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More for Children: Child-Centred Indicators of Multidimensional Poverty

More for Children Discussion Paper 1

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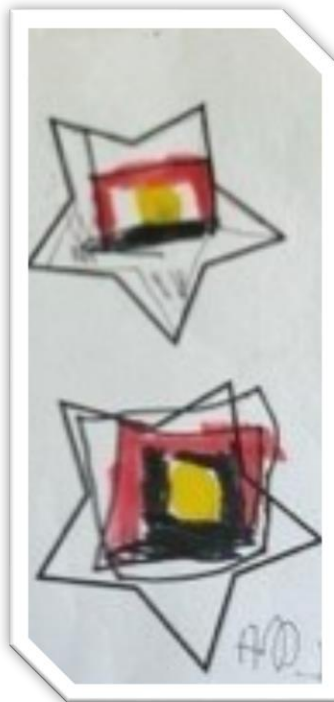
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The Children's Policy Centre acknowledges, celebrates, and pays our respects to the Ngunnawal and Ngambri people on whose country we are situated, and to all First Nations Australians on whose traditional lands we work. Much of this research is taking place on the lands of the Yorta Yorta people and in Pataway, Lutruwita/Trouwana on the lands of the Pakana/Palawa people. We recognise that these lands were never ceded. We pay respect to elders past, present and emerging and acknowledge the ongoing care for and connection to country.

In our research, our aim is to engage genuinely and respectfully with the traditional owners of the lands on which we work, recognising the importance of connection to community and country for all children and young people, but especially for First Nations children and young people.



Drawing by Rar, aged 7 years

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1. Background

Australia is a wealthy country with a high standard of living. The nation consistently ranks in the top ten countries on the Human Development Index. In 2021 and 2022, Australia was ranked by Credit Suisse as having the highest median wealth per adult in the world; in 2023 and 2024, it was ranked second highest. Yet, despite this, and three decades of economic growth and a progressive taxation system, challenges remain in addressing poverty and inequality. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Australians in the top two deciles by income held 64 per cent of wealth, while 13.6 per cent of Australians lived in relative income poverty (50 per cent below median income). Based on 2019 data, the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) and University of New South Wales (UNSW) find that the highest 10 per cent of households had an 'average after tax income of \$5,200 per week; over two and a half times more than the middle 20 per cent (\$2,000) and seven times that of the lowest 20% (\$800)' (Davidson et al., 2024). For people in the bottom two income deciles, there is a 'stickiness', which makes it difficult for individuals and families to move out of poverty (Productivity Commission, 2024).

While Australia does not have an official definition or measure of poverty, either 50 per cent of median income or the Henderson Poverty Line are most widely used. The former draws on the approach of the OECD and is used by ACOSS and UNSW to define and measure poverty through the Poverty and Inequality Partnership. This approach is widely used to measure child poverty in Australia, and the figure of (approximately) one in six children below the age of fifteen living in poverty is drawn from this work (Davidson et al., 2023). Child poverty in Australia – based on this definition – has remained stubbornly and disturbingly persistent over time, ranging between 17 and 18 per cent. Notably, child poverty rates declined temporarily because of the Coronavirus Supplement introduced in response to COVID-19 lockdowns (Naidoo et al., 2022).

Growing up in poverty has deleterious effects on children's experiences, development and learning – it impacts their lives now and into the future. Children who participated in the More for Children research described the ways in which poverty shapes and narrows their lives, creating stress and distress (Bessell & O'Sullivan, 2024a). Poverty has negative impacts on children's academic attainment (Hair et al., 2015; Morrissey et al., 2024) and on health (Lee et al., 2014; Mendes et al., 2011). Growing up in poverty has immediate and lasting effects on children's stress response, brain and immune systems (Schmidt et al., 2021). Vandermoortele (2012) has argued that 'No [poverty reduction] strategy will be more effective and efficient than to give each child a good start in life' (p. 4).

The 14 recommendations of the recent Senate Community Affairs References Committee inquiry into the Extent and Nature of Poverty in Australia are all relevant for child poverty, with four particularly pertinent:

Recommendation 9: The committee recommends that all levels of government invest significantly to ensure that children, especially those from disadvantaged or vulnerable backgrounds, have access to high quality early education and care.

Recommendation 11: The committee recommends the Australian Government conduct a review of Australia’s child support scheme.

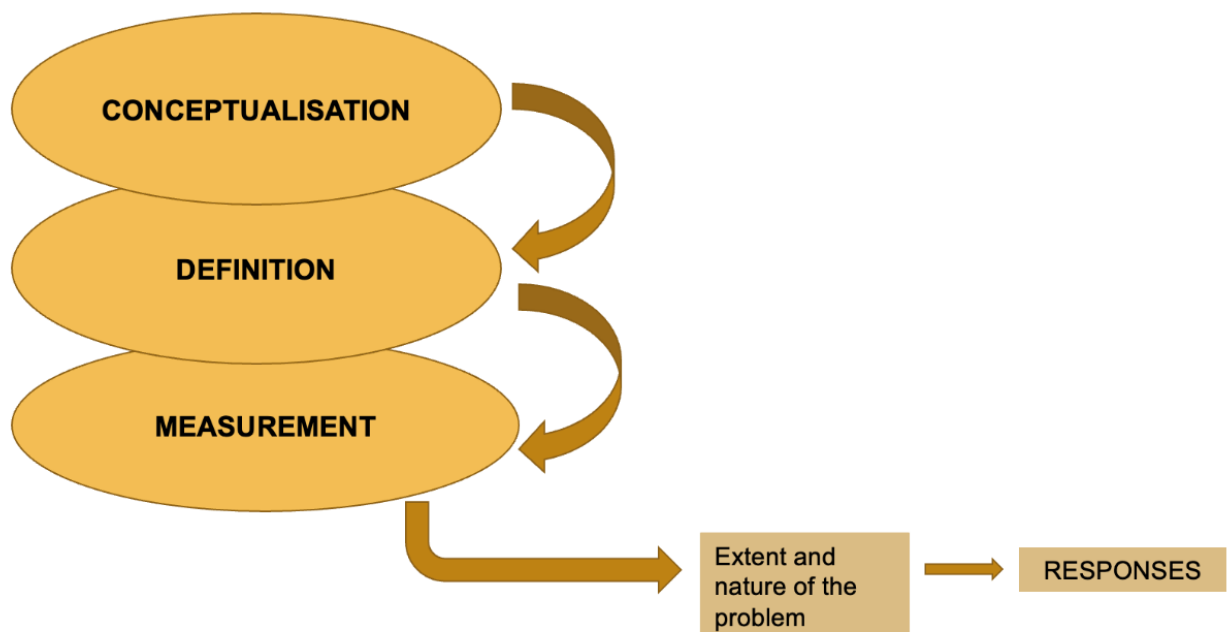
Recommendation 12: The committee recommends the Australian Government continue to invest, and consider increasing investment, in early intervention and place-based initiatives to address child poverty. Any initiatives aimed at supporting First Nations families and children must be led by and co-designed with First Nations people and support existing commitments under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

Recommendation 13: The committee recommends the Australian Government takes action to reduce child poverty.

