



**Australian
National
University**

Children's Policy Centre, Crawford School of Public Policy

**Safe and Supported:
The National Framework for Protecting Australia's
Children 2021-2031**

**Submission in response to the Discussion Paper:
Identifying priorities for the Safe and Supported Second Action
Plans**

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Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Discussion Paper: Identifying priorities for the Safe and Supported Second Action Plans and provide our research as part of the evidence-base informing the Action Plans.

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Background: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021–2031

Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021–2031 provides the foundation for advancing the shared goal that 'children and young people in Australia have the right to grow up safe, connected and supported in their family, community and culture. They have the right to grow up in an environment that enables them to reach their full potential.'

The National Framework does not identify poverty as a major barrier to this goal being achieved. Indeed, poverty is only referenced once in the Framework, as follows: *Some families have multiple and complex needs. These can be due to mental health issues, alcohol and drug misuse, domestic and family violence, disability, social exclusion, poverty, housing uncertainty, unemployment and underemployment (page 22).*

Yet there is strong evidence from Australia and internationally that poverty is a major – often the major – barrier to children growing up safe, connected and supported and reaching their full potential.

The development of the Second Action Plans under *the National Framework* provides an important opportunity to address this gap, guiding policy and action to strengthen Australia's approach to preventing harm to children and supporting families.

Making poverty visible in prevention and early support

The Discussion Paper, identifying priorities for the Safe and Supported Second Action Plans, places welcome emphasis on prevention, early support and child-centred responses. Crucially, it recognises that 'children are safer and do better when families and communities have access to the right supports early, before challenges escalate'. It also identifies social determinants and cross-system coordination as a proposed priority, recognising the importance of housing, health, education, employment and other systems in shaping child and family wellbeing and safety.

While these are important directions, there is a significant gap: poverty is not explicitly addressed in the Discussion Paper. This reflects the gap in the National Framework itself.

This gap is particularly significant given the important and welcome focus on prevention. Poverty can create and intensify many of the challenges the National Framework seeks to address. A national approach that aims to intervene early and prevent challenges from escalating must recognise and seek to address poverty.

It is essential to state at the outset that poverty is not neglect nor is it a result of individual or household choices, rather poverty is the result of inequity and systems that do not prioritise the human rights of all children, including to an adequate standard of living, health care, and education. Thus, reducing (and ultimately ending) child poverty must be an essential focus of action.

Recommendations

This submission makes three recommendations for the Second Action Plans:

1. Explicitly recognise children experiencing poverty as a priority population for action under the Second Action Plans.
2. Embed addressing poverty within approaches to prevention, early support and the social determinants of child and family wellbeing.
3. Draw on child-centred evidence, including the More for Children research and MOR Framework, to understand poverty and guide policy and practice responses.

The National Framework identifies four priority groups.

- Children and families with multiple and complex needs;
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children experiencing disadvantage or vulnerability;
- Children and/or parents and carers with disability experiencing disadvantage or vulnerability; and
- Children who have experienced abuse or neglect, including those in out-of-home care.

We recommend that children experiencing poverty be included as an additional priority group.

1. Children experiencing poverty should be explicitly prioritised

There is a strong case for their recognition as such. Poverty can affect children across the existing priority groups, but it also affects children and families who may not otherwise be visible within child protection or family support systems. Treating poverty only as part of a broader and less clearly defined category of 'disadvantage' risks obscuring both its significance and the specific policy responses it requires.

The Second Action Plans provide an opportunity to address this gap without requiring changes to the overarching architecture of the National Framework. Children experiencing poverty should be explicitly identified as a priority population within the actions developed for 2027–2031, particularly those concerned with prevention, early support, social determinants, cross-system coordination and data.

This would provide a means of prioritising children experiencing poverty within the current Framework while also recognising the importance of their explicit inclusion in future national child and family policy.

