



## 2022—23 Pre-Budget Submission

COVID-19 continued to leave its mark on families and communities across Australia in 2021. In the shadow of the lockdowns in 2020, outbreaks of the Delta variant beginning in June 2021 saw a cascade of lockdown restrictions implemented across the country, lasting for several months in New South Wales, Victoria, and the Australian Capital Territory, while sporadically impacting Queensland, South Australia and the Northern Territory. The ongoing impact of the Omicron variant has been marked by uncertainty and a significant increase in cases across the country.

Through our collation of data sources, headline indicators and examinations of focus issues, published in the ARACY/UNICEF Australia [Knowledge Acceleration Hub](#) we have showcased the adaptability and resilience of children and young people and their families – and how for some, lockdowns have again resulted in a welcome respite for busy households, providing an opportunity to spend quality time and reconnect with family members.

The research has also emphasised, however, the extent of deteriorating mental health, loneliness, struggles with remote learning, missed milestones, increased family conflict, poverty, unemployment, insecure housing, and an uncertain future for today's young people. The 2022-23 Budget must respond to the profound impact the pandemic has had on children and young people, the consequences of which may last long into the future. Now is our chance to place children and young people at the centre of our pathway out of the pandemic.

Work has already begun through recently published strategies such as *The National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy*, the *National Cabinet Framework for Managing C-19 in Schools and ECEC*, and *Safe and Supported: National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021 – 2031*. With the urgency of the pandemic upon us, they now need to be resourced for implementation.

### About ARACY

ARACY – Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth seeks to catalyse change by bringing people and knowledge together for the benefit of children and young people in Australia. We strive to achieve this by advocating for evidence-based policy and practice, focusing on prevention and early intervention. Our consultations with over 4000 children and young people, their families, and experts have shown us what wellbeing means to them: to be loved, valued, and safe; to have material basics; to be physically and mentally healthy; to be learning; to be participating; and to have a positive sense of identity and culture. These six domains are reflected in ARACY's wellbeing framework for children and young people — [the Nest](#).

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## Knowledge Acceleration Hub

In May 2020, ARACY partnered with UNICEF Australia to establish the [Knowledge Acceleration Hub](#) – an initiative designed to disseminate credible information to support evidence-based and informed decision-making about Australia’s children and young people in response to the effects of COVID-19. This involved collating and sharing innovative practices, and the release of monthly digests (from June 2020 to October 2021) summarising data and research on the impacts of the pandemic on children and young people. A report [Kids at the Crossroads](#), provides a summative response to the impacts highlighted throughout 2020 and a series of recommendations. A follow-up report reflecting new research and the changing circumstances during 2021 will be jointly released by ARACY and UNICEF Australia early this year. This submission draws on the evidence and findings of the Knowledge Acceleration Hub.

## Summary of Recommendations

1. The Australian Government bestow upon the Prime Minister overarching responsibility for the wellbeing of Australia’s children, ensuring alignment of policy settings, service delivery, and effort across Commonwealth agencies and other jurisdictions through the National Cabinet.
2. The Prime Minister make the measurement, reporting, and improvement of the wellbeing of Australian children a regular item on the agenda for National Cabinet.
3. The Commonwealth work with jurisdictions and the Children's Commissioners to develop an evidence-based Action Plan for the wellbeing of all Australian children, similar to that being deployed in New Zealand and inspired by ARACY’s Nest framework.
4. Work to bridge the urgent access gap across Australia for children and young people, including through the use of digital interventions, mobile/pop-up services, and peer-to-peer supports.
5. Increase the number of mental health professionals in schools, including psychologists, and fund and implement evidence-based whole-of-school wellbeing and resilience programs.
6. Expedite the urgent funding and implementation of The National Children’s Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy in response to the pandemic’s impact on children.
7. Urgently and permanently raise the rate of the Youth Allowance and JobSeeker payments, to ensure adequate social protection for young people whose livelihoods and employment prospects have been curtailed by COVID-19.
8. Create employment pipelines for young people by extending existing and developing new targeted programs, to support them entering the workforce and sustain their employment.
9. Provide ongoing targeted support to industries that predominantly hire young people and were hardest hit during the pandemic, including hospitality and the arts.



## Give children and young people a seat at the table

The recent *National Framework for Managing C-19 in Schools and ECEC* (adopted by National Cabinet, 13 January) goes some way in the recognition of schools to children's learning, social and emotional development. Building on this Framework, work is needed to build a national, coordination plan that also looks to action in areas of mental health, financial stress, and housing. The need for a National Children's Plan is clear. All actions should be underscored by the following two principles.

- Listen to children and young people, involve them in planning our pathway out of the pandemic, and act on what they say.
- Leave no-one behind in our responses. Ensure our pathway out of the pandemic is targeted and proportionate to meet the needs of children, young people, and their families in the communities and cohorts that have been most affected. These include First Nations peoples, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities, women, disadvantaged Australians, and people living with disability.

While Australian governments generally perform well, the fact remains too many Australian children (and their families) who find themselves in difficult times for reasons beyond their control, are not receiving the support they need to reach their potential. COVID-19 has only made this worse, exacerbating existing problems for many families and children, and thrusting many other families into disadvantage for the first time.

COVID-19 has shown it is possible for the Commonwealth, States and Territories to work more effectively through a National Cabinet. We see National Cabinet as a powerful vehicle to deliver on the recommendations in this submission, to help all Australian Governments meet their obligations to children and families, both during and beyond the COVID-19 crisis.

