## The impact of multiple disadvantage on children’s social and emotional difficulties

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Using the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) and *Footprints in Time*, a comparison of social and emotional difficulties scores for Indigenous and non-Indigenous children shows that Indigenous children on average have much higher levels of difficulties. Indigenous children also experience a disproportionate level of disadvantage. This research examines the extent to which disadvantage affects social and emotional outcomes for Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian children.

There is no generally accepted definition of disadvantage, although there are certain elements that are common in definitions and measures across a wide range of studies and publications. In the report ‘How Australia is faring’, the multiple disadvantage headline indicator is defined as ‘the proportion of people aged 18 to 64 years experiencing three or more of six disadvantages’ (Australian Social Inclusion Board 2012). The six disadvantages are across three domains: economic (joblessness, low income), social (inability to get support in a crisis, feeling unsafe at home after dark) and personal (low educational attainment, poor health) (Australian Social Inclusion Board 2012). Using this measure, there were around 640,000 Australians (or 4.6 per cent of the Australian population) who experienced multiple disadvantage in 2010 (Australian Social Inclusion Board 2012).

But are these measures of disadvantage relevant in relation to developing policies to address the gap in social and emotional wellbeing between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children?

Low educational attainment is an often-cited indicator of disadvantage. However, in 2010 people experiencing multiple disadvantages were more likely to have completed their Year 10 School Certificate or equivalent than people in 2006 were (Australian Social Inclusion Board 2012). Clearly, the goal posts are changing; higher education is no longer the advantage it was in protecting against disadvantage. Low educational attainment is also commonly cited as having an adverse effect on child outcomes. However, data from *Footprints in Time* has shown that when other factors are accounted for, the primary carers’ level of education does not have a significant association with social and cognitive outcomes for Indigenous children. Conversely, a family member reading to the child contributes to a positive outcome, suggesting it is a matter of what parents do rather than what parents know that plays a significant role in their children’s outcomes (FaHCSIA 2013).

Another commonly accepted disadvantage indicator is low income. However, analysis from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey has shown that, although the two are often linked, low income does not necessarily equate to financial stress. For example, a pensioner may have low income but their fixed expenses (such as mortgage repayments) are likely to be less and therefore they may not experience financial stress (Wilkins et al. 2006).

It seems that circumstances that are generally accepted to lead to poor outcomes are not necessarily good predictors of poor outcomes occurring for children in *Footprints in Time*. So how does multiple disadvantage drive poor social and emotional outcomes for children and why do some children have good outcomes despite experiencing multiple disadvantage?

This article examines whether the various measures of disadvantage are associated with the social and emotional wellbeing outcomes of Indigenous and non-Indigenous children in Australia, as represented by *Footprints in Time* and LSAC.

### Methodology

This analysis uses cross-sectional and longitudinal data from the first four waves of LSAC and *Footprints in Time*. At the time of Wave 4, LSAC children in the younger cohort and *Footprints in Time* children in the older cohort were both aged around 6 to 7 years. This gives a sample size of 4,242 in LSAC and 534 in *Footprints in Time*.

Children’s social and emotional wellbeing is measured using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) (Goodman 2012). It allows attribution of a score across five domains of social and emotional wellbeing: emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity, peer problems and prosocial behaviour. The first four domain scores are added together to provide an overall social and emotional difficulties score out of 40. Higher scores indicate greater levels of difficulties. The fifth scale is a measure of the child’s social skills and provides a score out of 10 (refer to Appendix B for further information).

Due to the design and weights applied to the LSAC data, it is representative of the Australian population. The *Footprints in Time* data, on the other hand, was not designed to be representative. The total *Footprints in Time* sample includes about 5 per cent of the Australian Indigenous children in this age group.

All children in *Footprints in Time* are identified by their primary carer as being Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander or both. However, their primary carer may be neither. The LSAC sample also includes some children identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. These have been removed from the LSAC data for the purposes of this analysis.

