

Nurturing Inclusion: Paving the Way to Improved Child Wellbeing

Child Social Exclusion Index

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In Australia today, one in six children live in poverty¹. But many more children face disadvantage on multiple fronts.

Early experiences of social exclusion, including lack of access to health services, vulnerability in early childhood development and limited connection to community and supports, can carry significant and life-long social, emotional and financial costs.

Measuring child social exclusion—a multi-dimensional measure of disadvantage—is essential in identifying the challenges and barriers impacting the wellbeing and development of Australian children.

How are Australian children currently faring?

The latest Child Social Exclusion (CSE) Index² reveals a varied outlook on the wellbeing of Australian children.

- Currently, nearly half (48%) of Australian children living in regional communities face a high or very high risk of social exclusion.
- 35% of children living in Tasmania are acutely excluded, lacking the opportunities and resources needed to fully participate in their communities.
- Experiences of exclusion vary greatly across Australia's major cities. Children in some neighbourhoods face a very high risk of social exclusion, with those in surrounding and nearby suburbs experiencing a dramatically lower risk.
- The risk of child social exclusion is persistent—since publication of the previous CSE Index in 2018, 16% of children remained in the highest risk category of social exclusion.
- Low income contributes significantly to exclusion but isn't the only causal factor. The comparison between the CSE Index and child poverty reveals that there are some locations where poverty is high, but the risk of child social exclusion is low, and conversely, locations of low poverty and high social exclusion. This indicates that a range of factors contribute to diminished child wellbeing.
- The latest CSE Index recorded some improvements across risk indicators since release of the Index in 2018, including improved housing affordability and family educational attainment. However, a decline in access to health services, including a diminished ratio of GPs and dentists per 1,000 persons, was also recorded.

1. 2023. Australian Council of Social Services. Poverty in Australia 2023: Who is affected. https://povertyandinequality.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Poverty-in-Australia-2023_Who-is-affected.pdf

2. 2024. University of Canberra and UnitingCare Australia. Child Social Exclusion Index.

How Does Child Social Exclusion Map to National Wellbeing?

The Child Social Exclusion Index extends the concept of child poverty, combining six domains—socioeconomic, education, connectedness, access to housing, health, and community and environment—to provide a spatial measure of social exclusion risk facing children under the age of 15 years.

The Index uses Census, other administrative and microsimulated data to produce an exclusion risk score at the local area (Statistical Area 2) level.



Socioeconomic



Education



Connectedness

Child Social Exclusion Index Domains

Income, wealth and socioeconomic factors are important indicators of poverty and social exclusion risk. The inclusion of a financial hardship indicator in the latest iteration of the CSE Index provides an additional measure of food security and associated risks, pointing to the potential effects of cost-of-living pressures being borne by Australian families and children.

Educational attainment is an important predictor of an individual's future employment, health and wellbeing potential. Further to existing indicators that measure the prevalence of risks related to learning and cognitive development, the latest iteration of the CSE Index incorporates a new indicator of ratio of teaching staff to students in primary school settings, highlighting access and engagement barriers impacting child wellbeing.

The CSE Index offers a spatial dimension to examine the impact of factors such as parental engagement, lack of transportation and limited English literacy in relation to a child's connectedness to, and participation in, their community.

National Wellbeing Framework Associated Indicators

The National Wellbeing Framework includes a range of socioeconomic indicators including access to work, job opportunities, household income, wealth inequality and job security.

Indicators regarding childhood and skills development, education attainment, and literacy and numeracy skills at school are captured through the National Wellbeing Framework and provide a broader context for interpretation of localised risk scores reflected through the CSE Index.

The National Wellbeing Framework offers a range of indicators that provide an overarching narrative of connectedness and wellbeing, including measures related to acceptance of diversity, creative and cultural engagement, experiences of discrimination, social connection and sense of belonging.

The Child Social Exclusion Index is complementary to the Australian Government's National Wellbeing Framework, which measures societal wellbeing across key areas of health, security, sustainability, cohesiveness and prosperity.

Combined, data from both tools provide valuable insight for policy makers on issues impacting Australian children, and a lens through which to guide policy and budgetary decision making to deliver improved developmental and wellbeing outcomes.



