

Tasmania Anti-Poverty Week Launch, Hobart – 18 October 2022

Speech by the Commissioner for Children and Young People, Leanne McLean

Check against delivery

I acknowledge that I am on the land of the palawa people of lutruwita and specifically here, in nipaluna, the ancient lands of the muwinina people.

I acknowledge palawa elders, past, present, and emerging and any palawa people here today.

I acknowledge the more than 60,000 years they have raised and cared for their children in connection with their country and their culture.

I'd also like to acknowledge the children and young people of Tasmania – all 114,000 of them who are aged under 18 and whom I, like many of you, am working for – they are about a quarter of our population.

And of great importance today, in recognition and promotion of the aim of Anti-Poverty Week, is that we take a moment to think about the fact that around one in six Australian children lives in income poverty.

That means that around 19,000 of our 114,000 young Tasmanians are living in income poverty.

Anti-poverty week is important because it encourages us all to talk about poverty. It's a difficult subject, for many. And leaders, I'm sure would much prefer to focus on the positives of our state.

For example, we have a Strategy to improve the wellbeing of our children and young people in Tasmania and we have defined what wellbeing is. This is a powerful thing and a terrific step forward for all of us, especially our children.

However, our efforts to improve wellbeing for children, and indeed for our broader population, need a solid foundation in place. The Vision of the Strategy is that *Children and young people in Tasmania have what they need to grow and thrive*. Our efforts to achieve this Vision will be hampered by the fact that 19,000 children do not have access to the material basics needed for a good life.

Often we think about children living in poverty because parents are living in poverty and so there is an indirect impact for the children in their care. This may be true, but children living in poverty also experience its effects directly - through a lack of access to food, clothing, housing and healthcare.

The common measure of poverty based around household income includes that access to material basics underpins a child's ability to access most facets of a good life. Income is a useful measure and enables us to compare ourselves to other countries around the world.

But it is crude measure, particularly for children.

Poverty impacts children in so many other ways, and the work of Prof Sharon Bessell and her team at the Australian National University helps us to understand this better.

Poverty not only results in material deprivation – food, clothes, housing etc. It also results in opportunity deprivation, and relational deprivation, and I want to give some examples of these today, from the perspective of a child.

Opportunity deprivation, from a child's perspective, is not going to the doctor when you need to, because the cost of getting there is too much, or there might be no car, or no bus because the transport services where you live are thin on the ground. It's not going to school on the day of the school excursion because there's no money to pay. It's not going to school for a week, because there's no food for school lunches. Opportunity deprivation is all the barriers to quality services and activities that contribute to a good life.

Poverty also includes relational deprivation. Poverty-related stress can be particularly detrimental to relationships with family members and other important adults. For a child, this feels like not talking to your parent about the troubles you're having because you don't want to add to their stress. Or a parent being distracted because they are desperately seeking accommodation for their family or working out how to buy food. It can also look like a child not asking for help at school because they don't think they deserve it.

It's often these subtle, and structural deprivations that are overlooked when we talked about income poverty. The multi-dimensions of childhood poverty compound and can impact a child's overall wellbeing and outcomes in life.

The frustrating thing about poverty in a wealthy country like Australia, is that we know what the answers are to at least the material components of poverty. We've even trialled them during the pandemic. We raised income payments.

Work done by the Australia Institute suggests that the Coronavirus Supplement brought 4.1 per cent of Tasmanian children aged 14 and under out of poverty. That's almost 4,000 children!

An ABS survey done at the time indicated that the vast majority of Australians receiving the Coronavirus Supplement spent their stimulus payments on food and bills.

Again, from the perspective of a child, that means more, and healthier food in your tummy, and a less stressed household.

Then, sadly, at the stroke of a pen, we took the extra money away.

Anti-Poverty Week is just so important. It's a time to consider the realities of our society and to rally support for doing things differently, to support our entire society to thrive.

It's an uncomfortable week for those who want to focus on the good. And we should focus on the good, but we also cannot hide from the reality that we will not achieve our goals for the wellbeing of our population without talking about and tackling poverty.

This requires transformational change.

The New Zealanders, as they so often are, are showing us the way. They have legislated poverty reduction targets. I think it's time we got serious about this and did the same.

And why not start with targets for children – because after all, the real measure of our success is how well we look after the next generation.

It's also about ensuring child rights impact assessments for all policies that affect children *including* housing and homelessness, employment, education and care, and government benefits.

It's about ending the blame of individuals and addressing the underlying causes of poverty.

Ultimately, it's about building a community that truly places the rights and wellbeing of our children at its centre.

Leanne McLean, Commissioner for Children and Young People