

There is much resting on the shoulders of the new prime minister and his team in the first year of his premiership. Many are looking to the federal government to implement its vision of social justice and improved wellbeing, and to deliver positive change that many cohorts of society desperately need. One cohort most in need is children.

Too many Australian children have suffered over the last few years, and data is emerging that paints a clear picture of the experiences of many children today.

Child poverty remains a huge issue, currently affecting one in six Australian children. This number has risen since 2021, when the Coronavirus Supplement and Economic Support Payment that reduced poverty in Australia by over 30 per cent during the height of the pandemic ended. The cessation of payments sparked an increase in poverty and income inequality which disproportionately affect single parents and young families to above pre-pandemic levels.

Another sign that Australian children are struggling is the number of children in out of home care, which rose from 43,100 in 2017 to 46,000 in 2020. Putting children in out of home care is a last resort for children who cannot stay at home with their families. The significant number of kids in Australia's out of home care system not only reflects the experiences of the children unable to live with their biological parents, but the broader societal context in which families are unable to care for their kids.

Many children and young people also fall victim to homelessness. In the 2016 census, over 116,000 people (<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/homelessness-and-homelessness-services>) identified as homeless, of which 19,400 were children.

Increasing rent prices are one driving force behind homelessness. In the year to December 2021, rents across Australia increased 9.4 per cent (<https://www.corelogic.com.au/news-research/news/archive/housing-values-end-the-year-22.1-higher-with-the-pace-of-gains-continuing-to-soften-as-multi-speed-conditions-emerge>) while wages grew just 2.3 per cent (<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/economy/price-indexes-and-inflation/wage-price-index-australia/latest-release>). Yet federal funding for social housing is in decline.

Family violence is often considered the leading cause of homelessness in Australia and affects thousands of children and young people across the country. Family violence fractures family units, with long-term repercussions on children's physical and mental wellbeing, development and schooling.

Despite an increasing focus on mental health in recent years, mental health in children and young people is declining, with suicide among young people on the rise – a shocking 460 young people committed suicide in Australia in 2019.

And the youth justice system continues to imprison an alarming number of children, with over 800 incarcerated children on an average night in 2020. Despite widespread gusto for the Close the Gap campaign, Indigenous children are still 20 times more likely to be detained than non-Indigenous children.

Clearly there are holes in our systems and flaws in our policies. The onus is on the government to respond.

Some positive steps have been taken. The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse was a significant step to uncover and address the prevalence of child sexual abuse in institutions. More recently, the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children identified progressive reforms that, if implemented, show great potential to improve the lives of babies, children and young people in this country.

The Labor government has already ended the cashless debit card, which stigmatised people on welfare and caused practical difficulties for users, steering the country in the direction we need to go.

There's also been commendable investment from both state and federal governments into early years, which has gone a long way in supporting many infants and babies during this pivotal stage of development.

But more action is urgently needed.

The determinants of poverty, family violence, out of home care, youth detention and homelessness are complex, converging and multidimensional. These are not easily fixable issues and there is no one size to fit all. However, there are policies that we know work.

Increasing income supports would lift many out of poverty, enabling many more families to care for their children. Investing in housing would keep people off the streets and prevent many from falling into cycles of poor mental health, substance abuse and family violence. Reforming the out of home care system would increase opportunities and improve wellbeing for some of our most vulnerable children. And raising the age of criminal

responsibility to 14 would reduce the number of children with criminal convictions and an experience of detention, both of which severely restrict a child's opportunities in later life, and often perpetuate lifetimes of crime.

We're asking that the Albanese government stays on course to deliver on legislation that improves the lives of children. We're asking for child-centric policies that view issues through their impact on children. And we're asking that the government implements and elevates the National Framework to better protect children.

All this is possible. It is up to the government to decide whether it becomes a reality.



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