## Recommendations

1. The Australian Government bestow upon the Prime Minister overarching responsibility for the wellbeing of Australia's children, ensuring alignment of policy settings, service delivery, and effort across Commonwealth agencies and other jurisdictions through the National Cabinet.
2. The Prime Minister make the measurement, reporting, and improvement of the wellbeing of Australian children a regular item on the agenda for National Cabinet.
3. The Commonwealth work with jurisdictions and the Children's Commissioners to develop an evidence-based Action Plan for the wellbeing of all Australian children, similar to that being deployed in New Zealand and inspired by ARACY's Nest framework.

## Urgently provide support for mental health

The health of children and young people is essential to the ongoing prosperity and cohesion of Australian society as this determines the future social and economic position of our community. The mental health effects of lockdown periods have been consistently shown to be one of the more harmful effects of the pandemic for children and young people. There is also compelling evidence<sup>ii iii</sup> showing poor mental health can start early in a child's life. Australian governments should be praised for the development of strategies such as the *National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy*<sup>iv</sup> and the *National Action Plan for the Health of Children and Young People*<sup>v</sup>.

However, there needs to be a strategic focus on prevention points across the life cycle beyond intervention junctures. The capacity of the mental health system in Australia remains strained and geographically inequitable<sup>vi</sup>. Governments are commended for their increased investment following the pandemic, but the system remains oversubscribed and underfunded.

UNICEF Australia found the pandemic added another layer of stress and anxiety that contributed to a lack of confidence in the support services outside of the family<sup>vii</sup>. Therefore, efforts to enhance the health and wellbeing of children and young people need to be cohesive and coordinated and should entail both a universally proportionate and life course approaches that work to reduce health risks and inequalities at the point at which they are most likely to occur<sup>viii</sup>.

The *National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy* recommends the use of a model of integrated child and family care. The integrated model brings together a multidisciplinary team including child and youth psychiatrists, paediatricians, psychologists, mental health nurses, occupational therapists, speech pathologists, physiotherapists, and social workers.

Having the model deployed at multiple locations around the country would create a network of skilled service providers. By offering services via a combination of face-to-face, phone and video, the model would have the capability to support a large swathe of communities. Children and families could be referred by a GP or another primary care clinician for assessment and treatment. Consistent with another recommendation of the Strategy, staff could also identify parents and carers who are struggling with their own mental health and connect them with support.

## Recommendations

4. Work to bridge the urgent access gap across Australia for children and young people, including through the use of digital interventions, mobile/pop-up services, and peer-to-peer supports.
5. Increase the number of mental health professionals in schools, including psychologists, and fund and implement evidence-based whole-of-school wellbeing and resilience programs.
6. Expedite the urgent funding and implementation of The National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy in response to the pandemic's impact on children.



## Support access to material basics for all children and young people

The introduction of the Coronavirus Supplement payment by the Federal Government in 2020 demonstrated the life changing effects of increasing income support to alleviate poverty. Prior to Covid-19, 39 percent of children in single parent families were living in poverty. Modelling estimates this was reduced to 17 percent with the \$550 per fortnight Coronavirus Supplement<sup>ix</sup>. This analysis also estimates, with the ending of the coronavirus supplement with a replacement of a \$50 per fortnight permanent increase:

- child poverty rates for single parent families will increase by 41 percent, and by 13 percent for children in couple families; and
- poverty rates for children under five will increase from a low in June 2020 of 12 percent to 46 percent in April 2021.

The less generous financial support provided to households and families during 2021 lockdowns, although involving a broader eligibility criteria (including casual workers and non-residents), left substantial gaps, with approximately 800,000 people (84%) on the lowest incomes not qualifying for any disaster support at all, despite being unable to get paid work because of the lockdowns<sup>x</sup>. This is a result of eligibility being contained to losing paid work prior to the 2021 lockdowns, even though an individual's ability to find or look for paid work prior to these lockdowns may have been restricted due to the pandemic.

Australian children should not be punished because the economy is not creating enough jobs, or because the adults in their family cannot or will not work. A child is powerless over whether the adults in their family have employment. The powerful negative impact of low social security payments upon Australian children has been demonstrated in ARACY's report *To Have and To Have Not*<sup>xi</sup>. That report found children in jobless families were more likely to suffer from a greater number of deprivations than any other group. For example, they are more than 4 times more likely to be homeless, nearly twice as likely to be bullied or face social exclusion and almost two and a half times more likely to miss out on learning at home.

For young people, the situation is also showing negative trends. The current workforce context young people have faced over recent years has left them particularly vulnerable not just during periods of lockdown, but more generally since March 2020 as a result of the long-term economic impacts of the pandemic on specific sectors and industries.

The Australian Government Department of Social Services (DSS) data<sup>xii</sup> shows the number of young people on social security payments has still not recovered since the pandemic began. As of September 2021, 84,778 young people aged 21-24 years were receiving the Jobseeker payment and 73,568 people aged 16- 20 years were receiving Youth Allowance (not related to studying or apprenticeship). This is higher than the 68,567 young people aged 21-24 years receiving Jobseeker

payments and 72,350 Youth allowance in March 2020; and substantially more than the 55,795 receiving Newstart Allowance and 64,434 Youth allowance payments in June 2019.

### Recommendations

7. Urgently and permanently raise the rate of the Youth Allowance and JobSeeker payments, to ensure adequate social protection for young people whose livelihoods and employment prospects have been curtailed by COVID-19.
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9. Provide ongoing targeted support to industries that predominantly hire young people and were hardest hit during the pandemic, including hospitality and the arts.

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