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Measuring Multidimensional Child Poverty in Australia

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ABSTRACT

That poverty is multidimensional is now well established. Multidimensional assessment of poverty provides the opportunity to measure poverty in ways that inform policy and reflect what matters most to people experiencing it. However, challenges remain both in determining the dimensions of poverty that should be assessed and in ensuring relevant data are available to reliably measure across multiple dimensions. These challenges are particularly acute in regard to child poverty, and too often, child poverty is measured using proxies that are not appropriate or in ways that are not child-centred. Fifty years on from the Henderson Inquiry, Australia does not currently have an agreed-upon definition or measure of poverty (for children or adults). This creates an opportunity to develop a multidimensional measure of poverty that is child-centred and able to provide information to inform policies and services. In considering child poverty, we define a child as under the age of fifteen years. This article explores why it is important to measure the multidimensional nature of child poverty and considers the data that are currently available. This study has been conducted by the Children's Policy Centre at the Australian National University. All authors were employed by the Children's Policy Centre while undertaking this study.

1 | Introduction

Poverty has high personal and societal costs. The effects of poverty on children's development, health and learning are of particular concern, due to both the impacts on individuals *and* the long-term social and economic consequences (Parolin et al. 2024). Vandermoortele (2012, p. 4) has argued that 'No [poverty reduction] strategy will be more effective and efficient than to give each child a good start in life'. The impacts of growing up in poverty are well-documented, with adverse effects during childhood and into the future (Ridge 2013). Poverty compromises children's academic attainment (Hair et al. 2015; Morrissey et al. 2014); health (Fraser 2011; A. R. Lee et al. 2023; H. Lee et al. 2021); and has both short-term and lasting effects on children's stress response, brain and immune systems (Schmidt et al. 2021). Poverty also denies children's human rights, as set down in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and ratified by Australia in 1990. The UNCRC entitles children to a 'standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development (Article 27.1); healthcare services (Article 24); education (Article 28) and leisure, play and recreational activities (Article 31), all of which are compromised when children and their families are in poverty. The UNCRC also obliges States Parties to recognise that every child has the right to benefit from social security (Article 26). The low level of working-age government benefits in Australia over time and across successive governments (Phillips and Narayanan 2021) has resulted in the violation of Article 26 in particular, as well as other rights highlighted above. The urgent need to address child poverty in Australia was highlighted in the 2024 report of the recent Senate Community Affairs References Committee (2024) inquiry into the Extent and Nature of Poverty in Australia, with the Committee recommending that 'the Australian Government takes action to reduce child poverty.'

To fulfil this recommendation, and to address the harms to which children are exposed as a result of poverty, both a

definition of child poverty and a means of measuring it are urgently required. While the UNCRC defines a child as under the age of 18 years, for the purposes of defining and assessing child poverty, we define a child as below the age of fifteen years, remaining consistent with the age categories used by the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) and the University of New South Wales Poverty and Inequality Partnership in measuring income poverty in Australia.

This article firstly maps what we currently know about income poverty and children. The shift towards multidimensional definitions and measures of poverty is then explored. We then share the *More for Children* research as a means of defining and measuring multidimensional child poverty. The MOR Framework is then introduced, a three-dimensional framework for understanding, measuring and responding to child poverty. The final sections discuss the dearth of relevant, child-centred data to measure multidimensional child poverty. Finally, we highlight the potential that the More for Children research and the MOR Framework offer for conceptualising a definition of child poverty and as a way forward for measuring multidimensional child poverty.

2 | Income Poverty and Children

Lack of income is central to understanding and responding to poverty. There is a material core of poverty that is closely associated with inadequate money to cover essential items (Productivity Commission 2024; Lister 2021). Measures of income poverty enable comparison across place, including international comparison, and over time, if definitions and methodologies of measurement are consistent (Chen and Corak 2008).

Income-based measures identify the money available to a household, including from employment and government financial assistance, and reveal the proportion of children living in low-income families. In Australia, poverty is generally indicated by households that are 50% below the median income, the measure adopted by the University of New South Wales and Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) Poverty and Inequality Partnership, and commonly used by the OECD. Before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated restrictions, 13.6% of Australians lived in relative income poverty. Based on 2019 data, households in the highest 10% of income had an 'average after tax income of $5200 per week; over two and a half times more than the middle 20% ($2000) and seven times that of the lowest 20% ($800)' (Davidson et al. 2023). Here, income reveals both the material deprivation of some individuals and households and also the unequal distribution of income across society.

Income poverty is higher among children under the age of 15 years compared with the overall population. For example, in 2019/2020, the child poverty rate was 16.6 percent while the average poverty rate was 13.4 percent (Davidson et al. 2023). This is due to the impacts of raising children on labour market participation, particularly for women, and the costs of raising children (Commission 2024; Davidson et al. 2023). Higher levels of child poverty also result from insufficient levels of government income support for families on low incomes, which is most apparent for sole-parent (usually sole-mother) families.

In 2019/2020, 761,000 children (or 16.6% of those under the age of 15 years) lived in income poverty. For sole-parent families, the number is far higher, with 39% of children in sole-parent families growing up in income poverty. The high levels of income poverty among sole-parent families reflect the inadequacy of government income support and the failure of the child support system (Cook 2021). They also reflect the nature of poverty governance in Australia since the mid-1990s, whereby government income support for sole-parent households and, to some extent, all households dependent on government benefits, has been focused on compliance and (re)entry to the labour market by parents, rather than ensuring children's human right to an adequate standard of living (Goodin 2006; Saunders 2002). Notably, Article 27 of the UNCRC identifies parents as having primary responsibility to 'secure, within their abilities and financial capacities, the conditions of living necessary for the child's development.' However, states have the responsibility to provide material assistance and support programs, 'in accordance with national conditions and within their means' (Article 27.3). Given both the wealth of Australia and the sophisticated nature and potential of the tax and transfer system, the failure to redress child poverty reflects policy choices and underlying ideologies, rather than inability on the part of successive governments to significantly reduce levels of income poverty amongst children over the past three decades.