To take action to reduce child poverty, there is an urgent need for a deeper understanding of the nature of the problem, including a clear definition of child poverty and a means of measuring it. The More for Children research is filling this gap, providing a child standpoint on poverty based on research with children; an understanding of the underlying causes of child poverty; a child-centred definition of poverty; and a child-centred index by which to measure child poverty.

More for Children has been informed by the work of British poverty researcher Ruth Lister (2004), who highlights the need to first conceptualise and then clearly define poverty, before deciding on how to measure and what indicators are appropriate. In working towards a measure, we need to ensure the experiences of those living in poverty are heard and respected.

Figure 1: Conceptualisation–Definition–Measurement



2. More for Children

More for Children is a program of transformative research that aims to understand children's experiences of poverty, in order to act. Led by the Children's Policy Centre at the Crawford School of Public Policy, The Australian National University, More for Children is driven by the vision that all children have material basics, opportunities now and into the future, and strong and supportive relationships. Currently, Australia is far from achieving that vision, with one in six children under the age of 15 living in income poverty (Davidson et al., 2023). More for Children aims to provide a knowledge base for change (Bessell & O'Sullivan, 2024a).

The More for Children research uses a child-centred, rights-based research methodology, put into practice through child-centred research workshops (Bessell & O'Sullivan, 2024b). Our aim is to understand deeply the ways in which poverty shapes and constrains children's lives, the systems and services that need to change, and how we can better support children to be healthy, happy and live free from poverty.

132 children and young people in Victoria and Tasmania aged between six and sixteen years have participated in the research, the majority aged between six and twelve years. Additionally, 39 parents/carers have participated in interviews or group discussions (of these 16 were child-parent dyads). Interviews have been undertaken with 28 key informants.

From our research, and prioritising children's experiences, challenges, hopes and dreams, we have developed a three-dimensional framework for assessing, understanding and responding to child poverty - the MOR Framework.



The MOR Framework comprises three dimensions: material basics, opportunity, and relationships. It has been well received as a conceptual framework. Its potential for understanding the nature and impacts of child poverty and informing place-based initiatives, services, and policy is significant.

A central principle of the More for Children research has been to work in partnership with communities, particularly through local partners, Community Engagement Officers, and Local Advisory Groups. The Framework has been developed with, and has the strong support of, local service providers and community groups.

As further examples of the positive reception of the framework, then Tasmanian Commissioner for Children and Young People, Leanne McLean, spoke during Anti-Poverty week in 2022 and again the following year of the importance of the MOR Framework in bringing change to thinking about child poverty.¹ In Tasmania, the More for Children research has supported the work of Burnie Works' Community Knowledge Collectors and Middle Years projects.² The Local Government Health and Wellbeing Network in Tasmania has responded positively, and we are now engaging directly with

¹ Leanne McLean (2022) Speech at the Launch of Anti-Poverty Week. Available at <https://childcomm.tas.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/FINAL-for-WEBSITE-AntiPoverty-Week-Speech-181022.pdf>

² Information on Burnie Works' Middle Years Project is available at <https://burnieworks.com.au/middle-years/>

additional local government areas. In Victoria, the More for Children research has been included in the State of Greater Shepparton Children Report (2024) and there has been strong engagement from VicHealth, including in the indicators workshop discussed below. On a national level, the Senate Community Affairs References Committee for the inquiry into the Extent and Nature of Poverty in Australia structured the section of their report on child poverty around the three dimensions of material basics, opportunity, and relationships. The More for Children team is now in discussions with other jurisdictions about expanding the use of the MOR Framework.

As momentum grows in Australia for an official definition and measure of poverty, the More for Children research offers a child-centred³ approach, grounded in children's lived experience. It offers the knowledge base to first conceptualise and define poverty from a child standpoint and then work toward measurement. To fulfill the potential of the research and to honour children's experiences, it is now important to identify the indicators that can be used to assess deprivation in each dimension and, when dimensions interact, to measure multidimensional child poverty.

3. Measuring Poverty

As noted previously, in seeking to contribute to discussions around how poverty should be measured in Australia, the More for Children research has been influenced by the work of Ruth Lister. Lister argues powerfully that poverty cannot be effectively addressed unless it is clearly conceptualised and defined, with definitions operationalised through measures (Lister, 2004). Yet often 'the quantification of poverty is divorced from any prior explicit conceptualisation or definition' (Lister 2004, p. 37).

