaker that disrupts their trajectory of vulnerability and creates a pathway for positive change.²³ The characteristics of families, community members and workers who engage with vulnerable children and young people are therefore pivotal.

Emerging research into 'relational capability' identifies some of the core characteristics among workers who excel in relationships. These include optimism (a belief that almost everyone is capable of change and that those facing huge challenges are 'victims of circumstance' rather than bad people), empathy, emotional maturity, tenacity, and passion.²⁴ Fostering the development and application of these skills and qualities among workers and the broader community is important to enable people to build relationships with, and effectively support, vulnerable children and young people.

The views of children and young people

Since 2007, the Commissioner has consulted children and young people across WA on a variety of issues and themes. Many of these consultations have focused on children and young people who experience adversity or disadvantage, including those who:

- have disability
- are culturally and linguistically diverse
- identify as LGBTI
- have experience in out-of-home care
- have been involved in the youth justice system
- have experience of homelessness.

This includes priority attention to Aboriginal children and young people who are overrepresented in measures of disadvantage and vulnerability. From these consultations, children and young people's views on the underlying causes of vulnerability and what they need to build their resilience and reach their potential became clear. Their views are presented within the domains of the Commissioner's Wellbeing Monitoring Framework:

- Safe and supported
- Healthy and connected
- Learning and participating.²⁵

Safe and supported

Children and young people clearly articulate the importance of feeling safe in their home, school and community environments, having stability in their home life, and their desire for strong boundaries and lots of support.

"A stable environment to go to. They'll allow you to say what you want to say and not tell you to quiet down; a positive place. Sometimes home isn't the best place to talk about your problems. A physically and mentally safe environment."

Children and young people overwhelmingly identify family and strong family relationships as central and formative in their lives. They commonly discuss the importance of loving, supportive families, being loved and cared for and having respectful and trusting long-term relationships with family.

"Family things are important as they give you good memories, role models, a safe home and support."

"My Mum and my Nan have really been the rocks of my life and they've always stuck like glue and stuck everyone together. Without them I don't think I would have gotten as far, without their encouragement and support."

For young people who lack a stable, nurturing family, sources of support may come from building a relationship with another adult in their lives, such as a teacher

or support worker. Young people have said it is important these adults are able to support them in a way that respects their autonomy.

“I was sent to a leaving care service and I was speaking with a youth worker who really made me believe in myself, in who I was as a person and showed me that I could be what I wanted. I wasn’t this kid in care, I was just [name]. And she’s been in my life for four years now and it’s the closest attachment I’ve ever had to having a parental figure or a mother/daughter relationship.”

Children and young people commonly describe the value of people who provide sources of support and role modelling in their lives, particularly those who set high expectations of them and give them opportunities to achieve. People who spend time and connect with young people, and independent people and supports outside of the young person’s immediate network of family or peers are also highly valued.

“[I] need help from teachers, homework centres, mentors, family and most of all a lot of role models that are showing a lot of young kids like me that they can be somebody.”

“A bit more positive role models... just to help the younger kids get back on track, tell ‘em, sorta like, tell ‘em what the consequences are really. And they need to do stuff with ‘em a lot more – instead of being out on the streets. I think that could take their mind off of stealing, drinking, smoking, and that sort of stuff.”

Healthy and connected

Children and young people express a holistic view of health and wellbeing that includes physical, mental, emotional and social dimensions.

“For me to be healthy I have to be happy, feel safe, feel comfortable, enjoy the people that I’m around, and to be healthy is not only not to be sick.”

“[To have a healthy and happy life, I need] acceptance, inclusion, to be seen as a person with potential and for help to reach that potential.”

“...in hindsight I now see that there were also things that were missing in my life...until I was maybe 14, I felt like I had to be there for my parents instead of my parents being there for me... having that lack of healthy attachment, led to some significant mental health issues for me.”

Children and young people often talk about the importance of feeling connected to their community and to support networks, and feeling a sense of belonging and how this positively influences their wellbeing. In particular, they describe the value of having someone in their lives they trust and feel connected to, whether that be a parent, carer, teacher, Elder, service worker or friend.

“I reckon everyone needs one good friend, one person that you can just tell everything.”

Aboriginal children and young people say Aboriginal culture and traditional values, such as respect for Elders, sharing and being close to family, and connection to country, is of great importance to their identity and wellbeing.



“[Culture] tells me who I am and makes me feel good. It makes me feel like I belong somewhere.”

“For me [what’s important is] learning about my culture and knowing how I relate to it and being able to spend time learning about my culture with my grandmother and family and [to] be shown the different types of things and responsibilities.”

Learning and participating

Schooling has a strong influence on a child’s future pathway into employment and further education and success at school is an important pathway out of intergenerational disadvantage. Children and young people strongly identify the need and value in going to school to get a good education, a good job and a better life. They express a very clear understanding about the connections between a good education and a good quality of life.

“Every kid in the state (should) go to school so they can get a better education and life so when they grow up they can understand themselves and people will respect them.”

“Education [gives you a] better chance in life. Because without it, you won’t get a job.”

Children and young people commonly described disengagement from school as significantly contributing to poor outcomes. Feeling out of place and unwelcome at school, experiencing bullying and discrimination, finding school boring, a lack of support educationally and financially, and suspension or expulsion have all been discussed by young people as leading to disengagement from school and learning.

“For me, a person with a disability, [school] was a terrible, discriminatory experience for me. They did not accept me... People still treat me like I’m worthless. People don’t respect me. People don’t believe in me.”

“At school I’ve been kind of getting bullied. So it’s hard for me cos my grades aren’t that good because I’m worrying about myself being hurt or something, so it’s hard for me. I like school but sometimes I don’t even want to go to school because of it.”

What works for children and young people

Children and young people who participated in the Commissioner’s School and Learning consultation shared a range of ideas on the support they need in challenging times and how this support can be most effectively provided.