In addition to experiencing income poverty during childhood, those who grow up in poverty are more likely to experience poverty as adults (Bird 2007; Wagmiller and Adelman 2009). There is also evidence to indicate that intergenerational poverty is mitigated or exacerbated by welfare and employment policies and tax and transfer systems (Parolin et al. 2024). In Australia, people in the lowest two income deciles experience the 'stickiness' of poverty (Productivity Commission 2024). The Productivity Commission (2024, 17) observes that low income may prevent people from accessing the opportunities that enable a shift out of poverty; moreover, low income limits the extent to which parents can support opportunities for their children.

The Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey provides data that enables an understanding of the nature and extent of monetary poverty and material deprivation, which is closely associated with income poverty, and identifies items and activities that are unaffordable. While HILDA does not directly identify the number of people living in poverty, the data provided enable researchers to derive participants' poverty status. Notably, the first 22 waves of HILDA data, show the intransigence of poverty, particularly for sole-parent families (Wilkins et al. 2024).

Significantly, child poverty declined as a result of the Coronavirus Supplements, introduced by the Commonwealth Government in response to the economic hardship caused by COVID-19 responses (Naidoo et al. 2022). The removal of supplements in late 2021 resulted in child poverty returning to the persistently high rates that existed before COVID-19, indicating both the significance of government income support and the lack of political will to significantly reduce child income poverty (Bessell and Vuckovic 2023).

As discussed here, income measures of child poverty reveal a good deal, both about the extent of poverty and the ways in

which policies, particularly in regard to government income support, shape child poverty. Income measures also provide data for tracking progress or otherwise over time. Yet, as discussed next, there are dimensions of poverty that income measurement cannot reveal, provoking a shift towards multidimensional definitions and measures of child poverty.

3 | Multidimensional Poverty

The multidimensional turn in definitions and measures of poverty provides the opportunity to measure poverty in ways that inform policy and reflect what matters most to people experiencing it. Dominant approaches to multidimensional poverty measurement, such as the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI), are significantly shaped by the theoretical work of Amartya Sen (Alkire 2005). Poverty is, according to Sen, 'inescapably multidimensional' (Sen 2000), it is also characterised as 'achieving absolutely less because of falling behind others' (Sen 1983). Approaches to measuring multidimensional poverty, following a Capability Approach, emphasise the fundamental role of individual freedoms and opportunities in achieving a life free from poverty and deprivation (Sen 1999). In translating Sen's ideas into the global Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI), three dimensions – living standards, health, and education – have been identified as critical both for assessing poverty and for enabling conditions that support human flourishing (Alkire et al. 2015).

Also influential in the shift to understanding poverty as multidimensional is a human rights approach, which is distinct from but often closely associated with a Capability Approach (Elson et al. 2014; Sen 2005; Vizard 2020). The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has described poverty as characterised by 'a range of interrelated and mutually reinforcing deprivations', including nonmaterial deprivations such as stigma, discrimination, insecurity and social exclusion (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights n.d., p. 4). The relationship between poverty and shame is also highlighted by Sen, particularly in his emphasis on the relational features of deprivation. The nonmaterial dimensions of poverty are often recognised as important in conceptualising and defining multidimensional poverty, but are excluded from measurement due to data limitations (Alkire 2007).

The groundbreaking work of Peter Townsend (1979) conceptualised poverty as multidimensional, resulting in exclusion from social life due to a lack of income, as well as access to education, healthcare and recreational activities. Significantly, in highlighting exclusion from social life and the shame and stigma that often characterise poverty, Townsend highlighted its relative nature, which is intertwined with being able to fulfil 'the obligations, associations and customs' required for full membership of society (Townsend 1985, 661). Here, Townsend recognises not only the multidimensional but also the relational nature of poverty.

The concept of multidimensional poverty is especially relevant when considering child poverty, not least because a 'monetary approach neglects to recognise that children's well-being also depends on nonmarket-based goods', including basic services and safe spaces for play (Minujin et al. 2006). While child income poverty can be defined as the number of children living in households below a poverty line (as discussed above), measuring child poverty through household income provides only partial understanding of children's experiences of poverty (Main 2018a). Additionally, assessing household income does not allow for the importance of children's subjective assessment of their deprivation or wellbeing (Main 2019b). Significantly, however, the same concerns apply to multidimensional measures of poverty that take the household as the unit of analysis and fail to provide sufficiently nuanced insight into the distribution of resources among family members, as well as the different experiences of children and adults. Main (2018a) has noted that parents often have a lower standard of living in contexts of poverty because they prioritise children, while the problems children encounter are often a result of their age and stage of development.

While multidimensional measures of poverty have the potential to be more child-centred than income-based measures, those that are conceptualised around an acceptable adult standard of living or rely on data that are adult-centred may not provide an adequate or appropriate evidence base for quantifying, understanding, and responding to child poverty. When children's experiences of poverty are centred, the nonmaterial dimensions of poverty – particularly the ways in which poverty shapes valued and valuable relationships – come to the fore (Bessell 2019, 2022; Ridge 2011). Few, if any, measures of poverty assess the ways in which poverty places pressure on children's relationships.

For children, the experience and outcomes of education are essential in both the present and the future but are often compromised by poverty (Lamb et al. 2020; Parker et al. 2019). Indicators that focus on access, for example school attendance or number of years completed, do not assess the forms of deprivation that are most acute for children now and in their future pathways, notably the quality and nature or experience of education. This is especially important, given that inequities in the quality and nature of education are essential to understanding different outcomes for children from low and high socioeconomic backgrounds (Perry et al. 2024; Perry and McConney 2010). While data on school attendance or completion are generally readily available, they miss what matters most to children and are unable to provide an adequate information base for policy action.

