

Section 6

Summary

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Summary of findings

The social and economic environment is a powerful influence on an individual's and a population's learning and developmental outcomes. This is evident in the opening sections of the report, where the many factors which determine learning, development and wellbeing across the life span are presented in a model drawn from research and practitioner experience. The information presented in Section 5 describes the geographic distribution of many of these factors across the South Australian population.

Despite the generally favourable outcomes for South Australians relative to Australians overall, there are substantial differences within the population. These differences are no more marked than in the data presented by remoteness, with the poorer educational achievements and overall level of socioeconomic disadvantage driving substantially higher rates in the most remote areas of the State, where many Aboriginal peoples live. The charts describing variations by socioeconomic status across Adelaide and country South Australia paint a similar picture of inequality for the whole population, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal.

Most of these differences have been known for many years, and have been quantified at a geographic level for the whole State since 1990⁽¹⁶⁾. The inclusion in this report of information on younger children, using the NAPLAN and AEDI data, adds to the weight of evidence of these inequalities.

There is a final example, not referenced in this report, which provides a salutary lesson for us all of the importance of addressing these issues. While deaths before 75 years of age for all South Australians have declined markedly over the past 20 years, the rate for these premature deaths in the most disadvantaged groups in the population in 2006 has not yet declined to the level of those in the most advantaged/well-off groups in 1987. This poorer life expectancy not only reflects a substantial degree of inequality, but is, by any measure, inequitable. What do we want the situation to be in five, ten, or 20 years' time?

It is a situation that is both avoidable and unfair, but not inevitable. The challenge for all of us, whether in government, the bureaucracy, as service providers or researchers or in the wider community, is to move on, from further description and better measurement, to action.

And where will those efforts be best placed? There is now substantial evidence that overall wellbeing is the result of complex interactions of the social, economic, biological and ecological environments in which people live. A lack of enabling social and

environmental conditions results in poor outcomes for people. However, if these environments are supportive, they can provide a foundation for the development of competence and skills that underpin learning, behaviour, health and wellbeing throughout life.

With respect to policy development, a determinants-oriented approach to tackling inequalities turns the spotlight on policies with the potential to influence the distribution of determinants, particularly inequalities in social position⁽²⁰⁾. There is evidence that interventions directed to disadvantaged groups and communities can be important levers for reducing inequalities in social position, and their consequences for wellbeing.

One example is early childhood intervention programs to improve the life chances of poor children. Evaluations show that these programs accelerate children's social and cognitive development throughout childhood and have a positive impact on their social position in adulthood^(17, 18, 19). Yet, even though they are important elements of an equity strategy, targeted interventions alone are not enough. The reason is that their effects will be mediated by more far-reaching policies: by employment and fiscal policy and by equitable access to quality education, housing, and social security. These mainstream policies have a more powerful impact on an individual's life chances and living standards and on the scale of inequality in the wider society⁽²⁰⁾.

Much time is spent discussing the relative merits of universal and targeted approaches. Should we put our efforts into improving outcomes for all, and in particular for the largest numbers, those in the middle socioeconomic status groups? Or should the focus be on the groups with the poorest outcomes? Both are, of course, necessary; but, unless we want the inequality gaps described above to widen, then we must do better than a one-size-fits-all approach.

The findings in this report highlight areas where further action is needed, and there is much that can be done. There is a growing body of knowledge that provides direction for developing policies to reduce inequities across the population. The socioeconomic environment is a powerful and potentially modifiable factor, and public policy is a key instrument to improve this environment, particularly in areas such as early childhood development and educational achievement, as well as housing, taxation and social security, work environments, urban design, sustainable communities, and pollution control. South Australia's Strategic Plan is also monitoring progress towards targets in many of these areas.

For the Department of Education and Children's Services (DECS), the findings of the report will be useful in its policy development and strategic planning processes.

Governments committed to improving a population's wellbeing, learning and development and reducing socioeconomic inequalities, need to assess the effects of their policies on the population as a whole. In addition, they must address the differing consequences of their policies for groups with unequal access to the factors that determine wellbeing, learning and development ⁽²⁰⁾. There are numerous benefits of investing in a population-based approach: increased social and economic prosperity, because a well-functioning and educated population is a major contributor to a vibrant community; reduced expenditure on education, health, welfare, justice to remediate social problems; and most importantly, overall community stability and wellbeing for current and future generations of South Australians.