Improving education and training for workers

“I think we need more education for the teachers and the principals and the EAs and all the staff. More PDs, more training, more workshops, hands-on workshops about disability just to make sure that people with disability enjoy school and not hate it, and not have a bad experience. I think for me the most important thing is for people to have an open-mindedness, an open attitude, and be very positive, not negative against disability.”

“I think if my mental health was taken more seriously rather than put down to behavioural problems and that I was just acting out, I think I wouldn’t have ended up so unwell or so lost in

myself, and wondering what was going on in my head. I felt like a lost little girl that missed out on that childhood of growing up and being happy. I think I needed to be taken more seriously.”

Building relationships with young people

“I think supporting young people when you are working for the department, under your policies and procedures can be really difficult but that’s when a lot of them stand back and be really, really professional and it’s just...I like to know the person I’m working with a little bit. I don’t want to know if like, you’re married or your personal life, but I want to know something about you like your favourite colour, your favourite food, or something that makes me think you’re another human being, not just someone behind an office chair.”

“Not always by the books and big words in counselling, like across a desk from each other. A lot of kids find that really intimidating. Go take them down the beach and kick a footy or play some basketball or do some yoga. Do some stuff that they get into, that they can get something from as well, instead of making it so clinical.”

Building young people’s autonomy

“I believe that people who want to work with young children, they need to be understanding and empathetic and they have to know that not every child is the same so don’t treat them like they are the same and they all have different problems and, you know, don’t try to enforce your decisions on them. Let them make up a decision on their own.”

“Well first of all they should build relationships, bonding with the kids. They should take an interest in what the kids like and want to do and stuff like that. But after that they should help the kids you know, become independent people.”

Providing more support for families

“Supporting families, making sure the families know how to give [young people] the life that they deserve.”

“To support Aboriginal children and their families, I think that there should be a more clear focus on our culture and togetherness because in Aboriginal culture it’s a real big thing that everyone’s together and everyone is family, that’s our mob.”

Having expectations of young people and creating opportunities so they can build a sense of hope for their future

“...to not give up on us as people even when you might think that there’s no hope. There’s always hope for someone to change. If people give up hope, why should we have hope in ourselves? I struggled on my own, like believing in myself and to have someone else believe in me was what made me think that I could believe in myself.”

“Since I have been in high school, a lot of programs have been like Follow the Dream, tutoring for Indigenous students, it’s like a real family there and it is really nice to be able to be around people who also celebrate good grades and academic excellence.”



Key learnings from the Vulnerability Speaker Series

The Commissioner's focus on vulnerability in 2018 generated learnings, ideas and strategies to inform the development of more effective responses to improve outcomes for vulnerable children and young people in WA. The information was gathered from the contributions of expert guest speakers, government ministers and MPs, and senior representatives from ten government agencies, two peak bodies, three universities, multiple non-government organisations, and senior Aboriginal leaders in WA (Appendix One).

Evidence and ideas from guest speakers

Winthrop Professor Stephen Zubrick 'Vulnerability: risks, predictions, outcomes'

- The key drivers of children's development are their biology, the expectations others hold and they have of themselves, and the opportunities available to them.
- Children develop in place, in context and in time and are impacted by national and global policies and events.
- Avoid focusing too heavily on individual risks of children becoming vulnerable as it places too much responsibility on individuals and does not recognise the systemic and structural influences that contribute to vulnerability.
- Place-based policies and practices are important because initiatives can be tailored to the developmental circumstances of the local child population to address the actual need.

Winthrop Professor Donna Cross 'The lived experience of poverty among children'

- Poverty can have immediate and long-term impacts on children's brain development and health.
- Children who grow up in poverty may have difficulty learning and at school. They may find it difficult to adapt, concentrate, manage their behaviour and emotions, and work with others. This can create an educational achievement gap between poor children and their more advantaged peers.
- Poverty can limit parents' ability to provide consistent and responsive care, and a stimulating learning environment for their child.
- It is important to understand the lived experience of poverty from the perspective of the child – children often describe how poverty impacts their sense of security, friendships, leisure activities, social participation, schooling and aspirations for the future.

Professor Alan Duncan 'Exploring the economic impact of vulnerability to society'

- Approximately 7.2 per cent of all children and young people in WA under the age of 15 years are living below the 50 per cent poverty line (standard poverty measure), while approximately 3 per cent are living below 30 per cent of median income (severe poverty measure).

- Children in single parent families face a far higher risk of poverty. They are more likely to experience financial hardship and material deprivation.
- In Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders have median household incomes 20 per cent lower than other households.
- Markers of emotional vulnerability, exclusion and financial hardship has increased for families with children and young people across the last decade.
- There is strong evidence poverty has a scarring effect on young adults who leave a family home that is under financial distress and adversely impacts their future economic and social outcomes.
- a Child Impact Assessment Tool that every government department has to use in constructing any law or policy to assess it against how it affects children
- a Child Poverty Reduction Bill, introduced in 2018, requiring the government to set and report on three-year and 10-year targets on child poverty levels
- a Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy to drive outcome-based policy and action on children's wellbeing with a particular focus on vulnerable children.

Judge Andrew Becroft
'Better outcomes for NZ's most needy under 18 year olds: what's hot and what's not?'

