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# CoLab EVIDENCE REPORT

Engaging with children's voices on poverty:  
The value of their lived experience



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### ABOUT COLAB:

CoLab brings together families, clinicians, educators, policy makers, other practitioners and researchers to provide evidence to improve service delivery and community capacity to meet the needs of children, families and communities who are experiencing vulnerability. Our vision is that young children in Australia develop, learn and thrive so they can build a better future for themselves and their communities. CoLab has three priorities, including: providing better support to families experiencing adversity; advocating for place-based approaches to improve the ways that families, services and communities work together, and; advancing the economic understanding of early childhood, with a focus on where the best early investments can be made. CoLab was launched in 2017 through a partnership between Telethon Kids and the Minderoo Foundation, made possible by Minderoo's founding commitment to ensure every Australian child gets the best possible start in life.



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### HIGHLIGHTS

- Even at a young age, **children appear to be aware of poverty and social class issues**, and the **stigma associated with being labelled 'poor'**, and many **fear being made to feel different** because they don't have the same access to opportunities and possessions as children from more affluent families. 
- Children's narratives reveal that living in poverty exerts a **profound impact on their wellbeing**, with many children expressing **sadness, anger, frustration and worry** about their family's financial situation.
- The social costs of poverty include **difficulty establishing and maintaining friendships** and children's **limited participation in social and leisure activities**. The experience of **bullying** was also commonly reported by children living in poverty.
- Children growing up in poverty spoke about **distress related to unsafe or insecure housing, family conflict and lack of safety**. Additionally, children also experience **difficulties in schooling**, including access to essential school items, as-well as additional expenses such as school trips, and some demonstrate **reduced aspirations and hope for the future**. 
-  A wide range of **coping strategies** are reported by children as they respond to the **challenging experiences** related to **living in poverty**, thus demonstrating that they are not just passive recipients of their experience.
- Research on **how children experience poverty in their everyday lives** can make a valuable contribution to our understanding of this phenomenon, and should be **duly considered by policymakers** to enable the **development of initiatives** that can better meet children's needs. 

## Engaging with children's voices on poverty: The value of their lived experience



### Introduction

The study of child poverty has typically been dominated by quantitative approaches which have provided a valuable understanding of the prevalence, mechanisms and effects of this phenomenon. However, this literature on child poverty renders children as passive recipients of their experience, not as actively engaged in processing their experiences of poverty<sup>[1]</sup>. Consequently, we know far less about the experiences and actions of the children behind the statistics, including how poverty impacts on their perceptions of their own lives and the related issues and concerns that these children identify as important<sup>[2]</sup>. A small but substantive body of literature now explores the issue of poverty in affluent countries from the perspective of children themselves, as it is experienced in the context of their everyday lives<sup>[3-5]</sup>.

### The value of understanding children's 'lived experience'

There is evidence to suggest that children as young as 5 years of age are aware of poverty as a social phenomenon, and have some level of understanding of the material and nonmaterial factors associated with its occurrence<sup>[1]</sup>. Furthermore, children and young people have not only the capacity, but also the willingness, to be involved in finding solutions to child poverty; they want to be listened to, supported and have their opinions taken seriously<sup>[6, 7]</sup>. An attempt to capture children's personal experiences of living in poverty, and their ways of responding, is consistent with current approaches to the sociological study of childhood<sup>[2]</sup>. The sociology of childhood recognises children as more than passive recipients of their experiences, but rather acknowledges them as competent social actors. Additionally, by focusing on the present world of children, rather than their future as adults (i.e. their 'being' instead of just 'becoming'), the sociology of childhood reinforces the view that "the experience of childhood matters"<sup>[2, 8]</sup>.

Allowing children the opportunity to voice their beliefs and opinions about poverty and how it affects them is also consistent with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which advocates the participation of children to participate in all decision making that affects



them<sup>[9]</sup>. Most research on children's poverty assumes that their experiences are subsumed within the family or household unit, thus obscuring their individual 'voice'<sup>[8]</sup>. Importantly, parents' perceptions of their children's experiences can be different from the experiences of children themselves, thus providing further support for the need to study children's own narratives<sup>[2]</sup>. Furthermore, it is hypothesised that children's beliefs, thoughts and attitudes about poverty may be an important factor in determining the influence of poverty on their behavioural and academic functioning. Indeed, not all children who live in poverty demonstrate negative outcomes, and it may be that their psychological processing of the experience is a key mechanism responsible for this effect<sup>[1]</sup>.

