

More than 94,000 WA children living in poverty, report finds, sparking calls for early intervention

By [Keane Bourke](#)

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Olivia Lawrence first visited a Child and Parent Centre with her children about five years ago. (ABC News: Keane Bourke)

Olivia Lawrence's son Trey wasn't even a year old when she felt she was left with no options after a traumatic break-up. A knock on the door at one of WA's Child and Parent Centres changed the trajectory of her and her children's life.

She described that time as "rock bottom", at the end of a difficult eight-year relationship.

"I had one friend that was still hanging around that said to me, 'no, you're not going to crumble, we're going to do this together'," she said.

That friend introduced her to the Dudley Park Child and Parent Centre near Mandurah.

"As soon as we walked in, we just felt so welcomed and it was just so bright and so friendly," she said.

Key points:

- More than 94,000 WA children are believed to be living in poverty
- WA has a high rate of children under five living in severe poverty
- Fortnightly COVID supplements were a distinct help for children

"They just made you feel at home."

More than 94,000 Western Australian children currently live in poverty, meaning their family earns less than half of the median household income, a new report released today has highlighted.

The 'Reducing Poverty and Improving Child Development in WA' report, put together by Anglicare WA and early childhood and parent support service Ngala, also found about 11.4 per cent of WA children under five years old live in severe poverty, compared to 6.7 per cent nationally.

Early intervention changes lives

There are 22 Child and Parent Centres across WA, each operated in partnership between the WA government and social service providers.

Anglicare WA hoped building more of these centres would play a key role in helping reduce the number of children living in poverty in the state.

"What that means is that not only is their development being impacted now, but it will change the trajectory of their life," Anglicare CEO Mark Glasson said.



The CEO of Anglicare WA, Mark Glasson, says people's lives are shaped by their early years. (Supplied: Anglicare WA)

The head of Ngala, Fiona Beermier, said that was because the first 2,000 days of a child's life were the most crucial.

During that time, if children grow up in homes with low income, or with parents who have limited education, they often are not ready for school by the time they reach the classroom.

"That trajectory actually never corrects itself completely," Ms Beermier said.

"It might start to recover some of it, with intensive work, but it demonstrates why it's so important that early intervention, right back at the beginning, must be made available to all families.

"We will see generational developmental vulnerability if we don't break this cycle."

Fostering parenting skills and community

One of the solutions put forward by the report was providing a range of free services to try and help people break out of poverty.

"We know that they work," Mr Glasson said.

"In an area where we know there's disadvantage, we go in there and we do deliberate things to lift parenting skills and confidence."



Ms Lawrence says the centre has had big benefits for her and her children Jennifer, Trey and Jayceon. (ABC News: Keane Bourke)

Ms Lawrence said the Dudley Park centre, and the community around it, had left a major impact on her life.

Her children were able to play, learn and make friends before they started formal schooling.

Staff at the centre had also picked up that her son's language skills were delayed and were able to connect her with a speech pathologist.

"They had to go through a lot through separation with me and their dad, and at home it can be a stressful environment, especially if that's where all the attention [is]," Ms Lawrence said.

"So for children to be able to go to an environment where there's no issues and feel calm and relaxed, it makes a big difference and a big impact in your life, and it makes parenting so much easier.



Ms Lawrence says her three children have learned from their peers at the centre. (ABC News: Keane Bourke)

"They are watching other children with their parents and they're learning new skills by role modelling and listening and speaking and learning from each other."

Ms Lawrence said the centre also provided meaningful support for parents.

"It's like a big circle of just being able to be yourself and have no judgement," she said.

Ms Lawrence said she was amazed the centre was able to offer support for free, because even small payments could make other services unattainable.

"Sometimes it might only be a few dollars, but a few dollars for someone that doesn't work or doesn't have that extra income, that's a lot of money," she said.

Learnings from COVID payment

Providing families with more income support was another recommendation put forward by the report, highlighting the significant benefits that resulted from a \$550 per fortnight coronavirus supplement that was given to people on some government payments at the beginning of the pandemic.



Ngala CEO Fiona Beermier says the best chance to break the poverty cycle is when children are young. *(Supplied: Ngala)*

Responses from people who received the payment said they were able to purchase healthier food for their families, pay off debt and enrol their children in community sport, all leading to less stress.

One parent even reported being able to send their children to birthday parties "as I can afford to buy a gift and not go empty-handed".

"That's all stopped again because these families have been plunged back below the poverty line," Mr Glasson said.

"Poverty is a decision made by governments, it's not an individual fault."

But a spokesperson for Social Services Minister Anne Ruston said further increases to government payments in light of these results were not on the cards.

"This government has invested more in Australians doing tough such as our \$50 per fortnight increase to the rate of JobSeeker and related payments – the single largest increase in more than 30 years," she said.

"Our focus is now firmly on reopening the economy because we know the best form of welfare is a job."

Concern for regional areas

Another key concern raised in the report was the rates of disadvantage in regional WA.

It highlighted findings from an earlier report that identified Halls Creek and Kununurra as being among the areas with the highest rates of disadvantaged children in WA.



Halls Creek has been named as one of WA's most disadvantaged communities for children. (*Edward Tonkin*)

That report found about 20 per cent of children in those areas were "developmentally vulnerable" in two or more ways.

That is compared to a national average of 11.4 per cent.

"No child should have to live in that kind of setting," Ms Beermier said.