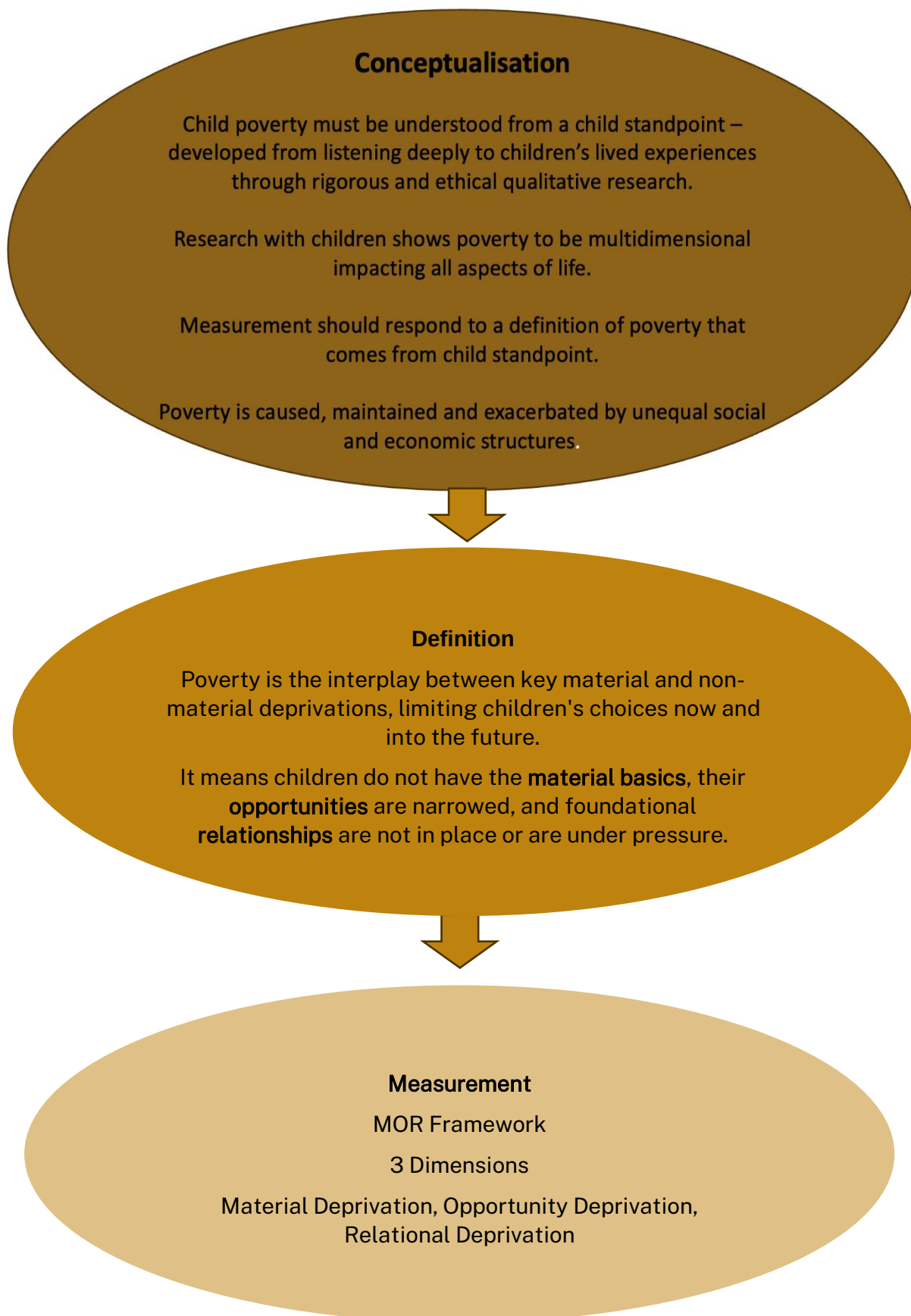
In moving towards a measure of child poverty, the More for Children research has sought to first conceptualise and define it. In doing so, we undertook research with children to centre their experiences, views, and priorities.

The following sections provide an overview of the ways in which we conceptualise child poverty and the child-centred definition we have developed, based on research with children.

Figure 2 summarises the More for Children conceptualisation and definition of child poverty and shows how we are now moving to measurement.

³ Child-centred social policies are those that place children's needs, rights and interests as the primary focus (Bessell and Vuckovic, 2023, 197)

Figure 2: Conceptualising, Defining and Measuring Child Poverty



3.1 Conceptualising Child Poverty

Concepts are often slippery and lacking the clarity that comes with definitions. Yet the way we conceptualise poverty is important; our concepts shape public narratives, policies, and services. Attitudes, values, ideologies, interests and pragmatism all contribute to how poverty is conceptualised, visualised and discussed. Lister (2004) reminds us that dominant conceptualisations of poverty are generally determined by more powerful groups, rather than those with experience of poverty. She highlights the ways in which counting poverty can render those suffering its impacts invisible within technical, academic and policy debates (Lister, 2015). In conceptualising and defining child poverty, we have sought to put children's experiences at the centre; in moving towards measurement, we aim to keep children centred and visible.

Children have long been central to conceptualisations of poverty, but usually as victims or examples of the deserving poor who are worthy of services. Older children and adolescents are often depicted as troublesome rather than deserving. Rarely are children's experiences of poverty considered in developing definitions or measures. Yet a review of sixteen studies of child poverty, published between 2000 and 2017 and focusing on the Global South, highlighted the value of participatory research with children in deepening understanding and leading to more effective assessments of poverty (Bessell et al, 2020). The More for Children research began from the position that child poverty cannot be addressed unless we understand deeply how poverty shapes children's lives, and listen to their experiences, priorities and ideas for action. Earlier research in Australia has demonstrated the power of listening to children and young people's experiences of poverty and of wellbeing (Redmond et al., 2016; Bessell & Mason, 2014; Fattore & Mason, 2007).

Our approach of beginning with rights-based, child-centred research using participatory methods is designed to understand deeply the ways in which poverty impacts children (Bessell & O'Sullivan, 2024b). Unlike a socially perceived needs approach (Abe, 2024; Wright & Noble, 2013; Gordon et al, 2000), our research did not seek to develop a consensus across the general population. Instead, we focused on children's experiences, perceptions of need, and priorities. Moreover, we undertook research with children who have experienced poverty themselves or live in communities where poverty is widespread. In doing so, we relied on relative income poverty to determine the location of the research but also identified communities where income poverty has been persistent despite being subject to interventions, and often conditionality, from government. Here, our approach was shaped by feminist standpoint theory, whereby an individual's position within social hierarchies shapes the ways in which they experience the world (Bessell, 2022; Harding, 2006). Those who are part of a particular social group, such as children, have unique knowledge due to their social position. In focusing on children's experiences, we have recognised not only that children have particular knowledge due to their age and place within society, but children who are experiencing poverty or disadvantage have unique knowledge that is not shared by those with very different life experiences.

The dominant conceptualisation of poverty is a lack of sufficient money to achieve a reasonable standard of living. Peter Townsend's groundbreaking work introduced the concept of relative poverty, whereby income is too low to meet socially recognised needs and take part in society (Townsend, 1979). The concept of relative poverty is

powerful and closely related to social exclusion (Saunders, 2003). Understanding poverty as relative and limiting a person's ability to take part in their society is important in uncovering and understanding the relationship between poverty, shame and stigma (Walker, 2014).

More recently, the concept of poverty as multidimensional has gained support, with dominant approaches to multidimensional poverty measurement strongly influenced by the work of Amartya Sen (Alkire, 2019). For Sen (1985), 'poverty is not just a matter of being relatively *poorer than others* in the society, but of not having some basic opportunities of material well-being – the failure to have certain minimum 'capabilities' (p. 669). Multidimensional conceptualisations of poverty that follow Sen prioritise the centrality of opportunities and individual freedoms to a life free from poverty (Sen, 1999). In operationalising Sen's ideas of capability through the global Multidimensional Poverty Index, three dimensions have been identified as essential in creating the conditions for people to be free from poverty and in assessing poverty: standards of living, health, and education (Alkire, 2005).