Housing



Health



Community & Environment

Risk of social exclusion is strongly influenced by a child's housing situation, geographical location and mobility, enabled through access to transportation. The CSE Index produces a measure of risk against these indicators.

Social exclusion greatly increases a child's risk of experiencing adverse physical and mental health outcomes. The CSE Index provides an insight into the health implications of disadvantage and associated child wellbeing impacts at a spatial level.

Availability of social and community infrastructure, as well as access to recreational and green spaces, have a significant impact on child wellbeing and community connection. The CSE Index measures the extent to which a child's lack of access to community infrastructure and other environmental factors contribute to an increased risk of social exclusion.

The National Wellbeing Framework incorporates several housing-related indicators within its 'security' domain, including specific metrics related to homelessness and housing serviceability and the influence of these factors in relation to national wellbeing outcomes.

Risk indicators related to health and wellbeing recorded through the National Wellbeing Framework include community access to care, support and health services, prevalence of chronic conditions, childhood experiences of abuse and mental health outcomes.

The National Wellbeing Framework includes indicators related to biological diversity, air quality and climate resilience to provide an overall measure of wellbeing with regard to community and environmental factors.

Addressing Child Social Exclusion: Policy Considerations

Integrated policy making and support systems offer the greatest potential to improve child wellbeing

Child social exclusion is multi-dimensional and dynamic in nature. As such, mitigating social exclusion risk requires a coordinated and holistic approach to policy design and implementation. This involves transcending silos and rigid structures to achieve wellbeing improvements across interrelated areas. Delivering an Integrated Child Wellbeing Plan across government would achieve greater consistency in the design, coordination and delivery of strategies to reduce child social exclusion and also facilitate clear measurement of progress against child-related outcomes in the National Wellbeing Framework.

Early intervention is key

Given the persistent nature of child social exclusion, addressing risk factors as early as possible offers the most effective means through which to prevent lasting adverse consequences. Effective prevention and early intervention initiatives mitigate the need for more expensive, complex interventions being required down the track, reducing strain on services and support systems. Effective use of data and evidence to support informed decision making is also of critical importance when delivering effective early intervention strategies.

Access to quality early learning translates to improved child wellbeing outcomes

Ensuring access to quality early learning and support is essential in delivering overall wellbeing improvements for Australian children. This is especially pertinent in locations where access to early childhood education and care services is restricted. To mitigate the risk of social exclusion faced by children in such locations, greater investment is required to facilitate more equitable and easy access to early learning supports and services. Such investment should be accompanied by broader adoption of place-based strategies that prioritise engagement with local communities to implement solutions that improve accessibility and quality of services and supports on offer.

Place-based initiatives offer significant potential to support children at risk

The latest CSE Index highlights the persistent nature of disadvantage facing children in many locations across Australia. Evidence³ further highlights that tackling entrenched, locational disadvantage requires delivery of tailored and collaborative strategies that are informed by local context and community aspirations.

Place-based approaches—namely, those tailored to addressing particular types of complex and interrelated disadvantage in place—can achieve sustained change. However, successful delivery of such initiatives depends on recognition of the complexities and developmental nature of place-based community-led work and requires adequate resourcing to be effective and deliver genuine and long-lasting wellbeing improvements.

Using and enhancing the evidence base is critical in improving child wellbeing

Whilst the CSE Index captures a range of observed metrics that reflect a child's risk of social exclusion, the Index does not capture all possible components due to a lack of available data. Expanding the evidence base to measure additional factors such as a child's subjective experiences at school, quality of life, safety, absence from harm, food security and participation in social and sporting activities would significantly improve understandings of child social exclusion and the prevalence and impact of such risks. Measuring the incidence of these factors at the local area level would also enable the development and implementation of tailored mitigation strategies.

Expanding the evidence base would also allow for its broader application and usage—including through the Australian Government's National Wellbeing Framework, to provide more specific indicators related to child wellbeing. Further, improved sharing of relevant data across government, non-government organisations and community groups would facilitate informed decision-making and the development of targeted, co-designed solutions to address locational exclusion and disadvantage.

The Child Social Exclusion Index Report was produced by the University of Canberra, with the support of the following UnitingCare network organisations:



3. See Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY). Place-based initiatives in Australia: An overview. <https://www.aracy.org.au/publications-resources/area-command=record&id=381&cid=6>