The development of measures that are specific to child poverty have sought to overcome some of these challenges and inadequacies. In the early 2000s, Gordon and colleagues developed what is often called the 'Bristol method'. Based on Townsend's theory of relative deprivation (Townsend 1979) and a children's rights framework (Gordon et al. 2003), the Bristol method used the definition of poverty adopted at the World Social Summit in Copenhagen in 1995, whereby poverty includes not only income but access to social services and the fulfillment of basic human needs (United Nations: Department of Economic and Social Affairs 1996, p. 57). Absolute poverty is 'a condition characterised by severe deprivation of basic human needs, including food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, health, shelter, education and information. It depends not only on

income but also on access to social services' (UN 1996, 57). The Bristol method is significant as the first attempt to measure child poverty in the global South, using internationally agreed definitions (Gordon et al. 2003). It identified eight deprivations associated with multidimensional child poverty: food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, health, shelter, education, information, access to services. Each deprivation is ranked as mild, moderate or severe, along a continuum from no deprivation to extreme deprivation (Gordon et al. 2003). Importantly, the Bristol method sought to address the shortcomings of other child poverty measures, particularly the failure to provide a sound theoretical basis for measurement and the failure to provide a definition of poverty (Gordon and Nandy 2012).

In the Australian context, Saunders et al. (2019) have argued for the importance of the views and experiences of children and young people shaping child poverty measurement, drawing on groundbreaking work around child-centred indicators of wellbeing (Ben-Arieh et al. 2014; Ben-Arieh and Frønes 2007; Fattore and Mason 2018). Central to these new approaches, which are significantly influenced by ideas of children's human rights, is the view that children's own perceptions matter and should be taken into account (Redmond 2008). Saunders et al. (2019) developed their Child Deprivation Index from the starting point of a series of focus group discussions, designed to determine what children and young people considered a 'normal kind of life'. They then developed a survey based on 24 items derived from the literature and the focus group discussions. The research was powerful in demonstrating the importance of often neglected deprivations – such as subjective health status, adult joblessness and family instability – as central to children's experiences of poverty.

From the preceding review, we can see that income poverty does provide important insights into child poverty but is insufficient. Additional, multidimensional approaches to measuring child poverty are needed but must be child-centred and based on a justifiable definition. The following sections introduce the MOR Framework, which provides a means of not only measuring but understanding and responding to child poverty in Australia (and potentially beyond), based on three dimensions of poverty.

4 | More for Children: A Child-Centred Approach to Defining and Measuring Child Poverty

4.1 | Research Methodology

The More for Children research project commenced in 2021, building on earlier research that highlighted the ways in which community-level advantage or disadvantage shapes childhoods in Australia (Bessell and Mason 2014), early consultations with service providers and policy-makers in Australia on the need for a child-centred understanding of poverty, and research on children's experiences of poverty in Indonesia (Bessell 2022). The More for Children research adopted a rights-based, child-centred methodology (Bessell and O'Sullivan 2024a, 2024b) to undertake qualitative research with children aged between six and sixteen years, the majority aged between six and twelve years. A total of 162 children participated in the research in two regional communities (one in Victoria and one in Tasmania) and two urban communities (one in Western Australia and one in the ACT). The research methodology was designed to create the opportunity for children to reflect deeply on their own experiences and the experiences of other children in their communities, and to identify what makes life good for children and what makes life tough. The term poverty was not used in the research unless introduced by children, because the word has come to be associated with individual failure, shame and stigma. Instead, the language that children most commonly used was adopted, for example, 'struggling' and 'doing it tough'. The More for Children research aimed to understand (i) the ways in which poverty shapes and constrains children's lives from a child standpoint, (ii) the systems and services that need to change to better support children, and (iii) what dimensions and indicators are best able to provide a child-centred assessment of the extent and depth of child poverty in Australia. In addition to research with children, 39 parents and carers participated in interviews and group discussions. Of the children and parents participating in the research, 16 were child–parent dyads. Interviews were also undertaken with 28 key informants with deep knowledge of the communities in which the research took place and/or of child poverty and disadvantage.

The research with children used child-centred research workshops, an approach to undertaking research with children on challenging topics that enables children to determine whether they wish to work in a group or individually and to choose the researcher with whom they feel most comfortable (Bessell 2013; Bessell and O'Sullivan 2024b). Four key principles shape the research methodology. First, children's human rights are respected throughout the research, with particular attention paid to children's right to express their views (Article 12 of the UNCRC) and to receive and impart information in ways that are age appropriate (Article 13 of the UNCRC), the best interests of the child (Article 3 of the UNCRC), and protection from all forms of exploitation (Article 36 of the UNCRC) (Beazley et al. 2009; Bessell 2017b, 2024). Second, informed consent is actively sought from children and is an ongoing conversation throughout the child-centred research workshops. Consent is also sought from parents/carers, but while necessary is insufficient without active consent from children. Third, alongside informed consent, the principle of informed dissent is crucial. This ensures that children can – and understand they can – decide not to participate in any activity or not to discuss any topic, and can withdraw from the research temporarily or permanently at any time without negative consequences (Beazley et al. 2009; Bessell 2017b, 2024). Fourth, it is ensured that children's confidentiality and privacy are protected. At a practical level, this involves children selecting pseudonyms, which we describe as 'research nicknames' at the outset of the research, which are used in all publications from the research (Bessell and O'Sullivan 2024b). The More for Children research was approved by the Australian National University Human Research Ethics Committee (protocol number 2021/458).