Importantly, as already noted but important to re-emphasise, recognising children experiencing poverty must not conflate poverty with neglect or problematise families experiencing financial hardship. Most parents experiencing poverty work hard to protect their children from its consequences. The purpose of recognising poverty is not to increase surveillance of families experiencing hardship. It is to ensure that the second Action Plan, and associated policy, responds to the conditions that place families under pressure and provides the resources and supports necessary to prevent those pressures escalating.

2. Poverty is a missing social determinant in the prevention agenda

The case for addressing poverty follows directly from the preventive focus of *Safe and Supported*.

The National Framework identifies early intervention and targeted support as one of its four focus areas and commits to addressing the 'known causes and drivers' of child abuse and neglect. It recognises housing stress, isolation, and lack of access to support among relevant risk factors. Significantly, the Framework also states that early support includes helping children, young people and families gain access to 'material basics', health services and education, which it describes as fundamental rights. The Second Action Plans provide an opportunity to secure these rights through an explicit focus on poverty.

The Discussion Paper identifies social determinants and cross-system coordination, including place-based models and recognising children and young people's experiences and views as priorities. It also recognises that child and family services need to work with disability, housing, health, education, justice, family violence, employment and other systems shaping child and family wellbeing.

Yet poverty is not itself identified. This matters because poverty does not sit neatly within any one of these systems. It operates across them and shapes children's lives, opportunities and relationships. Insufficient income and multidimensional poverty can deleteriously affect housing security, food, transport and access to health care; constrain participation in education and community life; and place significant pressure on children's and families' relationships.

Poverty is therefore not simply another social determinant to add to a list. It can be understood as a cross-cutting condition that shapes children's exposure to, and experiences of, multiple social determinants. This is why addressing poverty is fundamental to prevention and to ensuring all children in Australia are safe, supported and can reach their full potential.

3. The MOR Framework shows why poverty matters for prevention

More for Children is a program of transformational research, undertaken by the Children's Policy Centre at the Australian National University.¹ Through rights-based, child-centred research with children across Australia, More for Children provides a child-centred evidence base for understanding these connections.

The research has resulted in the MOR Framework, which understands child poverty through three interconnected dimensions: Material, Opportunity and Relational.

The **Material** dimension encompasses the economic and material resources children need, including adequate food, secure housing, utilities, transport and access to health care.

The **Opportunity** dimension captures the opportunities children need to learn, participate, spend time with others, relax, and be safe within their communities.

¹ More information on the More for Children research is available at <https://childrenspolicycentre.org/>

The **Relational** dimension encompasses the relationships and connections children need, including time with parents, kin and carers, caring adults, safe and nurturing family relationships, nurturing schools, and respectful services.

The relational dimension is especially significant for *Safe and Supported* and should be recognised within the second Action Plans. It demonstrates why the consequences of poverty cannot be understood only in terms of what families can and cannot afford. Financial stress can consume parents' time and emotional resources. Housing insecurity can disrupt children's relationships with schools, friends, extended family and trusted adults. Lack of money, lack of transport, and the isolation often created by poverty can all contribute to exclusion from activities and places where relationships and belonging are built. The stresses associated with poverty can place pressure on the relationships that children rely upon for security, connection and support.

The dimensions also interact. Material deprivation can narrow opportunities and place relationships under pressure, while diminished opportunities and fractured relationships can deepen the effects of material hardship for children now and into the future.

This does not mean poverty inevitably results in abuse or neglect. Nor should experiencing poverty ever itself be treated as evidence of deficient parenting. Rather, the More for Children research demonstrates how poverty can increase the pressures under which families care for children while simultaneously reducing the resources available to them. This distinction is crucial for a preventive approach. If prevention begins only when a family displays identifiable problems or risks, policy is already responding to consequences. A stronger approach also addresses the conditions that contribute to those pressures arising and accumulating.

Addressing poverty is therefore not separate from prevention. It is essential to prevention.

4. A child-centred evidence base for action

Australia does not have an official definition or measure of poverty. This has made poverty difficult to identify and address consistently within Australian policy. It should not, however, prevent the Second Action Plans from responding to poverty.

