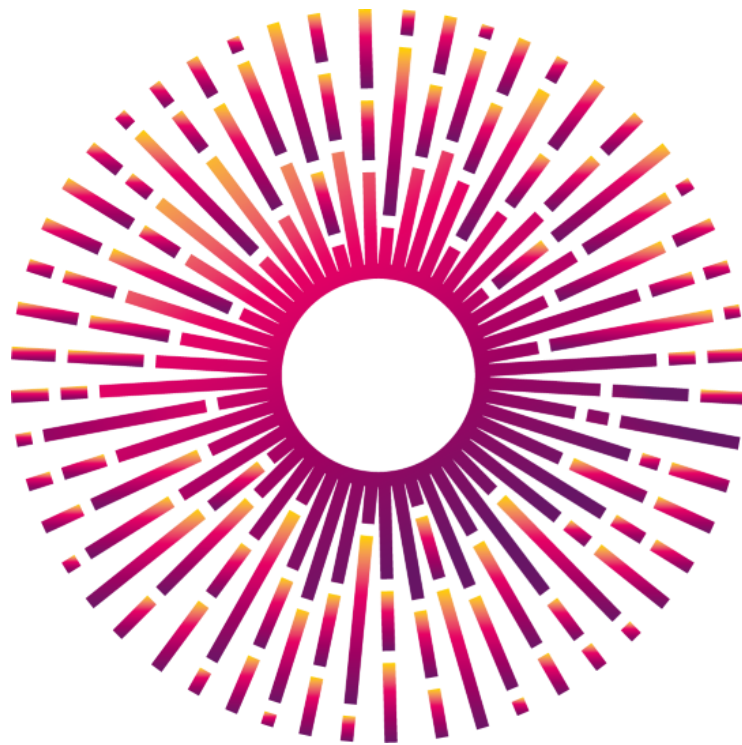




Submission to the Measuring What Matters Consultation

Australian Institute of Family Studies

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Executive Summary

Overview

This submission presents recommendations from the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) on the introduction of a national framework for measuring Australia's wellbeing and progress.

As the Australian Government's key family research institute and advisor on family wellbeing, AIFS support the proposal to introduce a national framework for measuring Australia's wellbeing. AIFS also support the proposed use of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) framework as a starting point. The OECD takes a holistic approach to wellbeing, includes domains and indicators of relevance to Australian families and children, and supports international comparison. This submission notes the following key considerations in developing or modifying this framework for the Australian context:

- Include indicators of family relationship functioning/quality, recognising the role and significance of family (broadly defined) in supporting the wellbeing of individuals.
- Include indicators for assessing and monitoring child wellbeing outcomes and policies. Children have a right to a happy and healthy childhood. Additionally, policies that support child wellbeing, and interventions that assist at risk or vulnerable children, can prevent poor wellbeing, including suicidality, in adulthood, thus creating a high return on government investment.
- Draw on child wellbeing frameworks when defining and selecting domains and indicators. Child centred frameworks are distinguished by a greater focus on outcomes that are meaningful to children and are framed in ways that are important to children and their experiences.
- Include a range of children's views and experiences in the development of indicators, collection of data and reporting of results.
- Include indicators developed by, and relevant to, First Nations Australians, such as connection to family, locality and culture.
- Disaggregate results to track progress in creating conditions for all Australians to thrive. This is recommended in the OECD model/framework but is not always followed.
- Periodically review the framework to ensure it captures key determinants of lifetime wellbeing, through ongoing comparison with more detailed research on causal mechanisms using longitudinal (rather than point in time) data.

Introduction

The Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) supports the Australian Government's efforts to measure Australia's wellbeing progress against a coherent and comprehensive framework that includes quality of life factors in addition to traditional macroeconomic measures. Such a process can improve understanding of how different Australians are faring in a broad range of areas, inform service provision and funding decisions and improve policy making and accountability. This submission presents AIFS' views on factors to be considered in developing such a framework in the Australian context. The submission is informed by the expertise of AIFS researchers and by previous research undertaken by AIFS.



AIFS is the Australian Government's key family research body and advisor on family wellbeing and has over 40 years' experience in conducting high-quality research into issues affecting Australian families — including several longitudinal research studies. Our work aims to increase understanding of the factors affecting the wellbeing of Australian families, thereby building the evidence about 'what works for families' to inform policy and practice.

AIFS has a family framework that guides understanding of the role and function of families, and how family functioning and wellbeing is impacted by the physical, social and economic environments in which families are located and varies at key life stages. AIFS also works with a broad range of Commonwealth, State/Territory, and non-government stakeholders to undertake research and evaluation using a range of wellbeing frameworks relevant to specific areas of policy and practice (e.g. we work with the Department of Veterans' Affairs using its Veteran centred model of wellbeing (AIHW 2018)).