4.2 | A Child-Centred Definition of Poverty

Poverty measurement is often considered a technical exercise, based on data that are regularly and reliably collected and readily available. Such an approach has considerable practical

merit but often suffers from imprecise conceptualisation and confusion between definitions and measures (Lister 2021, 5). Instead, Lister argues that we must start with conceptualising poverty and ensuring that people who suffer as a result of it are centred within that conceptualisation. The process of conceptualising child poverty in Australia commenced before the start of the More for Children project: between November 2020 and February 2021, with a series of roundtables with thirty not-for-profit organisations at state and national levels, discussions with Commissioners for Children and Young People from across Australia, and consultations with relevant government departments in Tasmania and at the Commonwealth level. These early consultations sought feedback on three proposed dimensions of child poverty: material, opportunity and relational (Bessell 2022). Following positive feedback, rights-based, child-centred research was undertaken with children across four jurisdictions in Australia with the aim of understanding and assesssing poverty from a child's standpoint, in order to act to end child poverty. As noted above, research was also undertaken with parents/carers and key stakeholders. In conceptualising child poverty, priority was accorded to children's views and experiences. In taking a child standpoint (Bessell 2017a; Fattore and Mason 2018), the aim was to challenge dominant hierarchies that often privilege the standpoints of those with power or technical expertise over those of children with direct experience of poverty, whose views are often unheard. The research began with the understanding, drawn from feminist standpoint theory, that 'less powerful members of society experience a different reality as a consequence of their oppression' (Swigonski 1994). Throughout the research, children's thoughtfulness, insights and strategies for resilience were illuminated, as was the powerlessness that results from poverty and youth – and the intersection of both.

When children described their experiences of poverty, they described the ways in which multiple dimensions of poverty intersect. Poverty is experienced as multidimensional, and also as both material and nonmaterial. This aligns with theories of poverty that illuminate the social as well as the economic nature of poverty and the social damage inflicted by it (Frost and Hoggett 2008; Jones and Novak 2012; Ridge 2002; Walker and Walker 2014). Here, children's experiences and descriptions of poverty align with Townsend's groundbreaking conceptualisation of relative poverty, whereby income is too low to meet socially recognised needs or participate in society (Townsend 1979). Children's descriptions of their own experiences and of what they witness in their communities also align with theoretical and empirical research that uncovers the ways in which relative poverty leads to social exclusion and creates experiences of shame and stigma (Saunders 2003; Walker and Walker 2014). Children described the material core of poverty and the challenges and pain of not having sufficient income to meet the most basic needs, including food, housing and transport. Children's accounts also illuminated the intersection between poverty and unequal social and economic structures, and how those structures both create and maintain patterns of social exclusion. Children described the extent to which their opportunities are narrowed during childhood and their fears that adulthood will continue to deliver limited opportunities for not only financial security, but also to build the lives they would value.

Our conceptualisation of poverty is child-centred. This is not to suggest that all conceptualisations of poverty should centre children's experiences, but to highlight the child-centred nature of the *More for Children* research and to correct the dominance and privileging of adult-centred conceptualisations. An important implication of this approach, discussed earlier and in line with other child-centred research (Main 2018a), is that measurement should focus on the child rather than the household. Moreover, the definition of poverty and the dimensions that comprise it should be based on the experiences and priorities of children and the elements of poverty that most impact their lives as children and into the future.

5 | The MOR Framework

Our conceptualisation of child poverty requires that it is understood from a child standpoint – developed from listening deeply to children's lived experiences through rigorous and ethical qualitative research. The rights-based, child-centred research with children that underpins *More for Children*, shows that poverty is multidimensional, impacting all aspects of children's lives and shaping – often narrowing – their futures. From this conceptualisation, we define child poverty as follows:

> *Poverty is the interplay between key material and non-material deprivations, limiting children's choices now and into the future.*
>
> *It means children do not have the* ***material basics****, their* ***opportunities*** *are narrowed, and foundational* ***relationships*** *are not in place or are under pressure.*

Findings from the *More for Children* research underscore the multidimensional nature of child poverty. A recurring theme throughout the research was the profound impact of financial insecurity, unpredictable and low income, and material deprivation on children's lives. However, while the material core of poverty is central in understanding and responding to child poverty, additional factors are important and inadequate money often interacts with relational and symbolic elements of poverty (Lister 2021, 13). As Spiker notes, 'poverty is not simply a matter of low income; poverty is not "simply" a matter of anything' (Spicker 1993, p. 11).

Child poverty is, in several crucial respects, distinct from adult poverty. It encompasses both immediate and long-term consequences, constraining children's present experiences while profoundly shaping their future prospects. This dual impact is not lost on children themselves; many expressed a fear that adulthood would bring continued hardship, including low income, unemployment and homelessness. Such anxieties reflect not only the constrained futures children consider attainable but also serve to limit their aspirations and expectations during childhood. Child poverty thus lies at the complex and entrenched core of intergenerational disadvantage. While adults living in poverty may also experience concern for the future, the consequences for children are uniquely significant given the foundational nature of childhood for human development. Compounding this is the reality that children possess limited

power to alter their circumstances. While some older participants (generally those aged around 15 years) spoke of efforts to earn income and support their families, younger children, defined as those under 15, are unable to take effective action.

Due to the nature of childhood, child poverty must be understood as extending beyond the absence of material basics, such as financial resources, basic infrastructure, and essential services, such as healthcare, to encompass a deprivation of opportunities. This includes limited access to community participation, quality education, and opportunities for play, rest, and informal learning. Throughout the research, children frequently reported lacking access to these fundamental aspects of a fulfilling and healthy childhood.

