

COLAB POLICY PAPERS SERIES

POLICY PAPER 2: HOW ARE OUR CHILDREN DOING? THE DEVELOPMENTAL STATUS OF WA'S CHILDREN

Health: The key indicators that are available from the health sector are birthweight and immunization rates. While there is a lot of data on the health and development of individual children, it is often not collated at a population level or publicly available for analysis. WA is marginally behind the Australian average for immunization coverage at ages 1, 2 and 5, with these rates moving from 93.4 per cent for 1 year olds, to 92.8 per cent for 5 year olds. More than six per cent (6.5 per cent) of Australian babies are deemed to be of low birthweight, with little change in these figures over the last 10 years. Of note, low birthweight frequency is higher for mothers who smoked, were Indigenous, or from lower socio-economic status and re-mote communities.

IMPLICATIONS

Are things getting better? Although the developmental status of children in Western Australia appears similar to that in other states and territories, this is not a reason for complacency.

The available data shows across a range of measurements in Western Australia, one in five 4-year-old children are at risk and this vulnerability is more evident in Aboriginal, rural and remote populations and socio-economically and economically disadvantaged locations, or socially disengaged communities.

The total number of vulnerable children in WA has also increased since 2009, even though the proportion of children deemed vulnerable has declined marginally, showing although things are getting better for most, for some it is not. This is despite significant investment in children's services by governments.

If we are to improve the developmental status of Western Australia's children, we need a clear understanding of how many children are developmentally vulnerable, where they live and the circumstances of their families. The 2015 AEDC data identified 6,982 children as vulnerable in Western Australia. While that seems a lot, when the numbers are divided by region or community, the numbers don't seem that high. For example, there were 225 children living in the Pilbara region identified as being developmentally vulnerable. The clear implication for policy makers is that it should be possible to target interventions for every child who needs support.

It is unacceptable that one in five Western Australian children is developmentally vulnerable, especially where action can be taken that is focused and at minimal additional expense, to address this issue. We believe a critical analysis of Western Australia's early childhood service system is necessary to address the question of why things aren't getting better for some children, to ensure that all children have the best start in life.

In the next policy paper in this **CoLab** series, we shift focus to the services and programs that support young children and their families. Are they working? **POLICY PAPER 3** is titled **EARLY YEARS SERVICES IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA: WHAT ARE THE ISSUES?**

References and Acknowledgements

- National Reports on Schooling in Australia 2008 and 2016: ACARA
- Early Childhood Development in Western Australia – Australian Early Development Census 2015: Commonwealth of Australia and WA Department of Education, 2016
- Performance of Year 3, 5, 7 and 9 Students in WA Public Schools, 2016 NAPLAN: Department of Education of Western Australia
- Australian Government Department of Health
- Australian Institute of Health and Welfare