While acknowledging the deep and sometimes acrimonious debate between Townsend and Sen, both approaches have been influential in our conceptualisation – and importantly, children's accounts of poverty reflect both. Our research with children highlights the importance of money (income and expenditure/consumption) in conceptualising poverty. Concepts of relative poverty clarify both how poverty is related to inequality and unequal social and economic structures *and* how it creates and maintains patterns of social exclusion. In doing so, poverty limits children's opportunities. Our research with children highlights the non-material elements of poverty, which are especially important. Among these, relationships – and the strain they are placed under in contexts of poverty – are particularly important but rarely included in measures of poverty.

The idea of poverty as multidimensional is reflected in the second target of the first Sustainable Development Goal (SDG1), aiming to end poverty for all. Yet, SDG1 provides little assistance in the definition of multidimensional poverty, deferring to national definitions.

The unit of analysis is also important in conceptualising poverty. More for Children is explicitly child-centred in its overall approach. This does not mean that the household or the community context are considered unimportant; there is an extensive body of evidence demonstrating the centrality of both to children's lives and wellbeing. Yet, measuring poverty at the level of the household alone has several problems (Bessell, 2022). Gordon et al. (2000) have highlighted two problems. First, 'income measures assume that children share the living standards of their family – if the household as a whole is poor, then children in that household must also be poor' (Gordon et al., 2000, p. 32). This is problematic both because some children within families might miss out disproportionately, experiencing greater deprivation than other household members, or, often more common, resources within poor households may be purposefully targeted towards children at the expense of adults. As a result, household level measures, including household income alone, is problematic in its inability to reveal the extent of children's poverty. Second, household income measures are unable to reveal the nature of child poverty and the ways in which it impacts children's lives (Gordon et al., 2000, p.32). To these concerns, we add two more. Household income is unable to

reveal the availability of infrastructure and services, or the extent to which their presence or absence either ameliorates or exacerbates children's experiences of poverty. Household income is also unable to assess the non-material aspects of poverty, which are especially important to children.

More for Children recognises that low and insufficient income is central to poverty, creating its material core – but poverty is more than low income. Our research with children highlights the ways in which poverty impacts all aspects of their lives, including preventing children from accessing the most basic material goods, including a safe home, sufficient food, transport, and warmth (Bessell & O'Sullivan, 2024a; Bessell & O'Sullivan, 2024c; Lang et al, 2024; O'Sullivan et al, 2024). However, ending child poverty demands social investment as well as increases in household incomes. It is unlikely that modest increases in household income would be sufficient to ensure children are living free from poverty. Our research also highlights the drivers of poverty, including unequal social and economic structures, which shape our conceptualisation of poverty.

Based on our research with children, their families and community stakeholders; our analysis of the relevant literature, policies, and measures; and the values that underpin the research and commit us to child-centred approaches, we conceptualise poverty as follows:

Child poverty must be understood from a child standpoint – developed from listening deeply to children's lived experiences through rigorous and ethical qualitative research.

Research with children shows poverty to be multidimensional impacting all aspects of life.

Measurement should respond to a definition of poverty that comes from a child standpoint.

Poverty is caused, maintained and exacerbated by unequal social and economic structures.

3.2 Defining Child Poverty

Based on our research with children, we have developed the following definition of child poverty:

Poverty is the interplay between key material and non-material deprivations, limiting children's choices now and into the future.

It means children do not have the material basics, their opportunities are narrowed, and foundational relationships are not in place or are under pressure.

Our research with children indicates clearly and powerfully that child poverty is multidimensional. Income is important, and a common theme of the research was the hardship created by a lack of money and by financial insecurity and precarious incomes. Yet, while low income matters greatly to children's experiences of poverty, the material core of poverty may relate to factors beyond money, and often interacts with the relational and symbolic factors associated with poverty (Lister, 2004, p.13). As

Spicker (1993) reminds us, 'poverty is not simply a matter of low income; poverty is not "simply" a matter of anything' (p.11). In advocating that child poverty must be understood and defined as multidimensional, we are explicitly highlighting the complexity of poverty, and the need for definitions and measures that seek to understand and respond to that complexity.

Child poverty is, in important ways, distinct from adult poverty. Most importantly, child poverty has both a current and future dimension – limiting children's lives now but also having deep implications for their lives in adulthood. This is not lost on children, and a common fear expressed by children during the research is that their adult lives will be characterised by low income, joblessness, and homelessness. Such fears not only reflect the limited futures that many children consider possible, but they also narrow children's opportunities and expectations during childhood. Child poverty is at the deep and complex core of intergenerational poverty and disadvantage. While adults may also fear for the future when living in poverty, the future impacts of poverty are unique for children given the nature of childhood as a critical stage of human life and development. Moreover, children have very few, if any, opportunities to change their situation themselves. While teenagers who participated in the research described seeking to earn an income to support themselves and contribute to their families, children (defined for the purposes of this discussion paper as below fifteen years) are unable to do so.

As a result of the nature of childhood, child poverty must be defined not only as a lack of material basics, which includes money and material resources *and* essential infrastructure and facilities, but also deprivation of opportunity, including opportunities to participate in the community, to be healthy and have access to health care and education, to play, relax and learn. Too often during the research, children spoke of not having such opportunities

Our research also revealed a dimension of poverty that is often given insufficient attention but is crucial for children: strong and supportive relationships. A powerful theme emerging from our research with children, and also from interviews and group discussions with parents, is the extent to which poverty places pressure on relationships within families. Children and parents shared their negative experiences of institutions and services, which leave them feeling disrespected and often disparaging and make it difficult to seek help when needed. Negative experiences are deepened when social attitudes result in children feeling shame and stigma as a result of their circumstances.

4. Three Dimensions of Child Poverty

Our research with children resulted in the child-centred definition of poverty above. That definition highlights the interplay of material and non-material poverty and the ways in which choices now and into the future are limited as a result. It also identifies three dimensions of child poverty:

- Material deprivation
- Opportunity deprivation
- Relational deprivation

Based on the experiences children shared, the challenges they face, and their hopes and dreams, we developed a child-centred definition for each of the dimensions of child poverty.

Material deprivation occurs when there is insufficient money and material resources to meet basic needs, and essential facilities and infrastructure are inadequate and inaccessible.

Opportunity deprivation occurs when there is a lack of meaningful connection and participation. Children's health, play, relaxation and learning are compromised, now and into the future.

Relational deprivation occurs when family relationships are under pressure or not in place and is maintained and exacerbated when children have repeated negative experiences of key institutions and services.