Our research also highlighted a critical yet often overlooked dimension of child poverty: the importance of strong, supportive relationships. This echoes the absence of relationships in child wellbeing indicators. Hall et al.'s scoping review of articles on child wellbeing published between 2009 and 2023 found a dearth of domains focusing on relationships with family or friends, or relationships within key systems (Hall et al. 2025). A prominent theme emerging from both the children and the parents and carers who participated in the research was the significant strain that poverty places on family relationships. Both children and parents described negative encounters with institutions and service providers that left them feeling disrespected, ashamed, and reluctant to seek support. A 12-year-old boy and his mother separately described one such incident when seeking support from a food charity. The mother described having bad experiences with several service providers, and recounted an experience that had been especially distressing:

> *On this occasion the lady said, "you're here again, what's your story? And you'd better make it a good one to get some food." And I had the kids standing in front of me. I didn't swear at her, but I said "this is a joke, I'm not going to feel like crap in front of my kids, and let my them hear you're not going to give them food." So I got in the car and went to my cousin's and borrowed some meat for dinner.*

Her son also recounted the story, separately and without prompting:

> *We were going through a hard time...and they [the charity] are not supposed to ask why you are coming there. But the lady was asking why we were there. It was to get food assistance, and they're not supposed to ask why you are coming there for food assistance. It hurts. My mum was angry. She was already crying that day and it made her feel even worse.*

More for Children found that when living in poverty, children and their families are often subjected to such harmful experiences. The pain is deepened when these experiences are frequent and compounded by social attitudes that contribute to children's feelings of shame and stigma.

5.1 | Dimensions of Multidimensional Child Poverty

As the above definition suggests, three dimensions of poverty that are especially important for children were reinforced by the *More for Children* research: material basics, opportunity, and relationships. Together these dimensions comprise the MOR Framework. In line with our approach of definition preceding measurement, each dimension was defined as a result of our research with children and families, and supplemented by the literature. Themes were then developed within each dimension, enabling the identification of child-centred indicators as the basis for measurement (provided in Table 1). Here, we followed the methodology of dimension-theme-indicator adopted in the development of other multidimensional poverty measures (Suich et al. 2020).

Material Deprivation has two defining elements: (i) insufficient money and material resources to meet basic needs and (ii) inadequate and inaccessible essential infrastructure and facilities. Including infrastructure and facilities in the definition of material deprivation is conceptually and practically important because relatively small increases in income may assist children whose families are experiencing poverty, but some essential material goods and services remain unattainable by individuals. For example, public transport, places for recreation and play, and healthcare facilities often remain inadequate or inaccessible to low-income families. Ending material and other forms of deprivation requires attention be paid not only to individual incomes, but to the universal provision of services that are essential to prevent poverty and to provide pathways out (Büchs 2021; Coote 2022; Gough 2019).

Opportunity deprivation has three defining elements: (i) lack of meaningful connection and participation in the community; (ii) limited and/or narrowed choices now and into the future and (iii) compromised play, relaxation, and learning. Throughout the research, children described the ways in which poverty disconnects children and their families from those around them and creates a sense of isolation and often loneliness. Children's health and education is often negatively impacted, as is their hope for the future. During the research, an 11-year-old boy described his fears for the future as not being able to get a job or having a job that is too low paid to meet his needs, because he saw the struggles of his parents. He described his fears of homelessness, which he experienced as a child. His choices and aspirations for the future are narrowed to survival as a result of the hardships he experiences daily as a child. Here, the impact of poverty on children's lives extends far beyond material deprivation to create scarring and trauma (Stewart 2009; Vrooman et al. 2015).

Relational deprivation has three defining elements: (i) family relationships are under pressure or not in place; (ii) a network of trusted, caring adults is not in place; (iii) repeated negative experiences of key institutions and services. In this definition, we use 'family' to align with Australia's National Early Years Strategy, which states 'Any reference to parents, caregivers and families in the Strategy acknowledges the diversity of people who fulfil these important relationship roles for children in their lives...' (Australian Government and Department of Social Services n.d.). The ways in which poverty places relationships

TABLE 1 | MOR dimensions and themes.

Dimension	Theme	Theme definition
Material basics	Money	There is enough money in the family to pay for essential things and not miss out. It means not worrying about money.
	Food security	Food security means always having enough nutritious food, not having to miss meals, and not being hungry.
	Housing	Housing means having a comfortable home that is of good quality and has a private place. It means not having to worry about paying the rent or having to move.
	Healthcare	Access to quality essential health-care services (including dental and allied healthcare) and to affordable medicine and vaccines.
	Transport	Affordable, reliable, accessible transport to move around the community and access services and facilities.
	Utilities	Affordable, reliable and sustainable access to energy and water, including electricity and internet connection.
	Play and recreational places	Places to play, meet friends and relax with family.
	Recreational and learning materials	The materials needed for learning and form play, recreation and leisure.
Opportunity	Quality education	School has resources to support students to learn, leading to strong learning outcomes. Learning things at school that open choices now and for the future.
	Learning outside school	Being able to learn important and interesting things outside school.
	Feeling safe	Feeling safe in the community or neighbourhood. Not seeing or experiencing violence.
	Inclusive community activities	Community activities and get-togethers that are welcoming and create a feeling of belonging and connection.
	Being part of a club or group	Being able to join and regularly be part of a club or group outside of school.
	Being able to relax	Not being stressed or overwhelmed about problems now or worried about the future.
Relational	Time with parents/carers	Having time to be with parents/carers and regularly do things together.
	No violence at home	Not seeing, hearing or experiencing any form of violence at home. Not being or feeling unsafe or being worried about violence at home.
	Nurturing schools	There are supportive and caring relationships between students and school staff, and between students. School staff believe in students.
	Parents/carers not under stress	Parents and carers are not stressed or overwhelmed by problems the family faces, particularly those caused by insufficient money; long working hours and/or insecure work; and pressure to find work.
	Ongoing connection with caring adults	Regular, positive interactions with caring adults outside home and school.
	Being treated with respect when seeking support	Feeling acknowledged and valued when going to services for help or support. Not being judged or treated badly.

under pressure is often neglected in the literature and exacerbated by policies that are characterised by an effort to govern and control, rather than support, those who are experiencing poverty (Mendes 2020; Staines et al. 2021; Woodward 2021). Relational deprivation plays out in children's homes when parent(s) or carer(s) are under enormous pressure as a result of poverty; have no time to spend with their children, often as a result of those pressures, and the need to work hours that impede family time; and when there is violence in any form. Relational deprivation also plays out beyond the home, and is deepened when school is not a safe, supportive or welcoming place and when children have no connection with caring adults. It is also exacerbated when children and their families are treated with disrespect and a lack of care or empathy when seeking support. The incident of the 12-year-old boy and his mother seeking food assistance, described earlier, is a powerful example of relational deprivation and demonstrates the harm it causes.

