

UNICEF Australia submission to the COVID-19 Response Inquiry

Guided by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and informed by our work in over 190 countries improving the lives of children, UNICEF Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Commonwealth Government's COVID-19 Response Inquiry.

In the months and years since the pandemic's peak, the evidence of its impact is continuing to take shape. While children were mostly spared from the immediate physical health impacts of the pandemic, the indirect impacts of emergency measures introduced to control the spread of the virus were significant for children and young people. These impacts are likely to last over the long-term for the youngest members of our community.

Early evidence suggests that Australian high school students fell months behind their learning as a result of school closures,ⁱ 42 per cent of children say the pandemic had a negative impact on their wellbeing,ⁱⁱ and 52 per cent of young Australians say that their mental health has declined as a result of the pandemic.ⁱⁱⁱ We won't know about the longer-term impacts on children and young people for some time but early international evidence is beginning to take shape. In the United States, pandemic-born babies are scoring lower on developmental and cognitive tests than those born pre-pandemic,^{iv} and globally it is estimated that school closures will cost the current generation of students \$26 trillion in lifetime earnings.^v

On revision, Australia's response to the pandemic could be characterised as one which was relatively successful in combatting the immediate physical health impacts of the virus, but in other areas lacking proportionality when assessed on balance. Various reviews have noted that existing inequalities in Australia were exacerbated by pandemic measures,^{vi} and that for children, they were largely affected by responses that were primarily designed to keep adults from harm, rather than having their unique needs prioritised in decision-making and their developmental stages considered.^{vii}

During the pandemic, UNICEF Australia detailed a [pathway for recovery](#) which prioritised the needs of children, much of which still holds true today. But now is the time for shifting towards how we can better prepare for the future, and while we still need to investigate the long-term impacts of the pandemic (particularly on children), UNICEF Australia wishes to provide practical solutions which will help ensure Australia is best-placed to minimise the negative effects of any future pandemics or emergencies on children and young people.

Child Rights Impact Assessment tool

In the context of the pandemic, UNICEF Australia partnered with the National Children's Commissioner to develop a Child Rights Impact Assessment (CRIA) tool.^{viii} CRIA's are endorsed by the United Nations CRC Committee^{ix} and are a way of embedding children's rights and interests in decision-making.^x They allow decision-makers to systematically assess the impact of their laws, policies, and budgets on children. Additionally, they highlight the need for children's views to be incorporated, ensuring that responses are tailored to need and decision making is better able to achieve the desired outcome.

The CRIA is an 18-question checklist which helps measure the impact of new laws and policies on the wellbeing of Australian children and families, and aid in determining whether the proposals support their best interests.^{xi} To illustrate the effectiveness of the newly-developed CRIA, it was applied to the decision-making processes regarding the closure of early childhood education and care (ECEC) centres and schools during the pandemic. We enclose the full [report](#) for information but in summary it found that, on review:

- there were significant data and information gaps on the impact of ECEC and school closures on children and families which need to be addressed to aid in future decision-making, and particularly for certain groups of children like Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and children with disabilities;
- the views of children and young people were not routinely sought when making decisions about closures of places of education and what actions could be taken to mitigate negative impacts; and,
- there were both positive and negative impacts associated with ECEC and school closures. Care needs to be taken to avoid bias towards one over the other, and a systematic consideration of all children's rights affected by the decision can help this.^{xii}

The CRIA is a helpful tool that can be employed across all decision-making including for future pandemics and emergencies, to mitigate risks from decisions that impact the rights and wellbeing of children, and also strengthen positive impacts.^{xiii} They can also act as an evidence base to help guide future decision-making,^{xiv} ensuring it achieves these same benefits. The CRIA tool should form an essential part of our decision-making when we next face a pandemic or emergency.

Recommendation 1

Routinely incorporate the Child Rights Impact Assessment tool into government decision-making, including for future pandemics and emergencies, to help ensure decisions are made in the best interests of children, young people and families.

The impact of social protection payments

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing inequalities in our society. Australians experiencing disadvantage and vulnerability were three times more likely to die from the virus than the most advantaged, young people were twice as likely to experience mental health issues, and students with low socio-economic status (SES) were 40 times more likely to have no computer for remote learning compared with students with high-SES.^{xv}

Children and families experiencing disadvantage and poverty were hit hard during the pandemic and UNICEF's recently released [Report Card 18](#) shows that child poverty remains a pressing concern in Australia – 1 in 6 children live in relative income poverty, and children in single-parent households are five times more at risk of being poor.^{xvi} But the pandemic also showed that we can make an immediate and significant reduction in poverty by increasing social protection payments. It is estimated that the coronavirus supplementary payments decreased the number of children in poverty in Australia from 624,000 to 585,000, and broadly 425,000 Australians were lifted out of poverty.^{xvii} However, once the payments were removed, 124,000 children were plunged back into poverty by April 2021.^{xviii}

UNICEF's global research shows that increasing spending on children and families through social protection payments like cash transfers is proven to reduce child poverty. Belgium and the United Kingdom (both with similar GDPs to Australia) tell two contrasting stories – Belgium has recently increased spending on children and *decreased* child poverty by 17 per cent; conversely the United Kingdom has reduced spending on children and seen child poverty *increase* by almost 20 per cent.^{xix} [Report Card 18](#) also shows that in countries with a higher social protection floor, children and families are better able to weather the economic storm that comes with a pandemic,^{xx} so strong spending on families makes us better prepared for future pandemics.