In the definition of relational deprivation, we use the term 'family' in alignment with the National Early Years Strategy, which states 'Any reference to parents, caregivers and families in the Strategy acknowledges the diversity of people who fulfil these important relationship roles for children in their lives...' (Department of Social Services, 2024, p.6).

Not every dimension of the MOR Framework indicates poverty independently of other dimensions, except material deprivation which is closely related to (but beyond) income poverty. Multidimensional poverty results from the interplay of deprivations across the dimensions. Multiple deprivations across dimensions create a stacking or layering effect, which deepens children's experiences of poverty and severely narrows their future lives.

4.1 The MOR Framework

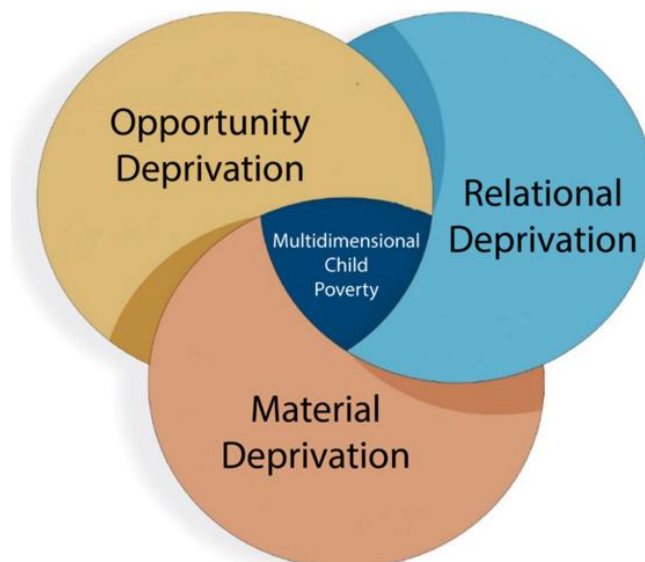
The MOR Framework provides a means of conceptualising, defining and understanding child poverty, based on the dimensions of poverty that are especially important to and for children.

Figure 3 shows each of the dimensions of child poverty, while figure 4 shows how the interplay of dimensions creates multidimensional child poverty.

Figure 3: The three dimensions of the MOR Framework



Figure 4: The MOR Framework



The More for Children research and the resulting MOR Framework is a long-term program of research, aiming to inform transformative change for children, their families and their communities. More for Children comprises several inter-related components; the development of indicators is a crucial component of the research, but also only one element of the overall program of research that aims to understand, reduce, and ultimately end child poverty in Australia, with important implications for redressing child poverty globally.

Currently, the components of the More for Children project are:

Component 1: Foundational Research with Children, Families and Communities

This component has led to the development of the MOR Framework (based on what children have told us), analysis of emerging themes, and the resulting child standpoint.

Component 2: A Bridge from Research to Action – Child-centred, place-based responses

Continuing collaboration with our community partners, this component will be based firmly on the findings from component 1 and the three dimensions identified: material basics, opportunity, relationships. It will also build on the idea of a ‘community jigsaw’, developed through the Children, Communities and Social Capital research (Bessell and Mason, 2014). Through component 2 of More for Children, the jigsaw will be developed to produce a child-centred needs-assessment and child-centred, place-based responses.

Component 3: Measuring Multidimensional Child Poverty

This component is developing candidate themes and indicators for a child-centred index of multidimensional child poverty.

Component 4: Identifying and assessing causes of child poverty

Component 4 will further develop measurement, involving novel approaches that aim to move beyond measuring the experience of poverty (developed in Component 3) to assessing the causes of child poverty, with a focus on the structural and systems drivers that are rarely the subject of assessment.

Component 5: Policy Analysis and Principles

This component involves the development of an information base to inform policies and services to reduce, and ultimately end, child poverty in Australia (with implications for policy and action beyond Australia).

5. Developing the MOR Index

As discussed, the MOR Framework provides a means of conceptualising, defining and understanding the impacts of child poverty and is able to guide the development of policy and services in ways that are child-centred and place-based.

The MOR Index is a child-centred measure of poverty and is one component of the MOR Framework. The MOR Index aims to measure child poverty based on the child standpoint developed in Component 1. As discussed, child poverty is a broad and multidimensional concept. The MOR Framework captures that breadth and complexity and provides the knowledge base for understanding, measuring and acting to end child poverty through transforming systems, policies and services. The MOR Index aims to measure child poverty, recognising the need for clear, simple, unambiguous and measurable indicators. Thus, the MOR Index is necessarily narrower than the MOR Framework, recognising that not every facet of child poverty can – or need be – included in a measure.

5.1 Developing candidate indicators

The following section describes the process that unfolded for Component 3 (above), directed towards the development of themes and indicators for each dimension arising from the More for Children research. This process was designed to identify the interplay between indicators and dimensions, to measure multidimensional child poverty and to respond.

Following the method advocated by the United Nations Development Programme and the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative for developing a national Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI), we developed the universe of indicators (UNDP and OPHI, 2019). This involved the following process:

Step 1: Initially reviewing the relevant literature on measuring child poverty, child wellbeing frameworks across all Australian jurisdictions and in other comparable countries, and measures of child poverty that have been used or proposed internationally.

Step 2: Capturing in an excel spreadsheet all indicators that related to poverty (discarding those that are focused on wellbeing for the whole population and prioritising those that reflected children's feedback in the More for Children research).

Step 3: Developing a long list of candidate indicators and their data sources.

Step 4: Developing a companion list of potential indicators that would ideally be used within the MOR Framework, but for which data are not available (ongoing).

Step 5: Workshopping candidate indicators with academic experts.

The goal of Component 3 was to develop a set of indicators that, taken together, measure the three dimensions of multidimensional child poverty – material, opportunity and relational deprivation. To represent a child standpoint, these indicators needed to be measurements taken at the level of the individual child or household, rather than purely aggregate measures (such as the child mortality rate).

However, the data must allow for aggregation to summarise the overall extent of child poverty in the population. Therefore, to measure multidimensional child poverty, we ideally required a single dataset with information about a representative population of children in Australia over time (whether on a panel or cross-sectional basis).

There was also a need for indicators to adequately represent the three dimensions of the MOR Framework. The More for Children research acknowledges that there is a 'material core' to poverty (Lister, 2004) which is largely but not entirely determined by individual or household income. In our approach, we have followed the MPI and excluded income from our Index. Our intention is not to minimise the importance of income, but highlight the multidimensional nature of child poverty, and the layering effects of deprivation across dimensions; we also suggest a separate, parallel and complementary income measure, to be used in conjunction with the MOR Index. The material dimension of the MOR Framework is most closely aligned with traditional income-based measures of poverty, but it goes further (based on what we heard from children) to include material goods such as food and housing as well as access to adequate facilities and infrastructure. This is based on the premise that to reduce and, ultimately, end poverty more needs to be done than to raise incomes moderately (important as raising incomes is).