New Zealand has implemented a number of strategies that are seeking to improve outcomes for all children and young people, but particularly those who experience vulnerability. These include:

- the Oranga Tamariki – Ministry for Children; most of the children and young people referred to the Ministry are living in families with multiple and complex needs
- the *Oranga Tamariki Act 1989* (*Children's and Young People's Wellbeing Act*) which now requires any written decisions to include the child's or young person's views
- the *Vulnerable Children Act 2014* that sets priorities for improving the wellbeing of vulnerable children and young people

Professor Leah Bromfield
'Effective strategies to prevent and address child abuse and neglect'

Some of the implications from the Australian Centre for Children Protection's research into the child protection system in South Australia are the need to:

- build robust mechanisms for oversight of the child protection system
- focus on key prevention strategies including: reducing the pregnancy rates for teens with maltreatment/trauma history; interventions for young parents with trauma histories which are designed to respond to family violence, alcohol and drug use and mental health issues; and delaying future pregnancies for first-time adolescent parents
- provide families who have multiple children chronically involved in child protection with high quality, intensive, culturally competent interventions
- address intergenerational trauma and abuse among children of the families involved in child protection
- reform child protection triage and assessment to move away from an incident-based system to a system that is child and family centred so they can be provided with the right support at the right time.

**Winthrop Professor Helen Milroy
'Intergenerational trauma and
vulnerability'**

- Australia is yet to understand and acknowledge the magnitude of the historical and contemporary trauma experienced by Aboriginal people.
- Anyone whose work involves Aboriginal children and young people (including teachers, workers in child protection, mental health and youth justice) must be trauma competent – better training is needed for all these workers.
- We cannot address the vulnerability of Aboriginal children in isolation from their family, community and culture.
- Pathways to healing that address trauma, grief, powerlessness and incorporate Aboriginal knowledge systems and healing practices are essential to move forward.
- Aboriginal children need strong, safe, enduring relationships with carers and early, comprehensive and collaborative intervention services that build on the strengths of Aboriginal people and culture.

**Mr Mick Gooda
'Re-setting relations and place-based
approaches'**

- There is a need to reset relationships between Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people in order to move forward and create change.
- Service delivery in Aboriginal communities is severely fragmented. Responses must be place-based, designed by people in that community so it is tailored to local circumstances and the community's needs.
- Government needs to decentralise power and delegate decision-making authority to local and regional levels, and not only fund the delivery of services but fund and resource the process of governance for Aboriginal organisations.
- The Bourke community in NSW is an example of good practice. Partnerships between the community and services are based on mutual trust, respect and commitment, and the community requires services to be culturally competent, build the capacity of local Aboriginal people and have an Aboriginal employment strategy.

Discussion themes

The following is a summary of the ideas and evidence from the presentations and the discussions at the executive roundtables and Aboriginal forum in the Vulnerability Speaker Series.

Prioritising children

A core theme throughout all the discussions in the Series was the need for children to be prioritised at the forefront of all considerations and decision-making to ensure their rights and best interests are upheld at all times. The importance of building greater understanding that children's wellbeing is the shared responsibility of the entire community was also highlighted.

Suggested actions

All government departments and service providers need to assess the impact of proposed laws and policies and their programs on the rights and wellbeing of children and young people. WA should develop Child Impact Assessments to ensure the best interests of children are upheld in every policy, program and service.

Poverty

Poverty was consistently raised throughout the Series as one of the most significant contributors to vulnerability among children, young people and families.

There is a strong link between family poverty and a range of poorer outcomes in life, including limited school achievement and lifetime income, lifelong impairments in physical and mental health, and premature death.²⁶ Early childhood is a particularly sensitive period in which economic deprivation may compromise children's outcomes in later life.²⁷ Poverty can affect

the developing brain whereby significant stress from ongoing hardship disrupts the biological foundations of learning, behaviour and health, which can have lifelong damaging consequences.²⁸

Families in poverty are more likely to have limited capacity and resources to provide a safe and enriching home learning environment for their children.²⁹ 'Working poor' families (employed, cash-poor time-poor families who tend to live in disadvantaged areas) are a group recognised as having less time for the care of their children, being less likely to be eligible for, or receive a lower level of, income support, and having less disposable income to divert to child care and developmental resources and opportunities.³⁰

In WA, children in the 'working poor' group show no improvement in their development from four to eight years, consistently remaining six months behind their developmentally enabled peers.³¹ This has important policy implications as it suggests a need to change policies and programs that determine threshold barriers to access support and services in order to redress inequities in family income, enable a more equitable distribution of opportunities for parental education and training, and improve access to high quality early childhood education and care in disadvantaged areas.

The work undertaken in New Zealand to prepare a Child Poverty Reduction Bill was discussed by stakeholders at the Series and suggested as an approach Australia could explore.

Suggested actions

A whole-of-government response to reducing childhood poverty should be considered at a national level.

Trauma

A number of presenters and stakeholders at the Series described how trauma underpins the poor long-term outcomes for many vulnerable children and young people.

Trauma can include physical, emotional and sexual abuse, neglect, exposure to family violence, random violence and abandonment, as well as experiences such as severe illness and bullying, poverty and homelessness. If young people do not have adequate opportunities to receive support and manage their trauma, they may internalise their experiences and create their own means of coping.³² This can result in destructive behaviours such as high rates of drug and alcohol abuse, self-harm, suicide attempts, criminal behaviour and interaction with the justice system, detachment from culture and family support, and disengagement from school.^{33,34}

The findings from the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse highlight the profound and lasting impact of trauma on the lives of victims, in their childhood and throughout their adult lives. This includes the detrimental impacts child sexual abuse can have on a person's mental and physical health, interpersonal relationships, connection to culture, sexual and gender identity, education and employment.³⁵ These interconnected impacts can be experienced at the same time or consecutively as a cascade of effects over a lifetime. For example, many survivors who spoke to the Royal Commission described how they developed addictions after using alcohol or other drugs to manage the psychological trauma of abuse, which in turn affected their physical and mental health, sometimes leading to criminal behaviour and relationship difficulties.³⁶

Suggested actions

All services and organisations that support vulnerable children and young people must be trauma-competent. This means the workforce must be appropriately trained and skilled in trauma-informed practice.

Aboriginal disadvantage

The range of evidence and discussion on vulnerability through the Series highlighted that Aboriginal children and young people are disproportionately affected across all areas of disadvantage.