The More for Children research provides a child-centred definition, evidence base and practical framework for action. A child-centred, evidence-based definition of poverty is as follows:

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.²

² Sharon Bessell, Cadhla O'Sullivan, Trevor Rose, Megan Lang and Talia Avrahamzon (2025) 'Measuring Multidimensional Child Poverty in Australia', *Australian Economic Review* 58: S22-S35. doi.org/10.61605/cha_3022. Sharon Bessell (2026) *Understanding Child Poverty*, Edward Elgar.

The MOR Framework is grounded in research with children about what poverty means in their lives and what they need to live free from it. This is particularly relevant given the commitment within *Safe and Supported* to child-centred policy and practice. The National Framework states that the evidence base should include the 'knowledge, insights and experiences of children, young people and families' (page 36). The Discussion Paper similarly emphasises recognising children as individuals with their own experiences, views and support needs.

The MOR Framework could support the Second Action Plans in four practical ways.

It can strengthen **prevention and early support** by identifying the material, opportunity and relational conditions that need to be in place before difficulties escalate.

It can strengthen **social determinants and cross-system coordination** by providing a child-centred framework for understanding how income, housing, education, services, community environments, opportunities and relationships interact in children's lives.

It can contribute to **accountability and measurement** by providing a conceptual foundation for assessing whether policies and services are improving the conditions children need to live free from poverty.

It provides, through the MOR Jigsaw, **a child-centred, place-based** means of understanding and responding to child poverty in specific communities and supports local action.

Conclusion: making poverty visible

The Discussion Paper asks: 'What would make the biggest difference in helping children, young people and families get the right support early, before concerns escalate?'

Part of the answer must be to address poverty.

Safe and Supported is committed to prevention. **Prevention requires attention to the conditions that place children and families under pressure. Poverty is a significant and cross-cutting condition. Poverty therefore cannot remain invisible within the Second Action Plans.**

There is a strong case for recognising children experiencing poverty as a priority group within Australia's national child and family policy settings. Within the existing National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children, an important and achievable step can be taken now: **the Second Action Plans should explicitly identify children experiencing poverty as a priority population for action and embed poverty within approaches to prevention, early support and social determinants.**

This does not require *Safe and Supported* to become an anti-poverty strategy. It does require recognition that a national framework intended to keep children safe and support families cannot separate prevention from the economic, social and relational conditions in which children live.

Recognising poverty as a key social determinant of children's and families' experiences and outcomes, which requires cross sector coordination, would strengthen the capacity of *Safe and Supported* to deliver on its own vision: that children and young people grow up safe, connected and supported in their families, communities and culture, in environments that enable them to reach their full potential.

Additional resources

We are happy to provide more detail of the More for Children research. Additional information is available at <https://childrenspolicycentre.org/>

A list of relevant publications and resources from the More for Children research is below.

Children's Policy Centre publications

Book:

Bessell, S. (2026): *Understanding Child Poverty*, Edward Elgar.

Journal articles:

Bessell, S. (2026): Falls the shadow: between the vision of the UNCRC and children's experiences of poverty in Australia, *Griffith Law Review*, DOI: 10.1080/10383441.2026.2666010.

Bessell, S. (2025). Taking Action to Reduce Child Poverty: Patching, Reforming or Transforming? *Social Alternatives*, 43(2).

Bessell, S., O'Sullivan, C., Rose, T., Lang, M., & Avrahamzon, T. (2025). Measuring Multidimensional Child Poverty in Australia. *Australian Economic Review*, 58(S1), S22–S35. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8462.70016>

Bessell, S., & Vuckovic, C. (2023). How child inclusive were Australia's responses to COVID-19?. *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 58(1), 194-211.

Bessell, S., and O'Sullivan, C. (2025). The rhetoric of never again and the failure to protect the rights and needs of children in Gaza'. *Frontiers in Public Health*.

Bessell, S., and O'Sullivan, C. Ahmed, Aaliyah, Jonathan, Lilyjana, and Tru. (2025). Learning for a healthy life now and in the future. *Children Australia*.