AIFS conducts three longitudinal studies that provide robust evidence on the causalities and determinants of wellbeing. These include:

- Growing Up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC), which commenced in 2003¹;
- Ten to Men: The Longitudinal Study of the health and wellbeing of boys and men (TTM), which commenced in 2013²; and
- Building a New Life in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Humanitarian Migrants (BNLA), which commenced in 2013³.

As a registered data linkage authority, AIFS is ideally placed to assist with the linkage of existing data sources (e.g., State and Territory administrative data and survey data) to monitor Australia's progress.

Considerations for a national framework

Reflections on the OECD framework

AIFS supports the proposed use of the OECD framework as a starting point for developing an Australian framework for assessing and monitoring Australia's progress. AIFS agrees that progress can be defined as improvement in the wellbeing of Australian people and that assessing such progress requires looking not only at the functioning of the economic system but also at the diverse experiences and living conditions of people (as described by Treasury).

The OECD framework takes a holistic approach to wellbeing, recognising wellbeing as a multidimensional concept with outcomes across multiple domains. It includes a wide range of indicators of relevance to Australian families and children and supports international comparison. Other strengths of the OECD framework include:

- Its proposed coverage of three distinct components: current wellbeing, inequalities in wellbeing outcomes, and resources for future wellbeing. This supports monitoring of contemporary inequalities in Australian society, resources needed for future generations (natural, economic, human and social capital) as well as how Australians are faring on average, relative to people in other nations.

¹ <https://growingupinaustralia.gov.au/>

² <https://tentomen.org.au/>

³ <https://bnla.aifs.gov.au/>



- The OECD's 11 domains of current wellbeing align well with other wellbeing frameworks, including: income and wealth, work and job quality, housing, health, knowledge and skills, environment quality, subjective wellbeing, safety, work-life balance, social connections and civil engagement.
- It can be linked to policies that affect individuals directly or indirectly through their housing, work, social or physical/material environment, such as household income or access to green space.
- It includes a mix of subjective and objective measures. AIFS agrees that measuring subjective wellbeing is an essential part of measuring quality of life alongside other social and economic dimensions.

The importance of family to wellbeing

Although the OECD framework provides a strong foundation for measuring Australia's progress, AIFS recommends that an Australian framework recognise the important role of 'family' in all its forms as it supports, or fails to support, individual wellbeing; and be expanded to include indicators of family functioning, family wellbeing, and/or the quality of family relationships.

Although what constitutes a family varies widely, the benefits of being part of a strong, stable and positive family are universal (AIHW, 2022). In socio-ecological frameworks, which many holistic wellbeing models draw on, individual wellbeing is influenced first and foremost by the proximal everyday contexts in which individuals are situated, including the family and home (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). While social connections more broadly are important, the quality of relationships within families — between partners, children and parents, and the broader extended kinship structures of First Nations families and communities for example — are critical in determining the wellbeing of individuals and supporting the optimal development of children over time. Previous research demonstrates the importance of families as economic units, as carers and emotional supports (Baxter and Carrol, 2022; Baxter, 2016). Research also highlights the negative impacts of dysfunctional relationships, parent stress, separation and divorce, and family conflict and violence (Kaspiew et al, 2017, OECD, 2019).

Families are also central to children's views of quality of life. Previous nationally representative surveys of children aged 8 to 14 years found family ranked as the most important domain for having a good life by children in all year levels (AIHW, 2020). The Living Standards Framework used by the New Zealand Treasury notes that "intimate family and whānau relationships are just as, or even more, important than friendships and community relationships, particularly for the wellbeing of children." (New Zealand Treasury 2021, p.38)

Consequently, AIFS recommends that an Australian wellbeing framework include indicators of the functioning and quality of family relationships. This includes strengths-based measures of positive family functioning and relationships, relevant to all children and adults (examples here: [Families and Children outcomes measurement matrix explanatory notes | Australian Institute of Family Studies \(aifs.gov.au\)](#)), as well as measures of risky, problematic relationships and vulnerability, such as rates of family violence, child protection substantiations, the number of children in out of home care, and the number of children and young people in the youth justice system.

These indicators are included in other national and international child and adolescent wellbeing frameworks, and in living standards frameworks used in other countries, as discussed further below. Family wellbeing frameworks have also been developed in other contexts. For example, the Family Wellbeing Index developed by NatCen in the UK identifies key behaviours that contribute to family wellbeing (rather than measuring wellbeing directly) such as the nutritional



and social context of eating, being active in everyday life, connecting with family, learning by having projects, setting challenges and developing skills, engaging in playful activities and giving back to others (Yaxley, Gill & McManus, 2012).