The pandemic has taught us many lessons, but on inequality in Australia it is providing us a unique opportunity to make lasting changes immediately which will positively impact an entire generation. Those facing poverty and disadvantage were hit hardest by the pandemic and the pinch on family budgets in the current cost-of-living crisis has only worsened. By heeding the lessons of the pandemic and permanently increasing social protection payments, we can help ensure a generation of Australian children are able to overcome the pandemic's impact, placing them and Australia on a pathway to prosperity.

Recommendation 2

Permanently increase social protection payments to the level needed to significantly reduce poverty and help children and families experiencing disadvantage to overcome the disproportionate impacts they face from the pandemic.

UNICEF Australia thanks the Commonwealth Government for the opportunity to respond to this inquiry and would welcome the opportunity to expand on the contents of our submission.

Warm regards,

Katie Maskiell

Head of Child Rights Policy and Advocacy

UNICEF Australia

ⁱ Department of Education, NSW Government (2022). *2021 Term 2 and Term 4 Check-in assessments*.

<https://education.nsw.gov.au/aboutus/educational-data/cese/publications/research-reports/check-inassessments-2021>

ⁱⁱ Australian Human Rights Commission (2022), *Mental health shapes my life: COVID-19 & kids' wellbeing*. <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/childrens-rights/publications/mental-health-shapes-my-life-covid-19-kids-wellbeing-2022>

ⁱⁱⁱ Sweeney, L., & Salmin, D. (2021). Young people are struggling the most with their mental health. Here's what they've learned from asking for help. ABC News. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-06-09/youthmental-health-australia-talks/100186268>

^{iv} Deoni, S., Beauchemin, J., Volpe, A., & D'Sa, V. (2020). *The COVID-19 Pandemic and Early Child Cognitive Development: A Comparison of Development in Children Born During the Pandemic and Historical References*. RESONANCE Consortium. <https://doi.org/10.1101/2021.08.10.21261846>

^v Azevedo, J. P. W. D., Rogers, F. H., Ahlgren, S. E., Cloutier, M. -H., Borhene, C., Chang, G. -C., Mizunoya, S., Reuge, N. J., Brossard, M., & Bergmann, J. L. (2021). *The state of the global education crisis: a path to recovery*. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/416991638768297704/pdf/The-State-of-the-Global-EducationCrisis-A-Path-to-Recovery.pdf>

^{vi} Shergold, P., Broadbent, J., Marhsall, I., Varghese, P. (2022), *Fault Lines: An independent review into Australia's response to COVID-19*. https://assets-global.website-files.com/62b998c0c9af9f65bba26051/6350438b7df8c77439846e97_FAULT-LINES-1.pdf

^{vii} Australian Human Rights Commission (2023), *Safeguarding Childre: Using a child rights impact assessment to improve our laws and policies*. https://humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/document/publication/cria_2023_-_final_-_18aug2023_1_1_0.pdf

^{viii} Australian Human Rights Commission (2023), *Safeguarding Childre: Using a child rights impact assessment to improve our laws and policies*. https://humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/document/publication/cria_2023_-_final_-_18aug2023_1_1_0.pdf

^{ix} Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 5: General Measures of Implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, 34th sess, Un Doc CRC/GC/2003/5 (3 Oct 2003) 11 [45]-[47], 15 [65].

^x Andressa Gadda et al, *Human Rights Monitoring and Implementation: How To Make Rights 'Real' in Children's Lives* (Routledge, 2020) 94.

^{xi} Australian Human Rights Commission (2023), *Safeguarding Childre: Using a child rights impact assessment to improve our laws and policies*. https://humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/document/publication/cria_2023_-_final_-_18aug2023_1_1_0.pdf

^{xii} Australian Human Rights Commission (2023), *Safeguarding Childre: Using a child rights impact assessment to improve our laws and policies*. https://humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/document/publication/cria_2023_-_final_-_18aug2023_1_1_0.pdf

^{xiii} Australian Human Rights Commission (2023), *Safeguarding Childre: Using a child rights impact assessment to improve our laws and policies*. https://humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/document/publication/cria_2023_-_final_-_18aug2023_1_1_0.pdf

^{xiv} Australian Human Rights Commission (2023), *Safeguarding Childre: Using a child rights impact assessment to improve our laws and policies*. https://humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/document/publication/cria_2023_-_final_-_18aug2023_1_1_0.pdf

^{xv} https://assets-global.website-files.com/62b998c0c9af9f65bba26051/6350438b7df8c77439846e97_FAULT-LINES-1.pdf

^{xvi} UNICEF (2023), *Report Card 18: Child Poverty in the Midst of Wealth*. <https://www.unicef.org/globalinsight/reports/report-card-18-child-poverty-amidst-wealth#report>

^{xvii} Shergold, P., Broadbent, J., Marhsall, I., Varghese, P. (2022), *Fault Lines: An independent review into Australia's response to COVID-19*. https://assets-global.website-files.com/62b998c0c9af9f65bba26051/6350438b7df8c77439846e97_FAULT-LINES-1.pdf

^{xviii} Shergold, P., Broadbent, J., Marhsall, I., Varghese, P. (2022), *Fault Lines: An independent review into Australia's response to COVID-19*. https://assets-global.website-files.com/62b998c0c9af9f65bba26051/6350438b7df8c77439846e97_FAULT-LINES-1.pdf

^{xix} UNICEF (2023), *Report Card 18: Child Poverty in the Midst of Wealth*. <https://www.unicef.org/globalinsight/reports/report-card-18-child-poverty-amidst-wealth#report>

^{xx} UNICEF (2023), *Report Card 18: Child Poverty in the Midst of Wealth*. <https://www.unicef.org/globalinsight/reports/report-card-18-child-poverty-amidst-wealth#report>