By going 'beyond the statistics' of child poverty we can gain a greater appreciation of the complexities of the children's day-to-day experience. This can complement existing research on poverty that, whilst highly valuable in its own right, may represent the phenomenon of poverty in abstracted, disembodied and de-humanised ways that mask the very real suffering and everyday costs experienced by living in poverty, including a profound sense of stigma and shame<sup>[8, 10, 11]</sup>. Notably, children in some studies were reluctant to view themselves as living in poverty, but rather they considered poor people to include children who were homeless or those living in developing countries<sup>[6]</sup>. Due to the negative connotations associated with being 'poor' it is perhaps unsurprising that some children are unwilling to identify with this label<sup>[1, 11]</sup>. However, by recognising the value of the lived experience of poverty we can help challenge these dominant

narratives<sup>[11]</sup>. As Ridge (2003)<sup>[12]</sup> emphasises, "without a research agenda that is open to understanding and acknowledging children's different perceptions and meanings, we run the risk of overlooking or obscuring the very real and subjective experience of what it is like to be poor as a child".

An insight into the lived experience of poverty illuminates the wide ranging effects this form of disadvantage can have on children's everyday lives. Much of the research on poverty as a lived experience among children has taken place in the United Kingdom<sup>[3, 6, 13-16]</sup>. To a lesser extent, some research on lived experience of poverty has also been conducted in Australia, New Zealand and the Netherlands<sup>[2, 7, 17-19]</sup>. Overall,

the literature describes the complex and nuanced ways that poverty impacts on children's day-to-day lives, restricting their capacity to participate fully in important aspects of childhood that are often taken for granted. Central themes of children's lived experience of poverty include: economic insecurity; emotional and psychological wellbeing; friendships, leisure and social participation; schooling and aspirations for the future; family functioning; as well as housing, neighbourhood and community. Research on how poverty is perceived and experienced among children also reveals how they use a wide range of strategies as they attempt to deal with the challenges of adversity, as well as children's recommendations for how they (and their families) can be better supported to find pathways out of poverty.

### Economic insecurity

Children living in poverty can be acutely aware of their family's struggle to meet their basic needs. For instance, children in Van der Hoek's (2005)<sup>[2]</sup> study spoke about having to "go easy on everything" when money ran out towards the end of the month; this often meant the refrigerator



being empty and having to wait for new (or second-hand) clothes and shoes. As well as being deprived of life's basic necessities such as food, clothes, electricity for heating and light, and essential healthcare<sup>[7]</sup>, children in poverty may also be missing out on important aspects of childhood enjoyed by those from more affluent families, including toys, holidays and birthday celebrations<sup>[2, 6]</sup>. In particular, children express concern that they do not have the 'correct' brand of clothes or shoes, the latest toys or the most modern technology, which can act as important signifiers of children's social status; subsequently, this can set them apart from their peers and put them at risk of being bullied for being different<sup>[2, 7, 12]</sup>. Children in poverty often do not receive pocket money; a taken-for-granted aspect of childhood that provides an opportunity for learning how to manage money, and can also impart children with a sense of control over financial resources<sup>[12]</sup>.

### Emotional and psychological wellbeing

As Crowley and Vulliamy's (2007)<sup>[6]</sup> research revealed, the experience of poverty is described by children and young people as having serious emotional and psychological effects, including feelings of worthlessness, failure, and lack of belief in oneself. Some children report feeling sadness, shame, jealousy, fear, frustration and/or anger related to their family's financial situation, particularly when they compare themselves to friends or classmates, or when their requests to do or have things are continuously refused<sup>[2, 15]</sup>. Poverty clearly exerts an emotional impact on children, as they describe being deeply distressed about their family's disadvantaged situation, as well as the fear of crime and violence in the community, and how they worry about other family members' health and safety<sup>[15]</sup>. Moreover, the considerable stigma children experience as related to their economic situation is central to their day-to-day experience of poverty<sup>[15]</sup>.

### Friendships, leisure and social participation

The social costs of poverty are a central theme in the literature, with children's perspectives highlighting that the experience of poverty goes well beyond material disadvantage<sup>[20]</sup>. Even at preschool age, children are likely to have the cognitive capacity to be aware of social stereotypes about poor people, and recognise that they are viewed as members of a stigmatised group<sup>[1]</sup>. A child living in a family without much money was seen to be easily identifiable by the clothes they wore (i.e. not having the 'right' clothes) and the different way they spoke; these children were often treated with little respect, and were made fun of<sup>[6]</sup>. Children from low-income families can have difficulty fitting in, and are made to feel inferior and different from others, including being isolated from peers who wouldn't play with them because they were poor<sup>[6, 15]</sup>. The experience of poverty-related bullying is commonly described by children as a main source of stress they experience<sup>[6, 7, 12]</sup>; they can be told they are dirty because they were from a poor family, and that they will always be poor because their parents are poor<sup>[15]</sup>.