Writers

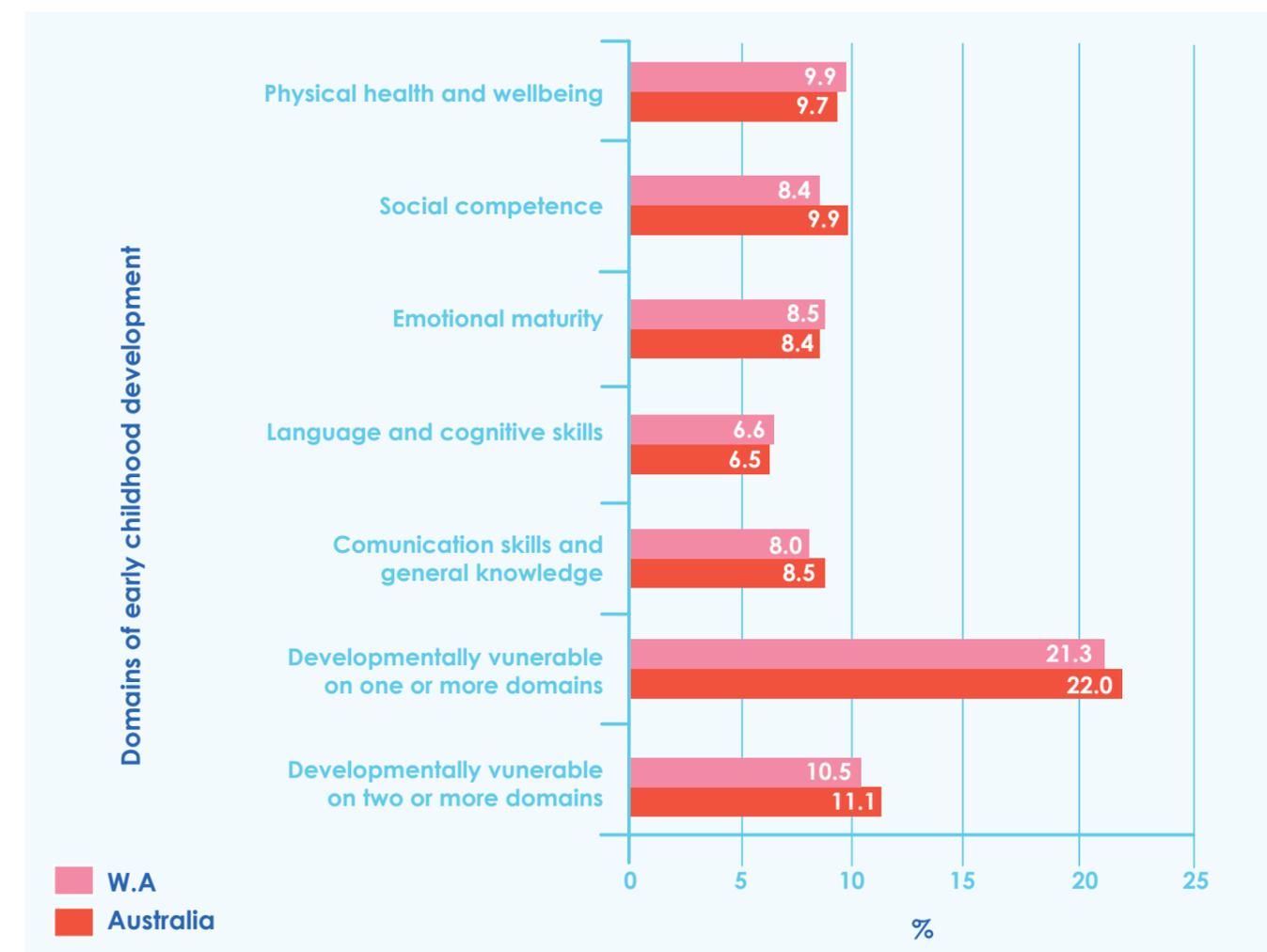
- CoLab: David Ansell and Jonathan Cook

- Reading is a key overall indicator of literacy and is shown in the table above. It shows that most children in Western Australia are on track.
- "Below National Minimum Standards" is acknowledged by ACARA and the WA Department of Education as reflective of students who "may require targeted intervention" and are "at risk of being unable to progress satisfactorily at school without targeted intervention."
- "At National Minimum Standards" students are acknowledged by ACARA and the WA Department of Education with this qualification: "It should be noted that students who are performing at the national minimum standard may also require additional assistance to enable them to achieve their potential." Therefore a child who performs 'At National Minimum Standard' is still at risk.

In the second paper in the series we look at the development and learning status of Western Australia's children

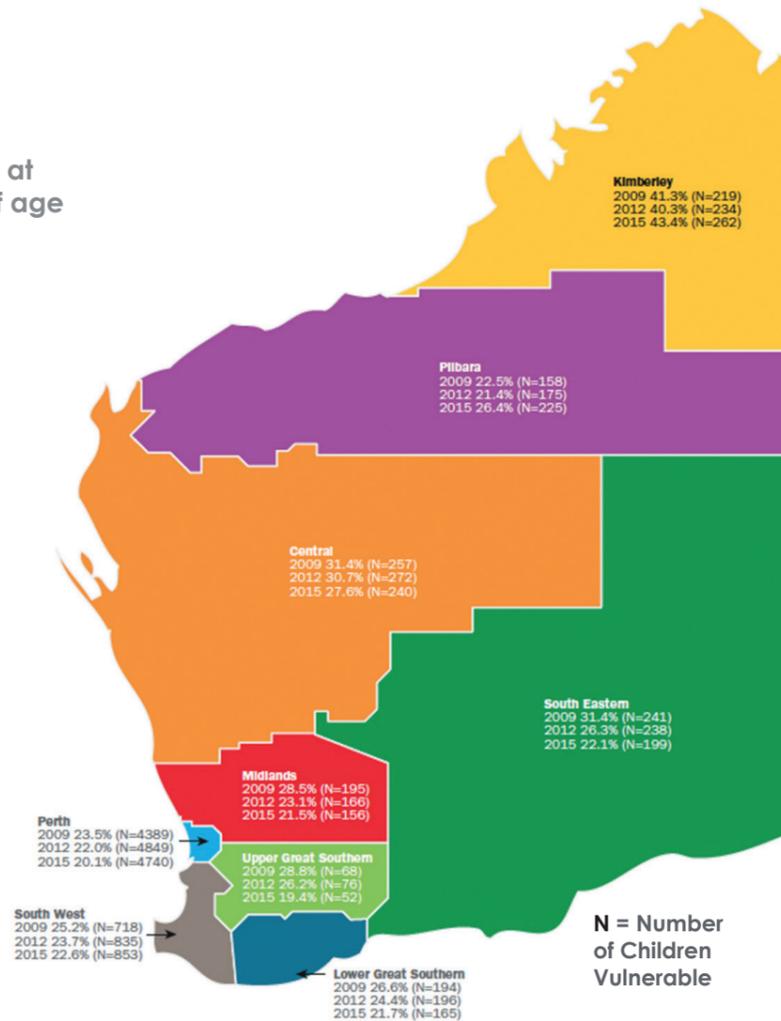
What is the development and learning status of Western Australia's children? How many of our children are developmentally vulnerable? Understanding this is a necessary starting point for analysing and developing current policy and practice. While information on childhood health, development and learning is readily available, it is not often collated and summarised. Here we offer highlights and snapshots, to make the necessary key points.