Despite significant investment and policy commitments, including the Council of Australian Governments' (COAG) commitment to close the gap in Indigenous disadvantage in 2007, there has been little progress in improving wellbeing among Aboriginal children and young people.³⁷ They continue to be overrepresented in vulnerability measures including poverty, out-of-home care, youth justice involvement, homelessness and mental health issues.

Addressing the underlying causes of the poor health and wellbeing in Aboriginal communities is essential to most effectively bring about change, and trauma is an important component of this. Trauma is a pervasive and complex aspect of the lives of Aboriginal people, operating at an individual, collective and community level, with historical and contemporary manifestations.³⁸ Aboriginal people have been exposed to generations of trauma through colonisation, dispossession, assimilation, child removal policies and marginalisation.³⁹ The magnitude and compounding nature of intergenerational trauma experienced by Aboriginal people is still not adequately recognised in Australia. Acknowledging and understanding intergenerational trauma is an essential step in the healing process that is

needed to improve outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people and their families. This requires increased community recognition of the impact of trauma and greater investment in the delivery of trauma-informed care and development of a trauma-competent workforce. Healing processes in communities, which include a focus on addressing intergenerational trauma, are an essential first step.

All support services and approaches to address trauma must embed opportunities to strengthen Aboriginal culture and identity,⁴⁰ and harness the knowledge and practices of Aboriginal communities to provide safe, nurturing environments and holistic care to their vulnerable children and families.⁴¹ The Commissioner has consulted many Aboriginal children and young people in WA and they have consistently described the importance of strong culture and identity to their wellbeing.

Suggested actions

Acknowledging and understanding the intergenerational trauma experienced by Aboriginal people is an essential first step of the healing process that is necessary to improve outcomes for Aboriginal children, young people and families.

All services and programs must build their cultural competency and ensure Aboriginal children and young people's needs are addressed in the context of their family, community and culture.

Aboriginal-led solutions

Senior Aboriginal leaders who attended the forum made clear statements on what needs to change to improve outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people in WA.

Key messages from the leaders:

- Transfer power and responsibility to Aboriginal people and communities

to lead the solutions to improve the wellbeing of Aboriginal children, young people and families.

- Resource Aboriginal community-controlled organisations to deliver services and build community capacity.
- Build policies to drive Aboriginal economic participation and development.
- Advocate for an Aboriginal Commissioner for Children and Young People.
- Programs and services working in the Aboriginal community must be Aboriginal-led, rights-based, client (child) centred, place-based, evaluated and appropriately resourced.
- Mainstream services must build their cultural competence, including trauma-informed practices, to ensure Aboriginal people always have access to culturally safe support.

The statements from the senior Aboriginal leaders at the forum clearly call for new ways of working with Aboriginal communities. This means rather than Aboriginal people being 'engaged' or 'consulted' as 'advisors' or 'co-designers' of services and policies, they are authorised and empowered to own, direct and make strategic decisions about policies, funding and allocation of resources, program/service design, implementation and evaluation.⁴²

The two-page high level summary of issues and solutions raised by Aboriginal people is available in Appendix Two. The full summary report on the Aboriginal forum is available on the Commissioner's [website](#).

The recommendations put forward by Aboriginal leaders align with the WA Service Priority Review's recommendation that government considers the establishment of a formal, upgraded representative voice for Aboriginal people in the State, possibly at regional levels, and to negotiate

agreements with regional Aboriginal groups to progress the economic and social aspirations of Aboriginal people.⁴³ The Review acknowledges that in order to effectively address Aboriginal aspirations and disadvantage there will need to be an adjustment to the internal systems and processes with which the public sector works.⁴⁴

Suggested actions

Begin a process of decentralising power and transferring responsibility to Aboriginal people and communities to lead the solutions and build local capacity to improve the wellbeing of Aboriginal children, young people and families.

Aboriginal leadership is needed at the very top of government as well as recognised representative groups working across WA to influence decision makers.

Place-based initiatives

Participants in the Series emphasised the positive outcomes that can be achieved for vulnerable and disadvantaged families and communities through place-based responses, and provided some best practice examples of these.

Place-based approaches involve "...stakeholders engaging in a collaborative process to address issues as they are experienced within a geographic space, be it a neighbourhood, a region or an ecosystem."⁴⁵ Features of effective place-based approaches to address vulnerability and disadvantage among children and families include:

- coordinated provision of evidence-based prevention and early intervention services to work with young people and families previously disengaged from support services and those from groups considered 'hard to reach'⁴⁶

- invest in each community's social and physical capital, such as physical infrastructure, and activities that enhance social cohesion and community safety and encourage young people to establish connections with their local community⁴⁷
- long-term, consultative and tailored in response to the strengths, needs and aspirations of children and young people and their community.⁴⁸

Importantly, place-based approaches can operate in conjunction with traditional models of service delivery to develop innovative local solutions and facilitate multiagency collaboration.⁴⁹ This can enable service systems and communities to work together to address disadvantage through coordinated and collaborative policies and programs that are responsive to local needs and conditions in each community. The commissioning, design and implementation of integrated place-based service systems requires significant government commitment and resource investment, supported by public and community sector leadership to achieve sustainable improvements.

Suggested actions

Greater investment in place-based approaches is needed to enable communities to design and deliver interventions at a local level to address the needs of vulnerable children and young people and families.

Child-centred approaches

Child-centred approaches to supporting children and young people's wellbeing and addressing underlying causes of vulnerability were consistently emphasised by stakeholders at the Series. Child-centred approaches involve an understanding of the child as a whole and all the different factors that influence their wellbeing. This means

approaches that incorporate their individual needs, views, strengths and capacity, as well as their families and the environments they grow up in.