Children in poverty are described as often missing out on social opportunities because they can't afford to participate in leisure pursuits, such as becoming a member of a sports club and the associated cost of membership fees, uniforms, and transport<sup>[2, 6, 7, 18]</sup>. Further, through engaging

in comparisons with peers, children in poverty can feel excluded because they cannot go on holiday every year, or have never been on holiday at all <sup>[2]</sup>. The impact of poverty on children's lives is also evidenced by the difficulty they experience making and sustaining friendships <sup>[12]</sup>. As Butler (2017)<sup>[21]</sup> describes, children in poverty may seek to conceal their economic situation from friends, such as avoiding admitting to their friends that they couldn't play sport on the weekend because it costs money. Similarly, in another study, one child spoke about how he wouldn't tell peers at school that it was his birthday, because his parents couldn't afford for him to have a birthday party <sup>[2]</sup>. However, other children converse openly with their friends about the economic struggles faced by their parents, as a way to justify their actions and decisions, and possibly demonstrate a strength of character by 'going without' <sup>[21]</sup>.

### Schooling and aspirations for the future

Growing up in poverty can limit children's enjoyment of school and their ability to participate fully in the various aspects of school life. For instance, children can experience difficulty in school because they can't afford the proper school uniform, essential items for school, such as stationery and books, as well as additional costs such as school trips <sup>[6, 7, 12, 13]</sup>. This can make the effects of poverty even more visible, marking these children as 'different' and risking further stigmatisation and bullying. Some children expressed worry about asking their parents for money to meet the hidden costs of schooling, even negligible amounts for a no-uniform day <sup>[13]</sup>. Limited access to technology and computers to complete homework was also a concern commonly shared by children, thus highlighting the technology divide faced by those growing up in a low-income household <sup>[7, 22]</sup>. In this way, children's experience of school is dramatically shaped by the level of disadvantage they face. Specifically, "the real costs of schooling" limit children's ability to participate fully in every facet of school life <sup>[13]</sup>. This lack of opportunity for a broader, more well-rounded education profoundly restricts children's learning opportunities and, hence, various aspects of their development.

That disadvantaged children's experience of school is characterised by such negative experiences, is especially worrying given that education is one of the central means of escaping poverty in the long-term. Compounding these issues, adults and teachers were perceived to have lower expectations of children from poorer neighbourhoods and limited faith in their ability to succeed <sup>[6]</sup>. If children living in poverty believe that their social class is a salient aspect of their identity, and come to accept negative stereotypes about their social class, this can have important implications for their identity development and future aspirations, including finding pathways out of poverty <sup>[1]</sup>. It has been suggested that the learnt response of protecting others through self-denial of their needs and wishes is likely to be a contributing factor constraining their future aspirations for finding ways out of poverty <sup>[15]</sup>. As some children describe, the experience of living in poverty can mean that young people have less hope



and fewer opportunities to succeed in the future, and would be unlikely to achieve the same dreams and aspirations in life as their peers <sup>[6]</sup>. In comparison, other research shows that children's aspirations for the future remain high, despite the experience of growing up in a low-income household, and that they wanted to earn enough to be able to give money to their parents to make their lives happier <sup>[15]</sup>. However, whilst children can identify ways to escape from poverty, such as education and employment, they also recognise the substantial obstacles faced by young people in following these routes <sup>[6]</sup>.