Australian-specific wellbeing frameworks must also explicitly include culturally appropriate indicators that are developed by, and are suitable for, First Nations families e.g., frameworks of Aboriginal child wellbeing may include individual characteristics, cultural connections, safety, material needs, access to services and the social and political context in which families function (Rountree & Smith, 2016).

Monitoring child and adolescent wellbeing

In addition to indicators of the quality of family relationships, AIFS proposes an Australian framework should include indicators relevant for assessing and monitoring child and adolescent wellbeing outcomes and policies. Previous research has established the importance of the early years in determining lifetime wellbeing and the value of investing in the early years. Not only do children have a right to a happy and healthy childhood, but policies that support child wellbeing (and interventions that assist at risk or vulnerable children) create fewer adults with poor wellbeing and have a high return on government investment over time (AIHW 2011, ; Heckman 2006).

In addition to the established importance of early childhood (Moore et al 2017; Heckman 2006, family researchers are currently drawing attention to the importance of the transition into and through adolescence (Patton, 2016). The middle years (defined from 8 to 14 years of age) are a sensitive time of development when environmental effects are particularly strong. Children begin looking beyond their family groups and achieve great personal development during this phase of life. They form the behaviours and skills that promote lifelong health and wellbeing (Centre for Adolescent Health, 2020). Teenage years are also a time of particular risk, as highlighted by research showing more negative mental health outcomes found for those aged 13–18 than those aged 5–12 during the Covid19 pandemic (Biddle et al 2021, Mundy et al 2022).

While the OECD framework includes domains and indicators known to affect child development and life chances, it has few specific measures of child and adolescent wellbeing. Indicators relevant to children and adolescents, including those that can be linked to policies that affect children directly or indirectly through their home, school, social or material environment, should be included.

There are several existing child and adolescent wellbeing frameworks that can be used when considering relevant domains and indicators to include in the Australian context. The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children was based on a bioecological framework of human development which places an emphasis on both the immediate and broader environment as important for child development. And as summarised in the first overview of the study, the ‘family, school, community and broader society, as well as the children’s own attributes, are seen to contribute to the child’s development in complex interacting ways over time’ (Sanson et al 2002).

Other useful frameworks include the OECD child wellbeing framework, the AIHW indicators for child health, development, and wellbeing (AIHW, 2011), and the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) Nest model⁴ (Goodhue et al., 2021). These are holistic frameworks outlining the different requirements or domains which support children and young

⁴ <https://www.aracy.org.au/the-nest-in-action/the-nest-overview>



people to reach their full potential and create a better future for themselves and the nation. The child and family wellbeing frameworks that have the strongest grounding in evidence are those that take a holistic approach, recognising the importance of environmental and social factors and the family context (Smart et al., 2019).

There are also more specific frameworks such as the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021-2031 (DSS, 2021) and the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children (2022-32) (DSS, 2022) that are designed to track progress in delivering a substantial and sustained reduction in levels of family violence and child abuse and neglect over time. Preventing and reducing family violence is a key indicator identified internationally in the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)⁵, of which goals 5 and 16 propose multiple indicators for tracking progress at a country level. These include tracking the number of victims of intentional homicide, the proportion of population subject to physical, emotional and sexual violence, the proportion of children who experienced child maltreatment and the number of victims of human trafficking per 100,000 population. All such data is recommended to be disaggregated by age and gender. Given the gendered nature of family violence, SDG outcomes also aim to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls in public and private spheres.

Beyond tracking experiences of violence, it is also important to understand positive indicators of wellbeing for children and adolescents. The UNICEF conceptual framework on positive child wellbeing provides a comprehensive starting point on this (Lippman et al., 2011). The OECD Child Wellbeing Dashboard⁶ is a tool for policy makers and the public to monitor countries' efforts to promote child wellbeing. The dashboard contains 20 key internationally comparable indicators on children's wellbeing outcomes, plus a range of additional context indicators on important drivers of child wellbeing and child-relevant public policies. These cover children's material circumstances, health outcomes and cognitive/educational outcomes, and social and emotional outcomes.

The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) Nest model was based on consultation with Australian children and young people and their parents on what is perceived to be vital to the wellbeing of those aged 0-24 years. This includes being loved and valued, being safe, being healthy, having the material basics, learning and developing, and having a say/participating (Goodhue et al., 2021). This has led to an indicator framework based on 6 domains or priority investment areas to underpin wellbeing for young people: loved and safe, healthy (food and exercise, healthy lifestyles), material basics/economic needs, learning, participating, and positive sense of identity and connection to Culture (Goodhue et al., 2021). The domains of being loved and safe are measured using a mix of strengths-based indicators relevant to all children, such as supportive family environments and positive parenting practices, as well as children not being placed in care, and youth not being placed in detention.