Ensuring children and young people's environments, in particular the institutions they attend, are child safe is essential. The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse made important recommendations on making communities and institutions child safe through prevention strategies and proposed a set of ten Child Safe Standards.⁵⁰ The Commissioner's work on child safe organisations provides a foundation to support the implementation of child safe principles and practices in organisations in WA.⁵¹ Child safe organisations value and protect children and proactively implement strategies to enhance the overall experiences of children they engage with, balancing the focus on child safety with continued positive interactions and environments that contribute to healthy development.

An important component of child safe organisations is ensuring children are empowered to participate and share their views. This requires organisations to embed processes that incorporate a commitment to listening to children and young people's voices and factoring their views into their decision-making. This includes understanding children and young people's experience of service delivery in order to provide support in the right way to achieve positive outcomes.

Suggested actions

Continue to invest in building child safe organisations. This requires organisations to embed processes that incorporate a commitment to listening to children and young people's voices, factoring their views into their decision-making and empowering their participation.

Early intervention

It was discussed regularly throughout the Series that the most effective approaches to optimise children and young people's development and wellbeing are prevention (preventing problems and identifying needs through universal services) and early intervention (targeted, intensive support for those in need).⁵²

Early identification of vulnerability among children, young people and families is critical in order to target strategies that prevent risks from escalating and accumulating. This requires proactive models of engagement that focus on the very young within families and define risk groupings based on multiple factors to help target strategies that provide timely, cost-effective intervention services to children and families who are most vulnerable.⁵³

Well-evidenced prevention and early intervention services must be better resourced to ensure they are appropriately targeted and most effectively delivered to vulnerable children, young people and families. High quality early childhood programs that focus on maternal and child health, early learning and positive parenting are particularly important as they can build strong foundations for children's wellbeing early on and prevent or mitigate the need for more intensive support services later in their lives.⁵⁴

Encouraging government investment in early intervention can be supported by collaborative research across the public, community and academic sectors to demonstrate the fiscal cost of late intervention.⁵⁵ Such research can identify preventable costs incurred by the public sector for children and young people who go on to become involved with statutory services and provide a platform to advocate for evidence-informed early intervention initiatives.

Suggested actions

Procurement and funding allocation must respond to need and provide balanced provision of services and support to vulnerable children and young people. This means a mix of universal, early intervention, prevention and statutory services, to most effectively support vulnerable children, young people and families.

Service systems

Discussion at the Series strongly focused on the importance of improving the service system in WA to more effectively respond to the needs of vulnerable children and young people.

The structure and funding of support systems often creates fragmented, poorly coordinated delivery of prevention and intervention services to vulnerable children and young people and their families. The multiplicity of intervention services that often do not communicate or collaborate with one another can be overwhelming for vulnerable young people and their families, and they may disengage from services altogether from despair or genuine confusion about what service to access and when. Integrated service systems on the other hand can more effectively use resources to avoid duplication, enable knowledge and resource sharing, lead to long-term solutions and foster a sense of collective responsibility for children and young people's outcomes.⁵⁶

Improved collaboration between service providers and across government agencies has been discussed and proposed across all areas of public service for many years to respond to the failings of siloed, single-disciplinary approaches that have traditionally dominated.⁵⁷ However, highlighting the need for better service integration without providing the mechanisms of how to do this is not enough. There must

be sustained and demonstrative focus on implementing collaborative practice.

Strategies to build a collaborative and integrated service system include:

- a whole-of-government strategy to improve the wellbeing of children and young people that connects strategies and services across the continuum from primary to tertiary
- whole-of-government targets that span individual agency responsibilities and require collaboration and innovation to resolve complex issues⁵⁸
- set outcomes that describe achievements with children and young people and their families and collect and report on data that measure these outcomes
- funding agreements and procurement policies that articulate the way local services must work together to achieve outcomes for children and young people and their families.⁵⁹

Suggested actions

Develop a whole-of-government strategy and associated targets that extend across election cycles to drive collaborative, cross-agency work to improve the wellbeing outcomes of children and young people in WA.

Data sharing

The Series emphasised the need for improved data sharing in WA at two levels: data linkage across government agencies and data sharing at a service and community-level.

Improving the capacity to link and analyse data across agencies assists understanding of complex issues such as vulnerability, and can be a driver to develop new multi-disciplinary approaches to address issues in

the community.⁶⁰ This is important to inform government policy priorities and resource allocation, as well as to enable academic research, via shared datasets, that supports communities' interests. Better access to quality data can also allow government to improve monitoring of service effectiveness and progress in achieving outcomes at a service and individual level.

The WA Government's Service Priority Review identified a lack of clarity in WA on data sharing between agencies which impedes the development of evidence-based policy and the delivery of effective services to the community.⁶¹ The Review recommended WA establishes data sharing legislation, with appropriate protection for personal and other sensitive information.⁶² This was informed by a review of WA's data linkage capabilities by the Data Linkage Expert Advisory Group (commissioned by the Department of Premier and Cabinet), which recommended the development of a whole-of-government data linkage model in WA.⁶³

Stakeholders have expressed the need for improved information sharing across services on an individual level to inform specific service delivery for vulnerable children, young people and families. Improving information sharing at a service delivery level requires comprehensive privacy and data sharing frameworks, and provision of training for employees, and awareness-raising initiatives relating to appropriate data management practices. Furthermore, harnessing the many potential benefits of data use requires building and retaining community trust in how data is managed and used, and building a shared understanding of the benefits that flow from better data access and use, including by consumers themselves.⁶⁴

Suggested actions

Improve data sharing between agencies to enable more seamless delivery of interventions and supports to children, young people and their families.

Outcomes and accountability

Participants in the Series consistently stated the need for long-term targets with meaningful outcomes that extend across political cycles, and for government and non-government agencies to be held accountable for these outcomes. Short-term targets to satisfy election commitments hamper the long-term strategy required to achieve sustainable, positive change for vulnerable children and young people.