In the absence of any material deprivation, a child is not considered to be experiencing poverty. Opportunity and relational deprivation go beyond income and the material core but remain linked to the material dimension. As described above, if there is some material deprivation, then any opportunity or relational deprivation has an additional effect on total poverty. When there is overlap of material and relational, or material and opportunity, or all three dimensions, multidimensional child poverty is created – a deeper experience of poverty. We therefore need data at the level of the individual child or the household level with direct relevance to children, which are capable of measuring these combined effects of the different dimensions of child poverty.

5.2 Perspectives informing indicator selection

The definitions of each dimension of the MOR Framework, discussed above, are drawn from research with children and respond to Lister's argument for clear definition as the basis for understanding, measurement and action. The process of indicator selection began with the understanding that it may not be feasible or desirable for every aspect of the dimension definitions to translate into an indicator, allowing the definitions to be broader than the measure. Further, it was apparent that themes, drawn from the MOR Framework, would be needed to link dimensions and their associated definitions to indicators. Figure 5 provides an example of the dimension–theme–indicator approach; Figure 6 applies this approach to the material dimension using indicative themes and indicators.

Figure 5: Dimension–Theme–Indicator

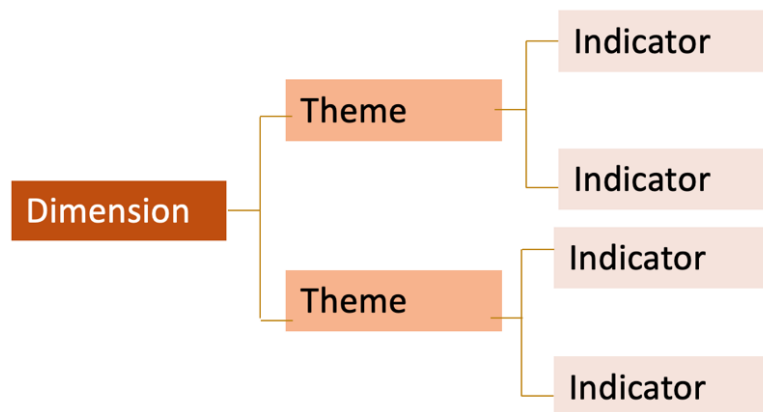
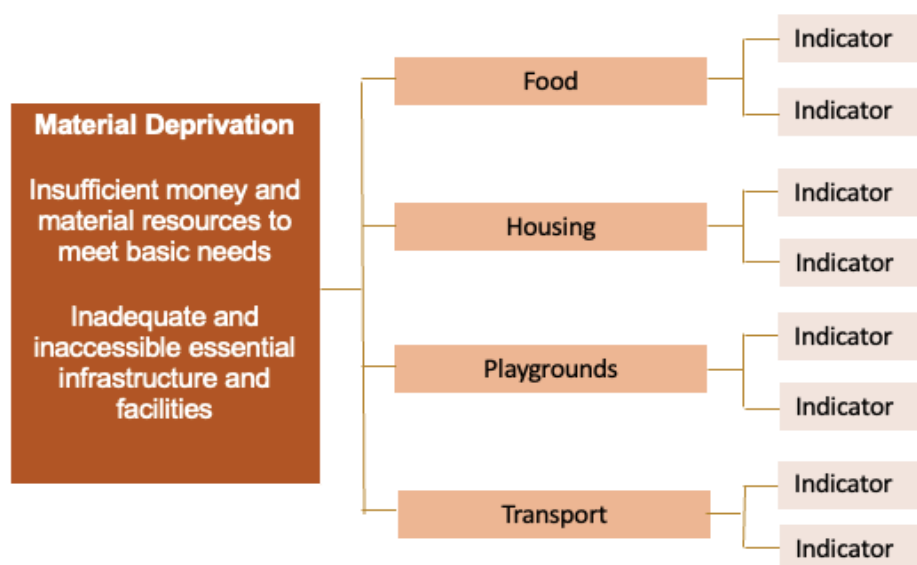


Figure 6: Dimension–Theme–Indicator applied to Material Dimension



** These themes are indicative only*

In searching for candidate indicators, we drew on the distinction made by Gill Main (2014; 2019) between household-centric indicators, child-centric indicators and child-derived indicators. Household-centric indicators are based on income or household approaches to poverty which often consist of unidimensional measures. Child-centric measures are determined by adults, either through expert deliberation (akin to the approach taken through Budget Standards) or through a social consensus approach. Child-derived indicators, in contrast, are developed from research or engagement with children. The dimensions of the MOR Framework are determinedly child-derived, having been drawn from the common themes that emerged from the child-centred research, but it is important to note that they are also informed (but not determined) by deep engagement with the relevant literature and consultation with both community stakeholders and experts. Our aim was that indicators align closely with the child-derived dimensions, and where possible were drawn from child-derived data sources.

We also make a distinction between household and individual (child) indicators. Where possible we aimed to choose indicators that go beyond the 'black box' of the household (Bessell, 2015; Main, 2013) and to avoid using adults as proxies for children's experiences. Here, the reference person is significant. ACOSS/UNSW, in their poverty and inequality reports, follow convention, including that used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics and other statistical offices, stating:

'The reference person for each household in the Survey of Income and Housing Survey....is chosen by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, by applying its selection criteria to all household members aged 15 years and over. The selection criteria are applied in the order listed, below, until a single appropriate person is identified:

- The person with the highest tenure when ranged as follows: owner without a mortgage, owner with a mortgage, renter, other tenure.
- One of the partners in a registered or de facto marriage, with dependent children.
- One of the partners in a registered or de facto marriage, without dependent children.
- A lone parent with dependent children.
- The person with highest income.
- The eldest person.' (Davidson, et al., 2024, p.9)

There are significant challenges in finding existing data sources that are child-derived, or are genuinely child-centred. The majority of data sources are at household level data or derived from adults, sometimes adults acting as proxies for children, sometimes adults answering survey questions from their own perspective. Whilst these are valid in their own right, they cannot be accepted as child-derived or child-centred. When designing the process of identifying the universe of indicators, selecting candidate indicators, and adopting final indicators for the MOR framework, there was no expectation that all (or perhaps any) would be child-derived. While a child-centred index demands child-derived indicators, in practice there are serious limitations to available data. However, where possible, the intention was that indicators would be prioritised that are directly relevant to children and respond to the definitions developed through the research with children. Moreover, the ongoing work of the More for Children project aims to progress methods for advancing child-centred data sources, exploring the potential for child-derived indicators.