The measures of disadvantage are defined within both datasets as follows:

* **SEIFA** (Socio-economic Index for Areas—Advantage and Disadvantage) is a measure that allows comparison across all geographic areas in Australia in terms of advantage and disadvantage.
* **A jobless household** is one in which neither the primary carer or, where applicable, their partner have a job at the time of the Wave 4 interview.
* **Financial stress** is a measure derived from seven questions about whether the family has experienced different types of financial stress, such as being unable to pay bills, being unable to heat the home or having to do without meals. ‘Yes’ responses are then added to give a total financial stress indicator. For this analysis, any family experiencing one or more indicator is considered to have experienced financial stress.
* Being a **single parent** has been defined as the primary carer not having a partner in the household. It should be noted that this does not necessarily mean that there are no other adults in the household, and that partners in a household are not necessarily the study child’s biological, foster or adoptive parent.
* **Low educational attainment** has been defined as having attained a level of education of Year 11 or below and not attained any subsequent qualifications.
* **Poor health** is based on a global health question asking primary carers how good they believe their health to be. Primary carers who rated their health as fair or poor as opposed to good, very good or excellent are considered to have poor health.
* For *Footprints in Time*, **low income** is defined as receiving $600 a week or less after deductions are taken out. For LSAC, the cut-off is the same but is based on household income before tax. Therefore, the cut-off for low income in LSAC has been set at $670 to provide a net of $600.[[1]](#footnote-1)

While the number of children in the household is not necessarily seen as a measure of disadvantage, it does highlight the need for increased financial resources. The LSAC measure includes the number of siblings in the household (with one added for the study child) and the *Footprints in Time* measure is the total number of children (anyone under 16 years) in the household.

### Results

The following table clearly shows that *Footprints in Time* children experience much higher levels of disadvantage than the LSAC children. The results for the Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) Advantage and Disadvantage reinforce that LSAC is representative of the overall population. However, *Footprints in Time* children are over-represented in the lower half of the population with 80 per cent living in areas in the bottom 5 SEIFA deciles.

**Table 50: Percentage of children experiencing different types of disadvantage**

| **Measure of disadvantage** | **LSAC** | **Footprints in Time** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| SEIFA Advantage & Disadvantage (bottom 5 deciles) | 50.1 | 80.0 |
| Jobless household | 11.1 | 39.4 |
| Financial stress | 21.6 | 45.0 |
| Single parent primary carer | 16.3 | 39.0 |
| Low educational attainment of primary carer | 43.3 | 56.1 |
| Poor health | 8.4 | 13.5 |
| Low income (<$600 net per week) | 13.4 | 41.9 |
| Age of primary carer, years | 37.3 | 35.1 |
| Average number of children in household | 2.6 | 3.1 |

On average, *Footprints in Time* children also live in households with greater numbers of children and have primary carers who are younger than their LSAC counterparts.

Using scores from the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), Table 51 compares the average social and emotional difficulties scores in each domain for children in both studies. Note that each domain is a score out of 10. Each domain has a different level that is considered to be normal. The SDQ is used worldwide and norms have been developed for each country. Australia’s norms are based on a cohort from Victoria and, while the cohort may have included Indigenous children, there are no norms specifically developed for Indigenous children. While the norms are used in this research, we note that there is no guidance on how accurately they reflect difficulties in Indigenous populations. With that caveat in mind, all average scores in Table 51 are within the Australian norms. Children with total difficulties scores of 13 and below are considered to be in the ‘normal’ range so while both groups are on average within this range, the *Footprints in Time* children tend to have greater levels of social and emotional difficulties.

**Table 51: Average scores for Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire**

| **Domains** | **LSAC** | **Footprints in Time** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Emotional symptoms | 1.7 | 2.7 |
| Conduct problems | 1.5 | 2.6 |
| Peer problems | 1.3 | 2.1 |
| Hyperactivity | 3.5 | 4.7 |
| **Total difficulties** | **8.1** | **12.2** |
| Prosocial behaviour | 8.4 | 8.7 |

Overall, children in *Footprints in Time* experience much higher levels of difficulties than do children in LSAC. Yet despite this, children in *Footprints in Time* have slightly higher average prosocial scores than children in LSAC. Prosocial behaviour includes being considerate, sharing and being helpful and kind.