Outcomes-based service models can support accountability efforts by ensuring the true impact of services and programs aimed at improving the wellbeing of vulnerable children and young people is measured and monitored and build the evidence base on what works. They can assist programs and services to be oriented towards achieving positive, long-term outcomes for vulnerable children and young people, enable targeted and practical funding and procurement decisions, and ensure there is a balanced spread of services provision to children, young people and families in greatest need.

Setting long-term targets to improve the wellbeing of children and young people must be supported by access to sector-wide data to measure and evaluate whole-of-sector performance and outcomes to more effectively identify and resource priority areas and work with shared direction to improve outcomes for the community.⁶⁵

Suggested actions

Government and non-government organisations need outcomes-based service models to measure and report on children and young people's wellbeing. These outcomes must be monitored and reported on through robust oversight mechanisms.

Independent oversight

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse and other inquiries identify improved independent oversight as an essential strategy to protect and optimise the wellbeing of children and young people.

Greater accountability of the decisions and performance of organisations that provide services to children, young people and families was called for by stakeholders at the Series.

Oversight of organisations that provide services for children and young people, both government and non-government, is a critical accountability mechanism and can contribute to more effective delivery of outcomes-based services. Monitoring of these organisations can improve the transparency of practice and procedure, provide Parliament, government and the public with important information about service standards and performance, and support efforts to direct services more appropriately and foster broad improvements in sector practice.⁶⁶

The Commissioner's oversight mapping work has identified that while WA's network of independent oversight bodies does important work in a range of areas, improvements are needed to ensure:

- mechanisms oversee children and young people and prioritise those who are vulnerable or disadvantaged for any reason
- mechanisms are comprehensive and robust
- the rights and wellbeing of children and young people are protected
- services are safe and fit-for-purpose.⁶⁷

Oversight mechanisms must also include proactive, rigorous examination of the experiences of children and young people, not simply compliance with legislative, policy and practice requirements.

Suggested actions

Government and non-government agencies need to be held accountable for policy decisions and outcomes of service delivery, and therefore comprehensive and robust oversight mechanisms are essential.

Independent advocacy

Advocacy is an important component of a comprehensive system of oversight and accountability. Stakeholders at the Series supported the Commissioner's priority to more effectively safeguard the rights of children and young people through enhanced access to reliable advocacy. It was recognised that proactive, independent advocacy is particularly important for vulnerable children and young people who may have limited capacity or opportunity to participate in decision-making or speak on their own behalf.

It is essential children and young people have access to advocacy that is independent of and external to the services they access, including both individual advocates and systemised support from organisations with independent oversight mechanisms. These advocacy mechanisms must be statutorily independent, adequately resourced, and actively facilitate their participation in decision-making processes.⁶⁸

Individual advocates support and assist individual children to access and navigate services and complaints systems if needed. They also play a role in promoting the interests of individual children, monitoring facility compliance with statutory obligations, conducting research into best practice service provision, and scrutinising pending legislation or initiatives. The Commissioner's oversight mapping highlighted a pressing need for a more comprehensive network of individual advocates in WA to assist children

and young people to access and navigate government and non-government services.⁶⁹

Individual advocacy should be complemented by systemic, broad-based advocacy that serves to promote the best interests of children and young people and encourage their involvement in decision-making that affects their lives.

Suggested actions

Expand advocacy services for children and young people with a focus on building children's capacity to advocate for themselves.

Recommendations

The Commissioner recognises the significant work already underway in WA in response to machinery of government changes, recommendations from the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse and the Coroner's Inquest into the deaths of thirteen children and young persons in the Kimberley region, and that this underpins much of the work to be done to address vulnerability as discussed in this paper.

The way agencies, services and the community engage and build relationships with children, young people and families is central to these responses. In order to ensure children's wellbeing remains at the centre of this work, the Commissioner makes the following recommendations to build on the current efforts to improve outcomes for vulnerable children and young people in WA.

The Commissioner will provide updates on the progress of these recommendations and the actions the Commissioner's own office will undertake.

In recognition of the need for a long-term, sustained strategy, the Commissioner calls on the government of the day to address the following recommendations and report back to the Commissioner in six months on its actions and intentions with a timeline for implementation.

The Commissioner encourages the government to establish mechanisms to involve stakeholders and the WA Parliament to develop responses to these recommendations.

1. Establish a whole-of-government Child Wellbeing Strategy for WA.

The Department of Premier and Cabinet, on behalf of the government, should lead the development of this strategy to set whole-of-government targets to improve wellbeing outcomes among children and young people. Targets should be long-term, extend beyond election cycles and span individual agency responsibilities.

Development of the strategy should be a widely consultative process and draw on the ideas raised by stakeholders who participated in the Vulnerability Speaker Series roundtable discussions and Aboriginal forum, as presented in this report.

The strategy should include a resourced, implementation framework with clear outcomes and timelines. Progress on the outcomes should be measured through robust data and regularly reported on.

The strategy should prioritise and strengthen investment in targeted, early intervention for children, young people and families who are vulnerable. This will require models of engagement that identify children and families who experience multiple forms of adversity and are at highest risk of poor outcomes, and provision of support that builds family and local community capacity to provide a nurturing environment for children and young people.

2. Develop and implement a Child Impact Assessment tool.

The Department of Premier and Cabinet, on behalf of the government and in collaboration with the Commissioner for Children and Young People, should undertake a consultation process to develop and implement a Child Impact Assessment tool. All government agencies should be required to use the tool through, for example, a Premier's instruction. Non-government agencies should also be encouraged to use the tool.

The Child Impact Assessment tool should assess the impact of any proposed legislation, policy or strategy on the rights, interests and wellbeing of children and young people.

3. Develop, implement and resource a comprehensive and rigorous model of independent oversight of services that provide support to children and young people in WA.