A further broad principle is that indicators are relevant across childhood (0 to fourteen years). The More for Children research has worked with children aged between six and sixteen years, with the focus on middle childhood (six to twelve years) and most participating children were in that age group. However, a measure of child poverty should be relevant to children from birth until fourteen years; here, we maintain consistency with the age cohort widely used in Australia, and adopted by the Poverty and Inequality Partnership between the Australian Council of Social Service and the University of New South Wales (see Treloar et al., 2023). Adopting different age-relevant indicators within the cohort of childhood (birth to 14 years) may have the perverse effect of seeing children recategorised as ‘poor’ or ‘non-poor’ simply because they have experienced a birthday, and possibly impacting the overall rate of child poverty.⁴

In making decisions about the inclusion or exclusion of indicators at step 5, we adopt the approach and criteria outlined below.

5.3 Criteria for indicator selection

Based on the More for Children research, including analyses of existing initiatives to measure poverty, disadvantage, exclusion and wellbeing, we developed the following set of criteria to help us determine which were the most desirable indicators to summarise each dimension of child poverty.

Desirable indicators were identified as follows:

- Based on the findings of More for Children’s child-centred research
- Relevant to at least one of the dimensions of the MOR Framework
- All from the same dataset, or datasets that are able to be linked together (ideally panel data but could be cross-sectional data)
- Relevant to the child’s direct experience (this criterion refers especially to sentiment-based indicators)
- Referring to the entire country rather than individual states
- In a dataset that is actively maintained (not discontinued)
- Ideally in a dataset that is publicly available in some form
- Available for as many historical years as possible
- Relevant across childhood (0-14 years)
- When taken in combination with other indicators, provide policy-relevant information to provide a knowledge base to drive change.

⁴ Our thanks to Sabina Alkire for highlighting this issue.

Ranking the indicators based on their relevance to child poverty

The long list of candidate indicators according to the above criteria was captured in an Excel table. These indicators were then labelled following a two-step process.⁵ The first step in this process involved ranking the indicators based on the frequency it was mentioned by the children involved in the qualitative work (Component 1) of the More for Children research project and by how relevant the indicator was to poverty, based on the relevant literature and analysis by the More for Children team. The ranking system was set by the More for Children researchers and was as follows:

Mentioned frequently by children and high relevance to poverty	1
Mentioned frequently by children and low relevance to poverty	2
Mentioned infrequently by children but high relevance to poverty	3
Mentioned infrequently by children and low relevance to poverty	4
Not mentioned by children but relevant to poverty	0
Not mentioned by children and irrelevant to poverty	Exclude/NA

⁵ Access to this information is available through our website [MfC Child Poverty Indicator Analysis - Children's Policy Centre](#) and can be requested by contacting us at the Children's Policy Centre: crawfordcpc@anu.edu.au

In addition to the ranking system, each indicator was referenced to the MOR Framework. Thus, it could be relevant to a specific part of the definition of a dimension, to the whole of the Framework, or it might lie outside the Framework. The dimension definitions of the MOR Framework were divided as follows:

Dimension	Definition
Material	Insufficient money and material resources to meet basic needs
	Inadequate essential infrastructure
	Inaccessible essential infrastructure
	Inadequate facilities (including healthcare, education and play/recreation facilities)
	Inaccessible facilities (including healthcare, education and play/recreation facilities)
Opportunity	Lack of meaningful connection (belonging) in the future
	Lack of meaningful connection (belonging) now
	Lack of participation in the future
	Lack of participation now
	Compromised learning
	Compromised play
	Compromised relaxation
	Compromised health
Relational	Family relationships are not in place
	Family relationships are under pressure
	Relationships within services are compromised or not in place, or are repeatedly negative
	Relationships within key institutions are compromised or not in place, or are repeatedly negative
MOR	Multiple dimensions
N/A	Not relevant to definitions

5.4 Database examination

As noted previously, information from a dataset that is representative of the child population of Australia is required to measure multidimensional child poverty. The indicators in this dataset should conform as closely as possible to the above criteria. The dataset should contain sufficient information on each of the MOR dimensions.

The measurement of multidimensional child poverty would technically be possible using either the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey, the Person Level Integrated Data Asset (PLIDA) or the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC). All are panel datasets with data available from the early 2000s covering each of the MOR dimensions to some degree. LSAC has the advantage of being one of the few child-derived datasets available. However, LSAC has limitations because only two waves are available, that are now over twenty years old, and there are concerns about the representation of low-income families. HILDA provides nationally representative, longitudinal data on issues such as wellbeing, family relationships, health and education that are highly relevant to the MOR Index. However, HILDA does not provide child-derived data and would require reliance on adult assessments of children's situation. PLIDA is likely to include some data that are child-derived and to have superior coverage of disadvantaged populations and enables linkage of data. Thus, PLIDA is the most promising data source for the MOR Index. However, there is a paucity of child-derived data available, and without closer examination of PLIDA it is not clear that indicators that align with the MOR Framework and children's priorities and experiences are available.

5.5 Workshopping candidate indicators with academic experts

A workshop to discuss the potential of appropriate indicators to measure child poverty in Australia was held both online and in person in Canberra in October 2024. This workshop followed the empirical and theoretical work described above and was intended to provide wider input both to sense-check our approach and to contribute to thinking about a narrower, appropriate and feasible list of indicators for each dimension of the MOR Framework, taking account of data sets that are currently available and able to provide the information sought. In taking this step, we were cognisant of the multiple Australian initiatives that have been developed over the past few decades and the challenges these have faced in measuring poverty and disadvantage using data currently available. As it eventuated, the workshop was a valuable and formative step for the progress of the project, as described below.

5.5.1 Overview of the Indicators Workshop

This workshop brought together a group of academics that represent a depth and breadth of experience on the topic of child wellbeing and poverty.

The workshop began with an overview of the More for Children project, as outlined in the first part of this paper, followed by a detailed discussion around the datasets included in the analysis. Importantly for the progress of the research, there was strong consensus that the MOR Framework and its dimensions add value to understanding child poverty.