Child centred frameworks are distinguished by a greater focus on outcomes that are meaningful to children and are framed in ways that are important to children and their experiences (Muir et al., 2019). The approach taken by the New Zealand Government in developing their national framework was to use child centred (including Māori) frameworks to reframe some of the domain definitions in their national framework to make them more meaningful for children. The New Zealand framework also amends the OECD wellbeing domains to better capture determinants of child wellbeing and to include indicators from their Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy (New Zealand Treasury, 2021). This includes the commitment to include measures of

⁵ <https://www.undp.org/sustainable-development-goals>

⁶ <https://www.oecd.org/els/family/child-well-being/data/dashboard/>



the quality of relationships within family, and to potentially develop new child indicators if needed (New Zealand Treasury, 2021).

As much as possible, indicators on child and adolescent wellbeing should be measured directly using self-reported information, in line with their participation rights enshrined in Articles 12 and 13 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1989). Such participation rights are now increasingly recognised as vital in research undertaken on child and adolescent wellbeing (Lansdown & UNICEF, 2019), as it has numerous identified benefits for children and society as a whole (Tisdall et al., 2009).

Other priorities in an Australian environment

As noted throughout this submission, an Australian wellbeing framework would necessarily include indicators relevant to, and developed by, First Nations Australians, such as measures of self-determination and connection to family and culture. These would likely align with measures and targets in other policy frameworks such as Closing the Gap and the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children. Incorporation of First Nations' concepts may require development of new indicators, but work is underway in this space (e.g. Bourke et al, 2022), and this is important given the policy priority of improving outcomes for First Nations people.

Other government policy priorities that AIFS sees as essential to address (and monitor) to improve wellbeing of Australian families as a whole include mental health, housing affordability/security, and financial security. AIFS support the budget commitment to 'pay for what is important'; with this including making healthcare more accessible, improving the aged care system, implementing the Closing the Gap Statement of Intent, enhancing access to child care and housing and strengthening efforts to improve women's safety. Using the framework to measure progress in these areas is a worthwhile goal, and this requires including effective indicators in these areas.

Summary of recommended measures

We suggest that the model be expanded to include measures of family wellbeing and/or the quality of family relationships, key measures and determinants of child and adolescent wellbeing, and those specifically relevant to First Nations peoples. The model should take a holistic approach that incorporates wellbeing/strengths-based indicators, such as positive family relationships, together with indicators that can highlight inequity or areas of risk, vulnerability and disadvantage. This latter category should include measures relevant to different stages of the life course such as child protection substantiations, children and young people in out of home care, children in the youth justice and family court system, and rates of family violence, and elder abuse. These measures should include, where possible, self-report data, including from children and young people.

Some new measures may need to be developed and data collection may be required. We suggested that data linkage to combine data from multiple sources (including administrative and survey data) will enrich the evidence base.

Disaggregating results and alignment with other research

AIFS reiterates the importance of disaggregating data and results when tracking and reporting on progress. While this is recommended in the OECD framework, it is not always followed in



reporting of results. The OECD notes that national averages often mask large inequalities within the population (OECD, 2020). We support their recommendation of identifying differences or 'gaps' within intersecting groups, by including age, gender, ethnicity, community and location. This model should also consider gaps between those at the top and those at the bottom of the dimensions (e.g. income inequalities) and deprivations (i.e. the share of the population falling below a given threshold of achievement, such as a minimum level of income, skills or health) (OECD, 2020). Disaggregation of this kind allows the identification of specific issues and targeting of support/interventions.

Disaggregation of data by age would support the tracking of Australian children and adolescents' wellbeing over time; AIFS' 20-year longitudinal study 'Growing up in Australia' is a rich source of this data. An Australian framework could commit to age breakdowns and/or inclusion of at least some key indicators of child wellbeing such as the share of Australian children living in poverty and their locality. Noting the differences in wellbeing outcomes between First Nations children and non-Indigenous children (Commonwealth of Australia, 2020), disaggregation of data by Indigenous status would also provide a more holistic picture.

Finally, we recommend that the government regularly review the framework to ensure it captures key elements that research identifies as critical to the wellbeing of current and future Australians. This requires ongoing comparison of point in time indicators with more detailed research identifying determinants and causal pathways using longitudinal data, such as that provided by the AIFS longitudinal studies 'Growing up in Australia' and 'Building a New Life in Australia'⁷.

⁷ <https://growingupinaustralia.gov.au/> and <https://bnla.aifs.gov.au/>



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