The model of independent oversight should:

- oversight all agencies that provide services to children and young people to reinforce a collaborative, holistic view of service responses
- have the best interests of children and young people as its paramount consideration and focus
- prioritise children and young people who are at increased risk of experiencing harm or poorer outcomes
- include a range of mechanisms for oversight that are systematic, proactive, and engage with children, young people and their families to understand the lived experience of policy and practice
- include resourcing for individual advocacy to assist vulnerable children

or young people to access complaints mechanisms and navigate service systems

- ensure all oversight agencies collaborate in the design and implementation of the model
- be adequately resourced.

4. Enable Aboriginal-led solutions.

The government should commit to enabling Aboriginal-led solutions as the model for service design and delivery for Aboriginal communities in WA.

The Commissioner refers the government to the findings from the Aboriginal forum which provides clear statements from Aboriginal leaders on how Aboriginal-led solutions need to be supported and resourced.

Processes to enable Aboriginal-led solutions must include broad engagement with local Aboriginal community members, not only the leaders of a community. This should include engagement with Aboriginal children and young people and families.

5. Investigate, resource and evaluate models to build community capacity to positively support children and young people's wellbeing.

The government should investigate, resource and evaluate models that build community cohesiveness and increase community capacity to effectively support children and young people's wellbeing and ability to reach their potential. This is in recognition that certain areas of children and young people's wellbeing can best be improved through their interactions with friends, family and members of the broader community, and through their participation in the community. The Commissioner undertakes to work with government to progress this recommendation.



Actions the Commissioner will undertake

The Commissioner for Children and Young People will:

- 1. Work with government to develop processes for the introduction of a Child Wellbeing Strategy and Child Impact Assessment tool.**
- 2. Consistent with the Commissioner's jurisdictional role and in recognition of the need for a national approach to this issue, the Commissioner will work with other key agencies to raise the need to develop a Child Poverty Reduction Bill.**

Informed by the work undertaken in New Zealand to develop a Child Poverty Reduction Bill, the purpose of such a bill in Australia would be to achieve a sustained reduction in child poverty, hold governments to account against published reduction targets and require transparent reporting on levels of child poverty.

- 3. Continue to engage with Aboriginal leaders and community to advocate for processes to develop Aboriginal-led responses to the issues and solutions raised in the Aboriginal forum.**

The Commissioner notes the government's current process to develop an office of advocacy for Aboriginal people in WA and will continue to advocate for an Aboriginal Commissioner for Children and Young People.

- 4. Monitor and report on children and young people's wellbeing through the Commissioner's Wellbeing Monitoring Framework.**

This includes data on a range of indicators across the life course which will be analysed to show trends and highlight critical areas of concern. This data can be used by government, organisations and the community to inform advocacy and strategies aimed at improving outcomes for vulnerable children and young people.

- 5. Monitor progress on the recommendations in this report.**

Conclusion

There is both an imperative and an opportunity to do things differently and develop more effective responses that provide the right services and support, at the right time, to improve the lives of WA's vulnerable children and young people.

Setting whole-of-government targets to improve children and young people's wellbeing, resourcing agencies to develop funding and service models that will achieve outcomes, and ensuring children and young people are placed at the centre of all policy decision-making, are important first steps.

New ways of working to build the capacity of children and young people, families and communities to develop and deliver the solutions to the issues they experience are also needed.

Creating safe, nurturing environments with resources, support and opportunities to enable vulnerable children and young people to reach their potential is a collective responsibility and government, the non-government sector and the WA community must work together to take action to achieve real change.

“I think as long as people have the right support, the right network, they can really do whatever they want in the future.”

Young person

Appendices

Appendix One: Vulnerability Speaker Series attendees

Guest speakers

Winthrop Professor Stephen Zubrick,
Telethon Kids Institute

Winthrop Professor Donna Cross, Telethon
Kids Institute

Professor Alan Duncan, Bankwest Curtin
Economics Centre, Curtin University

Judge Andrew Becroft, New Zealand
Children's Commissioner

Professor Leah Bromfield, Australian Centre
for Child Protection

Professor Helen Milroy, former
Commissioner for the Australian Royal
Commission into Institutional Responses
to Child Sexual Abuse, and University of
Western Australia

Mick Gooda, former Australian Human
Rights Commission's Aboriginal and
Torres Strait Islander Social Justice
Commissioner and co-Commissioner for
the Royal Commission into the Protection
and Detention of Children in the Northern
Territory

Dr Carmen Lawrence, University of Western
Australia (facilitator)

Ministers and MPs

Hon Simone McGurk, Minister for Child
Protection; Women's Interests; Prevention of
Family and Domestic Violence; Community
Services

Hon Samantha Rowe, Parliamentary
Secretary to the Minister for Education and
Training

Hon Dr Sally Talbot MLC, Member of
the Joint Standing Committee on the
Commissioner for Children and Young
People

Kyran O'Donnell MLA, Member of the Joint
Standing Committee on the Commissioner
for Children and Young People

Jessica Stojkovski MLA, Member of the Joint
Standing Committee on the Commissioner
for Children and Young People

Senior representatives from government agencies, peak bodies and NGOs

Association of Independent Schools of
Western Australia

Child and Adolescent Health Service

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service

Curtin University

Department of Communities

Department of Education

Department of Health

Department of Justice

Department of Local Government, Sport and
Cultural Industries

Department of Premier and Cabinet

Edith Cowan University

Mental Health Commission

Save the Children

Telethon Kids Institute

University of Western Australia

Valuing Children Initiative

WA Council of Social Service

WA Country Health Service

Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia

Aboriginal leaders

The full list of organisations represented
at the Aboriginal forum can be found in the
'Aboriginal Forum Detailed Summary Report'
on the Commissioner's [website](#).