O'Sullivan, C. Bessell, S., Bob, Crescent Moon, Orange Sharpie and Sam. (2025). Learning in and beyond school. *Children Australia*.

Research reports:

Bessell, S., & O'Sullivan, C. (2026). *Connecting Boys in Middle Childhood*, The Children's Policy Centre, Crawford School of Public Policy, The Australian National University.

Bessell, S., & O'Sullivan, C. (2024). *Rights-based Methodology for Research with Children on Poverty*, The Children's Policy Centre, Crawford School of Public Policy, The Australian National University.

Bessell, S. and O'Sullivan, C. (2024). *More for Children: Children's Experiences of Poverty*, Canberra: The Children's Policy Centre, The Australian National University.

Issues papers:

Bessell, S., O'Sullivan, C., & Lang, M. (2024). *More for Children: Housing*, The Children's Policy Centre, Crawford School of Public Policy, The Australian National University.

O'Sullivan, C, Bessell, S., Lang, M. (2024). More for Children: Food Insecurity, The Children's Policy Centre, Crawford School of Public Policy, The Australian National University.

Bessell, S. and O'Sullivan, C. 2024. More for Children Issues Paper: Transport, Issues paper 1, Canberra: The Children's Policy Centre, The Australian National University

Lang, M., Bessell, S. and O'Sullivan, C. 2024. More for Children Issues Paper: Education, Issues paper 4, Canberra: The Children's Policy Centre, The Australian National University

Discussion papers:

Bessell, S., O'Sullivan, C., Rose, T., Lang, M., & Avrahamzon, T. 2024. *More for Children: Child-Centred Indicators of Multidimensional Poverty*, More for Children Discussion Paper 1, The Children's Policy Centre, The Australian National University, Canberra

Blog pieces:

Bessell, S. and O'Sullivan, C., (2025), Defining and Measuring Child Poverty in Australia, Austaxpolicy: Tax and Transfer Policy Blog, 14 October 2025, Available from: <https://www.austaxpolicy.com/defining-and-measuring-child-poverty-in-australia/>

O'Sullivan, C. and Bessell, S. 2024. We should be looking at what we can add to children's lives instead of what we take away. Power to Persuade. Available online: <https://www.powertopersuade.org.au/blog/we-should-be-looking-at-what-we-can-add-to-childrens-lives-instead-of-what-we-take-away/13/9/2024>

O'Sullivan C. Bessell. S, 2024. Listening to Child Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Australia-What Matters Most. Available online: <https://refugeeresearchonline.org/listening-to-child-refugees-and-asylum-seekers-in-australia-what-matters-most/>.

Bessell, S. and O'Sullivan, C. (2024). Reducing poverty and improving wellbeing for all children: Where do we stand? Power to Persuade. Available online: <https://www.powertopersuade.org.au/blog/reducing-poverty-and-improving-wellbeing-for-all-children-where-do-we-stand/12/7/2024?rq=Reducing%20poverty%20and%20improving%20wellbeing%20for%20all%20children%3A%20Where%20do%20we%20stand%3F%20>

O'Sullivan, C., Lang., M. and Bessell, S. (2024). The 'Missing Middle' in childhood poverty and wellbeing indicators. Power to Persuade. Available online: <https://www.powertopersuade.org.au/blog/the-missing-middle-in-childhood-poverty-and-wellbeing-indicators/12/7/2024?rq=The%20Missing%20Middle%E2%80%99%20in%20childhood%20poverty%20and%20wellbeing%20indicators>

Bessell, S. and O'Sullivan, C. (2024). Shifting narratives about poverty in Australia. Power to Persuade. Available online:
<https://www.powertopersuade.org.au/blog/shifting-narratives-about-poverty-in-australia/12/7/2024?rq=Shifting%20narratives%20about%20poverty%20in%20Australia>

O'Sullivan, C., (2025). Measuring Multidimensional Child Poverty in Australia. Power to Persuade. Available online:
<https://www.powertopersuade.org.au/blog/measuring-multidimensional-child-poverty-in-australia/27/8/2025>

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