Not all dimensions of the MOR Framework independently signify poverty; material deprivation is the notable exception, as it is closely linked to – but extends beyond – income poverty. Multidimensional poverty emerges from the interaction of deprivations across the three dimensions. When children experience multiple, overlapping forms of deprivation, these combine in a cumulative manner, intensifying the experience of poverty during childhood and significantly constraining their future opportunities.

6 | An Approach to Measuring Child Poverty From a Child Standpoint

As discussed, *More for Children* – through rights-based, child-centred research – led to a deep understanding of how poverty impacts children's lives from a child standpoint. This, in turn, led to the conceptualisation and definition discussed above. From this child-centred definition of multidimensional child poverty, we sought to identify the indicators that should comprise a measure of child poverty. The following sections first outline the process undertaken to identify candidate indicators and the challenges of working with existing data.

In line with the methodology recommended by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI) for constructing a national Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) (UNDP and OPHI 2019), we developed a comprehensive set, or universe, of indicators. This process involved several key steps:

Step 1: A thorough review of existing literature on the measurement of child poverty and child wellbeing frameworks across Australian jurisdictions and comparable international contexts, and global approaches to measuring child poverty.

Step 2: Systematically compiling relevant indicators into a spreadsheet, retaining only those specifically related to poverty – particularly those that aligned with the insights shared by children in the More for Children research – and excluding broader wellbeing measures intended for the general population.

Step 3: Developing an initial list of candidate indicators along with their associated data sources.

Step 4: Engaging with academic experts to review and refine the list of candidate indicators.

Our aim in this process was to determine whether a set of indicators that combine to measure child poverty across the three dimensions of the MOR Framework can be developed from existing data. Future research will move beyond existing data sources to develop a list of desirable indicators that would ideally be included in the MOR Framework, but for which reliable data are currently unavailable.

To accurately reflect a child standpoint, the selected indicators needed to utilise data at the level of the individual child or household, where appropriate, rather than relying solely on aggregate statistics (such as overall child mortality rates). At the same time, the data needed to be capable of being aggregated to assess the overall extent of child poverty within the broader population. Ideally, measuring multidimensional child poverty requires access to a single data set containing detailed information on a representative sample of children in Australia over time.

It was also essential that the indicators meaningfully capture the three dimensions of the MOR Framework. The *More for Children* research recognises, in line with Lister (2021), that poverty has a 'material core', a core that is largely, though not exclusively, shaped by individual or household income. In alignment with the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) methodology, our approach deliberately excludes income from the Index. This decision is not intended to downplay the significance of income, but rather to emphasise the multidimensional character of child poverty and the compounding nature of deprivation across different domains. Money is included as a theme under the material dimension but is not intended to be included in a measure. Rather, we propose that a separate, complementary income-based measure be used alongside the MOR Index to provide a fuller picture. While the material dimension of the MOR Framework most closely mirrors conventional income-based poverty measures, it extends beyond them – drawing on children's perspectives to include access to essentials such as food, secure housing, and adequate infrastructure and services. This reflects the understanding that addressing poverty requires more than modest increases in income; a comprehensive response must also tackle the broader conditions that shape children's everyday lives.

A child is not considered to be living in poverty if material deprivation is not present. While opportunity and relational deprivation extend beyond income and the material core, they remain closely connected to the material dimension. When material deprivation is present, the addition of opportunity or relational deprivation deepens the overall experience of poverty. Multidimensional child poverty arises from the intersection of these dimensions – whether material and relational, material and opportunity, or all three – resulting in a more profound and complex form of deprivation. To effectively capture and assess these overlapping effects, data must be collected at the individual child or household level, with direct relevance to children's lives and experiences.

6.1 | Child-Centred Principles for Selecting Indicators

In selecting indicators, we recognised that not every element of the dimension or themes that sit within could or should be directly translated into a measurable indicator. Dimension definitions were intentionally kept broader than both themes and indicators because the aims of the overall research project go beyond establishing measurable indicators or a multidimensional child poverty index. As noted above, themes were derived from the research with children and the dimensions of the MOR Framework, and act as a bridge between the dimensions, their definitions, and the corresponding indicators. Table 1 provides the themes associated with each dimension and the definition of the theme. While multidimensional measures of poverty, including the MPI, include indicators on health outcomes, the MOR Framework does not include health status or outcomes among our themes. Access

to healthcare is a theme within the Material dimension of the MOR framework. The Opportunity dimension includes the theme 'being able to relax' (defined as not being stressed or overwhelmed about problems now or worried about the future) because children spoke often of the ways in which feeling stressed, overwhelmed and worried as a result of poverty narrows and limits their lives. It is well established that poverty is closely associated with the social determinants of health (Chang 2019; Perez et al. 2022; Spencer 2018); thus, the MOR Framework as a whole provides a pathway towards overcoming child poverty and creating the social determinants required for good health (Horton et al. 2015; Newman et al. 2015; Welsh et al. 2015). Should all elements of the MOR Framework be achieved, some children would continue to suffer ill-health, but the link between poverty and ill-health would be broken.