### Family functioning

Family relationships and conflicts at home can be a major source of stress and unhappiness for children living in a low-income household <sup>[15]</sup>. Further, the stressful home life caused by living in poverty was also described by children as leading to behavioural and academic problems at school <sup>[6, 12]</sup>. Children and young people are acutely aware of the sadness, shame and pressure felt by their parents as they struggle to do the best for their family while on a low income, and noted how a lack of money can cause considerable stress, frustration and conflict among families <sup>[6]</sup>. Even at a young age, children can worry a great deal about their parents as they are witness to their distress about making ends meet and the need for extra expenditure like unexpected bills or replacing household items <sup>[2, 15]</sup>. Children may be made aware of their family's disadvantaged situation indirectly, through parents' non-verbal communication, such as observed mood changes and, more directly, when parents ask to borrow from their pocket money or birthday money <sup>[2]</sup>. Butler (2017)<sup>[21]</sup> suggests that parents may engage their children in discussions about money as a conscious strategy to instil in them a financial ethic and an appreciation of money to serve them well in adulthood. Nevertheless, the emotional pressure caused by a severe lack of money at home is common to children's experience of poverty <sup>[12]</sup>. Some children relayed how they tried to prevent their parents from worrying about money, and would offer them their own money from their piggy banks as a way to help relieve them of their financial worries <sup>[2, 15]</sup>. Additionally, in several studies there was indication of children's self-denial of their needs and wants; they avoid asking their parents for money because they already knew the answer was likely to be 'no' or because they didn't want to add extra pressure to their already worried and stressed parents <sup>[2, 12]</sup>. In this context, children may also resort to self-exclusion from school and social activities, such as keeping school trips secret from parents so they wouldn't cause them extra stress and worry about whether they could be afforded <sup>[12, 15]</sup>. Children also sought to conceal their disappointment about things they could not have or do, and tried not to complain, so as to avoid burdening their parents with extra worry <sup>[2]</sup>. However, at the same time children also describe feeling upset by their experienced deprivation, and missing out on the same opportunities and possessions that their friends enjoyed <sup>[15]</sup>.

### Housing, neighbourhood and community

Poor housing conditions, unstable housing, overcrowding and a lack of privacy and space are cited by children as some of the main sources of distress related to living in poverty <sup>[7, 15]</sup>. Children also express concern about the limited facilities for young people in poor neighbourhoods, lack of safe places to play, violence and crime in the community, the risk of walking through dangerous areas, and intimidation by gangs <sup>[6, 7, 15, 18]</sup>. Similarly, safety at school was a concern for children in Horgan's <sup>[13]</sup> study; they worried about their school being vandalised, as well as encountering violence on their way to and from school. A lack of affordable and accessible transport is reported by children in disadvantaged communities, and they can feel trapped and bored due to the restricted space and resources available to them at home <sup>[12]</sup>. Moreover, as a consequence of the shame that they feel about their housing situation, children may avoid inviting friends over, thus limiting their participation in the everyday reciprocity of friendships that constitute an integral part of childhood <sup>[2, 12, 15]</sup>.

## Coping strategies and pathways out of poverty

Children utilise a wide range of strategies as they attempt to cope with the challenging experiences related to living in poverty. This again demonstrates that children are not just passive recipients of their experience, but rather are actively involved in processing and responding to the challenges they face when growing up in poverty<sup>[12]</sup>. For instance, children may moderate their needs and wants so as alleviate the financial pressures on their parents<sup>[12]</sup>. Similarly, as Van der Hoek (2005)<sup>[12]</sup> describes, many of the younger children in their study spoke about saving up their pocket money or birthday money to buy their own toys, and other children report finding creative solutions for leisure activities.



Children's narratives suggest that family relationships (particularly support from mothers) are central to their resilience<sup>[15]</sup>. Furthermore, support from relatives and friends can help lessen some of the difficulties faced by living in poverty, for example by receiving second-hand clothing or attending social outings courtesy of a friend's parents<sup>[2]</sup>. As some children report, secure friendships can also help provide protection against being bullied, which is a common experience among those children growing up in poverty<sup>[12, 15]</sup>. Some children seek to reframe their experience of living in poverty in a more positive light, such as remarking on how their limited financial situation enabled them to value what was important in life<sup>[2]</sup>. Likewise,

children in Egan-Bitran's (2012)<sup>[7]</sup> study spoke of how a lack of money meant that families and communities would band together to support each other. Children also spoke about times their parents successfully used creative solutions or satisfying alternatives to help deal with limited money<sup>[2]</sup>.

To help improved the lives of those living in poverty, children called for more affordable (or free) transport and leisure activities<sup>[6]</sup>. Additionally, there was a perceived need to update the physical environments they live in, including the provision of clean and safe public spaces, playgrounds and recreational facilities<sup>[7]</sup>. Children also felt that more should be done to encourage young people to believe in themselves and their capabilities to succeed, as well as providing better opportunities and education, and more support for families, including creating 'decent' jobs to help them escape from poverty<sup>[6, 7]</sup>. A common suggestion by children in Egan-Bitran's (2012)<sup>[7]</sup> consultations was that the school could act as a community hub to support parents and families, as is consistent with place-based approaches and integrated service models. The need for policies and practices to be non-stigmatising was also recognised as important, as well as avoiding causing any shame for children and families accessing this type of support<sup>[7]</sup>.