Appendix Two: High level summary report - Aboriginal forum



Commissioner for Children and Young People
Western Australia

Supporting Aboriginal-led solutions

The over representation of Aboriginal children in all indicators of disadvantage continues to highlight the need for more effective ways of working to address the underpinning issues and improve the wellbeing of Aboriginal children and young people across the state.

The Commissioner's Aboriginal forum was held in August 2018 to provide an opportunity to actively involve Aboriginal leaders in workshop discussions about Aboriginal-led solutions to improve the wellbeing of Aboriginal children and young people in WA.

Seventy-two Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people participated in the closed-session, one-day forum and provided the following recommendations.

Key recommendations for action

- Transfer **power and responsibility** to Aboriginal people and communities to lead the solutions to improve the wellbeing of Aboriginal children, young people and families.
- **Resource Aboriginal community controlled organisations** to deliver services and build community capacity.
- Build policies to drive **Aboriginal economic participation** and development.
- Advocate for an **Aboriginal Commissioner for Children and Young People**.
- Programs and services working in the Aboriginal community must be:

Aboriginal-led - the right of self-determination

Rights-based - rights of the child as well as Aboriginal rights

Client centred - place child at the centre

Place-based - locally identified issues with local solutions

Evaluated and appropriately **resourced**.

"The time of other people speaking for us is over, we want to speak for ourselves."

"Government and the sector need to be willing to unlearn the current ways of doing and re-learn better ways together with the community; we can't keep trying to adapt broken systems."

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Further recommendations

Other recommendations from the forum have been grouped into the following four themes.

<p>Aboriginal leadership and self-determination</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follow through on the implementation of the Uluru Statement and treaty discussions at a state and federal level to transfer power/control and responsibility to the community. • Aboriginal communities need recognised representative groups working across the state to identify issues and solutions at a local level, and to ensure policies and programs recognise the differences in urban, regional and remote contexts. • In addition to having access to decision makers and decision making power/influence, Aboriginal communities need access to localised data and resources to support the issues being prioritised and the solutions being identified.
<p>Cultural context</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Services and programs must address children and young people's needs in the context of their family, community and culture. Include families in discussions and intervene early to support families and provide them with the skills and assistance they need. • Aboriginal people must have access to culture. Connection to culture supports the strength and resilience of "our young people, who are our future". • Be strengths based. Children and young people need the resources and supports around them to see the positives in being Aboriginal. Current practices reinforce negative stereotypes, low expectations and negative relationships. • Education needs to be available to assist all Australians to understand the trauma that has affected and continues to affect Aboriginal people. Appropriate supports to heal the trauma need to be implemented.
<p>Roles of Aboriginal community, government and not-for-profits</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aboriginal community members must collaborate with government and the not-for-profit sector on 'What's next?' Resource Aboriginal people to lead the design, planning, development, funding, implementation and evaluation processes for programs and services in communities. • Increase opportunities for networking, training and capacity building that bring together non-government organisations, government and Aboriginal community to support better outcomes. • Provide independent monitoring and oversight to ensure organisations are held accountable for performing their roles and work seamlessly with other organisations.
<p>Systems and services</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop long-term social policies and programs with targets set across election cycles, to more effectively address the magnitude of the trauma and the complexity of the issues. • Funding should be proportionate to the needs of children and young people and their families. Complex issues require resources and multi-layered solutions, with a focus on trauma informed practice and positive outcomes for the service user and their family. • Funding should reflect the service user. Where there is high representation of Aboriginal people, funding and resources need to be put into Aboriginal organisations, programs and services. • Simplify compliance processes and focus on transparency and measurable outcomes. The need to spend public monies appropriately is acknowledged; there needs to be a balance between necessary compliance and allowing organisations to carry out their work.



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Infographic references

Children with disability are three times more likely to experience maltreatment than children without disability

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1/5 of children are developmentally vulnerable at the start of their first year of full-time school

The percentage of children developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains of the AEDC at school entry was 21.3 per cent.

AEDC domains are: physical health and wellbeing; social competence; emotional maturity; language and cognitive skills (school-based); communication skills and general knowledge.

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7% of children and young people are living in poverty

Approximately 43,985 (7.2 per cent) of all children and young people in WA under the age of 15 years are living below the 50 per cent poverty line (standard poverty measure), while approximately 18,574 (3 per cent) are living below 30 per cent of median income (severe or 'deep' poverty measure).

Duncan A 2017, *Child Poverty in Australia and WA*, Presentation to the Commissioner for Children and Young People, Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre, Perth.

732 children and young people are under youth justice supervision (community and detention) on an average day; 66% are Aboriginal and 34% are Non-Aboriginal

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) Youth Justice in Australia 2016-17 – *Data Tables, Table S134a*.

1 in 5 students is disengaged from school at some level

Hancock K and Zubrick S 2015, *Children and young people at risk of disengagement from school*, Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, Perth.

5,029 children and young people are in out-of-home care; 55% are Aboriginal and 45% are Non-Aboriginal

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Over 600 young people (15 to 24 years) presented to homelessness agencies in 2015-16

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Suicide is the leading cause of death for children and young people aged between 13 and 17 years

Suicide is the most common circumstance of death for this (13-17 years) age group (44%), particularly for investigable deaths, followed by motor vehicle accidents (28%) and illness or medical condition (12%).

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LGBTI young people are six times more likely to attempt suicide than their peers of a similar age

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Aboriginal children and young people are almost ten times more likely to die by suicide than non-Aboriginal children and young people

The age-specific death rate for Aboriginal children and young people aged five to 17 years in WA (20.2 per 100,000) is almost 10 times higher than non-Aboriginal children and young people in WA (2.1 per 100,000).

Australian Bureau of Statistics 2018, *3303.0 - Causes of Death, Australia, 2017, Intentional Self-Harm*, Table 11.12 Intentional self-harm, Number of deaths in children aged 5-17 years by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status, NSW, Qld, SA, WA and NT, 2013-2017.



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