In seeking to identify candidate indicators, we drew on Gill Main's (2018b, 2019a, 2019c) distinction between household-centric, child-centric, and child-derived indicators. Household-centric indicators typically rely on income or other household-level measures and are often unidimensional in nature. Child-centric indicators are developed by adults – either through expert-led processes (such as Budget Standards) or through methods based on broader social consensus. In contrast, child-derived indicators emerge directly from research or engagement with children themselves. The dimensions of the MOR Framework are intentionally child-derived, although we use the language of child-centred or a child standpoint, having been shaped by recurring themes identified through research *with* children. However, the MOR dimensions are also informed, although not determined, by a thorough review of relevant literature and consultations with community stakeholders and subject-matter experts. Our objective was to ensure that the selected indicators closely aligned with these child-derived dimensions and, where feasible, were based on data originating directly from children's perspectives.

We also distinguish between household-level indicators and those that reflect the experiences of individual children. Wherever possible, we prioritise indicators that move beyond the 'black box' of the household (Bessell 2020; Main 2018a), aiming to avoid relying on adult perspectives as proxies for children's lived realities. In this context, the identity of the reference person becomes particularly important. The approach generally taken, for example, by the Poverty and Inequality Partnership between the Australian Council of Social Service and the University of New South Wales, are consistent with the practices of the Australian Bureau of Statistics and other statistical agencies. That approach follows established conventions that provide insights into household or adult poverty, but is unable to provide child-derived data, stating:

'The reference person for each household in the Survey of Income and Housing Survey.... is chosen by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, by applying its selection criteria to all household members aged 15 years and over. The selection criteria are applied in the order listed, below, until a single appropriate person is identified:

- The person with the highest tenure when ranged as follows: owner without a mortgage, owner with a mortgage, renter, other tenure.
- One of the partners in a registered or de facto marriage, with dependent children.
- One of the partners in a registered or de facto marriage, without dependent children.
- A lone parent with dependent children.
- The person with the highest income.
- The eldest person' (Davidson et al. 2023, p. 9).

While such an approach is conceptually and ethically justifiable for assessing adult or household poverty, it is insufficient for measuring child poverty and is unable to fully reveal the nature and extent of children's experiences of poverty.

An additional principle guiding our approach is that wherever possible, indicators should be applicable across the full span of childhood, defined here as ages 0 to 14 years. While the *More for Children* research engaged children aged six to sixteen, the majority of participants were in middle childhood (defined as between six and twelve years). Nonetheless, a generalised measure of child poverty must be relevant from birth through to age fourteen. This aligns with the age range commonly used in Australia and adopted by the Poverty and Inequality Partnership between the Australian Council of Social Service and the University of New South Wales (see Davidson et al. 2023). A dashboard of indicators that are age relevant within the category of childhood may have considerable value in providing understanding of the poverty experienced at different ages. However, a dashboard does not enable observation of overlapping deprivations, meaning that the layering effects of poverty are not apparent. Moreover, if the aim is to develop a multidimensional child index, introducing distinct, age-specific indicators within childhood could have unintended consequences, such as reclassifying children as 'poor' or 'nonpoor' based solely on age progression, thereby potentially distorting estimates of the overall child poverty rate.

6.2 | Candidate Indicators and the Lack of Child-Centred Poverty Data

From a search of 41 existing data sources relevant to poverty, financial hardship, socioeconomic status, and child well-being, a long list of candidate indicators was constructed. Candidate indicators found within the data sources examined were discarded if they were irrelevant to what was identified by children during the research and/or poverty. Based on the *More for Children* research, the relevant literature, or both, 213 indicators were identified as potentially relevant to measuring child poverty. The 213 candidate indicators were subjected to a two-step process. First, all were ranked according to frequency with which they were raised by children. Second, each candidate indicator was referenced back to the MOR Framework definitions and themes (provided in Table 1). That is, candidate indicators were

considered potentially relevant if they addressed a dimension or theme. The ranking system and number of candidate indicators in each category and for each MOR Dimension is provided in Table 2.

A child-centred measure of poverty would exclude those indicators (50 in total) ranked as 0, unless there is a compelling argument, based on the evidence, to include them. Thus, 163 indicators were considered potentially viable for inclusion in an index.

Drawing on the *More for Children* research, along with analyses of existing frameworks for measuring poverty, disadvantage, exclusion, and wellbeing, we established a set of criteria to guide the selection of the most suitable candidate indicators for representing each dimension of child poverty. Indicators were deemed desirable if they met the following criteria:

- Grounded in the findings of the *More for Children* child-centred research
- Aligned with at least one dimension of the MOR Framework
- Drawn from a single data set or from datasets that can be reliably linked (preferably panel data, though cross-sectional data may also be acceptable)
- Reflective of children's direct experiences, with particular emphasis on sentiment-based indicators
- National in scope, rather than limited to individual states or territories
- Contained within an actively maintained (i.e., not discontinued) data set
- Ideally accessible through public data sources
- Available across multiple historical time points
- Applicable across the full age range of childhood (0–14 years)
- Capable, when combined with other indicators, of yielding policy-relevant insights to inform evidence-based change.