## Conclusion and implications for policy and practice

As this Evidence Report has described, poverty permeates many aspects of children's everyday lives, including at home, school and in their interactions with peers. Children elicit a wide range of coping strategies as they attempt to deal with the challenges they face due to poverty, and recommend several ways to help to support them and their families to thrive and find pathways out of poverty.

How children experience poverty in their everyday lives has important implications for definitions and measurement of poverty. Specially, as this review has highlighted, poverty is not only an economic construct, and definitions of poverty should adequately reflect this differential. Conceptualising poverty in a way that is multi-dimensional is more consistent with children's own accounts of the lived experience of poverty, for instance by focusing on individuals' exclusion from society (including economic, social, cultural and political participation) and considering children's wellbeing and their civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights <sup>[4]</sup>. Insights into children's lived experience can also help inform measures that ascertain the extent of childhood poverty, particularly to ensure that such measures take into account the child-centered perspective of poverty and its specific impact on their wellbeing and social participation, rather than solely relying on income-based statistics and looking at the extent of poverty experienced only by adults in the household <sup>[4, 6]</sup>. Ensuring that the definitions and measurement of poverty are inclusive of the complexity of children's lived experience, allows the opportunity to consider a range of potentially more effective policy solutions, that recognise the value of progressing children's rights, voice and participation in society, as well as improved human capital. Notably, children are not equally affected by poverty and there is considerable diversity in how a lack of money impacts on children's everyday lives; for instance, not all children have limited access to social activities, or indicate they are emotionally burdened with their families' financial worries <sup>[2]</sup>. Research on children's lived experience of poverty is sparse, particularly within an Australian context. In particular, it is largely unknown how the lived experience of poverty among children intersects with other inequalities they may be facing related to race, gender and disability; this should be the subject of future research. Additionally, further research could also articulate the compounding impact of poverty as it is experienced across various aspects of children's lives.



Children's views and experiences of poverty should be duly considered by policymakers when designing, implementing and evaluating programs and initiatives designed to alleviate child poverty <sup>[6]</sup>. This may include, for instance, the provision of support for families in poverty to meet the hidden costs of schooling <sup>[13]</sup>. Furthermore, policy makers and practitioners are encouraged to initiate their own consultations with children and young people, thus actively recognising the valuable contribution of their perspective and engagement as partners in ongoing efforts to eradicate poverty <sup>[6]</sup>. Indeed, children are the 'experts' of their own lives, and their voices need to be listened to and issues need to be viewed from their perspective, rather than thinking solely from a professional perspective and in terms of service solutions <sup>[23]</sup>. By promoting children's visibility and valuing their expert voice in these ways, we can gain a more complete understanding of the experience of child poverty. As Ridge (2003)<sup>[12]</sup> asserts, "without this more holistic approach to understanding children's lives, policies directed towards the alleviation of child poverty may run the risk of failing to respond adequately to those children's needs".

Integrating the multiple sources of knowledge and expertise that contribute to our understanding of the early years is necessary to achieve breakthrough impacts in early childhood. This entails a rethinking of what constitutes 'evidence' to incorporate practical on-the-ground insights and community-level knowledge <sup>[24, 25]</sup>. Moreover, a recognition of children and their communities

as sites of agency and producers of knowledge can lead to collective action to effect change through local solutions. Such collective knowledge sharing can also help shatter the 'culture of silence' and challenge the dominant discourses of blame and shame that characterise the lived experience of poverty <sup>[22]</sup>. As Lister (2015)<sup>[11]</sup> argues, people in poverty are frequently subjected to a process of 'othering' whereby the 'non-poor' treat the 'poor' as different and maintain a social distance that draws the line between 'us' and 'them', including through processes that objectify their experience and obscure their day-to-day suffering <sup>[11]</sup>. However, these dominant processes can be challenged by providing people in poverty with a 'voice', and acknowledging "the validity and value of the expertise born of experience"<sup>[11]</sup>. Additionally, portraying people in poverty as fellow citizens with agency can enable the promotion of alternative narratives of community pride, hope and aspiration <sup>[22]</sup>.

Through engaging children as partners in our efforts to eradicate child poverty, we can gain valuable insights into the realities of their everyday lives and very real costs of poverty they experience, the issues that matter to them, as well as potential solutions that are more likely to meet their needs. For instance, this can enable the development of specific child-centered policies that seek to improve their current situation and quality of life, while also complementing existing policy directives focused on reducing the prevalence of children living in poverty <sup>[2]</sup>. In this way, "children and young people have to be seen as part of the solution to child poverty and social exclusion – not the problem" <sup>[6]</sup>.

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