Born into disadvantage—Australian children face growing inequality

Children of the Lucky Country? How Australian society has turned its back on children and why children matter, by Fiona Stanley, Sue Richardson and Margot Prior, Macmillan, Sydney 2005.

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Child health research professor Fiona Stanley, whom the Howard government named Australian of the Year in 2003, has co-authored *Children of the Lucky Country?* a work that brings together wide-ranging data concerning Australian children, including economic, physical and mental health indicators.

The authors are clearly disturbed by the escalating problems children face and the growth of social inequality. As the book's title implies, reality is increasingly at odds with the official myth of Australia as an egalitarian society.

While the work outlines a plethora of risk factors likely to lead to the development of childhood health and behavioural problems, the information it brings to light unambiguously shows that the greatest factor is worsening poverty.

One in seven Australians now live in poverty, with the gap between rich and poor children "actually growing larger," according to Stanley and co-writers, labour economics professor Sue Richardson and family and child development academic, Margot Prior.

They show that economic inequalities have a serious effect even before birth. They cite studies carried out recently in two Australian states. A Queensland study concluded: "Family income during pregnancy predicts child cognitive development and mental health at ages 5 and 14" with "the script for these children's lives ... substantially written by the time they reach the age of 14."

A Western Australian study reported: "Poor social and economic circumstance are the greatest threat to children's growth, launching children on low social and educational trajectories that persist until there is substantial intervention."

However, even minimal intervention by welfare agencies is increasingly unavailable, especially to the disadvantaged, with "many of the services that exist to manage such problems overwhelmed ..." resulting in a "crisis in children and youth".

As the authors point out, these developments are taking place despite tremendous technological advances and the unprecedented growth of knowledge about child and youth development.

"We know how crucial early child-brain development is for the intellectual, social, emotional and physical capacity needed if, as later adults, individuals are to participate in our society throughout their adult lives. We know ... but *we are failing to put this knowledge into action....* What is it about our society that is 'disabling', rather than 'enabling'?" they ask.

The authors stress the resilience of babies and children, with no single factor likely to make a difference in a child's life. However, they document the way in which poorer children are exposed to multiple risk factors, which later present health professionals with full-blown difficulties "more severe, more complex and more difficult to treat and manage than problems encountered 10-20 years ago".

For example, the rate of "low-birth-weight babies" due to prematurity or poor growth during pregnancy, a condition associated with poverty and disadvantage, is increasing in Australia (as it is in the United Kingdom and the United States). Infants born of low birth weight are susceptible to problems, including infections, cerebral palsy and high blood pressure later in life. While low-birth-weight babies born into advantaged families tend to do relatively well, most underweight babies are born into disadvantaged families.

The authors outline a range of physical problems, such as diabetes and obesity; motor disabilities such as cerebral palsy; increases in child abuse and neglect, emerging at increasing rates and impacting hardest on disadvantaged children. Alongside this trend are increasing rates of psychological and psychosocial problems, which again are observed more frequently in children "living in low-income, step/blended and sole parent families."

Due to completely inadequate mental health services—the authors estimate that "probably less than 5 percent" of sufferers obtain treatment—data on psychological problems among young

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people is incomplete. However, citing a Western Australian study, the authors report that while an alarming 15 percent of children from high socio-economic households suffer from mental health problems, this figure rose to a staggering 25 percent for children from the poorest fifth of households.

The one area in which more complete data is available is the suicide rate. It shows a four-fold increase since the 1960s in suicides among males aged 15 to 24 years and a doubling among females of the same age group. Experts consider the increase to mirror rises in the numbers of young people with psychological problems.

Educational opportunities, too, the authors show, are least available to those in most need, starting from kindergarten. “Those least likely to have pre-school opportunities are children from indigenous or immigrant backgrounds, those from rural or remote areas, those with socioeconomic disadvantages including unemployed parents and those with special needs.”

Recently compiled statistics show a growing disparity in literacy standards at primary school age, with those struggling in Year 3 even worse off by Year 5. Again, services are “patently inadequate” with at least two-thirds of those children who show early signs of behavioural and learning problems never reaching a functional level of literacy.

The authors examine the impact on children of demographic and workplace changes over the past 40 years. The most noticeable shift is the halving of the birth rate. Here the authors point to the significant changes that access to education, paid employment and contraception have made in the lives of women. However, they also examine the collapse in full-time employment and the growth of part-time, usually low-paid jobs; the increase and growing irregularity of working hours; greater job insecurity; and the reality that two incomes are needed to sustain a family.

Bound up with these trends is another factor examined in the book—the growing proportion of single-parent families. Single parents, usually mothers, now head 23 percent of Australian families with children. According to Stanley, Australia has a higher proportion of jobless families with children than most other countries. Half of single mothers do not have jobs, including 70 percent of those with children under five. While single mothers are frequently demonised in the media and by governments, the authors argue that the difficulties that often arise for them and their children result from poverty, not single-parenthood itself.

In the book’s preface, the authors explain that they considered that Stanley’s award of Australian of the Year created a platform they could utilise to inform the public about the situation confronting children. As a result, they present a graphic picture of Australia as an increasingly polarised society with children of the rich facing starkly different prospects to those of children of the poor.

The authors are, at times, capable of making blunt observations about the factors behind these trends: “(W)e now realise that preventing health problems will mostly come from the portfolios outside health; problems such as low birth weight, ear infections in Aboriginal children, obesity and exposure to violence in the home have their root causes in poverty and inequality, poor and overcrowded housing, poor education, unemployment and inadequate community resources to support parents with mental health problems or addictions and other major stresses.”

Stanley, Richardson and Prior pose the question: “What kind of society is good for children?” Heading their list of answers is the call for “equality”. “A society that is good for children is one with the smallest possible inequalities for children....”

Yet, the book fails to address the root causes of the widening social chasm, which lie in the increasing subordination of all aspects of life to market forces and the pursuit of corporate profit. Although on occasions the authors point to worldwide trends, they treat the relentless downward spiral in social services and working conditions as a natural and inevitable fact of life rather than a process produced by global capitalism. Because of globalisation, privatisation and deregulation, they write, “life has become much tougher for firms and for the people who work for them”.

The limitations of the book’s political perspective are revealed in its concluding chapters. The authors end up with long lists of “recommendations” for individual, organisational and government action, either to achieve minor reforms or to improve the prospects for parents’ own children. They appeal to the same official political establishment that has presided over these processes for decades, arguing that “the future economic prosperity of our nation depends upon us focusing more on the developmental health well-being of children”.

Their calls for parents to become more pro-active, and to “take advantage” of existing services such as “parenting centres” and “parent help lines”, can play into the hands of the corporate elite and its political representatives who seek to make individuals and families responsible for their own health, education and social welfare, justifying further cuts to social spending.

Calls for more pro-active parenting, or appeals to existing political parties will not create a society in which all children can flourish. Genuine social equality can only be established through a fundamental re-organisation of society so that social need rather than private profit is the overriding priority.

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