Of the 163 candidate indicators identified, none met all criteria. Of data sources considered in our analysis, those that were most aligned with the MOR Framework were the Tasmanian Student Wellbeing and Engagement Survey 2024, which provides 37 plausible indicators, the Australian Child Wellbeing Project (Redmond et al. 2016) which provides 23 plausible indicators, and the Child Deprivation Index, developed by researchers at the University of New South Wales, which provides 15 indicators (Saunders et al. 2019). That the Australian Child Wellbeing Project and the Child Deprivation Index provide plausible indicators is not surprising given that each of these projects involved research with children and young people to understand their experiences of poverty before developing indicators. However, neither data source can be used to populate a MOR Index because they are not linked to other data sources, they are not national in scope, and are not ongoing and able to support longitudinal analysis. State-based surveys of child or student wellbeing, such as the Tasmanian Student Wellbeing and Engagement Survey (37 plausible indicators) and the Victorian Child Health and Wellbeing Survey (14 plausible indicators), are somewhat aligned with the findings of the More for Children research. However, these surveys are not national in scope. Mission Australia's Youth Survey potentially provides 13 indicators, but focuses on 14- to 19-year-olds and cannot be used to assess change over time, given the open nature of survey participation. The Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey is one of the most powerful datasets for understanding the socioeconomic situations of families, providing nationally representative, longitudinal data on issues such as wellbeing, family relationships, health and education that are directly relevant to the MOR Index (Wilkins et al. 2024). Our analysis suggests that HILDA potentially provides 11 candidate indicators. However, HILDA does not provide child-derived, or child-centred, data and would require reliance on adult assessments of children's situation rather than children's direct experiences. The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2023) has the potential to provide indicators or incorporate questions that would provide the data required to assess multidimensional

TABLE 2 | Ranking the relevance of candidate indicators.

Category	Rank allocated	No. indicators material dimension	No. indicators opportunity dimension	No. indicators relational dimension
Mentioned frequently by children and of high relevance to poverty	1	35	21	15
Mentioned frequently by children and of low relevance to poverty	2	3	18	20
Mentioned infrequently by children but of high relevance to poverty	3	15	5	8
Mentioned infrequently by children and of low relevance to poverty	4	4	16	3
Not mentioned by children, but relevant to poverty	0	20	25	5

child poverty from a child standpoint, but to be a relevant data source, new cohorts would need to be brought into the study regularly. Currently, all participants in the study are over 20 years old and therefore beyond childhood.

While a data set that is representative of the entire child population is required to measure multidimensional child poverty in Australia, such a data set does not currently exist. The data sources that we examined could partially provide the indicators of multidimensional child poverty, but most are not reliably linked and are therefore excluded from consideration. The Person Level Integrated Data Asset (PLIDA), a secure data asset managed by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, combines whole-of-life information on a range of relevant issues – including health, education, government payments, income, employment and population demographics – over time. However, further research is required to determine the relevance and appropriateness of PLIDA for measuring multidimensional child poverty from a child standpoint, using the MOR Framework.

In October 2024, the MOR Framework and the approach to identifying indicators were presented to a group of subject matter experts working on issues of poverty (including child poverty) and child wellbeing in Australia. This workshop with subject matter experts complemented the lived experience expertise that has shaped the *More for Children* research. There was consensus that there is a dearth of child-centred data in Australia – a challenge for both research and policy, but one that can be overcome. It was noted that both the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) and the Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children (LSIC) demonstrate the potential of collecting data that are child-centred, with LSIC in particular providing an approach that engages with communities as well as children.

The workshop participants identified risks to be considered as the MOR Framework is further developed, including:

- Ensuring that children's experiences and priorities are not lost in the process of developing a measure.
- Guarding against the possible unintended use of the model and indicators in the future.
- Taking care in the use of proxy indicators, which may provide inaccurate information.
- Avoiding using adult assessments as proxies for children's experiences as children move beyond early childhood.
- Avoiding assumptions or conclusions that are inherently risky in a data reductionist approach.

7 | Discussion and Conclusions

The *More for Children* research has provided deep insights into the ways in which children experience poverty, from a child standpoint (Bessell and O'Sullivan 2024a). It reveals the multidimensional nature of poverty and provides a child-centred definition as the basis for deeper understanding and for driving change. Based on what matters to children and the recurring themes that emerged from the *More for Children* research, the MOR Framework has been developed: a three-dimensional framework for understanding and responding to child poverty – and potentially measuring it. The MOR Framework recognises the material core of poverty, which comprises both lack of money and material basics at the individual and household level and the absence of essential infrastructure, facilities, and services. It also illuminates the ways in which opportunity deprivation and relational deprivation deepen children's experiences of poverty and create layering and cumulative effects. The MOR Framework is based on careful conceptualisation and definition, grounded in children's experiences and priorities and thorough reviews of the literature. In doing so, it avoids the problem of measures of poverty that are 'divorced from any prior explicit conceptualisation or definition of poverty' (Lister 2021, p. 44), running the risk of failing to reflect what matters most to those experiencing poverty and failing to provide an evidence base for policy change.

While the *More for Children* research and the associated MOR Framework illuminate children's experiences and provide a powerful means of understanding and responding to those experiences, the translation to measurement reveals both an abundance of data and a complete dearth of child-centred data that is relevant to poverty, as defined from a child-standpoint. While further investigation is needed to determine the possibilities of the Australian Bureau of Statistics Person Level Integrated Data Asset, the data sources assessed here do not meet the minimum criteria required for reliable, child-centred indicators – despite the valuable role they play in providing insights into specific aspects of children's lives.

As discussed here, the multidimensional turn in both theorising and measuring poverty highlights the importance of moving beyond income measures, without abandoning the centrality of money to poverty. A dual approach of an income-based measure and a multidimensional measure is likely to serve Australia best; however, the failure to develop a child-centred measure of multidimensional child poverty will not only have a deleterious effect on children's lives and futures, it will also undermine efforts to end intergenerational poverty. Fifty years after the Henderson Review, we have the information base from which to develop a child-centred measure of multidimensional child poverty that is able to track progress (or lack thereof) and to inform policy. Currently, the barrier is a lack of child-centred data. This is a major barrier, but not an unsurmountable one. The child-centred conceptualisation and definition of poverty provided by the *More for Children* research means Australia is well-placed to avoid data-driven measures of multidimensional child poverty that are divorced from children's lives and futures, and may misdirect policy. The breadth and depth of existing data – while not currently fit for purpose – demonstrate the potential to collect the data needed to create a genuinely child-centred measure of poverty that will deliver more for children.

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