The process of indicator selection described above was designed to centre the voices and experiences of children, which emerged through the child-centred research, as the guide for the refinement of the list of indicators. Discussion at the workshop highlighted the limitations of available data, which the More for Children team has encountered. Workshop participants positively reviewed the process for selecting indicators, but highlighted the challenges in identifying child-derived indicators and developing a child-centred measure of poverty, given the lack of adequate data. No dataset is fully fit for purpose. Workshop participants highlighted the limitations in currently available datasets in Australia, such as data gaps (including missed populations), attrition in longitudinal studies, data becoming outdated, and/or data collection or maintenance being discontinued. These limitations are barriers confronted by a number of research projects and have significant implications for policy and service delivery. Workshop participants highlighted that it is not a lack of data that is a concern in Australia but a lack of data that is well-informed and sufficiently targeted to measure the things that matter most for children. There was consensus that there is a pressing need for better data in order to measure what matters to children and their families.

There was further consensus that any effort to measure child poverty must hold children's priorities at the centre, noting that this is the innovation and value of the More for Children research. There was also discussion of the need to improve existing datasets to provide child-centred information. The workshop included discussion of whether the aim should be to measure and track prevalence of child poverty or to identify and measure policy levers, or a mix of both. Here it is important to note that the More for Children research is developing both an index to measure the prevalence and experience of poverty and a means of identifying the drivers of child poverty.

A crucial issue to emerge from the workshop was the increasing availability of wellbeing data, but the paucity of child poverty data. There was a strong consensus that wellbeing and poverty are distinct. Wellbeing data are important, but are not a substitute for reliable, child-centred data on poverty. It was further noted that few measures of wellbeing adequately incorporate poverty.

There was consensus that a survey capturing children's experiences is required, but with caution to ensure that the design would be rights-based and child-centred, recognising that some questions may re-traumatise children. The ethical challenges of surveying children on sensitive or painful issues, and the potential to create harm, were canvassed at length. Here, we refer back to the More for Children methodology paper, which outlines the principles that inform this research; it is important to note that those principles are relevant when conducting research with children (Bessell & O'Sullivan, 2024b). Within this discussion it became clear that there is a need to show how and why current datasets are not fit for purpose and to demonstrate how, at a local level, key issues might be qualitatively explored and important indicators identified.

The workshop participants identified risks that might influence approaches to measuring child poverty. These included:

- Ensuring that children's experiences and priorities are not lost in the process of developing a measure.
- Guarding against the possible unintended use of the model and indicators in the future.
- Taking care in the use of proxy indicators, which may provide inaccurate information.
- Avoiding using adult assessments as proxies for children's experiences as children move beyond early childhood.
- Avoiding assumptions or conclusions that are inherently risky in a data reductionist approach.

A more general risk was that taking a national approach is vulnerable to changes of priority in data collection processes. The point was made that a ground-up approach, in which smaller jurisdictions used the model to measure and compare in a local context, could then be used to build up to a national level. This would need to be designed in such a way that communities are empowered through a clear understanding of what can and cannot be influenced at their level, as well as where they are having success and where they might need to adapt their approaches.

There was unanimous agreement amongst the group that any approach taken, for example in highlighting themes and then indicators, should be revisited with children. This aligns with the methodology of the More for Children research, and with the intended next steps, which include returning to children and communities who participated in Component 1 to check findings; identifying new communities to determine relevance across other communities; and ensuring that the program of work continues to remain true to its commitment to child-centred work.

In highlighting the value of More for Children in bringing children's experiences to the centre, workshop participants agreed that wherever possible child-derived data should be used. Moreover, the caution was made that any index or measure of child poverty that results from the More for Children research should avoid using proxy indicators that shift the focus from the things that matter most to children. It was noted by several participants that using proxy indicators that are not adequately aligned with the findings of the qualitative research may cause damage to children by making incorrect assumptions and measuring the wrong things.

6. Concluding Comments and Next steps

Research with children has provided a deep understanding of how children experience poverty, resulting in a child-centred definition of poverty and the MOR Framework. The work documented here provides the knowledge base for the MOR Index, a child-centred measure of child poverty, based on rights-based, child-centred research. Importantly, this work is not data driven, in the sense of beginning with existing data and interrogating what we can learn from it; rather it places and holds children at the centre. This is not an orthodox approach and is challenging because concepts and definitions are often misaligned with existing data. More for Children – and the MOR Index – aim to correct that misalignment.

The next step in this work will be the finalisation of indicators, with the intention of developing the MOR Index. However, this step is dependent on the availability of data and, as discussed above, there is little child-derived data available and existing datasets are generally not fit for purpose. PLIDA is most likely to provide relevant data, but may not be sufficient. The More for Children work on child-centred indicators and a child-centred index of multidimensional poverty, and the expert workshop, highlight the urgent need for child-centred and child-derived data. It is possible that work on the MOR Index will stall without adequate data, noting that the expert workshop highlighted the dangers of using data sources that are not fit for purpose.

It is important to note, as discussed above, that the MOR Index will be designed as a child-centred measure of multidimensional poverty. It will not assess the full breadth and complexity captured by the MOR Framework. Consequently, a suite of complementary analyses and tools are being developed, including⁶:

A co-designed **community jigsaw** to support place-based responses to child poverty, based on the More for Children research and the earlier Children, Communities and Social Capital in Australia research (see Bessell & Mason, 2014).

An **assessment tool** designed to identify and shift the drivers of child poverty.

Principles to inform, and transform, systems, policies and services to reduce, and ultimately end, child poverty in Australia (with implications for policy and action beyond Australia).

⁶ Detailed in page 16



Glossary of terms

Child-inclusive: ensuring that children's needs, rights and interests are recognised as **a** primary focus (among others), and children are identified as key stakeholders in policy processes and outcomes (Bessell & Vuckovic, 2022)

Child-centric indicators: determined by adults, either through expert deliberation (akin to the approach taken through Budget Standards) or through a social consensus approach (Main, 2014)

Child-centred: placing children's needs, rights and interests as **the** primary focus (Bessell & Vuckovic, 2022). Distinct from the concept of child-centric indicators developed by Main.

Child-derived indicators: developed from research or engagement with children (Main, 2014)

HILDA: The Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia Survey

Household-centric indicators: based on income or household approaches to poverty which often consist of unidimensional measures (Main, 2014).

LSAC: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children

The MOR Framework: A conceptual framework based on rights-based child-centred qualitative work with children. It captures the breadth and complexity of child poverty as well as providing the knowledge base for understanding, measuring and acting to end child poverty through transforming systems, policies and services.

The MOR Index: A measure of child poverty based on the MOR Framework, it aims to measure child poverty, recognising the need for clear, simple, unambiguous and measurable indicators.

PLIDA: Person Level Integrated Data Set.



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