PERCENTAGE OF DEVELOPMENTALLY VULNERABLE CHILDREN BY DOMAIN FOR WESTERN AUSTRALIA AND AUSTRALIA IN 2015



PERCENTAGE AND NUMBER OF WESTERN AUSTRALIAN CHILDREN WHO WERE DEVELOPMENTALLY VULNERABLE ON ONE OR MORE AEDC DOMAINS BY REGION

In 2015: 6,892 children at risk in WA at 4 years of age



A SNAPSHOT OF WA'S YOUNG CHILDREN

The best available indicator of the developmental status of Western Australian children is the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC). This is completed by teachers for all children at 4 to 5 years of age, assessing their development across five developmental domains: physical; social; emotional; language and cognitive; and communication skills and general knowledge. While it is not possible to comment here on each domain, the graphics below taken from the 2015 AEDC Report provide a snapshot.

What does the AEDC data tell us about the learning and development of 0 to 4-year-old children in Western Australia? The following points highlight the key issues.

One in five are vulnerable. While approximately four out of five children are developmentally on-track, one in five are not. The AEDC data shows that 21.3 per cent are at risk in one or more of the five domains of vulnerability measured, with 10.5 per cent in two or more of the domains. In individual domains, vulnerability rates range between 6.6 per cent and 9.9 per cent.

It matters where you live. If you are a child in the Kimberley, Goldfields, Midwest or Pilbara, you are 1.5 to 2 times more likely to be developmentally vulnerable than in other regions of the state. Further, the percentage of children that are developmentally vulnerable in the Kimberley and Pilbara is increasing while it is generally decreasing in other regions.

Income matters. AEDC data shows a relationship between family income and the developmental vulnerability of children. For example, in metropolitan Perth, the lower the average income of a community, the more likely the community's children are to be developmentally vulnerable. This information demonstrates the context in which a child lives, including household income and location, reflect in the development of children and later life outcomes.

Aboriginal children experience the highest rates of developmental vulnerability. The percentage of Aboriginal children that are developmentally vulnerable remains much higher than for other children. Forty eight per cent of all Aboriginal children are developmentally vulnerable in one domain compared to 22 per cent for non-Aboriginal children, while 38 per cent are developmentally vulnerable in two or more domains compared to 19 per cent for non-Aboriginal children.

WHAT DOES OTHER DATA SAY ABOUT CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT?

While the AEDC is the best available indicator of the developmental status of Western Australian children, there are gaps in our understanding of childhood development. At its heart, the AEDC is a snapshot completed by teachers based on their observations of 4 year old children but it is not a holistic assessment of children's development. Other data from the health and education sectors can be used to supplement our understanding but the picture remains incomplete.

Education: There is no comparable information to the AEDC regarding the educational development of 0 to 4 year old children in Western Australia. The earliest key indicator in education occurs in Year 3, when children are approximately 8 years of age, through the NAPLAN testing regime. Research establishes that Year 3 NAPLAN results are indicative not only of a child's engagement in education programs in the early years of schooling but even more significantly, the life experiences of children through their crucial developmental years from conception to birth.

When considering the NAPLAN data, a key statistic is the number of students at or below the national minimum standard for reading in Year 3. The reason for including students that are at the national benchmark is the Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority consider children performing at the National Minimum Standard may require additional assistance to enable them to achieve their potential. They can therefore be considered at risk. This is explained in the footnote below.

NAPLAN YEAR 3 DATA, WESTERN AUSTRALIA, Government Schools 2016 (extrapolated figures)

NAPLAN Domain	At or Below National Minimum Standards:	At or Below National Minimum Standards:
	ALL YEAR 3 Students	ABORIGINAL YEAR 3 Students
Reading: Total students = 25,310	18.7% = 4,733 children	56.7% = 1,173 children
Numeracy: Total students = 25,310	19.3% = 4,885 children	53.0% = 1,096 children

Analysis of NAPLAN data shows a strikingly similar pattern to the AEDC data. Approximately 20 per cent (18.7 per cent) are either below or at minimum standards for reading and are therefore deemed to be 'at risk'; there is a clear 'gap' between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children; and children in low income, rural and remote communities perform below children in other WA communities.

There has been only marginal (although measurable) improvement over the 2008 – 2016 period. In 2008, the equivalent data had WA students at 10.6 per cent below the national minimum standard in reading, compared to 7.8 per cent for Australia and 42.7 per cent for Aboriginal students in WA, compared to 31.7 per cent for Australia.