Bivariate ordinary least squares (OLS) regression with each of the measures of disadvantage shows a significant association with difficulties scores for all of the measures in LSAC. In contrast, for *Footprints in Time* difficulties scores only demonstrate a statistical significance for low socio-economic status, living in a jobless households, experiencing financial stress, poor primary carer health and low income. Having a primary carer who is a lone parent or has a low level of education is not significantly related to children’s difficulties scores.

Table 52 shows the results from a multiple OLS regression model for each study using all the disadvantage measures shown in Table 50. No other control variables are included.

**Table 52: Association of measures of disadvantage on children’s SDQ difficulties scores[[2]](#footnote-2)**

| **Measure of disadvantage** | **LSAC** | **Footprints in Time** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| SEIFA Advantage & Disadvantage (bottom 5 deciles) | 0.80\*\*\* | 1.17 |
| Jobless household | 1.34\*\*\* | 0.26 |
| Financial stress | 1.52\*\*\* | 1.74\*\*\* |
| Single parent primary carer | 1.26\*\*\* | –0.26 |
| Low educational attainment of primary carer | 0.94\*\*\* | 0.43 |
| Poor health of primary carer | 1.68\*\*\* | 2.55\*\*\* |
| Low income (<$600 net pw) | –0.17 | 0.48 |
| Number of observations2 | 3,799 | 437 |
| Adjusted R2 | 0.0829 | 0.0471 |
| \*\*\*p<0.001; \*\*p<0.01; \*p<0.05. | | |

The numbers show the average change in scores of children experiencing that type of disadvantage and the stars indicate that the difference is statistically significant. That is, in LSAC a child living in an area in the bottom 5 SEIFA deciles has an average difficulties score of 0.80 points higher than a child living in an area in the top 5 deciles. Of the seven variables, six are significant for LSAC but only two are significant for *Footprints in Time*. Remembering that increases in SDQ scores reflect greater levels of difficulties, the results suggest that the presence of all but one of the measures of disadvantage (low income) are associated with increased social and emotional difficulties for LSAC children. The effect of low income is likely to have been moderated by the inclusion of other variables such as joblessness, financial stress and SEIFA. The greatest increases in scores are associated with poor health of the primary carer and financial stress, which are the only two measures that also have a significant association with social and emotional difficulties scores in *Footprints in Time*. The effect size is also greater for *Footprints in Time* children than it is for LSAC children. This means that these two disadvantages are associated with larger increases in difficulties score for *Footprints in Time* children than for LSAC children.

This difference between the two groups in the number of significant indicators may be due to the comparatively high proportion of children living with these disadvantages. If everyone around a child lives with similar levels of disadvantage, that child may not recognise the particular circumstance as a disadvantage. Redmond and Skattebol (2014) found that children’s experience of poverty does not concern a lack of things but exclusion, especially from participation in activities and events that other young people take for granted.

These results suggest that either these measures of disadvantage do not have the same effect on social and emotional difficulties scores for non-Indigenous and Indigenous children or they do not capture the effect for Indigenous children.

### Conclusion

While many of the disadvantage indicators used to target those in need of economic buffering and additional services do indeed have an impact on the social and emotional wellbeing of Australian children in general, the same cannot be said of Indigenous children. This suggests that policies aimed at counteracting these disadvantages directly may not have a positive impact in reversing the high levels of social and emotional difficulties experienced by Indigenous children.

While many of the circumstances used as indicators of disadvantage are likely to lead to worse social and emotional outcomes for children, it is generally due to the experience of the negative events they can trigger rather than the presence of the circumstances themselves. For example, low-income levels may lead to financial stress, which can in turn have negative effects on the child’s social and emotional wellbeing. However, if financial stress is not actually experienced due to, for example, the parent’s ability to budget or receiving services in kind, the negative impact is less likely to occur due to low income. Additionally, if children are not being ‘left out’ through not having a similar standard of living or not being able to join in the same activities as their peers, low income is not likely to be recognised by them as a disadvantage and therefore unlikely to be associated with changes in their social and emotional wellbeing.

### References

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1. This was calculated using www.paycalculator.com.au. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Lack of significance for *Footprints in Time* may be partially explained by the relatively small sample size; however, variables for the single parent primary carer and low educational attainment are not significant even in the bivariate models, suggesting that the smaller sample size is not the only explanation. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)